The Fool, the Emperor, and the Hanged Man
by ianthewaiting

Summary

Ten years after the fall of the Dark Lord, Hermione Granger leads a life of self-imposed obscurity, that is, until the day Headmistress Minerva McGonagall is murdered and a certain 'hero' is responsible.

Notes

My epic work, the Fool, the Emperor, and the Hanged Man was originally posted to my LiveJournal in 2008. To date, it is my longest fanfiction. I am very proud of this work and am posting to this great site for the first time.

To see a great fanmade trailer, visit this YouTube video!
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DErAdw-NdRI
I am not pretty…never have been, never will be; there are times when I wish I were. Of course, I am not ugly, either. All my features are in proportion, despite the fact my breasts have begun to sag a bit. I have very nice eyes, I think, out of all my features, and nicely shaped lips. Honey or amber would be the closest word for my eyes, and my lips? Lips like a china doll’s, pouting, plump and perfect. But for all those qualities, do I get asked out on a Saturday night? Absolutely not.

Everyone calls me Jane, although it is only my middle name, but somehow, after the War, the name stuck. I had encouraged it at first, the plainness of my middle name as compared to the weight of history my first name implied. Hermione Granger, war hero; Hermione Granger, Harry Potter’s best friend; Hermione Granger, the brains of the Golden Trio…I began to hate my name. So, when I went to work in the Department of Mysteries, I asked my few co-workers to call me Jane, explaining that I did not want any sort of special treatment for my part in the War. Ten years had passed, and most everyone I knew called me Jane, there are some exceptions, of course.

My life since the first few years after the War, had been quiet, and I have arranged it meticulously so. My face had been splashed over the pages of the Daily Prophet far too many times; wild speculations about my life and my love life, were becoming more and more ridiculous as the months passed. I had left my parents to continue to live in Australia in anonymous safety. Mum and Dad had come to love the people and the climate in their town. Besides, all of their acquaintances in Britain had been Obliviated and could not even remember the Grangers had a dental practice… As for me, I stayed at the Burrow for a time, ignoring owls, ignoring Harry and Ginny’s poorly concealed flirting, and ignoring Ron.

Ron…I had given in for two months to his advances. Our relationship was awkward, rushed, and unnatural to me. In the end, we parted on shaky terms, and I started on my way to a life of obscurity. That had been over eight years ago, and I have never returned to the Burrow or spoken to any of the Weasleys since. Occasionally, I will get Muggle postcards by owl from Ron. Ron travels extensively, part of an international organisation to rout any Dark activities following Voldemort’s demise. It is a luxurious job, compared to mine. After Voldemort, many Dark organisations came to light, and ever since Ron has been on many adventures, many life-threatening adventures. I, for one, am glad to be done with it all.

As for the hero of the Trio, the last time I had seen Harry Potter was at his wedding to Ginny Weasley at the Burrow soon after Ginny finished her last year and passed her exams. By that time I had already begun to pull away from the life I had known. I had respectfully declined Ginny’s invitation to be a bridesmaid, and I had slipped out of the reception early, dodging reporters, old schoolmates, and surviving Order members. I discreetly Floo’ed home, and stripped out of my
dress robes, going to my desk to record the day and further my plans to remove myself from that world.

When I went through the interviews to begin working for the Ministry I had to submit to the Wizarding world’s version of a psychological screening. The Healer was an ancient man who had screened thousands of Ministry employees, and I was relieved when my name did not stir any unnecessary notice due to recent events. After several hours of answering questions about my life, how I felt in particular about the War and Ministry regulations, the Healer sat back in chair and regarded me with yellowed eyes.

‘Miss Granger, your aversion to interaction with society is disturbing. Obviously, you realise that this attitude is a reaction to the events of the past three years and your involvement in the War. However as disturbing the post-traumatic stress may be, you are of sound mind. The hurdles you have overcome have strengthened you, and your achievements in the academic field are extraordinary. That being said, I will not contest that you are well suited for the position in the Department of Mysteries…’

The Healer conducted me to the head of the Department of Mysteries, gentleman named Alexander Roux, and I quickly became the youngest Unspeakable in Ministry history. And that was that. It was one of the first steps toward a life of privacy. The next step came when I took up residence in the only existing Wizard-made structure inside the boundaries of the Forbidden Forest.

My home was an ancient hunter’s cottage, nearly forgotten by the Wizarding world, but well-known to Hagrid. It had been Hagrid who had given me the cottage, after my asking him if there was place, a private place, where I would not be bothered by the press—they had left him alone, and so I hoped he could impart his method. Hagrid did not realise that I was asking for a place to live, thinking I only needed a place to escape. When I came to the cottage, however, I had all of my possessions in the pocket of an enchanted coat, and Crookshanks in his basket, dangling from my hand.

The cottage was set in a small clearing, only old wards keeping the Forest from devouring it completely in bracken and trees. It was an earth and wood structure, what seemed more like a Hobbit-hole to me than a cottage. There was only a few windows crusted with dust peering to the outside, and the wide door was low so that one would have to stoop to enter. Rising from the top of the earthen roof was a small stone chimney with vines growing over the rock. I remembered thinking that I had perhaps been too hasty to pile my entire life in my pockets and hands. I had already let my tiny flat in London for this broken-down cottage.

I stepped across the weak ward boundary, noticing immediately that the sun seemed brighter inside the small plot of land surrounding the cottage. I set the basket down at the door, noticing that the enchantments had kept the overgrown grass of what I would eventually call the garden from choking out the few flagstones that led to the door. I drew my wand, out of habit, and pushed
against the red painted door, the wood as strong as it would have been when it was placed in the entrance centuries ago. The door opened with a low whine and I looked inside what was to be my new home.

Dust and cobwebs littered the main chamber, but with a quick flick of my wand, the room was cleaned and freshened, even the windows of diamond glass panes scrubbed. The quality of light that came in through the windows was marvelous: warm, and homey. There was a small kitchen in the back of the cottage, sparkling after another Charm, a stone island counter in the middle of the kitchen, a small cooking fire in the back, and to my surprise, a low back entrance to the cottage, looking out into the Forest. The smallest room was an ancient water closet, which also submitted to cleaning. But perhaps the loveliest room was the bedroom, which made me wonder if the cottage had been hunter’s hovel or a lover’s bower. The bed was much larger than any I had ever had, built into the wall so that one could only enter by one side. The opposite side of the bed was graced with a wide window of similar diamond glass panes, looking out into the deep shade of the Forest. An oak wardrobe took up most the space of the room besides the bed, carved with beautiful figures of animals of the forest, centaurs, Thestrals, and unicorns.

I breathed fast and heavy, so excited by what I saw that I had totally forgotten about Crookshanks and his pathetic mewls from the basket on the doorstep. I flicked my wand from one place to another, clearing the flue of the main fireplace and the smaller kitchen fire. I opened all the windows and let the air inside, I restored all the wood planking that held the low ceiling up, rescrubbed the stone floors, and I managed to squeeze another window, albeit small, into the water closet as well as updating the fixtures inside so that it was no longer a closet, but a proper bathroom with a sink and stone tub. It was then I let Crookshanks out, welcoming him to our new home. The animal took to the place immediately, curling up on an ancient chair before the cold fireplace.

The rest of that day, I fortified the wards around the cottage and tamed the grass so that it seemed someone cared. I unpacked my pockets, transfiguring the furniture as I saw fit, find no visible evidence left behind by a previous occupant. I began working the wards to make the cottage Unplottable, which expended a great deal of energy. I set up anti-Apparition wards as my last bit of work, before settling down before the fireplace and thinking of what I would have to do next.

And so, my life as a recluse began. Over the next few years my cottage was a piece of heaven in the Forbidden Forest. I made a point to know my ‘neighbours,’ the centaurs, and made a peace with them for being the only human living in the forests. I was allowed to move as I pleased as long as I did not disturb their herds or bring any attention from the outside world. The centaurs found me odd, but tolerated me and my magic. They did not know where the cottage was due to the wards, but knew to avoid that particular clearing although they could not see the cottage or the smoke from the chimneys.

I started a garden, herbs at first, then potion ingredients, then vegetables. I began exploring the Forest, finding, to my amusement, an old path leading directly towards Hogwarts. Who had made the path, and when, was a mystery, but it led underground and into the dungeons of Hogwarts. It was a hidden path, and I could see that it had not been used in many years, decades perhaps, but it
became my personal path back to the world.

I had my Floo connected, and using my celebrity, although I hate to think of my life in that manner, I had my Floo unlisted, and connected for calls only. I was the only person keyed to use the Floo to travel, and any attempt by an outside party would direct them to the Leaky Cauldron or to the Ministry. It was like Muggle caller ID, in a sense, but it made me feel a bit safer. Post still came by owl, but with no address to send the letter to, only clever owls found the cottage; all others went to Hagrid’s Hut or to Hogwarts where I would pick mail up on the weekends. I no longer subscribed to the Daily Prophet; I no longer cared. I went to work every day, Floo-ing directed to the ninth level, and when my day was done, I would Floo home, never seeing the upper levels of the Ministry except on rare occasions.

That has been my life: avoiding the masses. The only people I saw are those at work, those who call me Jane. The only people who still called me Hermione were Ron (in his notes), Hagrid, Minerva McGonagall, and Albus Dumbledore’s portrait. I usually visited Hogwarts weekly, usually on the weekends to gather my post, and I usually had tea with Hagrid, or dinner with Minerva and Dumbledore in her office. I frequented the library late at night with the Grey Lady a.k.a. Helena Ravenclaw, and together we read. My late night visits had garnered me a reputation as a ghost among some students, and the castle ghosts bolstered the rumour for their own amusements. I supposed I could have been considered a ghost by the way I moved about Hogwarts, knowing all the secret passages, seen one place and then appearing in another. I had been seen on the grounds, near the lake, near the tombs of Dumbledore and Severus Snape, near Hagrid’s Hut, near the Whomping Willow. I had even been sighted around the Shrieking Shack, but I know that bit of information is pure fiction.

Actually much about me those days was fiction. Hagrid informed me one winter day that the Prophet was running a series of articles about Harry and his defeat of Voldemort. Several photos surfaced, it seemed, of the last moments of the battle where Harry, Ron, and I were locked in an embrace of relief. I did not bother to look when Hagrid tried passing the paper to me. Hagrid had great, glittering tears in his eyes, but I only gazed out the window and to the lake beyond.

It seemed that Harry had decided to lead a life of obscurity, the Prophet had said. Harry had not been seen in years, and his wife Ginny was also unreachable for comments on the upcoming tenth anniversary of Voldemort’s fall. When Hagrid told me of what the Prophet wrote, I did not think much of it. Harry had always wanted to lead a normal life, outside of the spotlight of any news venue. And it seemed he had…

It was February and in May it would have been ten years since that day… I do not think about it as often after so much time, and even though I traversed Hogwarts on a regular basis, the memories of what happened there did not torment me. I made myself walk along the paths I had taken that day…back to the Room of Requirement, back to the Shrieking Shack, back to the Great Hall. There were no lingering memories of the devastation, only the tombs of the two greatest Headmasters I had the pleasure of knowing in my lifetime. When I felt particularly maudlin about my life, I stopped by Snape’s tomb, and sat against it, looking out at the Black Lake. No portrait
had been painted of Severus Snape, but at times I could still hear his voice in my head, berating me, as always. As for the other headmaster, I only had Albus’ portrait to talk to, and more often than not, we talk about my work in the Time Room.

Work.

I was glad it is over for me, for the day. It had been a long week, and I had several days off, at my request. I needed to find a new familiar, Crookshanks finally having left me earlier in that week. I felt no grief at his passing; he had been old, and he had been good company, but it had been his time… Time… I felt another sigh forming as I stripped out of my Unspeakable robes and hung them on the back of my office door, shrugging into my heavy coat. Stepping out into the black marble corridor, the office door melting back into the stone, I heard someone bid me a good weekend, and I raised my hand in thanks in the direction of the voice. I did not want to have to think about being nice to a co-worker at that moment. I could only feel a knot of dread in my stomach at the thought of going to Diagon Alley and to Magical Menagerie. I had to go out into the public.

My coat, one of my prized possessions, would shield me, perhaps. I stuffed my hands into the pockets, the left pocket Charmed to be bottomless. I could feel my change purse there, my wand, a packet of tissues, a few phials of Pepper-up, the latest book I have been reading, several quills and bottles of ink, smaller collection phials, a couple Sickles, Ron’s last postcard, a pair of clean socks balled up, a parcel of clean clothes, a coupon for a free cone of ice cream at Fortescues’ several years expired, and lastly, an emergency Portkey to the gates of Hogwarts. Hagrid had given me the coat years ago, not long before he realised that I had taken up residence at the cottage. It had been his coat when he was a boy, and on me, it looked like a heavy leather duster. It was waterproof, warm, and able to be Transfigured into anything I wanted it to be.

As I went toward the ninth-level Floo, making sure that everyone had left before me, I Transfigured the coat into a heavy dark grey cloak with a hood that effectively obscured my face and features. The only part that did not Transfigure was the bottomless pocket, which was hidden on the inside of the cloak where I could easily reach it.

I was satisfied, and immediately Floo’ed to the Leaky Cauldron. No one bothered to look up, for it was far too busy inside the establishment to notice a new arrival. Some of my dread lessened, and I moved quickly out the back, through the archway and into the crowded street. Was being able to weave through a crowd unnoticed a true talent, I wondered, making eye contact with no one, keeping my eyes to my boots on the street?

I squeezed into the Magical Menagerie and paused. Despite the cages of kittens and other cute animals outside the windows, the shop was relatively empty. It was not a holiday, and students were at school. I was not sure if I liked the fact the store was nearly empty or not. The few customers, milling about the cages, I did not recognise, so I ventured forward.
Ravens, some owls, rats (Merlin forbid!), Puffskeins, none of which I was hoping to buy. In one corner were a couple cages of cats, not kittens, mind, but kittens that had not bought before their cuteness gave out. That thought appealed to me, for some reason, and I went toward the languid felines, keeping an eye out for any orange, familiar fur ball.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

I tried not to reveal how startled I was when the proprietress with the thick black rimmed glasses stepped in front of me, blocking my path. I had half the mind to hex her, but remembered that I had to maintain some sense of social decorum.

“Those cats there, they are for sale?” I said with a bend of my head in the direction of the cages.

“Those old things? I would give them to you if you want. Too old to be cute anymore, none of the students wanted them in the fall…” the older woman cackled, making my hand begin to reach for my wand at the sheer improper volume of her voice.

_Tut, tut, Jane_…I heard a voice in my head drawl…Severus Snape’s voice…

“I have just lost a dear familiar, very dear, too old to be cute,” I managed to get out between my teeth.

The older woman stepped back, and I wondered if I had been too forceful. Maybe she recognised my voice; surely she couldn’t see my face…could she?

“There’s a couple half-Kneazles in the bunch, they are quite popular pets nowadays.”

I blinked, taken aback. “Why’s that?”

“Oh, a long time ago I sold that Granger girl one…it was mentioned in the Prophet when they did a profile about her a year or so ago…and ever since…well…”
I wanted to start laughing, to throw my head back and howl. I had become a trend for girls, it seemed, or at least Crookshanks had. I suddenly wondered how that old half-cat would feel about that…and I missed him.

“Interesting,” I said, swallowing my thoughts. “I shall look at these.”

The older woman finally moved away, calling back to let her know if I needed anything. I did not answer, but stood before the cages and the six animals inside, gazed back lazily, unperturbed. I pulled the hood back a bit to look in their eyes, some yellow, some green…but one half-Kneazle looked back at me with curious eyes, curious grey eyes. I focused on the half-Kneazle with the odd eyes and bent lower.

The half-Kneazle was barely a kitten, and how in the world no one would consider it cute, was anyone’s guess. It was a male half-Kneazle, grey eyes, grey fur, marked more like a Siamese cat. Its fur was not as long as many of the other cats, but I knew immediately it was truly half-Kneazle. When I had first found Crooks, the connection had been immediate, sudden, and unexpected. I had almost forgotten.

I smiled as the cat stretched on his side and stood, coming to the door the cage, sticking his grey nose between the bars.

“Hello there, what is your name?” I asked softly, having asked the same to Crooks all those years ago.

I leaned closer, only recoiling as a clawed paw smacked the tip of my nose, not scratching me, but swatting at me playfully. I stifled a laugh as I poked at the outstretched paw, feeling only the tips of its claws in my fingertip.

“Want to live with an old, ugly witch?” I asked softly, reaching through the bars with my other hand to scratch behind the cat’s ear.

A tiny meow was all it took. I pulled the half-Kneazle from his cage and cradled him in my arms. When his nose touched mine, I knew.

I paid only ten Sickles. If it had not been so cheap, I would have found it an outrage. This half-Kneazle was worth far more, but I did not complain. I carried my new familiar in my arms, my fingers finding his short coat soft and silky, so different from Crooks… This animal was slimmer,
more suited for pouncing on a mouse than lying about in armchairs.

I knew I couldn’t take him through the Floo, so I Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts, moving quickly onto the grounds just as the sun was setting. The grounds were snowy and frozen, and I half expected to see students outside playing, throwing snowballs, but there was no one about. Even in the Entry Hall, I met no one, but I could hear voices in the Great Hall, and knew everyone was tucked into a warm, hearty meal.

Making my way to the dungeons, I pulled my wand and cast a Lumos to light the way. My new familiar was gazing about, but did not struggle or make a noise. Deeper and deeper I moved, possibly being only one of a few to ever travel so deep. Finally, I came to a wet statue of a large troll, half life-size and stained with mildew. It was behind the troll that I would find the path home. At the light of my wand and a low utterance of my password ‘girl’s bathroom,’ I was in the tunnel leading out and into the Forbidden Forest.

With a steady pace, it is a good hour’s walk from Hogwarts to the cottage. It would take longer walking in the dark, since it was not a good idea walking about the Forbidden Forest with a lit wand. So I started, first, ending the Transfiguration of my coat so that I could tuck my new familiar inside the normal pocket where he could be warmer.

Snow littered the old path, but as the moon began to rise with its face half hidden, the path was a trail of silver through the dark trees. My breath came out in ghostly white puffs as I climbed a steep bank, the roots of a nearby tree my only foot hold. I was nearly home.

Coming upon the clearing, I felt a familiar sensation of magic: the wards I had placed to keep intruders from coming to the edge of the garden. I paused, glancing down at the animal in my pocket that was peering up with Sickle-like eyes. I stepped through the invisible barrier, letting the magic recognise me and the animal. My boots landed on the snow-covered grass and the wards seemed to breathe a sigh—the Mistress of the plot was home.

Quickly, I moved inside the cottage, locking the door behind me and pointing my wand to the fire so that it raged to spread heat through the small cottage. I set the cat, it being half-cat as well half-Kneazle in the armchair before the fire, as I doffed my coat and hung it on a peg attached to a support beam between the main room and the kitchen. I tucked my wand under my arm and went to the cupboards, a cooler in one, to pull out a bottle of milk. Soon I placed a saucer of warm cream on the hook rug before the fire and the cat jumped down and sniffed, before lapping at his meal. I sat in the now vacant chair and watched the cat.

“What should I call you?” I asked aloud, more to myself than to the cat.
As if in response, the cat looked up and regarded me for a moment, its silver eyes coolly assessing me and apparently finding me satisfactory. I grinned.

“Malfoy. You just gave me one of those glances…and you did not call me a Mudblood…” I laughed softly, resting my head on my fist, watching the cat lap up the milk.

“Malfoy. I haven’t thought about him in a long time…”

The cat mewed softly, finished with his meal, and leapt up into my lap. I stroked his grey fur until he curled up in my lap to nap.

“I cannot remember the last time I saw that ferret. It doesn’t matter though…he’s probably enjoying some silly little life of prejudice and decadence…” I whispered, looking into the fire.

There were so many people I had not thought about in a long time. There were even those I had forgotten completely. When Hagrid mentioned names, it would take a long while for me to remember who they were… Maybe it was a good thing I was forgetting.

Malfoy, the cat, was proving to be a wonderful familiar, and perhaps that was due, in part, to his youth. Crooks was not young when I found him, and he was never as playful or so much company as Malfoy.

Malfoy liked the garden, and he liked stalking the wood mice, but never to kill, only to threaten. He watched me read, or curled up on my feet as I lounge on the fainting couch I installed two years ago against the wall near the fire. When I slept, he slept in the crook of my body whichever way I laid. He liked cream in the mornings, as much as I liked coffee, and for dinner, a can of tuna or salmon.

I was glad my new familiar had settled into my home so easily. The day came that I would be leaving him home alone, and I explained to him that many days would be spent alone. The cat only gazed at me coolly and glanced away in a haughty manner that just proved that I named him well.
I had two more days off. A warm snap allowed me to move about the Forest a bit, to gather some things I had promised for Professor Slughorn, things that the old man did not have the strength or bravery to acquire on his own from the Forest. I did not mind, Horace gave me books, books I would not have been able to acquire from the Library or from the Ministry. That day it is to gather aquatic moss from the many brooks in the Forest, used in various potions, but most prominently in Horace’s version of a sleeping draught.

I dressed in my favourite pair of fatigue pants, thermal undershirt, oversized green jumper, American military issue mountain boots, and my old coat. Bidding Malfoy a goodbye, I left the domain of my home for the domain of the Forest.

In February, the sun rarely shone down through the thick branches of the trees, so there was thick snow on the ground. The wind was not so cold in the shelter of the Forest, but my cheeks and nose were cold and most likely red. The brooks were not frozen, but a month before, it would have been difficult to get Horace his moss. I left the path to places that perhaps I only knew, perhaps the being only human who knew such places. There were so many invisible lines in the forest, and I knew them all after so many years. There were places I did not go, and there were places that I often meet centaurs that would speak with me from time to time. I had to go near one of those invisible lines, and as I did, the brook in sight, I heard a whistle.

I must not move when I hear this call, so I froze mid-step and pulled my hands from my pockets. I could feel their eyes upon me; I could feel that they knew who I was and that I was unarmed. Two long whistles sounded after what seemed like minutes and I bowed slowly, pointing to the brook nearby. I was free to go.

After the War, no real effort had been made to soothe relations between the centaurs and Wizarding kind. The centaurs had been so helpful during the Last Battle, and only Firenze and a few others kept in constant contact with the Ministry. I, on the other hand, as a human, kept in contact with the centaurs, not as a Ministry representative, but as a concerned citizen of the Forest. It was an agreement made soon after I moved into the cottage—I would keep the centaurs apprised of the Ministry’s intentions regarding the Forest and they would keep me apprised of any unusual movements in the Forest. For years there had been peace.

I stooped next to the brook and drew out a few empty phials from my bottomless pocket, uncorking the first of four and filling it with water. I dove my right hand into the freezing brook to grasp a clump of moss on the bottom. I repeated this process until all of my phials were full, and shoved them down into my pocket again as I rose. Glancing about, I bowed shortly again, and retraced my steps to the path.

It was a tedious process, at times, gathering stores for Horace. I pretended not to know what the ingredients were for. I never entered his office either, although every time I came by, he would ask. When he first realised who was stealing by his dungeon office door he pinned me down one
night, demanding to know why I was in Hogwarts…did the Headmistress know? I explained myself, and then posed a thinly veiled threat that my comings and goings in Hogwarts not become public knowledge lest some unsavory details of his past be splashed across the front pages of the Prophet.

Horace called me ‘downright Slytherin’…and I took it as a compliment.

It was not quite midday when I went into the underground passage. I wondered if I would be able to catch Minerva without being seen by the students. It was a weekday, and at midday most students would be at lunch, so perhaps…

Past the troll statue and through the dark I moved. There had been times, such as this one, that I did not need a wand to light my way. Every step had become habit.

There were no students about when I came to Horace’s office door, knocking four times in slow succession so that he knew who was at the door. This way of knocking had also become habit.

When the door opened, it was to find a flustered Slughorn whose eyes were rimmed in red.

“Miss Granger, my dear girl, have you got the moss?”

I nodded, studying Horace’s flushed face.

“You need to come in, my dear, this time you must!”

I frowned. Horace was always adamant that I come and have tea, but the tremor in his voice, the redness of his eyes, made me step inside, a knot tightening in my stomach. Something was not right.

I pulled out the phials before I got lost in my ruminations at Horace’s condition and pressed them into his meaty hand. He thanked me quickly, setting the moss on his neat desk before ordering me toward the fireplace.

“Take the Floo to the Headmistress’ office, quickly my dear!”
I blinked as Horace pressed a jar of Floo powder into my hand and shoved me toward the fire. I manoeuvred quickly and called for the Headmistress’s office, twisting out into the room, finding almost all the professors, Hagrid, Arthur Weasley, and Neville Longbottom standing about the circular room. Whatever conversation had been going on stopped as all eyes fell upon me.

I had been tricked, I was sure of it. Was this some sort of intervention? How dare Horace Slughorn!

All of this slid through my mind, and immediately out of it.

“Hermione…”

I winced at the sound of ‘that’ name coming from Neville Longbottom, the Herbology Professor and deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. He had grown into a handsome man, I had to admit, but I knew that he and Luna Lovegood had been a couple, albeit unmarried, on and off for the past ten years. I had not seen Neville since Harry and Ginny’s wedding, making it clear to Minerva and Hagrid that I did not want Neville knowing I was coming in and out of Hogwarts.

Neville came forward, stretching out his hands toward me, and I, as silly as it seem, recoiled as if he were coming to attack me. My movement did not go unnoticed by the other professors, or by Arthur Weasley who moved next, calling me Jane, and not Hermione.

“Jane, my dear, it is good to see you…” he began.

Of course, Arthur would know that everyone called me Jane; he still worked at the Ministry and surely had seen the memos with my name…

At the sound of my name, my middle name, I relaxed slightly. Arthur had aged, but his face was still as kind as it had always been. I suddenly wondered why he was here…at Hogwarts.

“I wish the circumstances could be better, my dear…”

“What do you mean?” I asked, suddenly suspicious.
Hagrid blew his nose on a tablecloth sized handkerchief and looked at me with watery eyes. He shook his great head and I felt my stomach plummet. I began looking around…Flitwick was there, Sinistra, Horace was in Floo-ing up behind me, causing me to step forward into the room…Neville, Hagrid, even Trelawney and Hooch.

“It’s Minerva. She’s…” Arthur began, resting his hands on my shoulders, staring me in the eye.

I shrugged him off, perhaps a bit too violently, and moved towards the stairs leading up to the private chambers of the Headmistress. But a voice stopped me in my tracks…

“She’s gone, Miss Granger…early this morning. When she did not come down for breakfast, I had Dilys go up into the heath painting in her bedroom and check…”

It was the voice of Albus Dumbledore, his portrait hanging just beside the Headmistress’s desk.

“How?” I asked, shock starting to penetrate the defences I had laid in my mind.

Albus shook his head and pulled his glasses from his pencil thin nose. “Uncertain. Poppy is up there now, preparing the…the body.”

The hand I had laid on the brass banister of the stairs fell limply to my side. Suddenly the eyes that were upon me did not matter, and I felt myself begin to fall. I did not faint, but it was Hagrid who caught me from falling completely. I could hear some of the professors voice their concern, and I heard Neville begin to usher them out of the office, telling all of them to forget they saw me and tell nothing to the students, as he would make an announcement over dinner.

Hagrid held me tight before setting me on a chair…and I realised it was Minerva’s chair, behind her desk…

“You alright, ‘Mione?” Hagrid asked softly.

I couldn’t move as I looked up at Hagrid, Neville, and Arthur. I felt like I was seventeen again, small and weak. So many of the old emotions washed over me that I felt nauseous.
“I was going to send an owl…” Hagrid started, but stopped, looking down into my face. I can only imagine what he saw.

It was a few more quiet moments before I could speak, and when I did, I was surprised at the venom that spewed from my mouth.

“Why are you here, Arthur?”

The men that stood around the desk glanced at each other, even Albus stiffened in his portrait, and I knew…I knew it was not just about Minerva. The old suspicious began to awaken, and I swallowed my own vomit.

Albus had said ‘uncertain.’

Minerva was old, I knew, but not so old in Wizarding terms.

“There has been an incident, Jane…” Arthur began, glancing quickly to Albus. “Harry is missing.”

I blinked once, twice. Those words meant nothing to me.

“Don’t you read the paper, Hermione?” Neville asked, and I instinctually winced again. It was not just the mention of my name, but the tone Neville used.

“I do not, Neville.”

My words came out thick, and I shoved my hand into my bottomless pocket and found a phial of Pepper Up. I tried to ignore the look Neville and Arthur shared as I downed the potion, but I noted that look in the back of my mind. The potion coursed through me, and I immediate felt better, my mind not as sluggish, and my stomach not as tense.

Minerva was dead, and I had to keep it together.
“Two days ago, Harry escaped from St. Mungo’s. He injured at Healer, resulting in the Healer’s death. No one has been able to track him, until today.”

Arthur’s voice was taut, as if barely able to contain some intense emotion. I narrowed my eyes… reading the space between the words.

“He was here?”

“We believe so. The authorities have been called, but we wanted to investigate first before they were called.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed a hand over my face.

“Why was Harry at St. Mungo’s, Arthur?”

My voice was calm, too calm, and when I opened my eyes, I could see that all four men, three living, one made of oil, were staring at me with fear in their eyes. I remembered these sorts of eyes, I remembered them when they looked at me at Order meetings, after the Last Battle when I advised that Voldemort’s body be disposed of and stasis Charms be put on others so that the Aurors could sort out who had killed whom… It was the fear they had for me because I had not collapsed into a puddle of emotional goo. It was the fear they had for my strategic and, at times, cold frame of mind.

This was something I had been trying for a decade to avoid.

*Our pasts always catch up with us, Jane…* Severus Snape’s voice said in a dark corner of my brain, the name ‘Jane’ spat out.

“Ron did not tell you?” Arthur breathed, running a hand through his thinning red hair. It was a question not really posed toward me, I knew. It was a type of accusation.

“Ron and I have not spoken in person for years, Arthur, and what contacts I have with him are through postcards. This fact is partly my own fault…” I conceded softly. “So, tell me what Ron didn’t.”
Perhaps it was the fact I was sitting in Minerva’s chair, or perhaps it was my growing irritation that I had been discovered by so many people when I had relished my life of relative solitude… I didn’t know… but I felt magic in my voice, and it burned my throat.

“A year after the wedding, Harry began displaying strange behaviours…” Arthur started. “It only got worse as time went on. Molly and I thought it was depression, post-traumatic stress, something manageable with potions.”

I frowned, deeply. I could feel my face contorting.

“But it wasn’t.”

Arthur nodded slowly. “Once Harry struck Ginny, and that was the beginning of the end. Everything snowballed from that moment. He stopped going to work, and eventually he was suspended from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Ron tried to talk to Harry, but Harry wouldn’t come out of his study. When the elves could no longer force Harry to eat or bathe, St. Mungo’s was called.”

I sighed. I could see it in my mind. Harry hitting Ginny, Ginny returning the Burrow, distraught… Ron going to the Potter house and trying to break down the door… Kreacher trying to bully or denigrate Harry to eat and bathe… and Harry… and Harry…

What was Harry doing?

“St. Mungo’s evaluated Harry and declared him insane.”

My body lurched, and before I could stop it, I was laughing. I couldn’t stop it, I couldn’t control the laughter that poured from me, and I couldn’t stop the tears leaking out of the corner of my eyes. They all stared at me, horrified, even Albus…

Harry had been so sane even when he feared he was not. Even after Voldemort was gone and Harry left two of the Hallows behind. I still had the book, The Tales of Beedle the Bard… That book rested on the carved headboard of my bed… It was the thought of that book that made my laughter die slowly. I was wiping my face, hugging myself; surely I was the one who looked insane.
“Insane…” I said.

Neville glanced at Hagrid, but I could not read into that look.

“As in ‘incurably?’ Or was there a reason why my best friend was committed?”

The anger caved in upon me, and the venom returned to my voice.

Arthur tried to appear calm, but I could tell…I could just tell that he was trying his best to not let the fear consume him.

“It was…” he started, but quickly cleared his throat, “It was what one of the Healers called a post-traumatic psychosis. In Harry’s case, the psychosis is fuelled by his innate magical ability. There is no cure, no conventional cure. Therapy and time were all St. Mungo’s could see as an ultimate solution. But, something sparked the psychosis, and we still do not know what it was. And now, something else sparked this episode.

He has not been so violent before. When he hit Ginny, he immediately regretted it, but now he is so deep into the psychosis that he thinks Ginny is a First Year girl. He used to call me Dad, but he calls me Mr. Weasley again…”

Tears filled Arthur’s eyes and he quickly yanked off his glasses before his tears clouded the glass.

As for me, I could only stare through narrowed eyes at the man. I knew that I had disassociated myself from the Weasley family, but surely…surely someone would have let me know that Harry was possibly permanently interred at St. Mungo’s. I frowned.

“He escaped, when?”

“Two days ago. He managed to break through the protective wards and escape into Muggle London. He didn’t have any money or a wand…” Arthur explained, his voice cracking.

“And somehow, despite all odds, he made it to Hogwarts? How?”
“We are not sure, Miss Granger, but I assume that his innate magical ability, coupled with his strong feelings for this school somehow brought him here,” Albus supplied.

I sat back into Minerva’s chair, hearing movement from the chamber above.

“What does this have to do with Minerva?” I asked, tiredly.

I was almost afraid to ask, but I tried to expect the answer I got.

“We believe that Harry might either be responsible for Minerva’s death or have knowledge of what caused it,” Arthur answered, the sorrow in his voice painful, for even me…

“How could he have slipped past the portraits in this office? Or the wards on Minerva’s chambers?”

Albus shook his head, even as a painting, he seemed weary. I blew out a breath, ruffling a piece of hair that had fallen from my ponytail. I was very putout. I saved my sorrow at Minerva’s passing for another time; it would have to be anger about Harry’s situation that would propel my thoughts now.

“What has Madame Pomfrey determined so far?” I asked, my hands clutching the armrests of Minerva’s chair…and suddenly I realised that the chair would shortly be Neville’s. I turned my eyes to Neville and saw how stricken he looked, standing before me, his hands resting on the edge of the desktop.

“Minerva did not struggle. Or so it seems at the moment,” Albus said with a sigh.

My thoughts whirled, and I rose from the chair and moved to the stairs before any of the men could stop me.

“I wouldn’t, Miss Granger. The investigators will be here shortly, and only Poppy and Neville have been in the room. It would not do to have any trace of you in the room,” Albus warned.
Ever the voice of reason, I thought with a mental snort. Albus was right. My involvement with inner workings of Hogwarts was strictly off the record. Surely I could think of an excuse to explain my presence at that very moment, as could Arthur Weasley, but in Minerva’s bedroom… that would be harder.

“I assume that Harry’s escape from St. Mungo’s has garnered the Aurors’ attention as well?”

Arthur nodded solemnly and Hagrid moaned in grief. Neville opened his mouth to speak, but closed it with a resigned snap. I ignored the urge to embrace the half-giant and again let my hand fall from the brass railing to my side.

“And I assume that Harry has not been found on the grounds?”

“The professors, elves, and paintings have searched, but no one has seen him,” Neville said with a sigh.

I bit my lip. “Then how do you know…”

“The school’s wards,” Albus stated, regarding me knowingly.

I nodded. The wards were keyed to me the moment I moved into the cottage. I was aware that the ancient wards that protected the cottage were connected to Hogwarts, if merely by geographic location. However, the wards would not be keyed to Harry or anyone else that was not living on or invited onto the grounds. There was a process to the wards, and ten years had passed since Harry had lived on the grounds. Only a dim recollection of Harry would remain in the near-sentient wards, not enough to alert the school that someone ‘different’ had come and gone. After Voldemort, the wards had been changed for the protection of the school and the students. Although Harry would be welcome, his magical signature would be logged and filed as ‘different.’ The Aurors would see this.

“But you cannot be certain. It could have been anyone!”

I knew my words were falling on deaf ears, all in the room, even Hagrid, had already made up their minds.

“Where would he be now? Surely not Hogsmeade…”
My words died and my eyes fixed upon Albus’. Shit.

“With the additional wards, Miss Granger, I doubt it will be found.”

Only half of me felt relieved, but the other half dug into the pocket of my coat for my wand. Just touching the wood made me feel a bit better, but I did not draw it out, yet.

“What are you talking about?”

Hagrid had not asked, for he already knew. Hagrid was not nearly as dim as most people thought, and through the years, he knew exactly when to keep his mouth shut.

It had been Neville who was now standing upright, his arms crossed loosely across his trim chest. He truly cut a handsome figure, but I could not help but despise him that very moment.

“It is of no concern, Professor Longbottom. Now, we should begin to prepare ourselves for the investigators, they will have questions, and possibly more information. Arthur, perhaps you should alert your family to some of what we have learned. Do not mention Harry’s visit here,” Albus instructed, his eyes twinkling even through the layers of oil.

“Hagrid, go to the gates: surely the Ministry will be here at any moment.”

Hagrid nodded and laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. I tried to smile, but gave up quickly, only able to pat Hagrid’s fingers before he left the office. Arthur left by Floo to leave Neville and myself to look at each other.

“Perhaps I should check with Poppy…” Neville said softly, apparently thankful to tear his eyes away from me. I stepped aside to let Neville pass up the stairs and out of earshot.

“Take care, Miss Granger. You know the Forest now, better than Hagrid. If Harry is there, I fear that he may find a spot of danger with the centaurs. He does not know the boundaries; he does not know the rules. If you should find him there, incapacitate him, and bring him to safety.”
I scowled. Albus and I never had seen eye to eye, although I would never argue with a man who was my senior and had been far more experienced.

“He will be sent to Azkaban, insane or not, Albus.”

Albus nodded.

“And if he has murdered…” I choked unexpectedly, near to vomiting. “If he had anything to do with Minerva, he will be executed.”

Albus nodded again, his expression grave.

I felt my face contort and then it came—something I had been wanting to say for over a decade.

“This is all your fault.”

His painted face turned away, but he did not nod. I sneered and moved across the office to the Floo.

“Where are you going, Miss Granger?”

Albus’ voice was desperate, but for which reason, I did not know. I did not turn back, but stopped before the fireplace.

“Home. If the Aurors want me, tell them to send an owl. Have Hagrid send me one, as well, when the funeral arrangements have been set.”

With that, I grabbed the Floo powder and threw it into the fire. Stepping inside, I called ‘The Cottage,’ and whirled, in a wave of green, home.
Malfoy let me hold him as I cried into his grey fur, purring oddly enough. I had barely stepped out of the fireplace of the cottage before I began crying. All that I felt for Minerva came out in my grief. She had been my Head of House, my friend, and my surrogate mother for so many years. She was gone…gone forever…gone before her time.

I cried for twenty minutes straight before I started to think about Harry. As soon as his face, his young face, swam into my thoughts, I started to retch. Malfoy hissed when I dropped him and ran for the loo, vomiting the contents of my stomach, intestines, and what felt like my bowels. I was still crying, and I could feel vomit in my nose and not just my mouth. Falling back against the bathtub, I moaned. My face was swollen, my hair disgusting, my clothes wet with sweat, and my heart breaking, or at least what was left of it.

My mental image of Harry was of him on his wedding day, the last time I had seen him. He was so happy that day. His hair was still as untidy, his eyes still as green, his dress robes cut to perfection and his smile radiant like the sun itself. The lightning bolt scar had faded so that it was barely noticeable, and his demeanour spoke of a man who had gotten, finally, everything he had ever wanted. A family…a wife…a home…normalcy.

I retched again, but nothing came. Malfoy watched me curiously from the door, his long, thin silver tipped tail swishing back and forth along the stone floor. I sat for a long time, staring at the cat, letting my body and mind settle. A very long time passed before I was able to stand to pull my wand from my coat and begin cleaning up after myself.

It was dark before I felt comfortable again in a nightgown and fuzzy slippers, cup of tea and Malfoy on my lap before the fire. My head ached, but the tea was helping. No owls had come, and I felt thankful for the privacy once again. I decided that in the morning I would call for the centaurs, a thing I had done only once when I moved into the cottage, and inform them of the current state of things. That had been our agreement, after all.

I would have to return to work again; it seemed like a sanctuary to me. No one at work had mentioned Harry before, why would they now? No one pried into my personal life…every one called me Jane. I almost looked forward to work.

And I winced, thinking of how I must have looked in Minerva’s office—neurotic, jaded, surly.

I slept fitfully that night, and when dawn came, I was already preparing a trek into the Forest. I fed Malfoy his cream and told him to look after the cottage, I wouldn’t be gone long. And I wasn’t. The centaurs were immediately upon me when I came to the edge of the nearest boundary. Two males, scouts by the look of them, listened as I told them about Harry. I asked that if they did find him to inform Hogwarts immediately. The centaurs nodded, and I expressed my thanks. To my surprise the centaurs thanked me for the news, I did not ask why. I made it back to the cottage within two hours of leaving to find a familiar owl waiting on the outside sill of the kitchen window.

“’Mione, funeral in two days by the Lake. Love, Hagrid.”
The scribbles had become so familiar to me that if it had been ten years before, I would have had a hard time reading the tear-stained missive. I clutched the note to my chest and let out a sob.

It was real. Minerva was dead.

I swallowed my tears, fed the owl while Malfoy watched jealously, and penned a quick note back to Hagrid.

‘Be there in the early morning, let’s have breakfast tea. Love, ‘Mione.’

I had to call off work again. I had at least two month’s worth of leave, and I had barely touched it. So, the call to work was no pain on my part, only a hint of disappointment from the Department Head who had apparently counted on me too much, but sympathised with my situation.

I went to my wardrobe and found a dress that would be suitable; a dress I knew Minerva liked, for it had been hers, many years ago. I held the dress up to my body in the mirror inside the wardrobe and smiled. I had never been one for fashion, and to this day, most of my clothes are old and worn. The only thing I ever spend money on are shoes.

The dress was black sateen with a mid-calf hem, the waist was belted with wide leather, and the neckline draped in the front, almost obscenely. The back buttoned up, and the sleeves, belled, came just past my elbows. It was a bit old-fashioned, but it was elegant. Coupled with my mother’s pearls, a pair of black patent leather pumps and a net hat, I would have made Minerva proud, looking every bit like a 1940s cinema femme fatale, missing only a small silver gun in my handbag. It had been Minerva’s favourite dress, and Minerva had given it to me.

Sad smiles were all I could manage to my reflection in the mirror. It would be pretty enough for me, I knew.

Hagrid said I looked pretty when I entered his hut, breakfast already set out. The funeral was not until noon. During my covert jog between the castle and the hut, I could see that Neville was overseeing the placement of chairs before the Lake. Apparently, Minerva was to be interred in a tomb next to Albus. I idly wondered if her portrait was already installed in, now, Neville’s office.

“It’s gonna be hard for him, ‘Mione,” Hagrid said when I mentioned Neville.

Hagrid passed me an oversized cup and saucer, careful not to spill any on my lap as we sat around his kitchen table. I nodded at his words and took a sip of strong black tea, trying not to cough. It has taken years of Hagrid’s tea for me not to choke.

Setting the cup and saucer on the table, I studied my muddy boots. I had slipped my pumps into the pocket of my coat, which rested across the wide armrest of Hagrid’s armchair. I had walked through the Forest, foregoing the Floo in case I would be seen.

“The Aurors have not contacted me, have they talked to everyone else?”

“Everyone they believed to be of so-called importance,” Hagrid said before blushing. He thought
he had insulted me, but I smiled. Hagrid had not meant anything ill by his words.

“I doubt there would be much I could say,” I said with a shrug. It was true, I had no real information, only speculations. There was so much I did not know.

“I haven’ heard a thing. Neville and Arthur don’ know much, either. The investigators came, and one of the Department Healers inspected…inspected the body…”

Hagrid dissolved into tears. All I could think to do was pat his large hand and push his tea toward him. Recovering quickly, Hagrid sipped loudly at his tea and wiped his tears into his hair.

“They suspect foul play, then?”

Hagrid nodded, apparently not ready to speak just yet. I sat back into the rough wood of the kitchen chair. If only I could see the Healer’s report…

“But there’s no way Harry could have done it, ‘Mione, you know that, don’ ya?” Hagrid asked miserably.

I could not answer. I did not know what to think.

“The Aurors probably believe that Minerva and Harry are connected…that is usually their thinking…” I spat.

“They are still working with Neville to access the wards; they were working late last night. There were a few of them walking the grounds with their wands out, like they were searching for something.”

I hmmmed to myself, and remembered my tea. We sat drinking in silence for a long time, the fire nice and warm against my left side. I turned our conversation to a lighter note, mentioning Malfoy. Although I told Hagrid I still couldn’t think of a suitable name. I blanched internally at the reaction Hagrid would have at the name had chosen.

“Those half-Kneazles are sharp creatures. You couldn’t have a full Kneazle, they’re too full of themselves, not personable at all…” Hagrid went on, apparently thankful for something light to talk about. I found that I was thankful for light conversation, as well.

We talked about old times, the times where Hagrid had acquired some new creature or another. We talked about Buckbeak and Norbert. After a while, we were laughing again, like we had only a few weeks before. It was not long until noon came upon us, and we quickly arranged ourselves, Hagrid donning his ugly fur dress coat and me my pumps. I Transfigured my coat into a warm cloak and threw it over my shoulder, raising the hood.

As I walked with Hagrid, I could already see the people gathering along the shore, and the smaller white tomb in which Minerva was to be laid. Hagrid had once again taken up the duty of placing the body, and he excused himself to go to the castle.

The wind was brisk off the Lake, and I lowered my hood a bit more. I noticed many familiar faces: Hogwarts staff, Ministry officials, and the stiff formality of Aurors. I placed myself in the penultimate’ row of chairs, on the outside of the group. I sat down and waited, watching as people began filling in the chairs. I spotted the Weasley clan, or what remained of it, toward the front. Ron was not present, which did not surprise me. Surely he was off somewhere around the other side of
the world and unable to come. I spotted the Lovegoods near the Weasleys, as well as Neville’s family, and his grandmother who had been the same age as Minerva.

There were other familiar families, all once having been Gryffindors or contemporaries with Minerva. But none of them noticed me, just as I wanted it.

When the funeral began, I remembered Dumbledore’s service. Minerva’s was much smaller than his. Hagrid came from the castle, carrying what was left of my mentor, wrapped in a red velvet shroud. He was crying just as he had been at Albus’ funeral, and I, despite my best efforts, began to cry as well.

It was Professor Flitwick who did the formalities, nearly breaking down twice as Hagrid laid the body atop the tomb. Flitwick spoke the last words, ‘so mote it be.’ The tomb flashed a brilliant gold, and Minerva McGonagall was entombed. I shuddered.

The crowd began to dissipate then, some heading for the gate, others for the castle for a small reception. I sat very still as they passed, unnoticed by all. And when I deemed it safe, I stood. There were only a few people lingering; Aurors mostly, Neville and Arthur talking with an Auror I did not recognise. I moved toward the tomb, noticing that the current Gryffindor house had sent a wreath of red and gold roses. I smirked through my tears; Minerva had cared little for roses. In fact, she preferred wildflowers. I was of the same mind. Neither of us were the hothouse flower type…

The white marble was warm from the winter sunlight as I laid my hand upon it. Three people who had been important to my development lay on this shore, and I glanced at the other two tombs. All three had been heroes, Minerva the only one to survive Voldemort’s madness. She would be the last to be entombed on this shore.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard Severus Snape snicker, and the words ‘I’m no hero,’ echo through the ether. I smiled. Snape had been a hero to me. As had Minerva.

“Any thoughts on Minerva McGonagall’s passing, Miss Granger?” a voice said from behind me and very close to my ear.

I whirled about, pulling my wand. Not another damn reporter!

But as my hood shifted, I saw that I was not aiming at a reporter, not unless he had taken up the profession.

“Oh, hexing me would not be a good idea, Miss Granger,” he drawled, his gloved hands up in a pose of surrender.

My eyes narrowed. I wanted to cackle insanely, I wanted to attack, I wanted to scream for help, and I wanted to quickly disappear all at the same time. Of all the people in the wide world, it would have to be Draco sodding Malfoy who would recognise me, and, most of all, rile me. I quickly composed myself and shoved my wand back into my Transfigured cloak, pulling back the hood to let the sunlight hit my face.

Malfoy blinked, and strangely enough, smiled.

“I am so glad I was right…it is you.”

I blinked back. He had been guessing? The bleeding ferret should have died ten years ago!
“What is that you need, Mr. Malfoy?”

Oh, that sounded officious enough.

“I have a few questions for you.”

I sighed. “Are you a reporter?”

“Merlin’s beard, of course not!”

I felt my brow furrow. I could not remember if Draco Malfoy did anything besides being the most arrogant prick known to mankind.

“I work for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

I frowned, “You…you are an Auror?”

It seemed ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. Draco Malfoy, an Auror? Hell must have frozen over.

“A bright witch like yourself must know that there are no such things as Aurors anymore. There aren’t enough Dark Wizards to fill a teaspoon nowadays, Miss Granger.”

His tone was condescending.

“I am part of the ‘police force,’ now.”

He was talking down to me as if I were three years old, enunciating the words.

“Surely you are familiar with how a police system works, being Muggleborn.”

And he did not say ‘Mudblood.’

“Of course I know what the ‘police’ are, you ridiculous man.”

“Do you want to see my credentials, or my badge?”

I wanted to hex him. But he did pull out a wallet from inside a pocket in his dapper grey suit. I could see a wand in a chest holster just inside, and I could tell that he had a second wand strapped to the inside of his left sleeve.

With a flourish, the wallet opened, and there inside was a silver badge, a true mark of a person who was part of the Ministry’s new concept of law enforcement. The number on his badge was 999, and I filed that bit of information away to think upon another time. His name was printed on a plastic ID card, along with a moving picture of his head, spinning slowly to show every aspect of his profile. I read the ID and quickly looked away.

DCI Draco A. Malfoy, Detective Chief Inspector.

I wanted to vomit. Draco Malfoy was the Detective Chief Inspector of Magical Law Enforcement, two steps from being Detective Chief Superintendent...
He flipped the wallet closed and stuffed it back into his coat.

“I have a few questions about your former Head of House, Miss Granger. Do you have a few moments to talk?”

So formal… I turned to regard him again. It had been almost ten years since I had last seen him, but if I had not recognised the blond hair and the trademark Malfoy family drawl, I would have deigned him to be a distant cousin of the Malfoy family and not Draco Malfoy himself. That was how much he had changed.

He was taller than I remembered, but then again, I was always on the short side. His hair was still pale platinum, but no longer slicked back. In fact, he had his hair cut very short, the only length spiked up in sharp spires. He did not look like Lucius, but more like a picture Harry had shown me of Regulus Black…Draco and Regulus were related, after all. The snivelling ferret face and cold eyes were softer, more masculine and adult. The only things that had not changed were the smug quirk of his lips and the cold gleam in his silver eyes.

“Five to ten minutes, at most, Miss Granger.”

I came back to myself, and looked about, noting that Arthur was watching my interaction with Draco Malfoy with a face full of concern from near the doors to Hogwarts. Almost everyone else was gone, and Hagrid had yet to collect and escort me to the dungeons as he had promised. I had had every intention of going straight home after the funeral.

However, Malfoy’s badge was legitimate as best as I could tell, and Arthur was not coming over to rescue me.

“Miss Granger?”

There was a new impatience in his voice, and suddenly I felt like a cornered animal. My feet itched to run…but running often gave the impression that one was guilty of something.

“Private, someplace private, if you don’t mind, Detective Chief Inspector,” I managed to say, my throat closing up from some unidentifiable fear.

Malfoy smiled, and the fear increased. “Of course, Miss Granger. Shall we walk?”

I nearly reeled when he offered his arm to me. But I took it, using my other hand to replace my hood. It would not do for anyone but Arthur Weasley to see me walking with Draco Malfoy.

This had to be nightmare. I walked, slowly, not quite comfortable with the pumps sinking into the sodden ground. The February sun had melted most of the snow, creating a muddy quagmire for any woman in heels. But I walked, trying not to think about the man at my side and how in the world he had bought his way into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. ‘Police Force,’ my fat arse! I had always called them Aurors, but that had been a different time. I knew better than to think that Draco Malfoy was an Auror…but he must be a Hit-Wizard or some amalgamation of Auror/Hit-Wizard. Merlin, I had isolated myself too effectively.

We walked toward the greenhouses and when we came to the nearest one, Malfoy suggested we step inside and warm ourselves. I did not answer, but stepped into Greenhouse 9 where Neville usually conducted Seventh Year classes. At the moment, there were only a few pots of aloe inside, and nothing else. It was warm, though, and I was thankful for that.
I watched Malfoy closely as he shut the door and drew his wand from the chest holster, moving down a row of worktables, glancing keenly about before casting a Charm to isolate our conversation with a Muffliato. With a façade of civility he motioned me to sit upon a crate of pots while he pulled himself upon the edge of a worktable, sitting above me. It was unnerving. I knew he was wanting to put himself on some psychological high ground…

“You work for the Department of Mysteries, do you not?”

His voice was almost saccharine, placating. I wanted to claw his eyes out.

“You know I do.”

“Ah, but you did not know I worked in the same building; why is that?”

He had always hated me, and I wondered how long it took for him to plan such a terrible form of revenge.

“I do not have much dealings with other departments. My work is classified.”

“Yes, as an Unspeakable. Well…I hope you will speak about a few matters that my department would like to clear up.”

I wanted to gape at him.

“First, the fact that there is no record of residence for you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“We find it peculiar, a bit suspect.”

‘We’ meaning the higher ups in the Ministry, I could only assume.

“I live in a house, which is Unplottable. If you were to send an owl, the post would arrive. If you were to call by Floo, you most likely would receive an answer.”

He smiled. It was a terrible smile, again, placating.

“You do not give your address for the sake of privacy?”

“Exactly.”

Malfoy crossed his arms, and I knew then, he was finally going to get to the point, and it did not really have to do with Minerva.

“When was the last time you saw Potter?”

The smiles were gone, as was the saccharine tone, and I was glad for it. This was the Draco Malfoy I remembered…cruel, spoilt, and demanding.

“At his wedding, eight or so years ago.”
His eyes narrowed dangerously and my feet itched again to run.

“So you had no contact with him while he was inside St. Mungo’s psychiatric ward?”

“Until recently, I had no idea that he was ill.”

“And how did you find out?”

I tried not to think too much, murmuring, “Someone at work left a copy of the Prophet laying about a few months ago…I think there was something about Harry in an editorial…”

The worst part was that I had no idea if it were true. But Malfoy nodded sharply.

“What about Ronald Weasley, has he been about, lately?”

I frowned. “Is someone suspecting Ron for something? He works in your department, Malfoy.”

“Yes, one of the last Aurors. He is suspected of no wrongdoing, I was just asking for the sake of information.”

I sighed. “The last bit of news of Ron came to me by postcard at Christmas. He said he was in Bali.”

Malfoy nodded again, and I was quickly growing annoyed.

“Look, Malfoy, I don’t know exactly what you are getting at, or what any of this has to do with Minerva…but won’t you tell me what this is really about?”

I sounded like I was begging, and perhaps I was. I had cut myself off from the world a little too well. I no longer had friends in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, or in the Minister’s office, for that matter.

“This is about Harry Potter, Granger. And with you being one of his best friends, supposedly, it is only natural I ask you questions.”

He stood, brushing off the back of his suit. His silver eyes peered down at me, and I could feel him judging me, sizing me up in an instant.

“I just told you all I know. I just found out that my best friend is insane, a killer, and now on the run. To top it off, my mentor and former Head of House, has just died! I do not know what is going on, and I would like you, or someone with the capacity, to tell me!”

The tears came, and my cheeks flushed. I was stronger than this, and I certainly did not want Malfoy, of all people, to see me cry.

“Your Potter has been here at Hogwarts, Granger, and he has killed Minerva McGonagall, along with Aberforth Dumbledore in Hogsmeade. He is now considered ‘armed and dangerous,’ and from all of my indications, he has not gotten far from Hogwarts.”

I fainted. Had I ever really fainted before, I was not sure… I honestly fainted at Malfoy’s words. I could say why I had fainted, exactly, but my worst fears had been confirmed.
When I came to, it was to find Malfoy holding me as Arthur wiped at my face with a piece of wet flannel. Hagrid was arguing with someone, and I quickly realised I was on the floor of the greenhouse. Then it came…although I tried to stop it…all my breakfast and breakfast tea spewed from my mouth in a great fit of sick…spilling down Malfoy’s impeccable grey suit.

Somehow, I felt vindicated.

Arthur sat me up on the crate from which I’d tumbled when I fainted, asking me if I had hit my head. He fussed worse than Molly ever had, and I swatted him away, resting my elbows on my knees. I finally got my head to stop spinning, and the truth of situation settled neatly in my brain. Once again, I faintly heard Severus Snape’s voice, but I could not make out the words.

“Jane, dear, are you alright?” Arthur whispered.

I nodded slowly. It was too warm in the greenhouse and I motioned for Arthur to help me to my feet. Outside, I realised Hagrid was arguing with two Aurors…scratch that, two detectives in plain clothes. Arthur held my arm gingerly as I made my way to the corner of the greenhouse and began retching again. Nothing came.

I started digging through the inner pocket of my Transfigured cloak, finding the last phial of Pepper Up. I used my teeth to pull out the cork, spitting it out onto the ground and dumped the potion down my throat. The effect was immediate, and I could breathe again, think again.

Arthur rubbed circles into my back, and although I found the gesture calming, I found it unnecessary. I pulled away from Arthur and walked back to the door of the greenhouse where Draco Malfoy stood looking down the empty worktables, sick still staining the front of his nice, expensive suit. He seemed dishevelled and as he raised a hand to scratch his chin absently, I noticed he was missing an emerald cuff link. A sick sense of satisfaction washed over me.

Hagrid pushed at the policemen who stood firm, gazing into the greenhouse to Malfoy, as if expecting instructions. I realised then how important Malfoy really was, after all.

“You think he might come for me, don’t you?”

I felt Arthur’s hand on my shoulder, but ignored it as I spoke to Draco Malfoy’s back.

“It is a possibility. We know you live somewhere in the Forest, he might venture there.”

Malfoy did not turn, and it angered me.

“He doesn’t know that I live in the Forest. The only people who knew were Hagrid, Minerva, and Albus Dumbledore’s portrait!”

“And now Arthur Weasley and my men outside… Potter could have extracted that bit of information from McGonagall before he killed her, have you thought of that?”

I recoiled. No, I hadn’t had the time…

“How did he kill her?”

My voice was small, and I immediately hated myself.
“A little known suffocating curse. He literally stole the breath from her lungs. It was a quick death, but painful. He rearranged her body so that no one would see how she had clawed at him or the bed,” he said, still not turning to look at me, somehow fascinated with the way the sun was just then coming around the castle to light the greenhouse.

I turned my own attention to the sick on his shoes. They were Italian shoes, worth more than what I made in six months.

“Her fingernails…” I muttered, the realisation setting in.

“Coupled with his signature in the wards.”

“But fingernail scrapings are Muggle…” I began.

“Our department has adopted Muggle technology, Granger. We’re not totally in the dark ages,” he drawled unamused, pulling out his wand and finally cleaning the sick off his body. He made a disapproving noise and I caught a curse under his breath.

“Why her? Why Old Abe?”

It was what I was thinking, but Arthur was the first to ask it. He was as desperate as I for answers, Harry was still his son-in-law, I believed.

“We do not know for certain, and honestly, Mr. Weasley, do you think I would tell you any more than I already have?”

Malfoy turned, his eyes like frozen mercury. The sneer on his face was familiar, as was the tone of his voice. Those eyes moved from Arthur to me, and I swallowed thickly.

“You are to be put into protective custody, Miss Granger.”

Triumph, it was clear in his voice.

“Absolutely not!”

Malfoy blinked and a few panes of glass above his head rattled. I amaze myself sometimes.

“I have not tried to keep people out of my life for ten years just to have you barging in again! I have enough protection, thank you very much. And if, for a moment, I feel as if I am in danger, I can get myself out. I did not live through Voldemort or his Death Eater without learning how to defend myself.”

I especially stressed ‘Death Eaters’ for Malfoy’s sake, but it did not seem to phase him. He only reapplied that placating, sickly-sweet, boyish smile, and said something that shocked me to the very core.

“Have it your way, Granger…”
It was after dark when I was able to return home. After Malfoy, it was his men who interrogated me with the same questions… Then I had to convince Arthur I did not want to go to the Burrow, that I was no safer there than my own home. If Harry were truly insane, he might as well go after his own wife rather than me. Of course, the logic of that statement was terribly flawed for many reasons. Hagrid detained me further by forcing me to eat something in the kitchens of the castle since I had ‘puked’ up everything I had had for breakfast. I ended up taking away a parcel of pineapple cake in my bottomless pocket.

I opted out of taking the Floo home, there were still too many ‘policemen’ about, watching every person in and out of the castle. However, my secret passage was still secret and Horace stuck his head out of his office door to pass me the book he meant to give me the day Minerva died…the Lives of Dark Lords, seventh edition.

I swapped my pumps for my boots and added a warming Charm to the coat and took off into the Forest. I walked without looking, too wrapped up in my own thoughts. So much had happened that I knew it would take time to process it all. But the fact that Harry had definitely killed Minerva seemed as much a nightmare as Draco Malfoy being a Detective Chief Inspector.

When I came upon the outermost set of wards, I frowned. What if Harry were looking for me and some how found out that I was in the Forest? I shook my head and pushed through the first set of wards, onto the second through seventh layer within a matter of seconds. I paused at the last and tenth ward, thinking that maybe, just maybe Harry was really clever enough to get past ten layers of wards. But…I was home and everything seemed normal from the outside. I let my forehead fall into my palm at the thought of Malfoy…the cat. What were the chances that I would see Malfoy…the Detective Chief Inspector at Minerva’s funeral? I had to tell Malfoy, the cat, about this…

Through the door, locking it behind me, I started to laugh softly. If only I could just wake up from this nightmare!

I flicked my wand toward the fireplace and heat suffused the room. I did not bother with the candles, the moonlight streaming through the windows enough illumination for me to move about.

“Malfoy…Malfoy, where are you?” I called, surprised the cat had not greeted me at the door.

I pathetic mewl from the bathroom made me turn as I was hanging my coat on the peg. I missed the peg entirely and the heavy coat fell to the stone floor.

“Malfoy, you silly thing, did you get yourself shut in the loo?” I called with a laugh, moving through the dark to the bathroom door. I tried to remember how in the world the door could have shut when I found myself falling, skidding across the stone floor until my head slammed into the front door.

Spots…only spots.

I shook my head, realising that I no longer had my wand, and that Malfoy, my cat, was crying pitifully from the bathroom. I was in the floor. What the hell…? I could not have collided so hard into the kitchen counter, and I most certainly did not trip.
There was a shuffling sound from somewhere from the area of the bedroom and I started to sit up. In the moonlight and firelight, I could see my wand laying against the base of the central island counter, and with a wagging finger, I tried to Summon it wordlessly. However, before it began to move, two bare and filthy feet appeared in a ray of moonlight next to the island. The sight of bloody toes made me gasp, and I knew…I knew what had shut Malfoy into the bathroom and what had truly made me pause as I entered the wards.

The shadows were still too thick for me to see him, but I could smell him…body odour, soil, must…and somewhere those scents reminded me of Sirius.

“Where’s Malfoy?”

He spoke and I knew it was Harry…but the voice was different, deeper.

My coat! Damn it, there was the Portkey in my coat, and it was closer than my wand. If only I could get to that… Wait. Harry had a wand, ‘armed and dangerous’ Malfoy the DCI had said. Damn…damn it!

“Where’s Malfoy, Hermione?”

He was angry and his toes twitched…that was all I could see of him.

“Wh-what?” I asked…forgetting. My head pounded and I could feel hot blood on the back of scalp…a concussion, surely.

He stepped forward, and I was assaulted by the very sight of him. Deranged…Bellatrix and Sirius would have paled in comparison to what I was seeing.

Harry Potter had once been handsome in his dress robes at his wedding, but now…now…my mouth quivered. Oh gods, this was not my Harry… His hair was long, spilling past his wide shoulders in inky tangles. He did not have his glasses, and I could just see a slice of emerald where the moonlight struck his gaunt and unshaven face. He wore rags that resembled what had once been neat pale gold St. Mungo’s hospital pyjamas, but had been ripped in various places, the front open to reveal a pale chest and a trail of dark chest hair. It seemed that every bit of Harry was torn and raw, and even his once handsome face had the look of someone who had faced Dementors.

“Malfoy, where is he?”

Aberforth’s wand was in his fist, somehow I knew it, and I tried not to start crying.

“He’s…he’s in the bathroom.”

It was my only opening, my only chance…would my cat mind being a diversion? Merlin, I hoped not.

Harry moved, Seeker-like, toward the bathroom door, ready to blast it open, and as he did, I moved. I was never a Seeker, like Harry had been, but I was fast enough to reach the coat just as he kicked in the door. I heard the impact of a random Stunning hex and saw grey streak out of the bathroom. I was digging through the pocket for the Portkey, finding everything but, it seemed.

“Malfoy!” Harry roared, and I thought, for a moment I had the damn thing…
“You!”

Too late! I screamed in pain and terror as a large hand grabbed me by the hair and pulled me to my feet. My body lurched and my feet literally left the floor as Harry spun me to collide with the bedroom door. My skull collided with the wood, and I saw more spots. The door gave under the impact and opened so that I tumbled into the small room, my head bashing against the side of the bed. My jaw snapped and I knew I bit through the side of my tongue.

And then, I, for the second time in a day, blacked out…
“Why are you hiding in there, come out, I won’t hurt you…”

I had been dreaming, Harry…

“Come on, kitty…Harry won’t hurt you…”

Hissing…

I tasted blood, and I opened my eyes. Moonlight still, Harry… I closed my eyes again until the rattle and breaking of dishware forced me to accept that I was not dreaming.

“Damn it!”

His voice came from the kitchen. I was on the bed, my hands tucked on my chest as if I were dead. I still could taste blood, and I felt some also caked in the lashes of my left eye. My coat was just visible near the door, but my wand was out of range. Portkey…damned Portkey, I could get to it if I were quiet.

“Here, kitty…Harry’ll give you a tin of fish…”

His voice was cloying, soft, almost gentle, but I knew better. I slid from the side the bed and noticed that my boots have been removed and set near the door.

Quiet…stealth…

“You’re not Crookshanks, are you? No, you are a new kitty…”

I cringed. Harry remembered Crooks…and he remembered Draco Malfoy, mistaking my familiar for the odious man. I crawled across the stone floor and nearly blacked out again as my head spun. I knew I had a concussion at the very least, but I knew I had to endure if I wanted to live, and I wanted to live…

“Are you Malfoy? Why would she call you that?”

I heard my familiar hiss again, and Harry’s chuckle.

My fingertips grasped the coat and I tugged, trying not to make a sound. When the coat was in my lap, I dug…dug,…and came up with nothing, not a damned thing!

“What are you doing, Hermione?”

He was in the doorway with a can of half opened salmon in his left hand, Aberforth’s wand in the
other. With a flick, the candles lit the room, and finally I could see Harry’s eyes. Those gorgeous emerald orbs were furious.

The coat and the salmon were suddenly on the floor, and Harry held me by the hair, lifting me to my feet, the stolen wand pressed into my throat. My arms were useless; my whole body was useless as I stared wide-eyed at the lunatic who had once been my best friend.

“Looking for that Portkey, weren’t you?”

Beyond Harry, on the counter of the island, was everything that had been in the pocket of my coat, the pineapple cake half eaten, obviously by the man who literally had my life in his hands.

“Is your cat called Malfoy?”

It seemed like an absurd question, considering the circumstances.

“Yes…” I gasped, the pain of hairs being ripped from my scalp most irritating.

“Funny, Hermione…”

“I-I thought so…”

He smiled, but it was not reassuring as he pressed the wand tip deeper into the skin of my throat. And the smile faded as he pushed me back into the room, finally releasing my hair, but keeping the wand tip firmly pressed into my larynx.

“I have been looking for you.”

I blinked slowly. “Why’s that, Harry?”

“I wanted to see you…and Ron. Where’s Ron?”

I tried to swallow, but there was blood in my throat. “He’s working in Bali, Harry.”

Harry frowned, and the wand tip pulled back slightly. “Bali? Did his parents send him there?”

Confusion, and slowly I remembered what Arthur had said…

“Yes…until everything’s settled down a bit.”

“Why didn’t you leave?”

I sudden had tears in my eyes… “I couldn’t leave you, Harry. We still have to find the last one…”

Horcruxes… The recognition in Harry’s eyes made the tears flow, and suddenly the wand tip was gone from my throat and wiry arms bound my body as he embraced me. He started to wail into my shoulder, and I tried to raise my arms to touch him, but he slid down my body to kneel at my feet. I tensed as he pressed his face into my thighs, rubbing his filthy and unshaven cheeks into the sateen of my dress. My hands rose, and I considered Summoning my wand again…until his face moved so that his nose was just at the juncture of my thighs and his hands ran up my legs under my dress.

“Hermione…gods Hermione, I missed you…”
A sob escaped me, part in sorrow for the man who had once been the Boy Who Lived, and in part to the fact that his dirty fingers had found the waistband of my underpants under my skirts.

Where was his wand? I tried not to move as my eyes cast about until I caught a glimpse of wood just near the door. I wondered if I could Summon it without his notice, hex him, and then run… I would rather have my wand, but a strange wand would have to do.

I stifled a shriek as Harry slid my underpants down my legs, and stiffened as he began gathering my skirt, lifting it slowly, trailing his rough cheek along my thigh.

“Harry…what are you…” I gasped as the cool air hit my inner thighs and my…

“Hermione…Hermione…” he wept into my leg.

I couldn’t hold back anymore, and I squirmed, nearly falling over at Harry’s tight embrace of my legs. And when his nose brushed against the course hairs of my…damn it…my centre, I tried to jump away. I did not get far, and Harry threw me onto the bed, snarling like a wild animal.

“You know…you know…” he breathed, his hair falling into his face, a rough hand pushing it away thoughtlessly. “You know, Hermione, these coy tricks may work on Ron…but I’m getting tired of it!”

Merlin’s arse! Why hadn’t I kept a backup wand?

“Accio!”

It was out of sheer panic, but Aberforth’s wand streaked toward me… I had not meant to vocalise! When it was nearly in my hand, the wand was swatted away, and it clattered against the floor, snapping and blowing red sparks as it flew into the kitchen.

“No! No, Hermione, we don’t play that way, now!”

Fear, unshakeable fear, Voldemort, or the thought of him had never made me shake as badly as I did before Harry Potter. And the fear quickly turned to revulsion as he launched himself upon me, pinning me down to my own bed, his face hovering above mine, leering. He held my wrists tightly above my head, and his knees insinuated themselves between mine…and I knew I was trapped.

Why did I not take that offer of protective custody?

*Your silly Gryffindor pride,* Severus Snape said clearly.

I groaned as Harry lowered his face toward mine and the scent of him overwhelmed my senses. He was filthy, sweaty, and I tried not to gag.

“You are going to help me, Hermione…”

I turned my face away, I could not look into those eyes.

“You’re going to help me find it…”

Harry’s words meant nothing to me, I was not listening. All I could think about were defensive
spells, something that would give me time to run to the emergency Portkey resting on the island
countertop. How he had known it was a Portkey, I did not have the time to ponder. It was a wooden
spindle with red thread, innocuous, and decidedly 'unmagical' by its appearance. But I could just
see it on the countertop…and I could Summon it wandlessly if my hands were free.

Harry shifted and I cried out as he forced my wrists together in one of his large hands, crushing the
tiny bones. It felt as if I had thousands of shards of glass for wrist bones.

“You’re not listening to me, Hermione. Pay attention, or I’ll…” he hissed, but trailed off, angling
his nose down to my throat and inhaling deeply.

I tensed and squeezed my eyes shut. Harry and I had never been intimate, not in the manner that led
to physicality, and to have him on me, smelling my neck, pressing me down into my own bed made
me feel more and more violated. This Harry was not my Harry. My Harry would never hurt me; my
Harry would never make me bleed.

“You’ll what?” I whispered, trying not to sound as rattled as I truly was… “Kill me?”

He groaned, and his tongue licked out to taste my pulse point. I shivered.

“Like you killed Minerva?”

“No, no, Hermione…not like that…” he whispered, his left hand moving along my collarbone to
the front of my wrinkled dress. With a mighty wrench, the sateen ripped down to the cinched belt,
exposing my black bra.

Tears blinded me again. If I could keep him calm…if only…

“But…but you’ll kill me?” I sobbed, unable to stop myself.

Harry said nothing, lowering his face to my chest so that his tangled hair fell against my face. The
black locks smelled like mud and wood smoke, dirty, and I turned my head to the side of my arm,
burying my nose in the intact sleeve of Minerva’s dress.

He listened to my rapid heartbeat for a few moments, his grubby fingers tracing circles into my
ribs. When he was no longer satisfied with that, he undid the front clasp of my bra and ripped at the
lace until it was torn beyond repair. I tried not cry out, tried not to breathe as he rubbed his grubby
cheek against my breasts, inhaling deeply as if to imprint every scent of my body into his tattered
mind. Harry hummed contently as he ran his chapped lips over the tips of my nipples. I had to bite
my lip from making a noise that would betray my fear…and my forced arousal. No one, not even
Ron, had ever touched me that way…

And then Ginny Potter’s face swam into my mind’s eye. Merlin…how could Harry have become
so unhinged?

“I won’t kill you Hermione…not me…but you’ll die with me…and we’ll be together forever. Ron
too…we’ll all be together. Mum and Dad, Sirius and Remus, Dumbledore and McGonagall…and all of
us together forever…”

I took a breath, my chest was heaving from panic. Harry seemed to relish the fear, and as his mouth
closed over my left nipple, I croaked.
“What about Ginny?”

Harry said nothing, his tongue twisting around my nipple causing my thighs to quiver involuntarily. Teeth dug into the flesh, and I screamed, my body trying to dislodge my attacker who was no longer the Harry Potter I knew. I could smell my own blood again, and see it running down the side of my left breast onto the bed. I thrashed my legs, and finally Harry pulled away, twisted version of a boyish smile on his bloody lips.

“H-Harry…please…” I whispered through my tears…and immediately regretted my words. It had been a plea for mercy, but I knew that was not what he heard.

“I’ll make you see, Hermione. I’ll make you mine, and then you won’t have a choice…”

The skirts of the dress were pushed up again, and if it were not for Harry’s inhumanly strong hold on my obviously broken wrists and his weight upon my hip, I would have fought tooth and nail. As it was, to my fear, anger, and embarrassment, I could not move enough to bite or scratch. I was going to be raped and murdered in my own bed…

Minerva…Merlin…someone, gods, help me…

“You…will…help…me…” he grunted, and I screamed.

I was being torn to shreds, and blood, I could feel it between my thighs, I could feel it inside me as Harry rammed three rough fingers inside my body. My fear had drawn every bit of bodily moisture and consciousness toward my brain, and the penetration was dry… But there was blood, dark, fragrant blood as he thrust his cold, blunt fingers into me. Every movement of his fingers brought screams, such loud screams that I thought there was someone else in the room, and it could not be me who was producing such a terrible noise.

It hurt…it hurt so much that I felt as if those fingers were clawing at my womb, tearing it out piece by piece. I could feel magic in my womb, a cold, terrible wave of magic…

“You will help me find the stone!” Harry roared back, pulling his hand away violently so that I shrieked in an absolute agony I could not remember feeling before then. Blood seemed to spray from me, and it dripped from his hand like liquid night.

Harry released my wrists, but knelt between my knees, peering down at my exposed and bloody body. He held his bloody hand close to his chest like a precious item, and licked his lips, eyes wide. I was close to unconsciousness, bleeding from my head, my breast, and now my most private of parts… I had no strength to move, and a part of my brain cursed me in Severus Snape’s voice, cursed me to calm down, cursed me to move…but I could not. All I could think of was a stupid thought…no one would ever want me now…not after this. I was damaged, absolutely damaged by the one man I had loved most of my life…my best friend…

“Tell me, Hermione, tell me…” he whispered, his body moving to bend down, his face coming nearer and nearer to the apex of my thighs.

I opened my mouth to say something, but I could not speak. It hurt to speak, it hurt to move.

His tongue lashed out first, almost to soothe the raw fresh, but then I screamed again, louder, as his mouth engulfed my wound and my clitoris, lapping at first, then biting like a devouring animal. My hands twitched, and my brain was beginning to shut down.
No, Hermione! Wake up, damn you! Fight him, fight him!

I wished Severus Snape were really there, he would have no qualms about killing this man who had once been Harry Potter. If Severus Snape were alive…surely he would rescue me from this hell.

I let go of the pain, and opened my eyes, which moved to the door, to the spindle. I reached out as best I could, mustering all my strength, and willed the spindle to my hand. If only I could just…

“Granger? Granger! Fucking hell, I’m almost through!”

It was not Harry’s voice, but a male voice that I dimly recognised. A light flashed from the main room, and there was a resounding crack that made me shut my eyes, causing my arm to fall over the edge of the bed limply. I could only hear, no longer see, or feel.

The sound of a powerful spell whizzing over my body smelled like ozone, and there was a muffled shout. Glass shattered so loudly that it deafened me, and I knew that shards of that glass were in my right arm, grazing the right side of my face. There were roars of anger and pain, growing more and more distant, and I could smell the Forest.

“Sergeant, did you get the tracking mark?” that familiar voice asked in a frantic, irritated growl.

“No, sir, he moved too quickly. I think he saw it coming, or sensed it.”

“No matter, he won’t get far. Secure the wards, I want this cottage invisible, closed up…alert Forensics to get their arses over here!”

“Yes, sir, I’m on it.”

“And get Healer Wiscombe to the safe house!”

“Yes, sir.”

There were people, at least eight, in my home. I could smell the Floo, and hear more people coming through.

“Cordon off the bedroom after I get her moved.”

One voice, closer, that familiar voice that had called my name...

“Is it wise to move her, sir? We haven’t documented…”

“She needs a Healer, and safe place to recover! Potter might return, and Granger cannot be here if he does!” the voice just over me snapped.

I knew the voice, and my eyes opened a crack to gaze up into a stormy face with stormy eyes.

“Can you hear me, Granger?”

Malfoy, Draco…
“Y-yes…”

He leaned closer, his ear near my lips.

“I need to move you and get you out of this house. Do you understand?”

“Yes…” I whispered again.

“Sweet Merlin…” someone gasped with alarm from the door, but I could only see Malfoy as he wrapped me in my coat and gingerly lifted me from the bed. I cried out as he lifted my legs, the pain returning, and he paused, looking down at me with an expression I could not recognise.

My head lolled against his chest, and I could hear the violent tattoo of his heart. I could feel eyes upon me, strange eyes, and I could feel their pity. It made me want to vomit on Malfoy again.

Malfoy…gods…

“Easy now, don’t struggle,” he said, his arms clutching a bit more firmly.


Malfoy paused just inside the kitchen. “What are you talking about, Granger, I’m right here…”

I sighed, but it came out as a gasp.

“Cat…my cat, Malfoy…”

I felt his body stiffen.

“Has anyone seen a cat around?” he called.

There were a few voices, but I could not hear what they were saying.

“Here, sir…”

A pitiful mewl made me more conscious of my surroundings, and soon Malfoy was in my arms, shivering as badly as I was, his tail as big as a Beater’s bat, his eyes a frightening shade of red and silver…

The human Malfoy muttered under his breath as he began moving again, every determined and heavy step jarring me painfully.

“Damn it all, Flint…Flint? Pull the comb from my back pocket, would you?”

I did not understand at first, but as Malfoy shifted me and my familiar in his arms, I understood immediately.

Portkey…
I was screaming roughly by the time I was laid down on a soft bed in some unknown place. Malfoy, the cat, lay near me, crying as I screamed, licking the tips of my right hand fingers from time to time with his rough tongue. My head was empty of all things except the pain and Malfoy’s terrible cries.

I knew there were people near me, but I had no idea who they could be. When I felt my clothing vanish from my skin, I screamed louder, suddenly cold, and vulnerable. And soon, my screams did not come, and I could feel magic in my throat. I had been Silenced.

“…possibly brain trauma…two severe concussions, possibly more than…”

A touch of something cold on my forehead stopped the ache there, but the rest of my body throbbed, and my screams remained as intense and as silent.

“Has she been raped?”

“No, but penetrated. The vaginal tearing is severe, but it can be repaired. I will administer several courses of antibiotics, there is saliva in her vaginal passage. Her clitoris can be saved, but it will require at the very least two weeks of bed rest…”

“You mean he…he tore it with his teeth?”

“Yes, sir. The right nipple as well…the damage to the glandular vessels is not as easily repaired, but with time and the proper potions, I am sure we can heal it.”

“Anything else?”

“Her wrists are broken in several places. Whatever he used to bind her was terrible…”

“His hand…it was his hand.”

“One hand, a human hand?”

“Yes, Wiscombe.”

“Merlin…”

“Anything else?”

“Well, uh…bruises mostly, from shoulder to thigh. And cuts from glass, did you say a window? Most are superficial and will heal in no time, but her wrists, her face, and hips will take longer. Then there is her mental health. She is in shock, which is to be expected… Wouldn’t it be better to take her to St. Mungo’s, Chief?”

“Potter escaped from St. Mungo’s, here is better. It is far from Scotland, and the wards around the property will keep her in and him out.”

“I understand, sir. I will begin treatments, if you’ll call Nurse Wronski in, we can start…”

I heard all of this, but I could not see. I could only push what I heard back into the depths of my brain to think about at another point in time. I submitted to the potions being poured down my throat and the uncomfortable prods to my genitalia. I lay very still as I began to feel flesh and bone
knitting back together, but how much time had passed, I could not discern. The voices were no longer over me, but away from me, and I could only hear snatches of conversations. The people were unknown, and I wondered if Malfoy had left me to hunt down Harry.

“...a day to fully regain consciousness...”

“I need to take her statement, Wiscombe.”

Wiscombe was the Healer, and I knew the other voice, cold and stern, was Draco Malfoy. I felt safer when I heard his voice, and part of me felt ridiculous for that reaction.

Sometimes I felt gentle hands touch me, and soft fabric wrap around me, keeping the chill off my skin. Sometimes I felt my familiar’s cool nose against my knuckles and his fur against my toes.

And then, I was awake. Of course, I think I had been awake for a long while, but I could see again as if someone had removed a blindfold from my eyes. Malfoy was curled up at my side, and I realised I was laying on a large bed, larger than my bed at the cottage. It is a soft, warm bed, with a heavy white comforter pulled up to my chin. My hair had been...cut.

I frowned as I stared up at the underside of a canopy of folded cream silk. I could not feel my long hair about my shoulders, and slowly, I slid a hand up to find out why. My head had been shaved, and I felt sore spots on my scalp, knots, and scars...

I tried to sit up, but I could barely lift my head from the pillow. Where was I? What day was it?

“Be still, dear, I’ll call for Wiscombe,” a soft voice said from my bedside.

I froze as my eyes swivelled to see a pale woman sitting on a chair, reading a book by candlelight. It was a face I had not seen in years, a face I thought I would never have to see again.

She rose slowly, her white robes falling beautifully around small, bare feet. As she walked toward a door across the room, I marvelled at how beautiful her blonde hair was, the way it streamed down in back in a perfectly straight cascade of platinum. She glanced back and smiled before slipping into a bright corridor beyond, leaving the door ajar.

Narcissa Malfoy...why was she at my bedside?

The information I had tucked away was taken out again. Draco Malfoy had taken me from my home to this place, which I could only assume to be Malfoy Manor from what he had said to the Healer.

And then the information about my injuries came back.

I could not feel any pain as I lay in Malfoy Manor, but I had the distinct haziness in my mind that I was sure I was under the influence of a pain-reducing potion. I did feel sore, but it was tolerable. I was more concerned about the loss of my hair...and the state of my home and my job.

“Ah, Miss Granger, it is good to see you awake!”

Narcissa returned with a wiry older man with thick glasses and Ministry robes. Healer Wiscombe’s face was very amiable, and as he touched my hand softly, I knew immediately, instinctually, that I could trust this man.
“I am Ernest Wiscombe, and I have been treating you for the past week. I work for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. If you don’t mind I would like to take a look at you, see how your injuries are healing.”

He kept his distance, and I could sense that he was waiting for permission to come nearer. Surely Wiscombe had been trained on how to approach victims of violent crime. I closed my eyes for a moment at that thought, but opened them quickly.

“I…” I started, but my voice came out as a croak.

“Ah, yes, the potions you have been taking have irritated your throat, and you have been unconscious for about a week. A little water might help…”

Narcissa was already passing me a glass with a straw, and I did not question her involvement, not until I had full capabilities of speech, at least. I took two large drinks and immediately felt better.

“I don’t mind…” I managed, my voice still very rough. “Do I have to undress?”

“No, my dear, I just need to pull back this blanket…and sweep my wand.”

I nodded as Wiscombe slowly pulled back the comforter and I saw that I was dressed in a light white nightdress with short sleeves, vee neck, and long hem. I laid very still as Wiscombe ran his wand from the tips of my toes up to my head and down again, pausing over my chest, then my thighs. Lastly, he swept his wand over my head a few times and nodded to himself, gently replacing the comforter over my body.

“Very good. You are healing nicely. Your wrists are healed, and the wounds to your head have closed nicely…”

“And…and my breast, my…” I whispered, my lips quivering.

“Healing well. No infections, and within a week or two, you’ll be healed completely.”

“No permanent damage?” I whispered, glancing to Narcissa who was looking down at her hands in her lap.

Wiscombe’s amiable face tightened and he took a breath. “It is too early to say. Initially, we believed the damage to be superficial, but there was also damage to your cervix. The type of damage was magical in nature, and I’m still unsure as to what the real cause was, or how it could have happened…”

I shivered, and before I could stop my words, “It felt like he was trying to dig my womb out with claws…I have never felt anything like it…”

Wiscombe nodded. “When he is caught, perhaps he will tell us.”

I blinked, and turned to look at Narcissa who regarded me gravely.

“For the time being, I will let you rest. DCI Malfoy will be here in the morning, as will be a few other people who would like to see you, Miss Granger.”
I nodded slowly…trying to process more information. Wiscombe bowed to Narcissa and turned to go, when I remembered…

“My hair…Mr. Wiscombe, was it necessary that my head be shaved?”

Wiscombe smiled sadly in the little bit of candlelight that lit the room. “You were worse off than we had expected, Miss Granger. Your determination to live fooled us…you had a skull fracture, and we did not think you would regain consciousness. The hair was a small price to pay for healing you. It will grow. And surely when you are well enough, you can Charm it.”

I smirked as Wiscombe bowed to me, this time, and left the room. I lay for a long while, thinking, and then began to move. Narcissa was at my side immediately, and I silently let her help me to sit up slightly. It felt good to be able to sit, although I did not have anything to do after sitting up.

“Has Malfoy been fed?” I asked suddenly, turning to look at Narcissa Malfoy. Needless to say, she appeared puzzled.

“Pardon?”

I stifled a laugh. “My cat,” I said pointing at the balled grey animal near my side.

“Ah, yes. The elves have been tending him…Malfoy…” Narcissa said with a furrowed brow. “We did not know what it was called.”

I smiled, although it hurt slightly. “He is a half-Kneazle. And I never meant any disrespect by naming him Malfoy…I did not think I would be meeting your family again.”

“Why did you name him that?”

There was no ice in her voice, which surprised me, there was only curiosity.

“His eyes. And, he reminded me of Malfoy…a bit snobbish.”

“For Draco, I see…”

Silence fell again, and I watched Narcissa move to take up her book. I sighed. I did not like this at all…

“Why am I here? I assume that this is Malfoy Manor.”

Narcissa paused, her pale hand resting on the cover of a leather bound book on the bedside table.

“This is a safe house for Draco’s department. It was part of the Ministry agreement with our family. We were exonerated of war crimes in return for our cooperation with Ministry affairs. And when Draco was made Detective Chief Inspector, he began using the Manor as a safe house.”

I noted the sorrow in Narcissa’s voice, but what that sorrow stemmed from was unclear.

“Why are you here, Mrs. Malfoy?” I asked softly, folding my hands on my sore legs.

“I…I have some experience with potions and Healing. I never was certified, so my methods are unorthodox. Mr. Wiscombe cannot always be here…and I…”
Her voice was penitent, and I understood. She had been watching over me, caring for me. The Pureblood/Mudblood dichotomy had been fading from our world ever since the War, and I could only assume that Narcissa was trying her best to fit in.

“Lucius maintains the wards, and helps Draco and his men with strategy. With Potter’s escape, the Manor has become an unofficial headquarters for such meetings,” Narcissa explained, pulling her wand from her sleeve to light the rest of the candles in the room, making it a bit cheerier.

“Why here and not the Ministry?”

“Leaks in the department. Leaks to the press. The Detective Superintendent knows that Draco is basing his investigation here, and there have been no problems with this arrangement. Potter’s escape has been a sensitive matter from the beginning. But there are other cases, other criminals to be caught and prosecuted…Draco was given Potter’s case because Draco knows Potter…and Draco is a very talented officer…”

Narcissa smiled, albeit smugly, but not at me, just the sort of general proud smile of a mother—the same my own mother had when people used to tell her how bright I was… How bright I had been in school...

I wanted to know more, not about Harry, but about Malfoy. How he had gotten into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, how he had risen so quickly through the ranks…but Narcissa quickly changed the subject.

“I know I should not ask this…but, how are you feeling?”

I knew she did not mean physically…

“Numb.”

“That is to be expected, I suppose.”

I nodded. “I suppose,” I repeated, “There are so many things to think about that I don’t know where to start…”

“From the beginning seems the most logical approach…”

I snorted a laugh and saw that Narcissa was smiling kindly. It was strange to me, to have Narcissa Malfoy smiling at me, but it heartened me.

I slept and when I awoke it was to find Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy standing at the foot of my bed, Lucius holding a tray of breakfast and Narcissa holding two phials of potion. I thought I was dreaming…
“Good morning, Miss Granger,” Lucius said softly, his face made of stone.

I sat up slowly, wincing at the soreness in my back and hips. “Good morning?”

“Draco will be here in an hour, Miss Granger. Are you well enough to take breakfast?”

I blinked at the older man. He had barely aged since the last time I had seen him, and I regarded him with caution.

“I believe so…”

Narcissa cleared her throat, aware that Lucius was staring at me, and not moving to place a tray for me to begin eating. When he finally moved, he skirted Malfoy’s sleeping body and gently placed the tray across my lap, moving away slowly, but still staring at my face. I suddenly wondered how bad I really looked.

“Have some toast and tea before taking these,” Narcissa said, placing the phials on the tray as well, but sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling warmly at me.

“Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy, Mr. Malfoy. I am sorry to be an imposition…”

“Tush, we rarely have visitors, but for you to be brought here in such a state…”

“Lucius!” Narcissa hissed, throwing an icy glare of reproach in her husband’s direction.

I had not been offended, but did note that the senior Malfoy’s drawl had not been one of sympathy or welcome.

“Enjoy your breakfast, Miss Granger,” Lucius Malfoy finished, bowing stiffly, and making his way quickly to the door.

“I made him come, Miss Granger. He has been avoiding anything to do with you, and I felt he should at least greet you…” Narcissa said softly, her eyes moving to her folded hands.

I bit my lip, and stared down at the toast on a china plate. “He has every reason to hate me…as do you and your son…”

Narcissa chuckled suddenly, and I watched, confused, as she laid a hand on her heart.

“My dear girl! Draco told me you had shut yourself away, but for you to be so ignorant… We don’t hate you! Quite the contrary, because of you we were spared a great deal of embarrassment.”

“I…I don’t understand,” I stuttered, frowning.

“You have forgotten, haven’t you?”

I frowned deeper.

“At Hogwarts, after it was all over, we Malfoys were sitting on the edge of the celebration, but you…you sweet girl…you asked if we would join you. The Weasleys and Potter had separated from the rest of the families, and you said you had been left out. You sat with us and brought food and drink. You talked earnestly with us, telling us to start being truthful about our involvement
with the Dark Lord. You hinted about what you knew…the Unbreakable Vow I made with Severus…Draco’s inability to murder Dumbledore… And then you turned to Lucius and called him a foul name…oh, what was it?”

“Pig,” I supplied with sigh, the memory of that night sepia toned and so distant.

“Yes. No one had ever called him something so simple, so base in his life!” Narcissa laughed with such glee that I began to wonder at her sanity.

“Surely I didn’t change the course of Lucius Malfoy’s life by calling him a pig?” I asked sarcastically.

“No, but it started something. For years Lucius had been labouring under a delusion. While I sought to align myself with the winning side, the right side, Lucius was so sure that he would revolutionise the world. Mind, Lucius is old-fashioned to a fault, and he is single minded…it was not just the Last Battle to make him realise how wrong he had been and for how long. It was merely the final straw for him. We barely made it out of the War with a sickle to our name, a home to live in, or a family to call Malfoy.”

I nodded. Lucius Malfoy was no saint, but as far as I knew, he was not aspiring to become the next Dark Lord. I remembered how he had searched frantically for Malfoy that day when Voldemort fell…

“Now, eat. There is a pain-reducing potion and a Pepperup. After Draco leaves, we’ll see about getting you on your feet?”

I nodded again, and began eating. It was a difficult process after not having anything solid in my stomach for a week, but I ate. Narcissa watched like a nosy nurse, and made sure I drank my potions. When she cleared everything away, she cast a few Charms, and my face was scrubbed, my gown switched and my linens cleaned. I felt quite better by the time a knock sounded on the door and Malfoy entered with Arthur Weasley and Healer Wiscombe. Narcissa rose and whispered to Malfoy before taking a seat in her bedside chair, nodding coolly to Arthur.

Conjuring two stools, Malfoy and Arthur sat down closest to the side of the bed while Healer Wiscombe stood next to Narcissa.

“I suppose a ‘good morning’ is in order,” I said, breaking the proverbial ice. The way that Draco Malfoy stared at my face was unnerving. Arthur was looking anywhere but my face, it seemed. Again, I wished I had a mirror.

“Morning, Granger. How are you feeling?” Malfoy said, trying to dash the mechanistic quality in his voice. I could tell he was not a morning person.

“Sore. And a bit bald. Otherwise, I’ll manage.”


It was then Arthur Weasley regarded me with tired, red-rimmed eyes. It was obvious he was having a rough time, and why wouldn’t he?

“I’m here to take your official statement, Granger. You do not mind that Arthur Weasley and Healer Wiscombe act as witnesses?”
I could not say that it made me comfortable, especially Arthur’s presence, but the need to convey the events of that night were far more important, as well as the connections I had made the night before with Narcissa as a sounding board. That, and I was still feeling a distance between how I felt and what had actually happened. Shock, maybe?

“I will consent.”

“Good.”

With that, Malfoy pulled a notepad and a Dicto-Quill from a pocket in his coat, and again I saw his wand in his chest holster.

Malfoy spoke into the Quill, noting the location, date and time, as well as the people present at the interview. Then the first series of questions came, all perfunctory, all common knowledge to Malfoy, some of it answered after Minerva’s funeral. When and where did I meet Harry Potter? When did I first learn of his mental state? Had I any contact with him before his escape from St. Mungo’s? And finally, and the real kicker: Why did I refuse protective custody?

“I refused because I believed that I was safe. I live in seclusion with many wards protecting the location of my home. Ten layers of wards protect from outside intrusions, and the Floo is warded as well,” I answered.

“Yes, a five layer ward which I had to dismantle under the authority of Article 43 of the Code of Magical Law Enforcement Apprehension Procedures.”

What Malfoy said meant nothing to me, and I think I shook my head in ignorance, something I rarely do.

“Article 43 says that an officer has the legal authority to break anti-Apparition and Floo wards of a private residence in the pursuit of a criminal who is in the midst of committing a crime. In your case, assault, and attempted rape, Miss Granger.”

I frowned, “But how did you know that…”

“A simple tracking device let me locate your home, and when I stuck my head through the Floo, I could see Potter through the bedroom door.”

I bit my lip, what tracking device?

“May I proceed, Miss Granger?” Malfoy said, meeting my eyes for the first time that morning. I nodded with a sigh, I filed my questions for later.

“Would you please recount the events from the time you returned home to the point that the detectives entered your home?”

I paused, and glanced at Arthur whose eyes had moved to my face. This would be hard, perhaps the hardest part, but I closed my eyes and began.

It seemed to take forever, trying to fit in every detail I remembered, every little thing Harry said to me. I dared not open my eyes, I could not bear to see Arthur’s face.
And then I remembered Harry’s voice: ‘You will help me find the stone!’

My eyes snapped open, and I began to choke. Something felt wrong. My body and brain were somehow divorced, and it was wrong. I could still Harry’s voice and his words repeating over and over and over… What was happening?

Healer Wiscombe was on me immediately, as was Narcissa, trying to hold my arms down as Wiscombe poured a potion down my throat. The pain…the pain was horrible. I could feel it in my wrists, in my head, in my breast, in my womb… It was odd, like being high. I was cognizant of the lack of control over my body and the able to handle the pain.

“Out! All of you!” Healer Wiscombe roared to Malfoy and Arthur.

I coughed at the bitterness of the potion, and I convulsed involuntarily from the pain in my womb. It felt as though my insides were about to explode…and my brain…it was imploding from simply not understanding why I had no control.

No you don’t, Hermione Jane Granger…Severus Snape roared in the blackness of mind. And suddenly, I could breathe, I could see, and the pain subsided as did the convulsions. I had frightened my familiar so that he cowered under a sideboard near the bathroom door, Narcissa’s hair was out of place, and sweat was pouring down Wiscombe’s face.

“What was that? Wiscombe!” Narcissa wailed, moving to wipe something from my forehead.

I lay very still on my back as Narcissa threw back the blankets to gasp.

Blood…I could smell it, I could feel it. Blood feels a particular way against your skin, and the fact that I knew what it felt like was disturbing to a part of me.

“Merlin…fetch Lucius, Narcissa. I need to examine her. Quickly, woman!”

I was helpless, and tears streamed from the corners of my eyes. What was happening to me? Why couldn’t I…?

The blood was Vanished, as were all the soiled linens. I could just see that my left breast was bleeding again, but the damage was not the same. I could hear frantic footfalls, but time had seemed to bend around me, my perception, my mind distorting it.

“The wounds have eopened, enough to make her bleed as much as the night she arrived,” Wiscombe said to Narcissa, I had not noticed her return to the room. “The damage has basically healed, but still…it is as if someone cut at the newly healed flesh, just enough to cause this…”

“How? How is that possible?” Narcissa asked in a rushed whisper, but fell silent as the door flew open, and Lucius Malfoy entered as if a devil were on the heels of his boots. Wiscombe threw a sheet over my body, as if I were a cadaver…I wanted to scream!

“Dark magic, my dear. You feel it, do you not?”

Narcissa nodded slowly, her eyes meeting mine and softening. She ran a gentle finger along my cheek and turned to Lucius again.

“It could be any number of curses, Lucius. How can we know which one it is for certain?”
Lucius gazed down at me, and I could see the pity and disgust in his eyes. He had his wand out, as if ready to duel some unseen monster.

“That is Draco’s job, ‘Cissa. Let him continue the interview. Whatever Miss Granger remembers might be a clue. I will return to the library, I must consult with…” he said softly his voice trailing off to a distance, and even his eyes softened slightly before he turned away, and addressed Wiscombe, not bothering to finish his sentence. “She needs to be able to speak, Wiscombe. She is the only survivor so far…”

I blinked, and glanced at Narcissa who shook her head. What had he meant exactly?

Wiscombe sighed, and with a quick apology to me, sealed the oozing wounds on my head and breast. With a complicated series of waves of his wand over my belly, the bleeding stopped. Another potion was poured down my throat and a fresh gown was reapplied.

A good hour had passed before Malfoy and Arthur returned to the room, Arthur’s face ashen, and Malfoy’s face expressing his frustration. Before Malfoy could ask his next question, I spoke. I knew I had to say it before I was somehow unable.

“He wants the Stone.”

It did not sound right to me, but it was my voice. I knew I had to say it…

“What stone?”

“The Resurrection Stone, one of the three Deathly Hallows.”

Narcissa’s hand went to her mouth, and Malfoy’s eyes widened a few millimetres.

“He had it…”

“…and lost it in the Forest almost ten years ago,” Malfoy finished.

I felt faint, but I continued.

“I can only imagine why he wants it back, after he gave it up, along with the…”

Lightning struck in my mind, and Severus Snape’s laughter filled my brain.

“Albus…Merlin’s balls! The Elder wand…gods, I am so stupid!”

Narcissa pushed past Malfoy to sit on the side of the bed, a wet rag pressed against the largest laceration on my bare scalp.

Speaking around Malfoy’s mother, I met his eyes. I had to speak quickly, the pain was beginning to return, and with it, this time, I could feel the fog of pain begin to erode my faculties. “You have to check Albus’ tomb, Malfoy! It would explain so much! It would explain how he got past the portraits in the office and into Minerva’s room…”

I paused, feeling Narcissa begin to cry as blood stained the front of my gown. I had to ignore it, I had to ignore Arthur’s ashen face and Malfoy’s scrutinising eyes.
“He got past Aberforth…through the portrait and into the Room of Requirement. He had to sneak to Albus’ tomb and with Aberforth’s wand blow it open… He had the Elder wand the whole time. He had it on him…hidden in his clothes maybe; that had to be the only way he got past my wards...”

I grew faint, Narcissa weeping, trying to keep blood from running into my eyes. Wiscombe was ready to move, ready to tell Malfoy and Arthur to leave...

“If he has the wand…you will not be able to find him. Ron…or I, maybe…no one else.”

“But why would he do this to you, if he thought he needed you?” Arthur asked, weeping, distraught.

“…don’t know…why did he kill Minerva? Aberforth? It doesn’t make any sense… Just promise me…promise you will not call Ron back! They will kill each other, Arthur…” I rasped.

“Miss Granger, you need to lie back now…” Wiscombe started.

I slapped his hands away, and met Malfoy’s eyes again. “Find the curse that killed Minerva, Malfoy…it is a clue…”

Malfoy grabbed his Dicto-Quill and tablet, and shoved them into his pocket. I fell to the bed, watching as Malfoy pushed Arthur Weasley from the room.

It felt as if my last moments were upon me…and I wanted to laugh. My life had made so much sense a month before. I had been healthy, plain, simple, Jane Granger. I lived alone with my cat, I wrote short stories, and worked in my garden. I had regular tea with Rubeus Hagrid and Minerva McGonagall. I talked to Albus Dumbledore’s portrait, and I swapped rare potions ingredients for banned books with Horace Slughorn. Those were my only friends...there were no lovers. There were no lovers because I had loved a man who was dead, and he never would have loved me...the insufferable little know-it-all.

What good is falling in love anyway?

*It is the difference between hope and hopelessness, Miss Granger.*

I had forgotten when I started to hear *his* voice in my head.

Wiscombe fussed over me, healing spells sinking into my skin, but having little effect. Narcissa wept, but she summoned elves to bring phials of various potions from her stores. Activity centred over me, around me, and I closed my eyes. This was not dying, not really; I’d been closer before. More potions, some poured down my throat, others applied to my skin. Hours and hours passed, and I let my body go numb. The pain was only an itch…

“Get out.”

My nose wriggled, there was a new voice and new warmth.

“Get out, both of you!”
The activity stopped, and the warmth of the bodies that had been hovering over me faded away. It was cold without those bodies hovering, and I opened my eyes just a crack. Draco Malfoy stood over me, looking from my bare toes to my bare chest to my bare head.

“Potter used a hex against me in Sixth Year, one he had gleaned from Severus. Do you remember what it was?”

If I had had the energy, I would have grabbed the nearest bit of cloth to hide myself, but as it was, I had no strength to even answer. His eyes skimmed over my body, coldly. I could see my own blood reflected in those eerie silver orbs.

“‘Sectumsempra,’ a particularly nasty spell, as it only could be having been created by my former Head of House. It is worse than a regular cutting spell, far more damaging. And it cannot be healed by conventional means. However, this spell, the spell that is keeping you from healing, is not exactly ‘Sectumsempra,’ but very similar.”

His voice was soft, and in no way condescending. And when he moved to sit on the edge of the bed, his cool eyes were a balm to the pain that was beginning to creep back into my consciousness.

“Potter has become quite creative during his years in the loony bin. And if he has the Elder Wand, any type of spell is possible.”

I tried to open my mouth to speak, but gritted my teeth instead. The convulsions began anew, and I shuddered uncontrollably. Malfoy sighed, and put a cool hand on my forehead, the sticky contact of his palm and my bloody skin making me itch.

“I can try the counter-curse, but I don’t know if it will have any effect,” he sighed, drawing his wand from his chest holster, removing his hand from my forehead.

“Close your eyes, Granger.”

I complied, it was the only thing I could do.

Words, deep and masculine, flowed over me as Malfoy seemed to sing an indistinct song to soothe my body. I knew of ‘Sectumsempra,’ but not the counter. I remembered deriding Harry for using any of the advice in the Prince’s potions book. I remembered Malfoy…and how miserable he had been that year. I could not, however, hate Severus for creating ‘Sectumsempra,’ I could never hate him.

Phoenix song, it was like phoenix song, but obviously not. The song went on and on until one deep and final note came from depths of Malfoy’s chest.

At the touch of his hand on my shoulder, I opened my eyes to meet his. The pity I saw in those orbs horrified me, angered me.

“We’ll see in a few hours, but the bleeding has stopped for now.”

I blinked slowly, feeling as if I had just run a marathon. “Mal…” I started, but thought better of it as he stood and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping the blood off his palm.

“Don’t mention this to anyone. Got it, Granger?” he said with his back to me.
I did not speak. He turned and pulled a sheet over me, but did not meet my eye again. Silently, he walked across the large bedroom and slipped through the door, passing Wiscombe and Narcissa as they entered. My eyes followed him until I could no longer see him. Tears, strangely wrought tears, filled my eyes, and I laid back a bit more in the bed, and let sleep steal my pain and worries.
I gazed into the mirror, frowning. My head was nicely shaped, but I looked like a torture victim with scars in my scalp, dark rings under my eyes, my lips still bruised, and the clean gown hanging off my pointy frame of bones. I was never pretty, but what I saw in the mirror was ghastly.

After three days of well-needed sleep, I was able to get up and move about. Narcissa held my arm as I moved to the marble bathroom, me praying to whatever god that I did not somehow fall. The bathroom was not outfitted to be fall-proof. Every edge and counter was a possible device to my untimely death. And considering how weak I was, my fears of bashing my head on the gorgeous green marble were doubled.

I had a proper bath, after nearly two weeks of Cleansing Charms, and it felt heavenly. I had a proper meal, and it nearly made me ill…but it was delicious going down. I was able to walk to one of the large windows and look over the gardens in the back of the Manor. But, for all that time, I had not left my room or gone outside into the air. It was March, and soon the Equinox would arrive. I usually celebrated at home with a few bottles of Ogden’s and a little toast for a mild spring in my garden. I had indulged myself at the last Solstice by having dinner out.

Narcissa sat with me during the day, bringing me books that I knew were banned by the Ministry, and we did not talk about Harry although I craved news. I missed my cottage, and the privacy. Malfoy had only been by once since I became able to see after myself, and then only to tell me that I was not allowed to return home for another week.

Healer Wiscombe came by in the mornings, amazed at how well I was healing. I said nothing. My nipple had healed, but there would always be a scar across the underside, one of several eternal reminders. The damage to my womb and clitoris was nearly healed, with no signs that it would tear open again. I would have to take potion treatments for the next few days to erase the trauma and nerve damage. The bruises were slow to fade, and my hair was slow to grow.

I grew tired of wearing nightgowns and lying in bed.

“May I enter, Miss Granger?”

I had retired to the bed again, curled up with my familiar and a book ‘Dark Shaman of the Amazonian Basin.’ It was late afternoon and the sun lit the white décor of the room with a fiery orange light. I glanced up to see Lucius Malfoy standing in the doorway, his face, as always, unreadable. He wore a pair of smoky grey trousers, fashionable boots, and a cream-coloured dress shirt, the shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows and the top button undone. His long silver hair was pulled into a ribbon and hanged over his left shoulder. Lucius Malfoy looked roguishly handsome, aged, but handsome, and I instinctually bit my lip…

I nodded slowly, my eyes noticing that he had a book in right hand and his wand in his left. As he neared, I could just make out the discoloration of his inner left forearm. I still felt a heightened
sense of caution around the Malfoy patriarch, but during my time in the Manor, he had not harmed me or verbally denigrated me. I had expected it, but it never came—some childhood traumas never heal.

Lucius Malfoy strode across the room and paused at the bedside, scrutinising me with cold, pale eyes. With a swift movement, he sat in the chair Narcissa usually occupied. We stared at each other for several more silent moments, and I broke the stillness by marking and closing the book in my lap with a snap.

“I understand that you are healing quickly,” he said with that familiar arrogant air and turn of his voice.

“I can walk on my own, eat and bathe on my own,” I supplied, unsure as to why Lucius Malfoy would want to speak to me without Narcissa present.

“The pain is tolerable?”

It was not a question to lead to a concerned line of conversation, and I answered.

“It is minimal, now.”

“Ah…” he said, tilting his head to gaze down his nose at me, looking to the front of my gown and then to my shaved head.

I sighed and stroked my familiar and constant feline guardian who slept contently in the bend my hip where I was turned towards the side of the bed.

“Is there something you wished to speak about, Mr. Malfoy?”

Cutting to the chase…I could tell he wanted to leave and forget I ever existed.

“I had come across a description of a curse in the library. Of course, it seems, now, whatever curse affected you has been countered, so I suppose I am a bit late…”

I detected a hint; a small hint of regret…and it shocked me.

Lucius Malfoy extended his arm to pass me the book he had been carrying. I paused; noticing the he still had his wand in his other hand. But, I took the book and opened it to where a red velvet ribbon mark rested between the parchment pages.

I read the words, realising that it was German, and quickly translated in my mind. I blinked at the handwritten words, scribed in flowing script. The blood drained from my face as I read…and read.

“What is this book?” I breathed, unable to speak properly or tear my eyes away from the ink on the parchment.

“It is called ‘The Hanged Man,’ but its real name has been lost to time.”

I swallowed as I closed the book and let it fall to my lap with ‘Dark Shaman of the Amazonian Basin,’ but I wanted to throw across the room and far away from me.

“It is a memoir of a Dark Wizard who, as you read, preferred to sexually destroy his lovers and/or
victims.”

The Marquis de Sade’s ‘120 Days of Sodom’ paled in depravity…

“The marked passage is about a curse that shares many similarities with what injuries you sustained. Your injuries are also reminiscent of Severus’ ‘Sectumsempra,’ and from my conclusions, what was done to you was a combination of the two…a spell uniquely Potter’s.”

I nodded slowly, my hands clenching so that I could feel my fingernails bite into my palms.

“Potter intended to literally mark you, Miss Granger, mark you so deeply that you would never be…”

Lucius paused and ran a hand over his mouth. I glanced at his movement to see that he was hiding the slight quivering of his lips. I furrowed my brow…even Lucius Malfoy, murderer, former Death Eater, was affected in some way. Whether it was disgust or some grander emotion, I could not tell, but the gesture was surprising and unexpected.

“‘The Hanged Man’ is a banned book, Miss Granger, and I think you know why. The curses and acts recounted on those pages are of the darkest magics known to Wizarding kind. I cannot say if Potter has encountered this book, but Merlin help us if he did. I have kept this book hidden from my family and my former associates…”

With a flick of his wand, the book floated from my lap back to his hand.

“And I had intend to destroy it, as I should have when I first became aware of it. However, this book might prove useful in countering Potter…but as it is, the book is dangerous and should be, at the very least, sealed.”

A sudden hissed incantation burst from Lucius Malfoy’s lips, and I gasped as the book glowed a terrible shade of red and the pages seemed to melt together, making it impossible for anyone to open it. I swallowed as Lucius Malfoy met my eyes, a ferocity visible in those silver orbs. He passed the book back to me, and I hesitated to touch it, but quickly placed it aside on the bed. It would take time to navigate past the spell Lucius had placed upon the book, but I knew that if I would need it, Merlin forbid, I would find a way.

“What my wife has not told you, Miss Granger, is that Potter has killed twice since your arrival here. The day Draco questioned you was the third murder, and yesterday the fourth. We feared you would be the fifth from the injuries you sustained.”

I closed my eyes. I could feel blood in my palms. Sweet Nimue…

“If your life was in danger before, it is doubly so, now.”

I found I was weeping silently, too tired to let my true grief pour out of me as it should. My body quaked, but Lucius did not move. I did not expect him to sympathise, it did not seem to be in his nature. But, in a comforting way, I felt strengthened by Lucius’ coldness. It reminded me that I was very much the same as he. I had become weak by no fault of my own.

I swallowed my tears, and let the shivers pass away until I was completely still. I had to keep it together.
I wiped at the remnant of my tears, hastily, and opened my eyes to meet Lucius’ gaze evenly.

“I need my wand, Mr. Malfoy.”

I could not say why I uttered those words so suddenly, but I felt incredibly naked without my wand. If danger were coming, I would need it, and by Merlin, I would not let it go.

“I will speak to Draco.”

“I would rather speak to him myself…I need information, Mr. Malfoy, and I doubt that your son would appreciate you leaking that information to me. I hope you have told him about the book you just sealed?”

Ice, sarcasm, strength…it was coming back to my voice. All I needed was my power, and Horace would literally initiate me as a honourary Slytherin House member.

“He is aware.”

“I would like to speak with him as soon as possible. I am still under confinement, of a sort, so I trust you will relay my wishes?”

An eyebrow arched, and I narrowed my eyes. I had once been afraid of this man, but I had been a girl, then.

Lucius’ lips curled into what I construed as a smile, but it seemed strained. “I can do that, Miss Granger, and as for confinement, you are free to move about my home as you see fit.”

I blinked once, the permission given to me seemingly lightening the weight on my shoulders as if I had indeed been confined to just the bedroom and adjoining bathroom. Odd…

He rose from the chair and bending to smooth his trousers, his hair falling from his shoulder to spill down his back when he straightened. “I know you will not mention your knowledge of that book to anyone outside this house, Miss Granger, it would not do for my tattered reputation, or yours, if the Ministry learned that I had owned it at one time.”

There was a veiled threat in those words, but I could only smirk.

“I borrow books from Horace Slughorn, Mr. Malfoy, I’ll say nothing, if you’ll say nothing…”

The expression on Lucius Malfoy’s face was one I knew I would treasure. Shock, and then respect, only an ounce or so, but something I had never expected from Lucius Malfoy.

“I’ll have Draco pop in as soon as he can,” he said, the temperature of his tone warming a few degrees.

And in only about three Lucius Malfoy sized strides, I was alone with my familiar and my thoughts. I opened my palms with a wince, and sighed. I slipped the now sealed copy of ‘The Hanged Man’ under the pillow with the other book I had been reading. With a wince, I extracted myself from the bed, which had been my home for nearly two weeks, and padded slowly to the bathroom.

Gazing into the large mirror over the basin of the sink, I tried to smile at myself, but my gaunt and
battered face could only manage a sneer. I washed my hands and studied the crescent shaped marks in my palm. I wished I had my wand. I had to make do with a bottle of healing salve I found in a small chest set into the wall, and soon I only had more scars.

I was still unsettled. I leaned against the counter of the sink, my hands resting on the marble surface, staring into my own familiar eyes. Honey-coloured eyes, long lashes, and dark circles underneath…and in those eyes I fell, thinking.

‘The Hanged Man,’ by its own title, had various meanings. The Tarot card, part of the Major Arcana…? Maybe I should not have walked out of Divination after all. Odin on the World Tree, Jesus Christ on the Cross, two men, two trees… What had that card meant?

Sacrifice…acceptance…waiting…new points of view…truth…alignment…

I blinked. I could almost formulate something… Damn. There was something beyond the reach of my mind, and it infuriated me. I was grasping at smoke. There had to be a motive, a reason to it… to Harry’s madness, the murders, and his need to find the Resurrection Stone. It could not be as simple as wanting to see those who had died that were dear to him, it was never so simple for Harry. But then again, Harry was mad.

I sighed, finding that my lips were quivering again. I pushed from the counter, taking a few steps backward to sit on the edge of the bathtub, still staring at my own face in the mirror.

‘The Hanged Man….’ The passage had shaken me, so perverse, so vile…but I had to keep that information fresh, it was pertinent.

‘To engrave one’s name into the womb of the one most important…so that she never forget to whom she would serve for all her days. That womb would be at the disposal of a master who would fill it with seed, or tear it out and force the woman to devour it as punishment.’

My stomach churned.

‘To drink the blood of the fount is to drink power…’

My heart seemed to squeeze in my chest and I clutched the front of my soft gown.

‘To make her scream in pain and in lust, she will serve to the very end the master of her innermost heart…’

I wanted to scream.

The curse had not been exactly that, but similar, both just as Dark and terrible. It simply was impossible for me to believe that my best friend, my Harry, would ever do something to me, something that would scar my very soul! How I wanted to hate him…

For so many years I had wanted love, what young girl did not want love? I loved Viktor Krum spontaneously and all too shortly, a mere infatuation. I loved Ron, but I could not be his lover. I loved Harry, he was like my brother, or the closest thing I could imagine to be a brother. Even during the time Ron left us while we were searching for the Horcruxes, I would hold Harry much like a mother would hold a child, or an older sister would hold a little brother.

Those were the types of loves I knew. And I knew they loved me in return, but it had not been
enough.

My hand slid down my front to my belly, to my womb, and I wondered if I could still have children. Had Harry’s curse made it impossible for me to have a child if I wanted one? Merlin, I could hate him if he had done something like that…

A part of me felt as if I had done something terrible wrong, but the feeling passed as I looked more closely at myself in the mirror.

I had only wanted my privacy. I did not want to leave the Wizarding world, the Muggle world was far too foreign to me, now. I could have easily given up, though. Maybe if I had, I would not be in this situation… No, he would have found me in the Muggle world just as easily.

We cannot run from our past.

No, my dear woman, you cannot… Severus Snape said, and for the first time, I could feel his presence inhabiting a part of my thoughts.

“Please do not be my conscience,” I begged… with a smile, noticing that my eyes had seemed to change for a moment, to darken.

He did not answer, and I did not expect him to. He was there and he was not there.

I wished he had loved me. I wished so many things, but they would never come true. I wished, from time to time, that I had died fighting Voldemort, but I had not. Someone always had to live with the memory of those times, and I was one of those people. So was Harry…and it was obvious what it did to him…

Was I insane as well? I was the one hearing Severus Snape’s voice in my head…

I chuckled, feeling my laughter in my belly just under my hand.

I most definitely am not normal, I couldn’t be.

“What are you doing, Granger?”

I nearly fell backward into the empty tub. I tore my eyes away from my reflection to the source of the voice, the voice that had called me a ‘filthy little Mudblood,’ in Second Year. But there was no scrawny, pale boy in the door way, but a wide shouldered, tall, albeit pale, man. I took a breath and let the hand on my belly fall to my hip.

“You’ve been thinking for hours in there…isn’t your arse numb from sitting on the edge of the tub?”

He was teasing me, but he was right, my bum was tingling.

Hours? I stood unsteadily, smoothing my gown down, feeling cold after being encased in the marble bathroom. I glimpsed my reflection one last time, and lamented my lack of hair. I really did look terrible.
Malfy stepped aside to let me pass into the darkened bedroom, the sun was starting to set on what I assumed was the other side of the Manor. I shuffled across the rug to my usual place on the bed, finding that my familiar had disappeared as he usually did to probably to lurk near the kitchens. Tucking my bare feet into the soft sheet of the bed, I settled on my left side, the posture I usually took when conversing with someone at the bedside. Malfy, however, did not come to sit in the chair by the bedside, but sat on the edge of the bed, near my feet, leaning back into the footboard, his hands folded on the clad knee of dark grey trousers. He had worn a similar suit the day of Minerva’s funeral. In fact, my more recent memories of the man had him dressed in only dark grey suits, sometimes with thin pinstripes, sometimes not. The tie was always a dark shade of green silk, and the cufflinks, making his outfit seem almost too formal or too antiquated, were emeralds.

He looked terrible. Despite the impeccable cut of his suit, one tail of his dress shirt was not tucked in, and there was a dark spot of something damp on the lapel of his coat. His hair was untidy, the platinum spikes having lost some of their height, and his mouth was set into a grim line.

“Did you find your cufflink?” I asked, happy to break the silence between us, his eyes staring at my shorn head with an obvious distaste.

“I did not lose it.”

I sighed, “After I got sick all over you in the greenhouses I noticed you had lost a cufflink. They’re emeralds, aren’t they?”

Malfy pursed his lips before saying, “I did not lose it.”

I did not want to argue, but I knew he was either wrong, or had more than one set of emerald cufflinks. Knowing Malfy, he had several sets.

“But you…” I began.

“I did not lose it, I knew exactly where it went…because I put it there.”

My face surely was comical, but Malfy did not laugh, instead he raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms before his chest.

“I put it in the pocket of your cloak when you fainted. The tracking device I mentioned?”

Hint, hint, I could almost hear him say…

“Oh,” was all I could manage.

“Father mentioned that you wanted your wand. I can retrieve it for you tomorrow, if you don’t mind waiting another day.”

“I’m just glad it wasn’t destroyed.”

“Yes. Well, Father also informed me that you wanted to speak to me.”

I nodded slowly. I needed to know more…

“About the Elder wand…”
Malfoy interrupted again, but I kept calm, and listened.

“We confirmed your theory, Granger. Potter has it.”

I had hoped I had been wrong.

“He covered his movements quite well, which makes some in the department believe Potter is not as ‘insane’ as many would like to think. I believe that with the Elder Wand he Confounded the portraits for several minutes so that he would not been seen in the Headmistress’s office. I have spoken to Albus Dumbledore’s portrait, and the theory is viable.

The curse used to kill the Headmistress…is Dark in nature, and obscure. The type of curse is mentioned only in one place…”

“‘The Hanged Man…’” I answered in a distant whisper. My sight was set in a dark place, and I could see it…

Ginny had fled to the Burrow after Harry had lashed out…Ron beating on Harry’s study door…and Harry sitting on the rug before a raging fire with ‘The Hanged Man’ open on his lap…

It was only a thought, but it seemed possible.

“How do you know of it?”

My vision pulled backward into my brain proper. The anger of Malfoy’s question had startled me, and I knew I had said too much. I hesitantly glanced at Malfoy, who was still sitting on the foot of the bed, leaning back into the footboard, his arms crossed before his chest, but his eyes blazing and his hands clutching at his forearms, white knuckled.

I tried to smile, “I’m a know-it-all, or have you forgotten?”

Malfoy seemed to relax, but his eyes were burning into me.

“This is no time for lies, Granger.”

I wasn’t so obvious, I knew. And then I felt it, a nudge just between my eye brows.

_Careful there, Jane, I taught him better than Potter_, Severus whispered.

“I was informed of a curse that was similar to what caused my condition; it was detailed in ‘The Hanged Man.’”

“My father told you.”

I said nothing. I wanted to tell Malfoy that Lucius was trying to help, and that the book was sealed, but there were surely other copies secreted away. Horace probably had a copy, everything else in his library was Dark…and I suddenly felt ill, knowing I had been reading such banned books as ‘The Hanged Man.’

“There was a curse in that book, then?”

Ah yes, divert course to something else…I did not want to feel Malfoy’s penetrating anger any
longer. And I did not want him to find a weakness in my mind.

“An asphyxiation curse, one of three varieties. If you know of ‘The Hanged Man,’ you know that much of the spells detailed are of a sexual nature.”

The anger was ebbing in his voice, but his eyes remained on me, as if looking through me. Surely he was probing for a crack to see something he deemed important, but I had been violated enough…

“Some of the spells can be used to kill. The third degree asphyxiation curse was used on the Headmistress.”

I said nothing, expressed nothing. All I could feel was the emptiness left behind, having already poured my grief out for my friend. All that remained was a growing anger, and a growing hatred for the man who was, and was not, Harry Potter.

“And the latest victims?” I asked dryly, my eyes falling to one of Malfoy’s cufflinks.

Malfoy shifted and I knew that he hoped I hadn’t heard…

“You are not going to like what I have to say, Granger.”

I lifted my eyes to his…and the seriousness of what he was about to say steeled me to expect the worst.

“The day I questioned you, Sybill Trelawney was murdered at Hogwarts. The school is now closed.”

Trelawney? Gears in the darkest part of my mind began moving, in a dire need of oil.

“How?”

No whispers, no gasps, my voice came out stronger than it had been in weeks.

“Her skin was flayed, she bled to death…”

Sweet Nimue.

“Longbottom found her in the chair she used in her classroom, nude, surrounded by tea leaves and Tarot cards.”

“And the flesh?”

“In a pile at her feet. Only her trunk was flayed, not her limbs.”

I bit my lip. Only bits of information were making sense, but the rest was madness. Perhaps that was what it was meant to be, but I couldn’t overlook anything.

“Anything else, Malfoy? Any markings, any signs?”

Malfoy shook his head, and ran a hand over his face to replace it against his chest.
Surely there had been something…something to give a clue as to why Harry was… I closed my eyes, the sickness overwhelming my brain. What had Trelawney have to do with the Resurrection Stone? If anything, the barmy woman had more to do with the Prophecy we had found in the Department of Mysteries in our Fifth Year, and not much else. Trelawney was harmless.

“And the latest?”

Malfoy rose to his feet.

“I’ve told you too much, Granger…”

I pursed my lips and took a deep breath.

“Who, Malfoy?”

He turned away from me, his hands clenching into fists. He was trembling from anger, I could feel it roiling off his wide shoulders, Malfoy pulsed with it…

I straightened, lifting myself off the pillows I had laid against.

“Who?” I asked again, magic lacing my voice, making me frown. I had felt magic in my voice before, but never so strong. I had not intended it…

“George Weasley.”

The steely reserve shuddered briefly, but held. My face began to crumple, but I stopped it, and the tears. Tears could come later.

Malfoy turned to look over his shoulder, perhaps checking to see if I were in some emotional distress. When he apparently thought I was safe enough to approach, he returned to the spot at the foot of the bed, crossing his right leg over his left knee as well as crossing his arms again. I could sense that he was still angry, and, like me, had managed to contain his emotions behind a cool exterior.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Malfoy rolled his eyes and began. He had anticipated my question.

“Weasley was attacked in his own shop on Diagon Alley, late in the evening after closing. He was incapacitated, tortured, and hanged upside down after which his throat was slashed. He did not die immediately, his wife Angelina found him and tended to him, running to alert us. Weasley was taken to St. Mungo’s where he managed to live long enough to tell me what had happened and who was responsible. The nature of his wounds caused his death. No potion or spell could stop the bleeding or close the wound…”

“But your counter…?”

“Did not work, I tried, Granger, believe me, I tried.”

Malfoy was not looking at me anymore, lost in his own memories. I studied his face, seeing the fuzziness of a glamour below his eyes, obviously trying to conceal the rings. I had rings under my eyes at that moment, and I had them often just out of the principle of my work, but I never hid them. Then again, I was not in a position of authority like Malfoy, and appearance meant a lot to
men like that.

“So it was a different curse.”

“A variation from ‘The Hanged Man,’ once again. This time it was a variation of a lashing curse, another curse with degrees. This curse was of the highest degree…never meant to be used on any part of the body other than the back or buttocks. It is like the curse he used to brand your womb, but purposely crafted so that there is no known counter or potion that would staunch the bleeding or close the wound.

When Potter cursed you, he seemed to lack the ability to make the curse take full effect, thus my being able to counter it. Within the time between your attack and Weasley’s, Potter has gotten better…more efficient.”

I said nothing, looking down at my fists in my lap. I did not dig my fingernails into my palms, but my knuckles were white and my palms were thumping.

“Wh-What did George say?”

Malfoy sighed, disconcertedly. “I shouldn’t be telling you, Granger, but you need to know.”

“For my own safety?”

We met eyes again. “Yes.”

I could see deep into those silver orbs, very deep. There was frustration there, and anger. I could see concern for himself, his family, his co-workers, and…

“Before Weasley died, the Healers were able to temporarily repair his vocal cords. Blood replenishers were pumping into him as fast as blood was spilling out, but he told me in not so many words that Potter was looking for Ronald. When Weasley could not tell Potter his brother’s location, he was tortured. I’ll spare you the specifics…”

“No!” I gulped. “No, I need to know, Malfoy.”

He sighed again and shifted so that both booted feet were squarely on the floor, and he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, clasping his pale, long fingered hands before him.

“He was stripped nude and bound. His fingers and arms were broken methodically, then his feet and legs. I’ve heard it called ‘hobbling.’ It was not until later he was hoisted by his right ankle to hang, his head about four feet from the floor of his shop.

While he was hanging, Potter began questioning him about you. Where you were…who had taken you… Of course, Weasley did not know.

Before his throat was slashed, Potter said something that Weasley repeated over and over, right until the moment he died. He said that Potter envied him. Potter said that he would fix everything… ‘Don’t pity the dead.’ ‘Don’t pity the dead.’”

Malfoy stopped, his hands trembling, his left eye twitching.

I laid back into the pillows, unclenching my hands so that my sweaty palms rested against my legs.
‘Don’t pity the dead.’

‘You will help me find the Stone!’

I wondered if my logic were anywhere close to the truth. I had passed the point in thinking that I was simply having a nightmare…

“Where are the Weasleys?”

“We evacuated them outside the country. Ronald has been sent to stay with them, and explicitly instructed not to return to Britain. I’ve already had three Floo calls from that git, screaming at me to let him return, or to send you somewhere safe,” Malfoy drawled characteristically.

“Why haven’t you sent me somewhere?”

Malfoy’s sneer faded as he turned to regard me. “You are safe here. Besides, you were injured, I couldn’t risk worsening your condition by moving you.”

It made sense, but I felt much better.

“And moving you now might bring unwanted attention,” he added as if reading my thoughts.

I sighed. I wouldn’t leave the country by any means. Harry had to be caught and treated. Or imprisoned…although I loathed the thought. I wondered if there was anything of my old friend left, if there was still a gentle, loving part of him that would make him stop… I wondered what Ron was thinking…

“Where is he now?”

“We’re not certain down to a village, but we believe he’s moving south…”

To Wiltshire.

“So, you realise what might have to happen, don’t you Granger?”

I nodded. “I would really like to have my wand back, Malfoy.”

“First thing in the morning, Granger.”

I slept fitfully, vivid dreams assaulting me, making me wake up in screams. My familiar hid under the bed and would not come out when I called. No one came to my room, and I felt terribly alone. It had been years since I had slept so poorly. Finally, though, too exhausted to fight another nightmare, my brain allowed me to sleep without dreaming.

When I woke again, sunlight streamed in through the windows on either side of the bed; it was after dawn. I sat up slowly, rubbing my eyes. Through my left eye, I saw something that made my spirits soar…my wand.
I had missed the stolen walnut wand. I still carried Bellatrix Lestrange’s wand ever since having been ‘snatched’ by Greyback and taken to the very house I sat comfortably inside at that very moment. The walnut and dragon-string grew to suit me better than the vinewood and dragon-string…and Merlin forbid I should ever tell anyone whose wand I carried.

Atop a stack of clean clothes, my walnut wand seemed to gleam in the morning light and I crawled toward it. When I took it up in my hand, my entire body pulsed. Instant recognition. I had half a mind to hug my wand to my chest and stroke it as if I were stroking Malfoy the cat. I was the owner of this wand now; it had accepted me over Bellatrix Lestrange—a personal point of pride.

I rose from the bed, gathered up the pile of clothes, and with my wand headed toward the bathroom. Someone, most likely Malfoy, had brought a whole outfit from the cottage. I tried not to think about him going through the underwear drawer, but I knew he must have. Cotton underpants, black, my favourite bra, black, my favourite pair of denims, stone washed, my favourite silk camisole, grey, and my favourite jumper, loose knit grey wool…it was my usual outfit for home…down to the heavy grey wool socks. The only thing that was missing were my military boots and my hand-me-down coat.

I washed my face, and dabbed it dry with a thick, expensive towel. In the mirror, I looked almost like myself. The hair was a drastic difference, now a centimetre-long caramel brown fuzz on a scarred, but shapely scalp. The bruises were nearly gone, but the dark circles and sunken cheeks remained. I did not look very healthy, and Merlin forbid my parents should ever see me in this shape…they would think I had an eating disorder.

I brushed my teeth with the new toothbrush I found in the wall chest, and felt tears stinging my eyes.

I could have easily gone to my parents in Australia and let the Ministry handle this nightmare.

But what if Harry remembered me mentioning Australia?

I rinsed my mouth and wiped my tears away with my sleeve. I could not just run away because something horrible had happened to me…

Now clothed to move about, I immediately went to the bedroom door, cracking it open to find a wood panelled corridor, dark and quiet. As I stepped over the threshold, I noticed a chair sitting next to the door. Touching the upholstered back of the chair, I could still feel the warmth of a recently vacated body. I wondered who…

I shifted my wand, which I kept in my sleeve, and decided to take the right side, the north, or what I assumed to be north passage. My wool sock clad feet sank into a rich carpet as I moved. I tried not to slink or creep, I was not trespassing, but, except for the bedroom I had just left, I did feel like an intruder.

Dim wall sconces lit the corridor, gleaming off dark wood panelling. There were a few paintings, but no portraits. I took note of the landscapes and still lives, as well as the number of doors I passed on either side of the corridor. I heard no movement behind any of the doors, no sounds of life. I was perhaps in a guest wing…I could not remember the layout of the Manor from the last, brief time I had been there. That had been nearly ten years before, and I had had little time to contemplate the architecture.

Finally, at the end of the corridor was light, and sound. I had reached the central foyer of the
Manor, and I knew I was not totally lost. Standing at a banister, I realised I was on the top floor, and far below were voices. I peeked down the adjacent wing, finding the corridor dark, and started down the stairs, pausing on the landing of the second floor. These corridors were brighter with lighter wood panelling and brighter sconces...and silenced portraits, who glared at my passing, lined the walls. The family wing, perhaps?

Down more steps, I came to the wide foyer with white marble flooring and large windows looking out across wide, rolling hills, dotted with clumps of forest. The sky was an incredible shade of blue, and large, billowing clouds ambled across the face of morning.

“Father...did you?”

Snippets of Malfoy’s voice came from down the main floor corridor to the right of the terminus of the stairs. I took two steps before stopping...I could hardly believe I was a guest in this ridiculously large house.

“Granger has…”

My name. I moved toward the source of Malfoy’s voice. My socks were a bit slick on the marble, but noiseless. Passing two different doors, hypothetically leading to two different rooms, I came to the last door on my left. A sliver of morning light came from a crack between the door and the jamb, and I passed through the light to press my back against the wall, my right ear closest to the door. I could faintly smell pipe smoke and coffee.

“She may be a Mud-Muggleborn, Draco, but she is not mentally deficient.”

Did Lucius Malfoy pay me a compliment?

“She is in shock, Father! Being nearly raped and murdered will do that to a person!” Malfoy snarled.

Malfoy was angry...no, that was an understatement of an adjective...he was seething.

“She seems strong enough to me, son. Her mind is of the calculative sort, she can compartmentalise her pain, her emotions, her needs...it also seems to me that she is as desperate as you are to stop Potter,” Lucius snapped back.

There was a sound of furniture moving, and I thought for a second there was a scuffle between father and son. I was wrong when I peeked through the bright crack to see Lucius Malfoy sitting in a plush green velvet armchair by a fireplace, his bare feet propped up on an ottoman, a pipe hanging from his mouth and a newspaper in his hands...a Bulgarian paper...he wore pyjamas, dark blue silk, with a matching smoking jacket overtop. Malfoy, on the other hand, must have plopped down in the adjacent chair for I could just see the back of his head, his cheek in his left palm as he lounged. He was not in pyjamas, but a black turtle neck, his wand holsters visible over the shirt. His feet were also propped up by the ankles, heavy black boots dangling off the corner. One long finger hooked through the handle of a large mug of steaming coffee.

I tried to see more of the room, but all I could see was a long black leather coat hanging over a chair behind a large writing desk situated centrally in the room, pushed back only slightly nearer the large casement windows. The sun was too bright to see more.

Quickly I slid back against the wall, relaxing so I could breathe properly.
“That may be, Father, but you are suggesting something that goes against the ethics of my department.”

“Oh damn those ethics, Draco. You have considered this long before I voiced the suggestion, admit it!”

A rustle of newspaper punctuated Lucius’ strong words and I clenched my teeth. The damn Death Eater was thinking of something…

“I cannot use Granger as bait, Father. These are not the old days. Besides, I have already run it past the Detective Superintendent…”

Bloody ferret!

“That then what do you propose to do, Draco? Potter is coming this direction, and Merlin knows who he’ll kill on his way.”

“He won’t find the Manor, and even if he did, he would never get through the wards.”

“Potter moved about Hogwarts pretty easily…he got through the Granger girl’s wards…”

Malfoy growled loud enough for even I to hear from outside the door.

“He is not all-powerful, Father. He’s deranged, and he will make a mistake.”

“He has the Elder Wand, son.”

Malfoy snorted. “Shall I repeat myself, Father?”

There was a pause, and I waited…and waited.

“What are you going to do with Granger?”

Malfoy sighed. “The DS wants to move her out of the country, but it would only exacerbate matters. It could lead Potter outside of Britain…”

“Then he can be some other Ministry’s problem…”

Malfoy sighed again. “It is not that simple, Father. The press is having a field day. My men are getting harassed, hell, I’m getting harassed by people in my own department. People are frightened, confused, and it doesn’t help that the Prophet is stirring the cauldron by adding their own wild speculations.”

“Every plan I have given you is out in the open, son. Without breaking a few policies, you may not stop him…” Lucius said gently, and I wondered what his face looked like at that moment. His words sounded almost tender, fatherly.

“That’s why I have been telling Granger everything…she knows Potter better than anyone. And after what he tried to do to her, I think it is obvious that she is somehow integral to whatever he is planning to do.”
Lucius snorted, “And you shouted at me for sharing ‘The Hanged Man’ with her!”

“Too much, too soon, Father…”

“That little Mud-Muggleborn would have found it eventually! Better from me than from someone else! I even sealed the damn thing; it would take days for her to get around the enchantment… decades for anyone else.”

Another long pause, another possible compliment, and my back ached, the wainscoting digging into my lower back.

“Son, all of this…Potter, ‘The Hanged Man,’ it feels so…it feels like the old days.”

Malfoy inhaled so deeply I could hear it from outside the door. “Only worse, Father. But we’re on the winning side this time.”

“Yes, this time…”

I could feel my face contorting into a scowl. But a movement out of the corner of my eye made me jump and nearly slip on the marble floor. Narcissa was fast approaching me, her brow knitted in confusion. As she neared, I pushed a finger over my lips as I silently began to put distance between myself and the door. When I was close enough, Narcissa grasped my hand and pulled me further away, down the other side of the Manor, glancing back to the cracked door.

Through a different door and down a few steps, I found Narcissa had pulled me into a large kitchen, elves moving every which way, some preparing food, other washing dishes, some doing laundry in a room off to one side. The elves glanced up, as if waiting for Narcissa’s instruction. With a raised, pale hand, Narcissa seemed to wordlessly command the elves to go back to their work as she pulled me along the length of the kitchen. In the very back was a low nook, a booth large enough for two people to sit and not be noticed. A tiny window in the back of the nook opened onto a small kitchen herb garden, and the pane was open slightly, letting cool air into the near stifling kitchen.

“What did they say?” Narcissa said aloud, her voice almost lost in the din of the working kitchen.

I blinked at her…dressed in a long white dressing gown over a white silk shift, plain white slippers on her feet and her long blond hair plaited, falling over her right shoulder. She was radiant in the sunlight, and for the first time I appreciated how beautiful Narcissa Malfoy was, especially if she were an ally.

“I don’t…” I started.

Narcissa grasped both of my hands, tightly, her eyes wide with what I would have considered fear.

“I know Draco told you about Sibyll Trelawney and George Weasley…I know Lucius showed you that…that foul book…”

“Mrs. Malfoy…Narcissa…I…”

I was flustered.

“Hermione, please…please tell me what they said…”
I blinked rapidly. Something began crumbling inside, and suddenly I was sobbing.

“The Ministry…wants to send me away…” I sobbed, taking deep gulps of air between every odd number of words. “Malfoy said no…too much trouble…and Harry…Harry might come here…”

Narcissa wiped my tears away with a handkerchief she produced from her dressing gown, alternating between wiping my cheeks and caressing my shorn head. I missed my mother when she touched my face, and I missed my father when she touched my miserable excuse for hair.

“Shh, darling…he won’t find this place. You are safe here…” she cooed, her fingers tracing my sunken cheek. I knew she must have found me hideous, I found myself hideous…

“Lucius he…he said to use me as bait…”

Narcissa’s face immediately darkened. “Draco won’t let him.”

I gulped several more mouthfuls of air before answering. “No…he said he wouldn’t.”

“Draco is not a monster, Her-Miss Granger. Lucius is not either, but he does have some monstrous ideas…”

I said nothing in reply, those dark gears beginning to turn again in my mind.

But it might work, little Jane Granger. Set a trap on your own terms, use yourself as bait, and catch the devil in a bag? Severus whispered evilly.

No. One time being tortured by my best friend was enough, Merlin knew what he would do if he had another chance at me. I did not think I could stand facing that kind of madness, not again.

“Was there anything else?” Narcissa asked, her concern prevalent in her soft voice.

“No…”

The tears had stopped, as had the sobs, and I could breathe in the breeze coming from the kitchen garden. Maybe, just maybe, there was something, one thing about Lucius’ idea that might work.

What was it Harry wanted me to do?

‘You will help me find the Stone!’

The Resurrection Stone. But why me…why did he need me to help him find it?

I could imagine Harry with the Elder Wand, Summoning the Stone and coming up with everything but…if it were not for the fact that my mental image was of the Harry that attacked me, the thought would have been comical.

I had had so little to do with the Resurrection Stone, and did not truly know of its existence until after it was gone. All I knew was the mentions of it by Beedle the Bard, as the book had been willed to me, all I knew were the connections, the coincidences…
I knew so little about the Stone, and I doubted anyone knew any more that I…through Harry’s recounting, through Dumbledore’s recounting…I only knew that the Stone could allow you to see people who have passed. The key word being ‘see.’

Unless…unless…

“Miss Granger?”

I bit my lip. I was gone again on some mental pathway, and had totally forgotten where I was and who was squeezing my hand. This was why I lived alone…

“I…I’m fine, Mrs. Malfoy, I just…”

“Talk it out, Miss Granger, if you need to.”

Her eyes were not grey or silver like Malfoy’s, but the palest shade of blue I could ever remember seeing. I had to pull myself together and tuck information into the filing cabinet of my mind.

“No, it would be nonsense…I need more information.”

Narcissa blinked at me and smiled wanly, I knew she could see through my evasion as if it were a glass pane, but she did not press me, and for that I was grateful.

“Breakfast first, and then to something to let your mind rest. If you are like me, you worry things too much.”

“I suppose,” I said with a hint of a laugh. I did worry things too much, but I had always been that way.

Narcissa summoned an elf, whispering softly, while I turned my attention to the small window of the nook, staring at the azure blue sky. Within moments, plates of eggs, bacon and toast popped onto the round table of the booth, along with halved grapefruits, coffee, juice, and jam. We ate slowly, not bothering with conversation, and I let myself enjoy a delicious breakfast, cleaning my plate as if I had not eaten in days. Sitting back with coffee, I noticed Narcissa preferred tea; I stared across the length of the kitchen. The fullness of activity put me at ease, it reminded me of breakfast at Hogwarts with students all around, talking and eating, laughing and cramming in time to finish a roll of parchment for some class or another.

I was deep into my soothing memory before I realised Malfoy was striding down the kitchen toward me, his face stern and his eyes piercing.

“Mother, Miss Granger, may I join you?”

I frowned over the rim of my cup as Narcissa Conjured a chair for Malfoy to sit on the outside of the nook. I took a sip of black coffee and let my eyes focus on a point beyond Malfoy’s face.

The filing cabinet opened entirely on its own…

‘The Hanged Man’ directed the course of my thoughts, and I felt at ease to traverse that path in the safety of this warm kitchen with Malfoy and his mother within arm’s reach.
Was there any way to ascertain that Harry had read the book? Of course, he could not get such a book while interred at St. Mungo’s. Where could he obtained such an evil book which was banned and blacklisted? Had he found it on his own before being committed? What had he been doing locked up in his study? Surely he was not just moping?

I felt my frown deepen as I took another sip of coffee. Distantly, I could hear Narcissa speaking, but I pushed her voice in with the noise of the kitchen…background, ambient sound.

Had there been an official record of Harry’s committal to St. Mungo’s? Ron…what did he remember?

What about Harry’s Healers? Were there records of treatment, therapy sessions?

I stopped. I was getting ahead of myself.

I focused on the possibility of Harry reading ‘The Hanged Man.’

“Granger!”

Fingers dug into my upper arm, shaking me. Luckily, there was no coffee left in my cup…

My eyes focused and all I could see was Malfoy’s stormy face. I blinked and set my coffee cup roughly on the tabletop, trying to shrug out of Malfoy’s painful hold.

“Snap out of it, Granger,” he growled, his jam laced breath hot against my cheeks.

“I’m fine, Malfoy. Kindly remove your hands,” I ground out.

Malfoy released me after carefully studying my face, pulling back to stand before the nook’s table and not leaning over it.

“Merlin, Granger, Mother was going send for Wiscombe again…” he muttered, falling back into his chair, running a hand through his spiked hair.

I took a breath and turned my attention to Narcissa who seemed stricken, her wide eyes moving from me to her son. I suddenly felt guilty and lowered my eyes to my empty coffee cup.

“If you’re going to go on some mental adventure, don’t do it over breakfast…it is rude.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but I knew, in all honesty, Malfoy was right.

Breakfast continued, though I kept silent and attentive to Narcissa’s light conversation. Malfoy spoke when he was spoken to, but I could feel his eyes upon me and little nudges between my eyes that were resisted easily.

“Well now, I’ll leave you two to your coffee, I need to speak to Lucius…”

I barely acknowledged Narcissa, only smiling absently as she left the nook. The earlier thoughts were beginning to move to the forefront of my mind.

“I know my mother’s conversation can be a bit trivial and silly, but she is trying, Granger.”
I tucked the thoughts away again, raising my head to watch Malfoy pour me another cup of coffee before filling his own from a fresh pot.

“She is a wonderful distraction.”

Malfoy smirked. “You think so?”

I nodded.

“She isn’t your mother, and you do not have to keep ignoring nicely phrased suggestions and veiled threats. But, for some reason she likes you, which is a bit disconcerting for me and Father.”

I took a small sip of coffee, trying not to scald my lips and tongue. Swallowing the strong drink, I smirked.

“She is one woman living in a house of two men…” I suggested.

Malfoy snorted over the rim of his cup. “She’s a Black.”

I could not say that I truly understood what her parentage had to do with anything, but I held my smirk.

“Are you going to tell me where you were?”

I nearly choked on a sip of coffee and reached for a napkin to dab at my lips.

“Wh-what?”

Malfoy grinned, which immediately put me on edge. I had rarely seen Malfoy grin, but when I did, it usually resulted in some type of nastiness. I especially remember Fifth Year when he was on the Inquisitorial Squad…

“That mental adventure you took while Mother was trying to talk with you. She thought you were having some sort of fit again…”

I felt blood heat my cheeks. I really felt guilty.

I scrambled to recompose myself, trying not to feel awkward.

“I…” I began, but paused, setting my coffee down. “You’re the Detective Chief Inspector.”

Malfoy quirked a pale eye brow, finishing his scalding coffee with a gulp, leaning forward in his chair to place his cup near mine.

“Astute observation, Granger…yes, I am the Detective Chief Inspector, and I need to get to work in an hour. So unless you have something to tell me, I’m going to be on my merry way to the Ministry.”

Cheeky ferret.

“I…you…”
Damn it, why wasn’t it coming out right?

“Do you have any records as to the events of Harry’s committal to St. Mungo’s? Reports about his house…his study?”

Malfoy stared at me as if I had grown hair in seconds…

“Somewhere in the files, maybe.”

“Maybe?” I asked, exasperation only a breath away from entering my tone of voice.

“Flint has been compiling everything related to Potter before he murdered McGonagall. We had to get documents from other departments and begin piecing it all together. Why would you want records about something like that?”

I sighed, my fingers playing along the rim of my coffee cup. “What was he doing between the time of his marriage and the day he was taken to St. Mungo’s? Maybe even before the wedding…” I said distantly, trying to remember something, anything…

“There may be some records, reports of the house, his mental state…but you realise that I cannot let you see those records, Granger”

“What?” I squeaked incredulously.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair, raising his arms to lace his fingers behind his head.

“You do not have the authority, you are not police…”

“I am an Unspeakable! My clearance is higher than yours will ever be!”

I was fuming. The ferret was not going to feed me this line of shite and expect me to swallow! I had access to every department if I wished it…

“This case pertains to you, among others, so Article 22 takes effect,” he muttered smugly.

Article 22, my fat arse. If we were standing in the halls of the Ministry I could squash him by merely breathing and wearing my Unspeakable robes.

My anger deflated. As it was, I was not an Unspeakable at that moment, and I was sitting in his kitchen. I had to think of another way of getting to that information. Ron, maybe could tell me, but how to contact him when he and his family are under protective custody? I could not ask Malfoy, obviously.

“Don’t even think about it, Granger.”

I closed my eyes and take a calming breath, opening my eyes again to glare at Malfoy.

“You might as well tell Potter where Ronald Weasley is…oh, and levitate a bright blinking sign over you head as well.”

The ferret was exaggerating.
“Well, I’m off…” he said, leaping up from the chair, strangely rejuvenated from the night before.

He turned and began walking…deliberately.

“Malfoy!”

I hadn’t meant to shout.

“Yes, Granger?”

“Check into it, will you? Books especially…and not just ‘The Hanged Man.’”

Malfoy continued walking, throwing a hand up, as if to wave, but didn’t. When I could no longer see the shock of platinum spikes, I cursed.
Part V

Part 5

I spent the majority of the day in Narcissa’s study, after asking for just some parchment, ink, and quill. Narcissa sat me behind a gorgeous bird’s eye maple desk, setting sheets of cream coloured parchment on a blotter with a ridiculous peacock feather quill and dark emerald ink. I thanked her, reassuring her I was not sending a letter, but marking down some notes.

When she finally left me to my thoughts, I started. I pulled out drawers of stored mental notes, memories, and speculations. By lunchtime, a tray of sandwiches appeared on the coffee table between the two blue velvet couches in the middle of the room. A pitcher of cool pumpkin juice tempted me, and I paused in my scribblings to eat.

When I could feel the sun setting against my back much later, I stopped. My neck was sore, as was my hand. I had pages upon pages of notes, hastily made charts, and diagrams. None of it, however, was complete or made much sense. Almost another full day had passed, and I knew almost nothing new as to why my life had been turned upside down.

I stretched, raising my arms above my bare head, and groaned. There was still a bit of soreness in places, but I preferred the soreness to the pain. I stood and moved to the small fireplace, sliding my wand from my sleeve to magically stoke the fire. The heat felt wonderful against my legs and belly. I gazed into the fire, wondering if my cottage was sound and shut up so the elements could not get inside…

And then, a pathetic mewl caught my attention. It was a muffled sound, and I moved to the door, opening it crack so that a streak of grey could run inside and jump up on the arm of the nearest couch.

“You naughty cat, where have you been?” I asked, betraying my happiness to see my familiar.

Malfy the cat sniffed, and looked about the room before answering me with a long meow. I grinned and moved to the couch, sitting on the arm next to the grey animal, running my hand from his head to tail, savouring the soft texture of his fur, glad to hear him purr.

“Narcissa would have a fit if she knew you were shedding all over her velvet couch…”

Malfoy blinked his silver eyes and meowed happily. I shook my head, thankful for my familiar’s distraction.

But the distraction did not last long.

I nearly jumped out of my skin as the study door burst open and Malfoy, the Detective Chief Inspector barrelled into the room. His hair was falling in lank strands into his face, and the long black leather coat he wore was soaked with rain.
Ignoring me, he moved to the fire, peeling off his coat, throwing it across the couch I perched upon, startling my familiar who immediately and pointedly ignored the new person in the room. I stood and turned to watch Malfoy kneel by the fire, his turtleneck wet down the front as well as were the hems of his trousers. I could see Malfoy shiver slightly, and I wondered why he had not drawn his wand from the holster to cast a drying Charm.

“Malfoy?”

My voice seemed so small, almost childlike in its questioning, but Malfoy did not answer, his silver eyes flickering in the firelight.

I bit my lip and let my own wand slip from my sleeve again, casting a discreet Charm on his clothes as well as the dripping coat flung across the back of the couch. When Malfoy shivered again, I knew it was not merely from the damp or the cold. I glanced out the casement windows at a mostly clear sky…it was not raining, at least, not in Wiltshire.

Sighing, I moved behind Malfoy to return to the desk, sitting down and staring at the scattering of parchment and the dark green stain of ink on my fingers. I watched him as he rubbed his hands together before the flame, his mouth tightening into a scowl. He was thinking deeply, and I supposed I had had a similar expression on my face earlier in the day at breakfast.

My eyes moved to my familiar who had balanced from the arm of the couch and along the back to sniff at Malfoy’s coat, sneezing softly before craning his feline head to stare at the other creature that shared his name. With a silent jump, the grey cat leapt to the floor and stealthily approached the man before the fire, and with a great sway, rubbed into Malfoy’s bent body. The power of my familiar’s nudge nearly sent the man face first into the fire.

“Bloody menace!” Malfoy sneered, catching himself with a hand on the rug, turning to glare at the cat.

My familiar made a strange noise and moved to Malfoy’s hand, biting the knuckle of his thumb so that the man snarled and recoiled, cradling his hand against his chest, only a little bit of blood colouring his usually colourless skin.

“Granger, you had better control this beast before I blast it back to wherever it sprang from!”

I could feel the laughter in my chest, but I could only smile. After everything, after pouring out my dark thoughts, it seemed a blasphemy to laugh. It would be more natural to cry. But I did neither, laugh nor cry, I could only watch my familiar purr and sway towards Malfoy, teasing the man it was named after.

“Malfoy, that’s enough, leave him alone, he isn’t interested in getting to know you.”

I was surprised at the roughness of my voice and the power imbued in the words. I did not sound like myself, and both Malfoys turned to stare at me with my elbows on the desk, my hands folded under my chin. If Malfoy, the DCI, had fur, surely it would be on end as it was with my familiar.

Obeying my command, the grey cat quickly slinked away, hiding under the coffee table to peer back at me with full-moon eyes. I turned my attention to Malfoy as he unfolded himself to stand next to the fire, his eyes narrowed, his left arm resting on the mantle as he leaned.
“I assume your brusque entrance into the one room I have occupied today is because you have some information for me, Malfoy?”

Again, the roughness. I blinked rapidly, sitting back in the desk chair, my hands curling around the carved maple armrests. Malfoy seemed ill at ease, his face paler than usual, his tongue lashing out to wet his cold, nearly colourless lips. I accepted his intense gaze when I would have shied away from it years ago. I was being examined, but why, I could not determine.

“Squeak!” he announced to the air, and I frowned, confused

A soft pop produced a small elf standing just at Malfoy’s feet. I could not see the elf’s face, but its skin was a pinkish colour, and it wore a scrap of what appeared to be a red velvet drape with silver tassels.

“Master?”

I knew then why the elf was called Squeak.

“Coffee, no cream or sugar, biscuits…inform the kitchens to keep dinner warm if we should want it,” Malfoy instructed, finally pulled his eyes from me to glance down at the elf.

“Yes, Master…”

And with another soft pop, the elf was gone. Almost instantly a tray with a coffee pot, two blue mugs, a platter of sweet cream biscuits and napkins appeared on the coffee table. The coffee smelled strong, and the biscuits made my mouth water…

“Come, sit, Granger, we have a lot to talk about…” Malfoy purred, pushing off the mantle to move around the couches, taking the one facing the fireplace. I stood slowly and took the opposite couch, his coat near my shoulder and the fire warm against the back of my shorn head.

Malfoy poured the coffee and passed a mug to me, which I took gratefully in my hands, finding that my fingers were icy for some unexplainable reason. When Malfoy sat back with his own coffee, his right ankle resting on his left knee, his right arm thrown over the back of the blue velvet couch, he regarded me again.

“Can I ask you something, Granger?” he asked, the corners of his pale lips curling upward.

I cocked my brow and pulled my mug toward my lips.

“Only if I can ask a question in return.”

Malfoy shrugged, “Quid pro quo…that’s only fair,” he murmured before taking a loud sip of his black coffee.

I waited. Malfoy closed his eyes as he swallowed, savouring his warm potable. I had yet to take a drink. I waited… His pale hand guided his mug to rest on the instep of his boot, his left hand balancing the hot liquid precariously.

“Why did you decide to sever your ties with Potter and Weasley when the three of you were inseparable all through school?”
I took a drink of coffee, and I made Malfoy wait…setting my mug on my knee, holding it with my right hand after I had swallowed. I took a breath and held it for a few moments before exhaling and flicking my eyes to meet Malfoy’s.

“Do you want the simple reason, or the deeper, philosophical reason?”

“Is that your question, Granger?”

I smirked. Tricky ferret…

“Spare me the swan song of your adolescent loves, Granger. The simple, quick, and dirty reason will suffice,” he drawled.

I tried not to let my anger show.

“A few reasons, Malfoy… I wanted my individuality back, I wanted my privacy back, and I wanted my life back. Is that simple enough?”

He grinned, and I immediately felt my mind’s walls rise.

“Not really, Granger, but I can understand. The only thing that troubles me…well, probably not just me, but the press and most of Wizarding Britain, is the real reason why the ‘Golden Trio’ split up.”

I sighed. “This is not a press interview, Malfoy. None of that is pertinent to my current situation or your departmental troubles.”

Malfoy raised his cup and drank deeply from his coffee. His eyes were liquid, the corners pulled from his almost gleeful expression. “True,” he muttered over his coffee.

“So, the reason you want to know is to satisfy some sick revenge you have been harbouring for years?”

I grasped the handle of my mug a bit too tightly and I relaxed my stiff fingers, using my other hand to lift the cup to my lips and drink. I was getting angry, too angry, and I wondered if Draco Malfoy had matured at all, or did he still enjoy riling me as he did at school?

“No, I gave that up years ago. My interest is purely professional. I am simply curious to know what motivations Potter might have in regards to you…you, a friend who has not shown her face to her two best male friends in years.”

“It is true that I have purposely distanced myself from Harry, and Ron, but not exclusively those two people. It has nothing to do with ‘painful memories’ or what the Prophet once called a ‘jilted love.’ I still…I still love them, they will always be my friends, but their need for me is at an end. It ended when Voldemort was destroyed… I could not think for them for the rest of our lives…”

Malfoy barked a laugh, and it startled me. My anger drained away and I felt my energy drain with it.

“So, you can think of no reason why Potter would do what he did to you, or why he pursues you now?”
“Ron is outside his reach, and for whatever reason, Harry wants him…” I muttered before finishing my coffee and sitting it on the tray upon the coffee table. I noticed my familiar curled up under the maple, his head resting on the toe of Malfoy’s boot. Odd…

“Has the thought occurred to you that Potter might want you and Weasley because he cannot function without you?”

It had occurred to me, but it had seemed ridiculous.

“His psychosis suggests that he believes he is still sixteen or seventeen years old. In his mind, the Dark Lord is sometimes defeated, sometimes not…just as Dumbledore is or isn’t still alive…”

I frowned at Malfoy’s words. When I had mentioned the Horcruxes to Harry at the cottage, he reacted with a type of relief, as if I were speaking his language…that I understood.

“But that doesn’t explain everything, Malfoy. It doesn’t explain why he would murder…”

“No, it doesn’t.”

I stared at my empty coffee cup, the details of the night I was attacked billowing up in my third eye. I had already written it down in my notes, but the emotions I had felt myself, and from Harry, could not easily be conveyed in writing.

Aberforth, Minerva, myself, Trelawney, George…there was not a simple connection.

“And here is where I can supply some information.”

I pulled my thoughts back to the moment, gazing at Malfoy as he leaned forward to refill our coffee cups. I took mine, not fully intending on drinking, but to absorb the warmth through the porcelain.

“I went through the early files, the complaint filed by Arthur Weasley to my department…the domestic dispute…”

I blinked. It was hard to believe that the Weasleys would file a complaint against Harry for anything. Granted, from what Arthur had told me, in not so many words, the fact that Harry had struck Ginny was disturbing enough. I suddenly wondered what the circumstances had been for Harry ever to hit his wife, the girl he had loved through the nightmare of Voldemort and long afterward.

“It was the first bit of documentation to Potter’s deteriorating mental state. I was only a Sergeant then, and on a different case…but I knew the Inspector who took Ginny Potter’s statement, and eventually Potter’s statement.”

I nodded for Malfoy to continue.

“I am paraphrasing, Granger. I could never let you see those documents, and you realise everything I have been saying is to stay between us?”

“Of course.”

Malfoy nodded in return. “Ginny Potter was struck across the face resulting in a broken nose and cracked teeth, easily mended, of course, but still enough for the Weasley family to go to such a
length as filing a complaint. From what I gathered, earlier in the day Ginny Potter had had an argument with her husband about his work. He was an Auror, when there was a need still…”

I rolled my eyes.

“…but the argument was not heated in the sense that it became physical. More like a wife nagging a husband, from both accounts. But Potter isolated himself in his study for the rest of the day. Ginny Potter entered the study at about seven in the evening, after calls for Potter to come to dinner were ignored. She found him sitting in the floor before the fire, books, and parchment around him. After calling for him several times without a response, she pulled on his shoulder. That was when he hit her.

By Potter’s account, he claimed to have been startled by his wife. By Ginny Potter’s account, she was wilfully and angrily assaulted. I think her statement had words like ‘seething,’ ‘wide-eyed,’ and ‘frightening presence.’

She has been separated from him ever since. That was approximately seven years ago, Granger.”

All I could think to do was frown. I knew Ginny would not be one to stay in a dangerous or abusive relationship, even if it was with Harry. Ginny had learned her lesson very well in her First Year… and that lesson was what had kept her alive now. I envied her strength of character.

“The books? What were…” I began, my sight set upon the notes I had made on the desk.

“There were no details as to what books Potter had in his hands that night.”

I sat up straighter, ready to move to my notes to fill in blanks. It was information, but not as much as I would have liked. It strengthened my speculations, but nothing more.

“But there is a quick description of his study and the items inside when the Aurors came six months after Potter hit his wife…”

Malfoy was baiting me. He wanted another bit of personal information from me, I knew. I met his eye defiantly. All of Wizarding Britain had wanted to extract something personal from me. When I was eighteen, it had been who I had had my heart set on: Ron, Harry, or Viktor Krum. My personal life had been used to sell magazines and newspapers… Malfoy wanted something to use to hurt me.

“What is it you do, exactly, in the Department of Mysteries, Granger?”

Merlin, that again.

“You know I…”

“You cannot tell me…well, Granger, actually you will tell me, as it is information that most likely aid in the capture of Potter before he decides to kill someone else.”

I bit my tongue, literally, to keep me from calling Malfoy out. I would lose my job, if I hadn’t already…I would lose my security clearance, I would lose my only source of income, and my only escape from the mundane life I had made for myself.

“I could recite the policy, Granger, the policy that exempts you for any sort of responsibility to your department while assisting in a criminal investigation, but I’m sure you already know your
department’s policies by heart.”

I glared.

“Would you like to fetch a note from your department Head?” he mocked in a simpering tone.

“I am not above hexing you, Malfoy…Detective Chief Inspector or not,” I growled, shifting my arm to let my wand slide into my hand.

“Then you would find that your ‘safe house’ is no longer my family’s home, but Azkaban prison, Granger,” he muttered, meeting my glare with one of his own. “Or, you could just answer the question and continue drinking coffee, sleeping on feather beds, and keeping yourself outside the notice of the press, and Potter.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I was tired, so damn tired, and I knew that I could just as easily ignore Malfoy and not exhaust myself by answering his question…

“I relegate time.”

“Meaning?”

I sighed in frustration. “I work to keep the time of our world from interfering with time in the Muggle world. Our magic, our spells, our structures often coexist or cohabitate in time and space with the Muggle world. Just as there are magical devices to keep our world from being seen by Muggles, I work to keep our essential existence from colliding with the reality of the Muggle world… There is no simple explanation, Malfoy, but my co-workers call me Verdandi.”

Malfoy frowned, moving to drink his coffee again. “Verdandi?”

I took a deep breath. “How is it you were second to me in studies, Malfoy?”

He coughed into his mug, spluttering, his face flushing. “I know who Verdandi was, Granger, do not insult my intelligence. And if you want to be completely truthful about the situation, you didn’t even finish Seventh Year!”

I did not even have the energy or will to laugh at the flustered expression on Malfoy’s face, but I did feel a bit satisfied that I had riled him.

I continued. “I also oversee the usage of what is left of a magical devices called Time-Turners. In fact, you could say that I am the guardian of time…”

Damn, I had not thought of that…

“Granger?”

Harry surely remembered Third Year and my Time-Turner. Did he know anything about my work in the Department of Mysteries? It was unlikely with him being in St. Mungo’s for years, but not impossible. When one is said to work in the Department of Mysteries, there is little else to be said…and it was not a secret that I worked as an Unspeakable, but it was not broadcast to the populace either. Harry could not know about my work, but if he did, it would make me a natural choice to target…
Damn, if he was unable to find the Resurrection Stone, he might try for a Time-Turner…

No. No, it did not make sense. The Stone could only allow you to see a shadow, unless… No, that was silly… I was missing something, a big piece of something.

“Granger!”

I physically jerked at the sound of Malfoy’s voice, spilling a few drops of tepid coffee into the knee of my denims. I set the cup on the tray for the sake of not spilling what coffee was left in the cup on my only set of clothing.

“What are you thinking, Granger?” Malfoy purred, his lips caressing the rim of his cup.

I flushed, despite my aversion to the man. My mind betrayed me, admiring the silver of his eyes, the way his hair fell across his forehead in lank platinum strands, the muscles rippling under his turtle neck and holster…

Stop it!

“I’m just...thinking, isn’t that obvious?”

“Obvious, yes. Annoying to everyone in your vicinity, absolutely…”

He stretched to snatch a biscuit from the tray and bit into it slowly, his eyes still fixed upon me. I tried to let the sudden flush of blood to my face pass, but it did not…

“Now…” he said, licking crumbs from the corner of his mouth. “…is that the general details of what you do, Granger, or is there anything else I should know about?”

I shook my head, “That’s about it. I will sometimes assist in the cataloguing and collecting of prophecies, or assist in recording astronomical phenomena, but I mainly work with time…”

Malfoy ate the rest of his biscuit, swiping at the few crumbs on his shirt, leaning to grab another.

I sat quietly as he ate, trying not to stare at him. And I wondered if I had suffered some sort of brain damage for thinking for an instant Malfoy was not bad looking after all…

“When the Aurors broke into Potter’s study, they quickly subdued him and transported him to St. Mungo’s. Afterward, they returned to fill out their reports,” Malfoy began, but paused as I had opened my mouth to ask.

“Photographs of the room?”

“None. It was not a crime scene…not a criminal investigation. But there was a description in the report, which I will summarize…”

I nodded as Malfoy leaned back further in the couch, ignoring the haughty expression on his face.

“As you can imagine, the room was filthy, there was a note about the smell. Books were scattered everywhere, but the ones that were found around Potter when he was subdued were noted specifically. The first was a copy of ‘The Tales of Beedle the Bard.’”
I swallowed. It had to have been a commercial copy, which I had always assumed was much different from my copy.

“The second was, as we might have feared, ‘The Hanged Man.’”

I closed my eyes.

“The third was a copy of Skeeter’s biography on Dumbledore. There were two different types of books on potions, one banned, one used in Hogwarts curriculum. The last book, which has confirmed a possible motive behind your attack, was a book on time travel, mostly outlining the perils as well as giving instructions on how to avoid detection by the past self. The rest of what was found were notes, all illegible to the Aurors who made the report. I found out this morning that those notes have either been destroyed or are missing.”

Malfoy paused to search my face, but I did not have the energy to work the information out, so I filed it away.

“The only other information worth mentioning was the photographs pinned to the walls in no discernable pattern. Photographs of you, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Sirius Black, Severus Snape, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Fred and George Weasley, Potter’s parents, Remus Lupin, and…myself.”

Malfoy’s face darkened at his last word, and I narrowed my eyes. All of the people he mentioned had been important in some way or another to Harry. Unfortunately, most of those people were dead. Only four of the mentioned names lived still...

“You have put eyes on Neville, I hope.”

Malfoy nodded, grabbing another biscuit and chewing it thoughtfully. I could not make my brain move any longer, and the coffee had not rejuvenated me in the least.

“Mother tells me you spent your day making notes? Anything interesting?”

My eyes were growing heavy, but I shook my head, forcing myself to stand. Managing to move to the desk, I gathered up my parchments and rolled them in my hand, turning to Malfoy and leaning my hip on the edge of the desk.

“There are too many unknowns, Malfoy…” I said softly, my eyelids getting heavier.

“Granger…”

My eyelids fell, and blessed blackness came with it. Merlin, I was in bad shape… I opened my eyes and stood fully on my feet. What had brought on this sudden fatigue?

“…go to bed already…”

From time to time, I will wake up in a ‘mood.’ The morning after sitting with Malfoy in his mother’s study, I awoke in the early grey hours unexplainably angry. Ron had always said that my
sudden outbursts of anger was a cause for general alarm…

I bathed, sitting in the floral scented water, seething. Even when I found that my clothing had been washed, and a fresh set of underwear had been set upon the counter, my mood did not improve a degree. I dressed, my face burning as if actual flames danced on my brow.

I hated my clothes, I hated my face, I hated my lack of hair, and most of all I hated the fact that I was missing a piece of the puzzle that had become my life as of that moment. Helplessness was never a feeling familiar to me, but I felt it, and it made me angry. A part of me knew that this anger was a reaction to the stress…the stress of being attacked by one’s best friend, sexually assaulted, and left alive knowing he would kill again and again.

I crumpled to the marble floor, quaking with silent sobs.

Everything was all-wrong. My life should never have been this way…and I had so little to cherish or look forward to… That much was my fault, cutting myself off from everything and everyone I loved.

I wanted my mother.

My tears slowly dried on my cheeks and in my eyes. I only had myself to rely on in this world. I had to take care of myself, and I had to stop Harry.

It was not as if Harry Potter had ever been my responsibility, but he was…had been…my friend, and he had attacked me with a brand of evil that I could not imagine.

As I sat on the bathroom floor, I wondered… What was Harry really thinking to himself when he hurt me? Did he believe that he was going to force me to do anything after he had escaped from St. Mungo’s and murdered Minerva? Did he realise how cruel he was?

I wanted to hate my friend, I wanted to pour all my anger and energy in his hating him absolutely, but, I could not… All I could do was try to find his motives, stop him, cure him, if possible.

*That brand of insanity cannot be cured, my dear Miss Granger…* Severus said in the darkness of my mind.

Hearing his voice, albeit manufactured by my imagination, was a comfort, and my quaking stopped as if someone had grabbed a hold of me. I had to face the truth, whatever it may be, about Harry.

I used the sink counter to pull myself to my bare feet, my reflection shocking me as it had for the past few days. I sniffed and turned away, leaning back against the counter, staring down at my toes. Plan…plan…I had to have a plan of action. First order of business, the Resurrection Stone. The only person that could know anything about it was the person who had given it…willed it…to Harry. That meant a visit to Hogwarts. Second order of business, go home…

I stopped my thoughts. Home… Clean clothes, a few books, especially my copy of Beedle the Bard, my old wand holster…

Third order of business, talk with Alexander Roux, the Department Head, secure the Time Room…

It was a start, and I took a cleansing breath, some of the anger was gone. All that remained was to
speak with Malfoy, thank Narcissa, find a basket for my cat, and be on my way. Simple.

Or so I thought.

By the time I left my borrowed room, wandered a bit, listening for life. It was light outside the Manor, and an hour had passed. I found Malfoy in Narcissa’s study, drinking coffee. I had not thought coffee to be so popular for breakfast, I had been the only one I knew to drink it so regularly, but Malfoy sat where he had sat the night before, drinking black coffee, reading the Prophet.

Drawing my wand, I Conjured a second cup and helped myself without asking, taking the same place I had the night before. Malfoy did not acknowledge me as I poured my coffee and took a shortbread biscuit from the tray on the coffee table. I stared at the backside of Malfoy’s paper, seeing nothing of interest, but the front page was a different matter.

**Potter Sighted! Wizarding London Braces for the Worst!**

“He’s in London again?”

“He’s also been sighted in York, Bristol, and Brighton…all four locations providing strong evidence that he had been there. A diversionary tactic, Granger. Potter may be insane, but he is not stupid,” Malfoy muttered from behind the newsprint.

I sighed, finishing my biscuit with a generous mouthful of coffee to wash it down. Malfoy turned to the Business section of the paper and continued to pretend I did not exist. I could see just over the top of the paper that he had changed his hair from spikes to a groomed, side part, making him appear more mature and more fitting to his age. He wore black trousers and the same black boots as the night before, but I could not study his shirt for the newspaper held before him.

“I need to go home, Malfoy.”

Malfoy did not answer.

“I need to go home.”

Nothing.

I gulped down my coffee, the fire of my anger building. Slamming the cup down on the coffee table, I flicked my wand and Vanished the newspaper so that Malfoy was forced to stare into my face, his arms lifted before him uselessly now that his reading material had disappeared.

Black, fisherman’s knit sweater with a wide collar, chest holster, and visible arm holster on the left forearm under the baggy sleeve.

“Did you hear me?”

Malfoy let his arms fall to the cushions of the blue velvet couch, his eyes burning into my face.

“I was ignoring your idiotic question, hoping you would take the cue, Granger,” he sneered.

“Why idiotic?”
I was still holding my wand firmly, but remembering that I was pointing it a Malfoy in a somewhat threatening manner, tucked it back into my sleeve.

“I am not your bodyguard, Granger.”

I frowned. “I never asked you to be my bodyguard, and I’m not asking you that now. I am simply informing you that I will be leaving to return to my home.”

Malfoy’s sneer seemed to darken the very room. “I am surprised you felt the need to inform me at all. But, the fact is, Miss Granger, you are not to leave this house until the Ministry deems it safe for you to do so,” he mocked with poignancy and enunciation of every word.

I could feel that fire on my brow again. “Why?”

The age-old question.

“Legally, and officially, you are under the protection of the Ministry, until Potter is caught. Unless you want to become a criminal yourself, or more likely Potter’s next victim you are to stay in this house.”

Malfoy’s tone of voice revealed that he would absolutely love to see me out of the Manor, but as a DCI, and the man who had allowed the Manor to be used as a safe house, he had to tolerate my presence.

“I know you don’t want me here, Malfoy, and if I had had a choice in the matter, I would not have darkened your door…but I did not have a choice. So, here’s what I will propose…call your Superintendent, ask for me to be moved. Or find me a bloody bodyguard!”

“No.”

I balked, flying to my feet as if to attack, but I moved around the couch to the fireplace and began pacing before it.

“I need to go, Malfoy, don’t you see?” I gasped, my exasperation beginning to make me sound a bit unhinged and volatile.

“No, I don’t, Granger.”

“I have to stop him…I know I can…”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “You are not a Detective, Granger, there is a matter of protocol you are overlooking.”

My pacing increased, my bare feet sinking into the thick rug as if to slow me down.

“I am a witch, an Unspeakable, and I know more about this than…” I started, my voice raised into a crazed pitch.

“What you are is a victim, and the only thing you are going to do is testify at Potter’s trial, and witness his Kiss. You are not a professional investigator, there are whole departments devoted to that sort of work, so, I suggest you should calm the fuck down and have more coffee!” Malfoy roared, he was quickly on his feet, his arms crossed before his wide chest, the muscles in his neck
and cheek twitching unpleasantly.

I ignored his anger. There was no way he could ever understand.

“Doesn’t it frustrate you, a lowly DCI, to be stuck with babysitting the girl he hated in school…the Mudblood?” I mocked, mirroring Malfoy, pausing in my pace to cross my arms before my own chest.

Malfoy’s eyes closed slightly as his jaw clenched, and suddenly with a great burst of palpable energy, he clutched the coffee table and flung it, and everything atop it, across the room. I nearly collapsed into a foetal position, the magic that crackled through the air frightening me, reminding me of the night Harry attacked me.

“I did not choose to become your warden, Granger. Or would you have rather I let Potter rape and torture you? Should I have watched from the Floo as he eviscerated you in your own bed? Should I have simply added your name to the list of the dead? I did not ask for this…for you!

I saved your life, I have kept you safe, I have opened my home and my family to you, Granger. If anything, you should be thanking me on bended knee…or is this how Mudbloods behave in the…”

Smack!

Malfoy’s roaring had been deafening, frightening. I honestly can say that his anger manifested itself more strongly than my own, but when he said that word, the word I hated most in the world, my own anger propelled me across the room as if on a gale wind and my hand flew of its own accord. The strike was wickedly painful, my right hand thumping and a corresponding hand mark welling up to bruise on Malfoy’s sharp cheekbone. His head was been forcefully turned, but he gazed down at me out of the corner of his icy eyes, and I immediately regretted what I had done.

He had saved me, he had protected me…but...

I stepped back, the backs of my knees hitting the adjacent couch now that the coffee table was in splinters against the wall, blocking the door. I fell into the couch, dazed, embarrassed, and fixed my eyes on my toes.

“You could never understand, Malfoy, you have always lived in this world and never had a need to know about mine… You can never understand how frustrating it is to love and hate a boy like Harry. He is my best friend, and he means me harm.

My life is tearing itself apart, and everything I have fought for, everything I have believed is disintegrating before my very eyes.

I may be a Mudblood,” I spat, “but I am not defenceless. If you want to ignore my conclusions about Harry’s motives, ignore my right to defend myself, you are no better than an imbecile still living your life in the old times, in the old ways…blinded.”

Malfoy said nothing, but turned his head to stare down at me evenly. The handprint was an angry shade of red still, but I had spoken my peace and I felt better for it.

“I cannot be your bodyguard, Granger. I may be a lowly DCI, but I do have some important work to do…”
The calmness of his voice was alarming.

“I will leave this house with or without your consent, Malfoy. If it makes me ‘bait,’ so be it…”

Malfoy frowned, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers, still standing before me. “You were eavesdropping on our conversation…”

I had said too much, as usual.

“I will speak with the Detective Superintendent about assigning a detail to escort you to Hogwarts at the very least. Your cottage is still closed, and Hogwarts is far as you are going to go, most likely,” Malfoy sighed, bowing his back to shove his hands deeper into his pockets making him appear more like a boy than a grown man.

I nodded. It was all I could expect, I supposed, Hogwarts was my main destination. And I had already imposed myself so much upon Draco Malfoy’s good graces.

Malfoy moved toward the door, drawing his wand and repaired the coffee table and levitated it back to where it belonged in the room…Vanishing the ruined tray, food, and smashed mugs. Without a backward glance at me, Malfoy left the room in wide, determined strides.

I counted to five, and leapt to my bare feet, my toes sinking into the plush, thick carpets, hot on the pursuit. Why had he changed his mind? I had been terrible, rude, and even cruel to him. Did he want me out of his family’s house so badly?

Up the main staircase and down a corridor I had not explored, I just caught sight of Malfoy’s pale hair entering a door halfway down. I kept to the shadows. I pressed my back against the wall next to the door, which was completely shut. I suddenly thought of Fred and George’s Extendable Ears, and my chest burned with unshed tears.

I heard Malfoy’s voice, the timbre rumbling through the door and my chest as he called a name into the Floo. I did not hear the usual noise that accompanied the activation of the Floo, but I soon heard a voice that was not Malfoy’s. The first part of the conversation was lost to me, indistinct. However, after hearing deep laughter, the words became clear.

“…ger is thick-headed, but brilliant, Malfoy. She should have worked for our department, but that French expatriate Roux who acts as head on the ninth level snatched her up first.”

It was a male voice, older, and I guessed it was the Detective Superintendent Malfoy had mentioned.

“You will do whatever Granger needs you to do, Malfoy. And I know how you feel about her…about all of this, but Granger is our best chance at catching Potter. You are up for promotion, Malfoy, remember that. After this case, you’ll have my job.”

More laughter. Alastor Gumboil…it had to be. He had been the head of the Hit-Wizards at the end of the War. With the reshuffling of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, I, again, could only guess Gumboil had been made Detective Superintendent of the new ‘police force.’

“Al, this is not about promotion and I am not thinking that far ahead. This is about catching Potter before our world falls apart. With Hogwarts closed and the curfews, the country is reverting back to the old times and petty crime is taking too many of our resources…”
“I know that all too well, Malfoy. For the time being, you will investigate ‘with’ Granger, she is the only ‘surviving’ asset we have, and the only lead we have to Potter.”

“Surely there is someone else who would be better suited… I have more important things to do.”

Malfoy’s voice was polite, but insistent.

“Do you now?”

There was a pause, and I wondered what sort of expression was on Malfoy’s face.

“There is no one better suited, Malfoy. You are my best DCI, and you were given this case because of your affiliations to Potter and his victims. I have four other Inspectors who can handle everything else.”

Another pause and I craned my neck so that my ear was closer to the door. I missed whatever Malfoy had said…

“I know you have been filtering pieces of information to Granger in order to filter it back to us with the pieces put together. You have been working with her for some time now, you might as well make it official. And that is my final word, Malfoy,” Gumboil growled, and even through the door I felt the authority of that voice.

“Fuck!”

It was Malfoy, and the Floo call was over. I took a breath and moved, my bare feet padding over the carpet noiselessly. I almost ran down the corridor to the stairs, going up just as Malfoy left his room, his furious strides propelling him faster than I could move up the stairs. As he passed, he did not acknowledge or notice me, and stomped down the stairs, his face still bearing my hand print, but was flushed with anger as well.

I descended slowly, making my way to the kitchens, hoping to have a proper breakfast. When I entered the threshold, I saw Malfoy at the far end, leaning down to speak with his mother who was staring back at me with an amused expression on her face. I walked down the few steps to the kitchen floor, paying little mind to the elves working all about. Malfoy stood and turned, his eyes flashing upon me. He lifted his chin slightly and strode toward me, but did not stop as he neared, and passed by me as if I did not exist.

I was not offended.

Narcissa beckoned me from across the kitchen and I moved, the stones warm under my bare feet. Merlin, I wanted my boots. Narcissa sipped her tea as I sat near her in the nook, happy to see a plate of breakfast had popped into existence before me. Without prompting, I began to eat as Narcissa watched, the amused smirk still gracing her regal lips.

“Please forgive Draco, Miss Granger.”

I swallowed my egg and dabbed my lips with the cloth napkin provided me. I met her cool gaze as she continued.

“Draco has had a difficult time since the War. Of course, haven’t we all?” Narcissa twittered, but I
sensed an edge of nervousness in her laugh.

I nodded.

“This case…Potter…has been the hardest yet…the most personal. So please, Miss Granger, understand…”

Narcissa’s words trailed, as if she was either unable to say more or did not know how to proceed. The guilt I had held in place burst free and threatened to consume me. Narcissa loved her son. And Narcissa had been nothing but kind to me, and I knew it was not simply because I was a guest of sorts.

“Be careful, Miss Granger,” Narcissa whispered, and my blood ran cold, the warning in her words laced with an undercurrent of maternal magic. She grasped my left hand, her fingers cold around mine.

I nodded again. “Mrs. Malfoy…” I whispered, surprised at the emotion in my voice. “There is so much…so much I would like to ask you, but I suppose…”

I did not finish, the sound of Malfoy’s booted feet pounding against the stones making me glance up and across the kitchen. Narcissa squeezed my hand before releasing it, leaving an icy sensation upon my skin.

“Five minutes, Granger.”

Malfoy could barely contain his annoyance as he stood before the nook, his silver eyes flashing, as if expecting me to object, but all I did was blink rapidly, surprised.

“Don’t give me that blank look, Granger. I know you were listening…”

When I said nothing, Malfoy nodded to himself and turned on his heel, stomping out of the kitchen again. He was already in his long coat, his face set.

“Return, Miss Granger…there are many things I would like to tell you when times are better suited for such things.”

Narcissa Malfoy had said what I had attempted to say with much more grace that I could muster, and as I extracted myself from the nook, and my breakfast half-eaten, I turned to smile at the Lady of the house. I had been very wrong about this woman, and I hoped deep inside that I would have the ability to speak as candidly with her in the future as I had during my time spent in her home.

“Don’t worry, Miss Granger…Draco will take great care with you, despite his gruffness. He is an officer, a bit rough around the edges, but the model of an officer. He has been a boon to us…and someday, hopefully soon, I will tell you about it all…”

I smiled.

“Could you…could you possibly watch after my cat while I’m away. I can’t…”

“Of course, dear. He’s part of the family now, and has taken a particular liking to sleeping on Lucius’ lap.
Hurry now…”

I finally left Narcissa Malfoy’s presence, and I hoped it would not be the last time I would sit with her in the uncharacteristically homey kitchen of Malfoy Manor.
Part VI

Part 6

Within three minutes of Malfoy informing me of my imminent departure, I was descending the stairs. I wore a new pair of heavy boots, my hand-me-down coat, which had been cleaned of my blood, and placed in the wardrobe with the rest of my battered clothing. I carried a heavy haversack over my shoulder with the book I had been reading, the sealed book, the notes I had made the day before as well as a small travel kit with some expensive toiletries from France, most likely from Narcissa.

Malfoy was pacing frantically in the foyer, and as my new boots tapped soundly on the marble, he turned.

“We’re Apparating.”

Malfoy strode to the wide front doors, and I had to nearly jog to follow him out into the cold of the day. Malfoy paused just before the door to pull up the collar of his coat before moving down onto the white gravel drive. I took the small haversack from my shoulder and shrunk it, shoving into my bottomless pocket, costing me a few steps so that I fell behind.

Old memories of my last visit to the Manor swept through my mind as I tried to keep up, but I kept them away as I finally managed to come within arm’s reach of Malfoy’s back. Together, we passed through the wrought iron gates and I felt a shift in the air around me. The wards had let me pass, and glancing back all I could see was the indistinct drive and the Manor in overgrown, burnt ruins.

Ten steps from the gate onto a muddy, disused lane, Malfoy turned and drew his wand, and I blinked at it…pausing before him, staring dumbly at the light coloured wood. Malfoy frowned, and sighed as he lunged forward to grasp my right arm. I opened my mouth to protest, but time stopped for just a moment.

The world quickly compressed around us, and I was shoved against his chest, inundated with his spicy scent. My head lightened and I crumpled against him, finding it odd that Malfoy’s arms held me…

Side-Along Apparition.

The world re-expanded, and I felt pain again, slicing through my brain like a dull cleaver. Apparition was different than Portkey travel, and it had been a while since I had Apparated. My head felt as if it were shattering, the pressure inside my cranium releasing with an excruciating whistling in my ears.

Malfoy’s arms guided me to the ground, his wand moving over my face to heal shut the wounds that had suddenly reopened on my scalp. My eyelids fluttered, and soon the pain abated. I was panting, disoriented, and tired, but I could see.
“Easy…easy,” Malfoy whispered, and I blinked, amazed at the gentleness in his voice.

He held my shoulders as I began to breathe normally, and I realised I sat in snow. I began casting my eyes about, and I saw I sat in the shadow of the Shrieking Shack.

I pushed Malfoy off in my dazed state, and with a thump, he fell back into the snow, staring at me as if I had grievously injured him in some way. If my head has not been thumping so hard, I would have burst into a fit of laughter. Instead, I drew my wand from my bottomless pocket and struggled to my feet.

Malfoy sneered as he wiped snow from the back of his coat and glanced about. It was pouring snow outside of Hogsmeade, a vast change from the breezy cold of Wiltshire.

I Transfigured my coat into a long, heavy cloak. Malfoy mimicked me, pulling up the hood to hide his shockingly pale hair and face.

“Pull up your hood, Granger, and keep it low. Stay close to my back,” he growled, tucking his wand back into the holster over his black sweater and under his dark cloak.

I nodded, pulling my hood up so that I could only see as high as Malfoy’s long fingers. The wind whipped around the creaking house like a wall of ice and I shivered, feeling a draft in my hood, wind moving about my shorn head. I adjusted the cloak on my shoulders and soon all I could see were Malfoy’s boots.

He started to walk, his soles crunching into the snow, and I moved to follow, trying my best not to let the cold deter me. It had not been so bitterly cold in Wiltshire. My boots slipped in the mix of loose and hard-packed snow as we moved from the Shack, up the lane going into Hogsmeade.

My breath came out in white puffs from under my hood as I breathed from my open mouth. Malfoy was moving too quickly, and I was slipping too often in the snow…my head still ached, and my chest burned from the exertion of walking at a fast pace.

We were nearing Hogsmeade proper, the village nearly obscured by the amount of snow falling, when I had to stop and let my head clear.

“Move it!” he snapped, stopping a few yards down the lane.

I did not answer and bent to rest my palms on my knees, taking in as much icy air as I could. I still was not in the best of health for I knew I could walk leagues in the uneven terrain of the Forest and not need to stop for a breath. I had walked the lane in and out of Hogsmeade as well, and never did I feel as I were operating on only one lung.

I was dizzy, and I could feel cold sweat on the back of my bare neck. The snowy ground seemed so appealing, all of a sudden…

“Damn it, Granger…”

I was in his arms again, my face directed toward the ground. I wanted to sleep, to die, anything to be able to close my eyes and rest. I wanted to throw up…

Malfoy whispered to me, but I could not listen. My vision was off, and the snow was a strange shade of yellow, then green, then blue. I knew something was not quite right with my eyes, but
after a few moments of stillness, the snow was white again. I could finally breathe without straining myself, and I lifted my head to stare at Malfoy’s chin.

“You’re feverish, you silly bint… should never have let you leave the Manor…”

He was angry, but he was not speaking to me as much as he was speaking to himself. I was also a bit angry, but at myself for being so weak. I had never been so weak before…

Lifting me up with ease, Malfoy set me on my feet, readjusting my cloak, pulling my hood down again. I still could not see his face for his hood, only his sharp, clean-shaven chin.

“Come along then…” he whispered with an air of irritation, taking my hand in his and pulling me along at a much slower pace.

I was sure we looked ridiculous walking down into Hogsmeade’s High Street. Malfoy stood a head and half taller than me, and his pale hand totally enveloped my own. No one could see who we were, but if they compared sizes, one might have thought we were parent and child.

There were very few people out in Hogsmeade, which surprised me. Then again, with Hogwarts closed, the village would seem quiet. Passing Honeydukes, I managed to see official Ministry notices pasted to the windows announcing curfews at sundown, effective for all of Wizarding Britain…

I wanted to ask Malfoy more about the notices, but said nothing as we finally left the High Street for the lonely lane towards the castle.

I wondered about the people of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. The village and the castle had survived the War, and never once had the school closed because of Voldemort. It was closed because the castle’s residents had been attacked, and not the castle itself.

As we neared the gates to Hogwarts, I lifted my hood a bit, causing Malfoy to glance back with a sneer, his hand squeezing painfully around mine. I ignored the man who was pulling me along like a petulant child, and examined the figures standing at the gates.

Old Mr. Filch stood in a ridiculous looking balaclava and cloak, speaking with four other cloaked men. Malfoy growled a curse under his breath as we approached, and quickened his pace, dragging me behind him.

“Macavoy, Peters, Scruggs, Hartley, is this what you call ‘patrolling?’ I walked up the lane as bold as day and no one, no one stopped me!”

Malfoy released my hand with rough gesture, and I stepped closer, peering from under my hood to stare at the four men. I did not know any of them, but they looked younger, their names unfamiliar.

One dark skinned man stepped forward and saluted as Malfoy pushed back his hood. Malfoy frowned at the man and hissed.

“No, sir…we were just about to have a cup of…”

“Hartley, you piece of dung, you were supposed to be positioned down the lane, at the bend. And you, Peters, you were supposed to be monitoring the other end of High Street, why the hell are you here?”
Peters seemed to be the oldest of the four men, his hair a beautiful shade of honey, his face pleasant and round. He stepped forward and saluted as well, causing Malfoy to hiss again.

“Sir, I was about to return…”

“Move it, Peters. By Merlin, if I am going to have to speak with your Sergeant, heads are going to roll!”

Malfoy’s face was a mask of cold anger, and I noticed that there was still a faint imprint of my hand on his cheek, which had nearly faded for the cold. The two reprimanded men popped away, Apparating back to their posts, I assumed. Only Macavoy and Scruggs were left, as well as Mr. Filch who was grinning stupidly at the situation.

“Sir, is there a problem outside…” a dark haired man began, but stopped as Malfoy shook his head slightly, his mouth moving as if to spew some more orders.

“I have brought a consultant from the Ministry to speak to the remaining staff. The DS is aware that I am here, now, can we pass, Scruggs, or am I going to have to stand here all fucking day?” Malfoy growled at the man named Scruggs.

Consultant? I felt a slight grin crack my face.

“No, sir, just let Macavoy take the ‘consultant’ through…”

I blinked as the last man, a hefty red headed fellow with large brown eyes came to my side, clutching my elbow roughly.

“She’s not some criminal, Macavoy, take it easy,” Scruggs scolded his partner, glancing past Malfoy to me, his head craning to attempt to see my face.

“Go on then, I’ll be right through,” Malfoy uttered in a low tone to me, and I nodded as the large Macavoy pulled me toward the gates.

Mr. Filch, I noticed upon approach, stood just inside the gates. As I was pulled through, I grunted, causing the man attached to my elbow to pause, but then pull me through so that I stood near the caretaker.

“You alright then, missus?” Macavoy asked in a thick regional accent that I did not recognise.

I nodded, my hood shaking around my head.

I was not ‘alright,’ in fact, I could feel blood trickling from my head and around my left ear. Whatever the protections were that surrounded Hogwarts, it had ‘probed’ my body, recording my magical signature, and plucked at something inside me, as if pinching me to see if I were real. I watched Malfoy walk through with Scruggs, his face hardening for a moment as he passed, he, too, apparently feeling what I had felt.

Malfoy spoke brusquely with the two men, who I assumed were constables of sorts, and then took my elbow much like the large Macavoy had, and began pulling me along towards the front doors of the castle.
“You’re bleeding again,” Malfoy said softly, irritated.

I sighed. “I know…it was the wards…I…”

“They are not really wards, per se, Granger. It is goblin magic, the strongest protective sort. It pulls apart your magic, looking for the minutest traces of whatever it deems dangerous. If you were Potter, the gates would have literally incapacitated you in a type of stasis until the authorities arrived.

Why they did not use the goblins earlier, I have no idea…” he muttered as we started up the front steps.

The idea of using the goblins to fortify Hogwarts made me uneasy.

I knew I would have to find Poppy once we got inside, the bleeding was not serious, but it was not stopping either, and I could feel it running down my neck and into my sweater.

Malfoy pushed against the large front door so that the ancient wood released a low groan, and opened just enough for us to pass inside. The first thing I noticed, as Malfoy threw his shoulder into closing the door, was how cold it was in the entryway for I could still see my breath before my face. The castle seemed abandoned, none of the torches lit and a mournful wind moving high above my head.

I pushed my hood back and shivered, glancing toward the closed doors of the Great Hall, then toward the Portrait Hall, only hearing a few whispers from the paintings.

“Look at me, Granger.”

I jumped as Malfoy stepped in front of me, grasping my face by the chin, turning my head so he could look at the opened wound in my scalp. I felt silly, but strangely comforted as Malfoy drew his wand and Vanished the blood and muttered a spell too low for me to discern, sealing the wound again.

“You need to see Wiscombe again, Granger. These wounds are not normal…” Malfoy muttered with a hint of disgust, turning my head the other way to look at the other side, his large thumb pinching my chin slightly.

“I know.”

Malfoy released me, giving my face a once-over, stepped back, and then turned away.

“Let’s go. Longbottom should be in his office…”

We moved through the freezing stone corridors towards the gargoyle and the entrance to the Headmaster’s office.

I had not told Malfoy what I intended to do from that point on, and I wondered if I should stop him from addressing the gargoyle guardian and inform him of my latest plans. I had only been allowed to leave the protection of Malfoy Manor because Gumboil had wanted Malfoy to work with me… and I needed Malfoy’s protection although it made me feel very…odd. Ten years ago, Malfoy would have rather hexed me than protected me. Ten years ago, I would have rather given up magic all together than be indebted to him…
Times change.

And your generation has had the benefit of being able to change with them, Severus whispered.

I tried not to smile at that comforting voice as the gargoyle informed Malfoy that Headmaster Longbottom was in the greenhouses, but for us to wait in the office. I stepped behind Malfoy as the spiral stairs curled upward.

The familiar Headmaster’s office was a wonderful contrast to the halls, warm and comfortable. Snow blew against the windows, and the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and immediately I began looking for Minerva.

I drew my wand, re-Transfiguring my cloak to my familiar coat, doffing it to move toward Dumbledore’s portrait. However, before I could take two steps toward the portrait, the door banged open and Neville Longbottom stood just inside, snow on the shoulders of his dark red cloak having seemingly run from the greenhouses. Behind Neville was Horace Slughorn.

Malfoy’s face tightened, noticing that Neville was staring at me with a mixture of shock and joy. Horace, on the other hand, looked ill, his fat face as white as the snow falling on the grounds. Malfoy did not move from his place before the fire, and I stood in the middle of the office dumbly holding my coat before me, my wand caught in two fingers of my right hand.

“Thank Merlin, Hermione!”

The door banged shut, creating a cold draft that made Malfoy scowl.

I blinked at Neville. My old housemate looked terrible. I knew I must have looked worse, but Neville’s face shocked me to complete stillness. His normally bright face was sallow, his handsome eyes red, and his mousy hair dishevelled. He had lost weight and his cloak hung from his shoulders limply: his jumper too big, his trousers held up by a cinched belt.

I took a breath and laid my coat over the back of the nearest couch, trying to mirror Neville’s joyous expression.

“We had heard you were attacked, Hermione, are you alright?” Neville asked stepping toward me, his eyes moving from my shorn head and sunken cheeks. His worn hand raised to touch my face.

I surprised myself by backing away quickly, an abrupt cloud of fear billowing up in my mind. Neville froze, stricken, glancing to Malfoy who had moved to stand behind me near my elbow. I closed my eyes, how stupid could I be?

Horace remained near the door, his dark eyes staring pointedly at me, and I noticed that his face conveyed a wordless message. Horace needed to tell me something. After so many years dealing potion ingredients for banned books, I knew how to covertly communicate with the sly old bastard. I was an honourary Slytherin after all, and when I nodded slowly, Horace returned with one nod and discreetly showed himself out.

“Neville…” I started, moving my eyes to my old housemate, plastering a congenial smile on my face. “I’m fine. Of course, I’ve been better, but I’m fine…”
What a lie.

“But, if you’ll excuse me, I must speak with Albus. I don’t mean to be short with you, Neville, but it has to do with why Malfoy is here with me…”

Neville’s wide eyes moved from my face to Malfoy, and his expression darkened as if a cloud had passed before the sun.

“I understand, Hermione. I’ll be in the greenhouses, if you should need me… Malfoy.”

I could not see Malfoy’s face, but apparently a flickering of understanding passed between the two men. Neville forced a smile as he considered me again, but I could see a pain in his eyes, a pain I could not identify.

Neville turned and slowly exited the room, his eyes studying me as he shut the door. I felt sorry for Neville having suddenly been thrust into the role of Headmaster of a school that was closed…

I sighed, my shoulders falling. The depressing ambience of the castle had been amplified by its Headmaster, and I wondered how soon the world would right itself. And then I remembered…

I turned, ignoring Malfoy, and moved through the office, up to the Headmaster’s desk, to face the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

“Where is she?”

Albus’ painted blue eyes twinkled, and a smile turned his lips upward. I realised…I really did not like this man albeit he was now a magical conglomeration of pigments on canvas.

“Protecting Gryffindor Tower, as per the instructions of her will.”

I started to turn away, but thought better of it. As much as I longed to see and speak with Minerva, I still had a line of questioning to pose to the former Headmaster. I leaned into the corner of the Headmaster’s desk, crossing my arms before me, staring evenly at Albus. After a few moments, those blue eyes turned away from me, towards the door of the office.

“I see you still carry Severus’ wand, Mr. Malfoy.”

I frowned, and turned my shorn head toward Malfoy who had also doffed his coat and was moving a wand over the door to cast a privacy charm. It was a different wand than the one in his chest holster, the other wand I had suspected strapped to his arm.

Malfoy turned toward me, his eyes moving passively from mine to Albus. In his right hand he held a long, thin wand of dark wood. It was possibly red oak or mahogany, but I was not sure. However, I was more concerned with Albus’ words…

Severus’ wand…

I had rarely seen Severus Snape with a wand. There had been that speech in my First Year about ‘foolish wand waving…’ But I vaguely recalled that Snape’s wand was at least thirteen inches of dark wood and unknown core.

How and why did Malfoy have it?
Malfy tucked the wand into his sleeve, and moved toward Albus’ portrait, his face unreadable.

“And Tom’s as well?” Albus asked, but there was no hint of surprise in his voice.

I, however, gaped. I rarely gape.

I thought I had recognised the pale wood wand Malfy carried in his chest holster, his primary wand, I assumed. There was only one ‘Tom’ to Albus, Lord Voldemort nee Tom Riddle. If I had been puzzled at Malfy having Severus’ wand, I was shocked that he had Voldemort’s.

“Is that a problem for you, Dumbledore?” Malfy asked, standing near me, aping my composure by also crossing his arms before his wide chest.

“Not at all! It merely surprises me that you have never found a wand that was uniquely your own. You had mine for so long…”

Ah, yes…

“It was not really yours to begin with, though. As it had never really been Voldemort’s or Malfy’s, although Malfy had it longer than Voldemort, and could have used it if he had liked,” I snorted, ignoring Malfy’s piercing eyes upon the left side of my head.

“And now Harry has it. It is his by right.”

“Perhaps so, but I would rather see the damn thing destroyed,” I sneered.

Albus said nothing in retort, but studied me, his eyes returning again and again to my bare head.

“It is dangerous for you to be here, Miss Granger.”

I rolled my eyes. Sometimes Albus could be so daft.

“There is something I need to know, Albus, and you may be the only one who can answer my questions.”

Malfy shifted on his feet, and I let my arms fall to my sides, hands clutching the edge of the desk. Albus nodded after a moment of hesitation.

“The Resurrection Stone. Its only power is not simply what we believe it to be…not what is recorded in Beedle the Bard, is it?”

Albus frowned, shifting in his frame. “What is it you believe, Miss Granger?”

I rolled my eyes again, and my face flushed. “We do not have time for riddles and mental exercises, Albus. The Resurrection Stone can literally resurrect people, not just their shadows…”

“I didn’t…” Albus started, agitated.

“You didn’t try it yourself, but you knew, didn’t you?”

Gravely, Albus nodded, too agitated to answer aloud.
Silence fell over the office, and I closed my eyes. Sometimes I hated it when my theories proved correct.

“Time and chance…”

I opened my eyes to stare at Albus who had spoken in a near whisper, almost as if speaking to himself, which I knew he did quite often.

Time and chance…I wanted to vomit, die, or curl up in a ball and be left alone for a very long time. Yes, I hated when my theories…

“You told Potter this?” Malfoy growled, taking a step toward the portrait, and I half wished Malfoy would use Voldemort’s wand to erase the canvas.

“Long ago…almost as an afterthought…”

Merlin…

I started laughing, much like I had the last time I was in that office… How did that poem go? Laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone? Oh how true.

I flopped down in the Headmaster’s chair, throwing my right leg over the arm, laughing all the while to keep from screaming at Albus and Vanishing the oil from the canvas.

“You old fool… All these years of you feeding into Harry’s pain, his vulnerabilities, to sway the outcome of a war…you are going to lose it all because of some stray words…lose it when he somehow manages to ‘correct’ the timeline. If you weren’t already dead, I would kill you!” I progressed from laughter to screaming at the portrait, the figure in it which recoiled…the frame having cracked and the painting thumping against the wall.

I slapped a hand to my face, rubbing my eyes, then the right temple. Merlin, my head hurt. I had done it again letting my own magic project through my voice. I would have to think as to the reason why it was happening at some later point…my head hurt…

I glanced to Malfoy, who had been watching me all the while. My skin prickled at his gaze and the way his lips curved into a satisfied smirk. I sighed.

“Why do we have to suffer for you, Albus?”

Despair laced my voice, and I had to keep my tears at bay…

“I never asked…”

“You didn’t think to ask, you just…” I trailed, sighing again to cover my deteriorating emotions. “I am just a chess piece to you, a pawn.”

“A Queen, Miss Granger, if you must use that analogy, there are better, more accurate analogies,” Albus said swiftly, his words correcting me. “Harry was the King on my side…just because the King has been checked…the game is not over.”

I stared at Albus. “Explain.”
Albus smiled, sadly, arranging his hands before him, delicately. “Protect the Queen, she has all the moves. You have been called the ‘brightest witch of your age,’ Miss Granger. Did you really think it a simple compliment? You have heard it so many times, maybe the words have lost all their meaning.

Just as Harry had been groomed to stop Voldemort, you have been groomed to stop Harry.”

I was on my feet before I realised it, with my wand drawn. “No one has groomed me for such a thing, don’t you dare claim that, Albus!”

The room shook, the other portraits yelling protests from other side of the office. Albus remained calm, bowing his head as his painted world suffered a devastating earthquake.

Suddenly, the shaking stopped as Malfoy’s hands enveloped mine, forcing my wand hand down to my side. I had not seen him move, but then again, my attention had been fixed upon Albus.

“You have all the moves, Miss Granger. Do what you feel is right. You have always known what to do…and I was not the one to groom you, my dear, someone else takes that honour…two people, in fact.”

“I am not listening to this shite now, Albus. And if you don’t have anything useful to say, I am going to leave this office and possibly never return!” I snarled.

Albus opened his eyes and raised his white head, but he was not looking at me, but at Malfoy.

“Miss Granger, if I had any more information, I would gladly give it without being asked. As it is, there is nothing more I can give you.”

“Not even a speculation as where Potter might be now?” Malfoy asked, his official DCI tone of voice employed.

“I thought about Number 12 Grimmauld Place early on, and sent Phineas to check, but no one has been there for years.”

Malfoy snorted, “Phineas Nigellus Black is confined to the view of one room…but Grimmauld Place has been searched, Potter has not been there.”

I bit my lower lip. I had not pondered the possible whereabouts of Harry. There were places he could hide, places he could go, but that was only to capture him. I wanted to stop him…

I shifted my feet. There was nothing more to be learned from the room. I passed Malfoy and Albus’ portrait, and retrieved my old coat, shrugging into the warmth. I tucked my wand into my pocket and strode to the door, passing through and shutting it behind me, leaning back into the wood. Malfoy would soon follow. However, Malfoy did not come, instead, I could hear him speaking to Albus.

“You are far too resistant, Mr. Malfoy.”

“A quality that has kept me alive, Dumbledore.”

“Every Queen needs a Knight, every Fool needs a ruler to protect it…”
I heard Malfoy scoff. “You were a fool when you were alive, you are just the same dead.”

“The Fool is not my part to play, Mr. Malfoy, but I digress…it seems fate has found you fitting to play a major role in this story, whether you like it or not…”

I stepped away from the door, feeling a surge of magic pass through the walls, and all was silent. I stepped onto the staircase and was halfway down when Malfoy exited the office above me. Through the dark of the stairwell, I could see he had reapplied his cloak, not having re-Transfigured it, and was tucking his light coloured wand into his holster.

I decided to think about Malfoy’s wands later.

We met again in the corridor, I in my ugly oversized coat, he in his elegantly Transfigured cloak. I did not ask about the sudden surge of magic I had felt or Albus’ words, but I did mumble that I wanted to see Minerva. Surprisingly, Malfoy followed me as we moved down the near frozen corridors to the Portrait Hall and up the moving stairs towards Gryffindor Tower.

The silence in the castle was deafening to me, and the portraits that watched Malfoy and I were strangely hushed. It was unnerving, and the slowness of the moving stair was becoming an irritation. Finally, I stood before the portrait guarding my old dormitory.

I smiled, I couldn’t help myself. Minerva’s portrait was large, and in it she sat in a chair in her old Transfigurations classroom. She wore her best dark red robes, her hair pinned up in beautiful ruby coloured pins. Sunlight fell over her from an unseen window, and I felt tears burn in the corners of my eyes.

However, Minerva slept in her chair, her head propped up on her right fist, her left hand holding wand, resting in her lap. She slept peacefully, breathing evenly.

“She won’t wake.”

The voice as muted, and as I lifted my chin to glance to the portrait immediately above Minerva, I remembered the round face staring down at me. The portraits had been moved around since the last time I had been in the hall and I never passed through during my time living in the cottage. The less the portraits knew of my presence in Hogwarts, the better. However, the kind face beaming down at me was none other than the former dormitory guardian, the Fat Lady.

“She’s been sleeping ever since the portrait was placed after the funeral. I gave up my post happily for her…but there are no students…”

“She hasn’t been awake at all?” I asked, the disappointment clear in my voice.

The Fat Lady shook her head, her dark coiffed hair bouncing about her wide shoulders. “The new Headmaster comes every day to try to talk to Minerva, but he always walks away after a few minutes. I have to pop down and open the door sometimes when someone needs in. But, it is like this sometimes, especially if the portrait is new.”

I nodded, Albus’ portrait had slept for a very long time. It was not until what would have been my Seventh Year did he respond to anyone.

“I will watch over her, Miss Granger, do not worry.”
A tear trailed down my cheek as I looked at Minerva again. Oh, how I wanted to talk to her, hear her voice again.

“And dear?” the Fat Lady asked in a familiar melodic voice. “Do something about your hair before Minerva wakes, you look terrible.”

I nodded, a laugh trying to well up from my chest, but stopped in my throat.

I inhaled the rest of my tears and turned to start up the stairs again when Malfoy, who had been silent all the while, grasped my wrist.

“Where are you going, Granger?”

I turned, meeting his eyes, which flashed brilliant silver in the filtered light of the Hall. Looking down on his face, I was struck at how pale and perfect he was…he was like a white marble statue, but I knew it was the quality of the light in the Hall and the tears in my eyes that made Draco Malfoy seem so beautiful.

“To Trelawney’s classroom,” I answered as if Malfoy had just asked the stupidest question of the decade.

“Why?”

The pressure on my wrist increased slightly and his warmth suffused my skin and travelled to my chest. I gently extracted my arm.

Why indeed? There was a little niggling bit of thought in my brain, it was the memory of only a few minutes before…something Albus had said. Analogies…Trelawney…and ‘The Hanged Man.’

“There is something that bothers me…” was my answer as I started up the stairs again, my hands grasping the railings as I climbed. My head still thumped painfully.

Malfoy followed close behind me, and every time that I stumbled on the step, I felt his large hand against the small of my back, keeping me from falling backward. I could not really think too much about how warm and big his hand felt, and I could not really think about how he would gaze at me when I would turn to him. No, I had to keep my mind focused.

I knew I needed to see a Healer about my head. Maybe a specialist, and not Wiscombe. Wiscombe was suitable, but he also was attached to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement…

Finally, I entered Trelawney’s classroom, pausing to catch my breath and hoped that the pounding of my heart in my brain would slow and eventually stop. I leaned against the back wall, wheezing as Malfoy passed by me and into the dim light of the classroom.

Even with Trelawney dead for some time, the room still reeked of a strange mix of incense and weak tea. I had left this classroom in my Third Year, and had not ever returned. As I scanned the room, I found little had changed. There were still small tables clustered about the middle of the room, chintz poufs for students to sit, and Trelawney’s spindly table and matching chair in the middle of the room.

Malfoy moved to the opposite wall, pulling aside heavy curtains to uncover a large round window,
spilling grey snow laden light across the room. Around Trelawney’s central space was a floating blue line, glowing faintly in the light. It reminded me of Albus’ age line around the Goblet of Fire, but I knew what it was…a Ministry sanctioned cordon, allowing only certain people to cross and barring all others. It was a literal barrier as compared to the Muggle version of police tape.

I pushed off the wall and made my way down the row of low tables with crystal balls perched on fake gold stands. Malfoy stood by the window, leaning back against it to gaze out of the frosted glass to the Lake. I was thankful of his limited involvement as I approached the cordon, careful not to touch it. I had heard that anyone trying to cross a barrier as the one I skirted, received a nasty hex and strong Confounding to boot.

There were congealed puddles of black blood staining the floorboards, shards of a crystal ball… and scattered atop those things, Tarot cards. I let my eyes move from the floor to the chair. Trelawney had draped the chair with gauzy scarves, as she had used to decorate the rest of the room, and it was unnerving that those scarves, albeit garish in colour, were now stained black with blood.

It was like something out of Muggle horror films. There was a distinct odour as well, one I had not noticed when I had entered, but one that I knew. It was the smell of excrement, bile, and death. It was not overpowering for the lingering scent of incense that permeated everything in the room for the past twenty years. I was suddenly glad for that headache-inducing incense. After the Last Battle, I never wanted to smell the scent of death again.

I could see a particularly dark stain before the chair, where Trelawney’s flayed skin had been piled, and I could see bloody fingerprints upon the shards of the crystal ball that I assumed had been knocked from the side table inside the cordon. I sucked on my bottom lip, moving around the cordon to get a better look at the table.

“Why hasn’t this been cleaned?” I asked distractedly, but glanced quickly out of the corner of my eye to Malfoy who had not moved from the window, his arms crossed before his chest.

“Documentation. The Forensics teams have been through, but the blokes in charge of documentation are taking their time with this one.”

I nodded, but to me it just sounded like laziness on the part of the police. I thought no more of it as I stood as close as I could to the table, noting the empty base the crystal ball had been knocked from, an empty cup of tea, a small incense coffin, and four Tarot cards smudged with bloody fingerprints.

“Trelawney’s fingerprints?” I asked aloud.

“Yes. Potter’s were found on the shards of the crystal. The bloody fingerprints on the crystal is Potter’s blood, he must have cut himself somehow.”

On the shards? I took a breath and leaned closer, my eyes fixing upon the cards.

Had I stayed with Divination, I might have been able to identify the exact deck Trelawney had used, but as it was, the only way I could think to describe the illustrations on the cards was ‘medieval.’

The cards were arranged in what I considered a pyramid, one card above two others…actually, three others with one card overlapping another. At top was ‘The Fool,’ below, on the left was ‘The
Emperor,’ and on the right, ‘The Hanged Man’ resting atop ‘The Magician.’ I leaned back, straightening. Trelawney had touched the cards with bloody fingers, either during or after Harry… I took an unsteady step back.

Proper analogies… I sucked my lower lip between my teeth again.

“You did not mention this to me, Malfoy,” I muttered, turning my shorn head to look at the pale man, he was still gazing out the window.

“The cards? I did mention those.”

“Not the configuration or the exact cards.”

Malfoy sighed, his eyes swivelling to the table and then back out the window.

“I thought you did not believe Divination to be an art worth mastering, Granger.”

I did not answer. I did not want to verbally spar with Malfoy at that moment, I, instead, began racking my addled mind for what I remembered about Tarot symbolism.

The configuration had significance, the top card being the base from which to begin. It was possible that the top card represented the querent… The Fool. My lips twitched, there were so many meanings to that card. But the card that really put me ill at ease? The Hanged Man.

“Too much of a coincidence…The Hanged Man…”

A shift in the light startled me and I realised Malfoy had moved from the window to stand a quarter of the circular cordon to my right. His eyes fell upon the cards and his lips twisted in obvious distaste.

“I…I know so little about Divination, I cannot begin to interpret the significance of the cards in a configuration…”

My voice trembled, and my head began to pound harder. I was thinking too hard, too deep, and I wanted desperately to sit down, but the only option was the chintz poufs.

“The Fool is the protagonist, Granger…a person represented who seeks experience and knowledge over the cost of his welfare. The key words being ‘seeking’ and ‘knowledge.’ There is a lot more to The Fool than that…

And then The Emperor, he is the father figure, in this case the lord of the land, the protector, and the hand of autonomous justice.

And The Hanged Man…”

“Yes, I know. But why this configuration, and why The Magician underneath The Hanged Man?” I huffed. I really did not like the feeling of Malfoy lecturing me, then again, he had stayed in Divination while I had walked out.

Malfoy smirked, shoving his hands into his pockets, reminding me of earlier in the day when he had done the same thing.
“I can only speculate, Granger, but it is clear that the querent or the person of true importance referenced in the spread is The Fool.”

Analogies…

Malfoy continued, “Potter could not have been the querent for his character does not fit. But The Hanged Man…”

“Yes…” I whispered.

So much about Harry reflected the symbolism of The Hanged Man. But who was The Fool, and who was The Emperor? And then there was The Magician who was very different from The Hanged Man.

Action versus inaction, creativity versus conformism, manipulation versus acceptance…two sides of one…

I blinked. The Fool had two paths, protection under The Emperor or confliction of The Magician/The Hanged Man. I licked my lips, my eyes moving over the table.

The Hermit.

I had not seen it at first, the empty teacup obscuring the face of the card, but I could just make out the words from under the shadow of the handle.

It seemed ironic that The Hermit was separate from the others, obscured. However, it rested above The Fool on its side as if it had fallen there by chance and was ignored as there was an empty teacup sitting atop it.

The Hermit…the interpretation of the card was a bit simpler in my mind. Reclusive, introspective, philosophical, and I wondered if that was where I fit in.

If Harry was The Magician/Hanged Man, I was the Hermit…

I closed my eyes as a particularly nasty slice in my brain stopped all cognizant thought. The room, its ambiance, and the conflicting odour of death and sweet incense were making my headache worse.

Slowly, I moved around the magical cordon to stand next to Malfoy. If I were going to fall, I would rather have him catch me than suffering a hex by unconsciously crossing the barrier. As I came to his side, my head began to clear.

“Do you remember when I walked out of her class?”

Malfoy smirked. “A glorious day, another class I did not have to share with you…”

I rolled my eyes, only succeeding in making myself dizzy. I had to get out into better air. I made my way to the door slowly, Malfoy on my heels, and when I was clear of the room and into the empty corridors, I could breathe.

Glancing back up at the entrance, I sighed. “Trelawney was rarely correct, but when she was…her predictions were explosive.”
I let the mental image of the cards on the table flash behind my eyes. I had imprinted the sight as best I could…

“Those cards could mean anything, Granger. Trelawney was a barmy old bat.”

“Better to consider everything, Malfoy, than miss the one thing that will explain why all of this is happening.”

Malfoy’s face darkened with repressed words, but I ignored his expression. Malfoy was not a fool, but he had not been the one attacked by Harry Potter either. However, I could not tell if I were any closer to formulating an answer as to why Harry was tearing our world apart. As I stood in the corridor, Malfoy staring at me, his face shuttered with anger, I was more concerned with why my head was hurting so terribly, and why the wounds were refusing to heal. My head injuries had not been caused by magic, but by sheer battering, and I knew that if I were to puzzle out Harry’s motives, I needed a clear mind.

But it would have to wait…at least for a while.
“What are you doing, Granger?” Malfoy hissed, his voice echoing off the close, damp stones of the dungeon passage.

I had my right fist raised to knock on Horace Slughorn’s office door, but paused to regard Malfoy with a sharp look, telling him to calm himself from whatever fury he had wrapped himself inside. When Malfoy’s cloudy face did not break in the muted torchlight, I sighed.

“Horace wanted to see me, he might have some information.”

Malfoy’s right brow arched. “Did I miss something?”

I grinned, “And you were Sorted into Slytherin?”

Malfoy’s mouth worked, but I rapped on the door four times in quick succession, the knock I used whenever I came by with ingredients for Horace’s stores.

Perhaps only three seconds passed before the door was flung open and a very flustered Horace Slughorn ushered me and Malfoy inside. When the door was sealed and Charmed for silence, Horace turned, his robes flying out around his rotund form.

“Ah, Mr. Malfoy, how’s your mother? And Lucius…is he…”

I frowned. “Horace, we really do not have the time for this. What did you need to tell me?”

Malfoy stifled a snort as Horace’s jaw worked and his face flushed. The man’s sense of decorum was so fragile that I almost felt guilty for interrupting his attempt at civility. But then again, I never had been one to placate Horace in any way.

“The uh…the centaurs. They wanted to speak with you, Miss Granger, but I told them you had gone from the Forest. After you were attacked, I ran out of some essential ingredients, so I had to trek into the Forest myself. I went to the brook you told me about, and there I met with a centaur called Roan. They had been watching me for some time, it seemed.

However, when they realised I was not you, they chanced a meeting. They knew who I was when I taught here years ago and would trek into the Forest… But, nevermind that, the point being, they had information for you that they deemed to be of the utmost importance.

I explained the attack, who had attacked you…we were told by the Aurors; pardon me, police, since they learned that you passed through the castle quite frequently. Roan became quite upset, and informed me that part of the information they had was about Potter being seen in the Forest. Of course, the information came too late, but Roan mentioned Potter being near a cave…a cave
where Ara…Ara-something used to live. Apparently, Potter was searching for something. The centaur knew what it was, but would not tell me. But, whatever it was, the centaurs have it now.”

My eyes widened and I glanced at Malfoy, whose face was still shuttered, but he pursed his lips and I knew he, too, was thinking. Harry did not have the Resurrection Stone!

“When was this, Professor?” Malfoy asked.

“Oh…after Miss Granger was attacked. The day before poor, silly Sibyll was murdered.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. Time-wise, Harry had searched for the Stone before he invaded my home, and the day before Trelawney was murdered, the centaurs still had the Stone…but over a week had passed since then. A tiny mote of worry floated about my thoughts.

“Anything else, Professor?” Malfoy asked, having taken on his Detective Chief Inspector tone again.

“No, I grew too busy organising the Slytherins for their return home…I haven’t been to the Forest since, or off the grounds.

In all my years, nothing like this…not even the Dark Lord caused this school to close.”

Malfoy and Horace spoke a bit more, mostly Malfoy trying to reassure the aged Potions Professor that the Ministry was doing all in its power to apprehend Harry. I had tuned out, only half-listening when Horace offered tea. Malfoy declined the invitation, glancing at me.

I cocked my head and came back to the present, thanking Horace for relaying the message, and hastily making my exit, Malfoy again on my heels. I had automatically turned to go deeper into the darkness of the dungeons, not bothering to light my wand to see the way down.

“I am getting awfully tired of this game of ‘follow the leader,’ Granger. Where the hell are you leading me?” Malfoy snarled, lighting his acquired yew wand and grasping my wrist the second time that day to stop me in my tracks.

“The Forest. I thought that was obvious after what Horace told us,” I snapped, pulling my wrist free and continuing down the last corridor to the statue of the troll and the passage out of the castle.

“You need to slow down. Didn’t you mention needing to see Pomfrey?”

“There’s no time, Malfoy. And the fact that the centaurs would go so far as to speak to Horace Slughorn tells me that something is wrong…”

I stepped before the troll statue and muttered my password, causing Malfoy to arch an eyebrow. Before I could enter the passage, however, Malfoy blocked my path, moving before me.

“Harry doesn’t know about this passage, no one really does…”

“Better safe than sorry, isn’t that how it goes?” he muttered moving forward; extinguishing his wand and sliding it back into his holster.

I said nothing, but followed, hearing the statue grind back into place behind me. As we walked, I smirked at the sight of Malfoy’s pale head swiping the top of the tunnel and his faint curses about
cobwebs and dank passages.

The light outside the hidden tunnel was bright, but my eyes were slow in adjusting, and another slice of pain made me stop and hold my head. The cold air was refreshing, however, but I was cold almost immediately.

“How far into the Forest are we?”

I did not answer, but ground my teeth. A specialist Healer…yes, I would need one.

“Far…” was all I could manage.

I forced my head up out of my hands to find Malfoy frowning at me. I sighed, pulling my wand from my pocket again, Transfiguring my coat into an ugly grey cloak. It seemed that even my skills at Transfiguration were effected by my pounding head. Malfoy perfectly altered his cloak, added bulk to the material, as well as a grey fur lined hood, which he pulled over his pale head.

“It is a good twenty-minute walk to the brook Horace mentioned. The centaurs will see us there…”

“As much as I hate to say it, Granger…lead the way.”

I rolled my eyes, and again immediately wished I hadn’t.

The Forest floor was a blanket of white, and there was still more snow pouring down from the sky. In spite of the snow, I could still see the path by the deep rut in the ground between the wild roots of massive trees. I had walked this path many times in much deeper snow, and I had never lost my way.

Of course, the Forest was magical, and I could feel the magic under the soles of my boots, upon the wind, even in the scent of the trees and soil…the Forest was my home, just as it was to all manner of creatures. And it was refreshing to be home.

I walked sure footedly through the deepening snow, my footfalls barely making a sound. Malfoy, on the other hand, was muttering curses to himself, and occasionally slipping or snagging the toe of his boot on a snow covered root. However, he managed to keep right behind me, and after few minutes, he moved as stealthily as I.

We did not speak as we walked, and only the wind through frozen branches high above accented the air with mournful creaks and cracks. The memory of moving through the Forest with Malfoy came to me. It had been our First Year, and we had been serving detention with Hagrid…all I really remembered was how frightened Malfoy had been.

I smiled as my feet moved off the path along the obscured trail to the brook.

I took three steps, and was quickly jerked back by Malfoy who had grasped my shoulders and pulled me toward him. I opened my mouth to protest, but was ‘shushed,’ my face pressed tighter to his right shoulder.

Malfoy had pulled his wand, holding it with his right hand, and cradled me against him, his left arm, keeping me still. I blushed, taking in the scent of Malfoy…spicy, clean, like a mixture of citrus and sage.
I squirmed to see what it was he pointing his wand at, but could only manage to turn my head, resting my right cheek against his chest.

I could not see anything, but Malfoy apparently had.

“Ahead, thirty metres…moving through the trees,” he whispered.

I squirmed again, but Malfoy held me tighter, squeezing the breath from my lungs.

“Let me go…” I whispered breathlessly.

Malfoy stiffened, as if realising he was holding something that was not his…and he released me, but kept me close, his cloak enveloping and shielding me.

I turned and narrowed my eyes to peer through the dark trunks of the trees. I still did not see anything.

“Fucking hell!” Malfoy gasped, stumbling backward suddenly, his left hand flying to his cheek.

Malfoy had reacted to a sound, a sound I was slow to register. But when I did register the sound, Malfoy had already cursed and grabbed his cheek, which was now oozing bright red blood.

An arrow had whizzed past my head to graze Malfoy’s cheek. I winced as Malfoy cast a quick and dirty healing Charm to staunch the bleeding, moving to point his wand past me again.

“No!” I whispered loudly, “Put your wand away!”

Malfoy sneered, conveying he had no intention of slipping the long yew wand into its holster. I frowned and whirled so that I faced away from Malfoy. The brook ran nearby, and I knew that we were close to that invisible boundary between the realm of the centaur and my realm.

I bent with a deep bow, and waited, taking a few more steps to put distance between Malfoy and myself.

After what seemed like minutes, a faint whistle sounded, followed by another much closer. Malfoy stiffened, and I could feel his alarm, but he did not move, only his eyes peered through the trees, moving slowly from one point to another.

“Granger?” he whispered hurriedly.

“Quiet. Centaurs, lower your wand or their arrows will do more than mar your pretty face,” I hissed.

Finally, after a moment of hesitation, Malfoy lowered his wand from a defensive position. I sighed, turning my attention again to the trees. There was a final whistle, very close, and then from the trees, as if emerging from the air, a centaur stepped out into my range of vision.

I did not know this male centaur whose hooves barely made a noise over the snow, soil, and tree roots. He was not like Roan or the scouts for he was older, larger, with long grey locks, skin, and body. His eyes were a bottomless silver, hooded, and wise. There had always been speculations as to the life span of a centaur, but it was known to Wizards that centaurs could live for centuries, and were incredibly resilient beings, hard to kill…
As the regal grey centaur approached, I bowed low, pulling back my hood to reveal my face, ignoring Malfoy’s palpable caution at my back.

“Rise, Hermione Granger, you are known to me.”

The centaur’s voice was a deep bass, perhaps deeper, and he spoke with an articulate eloquence that was befitting his race.

“Command your human to stand down.”

If the situation did not require the utmost seriousness, I would have laughed. I turned and glanced at Malfoy who frowned horribly, and angrily slid his wand back into its holster. Malfoy would certainly make an ado about being called ‘my human’ later, I was certain.

I turned my attention back to the centaur. “You know me?”

The centaur seemed to smile, but thought better of it, and lifted his chin slightly.

“I know all who live in this Forest,” he said with a distinct air of authority, his deep voice humming through my chest.

“Forgive my ignorance, my lord, but I do not know you.”

Always when engaging centaurs, it was wise to be overly courteous…

“I am Magorian.”

The Lord of the Forest, the leader of the centaur herd. I knew his name very well, but I had never met the being before. Magorian was the most powerful sentient being in the Forest: everything in the Forest was known to him, and when I moved into the cottage, I had sent word to the Lord of the Forest, asking for his approval, given that I never interfere with his realm or territory.

I bowed again, deeper than before. I most certainly did not want to offend this being.

“The old, fat human has conveyed the message we sent?”

Horace would have bristled at Magorian’s description of him…but it was accurate.

“Yes, my lord, I apologise for not coming sooner.”

Magorian’s hooves shifted in the snow.

“Late, it is, but no fault of yours, Hermione Granger.”

I bowed my head again.

“Your information about Harry Potter was appreciated; we were the ones at fault. Had we contacted you sooner, you may not have been so grievously injured.”

My throat closed, and my eyes watered. I stayed silent for a few moment before attempting to speak.
“My lord, I have come to ask you…” I trailed, tears trailing hot down my cheeks. “The Stone…is it…?”

Magorian’s hooves shifted in the snow again, and his grey skinned hands clenched.

“Hermione Granger, we no longer have the relic.”

I felt my face crumple, that nagging worry had felt morphed into fear.

“Harry?” I risked.

Magorian nodded, his grey locks moving over his shoulders. “He killed two of my herd, two scouts. He injured three more, one being a young mare, my daughter.”

I was weeping, and there was nothing I could do to stop the tears or the quivering in my lips. I hoped that Magorian did not see my tears as an insult.

“When?” I gasped.

“The day after the old, fat human came.”

I nodded slowly. “Can I be of any assistance to you and your herd, my lord?”

Magorian said nothing, but then shook his head. “There is no need; we have our own ways, Hermione Granger.”

I bowed again, as deeply as I could, there was little else to say. The centaurs had had the Stone, but Harry had forcefully taken it. Surely they had found it near Aragog’s cave, as the spiders long gone from the Forest. Keeping it secret, and keeping it safe, the centaurs guarded the Stone without the Wizarding world’s knowledge. For the centaurs to do so showed that the Stone was, indeed, a powerful magical item.

I turned to go, expecting Malfoy to follow when Magorian spoke again, causing me to keep still.

“Harry Potter had been our ally ten of your years ago. He is now an enemy of the Forest. You, however, Hermione Granger are welcome here. For years you have lived with us in peace. You have built a rapport with us, and for your heart and you kindness, we thank you.”

I could not see for the tears. Blinded, I answered, “Thank you, my lord, I will always treasure your confidence.”

Wiping my tears with the back of my hand, I watched as Magorian bowed to me…an action that did not go unnoticed by the Forest or by Malfoy.

“There is one last thing I must tell you, Hermione Granger.”

Magorian paused, his jaw working as if mulling over how to phrase what he was about to say.

“Harry Potter’s illness is not just of the mind…there is a taint in his soul. Be careful, Hermione Granger: for Harry Potter to kill us had not been foreseen in the heavens, and to kill us is a difficult task, even for a Wizard.”
I closed my eyes and bowed my head as Magorian turned to slip back into the camouflage of trees and snow. Within a few short moments, I knew the centaurs were gone. I wept, falling to my knees in the snow and soil. Perhaps it did not mean anything to the Wizarding world, but to be trusted by the centaurs of the Forest was perhaps the most important feeling I had in my life at that moment. Harry had taken so much from me…and Magorian’s words comforted me to the point where I felt as I were indeed a cherished person.

I hugged myself as I cried, my cries soft, but painful, as my body shook with a mixture of anger, grief, and happiness. When a hand fell heavily upon my shoulder, I recoiled, falling to scramble in the snow, my palms scratching against tree roots.

“Merlin, Granger!” Malfoy growled over me.

I felt incredibly stupid. I had almost forgotten he had been standing behind me the whole time. I sniffed, and climbed to my feet, wiping off the snow and dirt from my cloak. Pulling the hood up to shield my bare head from the increasing winds, I moved past Malfoy, retracing our steps to the path.

“Two more deaths attributed to Potter…” I heard Malfoy say as I started up the path toward the cottage.

“The Ministry won’t take those into account, and you know it,” I muttered angrily, using that anger to move quicker along the path.

“It is unfortunate, but right now I would like to know where you think you’re going?” Malfoy rumbled, trying to keep up.

“Home.”

My forward momentum was suddenly stopped, and I found myself being twirled backward by my wrist until I bumped into Malfoy’s chest. Automatically, I pushed at him, stumbling back, but managing to keep on my feet.

“Would you stop grabbing me, Malfoy? I really don’t appreciate being treated like a rag doll!” I yelled, disturbing the sleep of an owl high above who took flight at my voice, knocking snow off its perch so that it fell with a thud near the path.

“Until you act as if you have half a brain left in that shaved head of yours, I will treat you as you deserve,” Malfoy snarled, tossing my wrist from his hand as if it were something foul.

My head started to pound again. I had had a glorious reprieve only moments before, but the slicing pain returned. I felt as my eyeballs were being squeezed of the viscous matter inside.

I took a deep, cold breath and held it for a moment, moving my hand over my eyes to rub my temples.

“I need clothes, Malfoy, and I would like some things from my bathroom. I really do not have the money or the means to buy new clothes while under police protection. You are a DCI, and we are ten minutes from the cottage. So unless you want to foot the bill for me…besides setting me up in your family’s house, eating their food; you’re going to let me go home, pack a few things, and then we can go wherever you want to go. I have no place to go anyway…I’m at your mercy, if that is...
what you would like to hear.”

I had said it all calmly, my head pounding too soundly for me to convey any other emotion in my voice.

“Not really, Granger, but you do have a point. You are at my mercy,” Malfoy muttered, his eyes moving from my toe to head. “You could not protect yourself…you cannot even Transfigure your coat properly, the enchantment is beginning to wane.”

I did not react; I could already feel the magic I had cast on the material of the coat dissolving so that only the original coat remained. I had known that the spell had not been strong enough, but I accepted it. I wondered if I could even cast a faint lighting spell, but I did not move my hand to retrieve my wand.

“I will go to the cottage with you, but from there, it is my say. You go where I go; you do what I tell you to do. There has been enough of you wearing us both out today,” Malfoy growled, pulling Voldemort’s wand from the chest holster and recasting the spell to Transfigure my coat into a longer, warmer cloak, a dark green with black fur around the edges which kept the wind from blowing into the hood and freezing my exposed ears. “Do we have an understanding?” he said, tucking the yew wand away.

I managed to nod.

Whatever energy had propelled me through the Forest only moments before must have been my last wind. My stomach growled, both Malfoy and I having missed lunch, and as we walked, the sky grew darker. I had not realised it was so late.

The ten-minute walk had turned into twenty minutes at the rate I was moving. I could tell Malfoy was growing more and more irritable with each sluggish step, but he said nothing. I wondered, as we walked, when Malfoy had grown to be able to control his mouth from spewing such idiotic filth as he had during our schooldays. Malfoy had changed so drastically that I could barely believe it was the same Draco Malfoy that had jinxed my teeth to grow down to my knees. There had been moments in the days before where he had almost been complimentary toward me, almost kind, almost caring… It puzzled me.

When we came over the snowy rise and into the clearing, I was shocked to find that I could see the cottage. The layers of wards I had set upon the area were obviously down, for had they still been up I would have not seen the cottage at all. However, seeing that the front door was, at the very least, shut, I did not feel so apprehensive. I passed through the weak wards, perhaps only two layers, and noticed that my little garden was ruined. The warming Charms on the small plots of herbs and vegetables had been dispelled. In the weeks of absence, the Forest was ready to retake the cottage, and it nearly broke me to see my home in such a state.

Moving to the front door, I eyed the Ministry notice tacked to the door declaring my home a crime scene and that only authorised ‘police’ were allowed to enter. That was when Malfoy stepped in front of me, drawing the yew wand again. With a spell I did not recognise, the door sprang open, and Malfoy entered, moving to look about the cottage for anyone who might be inside. I waited as Malfoy moved to the bathroom and then to the doorway of the bedroom, striding back to the door to beckon me to enter.

Crossing the threshold, I found it was almost as cold inside the cottage as it was outside. I wanted to frown and express my distaste, but I could barely stay on my feet. I absently closed the door
behind me, and moved through the front room to the kitchen island. Everything that had been in my coat pocket lay upon the stone surface just as Harry had pulled it out the night I was attacked; the only thing that was missing was the half-eaten pineapple cake.

The emerald cuff link rested next to the small bundle of spare clothes, and that was the first thing I put back into my pocket. I replaced the rest with painful slowness, Malfoy looking about the cottage, apparently finding nothing better to do. Next, I went into the bathroom, wrapping my toothbrush and some feminine products in a hand towel and slipped them into my pocket. I did not need shampoo… I did not really have hair to wash.

I moved to go to the bedroom, but froze, noticing another faintly glowing line at knee level… another magical cordon.

“Malfoy…” I said, but it came out as a whisper.

Malfoy had not heard me, standing near the cold fireplace. I did not call his name again as my eyes alighted upon my bed.

Someone had repaired the window Harry had burst through, but there were still small shards of glass on the comforter. But it was not the shards that made my stomach twist and my eyes burn. It was the dark brown stains of blood, my blood. It was everywhere, and not just in the bed, soaking down into the eider tick mattress, but the floor, the walls, the open door and jamb. There seemed to be enough blood to fill a body, and it was all mine.

I gagged and swayed, falling to my knees a second time that day, the pain of my knees into the stone floor jarring me horribly. I could go no further, my brain was numb, my body ached, and my head felt as if it were going to burn up in a blaze of unquenchable fire.

Malfoy was instantly at my side. He asked questions, but I did not hear them, all I could hear was my heartbeat in my head and the shallow inhales that could not sate my need for air. He shook me, but I did not answer. He tried to lift me up, but I could not budge. Malfoy finally gave up and stood over me as a sentinel swathed in black, with a deathly color to his skin and hair.

“I need clothes from the wardrobe, and the book in the shelf built into the bed.”

I exhausted myself just by speaking those words, but Malfoy moved, slashing his wand through the air as he passed through the door. He had had the authority to enter the room, and he went to the wardrobe, pulling clothes off hangars, grabbing underclothes and socks from the lower drawer. Finding a small case next to the wardrobe, he stuffed the clothes inside and shrank the case so that it was the size of the book he drew from the shelf.

Exiting the room, Malfoy shut the door, and dropped the two items before me. I mechanically moved to stuff them in my pocket, my last conscious effort at movement.

I grunted as I was hauled to my feet, Malfoy catching me under the arms and lifting me. Shifting me, I found myself in his arms, my body, my head falling limply back and against him.

“You’re going to Pomfrey now, Granger. I do not want to hear a word from you; you’ve done too much harm to yourself for one day.”

I could not answer even if I had wanted to. Malfoy had sounded furious. Wandlessly, Malfoy opened the low door of the cottage and had to nearly crouch to exit. He sighed as he carried me,
Charming the front door shut behind him. Through the weak wards, Malfoy paused to set me on my feet as he pulled out his wand. Grabbing hold of my waist, he held me tightly, adding the warmth of his cloak around me.

“Hold tight, Granger, I have a feeling this is going to hurt…” he said resignedly.

I tried to hold him, but I lacked the strength to lift my arms. When I did not move, Malfoy growled and held me tighter.

“Here we go…” he whispered, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

And off we went.

I heard music. It was the sound of a piano that led me out of sleep. I did not open my eyes, listening. It was not the sound of a literal piano, but with the muted, scratchy sound of a phonograph record. The quality of the music was superb, and it reminded me of a time while I was a student. It was a not a distinct memory, but a combination of sensations that had always comforted me when I wanted to feel safe, happy, and warm. Sunlight streaming through the windows of the Gryffindor Common Room, bathing everything in golden light and the fire crackling in the fireplace. That was safety, happiness and warmth to me.

The music drifted to my ears from some place slightly removed, but I knew what it was—Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 5 in E flat Major, opus 73, ‘Emperor.’

I had never been particularly skilled with musical instruments, so I had contented myself with being an avid listener. It was not just Romantic Classical music, but all types of music from Billie Holiday to The Pogues, Bach to The Buzzcocks. My parents kept a collection of music for me in their home in Australia. Merlin, how I wanted to escape there…

When the last note of the piece ended, I could hear that someone was changing the record, and soon the deep voice of Enrico Caruso singing ‘Una Furtiva Lagrima’ drifted to my ears in mournful notes. I had always enjoyed the Italian tenor, and decided that whomever was picking the music certainly had refined tastes.

It was then that I opened my eyes. Everything that had happened in the last month came back to me, and I took a deep breath. In my restful state, I did not now feel as frightened as I had.

I could feel my toes, my legs, my arms, and my head, all of which did not ache. I thanked the gods.

I stared up into an unfamiliar ceiling made of stone, but I did not panic. I turned my head to the right to find a dark wooden door, ajar, leading to another room brighter than the one I lay in. To the left were windows, heavily draped in green velvet, the view of the Forest beyond. Snow was still falling, and I realised I was at Hogwarts.

The bed I lay in was smaller than the one I had occupied at Malfoy Manor, but it was just as
comfortable and warm. Near the foot of the bed, against the adjacent wall was a chest of drawers made of dark walnut, and above it, an oval mirror in an ornate wooden frame. I could just see myself in the mirror, and what I saw disgusted me. My face was bruised, both of my eyes blackened, and a bandage wrapped about my temple just above my eyebrows, blood staining the white gauze. I looked like death.

I could not lift my head, lacking the strength, but I could move my arms, lifting the heavy down comforter off my body to see that I had been dressed in a hospital gown. It was one of the gowns given to those in the Hospital Wing, confirming my assumption that I was at the castle, but where in the castle, I could not say.

The music stopped abruptly, and footfalls sounded on the stone floor. My movement must have been heard, for the footfalls came to the door.

Malfoy was dressed differently than I remembered, black trousers and a black dress shirt, the jumper gone. His hair was a mess, falling at all angles about his face, his shirtsleeves rolled up so I could see a shadow of something under the skin of his left forearm. The first four buttons of the front of the shirt were undone revealing a pale, muscular chest with pale hair trailing down his body in a thin trail.

“Winky, fetch Pomfrey, Granger is awake,” he said gruffly into the other room.

I heard an elf’s voice and a soft pop, but thought no more of it as Malfoy came to my right side, glancing at me to turn to the bedside table. I had not noticed the table was laden with phials, bandages, and a pitcher of water. I suddenly wondered how long I had been lying in bed.

Malfoy poured a glass of water, but left it to place a knee on the bed to lean over me. With gentle hands, he helped me sit up slightly, stacking pillows behind me. Without a word, he helped me drink a few sips of cool water, the liquid like nectar to my dry lips and throat.

I wanted to speak, to ask him how long it had been since the cottage. I even felt the urge to thank him, but I simply could not speak. I stared him, and the stubble along his jaw. He looked exhausted, haggard.

A ‘whoosh’ from the other room indicating the Floo had activated, and Malfoy pulled away from me and drew his wand from a side pocket in his trousers, apparently concealed. My eyes widened at Malfoy’s sudden motion, but as Poppy Pomfrey entered the room, Malfoy relaxed. Another figure entered dressed in Healer robes, and it took me a moment to realise Parvati Patil was staring at me with a mixture of concern and surprise. If Parvati had been considered pretty in school, she was now stunningly beautiful. Her long black hair streamed down her narrow shoulders, and her large dark eyes seemed to sparkle in to the low light coming through the window.

“Miss Granger, how are you feeling?” Poppy asked, moving around to the left side of the bed, grasping my wrist as if to take my pulse.

I did not answer, but moved my head to regard Poppy blankly. The effort of merely holding my head up was draining. I turned my attentions back to Parvati who moved to stand next to Malfoy.

“Has she said anything?” Parvati asked Malfoy, but did not move her dark eyes to the man who was discreetly slipping his wand into the concealed pocket along the right seam of his trousers.

“Not a sound. I just gave her some water. I think she’s still too exhausted to speak. She looks like
she’s about to fall asleep at any moment.”

I hated when people talked about me as if I were not there, but all things considering, I would have to endure it.

Poppy fussled to herself, seemingly unsure as what to do next. Malfoy whispered something to Parvati I could not make out, and strode to the door, leaning back against the jamb, crossing his arms over his chest, blocking my view of his pale pectoral muscles and the light chest hair that trailed down his chest. I had to admit that Malfoy was handsome, as long as he did not speak…

“Hermione? Do you know who I am?” Parvati asked, sitting on the side of the bed within arm’s reach.

I blinked at her once. I really wanted to tell her that I was not a child and I did not appreciate her placating tone. Alas…all I could do was blink, nodding proved impossible.

“Are you in any pain?”

I blinked twice. Besides feeling as if the life had been suck out of me, I felt quite well.

“I need to remove the bandages, Hermione, can you keep still?”

I blinked once. Stupid cow, I could barely move at all, of course I would stay still!

I had never really counted Parvati as a friend. Parvati and Lavender had been thick as thieves during school, and I was always the odd one out.

Parvati nodded to herself and moved her beautiful hands to my head, unwinding the bandages. In the mirror across the room, I saw that I had a bit of blood caked in my now three centimetre long hair, but the cuts and scars were nearly gone. Poppy moved in the reflection of the mirror, Conjuring a basin of warm water and a cloth. Carefully, wiping away the blood so that I could see that my scalp was nearly healed and that the scars were re-growing hair, which was impossible without the assistance of magic.

“It looks much better,” Parvati said more to herself than to me. She drew her wand from her robes and Vanished the bloody bandages and then proceed to run the tip of her wand around my head and before my face. The wand tip glowed green then yellow to green again. “Still a bit of residual damage, but it seems to be repairing itself in record time,” she said softly with a hint of satisfaction.

Poppy wiped one last clot from behind my ear and pulled away, silently.

“No permanent damage?” Malfoy asked from the door, and my eyes moved to him again. His face was passive, his demeanour stoic, but the manner in which his hands clutched his upper arms told me volumes. He had been concerned.

“None that I can see. However, if she would have gone on a bit longer, the damage would have been irreparable. It is a good thing you sent for me, Malfoy,” Parvati said without turning to him. Instead, she moved her hands to cup my face, looking into my eyes and turning my head from one side to the other, my eyes moving to remain on Malfoy.

I wanted to ask what he had meant by damage. Surely, his counter curse had healed me?
“Tell Granger why I called you, Patil, she wants to know.”

Parvati frowned, pulling her hands away from my face to turn to Malfoy.

“How do you…?”

Legilimency.

When Malfoy did not answer, Parvati sighed and returned to gaze to me.

“Malfoy has informed me of the details of your attack, Hermione, I hope you don’t mind it. When I became a Healer, I took the vow of confidentiality, so don’t worry yourself.

I specialise in Curse damage, and ever since the War, my job has been a bit hectic. You may not realise it, but there have been new groups of Wizards forming in the wake of Voldemort’s absence. Terrorist cells, bent on disrupting the order of the new Ministry. The reason I know about them at all is their interest in using new and obscure Curses. Last month there was an attack in Glasgow, twenty people were injured with a new type of Conjunctivitis Curse which burnt out the eyes of the victims…”

I closed my eyes, having no energy to wince or express my disgust. I had heard about the so-called ‘terrorists’ from my co-workers, but did not know much else besides their Dark affiliations. They were not Death Eaters, but disgruntled witches and wizards with their own dogmas and ideals. The violence of the ‘terrorists’ had not reached my ears, and I wondered if it had been wrong of me to be so closed up in my own head.

“Everyone has been up in arms about Harry, Hermione. The ‘terrorists’ are claiming him, but everyone in this room knows that Harry would never truly be a terrorist. His agenda is his own…”

I’m sorry for what has happened, Hermione.”

I opened my eyes to see Parvati leaning toward me, a beautiful hand resting on mine.

“I was called because there was a curse affecting you. Malfoy explained that he nullified a curse, but there was one that was lying dormant, waiting to strike at you internally.”

I blinked…confused.

“The only way to explain the curse is to compare it to a virus or a cancer.”

Alarm could only be conveyed by the widening of my eyes. Cancer was not unknown disease to the Wizarding world, but it was rare.

“The curse was slowly eating away at your magical ability, sapping your strength and your body’s natural immunities. Malfoy told me that there were times that your magical ability was very weak, but there were times when it would surge from you without conscious effort or the use of your wand. This is consistent with type of curse you were under…

However, your body was fighting the curse, using all of its energy to fight. By the time I was called, your own magic was weakening, allowing the curse to take control. I was in time to remove the curse, Hermione, do not worry.”
Parvati squeezed my hand gently, trying to be as reassuring as possible.

“You are a powerful witch, Hermione. If it had been anyone else, they would have died days ago. You have healed so quickly, it could be called a miracle, but it was your own magic that kept you alive,” Parvati whispered, leaning closer, her dark eyes shimmering. I could hear the pride in her voice, with strains of relief and of envy. Parvati was admitting my strength as a witch…

“Tell her what type of curse it was, Patil,” Malfoy growled from the door, causing Parvati to unexpectedly wince.

“It is….or was a curse of enslavement.”

I could just knit my brow and narrow my eyes.

“The curse had not taken full effect, if it had, I would not have been able to remove it. Only the caster can remove the curse after it has taken full effect.”

I closed my eyes slowly. The curse had been a supposed fail-safe. Harry had tried to brand me by assaulting me in the manner he had, but he had also planted another curse, a parasitic curse that would begin working after a period of time. So, if one curse was nullified, the other would remain, unnoticed until it was too late.

I looked to Malfoy again. He had been the one to notice; he had been watching me all the while, and the thought warmed me, strangely. I did not know this man at all.

“The rest, Patil,” Malfoy commanded causing Parvati to sigh in frustration.

“There is a thing called ‘bedside manner,’ Malfoy. I was getting to the rest,” Parvati snapped, but did not look at Malfoy.

I wanted to smirk. There had been something between Malfoy and Parvati, and it was not just because we were in the same year. I tucked that bit of information away for another, more appropriate time.

“When I removed the curse, which was aggressively attacking your brain, I came across another spell. It was not a curse or hex, but something I have never encountered before.

It was a type of imbedded spell that worked concurrently with your own magical ability. If the soul is situated in the seat of the brain, it is your magic that shields the soul from harm; protecting your soul…this spell is something that your magic could not create. Just as some can ‘occlude’ their minds and block unfriendly mental curses, this spell is like those ‘occluding’ barriers. But I could not determine how the spell is working, exactly.”

I wanted to frown, but could only manage to quirk my lips.

“The spell is a protection, and is not harmful to you. In fact, this spell is part of the reason you were able to resist Harry’s curse for so long.

I could not determine when it had been placed, or what effects it has had on your body or your magical ability, but it is not harmful enough to risk another procedure like the one I preformed to remove Harry’s curse.”
I blinked an affirmative, but my mind was whirling. Someone had cast a spell upon me and I had not known it. The curse I had been dimly aware of since my body and my magic had been effected…but another spell…not a curse or a hex, had been working on me for Merlin knew how long. And it had saved my life.

“For the time being, you are out of danger. All that remains is for you to regain your strength. Sleep now; your body needs the rest,” Parvati said softly, smiling and squeezing my hand once more.

Poppy proceeded to help me lie back, performing a few spells as she did, checking my vital signs and finding that I was much better than I had been, apparently. There was so much I needed to know, but Parvati bit me farewell, Poppy close behind, which left only Malfoy. I wanted to know how much time had passed.

Malfoy shoved off the doorjamb and came to my bedside, letting his hands fall to his sides. He gazed coolly at my face, a smirk on his lips.

“Two days, Granger, no sightings of Potter. Rest easy for now, I will be here.”

I hesitated in shutting my eyes, but as I was horizontal again, the sleepiness came easily. When I finally shut my eyes, I heard Malfoy move away from the bed. Sleep fell upon me like a wave crashing into the shore, and I soon off into a dreamless rest.
The next time I woke, it was to music again. Soft, sensual notes came from the other room, it was jazz…Dave Brubeck’s ‘Take Five.’

The thought came again that the music selection was wonderfully soothing to me, and that Malfoy, despite his manners, had great taste.

*It is my music, not his, my gramophone…*Severus Snape whispered.

I sighed. I knew I was simply dreaming Severus Snape’s voice, but it was comforting to hear his deep baritone words. Where had his presence in my mind been all this time?

*Fighting Potter’s curse, I couldn’t let him try to destroy us again.*

I opened my eyes, troubled by Severus Snape’s answer.

I was surprised when I was able to sit up on my own. I could feel power in my limbs and my head did not ache. It was as if someone had poured liquid energy into my body, and I was able to stand, to move. The first thing I did was go to the door, peeking into the other room. It was a parlour, of sorts, with windows facing the Lake, and I wondered if the windows had been magicked to show the impossible view.

A fireplace stood directly across from the door, a large leather wingback chair near the fire. There was a couch below the windows, and from all appearances, it had been a bed to Malfoy, I suspected. Bookcases lined the walls, and a table and two chairs set in the middle of the room with a low hanging light dangling from above. There were two doors, and one, I assumed was the bathroom, the other, the exit.
I steadied myself with a hand upon the bookcases as I entered the parlour, moving to the gramophone on a low table next to the couch. In a floor rack beside the table was a collection of records, and that was where I went.

The Clash, Ella Fitzgerald, Beethoven, Bach, Django Reinhardt, Nat King Cole, David Bowie, The Rolling Stones, Gary Numan, Enrico Caruso, the names of artists went on and on, and varied.

So these were Severus Snape’s records, which meant that the bed I had convalesced had been Severus Snape’s. The rooms, the books, the furniture, all of it had been his? I suddenly felt as if I were trespassing, and backed away from the records, letting the gramophone click as the track ended to start all over again. I frowned, and turned to look about the parlour again. Where was Malfoy?

I sighed and let my shoulders slump. I suddenly missed the other Malfoy in my life…my familiar. If I was to be alone, I wanted to be able to speak to my cat rather than talk to myself. But then again, I was not really alone.

I moved to the left-most door, and was happy to find that it was indeed a bathroom. It was modest in size, compared to the one in Malfoy Manor, but the tub was larger, more like the bathrooms in Hogwarts. On the counter of the sink I found my toothbrush and a change of clean clothes. The fact that someone had been digging through my coat’s bottomless pocket annoyed me, but it saved me from having to dig through it myself.

I bathed; washing off the staleness of convalescence, elated that there was no pain or minor ache in my head. Everything was very clear and not wrapped in discomfort. It was as I soaked in the fragrant, hot water, that I began to think.

Foremost in my mind was Parvati’s words. A spell had been cast upon me at some point, a spell that was imbedded so deeply into me that it would be perilous to try to remove the spell. The spell had also heightened my resistance to Harry’s curse.

And that spell was probably why I was hearing Severus Snape’s voice in my head. I was not ‘hearing voices’, the voice was real and it was protecting me in some way. Albus’ words came back to me—two people were responsible for ‘grooming’ me. Had Snape been one of them? But why, and to what end?

To stop Harry.
I splashed water in my face and gasped. It was no time to be thinking about the spell placed upon me, the immediate danger was Harry.

Harry, who now had the Resurrection Stone. Harry, who had murdered two centaurs. Harry, who had killed four people, nearly five including myself. Harry, who had hit his wife. Harry, who had lost so many people in his life due to one man. Harry, who had survived that one man. Harry, who was a man of prophecy… the Hanged Man.

“Let my own house be my gallows,” I whispered to myself, quickly dejected by thoughts of Harry.

*Dante does not apply here, Miss Granger…* Severus whispered back.

I smirked.

I left the warmth of the water and reached for a clean towel hanging from a peg on the wall, wrapping it around me, not bothering with my nearly non-existent hair. I felt better, cleaner, and I realised quickly that I was famished.

As I began dressing, I blinked when I found my wand resting under a long sleeved thermal shirt. Merlin, I had not even thought about my wand when I woke… But when I finished dressing in a long, heavy black skirt, woolen socks, my soft black thermal top, I slipped my wand into the sleeve of my shirt.

Moving into the parlor again, I went to the gramophone, lifting the needle gently and removing the record. I found the sleeve resting upon the windowsill, and I sighed, gently slipping the LP gently inside. I knelt on the floor, flipping through the rack when a soft pop startled me, and a covered plate appeared upon the table in the middle of the room, a pitcher of pumpkin juice, flatware, a goblet, a tea pot in a cozy and a tea cup.

I smiled; I was most definitely back in Hogwarts.

Pulling an LP from the rack, I put the record on, gently placing the needle on the surface. The first track, Side A, *The Clash’s ‘London Calling’,* began, and I rose from the floor to move to the table.

Lunch consisted of a cream based soup with chicken. A few slices of hot French bread were added as a side, the elves obviously remembering the way I liked to dip my bread in my soup. I had spent
enough time in the Hospital Wing during my school days that the elves knew what sorts of dishes to prepare while I was on the mend. For a bit of something sweet, a small bowl of bread pudding was emitting hot, sugary steam as I ravenously ate my soup.

I was into the bread pudding by the time ‘Hateful’ started.

My stomach gurgled when I sat back, preparing to pour some tea, however the sound of the activating Floo startled me so that I poured tea not into the cup, but onto the tabletop. When Malfoy came through the green flames, seeming to roll on the rug to come to his feet just beside the table where I sat, I slammed the teapot down in shock.

Malfoy’s face was a mess, as was his hair. He wore a heavy cloak over black slacks, white dress shirt, and black blazer, his badge attached to the front pocket. His nose had been broken and blood streamed down his face in bright red trails, staining his lips and his stubbly chin. His right eye was swollen shut and his right cheek was cut and bruised. Glancing down to his hands, I could see that he had torn the skin from his knuckles on his right hand and that his left hand had at least two broken fingers.

I leapt to my feet, but Malfoy ignored me, striding angrily to the bathroom, pulling his wand.

“Bloody hell…” he slurred, leaning towards the mirror over the sink.

I jogged to the doorway, turning back to flick my wand to stop the gramophone. Luckily, my spell worked fine and a faint smile turned my lips.

“Fucking Muggles…” Malfoy muttered before casting a healing Charm so that the crumpled bridge of his nose straightened.

“Malfoy?”

Merlin, I sounded horrible.

“Not now, Granger, I need to clean this up…”
Malfoy’s voice sounded better after fixing his nose. Two more spells and the blood was gone and the cuts on his face healed. I barely heard him mutter that he needed a potion from Poppy before magically setting the fingers in his left hand, Conjuring a bandage to keep the middle and ring finger straight. Awkwardly he moved his wand to his left hand and healed the knuckles of the right.

After Malfoy seemed satisfied that he had taken care of the worst of the damage, he turned to me, his left eye stormy grey, his right eye still swollen shut.

“You know why I hate fucking Muggles?”

I shook my head, frowning.

“They have no fucking manners!”

“What happened, Malfoy?” I asked softly, crossing my arms and leaning into the door.

“Muggles, that’s what happened!”

I sighed. “That does not tell me anything.”

Malfoy narrowed his functioning eye. “And why are you out of bed? You need to be resting,” he growled with admonishment.

“I feel fine. I took a bath, ate lunch and was about to have some tea. Why don’t we sit down have some?” I suggested, hoping to diffuse Malfoy’s anger and get some straight answers.

“Tea? Are you fucking kidding me? Firewhiskey is what I want right now!” Malfoy grumbled.

It seemed to me that he was not going to calm down unless I found him some alcohol.

“As it is, Malfoy, we are in a school, I doubt that there’s going to be much Firewhiskey about,” I sighed.
Malfoy’s eye narrowed even further, and he pushed past me into the parlor, moving to the bookcases.

“Severus kept a bottle around here somewhere…ah ha!”

I whirled at Malfoy’s exclamation just to see him pull a hardback copy of ‘Crime and Punishment’ from the bookcase nearest the bedroom, extracting a bottle of amber coloured brandy.

“It’s not Firewhiskey, but it will do,” Malfoy muttered, dropping the book to the floor and falling into my seat at the table.

Little bastard has my twenty-five year old single malt…I heard Severus hiss in my head.

I sighed, moving to collect the book Malfoy had dropped, and slid it back into place. As Malfoy was pulling at the cap with his teeth, I moved to the opposite chair, Vanishing the tea I had spilt, and sat down. I watched Malfoy with disdain as he managed to open the bottle, spitting the cap onto the table, and took a drink.

“You aren’t drinking his brandy just to push the pain in your face aside, are you?”

Malfoy swallowed thickly, making a face as the brandy went down.

“This tastes better than some of those potions Poppy has for pain.”

I couldn’t disagree, however…

“It is barely the afternoon, Malfoy…”

“Shut it, Granger. I really do not need your mouth right now,” he muttered with less fire to his words.
He took another drink, but did not make a face as it went down. He used his left thumb to undo the clasp of his cloak, shrugging off so that it fell across the chair. I could see a few spots of blood on the collar of his shirt and a splash more darkening his green tie.

“You said ‘his’ brandy…” Malfoy grumbled, staring at me from across the small table.

“Snape’s.”

Malfoy nodded. “Not curious as to why we’re in his quarters?”

I shrugged, “Should I be?”

Malfoy quirked his lips, preparing to take another drink. “You are curious, I can tell…now that you know.”

I did not answer as Malfoy took another drink, slamming the bottle down onto the tabletop, jarring the teapot and cup. I blinked, and poured myself a cup, not bothering with the cream and sugar.

“McGonagall was a sentimental old hag, she kept these rooms for Severus after he and I fled at the end of our sixth year. When we returned, Severus, as far as I knew, never used these rooms. But, McGonagall kept them, warded them, hid them…so I took advantage of that when I Apparated back with you…”

I nodded, lifting the tea to my lips, keeping my anger about Malfoy calling Minerva a ‘hag’ to myself.

“You were lying in Severus’ bed, and Merlin knows what he did in that bed…”

_Sodding ferret, I slept in it, of course…_ Severus raged within, causing me to wince. But I knew what Malfoy was trying to say, and I did not want to think about it.

“And where were you? Why does your face look like you were on the losing side of a fight with a manticore? You said something about Muggles?” I asked calmly, changing the subject.
Malfoy hissed, moving to take another drink, but stopped short as my hand shot out and grabbed the bottle. I surprised myself with the speed in which I moved, but Malfoy was even more surprised when I pulled the bottle from his fingers effortlessly.

“That’s enough, Malfoy. Answer my questions, and I might consider letting you drink through the rest of Snape’s brandy later tonight,” I said calmly, acting as if I had done the most natural thing by moving as I had.

Malfoy shrugged, his cheeks already pink from the alcohol. He sat back in his chair and pulled his wand to light a large fire in the grate. Slipping his wand back into the holster hidden beneath his blazer he turned his attention to me again.

“I cannot believe that you were raised with Muggles, Granger. Do all of them know how box bare-fisted?”

An eyebrow arched, “Pardon?”

Malfoy shook his head and closed his eyes.

“We almost had Potter.”

The blood drained from my face. “Almost?”

Malfoy nodded. “He has been living in the Muggle world all this time. Well, probably not now, but that was why we were having a hard time locating him.”

“Where was he?”

“We nearly had him in Surrey, but he was staying in London with a relative.”

I racked my brain. Relative? And then I bit my lip. The Dursleys?
“His cousin, Dudley Dursley put Potter up soon after Potter escaped from St. Mungo’s. Of course, the Muggle had no idea what Potter had become or what he had done. This Dudley is not the sharpest arrow in the quiver.”

I smirked. Harry was not stupid, he had used the Muggles to insulate himself, and it had worked well, for a while… But what I remembered about Dudley Dursley was that he was much like his parents, fearing Harry for being different. I wondered how Harry could have appealed to Dudley—if Harry used the Imperius, it would be traced, therefore, Harry would have to be convincing in some way.

“Dudley Dursley is the Muggle you’re angry about?”

“He did this to my face, Granger!” Malfoy growled, pointing to his swollen eye.

I felt a giggle bubble up, but held it in. “Why?”

“I was getting to that. Where was I?

Oh, yes. The fat fucking Muggle bastard who did this to me… Last night, Potter killed his aunt and uncle in Surrey.”

Merlin…two more…

Ron and I were both privy to Harry’s feelings about the Dursley’s, but Harry had never hated them so much as to murder them.

“Dudley Dursley let Harry stay in his London flat, feeling a closer kinship with his cousin. I suppose Dursley felt sorry for Potter, but it was probably a bit of guilt as well.”

“You’ve heard about Harry’s life with the Dursley’s?”

“It is mentioned in the Pensieve logs of Potter’s therapy sessions.”
“What?” I asked in a gasp.

“You cannot see them, Granger, and I shouldn’t have mentioned it…” Malfoy grumbled, using his right hand to brush several long strands of silver hair from his eyes.

Narrowing my eyes, I placed some more information into my mental filing cabinet.

“Continuing… Potter was living with Dursley as a type of flat mate. Potter kept the place clean, bought groceries, among other things, according to Dursley. The fat Muggle had no clue as to what Potter did when he disappeared at times, nor did he care to know.

Dursley told me that about a week ago he rang his mother, mentioning Potter. This call caused Petunia Dursley to panic. Somehow she knew that Potter was wanted for murder, and somehow she knew to contact Hogwarts. A letter was received by Longbottom two days ago, which was then forwarded to me since I was the most senior officer in or near the castle. So, we moved on intelligence from Petunia Dursley.

Potter had expressed an interest to visit his aunt and uncle to Dudley Dursley. Dursley was hesitant to go to Surrey because of a falling out between father and son. However, Petunia Dursley made to welcome Potter, expecting the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to lay in wait at a certain time. Unfortunately for the Dursleys, Potter arrived at the Number Four Privet Drive last night instead of tonight as had been planned.

From what we can tell from the scene, Petunia Dursley attempted to send another correspondence by way of a Squib who lived nearby, an Arabella Figg. Petunia Dursley had welcomed Potter and her son, prepared dinner, and slipped out the back of the house to contact Arabella Figg when she was caught.

From that point, the events become a bit fuzzy. Dudley Dursley remembered eating dinner with Potter and family, the next thing he remembers is sitting at the dinner table, his father Vernon in the next seat, disemboweled, and Petunia Dursley decapitated on the kitchen floor, her head was found inside a cupboard under the stairs later on. Potter was sitting across from Dudley Dursley, eating dessert. Dudley Dursley immediately tried to escape, but Potter restrained him in his chair at the dinning table.

Dursley remembered Potter saying one thing to him before he was knocked out cold.”
I swallowed. “What did he say?”

Malfoy’s expression was grave. “Something about ‘Don’t pity the dead, pity the living…’”

“And above all, pity those who live without love…” I finished.

I felt very ill very suddenly. Malfoy had mentioned George saying very similar words before he died…

After the Last Battle, after we had been healed and rested, Harry told Ron and I about everything that happened up until he battled Voldemort. He told us about seeing his parents, Sirius, and Remus with the Resurrection Stone. He told us about Albus in King’s Cross…and that phrase in particular. It was like a proverb to Harry, while I just thought it as merely wise words of parting from the Headmaster that were fundamental to everyone who had their hearts and minds set upon the Light.

I remembered the words, they were poignant. But Harry, Harry had turned the words into a mantra, a reason, a cause, and most likely, an obsession.

“You’ve heard him say it?”

I nodded, my mouth dry, “He heard it from Albus.”

Malfoy’s face shuttered, his line of sight turning inward. After a few moments, Malfoy’s mind seemed to return to the room.

“Dursley was Confounded. Arabella Figg found him and contacted the Ministry. I left late last night for Surrey. We had Oblivators working around the neighborhood, finding any contacts with the Dursleys.

Dursley was raging by the time we managed to free him. He dislocated Flint’s shoulder, broke Macmillan’s jaw, before I had to incapacitate the Muggle again and extract the statement. When I freed him, he attacked me. I knocked him out cold and had the Ministry take him.”
I forced myself to pour another cup of tea, my hands shaking slightly. Malfoy had not given me all the details about his scrap with Dudley Dursley, but it was not pertinent.

“What will happen to him?” I ventured.

“He’ll be Obliviated and relocated, most likely to America.”

“And the curses used on the Dursleys?”

“Splitting and lashing hexes. Powerful ones at that. Potter Apparated away to Merlin knows where, leaving us to clean up after him again. The hard part, though, is modifying Dursley’s memory. It is not going to be easy, and it is going to cost the Ministry a pretty Knut or two.”

I quirked my lips, moving to drink my tea. I knew the Dursleys only through Harry, and they had sounded like abusive, foul people. However, to wish them dead…it was too cruel.

Harry’s motives sounded too much like revenge, but his words to Dudley Dursley made me doubt that particular motive. Harry’s actions had been contradictory at times, senseless. But his need to find the Resurrection Stone, the books he had been reading before his commitment to St. Mungo’s, his need to find Ron and me, it did not exactly add up.

My own words about ‘correcting the timeline’ kept coming back to me. Perhaps that was exactly what Harry wanted to do. In the meantime, however, he wanted to eliminate factors in this timeline, to heal his own anguish, perhaps?

_It has been people who have suffered the most or have caused the most damage, Miss Granger…_ Severus said knowingly.

I blinked. Aberforth had lost both siblings, Ariana years and years before, and Albus, whom Aberforth resented since his sister’s death, during my Sixth Year. McGonagall had lost Albus, her dear friend, and many of her students. I knew better than most that she had been carrying her grief as a burden ever since the Last Battle. He had murdered Trelawney simply because of her prophecy…a prophecy that had led us to the Death Room in the Department of Mysteries where Sirius died. George had never been whole since Fred was killed, but it was also the fact that Harry needed to find Ron…killing two birds with one stone, perhaps?
The centaurs had been in his way, and nothing more. As for the Dursleys; it was obvious. He had spared Dudley because Dudley had extended a hand of reconciliation at the very end.

Harry had always thought in terms of black and white. And in that sense, Harry had never matured properly.

“He’ll try for the Ministry next…” I whispered to myself.

“What was that, Granger?”

I mentally shook myself.

“Either the Ministry or me.”

Malfoy frowned, but ended up wincing, his facial bruises limiting his expressions.

“Why not Weasley?”

I rolled my eyes. “You have him under protection in another country, Malfoy. If Harry tried to Apparate or use a Portkey, he would be tracked because he would be trying to leave the country. If you used Muggle means, it would be the same. Surely your department is in contact with the Muggle authorities?”

“Of course, I’m not stupid, Granger.”

I sighed, “You’ve just had too much brandy too quickly then?”

Malfoy did not answer, but eyed the bottle sitting by my left hand. With another sigh, I pushed the bottle towards him across the table, and he smiled…his teeth stained pink with blood.

“Go on then, drink away your pains and troubles, I know I’ll not get anything useful out of you for now,” I said resignedly.
Malfoy took the bottle and tipped it back, taking a large gulp.

“You’re going to regret it in the morning, if not sooner,” I mumbled, finishing my tea.

“As I am technically off-duty, I really don’t care, Granger,” he said softly, drawing his wand—Severus’ wand—and cast another charm I was unfamiliar with at his right eye. The swelling went down, but left behind a bruise along his brow and blood in his silver eye.

Cocking his head slightly, he nodded to me and rose from his chair. Setting his bottle of brandy on the arm of the couch, he shrugged out of his blazer, throwing it across the room toward the bathroom. He stretched before the windows like a man having woken from a twenty year nap. Then, Malfoy went to the gramophone, making a distasteful noise in the back of his throat and took the record off the turntable, hastily sliding it back into the sleeve.

Crouching down to look at the record rack he pulled out an album and proceeded to put it on, gently lowering the needle. The first sound of a muted drum made Malfoy sigh and step back, bending to grab his brandy.

“I wish I were home…” he sighed, swaying slightly as if to dance before falling back into the couch. “I wish I had this record at home…” he continued before up-ending the bottle.

I knew the song, it was not my favourite, but I knew it…David Bowie’s ‘Five Years.’ Malfoy hummed along, resting his head on the back of the couch, eyes closed. I had half a mind to ask how he knew the Muggle song, but he was too far removed from the moment. I did not want to bother him.

_He has seen too much for one man_…Severus said softly, his tone almost pitying.

‘Soul Love’ began and Malfoy smiled, moving his lips along with the words.

I did not pity him. All things considering, Malfoy had made a life for himself, and he was intelligent, resourceful, manipulative, and strong. Most people we went to school with were not half of those things.
I watched him as he drank again, some of the amber liquid sloshing down his chin. ‘Moonage Daydream’ began, and this time Malfoy was singing softly. At that point, I stood, and quietly went into the bathroom. By the time I returned to the parlor, Malfoy was singing the chorus in a deeper voice than David Bowie, but was, surprisingly on key. However, I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the unguarded behavior.

I did not really know this man.

Moving to the bookshelves, I scanned the titles to diffuse my discomfort. Most of the titles were Muggle novels, but there were a few titles that were not. I was slightly disappointed as I looked around the parlor, ignoring Malfoy’s singing the best I could. Happily I spotted my coat in a heap by the door leading from the room and into the castle. I had put my Beedle the Bard somewhere in the pocket, as well as ‘Dark Shaman of the Amazonian Basin.’

Soon, I curled up on Severus’ bed with the latter book, trying not to think of the sealed book that was also in my pocket. I had shut and cast a Silencing Charm on the door, effectively shutting out Malfoy’s voice, which was becoming more and more ragged as the record played on.

The snow was still coming down outside the window, but I would glance up at the change of light from time to time to see sun streaming through the clouds. I tried not to think about the Dursleys or Harry as I read, I had thought as much as I could without tiring myself. I put off trails of thought for later, when I felt stronger, when I had more information.

The only conclusion that I could manage was that Harry would try to infiltrate the Ministry. To attempt to correct the time line, he would go for my area of the Department of Mysteries by which he would need me. I stopped my thoughts there. I was safe for the time being, although the officer assigned to work with me as well as protect me was getting pissed in the next room…

I continued reading, or tried to, my eye lids growing heavier with each word. It was not long until I was curled up, my legs tucked in my skirt and the comforter pulled to cover the upper half of my body.

I slept for a few hours when I awoke suddenly, unable to explain why. It was just getting dark outside the windows. I stretched, needing to use the bathroom as well as eat again fas my stomach growled so loudly that it actually hurt.

Rising from the bed, I slipped my wand from my sleeve and lit the candles in the wall sconces and removed the Charm from the door. I moved quickly from the bedroom to the bathroom, my urge to use the facilities overcoming my desire to engage Malfoy. When I left the bathroom, I realised
that only the fireplace lit the room, and I flicked my wand again, lighting the room a bit more with candles. The record had restarted, but the volume had been lowered to a mere whisper of music. I assumed Malfoy was sleeping on the couch, but as I moved across the room I found that I was only half right.

Malfoy was face down on the floor, sleeping. I rolled my eyes, noting the empty brandy bottle and ignoring Severus’ exasperated words in my head. I had to move Malfoy. I most certainly did not want him aspirating his own vomit. If I just rolled him onto his side, I would feel a bit better. I intended on leaving him on the floor, he had put himself in this situation, after all.

Moving to his left side, I knelt, but recoiled at the smell of alcohol roiling off him in disgusting waves. I held my breath as I nudged at him to see if he would move on his own accord. My nudge only elicited a soft sigh. I turned my head to take in another fresh breath of air.

Nudging him a bit harder, Malfoy groaned slightly, and turned his face toward me. The bruising discoloured his skin, but the swelling was nearly gone. Still, he looked awful.

I nudged again, and Malfoy snored. I was not amused.

Finally, I prepared myself to roll him onto his side, grasping his arm to push with all I had. I had him turned almost half way, when three things happened almost simultaneously.

First, Malfoy opened his eyes with a snap. Second, his body twisted faster than I could react and I was pulled down to the floor, my chest against his. And third, Malfoy was kissing me while I squealed in shock against his lips.

I had not had two male best friends without knowing how amorous they could become when drunk. The intoxicated do not discriminate, I learned very early. This was one reason why I did not want Malfoy drinking near me. But I had to be the mindful one, as always, exposing myself to this situation.

The kiss was chaste on my part, but I could feel Malfoy’s tongue seeking access to my mouth. He held me by the arms none too gently, his eyes closed, a hum coming up from his chest. Luckily, he remember he had to breathe and broke this kiss. I tried to squirm away, but Malfoy held me fast. I opened my mouth to scream at him, plead with him to let me go…and that had been my mistake.

Malfoy’s lips found mine again, and this time it was not a chaste kiss. He tasted like blood and
brandy, and it was not pleasant. His tongue tangled around mine, and his hands moved to cradle my head.

I panicked. The emotions I had felt the night Harry attacked me came crashing through me like a runaway train. I knew that Malfoy was not hurting me, he was not going to kill me, in fact, his kiss was gentle, yet passionate, and the way he held my face was tender. But I could not stop the emotions being sieved through my brain. I was rigid, but Malfoy continued, kissing my face and returning to my lips again. Tears stood in my eyes, and I shut them, only one tear escaping to fall from my eye to land on the collar of Malfoy’s rumpled shirt.

And as if there were no more painful emotions to push through that internal sieve, my panic dissolved, and I could feel again.

Although his hands were a bit rough, they were warm on my jaw and cheeks. I quickly adapted to the taste of his mouth and the strong push of his tongue dancing with my own. I hummed into the kiss, enjoying it. Christ…

It had been years since I had kissed someone, and I idly wondered why I had denied myself for so long. To be held, to be kissed, was a wonderful feeling. And, if it had to be Draco Malfoy to remind me, so be it.

I kissed him, I took the cue, and I kissed him. However, this action broke whatever spell had been created, and Malfoy stopped, his hands moving to my arms again, lifting me off his chest.

His pale brow furrowed as he looked up at me, and I knew that he had realised whom he had been kissing. The little dream was over. I wrenched away, sitting next to him as he lay on the floor.

“Granger…what is this?” he growled, sitting up, staring into the right side of my face.

“A mistake,” I whispered. I cleared my throat and climbed to my feet, looking anywhere else but Malfoy. “You fell asleep on the floor, I was about to roll you onto your side when you grabbed me…”

Malfoy groaned softly, holding his head in his hands. “I apologise, Granger. I didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” I managed, tears coming to my eyes again.
“I’m glad…” Malfoy whispered. “I will fetch a Sobering potion and then we should have dinner, yeah?”

I nodded, and made a hastily escape to the bedroom, closing the door behind me, falling back against it as tears fell in earnest.

I cried not because of all the emotions I had swept through in a matter of seconds. I did not cry because it had been Malfoy I had kissed. I cried because I had begun to enjoy the kiss, but knew that Malfoy would rather hex off his lips than kiss me because he wanted to. It was not as if I liked Malfoy…he was handsome, he was intelligent, but he was also cold and manipulative. No one wanted me before, and Malfoy certainly would not want me now. To him I was an asset as well as a liability. I was a witness and a victim, and my security was paramount. Malfoy did not want me, how could he? And I did not want him, did I?

*You are, at the very least, interested…* Severus stated.

I wiped my tears with the back of my long sleeve.

What did Albus say? ‘Pity those who live without love?’

I was below pity. I was merely a functioning mind, as I had always been to Ron, Harry, and now to Draco Malfoy and the Ministry.

*Self-pity is even more reprehensible, Miss Granger.*

I took a shaky breath and pushed off the door to move to the chest of drawers. Faintly from the dark wood, I could smell Severus. He had placed clothes in the drawers, he had lived in the room, and as leaned my chest against the drawer, looking up into the mirror, I could almost imagine seeing him standing behind me. In another time, Severus would have inhabited the same space, but he would not know me as I appeared at that moment.

My face reflected in the mirror was that of stranger. My eyes were red with crying, my face gaunt with sickness, my hair shorn short so that I looked like a boy and not a woman.
“Look at me, I cannot even manage to be pretty…” I whispered through my tears, staring at my full lips and my honey eyes.

_I was not ‘pretty’ either, but did that mean I was not good enough to love or be loved?_  

I wiped at my eyes before resting my chin atop the chest of drawers, my mouth quirking as a swirl of black in honey made me pause.

_Do not make the same mistakes I did, Hermione. Do not deny yourself the hope of love, even if it is a fleeting infatuation._

“I do not love Malfoy…” I whispered, staring into my own eyes and the murky swirl of black that moved like ink over water.

_Well you could, if you wanted. You can no longer be The Hermit, Hermione, be The Fool._

I wanted to scoff, but it came out as a long sigh.

“I have loved…love you…” I whispered to my reflection and the disconcerting swirl of black.

_Which proves you really are The Fool, Miss Granger. What good is it to love a dead man?_  

I coughed a laugh. “None, I suppose.”

_Correct. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, there is no need. Stop crying and put on a brave face. Malfoy feels just as awkward as you._

“I really am The Fool to feel for Malfoy.”

_That remains to be seen. You doubt your feelings, I know. You wonder if you only feel this way because he has saved you, protected you. It is a justified concern, but not one to keep you from hoping._
“Hope cannot always be harmless, Severus,” I sighed, my tears passing.

*You are intelligent enough to know when to take care, Miss Granger.*

I smirked into the mirror, watching as the swirl of black in my eyes faded and only my eyes remained. I stepped back from the chest of drawers to fall back to the foot of the bed, sitting with a sigh, my hands in my lap, my eyes fixed on the floor.

Had I shut myself away for so long that I had forgotten how to feel?

A knock on the door startled me to my feet, and as the door opened slowly, I forced myself to remember to breathe.

Malfoy’s hair had been combed, his clothes changed, and I could smell the traces of a bath and a Sobering Potion. As he pushed the door open, I tried not to grimace or smile. He conveyed that dinner has been set out, that it was late, and we should eat.

I agreed.

Within a few moments, we sat at the small table in the parlour, eating in silence. It was a simple meal of baked chicken, boiled, and spiced potatoes and vegetables, simple, yet delicious to me as I had been quite hungry.

Malfoy ate slowly, and I watched how his fingers curled about his fork and knife as he sliced a piece of chicken and raised it to his mouth. His battered face seemed even better than before, all of the swelling gone and only a few scratched and bruises remaining around his right eye. He ate with an air of delicacy, renewing a thought I had had during out school year: he had been schooled in manners, or at least, table manners.

I watched him dab his lips, one corner of which still a little red from his fight with Dudley Dursley, and blink as he met my eyes.

“We are returning to the Manor tomorrow,” he stated.
I averted my eyes to my own plate and stabbed at a piece of potato, nodding.

I could feel him watching me as I began eating again. It was unnerving. His silver eyes watching me over his goblet of pumpkin juice seemed almost unfair to my passive observation of his eating habits. With one more bite of chicken, I no longer felt like eating, and I set my knife and fork down, moving to dab my lips with the napkin in my lap.

“I apologise, Granger. I let my anger take hold earlier. I should not have let myself…” he trailed, setting his goblet down to lean back into his chair.

I kept dabbing my lips, thinking of nothing else to do, formulating what to say in response. Slowly I placed my napkin next to my plate and raised my eyes to gaze at his chin, too unsettled to look into those eyes again.

“Apology accepted, Malfoy, let’s just put it behind us. There are more important things to think about now.”

My words sounded artificial, but it conveyed a small, honest wish.

Malfoy’s mouth opened as if to speak, but he shut it again, moving to grasp his goblet again, lifting the rim to his lips. He drank deeply, uncharacteristically wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

“We’ll have to go through the village again, we cannot Apparate from the gates.”

I frowned and met his eyes, finally.

“How were you able to…” I started.

“To Apparate from the Forest here? The Forest is included in the enchantments that now protect Hogwarts. Only Hogwarts staff and the Ministry can Apparate within the grounds.”

I nodded. The protections had changed as I had been able to Apparate from outside the wards of
the cottage, I doubted I could do it at that moment.

“After a bit of breakfast, pack your things, we will leave before midday.”

Malfoy gently tossed his napkin to the table and rose, moving past me to the door that led out into the castle. I did not turn as I heard the door snap shut, indicating he had left Severus’ chambers. I sighed, looking at his empty plate. He was going to miss dessert.

I turned my eyes to the fire, scowling. The idea of leaving the castle frightened me. In fact, the idea of being out in the open, frightened me. I had been healed, but I was not confident in my magical ability. Would I be able to fight if I needed to? I did not know. All I did know was that I would try.

It was not like fighting Death Eaters or Giants or Dementors, I would be fighting Harry. And that fact was what had me uneasy. Harry had been raised to fight, and with the Elder Wand, a fight with him would be quite one-sided.

I clutched my wand as it lay against my right forearm, feeling a tinge of power against my skin. Bellatrix’s walnut wand…I wondered idly if it would protect me if I had to face Harry again. It had been the wand that killed Sirius Black, it had been the wand that had made the Longbottoms insane, it had been the wand that had siphoned so much insane evil, that I wondered if it were going to serve me this time around…me, its new master.

The enchantments at Hogwarts’ gates still made me feel a little light headed as Malfoy and I passed out into the lane. Two different men stood guard and Malfoy nodded to them before pulling up the hood of his cloak. I had been made to conceal my face even before leaving the castle. Luckily, with my renewed health, I was able to Transfigure my cloak beautifully, resembling that same bit of wand-work Malfoy had performed on the old coat while we had been in the Forest. Soft black furred lined the edge of the hood, but the inside as well, keeping my shorn head a bit warmer than before.

Malfoy held my hand again as we walked quickly down the lane towards Hogsmeade. The warmth of his large hand over mine made my insides prickle, but I did not pull away or try to think too much of the meaning of his hand over mine. No matter what Severus had said in my mind, I would not let my hopes grow beyond the facts of the situation. I had always been more of a pessimist.
We did not speak as we walked along the High Street, and again, I only saw a handful of people out on the snowy street. The only person I recognised being Madam Rosmerta who was angrily moving snow from the entrance of her establishment with her wand. I bit my lip, hoping Malfoy did not see her or vice versa. I did not know how the older woman felt about the man charged to protect me after he had kept her under an Imperius during Sixth Year.

As we moved from the village to the lane leading out into the countryside, I managed to spot the Constable placed along the tree line just outside the village, marking a halfway point between the village and the Shack. Malfoy ignored the Constable and moved forward without a pause. The Shrieking Shack came into view, slightly down the hillside from the lane. I could not help but feel hesitant about Apparating again after my several mishaps in the weeks before.

However, before we could move off the lane to pass to the Apparation point, Malfoy froze, and I collided against his back, about to open my mouth to speak. Malfoy’s hand slipped from mine to the front of his cloak, his wand slipping into his hand with an audible ‘whish.’ His left hand moved to push me flush against his back, his fingers resting on my hip.

I frowned…and then grunted as suddenly Malfoy turned, grabbed me, and we were flying through the air, his body landing above mine. I screamed softly as a stump situated only two feet from where we were standing exploded sending rotten wood, clumps of dirt, and snow raining down upon Malfoy’s back.

I began coughing, the air retuning to my lungs, but I did not have time to think as Malfoy jerked me to my feet.

“Move!” he hissed, pushing me up a low bank and into the trees across from the Shrieking Shack.

I obeyed as the nearest tree to me cracked and splintered. I barely turned my face away in time so that those splinters did not fly into my face.

Malfoy was growling as we ran haphazardly through the trees and further away from the lane. With a rough tug, Malfoy threw me behind a scattering of large rocks. I winced as my back slammed into the largest boulder. Malfoy rolled over the snowy ground to land beside me, his mouth open in a pant, his eyes narrowed. He clutched Tom Riddle’s wand tight in his fist, the knuckles white.

Moving only slightly, I peered around the boulder to see that the roof of the Shrieking Shack was
visible through the trees. We were only perhaps a hundred metres from the lane, give or take.

The whistle of another spell made me stiffen as a hex slamming into the other side of the boulder, cracking it down the middle sending shards of rock into the air. I gasped as Malfoy moved to shield me, the sounds of rock striking his back making me clench my teeth. Malfoy did not make a noise at the impact, and quickly pulled away, looking into my face as if assessing my current state.

“Change your cloak, he can see us…” Malfoy whispered in a rush, his breath hot against my face.

I nodded, slipping my walnut wand from the sleeve of my jumper, Transfiguring my cloak again so that it was no longer black, but white as the snow and the tree trunks around us. Malfoy did the same, blending in with the landscape far better than I, his pale skin and hair helping his camouflage.

“Can we Apparate from here?” I whispered as another hex splintered a tree a few metres before the boulder.

“The edge of the barrier is just beyond Potter…” Malfoy growled.

So it was Harry…

“Portkey?” I suggested.

“No…not to the Manor.”

“But somewhere else?”

Malfoy blinked at me, a hand digging into his cloak. Pulling out a large folded piece of parchment he moved his wand over the paper.

“Portus!” he hissed.

The parchment glowed for a split-second, but I knew the Charm had not worked. Malfoy tried
twice more before growling.

*Blocked, Miss Granger, Potter has covered all your exits...* I heard Severus hiss.

“There should be a limit to the range of the barrier, maybe if we tried another direction...” I began.

“Perhaps, but at the moment we are pinned down.”

“The Constable down the lane?” I asked, turning my face in the direction of Hogsmeade.

Another spell slammed into the boulder that shielded us, fracturing another large portion of stone. I clenched my teeth, my frustration beginning to turn to anger.

Malfoy moved slightly to peer around the rock, and I could see his eyes widen slightly as if trying to see beyond some invisible barrier.

Another spell...and I found myself sliding along the rough, snowy ground of the wooded copse, a root digging into my lower back. Malfoy leaned over me, pressing me down. We were not exposed behind a natural row of smaller boulders, the larger one having been blasted to rubble.

“Listen to me carefully, Granger. You need to go to the Manor, now! I will draw Potter’s fire. You need to run down the hillside to the Shack—past the dead birch tree—you must Apparate from there! Picture the gates...the gates!” Malfoy hissed, his face only two inches from mine.

I shook my head, desperately. “No, not without you, Malfoy! I haven’t tried Apparating since...” I sobbed, somewhat embarrassed.

His face reddened, and I knew it was out of anger. “You must, Granger! If Potter gets you, it is all over!”

I closed my eyes and swallowed, licking my lips.

“I’ll send help, Malfoy,” I whispered.
His face softened slightly, the angry red draining away. “Run as fast as you can—try to Disillusion yourself, if you can… Think of the gates!”

I nodded, gazing up into his face, inhaling the scent of his breath…coffee and buttered toast.

“Be careful?” I whispered, the slight turn at the end of my words making it seem I was speaking with a form of sarcasm.

Malfoy smirked and I felt my heart flutter strangely. “I’m a professional, Granger…”

And then, I did something totally unlike me…I kissed him. I knew it was because of the situation, adrenaline pumping, our lives in danger, amongst other things, but I kissed him. It was a short kiss on his lips, chaste, for the most part, but it was the only way I could think to react when he had smirked and said what he had…so much like a scoundrel…

His eyes widened, and his hand moved to my right shoulder, squeezing slightly. When I let my head fall back into the snow, I saw a wide gamut of emotions flicker across his face until his expression settled on seriousness again.

“Go, as soon as I’m away…go…” he whispered with a growl. “Don’t stop, don’t look back no matter what you hear…just go, understand?”

My heart clenched, but I nodded. “Yes…”

I was surprised as Malfoy’s face softened and that scoundrel-like smirk returned. “Wish me luck.”

And suddenly he was gone, the lingering warmth of his body gone.

I blinked once and took a deep breath, rolling on the snowy ground so that I was on my knees. With another breath I tapped my wand on top my head, the hood having fallen away. A cold trickle passed through me and I knew that I successfully Disillusioned myself. Another breath, and I was on my feet. I touched a tree trunk to orient myself and soon I was moving.
Blasting curses whizzed through the trees, volley after volley, but they were not aimed at me, but twenty metres to my right. I did not look, I did not want to see, all I could do was run.

I had never been very physically fit, so I knew I was moving under the influence of adrenaline, my legs pumping as I came to the tree line. I slid down the bank and into the lane. I did not look…the Shrieking Shack the only thing I could focus upon.

I could smell ozone over the cold damp of snow and trees, and all I could feel was the pounding of my heart and the burning of my lungs.

I streaked across the lane down the path to the Shack, and that was when I saw him.

Harry Potter stood in my periphery vision just at the far side of the lane, close to the path. I let myself take in his dark form, dressed in an indistinct black cloak, the hood pushed back to reveal long, wild black hair. His face was contorted in a sneer worthy of Sirius Black, his eyes almost a luminescent green in the overcast light of the day, the glasses I had come to know were gone. In his right hand was the Elder Wand, and red flashes of curses flying from the end without being vocally incanted. The scar on his forehead was an angry purple, and bruises marked his face, and the backside of his right hand.

I let that image burn into my mind for only a moment as I ran.

I slipped on the path, but I was coming nearer and nearer to the dead birch tree and the grey wooden siding of the Shack. I grasped my wand tighter, praying to whatever god who would listen that I somehow survive the day.

“Hermione!”

I did not stop although the sound of my name made my heart skip of beat.

“Her-mi-o-neeeeee!”

Harry screamed my name, his voice taking on a whine at the last syllable. The power of his voice slammed into my back making me stumble across the Apparition barrier so that I rolled into the snow…just in time to avoid being hit by a hex, which flew just over me and tore into the side of the Shack beyond me, debris falling to the ground.
I rolled to my feet, feeling that when I crossed the barrier the Disillusionment had been dispelled. Harry could see me, I could see me.

I turned to face Harry, preparing myself mentally to Apparate.

Harry took a few steps toward me, his face moving from an expression of anger to relief and back again. However, those expressions were not familiar to me, for the madness contained in Harry’s face distorted him in my eyes.

“You!” he screamed in a rasp, his eyes glowing a terrible shade of green.

I took a step back, suddenly losing my focus.

Malfoy Manor…I had to think of the muddy lane and the gates…the gates of Malfoy Manor…the gates of Malfoy Manor…

Harry’s Elder Wand raised, and I knew that I would either have to Apparate in that moment or possibly be killed.

The gates of Malfoy Manor…

“Sectum…” Harry began, and I stiffened.

“Go!” another voice roared…roared so loudly that I thought I felt the ground shake.

Harry froze, his eyes widening, beginning to turn toward the source of the terrible roar. However, before Harry could point his wand, a flash of white streaked into view, and I gasped as Harry was picked up from the ground, flying high into the air so that his body flailed like a doll’s in the grey sky.

The gates of Malfoy Manor…
Go, Hermione, go! Severus roared in my head.

I held my wand against my chest and the world whirled around me.
I gasped as my feet slammed into the ground, and I fell face first into mud. Pushing myself up from the ground, I spat. I was hyperventilating and the muddy water in my mouth was not helping me to breathe.

However, I forced myself up, whirling about to see that I stood in the muddy lane, and the wrought iron gates of Malfoy Manor set into an overgrown stone wall were at my right. I whimpered out of joy, stumbling to the gates, my left hand wrapping around the ancient, cold iron, the other hand wrapping slightly around the metal as I still held my wand.

I felt stinging and burning hexes pass through my hands, but I did not care. I pulled at the gates, rattling the metal. I could feel the skin of my palms begin to burn, but I pulled and pulled, wheezing as my breath began to regulate from the pain.

Malfoy…Malfoy had to be just behind me…but I still rattled the gates with every bit of strength I had.

“Miss Granger?” a silky voice sounded just to my right.

Lucius Malfoy had appeared through the closed gates like a spirit, his pale hair tumbling down his shoulders, his eyes glinting in the brighter light of the Wiltshire sun. I tugged my burnt hands away and moved to him, grasping the front of his leather jerkin. He was dressed much as he had been in the Department of Mysteries all those years ago.

“Malfoy…he needs help!” I wheezed. “Shrieking Shack…go!” I screamed at him.

Lucius’ eyes widened, and I suddenly found that he had me by the arms, pulling me through the wards and into the warmer side of the Manor grounds.
“Go to the house, Miss Granger. Tell Narcissa to call the Ministry. Run…now!” Lucius snarled, startling me to move. A distant, soft sound told the still logical part of my mind that Lucius Malfoy had gone.

I ran again, my feet slipping along the white gravel of the drive. My mind was whirling as I fell into the door of the Manor; another series of hexes burning my hands like a white fire. But the door opened, an elf staring up at me in confusion. I ignored the creature and threw myself into the foyer, a relieved laugh passing my lips as I saw Narcissa Malfoy flying down the staircase like a ghost.

I slid against the marble floor, and landed in a heap in the middle of the foyer, my legs finally having given out. Narcissa was at my side almost immediately kneeling before me.

“Ministry…” I panted. “Malfoy needs help!”

Narcissa’s pale eyes darkened, and she whirled away, moving to one of the two Floos in the foyer. My head was pounding, as my heart seemed to have moved there during my flight.

I turned my head slowly to Narcissa who was whispering into the Floo. She spoke in what seemed like nonsense, but slowly, I realised she was speaking in code words.

I licked my dry lips, tasting mud, wondering if I could just curl up in the floor of the Malfoy foyer and rest. However, the worry and dread that was consuming me would not let me move. The image of Harry…it frightened me. But, what frightened me more was the last thing I had seen before Apparating. A streak of white throwing Harry Potter into the air…

I closed my eyes as my burnt fingers moved to my lips, and the slight tingling of the kiss remained.

Malfoy…he had to be safe. He would push through the doors behind me, at any moment, in a mood…

But he didn’t.

As a cool hand grasped mine, I opened my eyes. Narcissa Malfoy was smiling at me, sadly, taking my hands. I dropped my wand into the folds of my white Transfigured cloak, tears welling up in my eyes.
“Are you alright?” she asked softly, her eyes moving from my muddy face to my blackened palms.

I managed a nod.

“Potter?” Narcissa ventured.

I nodded again, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Thank goodness you are safe, Miss Granger,” Narcissa whispered, drawing her own wand to wave it over my muddy face and then my palms.

I winced as a healing spell worked over my skin, knitting skin back together so that the damaged flesh sloughed off in charred layers and fell to the fine marble floor.

“The Ministry has gone to Hogsmeade…it will be all right…” Narcissa whispered as reassuringly as possible.

I wept. I could not imagine how it would all be ‘all right.’ Harry had come after me again, and Malfoy had not yet returned.

I set myself to move automatically as Narcissa helped me to my feet, removing my cloak and giving it to an elf for safe keeping. She slid my wand into my sleeve again, and then, running a motherly hand along my face and my bare head, took my healed hands and led me to the kitchens.

I had returned to Malfoy Manor, but the circumstances were grave… I sun was shining dimly through the window in the nook, but it did little to cheer me. Even when a cup of Irish coffee was pressed into my hands, all I could think of was Harry’s voice screaming my name and the sight of his body flying through the air.

Narcissa had to prod me to drink, and I did, tasting the slight bite of alcohol in the bitterness of the coffee. I drank deeply, letting the alcohol course through my blood until my world and its perceptions returned to the moment. I set the cup down and turned to regard Narcissa whose eyes were sparkling with concern, not for her son, but for me.
“Draco told us that Healer Patil cured you,” Narcissa said, moving her fingers over my shorn head.

The motion made me want to cry again. How this woman could be so tender, astounded me.

“The scars are nearly gone…and your skin has a healthier glow…”

I nodded, biting my lip.

“It will be over soon, Miss Granger.”

I looked away. I did not really know what Narcissa Malfoy meant by those words, but somehow, it was reassuring.

“Call…call me Hermione,” I whispered.

All the while, I had been calling Narcissa Malfoy ‘Narcissa’ in my mind… Malfoy called me ‘Granger,’ and only a few people called me ‘Jane.’

I was not really Jane, not really… I had been lying to myself, I had been trying to hide myself, but then…at that moment, with Minerva, George, and so many others dead, I was just ‘Hermione.’ I had always been Hermione, just as I had always been The Fool.

“Do not worry about Draco. I know I have said that he was a model officer, I was not exaggerating or boasting, Miss Gra-Hermione.”

I gazed at Narcissa again.

“A Detective Chief Inspector is not just a fancy title, and it does not mean that Draco is simply just a glorified Constable. He started training to be an Auror in America after the War…but was called home after we had to testify to the Wizangamot. Even in America he was considered exceptional, and the only reason he is not the Head of his department has to do with our family’s status…”
I frowned as Narcissa’s eyes grew distant, regretful.

“He will stop Potter, Hermione, Elder Wand or no. Draco is an exceptional man…extraordinary…like you.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Narcissa patted my healed hands and smiled. I wanted to ask so many questions, but I couldn’t form the words. Instead, I turned to my Irish coffee and drank the rest.

My legs burnt from running, as did my chest from panting. I was tired, but I knew it was not because of some viral curse. The array of emotions I had felt made me tired, and I settled back into the nook as Narcissa called the elves to bring an early dinner. I had not realised how much time had passed.

I ate slowly, Narcissa at my side. We did not speak, but ate thoughtfully, trying to ignore our anticipation for news. We were both anxious—Narcissa for her son, and I for word that Harry had been captured.

As we were finishing our light dessert, the door to the kitchen flew open causing the elves to cower. Lucius Malfoy strode through the kitchen, a vision of black, making me remember the old days. His face was made of stone, but his eyes were sharp…and angry.

Narcissa paused in the middle of a bite and let her fork fall to her plate in a clatter. I paused as well as Lucius approached, moving to stand just before the nook.

“Draco, is he…?” Narcissa gasped, her hands clenching in her lap.

Lucius shook his head, his pale tresses swishing over his shoulders. Narcissa visibly relaxed. And, surprisingly, so did I.

“The Ministry is on the move. Draco battled Potter in Hogsmeade, but as soon as the Ministry appeared, both Apparated. The Ministry is scrambling to keep up. Potter keeps moving, Draco pursuing. I do not know where they are…” Lucius growled, his hands moving to remove his gloves.

“What do you mean?” I asked before thinking.
Lucius shoved his gloves into his cloak and turned to me. “The Ministry told me to go home. I am not an official part of the investigation, and I am not an employ of the Ministry. I was shut out…” Lucius hissed, his anger not directed at me, but the Ministry.

Narcissa glanced at me and swallowed. “Casualties?”

“Several. No deaths, but Hogsmeade was nearly razed to the ground.”

I frowned. Casualties only…I thanked Merlin. However, it shocked me to hear that Hogsmeade was attacked.

“Where were they before you…?” Narcissa asked softly.

“York. But I doubt they lingered there long,” Lucius answered, reigning his anger to Conjure a chair wandlessly and sitting down before the nook.

“So, what now?” I asked, moving the coffee carafe toward Lucius should he want some.

“We wait. That is all we can do. The Ministry is satisfied with you being here, Miss Granger, and here you will stay for the foreseeable future,” Lucius said leaning forward to grasp the carafe and pour himself some strong, black coffee.

I sat back into the nook, meeting Narcissa’s eyes again. Under the table, she grasped my hand, and I suddenly felt that relief again. I was not alone…and I was not unwelcome…and it was not simply because I was under Draco Malfoy’s protection. It was a strange feeling, but I did not ignore it.

I begrudgingly took a mild sleeping draught. Narcissa had insisted, saying that I needed my sleep. I slept in my guest room, happily finding that my familiar was waiting for me.
Malfoy, the cat, was quite cross with me for approximately a minute before I took him up in my arms and rubbed my face into his soft fur. The cat sniffed my face, my hair and then batted a paw against my nose. I laughed, tears in my eyes, as I stroked his fur and whispered apologies into his grey ears.

The cat slept atop my pillow, his nose near my ear. He wanted to protect me, I could feel, and eat my bad dreams… I fell asleep without a worry, warm in my bed, my cat watching over me.

However, sometime in the early morning, I was startled awake. I sat up in bed with a start, scaring my familiar so that he hissed softly. The room was dark, and I blinked blindly into the blackness. I could not identify what had roused me, and I listened…

A sound seemed to echo through the Manor, a dull thumping noise, followed by the rumble of voices far below. I threw back my blankets, pulling my wand from under my pillow. My familiar moved to rub against me in a comforting gesture, and I absently rubbed his spine with my hand before rising.

Casting a dim lighting spell, I crept across the room, my soft white nightdress swirling around my ankles. Cracking the bedroom door so that candlelight from the corridor filtered into my chamber, I ended my spell and slipped into the light.

Voices were in the foyer, many voices. Their words were indistinct, but I could tell by the pitch and tone that some of the voices were angry and others concerned. Moving to the top of the staircase, I peered down into the foyer, my view blocked slightly by the molding of wood of the steps.

“This is no time to be arguing, gentlemen!” I heard Lucius drawl, anger barely contained.

“We must wake him, Malfoy! We will lose Potter’s trail if the DCI doesn’t come to his senses!” shouted another voice, male and unfamiliar.

“He’s severely wounded, Deputy Minister, doing anything at this point could possibly harm DCI Malfoy,” Wiscombe intoned calmly.

“We have a trail to follow, Deputy Minister, Malfoy’s tracking spell is still active…as long as he lives. I very much doubt that Potter noticed…” another voice, another male voice said with a gruff tone. The voice seemed familiar.
“All that matters now is that the Department continue working on tracking Potter. Draco is wounded, and until we can heal him, there is nothing more to be done,” Lucius sighed. “Now, I’m sure you have plenty to do in the next few hours. Let my son be treated…he has done all he can for the time being…”

I flew down the stairs to the landing of the next floor, peering down for a better look.

Marcus Flint and Ernie Macmillan stood near the Deputy Minister, a man by the name of Lowell who was junior to the Minister of Magic, Malfalda Hopkirk. Wiscombe knelt close to the bottom of the stairs, but I could only just see his feet from my vantage point. Lucius stood before the three other men, still dressed in his black robes. And Narcissa stood behind him, glancing between Wiscombe and the Deputy Minister.

“I want reports, Malfoy. Your son…” the Deputy Minister spat, “Your son is integral to apprehending Potter. The Ministry demands that he continue his duties with this case!”

“Of course, Deputy Minister. As soon as he is able to speak, I will inform you myself,” Lucius drawled in a placating tone, bowing slightly.

The Deputy Minister as well as Flint and Macmillan headed to the Floo and were soon gone. As soon as the Floo deactivated, Narcissa seemed to fly to Wiscombe’s side in a sob.

“It is bad, madam…” I heard Wiscombe whisper.

I clenched my teeth, and ran down the stairs, my bare feet noiseless on the carpet. When I approached the bottom, I froze at what I saw on the marble.

Blood…there was so much blood, but my shock was not just the sight of garish red on white marble, but the figure that was producing it.

It was not Malfoy at the bottom of the stairs, but a creature. The creature had a slender body, twenty feet of more in length with a mixture of white fur and iridescent scales. I blinked at the creature, and the gashes along its long, narrow body, its reptilian feet with bloody claws, and the terrible cut along its face. I knew what the creature was…a wyrm, a magical European dragon thought to be extinct.
“Hermione!” Narcissa sobbed, forcing me to look away from the creature dying on the floor below.

Narcissa’s face was stricken, but her exclamation was not one of shock at my sudden arrival.

“Miss Granger…can you come here?” Wiscombe asked softly, rising from his kneel.

I blinked and pushed myself up, my wand still in my hand. I edged down the steps, moving to one side so that I avoided stepping into blood.

“Good…I need your help. I need you and Narcissa to be ready to subdue him if need be with a gentle spell while I start healing what I can…”

I did not understand, and looked around the foyer finding Lucius suddenly missing.

“Can you do that, Miss Granger?” Wiscombe asked again with a bit more force.

I nodded, moving around the Healer to stand by Narcissa’s side. Narcissa circled an arm about me, and held me close as we aimed our wands at the wyrm.

“Now, be ready to move. He might thrash, and his tail is like a whip…” Wiscombe advised.

I frowned. Either I was having the most extraordinary dream or it was really wyrm lying before my feet.

From where I stood with Narcissa, I could see that there was extensive damage to the scaly underside of the wyrm, but most of the blood was oozing from the gashes in the softer parts of its back. The wyrm reminded me of the depictions of Asiatic dragons I had seen popularised with Muggle teenage fashion, but this wyrm, if it had not been injured, was far more beautiful, and deadly… Long fangs ran down its lower jaw, its snout long and large enough to crush a man’s head. Its head reminded me of a dog’s in a way. It had short ears that were laid back against its skull, and large eyes, one of which was horribly wounded, a gash running along the right side of its head.
"Here we go…" Wiscombe whispered to himself, kneeling again and drawing his wand.

The glow of gold snapped me from my thoughts as well as the deep canine like growl rumbling from the wyrm. Magic knitted the wounds along the wyrm’s back shut and the blood tapered away to nothing. But as Wiscombe moved his wand to heal the wounds, I could see that not all the damage to the beast was closing. The red aura that was emitted from the wounds as Wiscombe’s wand swept over indicated that a strong curse had caused the injuries.

However, the bleeding had stopped and raw wounds remained. When Wiscombe moved to kneel before the wyrm’s head, he hesitated.

“He’s lost his eye…” Wiscombe said to Narcissa and I, causing Narcissa to sob quietly, shaking against me.

Wiscombe sighed, and began to heal the wound on the wyrm’s face when suddenly the beast was on its large white reptilian feet, snarling only inches from Wiscombe’s face. Narcissa moved from my side to stand next to Wiscombe, her wand trained on the wyrm.

The beast stood at least four feet high, its front legs about four feet from its head, the back feet another five or six feet…leaving a long tail that moved like a cat’s, swishing back and forth, moving the air violently.

“Easy now…you’re home, luv…you’re home,” Narcissa wept, reaching a hand out toward the wyrm.

And then I realised, a little too late, that this was not just a mythical beast, but a man caught in an intricate transfiguration that he did not have the strength to dispel. The wyrm was the Animagus form of the man who had been charged to protect me from Harry Potter.

The wyrm’s breathing was laboured and as he whipped his long neck about to look at me with his left, eerily silver eye, I bit my lip. Blood and viscous fluids ran off the side of the wyrm’s face, and I bit my lip harder to keep it from trembling.

The wyrm blinked at me before the eye shut, and the beast collapsed onto the floor at my feet, its hot nose barely missing my bare toes.
“Why can’t he dispel it, Wiscombe?” Narcissa cried as the Healer moved again to Malfoy’s oozing face.

“It’s not a curse…but his mind has kept him in this state so he could survive. He should change any moment now…now that he knows he is safe…”

I could not move, watching as Wiscombe tried to staunch the blood oozing from the wyrm’s eye. I could not believe that the wyrm was Malfoy. And then I remembered the streak of white I had seen throwing Harry high in the air.

With a flash of silver light, I gasped as the body of the wyrm began transforming back into the shape of Draco Malfoy. He lay face down, his back in bloody tatters, his hair stained red.

Narcissa rushed to help Wiscombe turn Malfoy over, holding his upper body off the floor. Malfoy’s clothes were ruined, the wand holsters seemingly protected by a spell and the wands in place. There were more gashing in his limbs, and up and down his chest and stomach. But perhaps what set my teeth on edge and made my stomach twist was the gash on his face. In human form, the damage seemed much worse. The eyelid of the right eye was torn, and underneath I could see part of a ruined eyeball. I slapped a hand to my mouth and turned away.

“Have the elves prepare a room, Narcissa. I will need healing salves, antiseptics…and a steady hand,” I heard Wiscombe instruct Narcissa.

Narcissa tore away from Malfoy’s side with a whimper, and began summoning elves, sobbing instructions.

“Miss Granger, there is nothing more you can do for now. Perhaps if you would keep Narcissa company…” Wiscombe suggested, gathering Malfoy up into his arms, casting a wandless spell to levitate the man, he began moving to the stairs.

I swallowed thickly.

“Lucius has the room prepared, Wiscombe, Squeak will show you,” Narcissa said, her voice thick with tears.

I watched as the familiar peach skinned elf moved to tug at Wiscombe’s trouser leg and lead both
him and the man in his arms up to the second floor. When I could no longer see Malfoy, my eyes
moved to the blood pooled upon the floor. My lips trembled at the sight of near black blood on the
marble and smaller drops on the carpeting of the stairs. I did not know what bothered me more:
Malfoy being an animagus in such a strange form or the damage he had sustained to give me a
chance to escape unharmed. The guilt was heavy—I had had a good night’s sleep, comfort, while
Malfoy…

The warmth of Narcissa’s embrace shocked me back to the moment. And suddenly I realised that
she had more reason to shocked than I did—her son had been the one dying on the foyer floor.

I returned her embrace, realising that I was trembling as badly as she. Slowly, she took my hand
and led me to the kitchens, both of us in our nightdresses, barefoot, and quite out of sorts.

The Malfoy kitchen had become a refuge to me, and it felt strange to think of any place in the
Manor that would feel safe, but the kitchen with its little nook in the back seemed to be the safest
place to be in my little world.

Narcissa held my hand fast as we sat down, mugs of steaming tea popping before us, the scent of
chamomile and honey quickly pushing out the lingering scent of blood in our noses.

Our collective silence held despite our imbibing of tea.

The sun rose, and the pink light streamed through the windows of the kitchen, elves slowly coming
into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, others going about other chores. We watched silently, our
shaking gone, our minds growing tired and sleepy from the hot herbal infusion.

It was possibly nine in the morning when the peach skinned elf, Squeak, popped loudly into the
kitchen just before the nook, causing me to gasp, and Narcissa to jump visibly.

“Missus, the Master asks for you upstairs,” the elf characteristically squeaked, its large eyes wide,
its hands wringing before its velvet garb.

Narcissa released my hand and slid from the nook, glancing back to me.

“Come, Hermione…quickly!” she whispered as the elf popped away again.
After a few moments, we were racing up the stairs and down a second floor corridor. Outside a set of double doors, Lucius was speaking softly to Wiscombe, who was wiping blood from his hands with a handkerchief, and another man I did not know. This second man was dressed in robes that I knew indicated he was an Auror…not a police man…but an Auror. He stood taller than Lucius with long black hair, pulled back in silver clasp, a handsome face with blue eyes, and browned skin. His robes were a dark red, and a badge, one of which I had not seen in years, was pinned to the fine fabric.

As Narcissa and I approached, the dark haired Auror stopped his voice and regarded us with keen interest.

“He’s fine, my dear, but Wiscombe needs some assistance,” Lucius provided, noticing the nervous expression on his wife’s face.

Narcissa sighed, squeezing my hand before releasing it to follow Wiscombe inside the room beyond. As the door opened, I managed a peek inside, finding a huge room beyond coloured in shades of green and a large bed in the middle. Upon the walls were posters, old posters of Quidditch stars of a decade before…pictures of dragons…and I wondered if the room had been Malfoy’s when he was a boy.

“Miss Granger, you should try to sleep,” Lucius began, taking a step toward me as the door closed, shutting off my view of the room beyond.

I straightened, and turned my eyes to the senior Malfoy and the dark pony-tailed Auror. I studied the Auror closely, noticing the lines around his eyes and mouth. He was older than I, but still rather handsome, however, I had no recollection of the man.

“Ah, yes, this is Auror Williamson…”

Before I could think, I asked: “Why is he here, Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius took another step forward so that he towered over me, his face stony, but his eyes soft. “The Ministry has decided to recall the Aurors…”

Understanding was slow to dawn, but when it did, I felt my jaw clench painfully.
“So…” I began.

“The Ministry will rule that Potter is no longer the responsibility of the police force. He will be considered a ‘Dark’ wizard by the afternoon. You do understand what that means?” Lucius asked softly, his right hand twitching as if undecided whether to place a hand on my shoulder in some display of concern.

I nodded. I understood only too well.

The Aurors would kill Harry on sight. There would be no trial unless Harry gave up…which would never happen. The Ministry had enacted a strong decree after the fall of Voldemort: when a wizard was declared ‘Dark’ every effort would be made to eliminate the wizard, no matter what the cost. The zero-tolerance for megalomaniac wizards bent on mass destruction or genocide seemed like a natural reaction after Voldemort. But in this case…it was Harry.

The conflict inside my body threatened to suffocate me. Harry was my friend, but he was also my attacker. He was my friend, but he had murdered my friends…

“Aurors from America and Australia will be coming to aid the Ministry…it seems everyone wants to have a piece of Potter…” Lucius whispered.

I ignored the soft triumphant turn of the man’s voice, and turned my attentions to Auror Williamson.

“And Malfoy? Your son?” I asked, not wanting to look at Malfoy senior.

“He will live. And he will aid the Aurors. He started off as one in America, the Ministry will use him here.”

I bit my lip, and turned my eyes to the floor.

“Potter was wounded as well. Even with all his power, it will take time for him to heal, and there is not a wizard in this country who would aid him,” Lucius continued. I could feel his eyes boring into the crown of my shorn head, but I again, ignored him, only registering his words. My fatigue
was beginning to show, and I turned, intent on returning to my own bed. There was nothing to be done…I had imposed myself on the Malfoy family enough.

I took several steps before Lucius spoke again.

“Come back in a few hours, Miss Granger. Draco will want to reaffirm that you are unharmed. He was quite concerned before…”

I nodded once, and continued toward the staircase, my only desire to sleep to clear my mind to think later. However, when I laid back into my bed, my familiar sneezing at the foot of the bed from the permeating scent of blood that had wafted up from the foyer, I could not sleep.

I decided that I was absolutely sick with crying, but cry I did, all the same. I wished there was a better way to express my fear and frustrations, but all my body would do was leak tears and quake with sobs. I hated myself for being so lacking in control.

Hours had passed, and it was nearly dusk, a red sun casting a warm glow in Malfoy’s childhood bedroom. I wondered why he had been placed in the tomb-like room with the dusty windowpanes and the peeling posters…did he not live in the Manor?

I let my itchy eyes move about the room as cold tears ran courses down my flushed cheeks. I wanted to look at anything besides the figure lying in the narrow bed. Unfortunately, it did not matter how hard I tried, my eyes kept alighting on the figure of Malfoy again and again.

I was crying silently out of guilt.

Malfoy lay very still on the bed, pillows adjusted so that his body was not lying flat on the soft mattress. A blanket was pulled up to his bare chest, which was wrapped in thick bandages, tinges of pink staining the white of the gauze. His hands were also wrapped up to his forearms, and more bandages were wrapped about his head, angled so that it covered the right side of his face. His silver hair stuck up at angles from the bandages wrapped about his head, and minor scratches adorned all of the exposed flesh I could see. Seeing his musculature, and frame without clothing, I realised how truly big Malfoy was—in no way slight, as was my adolescent memory of him. He had grown up, was solid, and was not the boy I remembered. But as his wide bandaged chest rose and fell slowly, the gnawing guilt would not let go. All in all, it looked as if Malfoy had fought for his life, and nearly lost.
I suddenly wondered if I had looked as terrible not so long before.

Fresh tears worked their way up from some dark place inside, and I closed my eyes, pressing my right hand over my contorting face.

Wiscombe had said that Malfoy would survive, all of his wounds not serious enough to end his life. It would just take time for Malfoy to heal. However, the damage to his right eye was irreparable, and bar some medical advancement in the year few months, Malfoy would never be able to see out of his right eye.

Narcissa had not taken the news well, but still managed to find optimism enough to be thankful that her son was alive. Lucius had only scowled and muttered something about his ancestors… I could only feel guilt.

I should have fought; I should have stood up for myself, fought at Malfoy’s side.

I had had the strength once, and I wondered where it had gone in the years since the Last Battle.

*Your mind is your sharpest weapon, Miss Granger…* Severus whispered as I sobbed into my hands at the foot of Malfoy’s bed.

Would my mind save me? Would my mind be able to stop Harry?

I gasped for air.

“Little boys shouldn’t…shouldn’t cry…”

I gasped again, quickly wiping my tears to look to the figure in the bed.

“Wh-what?” I sobbed.
Malfy was smirking, the right corner of his mouth obscured with bandages, his left eye gazing at me with a dazed glow.

“Little boys…” Malfoy began, his voice ragged.

“I heard you…I’m not a little boy…” I whispered, wiping my face with the back of my baggy jumper sleeve, taking a step toward the bed.

“You look like one…” he whispered, wincing as he began to lift himself up in the bed to sit.

I moved to help, but jumped back as Malfoy threw his left arm up to stop me. I could only watch as he manoeuvred himself to sit back against the pillows.

“Short hair, baggy clothes, short frame…you look like a little boy.”

I smirked.

“If you’re teasing, it must mean you are feeling better?” I asked, moving back to my original spot at the foot of the bed.

Malfy grunted, running a hand over his bandaged chest. “I feel like utter shite. And you?”

I blinked. “Me?”

“You alright?” he rasped, moving his hands before his functioning eye to study the bandages wrapped about his fingers.

“I’m fine…” I whispered, turning my eyes to look at my socked feet.

Malfy hummed in satisfaction, running a hand over the right side of his face. “I could be better, I suppose. I only hope the Ministry sees fit to pay me compensation for my eye.”
I stiffened, and hesitated to look at Malfoy fully. I opened my mouth to speak, but I could not think of any words that would sound in the least bit reassuring. In fact, all I could think to say were apologies. So, I stood awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other.

“How did you kiss me, Granger?”

I stiffened again, and stopped my shifting, clutching my own hands before me. I dared not look at him.

“How of course… I kissed you, so I suppose it is only fair you kiss me…”

I felt my face begin to burn.

“All this kissing…someone else might think we actually like each other…”

My lips trembled, so I bit down on the soft flesh.

“Don’t tell me that you have fallen in love with me, Granger…” he drawled in that characteristic Malfoy tone that I had come to hate when we were younger. That drawl was a slap in the face…he might as well have called me ‘Mudblood.’

“Because that just will not do…”

I could feel blood in my mouth and in the corners of my lips. And then, I snapped…

“How could I love someone like you, Malfoy?”

My eyes met his one, and I noticed his mouth twitch away from a smirk to a frown. His one eye was widening slightly as he looked at me.

“I despise you! I have despised you since the first time I heard you voice, saw your face, knew your name!” I sobbed.
I hated myself. I had wanted to scream all the words, but after the first few, my voice roughened into a terribly bone jarring sob. But, I couldn’t stop it…

“I have felt guilty for days…guilty because you had to be the one to save me…guilty because you had to be the brave one and fight Harry…guilty because your mother is so wonderful…guilty because I had begun to respect you…even like you a little bit…”

“Granger…” Malfoy whispered, moving to sit up in the bed, to move closer to me.

I backed away, further from him and his reach.

“Don’t you dare mock me, Draco Malfoy! Don’t you dare!” I bellowed, finally achieving the effect I had wanted. All the same, I was still crying, I was still hurt.

With one final look at Malfoy and his bandaged body, I turned, and like a melodramatic slag, I ran.

I ran until I was back in my rooms and in the bathroom, staring at my tear-stained and swollen face in the mirror. In the amber irises, the black swirled like ink begin stirred into honey at a frantic pace.

You are both fools…Severus sighed.

“I hate him. I was a fool to think that he could…” I sobbed to my reflection.

Could what? Severus asked, his deep voice echoing in the hollow of my mind reserved for his presence.

I shook my head roughly as if to rattle Severus Snape’s voice.

“I have been letting my situation addle my brain. Post-traumatic stress…a syndrome…something… The only reason I…”
“No, don’t be ridiculous! Love is not that… I esteemed him, and I wanted him to like me. I wanted to think that after everything, after Voldemort, after years, he wouldn’t—he wouldn’t see me as a ‘thing!’” I sobbed into the mirror, the black ink manically swirling.

See you as a victim…you mean.

I nodded, tears splattering my hands and the marble surface of the counter.

“I was so worried, Severus…so worried… I did not want him to die because of me. I did not want him to be hurt because of my weaknesses…” I wept bitterly.

Severus did not answer, but I could feel him inside my mind, pondering, thinking. I lowered my chin to my chest, and wiped my face with the back of my hand. I wanted Severus to console me somehow, tell me that everything was going to be explained, that peace would come again. But, I knew better. Severus was the realist, the voice of logic.

“My feelings are going to get in the way. I should just stop feeling and do what I must to stop Harry. Albus said it…I have all the moves, I am the one who must stop him,” I whispered, looking into the mirror again.

If you think that is what you must do, Miss Granger. But, I warn you, it will not do you a bit of good to bottle your feelings. I cannot assume to know young Malfoy’s mind, but do not push his protection aside. He is powerful, very powerful. He has sworn to protect you, and you must allow for that. Your feelings may or may not be misplaced, but do not hide them away. Do not become me…

A deep painful cry passed my lips as I looked into the mirror, the blackness fading back from my eyes to my brain…Severus Snape falling silent. I, again, was left alone.

I took another sleeping draught that night, but I still had nightmares. Twice I woke screaming, frightening my familiar who hid under the bed for the rest of the night. I laid back into the bed
horribly unsettled, trying to remember what I had dreamt.

The only snatches I remembered of the first dream had to do with the night Sirius Black died, Harry, Ron, and the other in the Department of Mysteries. I had dreamed that Antonin Dolohov tried to kill me again…only the face I saw was not Dolohov’s, but Harry’s. I remembered the pain I felt from the curse used to cut me, and how the blood sprayed into the deep black of Death Eater robes. I remembered falling to the floor, Harry’s face over me, sneering in anticipation of my death.

I woke grasping the front of my nightdress.

The second dream was far worse than the first, and not a memory from the past. I was in the Department of Mysteries, but I was not a Fifth Year. I wore my Unspeakable robes, standing in the Brain Room. I remembered thinking of Ron.

In the middle of the room was the green tank, lit from some unseen source so that sickly green light splashed upon the stonewalls. In the viscous green sludge, twelve white brains floated like gliding stingreys upon an unseen current.

I moved through my dream, sitting at the nearest desk before the tank, my hands moving as if to write, but there was no quill or parchment. As I sat, the twelve brains seemed aware that I was near, and floated to the wall of the tank, filed in a rank as if to stare at me. Of course, the brains were not equipped with eyes, but they were aware of my presence.

The brains spoke to me in one voice, an amalgamation of male and female tones, speaking only as loud as a whisper. I could not make out their words, but my hand moved in the pantomime of writing without looking at the desktop.

The brains were telling me something important, very important, but I could not make out what it was.

Suddenly the brains swam away as I could see a reflection in the glass of the tank…an indistinct shape of a figure standing behind me. I turned sharply, the desk chair scrapping upon the stone floor.

Harry—Harry Potter stood just behind me. His hair was a mess of black tangles, and his right eye was damaged, the eyeball hanging from the socket, resting on his gaunt cheek. Quicker that I
could image, a pale, clawed hand lashed out, grasping me by the neck, pulling me upward.

Harry snarled in my face, pulling me close, and his breath against my face smelled like rotting flesh. With a great push, I landed on my back across the desk…and it was then I realised I was naked. My dream had rendered me bare.

Harry spoke, but again, I could not make out the dream language. He touched my hip with bloody claws at the ends of his fingertips. I could not move, all I could do was watch as those fingers moved to my inner thigh, traveling upward to the juncture…

Claws dug into my body, scratching my womb…and I screamed myself awake.

I hugged myself and rocked in the bed, thankful that I could not feel pain in my womb. Needless to say, I was unsettled, and I would not let myself sleep more.

I rose and went to the bathroom, running myself a scalding mint scented bath. Malfoy the cat, watched me from near the door as I leaned against the side of the tub, my body turned so I could face him, my legs floating out behind me.

“I have been a lazy witch, Malfoy,” I said to the silver furred cat.

My familiar blinked at me.

“I do not believe in prophetic dreams, or dreams trying to convey some cosmic message…but I do believe in dreams that inspire.”

My familiar seemed to smile at me, his eyes closing, and his grey nose wrinkling slightly. I could tell he was purring.

“I have been so…so silly.”

The cat yawned.
“After so many years, you would think I would learn something...be mature emotionally.”

The cat licked his jaws.

I sighed, pushing off the side of the tub to duck my head under the surface. I had been silly, melodramatic, and simply...immature. There were various reasons for these behaviours besides the recent events of my life. These behaviours had been fostered by my inability to face the truth about myself.

I had run away. I had purposely taken myself outside the realm of normal, functioning society. I had shunned attachments that would have allowed me to mature. I had not loved as I should have, I had not cared as I should have... And at that moment, I was paying the price for my lack of feeling, my selfishness.

I wanted to bang my shorn head repeatedly into the marble floors of the bathroom. I wanted to cut out my tongue for speaking like a miserly curmudgeon. I was not just a ‘brain,’ I had a heart...that I had conveniently forgotten for almost ten years.

I really was paying the price.

As I pulled myself from the bath, I wrapped a thick towel about my body, grabbing my wand from the sink counter, and padded out into the coolness of the bedroom. It was early morning, and I set my mind to the task of making some sort of amends with Malfoy, pouring my thoughts out to him, and see if, with his help, put some more of the pieces together.

As much as I loved puzzles, I did not care much for that fact that my life had become one.

I dressed, thankful to finally have some clothes that were different from the denims and grey jumper. I slipped into my favourite black linen skirt and dark green long sleeved top. I found my wand holster in the pockets of my coat, and strapped it to the inside of my right forearm. Sliding my wand into the leather, I knew the walnut and dragon-heart string wand was secured, and would not accidentally fall from my sleeve. Remus Lupin had given it to me at Shell Cottage, the day he brought the news about his son, Teddy.

I took a deep breath, allotting only a small part of me to feel the ache of loss. I felt that, maybe, if I could survive another terrible battle, I would allow myself to finally mourn as I should have years ago.
Terrible battles…that was what was to come, I could feel it in my bones. Except this time I was not going to battle against some ‘Dark Lord,’ I was going to battle with my best friend.
I did not find Malfoy in his room. This fact startled me. However, I did find him in Narcissa’s study, drinking tea, and eating biscuits without a care in the world, or as if he had nearly battled Harry Potter to the death a little over a day before.

In the strong spring sunlight, he seemed to glow, and I slammed my eyes shut as I stood just inside the door, terminating any thought into how beautiful his hair was…

I wanted to be more…sympathetic…more feeling, but not a sappy and silly slip of a woman.

“Ah, Hermione, come have something light for breakfast.”

Narcissa’s voice forced me to open my eyes. She sat on the blue velvet couch I had twice occupied. She raised her hand towards me, and I had no choice but to shut the door behind me and move to sit next to her.

Across the repaired maple coffee table, Malfoy sat stiffly, one hand unwrapped from bandages to hold a steaming cup of what smelled like a strange mixture of breakfast tea and added herbs. His hand was red and raw as if it had been burnt. In fact, most of his body was still covered in bandages with loose fitting clothing over top. His face was still bandaged and with his left eye…he glared at me.

I shivered, and looked away, gently taking the cup and saucer being pushed into my hands by Narcissa.

“He’s looking much better than yesterday, isn’t he, Hermione?”

I moved my mouth to answer, chancing another glance at the bandaged man across the way. He was still glaring, his cup still poised as if to drink.
My insides burned under his scrutiny, and I knew I just had to be outright with it.

“I was upset, Malfoy…I did not mean to say what I did yesterday.”

It sounded awkward, and I could feel my lips trembling with nervousness. I managed to rest my tea on my knees before my shaking hands spilled it on the expense rug under my feet.

The loud clack of a cup against a saucer made me jump, sloshing a bit of tea into my lap. I ignored the seeping bit of scalding tea against my thigh, bowing my head so that my chin touched my chest.

“Mother, could you excuse us for a moment. I need a word with Miss Granger.”

His voice was as raw as the skin of his right hand, and the voice demanded obedience. It was not unlike Lucius’ voice, and it unnerved me.

Narcissa rose suddenly. She moved around the couch so that her fingers brushed reassuringly against my shoulders. I had a feeling that she would somehow listen to whatever was about to be said, or wheedle it out of me later. Either way, I felt whatever words were to pass Malfoy’s lips would not be pleasant.

I waited for the hammer to fall.

“Are you purposely wearing a skirt and a tight shirt because I said you looked like a little boy?”

I blinked, and surprised, I found his face. He was still glaring.

“No.”

His mouth moved, but he still glared, his brow furrowed.

“I can see your breasts, your hips…in those clothes. You’re doing this out of spite.”
I blinked again, my mouth opening, but no words shaping my tongue and lips to form a sound. I was not sure how to interpret Malfoy’s words.

“I was teasing you…and then you had to start crying and spewing some bile about how you despised me and felt guilty. I was only trying to lighten the mood.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Lighten the mood?” I asked incredulously.

Malfoy’s glare turned into something I never would have thought possible: a wily, scoundrel-like smirk. I felt boiling anger beginning to rise in my chest, but I pushed it down a bit. Hadn’t I come to apologise, and then start formulating a strategy with the bandaged man?

“I don’t know about you, Granger, but nearly dying does not make me want to sing a ditty and do a jig,” he intoned sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes. It seemed Malfoy was feeling better than he looked.

“And there you were, blubbering at the foot of my bed, looking like some little boy who had had his toy taken from him. I couldn’t help myself.”

I sighed. “And then you went on to…” I began.

Malfoy barked a raw laugh, pressing his bandaged hand to his chest as if in pain.

“Don’t tell me…Merlin, Granger. You got pissed because of…” he laughed, but stopped short, his left eye glazing over for a moment.

I felt a blush creep up my chest. No…this line of conversation was going to a very uncomfortable place very quickly. I was not ready to go there yet.

I took a deep breathe, and pivoted.
“What happened?” I asked abruptly, causing Malfoy’s perception to return to the room.

“What do you mean?”

I sighed again, moving to set my untouched tea on the coffee table. “After you told me to run at the Shrieking Shack…what happened?”

Malfoy licked his lips, and also set his tea aside. He moved stiffly, but steadily.

“You ran…I told you to go…and then I threw Potter so he would not curse you.”

I bit my lip. “As a wyrm.”

Malfoy blinked, and slowly, he frowned.

“You saw that?”

I shook my head. “Not really…not then. When they brought you back here, I saw you then, don’t you remember?”

“No.”

Silence fell as Malfoy’s eye moved to his bandaged left hand in his lap. He took a deep breath through his nose, and raised his head to meet my eye.

“You weren’t suppose to see that, Granger.”

I did not understand, and I conveyed this with a frown. “Why?”

“I’m ‘unregistered.’”
“So?”

It was Malfoy’s turn to sigh. “Besides the Minister, her deputy, Flint, Macmillan, Wiscombe, and my parents, no one else was ever to know I was an animagus. Potter did not even figure it out…at least who I was when I was fighting him.”

If possible, my frown deepened.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Malfoy raised a raw finger at me.

“If you dare make a crack about why I am not a ferret, I will hex you, Granger.”

My frown reversed into a short smile. I could not help but find Malfoy’s words and tone of voice oddly hilarious. But I did not laugh.

“So, why does the Minister, and select others know about your animagus ability, and allow it, if you are unregistered?”

Malfoy smirked. “It is part of my job, Granger. I’m not going to advertise that I’m an animagus, or divulge my form for Ministry records. Those records are public, you know.”

It made a strange sort of sense, but then I began to wonder… Malfoy was not just some regular DCI, was he?

“Why bother with Transfiguration at all? Why not duel him?” I asked softly.

“Potter? Ah…well, Williamson asked me the same question yesterday before I passed out from the pain,” Malfoy drawled in a combination of laugh and sigh. “I had to move faster than this form,” he pointed to his chest, “would allow me. Potter is wicked fast with casting curses. When he began to vocalise the ‘Sectumsempra’ surprised me… Maybe he wanted you to know exactly what was coming.
I am fast on my feet, but I needed to be faster. So, I transformed while you ran. It had been a long time since I had…”

Malfoy fell silent, his eye distant again…but only for a moment.

“What did you see?” he asked me.

I swallowed and said, “I streak of white, and then Harry flying through the air. I heard your voice just before, and I Apparated.”

Malfoy nodded. “Potter somehow managed to land…a cushioning Charm, maybe. But I went after him. I knew if I could somehow subdue him, break the Elder Wand, anything, I could bring him to the Ministry.

Potter fought me, Hogsmeade burned. I’m sure it was frightening to an outside viewer, but to me, I was fighting him with all I could muster.

Even in my animagus form I could work spells, but nothing like what he was using. I could only block or dodge. My claws were more useful than the magic I could perform.

And then the bastard Apparated. I had had the foresight to place a tracking spell on him during one of our ‘exchanges,’ and I followed. I was so pissed that I did not think about where I was going, or what I would find. All I knew was Potter’s anger began to dull his senses. He couldn’t understand how I was able to appear just behind him. I lost track of where I was…the last thing I remember was Dolwyddelan Castle in Wales…

Finally, I followed him to Stonehenge…not too far from here…and I knew that it had to be the last place. Everywhere we had gone had one thing in common though…magic. Each place had a point of power…where the Magic and Muggle met…like a border.”

I stiffened. Malfoy had noticed it. Without being told what it was, and I grew very concerned.

“I had broken his arms, but he still was casting spells. I nearly ripped his leg off with my teeth, and yet he still stood. He was screaming…a terrible scream. Most of what he said came out as screams. He did not know who I was, but he told me he would find out what or who I was… And then, he tried using the Killing Curse.”
Malfoy paused, finally deciding to unravel the bandages of his left hand, apparently growing increasingly irritated by them.

“And?”

Malfoy chuckled, letting his bandages drop to the rug under his bare feet, which seemed to be the only bit of him that was unmarked as he moved to prop them up on the coffee table.

“It didn’t work. Instead, it seemed to overload the wand, and his body. He was blown back, bashing his head into the Muggle fence they have around Stonehenge. Then he was up...stared at me for a long time, and then he collapsed again. I tried to move, tried to change back so I could grab him and Apparate to the Ministry, but I couldn’t. Then, I could not remember anything more...except waking up in my old bed with Mother hovering over me, crying.

Williamson told me that the Ministry was just behind me, but not quick enough to catch Potter who had escaped while I was out for the count. Flint and Macmillan brought me home...and that is that.”

I looked away from Malfoy, exhaling loudly.

“Oh, and I lost my eye, I forgot to mention that. I think it was some where in Derbyshire,” he said with the most obvious twist of sarcasm.

“How can you be so calm?” I asked, annoyed.

“Defense mechanism.

You think I’m delighted that Potter tried to kill me, took my eye, marked me with curse scars? No, absolutely not! I hated the bastard in school, and I still hate him. I’ve even a good reason to hate him now,” Malfoy growled, but a smirk remained on his lips.

I rolled my eyes.
“Now…you’ve made your apologies, I’ve told you my account of the events, are you wanting me apologise for teasing you about the kiss as well?”

I reddened, and bit my lips.

“It was a mistake, obviously. I lost my senses in the moment, it won’t happen again,” I said abruptly.

Malfoy said nothing, but reached for his tepid tea. The silence was awkward, and I felt like an idiot. Malfoy had somehow managed to make me look like an idiot many times through the years, but at that moment, I, by far, felt like I truly, absolutely was an idiot.

Sitting back, Malfoy sighed. “What did you want to talk about, Granger? I can tell there’s something rattling around in your head. You wanted to apologise so I would give you more information. Now you have it. What have you deduced?”

I hesitated. What had I deduced?

I shook my head slightly. I had not deduced much. All I had were bits and pieces of thoughts, speculations, and few facts. The anger I had pushed down swept through me like a storm surge and was suddenly gone. Whoever had called me the ‘brightest witch of my age’ was also an idiot.

“I…er, I had a dream last night,” I started softly, knitting my fingers in my lap, trying to keep myself from flailing at my lack of information and true deductions.

“Very nice, Granger. I had a dream as well, but I doubt mine was like yours…unless there was a harem of naked women attending to your every need and whim,” Malfoy growled.

His sarcasm was becoming a bit irritating.

“No harem, Malfoy…the Department of Mysteries. I dreamt about beautiful naked brains swimming about in a tank of gorgeous emerald,” I countered with as much belligerence as I could produce so early in the day.
I sighed. I had been sighing quite a bit, but it was the only thing I could think to do to show my disdain at Malfoy’s acerbic nature.

“I cannot form any real deductions, Malfoy, but I can speculate. So, bear with me, and try to keep your insightful comments to yourself for a moment,” I muttered, twisting my fingers tighter in my lap.

Malfoy finished his tea, and placed it on the table, nodding slightly, a grimace upon his lips. I wondered, suddenly, how well he truly was, still wrapped in thick bandages.

“Harry has the Stone. And…I thought that maybe it would stop there. ‘It’ being the attacks, the deaths. But, then he killed the Dursleys. I thought that if he had the Stone he would start moving to use it, but as far as we know, he hasn’t.

Weeks ago, I thought that he would try to somehow infiltrate the Department of Mysteries and take a Time-Turner, if he did not have the Stone. I am still convinced that he somehow wants to change something in the past, or save someone in the past. The problem is…who does he want to save?

Let me pause for a moment… There is something that you may not know, so I’ll say it straight out now.”

Malfoy nodded, his raw skinned hands folded neatly on his knee.

“In Third Year, I used a Time-Turner to help me with my coursework. I took a double curriculum. Minerva gave it to me to use…”

I trailed my words, blinking into the space I had created with my mind’s eye. Had Harry believed that Minerva still had a Time-Turner? It would explain a bit as to why he had gone to her… But I knew, and the Ministry knew, that Minerva had turned in the magical device soon after my Third Year. But did Harry know that?

“When Sirius Black was captured by the Dementors…Harry and I saved him. That night we learned about Sirius’ connection to Harry. The existence of Peter Pettigrew… After Sirius was caught by the Dementors, Harry and I used the Time-Turner to return to just before the point Buckbeak was to be executed. You might not remember, but I gave you a piece of my mind…”
“And a piece of your fist…” Malfoy muttered darkly, his raw hand moving to absently rub an undamaged portion of his jaw.

“Harry and I saved Buckbeak. Later, Harry used his Patronus to save his past self and Sirius. Afterwards, we freed Sirius and caught up with ‘real time.’ Only Harry, Ron, Albus, and myself really knew about what had happened.

A few days later, I returned the Time-Turner to Minerva, and that was the end of it.”

Malfoy shifted slightly on his couch. “Interesting story, Granger, but what does that have to do with your dream of brains?”

I ignored the sarcastic drawl. “I will get to that. I’m not done with my speculation.

The other day, when Harry attacked us, I could not have anticipated it. Of course, I wouldn’t. But the reason I did not anticipate it was that I did not think Harry would need me. He had the Stone, what else did he need? Surely, he had figured out a way to resurrect the dead, but then I remembered my initial speculation…the Stone, a Time-Turner, the book in his study… True resurrection must be contingent on time. Moments after death, when the soul is still in reach of the body…

Albus had said ‘time and chance.’”

My mind was far away, in some other place, and my eyes were filled with the sight of the large timepieces of my Time Room and then to the desk with my ‘samsara’ jar.

“The unknown elements…who and when? There are only two Time-Turners made to go back further than a day, and those are under the heaviest protections. To go back more than a few hours is risky…the odds of creating a paradox in this particular time line increases. But that isn’t the only problem…or alternative for him now…” I whispered, my mind soothed by the cycle of death and rebirth in my mental bell jar.

“What do you mean?” I heard Malfoy ask distantly.

“The many-worlds theory…where there are no paradoxes. He could decide to insinuate himself into a timeline, his existence and reality superimposing into another. He could kill himself in
another world, take the place of himself if he found the world suitable. Moving from one world to another can have devastating consequences…realities can overlap, but not completely. His existence in this world is his and his alone…his own path. But, if he would move to another world and exist there as well, the danger of the two realities colliding is almost certain.”

I closed my eyes. Hoping it was not ‘that’ alternative. There was only one device that allowed someone to move between worlds, and no one had had access to it in ages…it had been hidden long ago, and only records remained used only for the purpose of instruction.

“All the same, if he wants to alter this timeline, the repercussions could be severe. This moment, the people we are would no longer exist. Of course, we would not realise this fact as soon as the quantum ripple passed, but all the same…it would be the end of this reality.”

Malfoy growled, and I opened my eyes to look into his silver eye.

“I follow, for the most part, Granger, but something bothers me about all this…”

I took a deep breath, and nodded for him to continue.

“I always thought that if a person is meant to die, saving their lives would only postpone their inevitable end for only a very short while.”

I smirked. “There is that, as well, to consider. We know Harry has the Resurrection Stone. Why else would he need it than to resurrect someone?”

“Either Potter is too stupid to realise that he will just keep losing people, or, he doesn’t care.”

I had wondered the same thing.

“And…who does he want to save? The problem with that question is that it could be any number of people. His parents? Cedric Diggory? Sirius? Albus? I could go on and on. Or, is resurrection even all he feels he must do? He could go back and kill Voldemort…”

Malfoy unconsciously winced.
“Or you, your father, Bellatrix Lestrange, Greyback…the choices are too complicated and too many.”

“Giving Potter the benefit of the doubt for three seconds,” Malfoy sighed, “Maybe he is going back to impart some information that would prevent some event.”

I shrugged. “Given the pattern of his recent behavior, I rather doubt that.”

Malfoy smirked. “And you were supposed to be his best friend?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m being logical, Malfoy.”

The room fell silent again, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

I felt as if I should somehow try to reason with Harry, ascertain his motives to verify that my speculations had been correct. Or, to learn who, what, or when he wanted to ‘correct.’ Even if he, for example, managed to prevent Sirius’ death, the timeline would be changed. All the same, Sirius most likely would die in some other fashion within days or weeks. Somewhere, a place I could not remember, I hard heard the phrase ‘course correction’ when speaking of such an effort. It was a proper phrase.

Even if Harry changed something seemingly insignificant, the time line would alter. That was why I was still analyzing what we had done in Third Year, even after so long. We had changed the timeline then…and I had always wondered what would have been if we hadn’t saved Buckbeak or Sirius. I always wondered if we had inadvertently spared Sirius his intended fate by saving him, only to have him die in our Fifth Year in the Death Room. It was not until later that I learned that ‘course corrections’ often took place within moments or as long as two weeks later. The universe demanded lives, and we, as human beings, finite creatures of dim understanding, had no business pitting ourselves against the universe.

I had always questioned the need to keep Time-Turners. Why not destroy them all and never have to worry about ‘fucking’ up the space-time fabric of our fickle universe? All the same, the Ministry would never go for destroying the Time-Turners—we might as well destroy our wands or the Muggles give up nuclear weapons. Time-Turners were a weapon to the Ministry, collateral against foreign or malignant incursions. Did that mean the Ministry let anyone use the devices often? Of course not. The only reason I was allowed one in Third Year was because I had applied for one as soon as I learned of their existence two months into my First Year. Even then, I had to
fill out forms of twenty feet or more, write a statement as to why I needed it, guarantee that I kept up my scores, etc. I was surprised that I could use one at all.

“The Department of Mysteries will have to be closed and sealed,” Malfoy announced, rousing me from my thoughts of the flow of my mental bell jar. “It seems like the most ‘logical’ course of action to me.”

I frowned. “Alex Roux will fight such a decision. There are on-going experiments down there that need constant supervision…and my work…whoever is working as my substitute must be cursing my name at the moment.

All I can think to do is to post guards, lay wards, move the Time-Turners to a safer location…” I trailed.

A flash of my dream passed through my mind’s eye, and faintly, I could hear Severus humming to himself as if to remind me of what I had forgotten.

“The dream…” I whispered, moving my attention to Malfoy. “I need to tell you about that.”

“The brains?” he asked, moving to stand.

I watched him as he swayed on his bare feet, and moved to the window, the light changing from morning brightness to afternoon warmth. He wore loose fitting pyjama bottoms, white in colour, and the waistband hung from his hips, revealing a space of torso wrapped in bandages. But after a few steps, Malfoy seemed to be walking and moving as if he had not been so injured.

“The brains…specifically the twelve brains in the Department of Mysteries.”

Malfoy turned slightly, his lips curled in disgust. “You have brains in the Department of Mysteries?”

I nodded, trying not to smile. It was a bit disturbing to keep brains in a tank, and what was worse, the brains were sentient, living, organs.
“Roux works in the Brain Room, and I have only ever observed there once. From what Roux told me then, the brains work collectively like a Muggle computer…or super computer. The brains, as Roux said to me, contain a great deal of knowledge of a great variety of subjects. But, as I never worked in the Brain Room, I never had any dealings with the brains, and to be honest, I took Roux’s explanation as fact.

But last night, I dreamt about the brains, and they spoke to me. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but it was important, very important.”

“Don’t tell me you think you had some psychic insight…a prophetic dream?” Malfoy drawled, moving to his mother’s bird’s eye maple desk, picking up the peacock feather quill, and swiping it over his lips—possibly to distract himself from the pain?


But, I would like to go there…to the Department of Mysteries. Maybe if I went back, the environment would inspire me to…to do something…” I trailed pathetically.

“And you know you cannot go anywhere at the moment.”

I blinked.

“If Potter is still after you…”

Yes. Harry would still come for me. But the exact reason why he wanted me was still unknown. Would he want me to somehow get him into the Department of Mysteries? The possibility could be remedied easily. I would have to give up my clearance, resign, possibly only temporarily, but give up access to my workplace.

I doubted that that was the reason Harry wanted me, but I had no idea as to any other reason. Malfoy had mentioned Harry needing both Ron and myself…just to function. I was not sure that was the case either.

I could not risk seeing Harry, and I doubted he would answer my many questions. All I could do was assume and speculate, and it frustrated me.
“Potter will not be moving for a while.”

I turned my face to Malfoy who was sitting against the desk with his back to me, twirling the peacock feather quill between the raw looking thumb and forefinger of his right hand. As if sensing my slight bewilderment, Malfoy turned his face to peer over his shoulder, but all I could see were bandages.

“I did break his arms, nearly tore off a leg, not mention knocked him soundly about the head…I nearly broke every bone in his body. With no help…no Healers, he’s not going to be moving about any time soon.

There is no one in Britain that would help him now…”

I let my eyes fall to my fingers woven in my lap. Lucius had said the same thing…

I wanted to find some bit of relief in Malfoy’s words, but I knew that Harry had never been an ordinary wizard.

But he is not extraordinary either, Miss Granger…Severus whispered.

I had to agree. Harry was formidable wizard, powerful…but even he suffered pain.

The Equinox passed with little ado. I missed my cottage, and the close warmth of the stone, earth, and wood. I felt as if I were living in a dollhouse at Malfoy Manor, only the kitchen seeming like anything close to the earth.

A week and a half had passed since Malfoy had been brought to the Manor desperately clinging to life. And over the week and a half, I was shocked to witness how quickly Malfoy was healing. The skin of his hands and arms were a pristine white, no scars. He moved as he had moved since I had been reacquainted with him…quickly, precisely, stealthily. All that remained as a reminder to his battle with Harry was the bandage around his head.
The second day of April, I sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee, and staring out the small window in the back of the nook to the flowers blooming in the garden outside. I had made it routine to take breakfast in the kitchen, sometimes alone as I was that day, but most times with Narcissa.

The longer I spent in the Manor, the more I began to realise how silent the house was, with little or no visitors, and never any great to dos or dinners. I had always imagined the Manor a central location for extravagant balls, dinners, or dances, but it was not.

Narcissa told me that many centuries before the Manor was such a place. The nearby village the domain of the Malfoy lords, with other witches and wizards living in close proximity to the Malfoy lands. However, after the 15th century and the Act of Magical Segregation, the village had forgotten the Malfoy Manor for ruins, and the magical folk had either moved away or died out. I found it a bit sad…

As Malfoy had predicted, Harry had not been seen, or noticed in the weeks since his confrontation with the wyrm Malfoy. No murders, no sightings, no leads…

The lull was troubling to me as I still had not formed any sort of deduction about what was happening to my life, and the lives of so many others Harry had imposed upon. My mental Severus had kept silent for the majority of the time, only making soft comments about my lack of evidence in my deductions, and the dangers of assumption…mostly his type of encouragement, which often sounded like derision.

I saw little of Lucius Malfoy, and only a bit more of his son. We did not speak often, and during the weeks, there were times that up to three days would pass that I did not speak to him. Often times he was immersed in a Floo call of which I had been barred from eavesdropping—Malfoy cast privacy Charms every time he entered a room to make a call. But as far as I could tell, Malfoy always informed me truthfully about the few developments in the case.

The Aurors had been recalled, just as Lucius had said, and every time I managed to see the front page of the Daily Prophet I would see a picture of Harry’s face…a picture taken on his wedding day with the eerily familiar words: Have You Seen this Man?

Only the day before was I able to begin making Floo calls of my own. Apparently, Alastor Gumboil was hesitant for me to be communicating with anyone outside the Manor. Of course, I understood his hesitation in light of Harry’s unnatural attentions toward me, but I still had to investigate, speak to, and question those who I believed to have important information regarding the case.
The only call I had made by that point was to my department head Alexander Roux. Roux and I had a great rapport, which had nothing to do with my so-called celebrity. Roux had been the one anxious to have me work in the Department of Mysteries, reading my papers on the practical applications of the relegation of time, my experiences with the Time-Turner in my Third Year, which I documented later in life then understanding the mechanics of time travel, and my paper on methods to prove the existence of the ‘multiverse.’ Roux had found my work interesting, and possibly applicable, and thus my work in the Time Room began.

When I called Roux, he seemed to have anticipated what I had to say. He was very concerned, not just about the possibility of Harry Potter infiltrating the Department of Mysteries, but Harry’s violence toward me. The first thing he asked was: when are you coming back to us, Jane?

I explained to Roux that it seemed as if the Ministry was going to detain for a long while yet, but I hoped that with some information, I would be able to aid in stopping Harry. I did not tell Roux specifics, but I conveyed that I needed information. My speculations and assumptions were dangerous in the sense that I was quickly moving away from a very simple principle of deduction… ‘Lex parsimoniae.’ Occam’s Razor…

Roux and I laughed as we spoke in unison: entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem.

It was then Roux grew serious, and leaned through the Floo a bit more.

“The Titans have been in a frenzy as of late. I cannot get them to speak to me for long.”

I had blinked at Roux.

“I had tried to let the Ministry to allow me to reach you weeks ago, Jane. Unfortunately, I was met with a literal threat that if I brought more attention to myself, concerning you, I could make myself a target for our recent rampaging Wizard.

As much as I would like for you to come back to us, something has been happening that has everyone in the Department in a perpetual state of confusion…not just the Ministry placing protective wards or posting policemen, now Aurors, in every bit of the our Level…but something else.

The Time room has been secured, but my room and the Death Room have been strangely cold. Of
course, this is not really a concern, but it is troubling. Some have heard voices in the Death Room, and not just your typical whispers from beyond the Veil. It started a few weeks ago, and has not stopped since. The voices are clear, their words disturbing.

They are saying, Jane, that the portal between the two worlds is about to open…no, not open, but combine. Personally, I cannot understand what that might mean, but it is disconcerting all the same.”

I agreed with Roux. I could not tell him that Harry had found the Resurrection Stone, or my speculation that he was to use it in a greater capacity than what was first believed.

“But, the most disturbing bit of information I must give you is about the Titans.”

I vaguely remembered Roux referring to the brains as the Titans once before. The Titans…twelve in number, each with its own personality traits as well as knowledge.

“They have said your name, Jane. And rarely do they speak as one as they did the first time I recorded your name. They will not tell me why they want you, and actually, I am going out on a limb to say that they do want to speak to you. Your name has been whispered by them for a while…maybe three weeks or so.

Rhea is the only one who will speak to me now. She is concerned about what the Titans have been seeing…Potter, the voices of the Death Room, specific people she will not name, and specifically you.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I dared not tell Roux about the dreams, I did not want him involved, and possibly put into danger. I did know, I had to go. I had to hear what the Titans had to say, but leaving Malfoy Manor was going to be a problem. During my last outing, I nearly died, and Malfoy was nearly killed. Even with a detail of Aurors, I doubted that I would ever be safe.

I finished my call with Roux, plastering on a face of hope, of safety. I wished Roux the best, with a half-hearted promise that I would see him soon and be back to work doing what I did best. My job had never been one where I had to appear to work everyday, but I always had done so because I felt that the Department of Mysteries was a natural habitat to foster a great thoughts.

Sitting in the Malfoy Manor kitchen, idly sipping coffee, I knew I had to go back to London. I doubted that any definitive answer lay in the Department of Mysteries, but surely, I would be able
to collect more evidence to support my theories.

All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best.

Harry wanted to change time. He would do this by the only means open to him. He would use a Time-Turner. If he were unable to save the life of one immediately, he had the Resurrection Stone.

These were the things I knew with ninety-eight percent certainty. The other two percent had nothing to do with fact or speculation…it was my own doubt.

And now, the compendium of our knowledge, the entity known as the Titans have spoken your name, Miss Granger…Severus said softly.

“It smells of a type of prophecy, Severus, and I do not like it,” I answered aloud, taking in the scent of irises and daisies from the garden window.

I simply did not have the stomach for a prophecy or some mystical portents. Not during the battles with Voldemort, and absolutely not after his fall. The cosmos had nothing to do with what Harry had decided; the cosmos did not have anything to do with Harry’s vanity either. Of course, considering the life Harry had lived, anyone who knew well would not be completely surprised at Harry’s behavior. He had been called ‘mad’ even as a child.

This thought made me remember Malfoy’s words. Either Harry did not know the dangers of time travel, or, he did not care. I opted for the latter. And this thought frightened me.

Harry would go for the Time Room; he had no other choice. He would fight his way through and preventative measure, kill, maim, and eradicate anything or anyone who deterred him from his goal. Harry was single-minded, he always had been.

I had to go to London, but in a manner that would not bring any unwanted attentions. I could Polyjuice myself easily, but would it be enough? I had a feeling that Harry was waiting for me just outside the wards of the Manor…a silly feeling, I knew, but one that kept me indoors. There had to be a way to slip past him if need be.

I sighed, moving in the nook to pour myself another cup of coffee, when I noticed a figure standing at the threshold of the kitchen. When my eyes alighted on the figure, it began to move, wide,
purposeful strides toward me. I knew immediately it was Malfoy, and as he moved to slide into the nook at my left, he avoided my gaze and began pouring himself coffee.

Malfoy was dressed in his typical black jumper, black slacks, his holsters strapped to him. His hair had grown, I noticed, the length of which fell over his pale face nearly to the end of his nose, the bandages had kept me from noticing before how his hair had grown. The scratches and cuts on his visible flesh were gone, however, the right side of his face was mangled. It had been the first time I had seen him without the protective bandages.

An angry scar ran down his face, from his temple, over his brow, over his ruined eye, terminating a finger width from the corner of his mouth. The eye itself was scarred so that the eyelid was fused shut and a line ran down to evenly split the skin. I could tell that he still had most of his eye behind the lid, but it was ruined and useless. Besides that disfigurement, Draco Malfoy was little changed.

“A good morning would have sufficed, Granger. I know I’m a handsome beast, but gawking is still rude,” Malfoy drawled, raising his cup to his lips.

I flicked my eyes away to the dark liquid surface in my own cup.

“Morning, Malfoy,” I whispered with a hint of growl.

We sat in relative silence for a few moments, before Malfoy spoke again.

“How did your calls go yesterday, Granger? Anything I should know about?” Malfoy said holding his cup before him in two hands, apparently relishing the warmth against his long, healed fingers.

I took another drink and set my cup down, running a hand over my shorn head, happy to feel that that the hair was beginning to grow.

“Roux told me…” I began, but shook my head slowly. Rephrasing, I said, “London, we need to go to London, Malfoy.”

Malfoy smirked, his left eye staring at the cup in his hands.
“To the Department of Mysteries, you mean?”

I nodded.

“The dream I had…”

“About the brains? Didn’t Mother give you enough Dreamless Sleep to knock out a team of Thestrals?”

“I haven’t been taking them.”

Malfoy set down his mug with a sharp tap, and turned his face so that his left eye peered at me with the intensity of two eyes. Before he could open his mouth to speak, I cut in.

“They are addictive, besides, the dreams have changed.”

“So, Potter isn’t raping you? What’s he doing he doing now? Playing Gobstones?” Malfoy hissed.

I rolled my eyes. It had been mistake to tell Malfoy the rest of the dream. He pressed me to do so a few days after I had initially told him about it. The reason for the Dreamless Sleep was because the dreams had grown more intense, more violent, and I would wake screaming and crying. Before, no one came to my room when I woke in such a state, but then, Malfoy came.

It had been a week prior, and the dream had been the most violent yet. In the dream, after listening to the Titans, Harry would attack, but as the nights progressed, Harry did not repeat his actions toward me in the cottage. One night I was suffocated, another I had my skin flayed, another I had suspended upside down with my throat slit…but that night, the night Malfoy came, Harry was raping me.

Malfoy shook me awake, as I sat up screaming in my bed. I did not realise who he was at first, but when he wrapped his arms about me to keep me from scratching him, I knew him immediately. It was the scent of him, a scent I had somehow associated with safety. After that, Malfoy insisted on Dreamless Sleep.
My dreams by that day were not as violent, in fact, in the most recent dream; Malfoy had saved me from Harry…Malfoy killing Harry… I did not know whether this dream brought a sense of relief or fear. All the same, I had associated Malfoy with protection.

“Roux told me that the Titans have been saying my name, Malfoy. It is rare for them to ever name a person out right.”

Malfoy calmed himself, turning his silver eye away from me. “And you feel you have to go to London to investigate?” he asked distantly.

“Yes. The sooner the better. If your theory is correct, Harry will be revealing himself again. It doesn’t matter if he has not completely healed, he will move even with broken limbs.”

“He was always so pertinacious… Then, how do you suggest we get you to London?”

I smiled. “I can Floo straight to the Department of Mysteries, and if I do not want to be noticed, there is always Polyjuice, or glamours. I can inform Roux about my coming, and he can arrange for me to speak with the Titans. I can check the Time Room, secure the Time-Turners with Roux’s help…and visit the Death Room.”

Malfoy’s eye blinked. “Death Room? You mean where the Veil is?”

I was not totally surprised Malfoy had heard of it. Bellatrix had killed Sirius there, and his own father nearly killed me and my friends there as well…

“Why would you want to go there?”

I took a breath, hesitating. “Roux mentioned that something odd has been happening. The whispers behind the Veil have become louder, succinct. As far as I know, it has never happened…no one in the history of the Department has been able to discern the words spoken before.

With the Titans calling my name, Harry’s actions, and now the Veil…I doubt it is all a coincidence.”
Malfoy’s mouth quirked, and he nodded, turning his eye back to me again.

“To London, then?”

I smiled. “Whenever we can.”

“Day after tomorrow, in the morning.”

My eyes widened, so soon?

“As for a plan of travel…taking the Floo to the Department of Mysteries is the most direct route. And Polyjuice is not a bad idea…just in case. Mother has a few phials. We go in, do what we need to do, and go out the same way.

If something should happen, we go up to the Atrium. We can get lost in the crowd and escape into Muggle London. Of course, my men and other Aurors will be all over the place. If by some stroke of fate, Potter shows up, he won’t stand a chance against so many.”

I blinked. It was a simple plan, but a sensible plan. And then I remembered something…something I had been meaning to ask Malfoy.

“Your father said something to me a while back, after you were brought back to the Manor…”

Malfoy snorted, “You shouldn’t listen much to my father, Granger…he is prone to lying…”

I sighed. “He said that with the Ministry recalling Aurors, you will be with them?”

His face darkened, and he turned it away to rest his chin on his left shoulder to gaze out to the kitchen, the elves moving about.

“Even your mother mentioned that you trained in America…”
Malfoy rose suddenly from his seat in the nook and took two steps into the kitchen, his back to me. I wondered if I had said something wrong, and then derided myself for even caring.

“Let’s take a walk, Granger.”

I blinked. “What?”

Malfoy turned, his face stoic and impassive. “A walk. It is a nice day, might as well enjoy it,” he said, but his words had no emotion behind them.

“Alright,” I replied, curious.

Malfoy began walking toward the sidewall of the kitchen, near the windows, and as he approached, a Dutch door seemed to slip into existence, melting out of the stonewall. He opened the door, and outside I saw that a cobbled path lead through the kitchen gardens and out of sight.

I followed, wondering what Malfoy wanted me to hear or to see.
I was glad I had decided to wear my favourite linen skirt that day, as well as a heavy green jumper that fell down past my hips. I wore my boots, which threw off the whole outfit, but I had never been one to prescribe to fashion trends. I wore my wand in its holster in my sleeve, and considered casting a warming Charm around the vicinity of my head.

The early April day was sunny, the sky clear and a gorgeous shade of azure, but the wind was still brisk. Malfoy did not seem bothered by the wind, which whipped at his platinum hair about his face. He walked three paces ahead of me, his feet moving surely over the cobbled path.

We moved quickly from the kitchen garden, and through a hedge into a larger garden that reminded me of pictures I had seen of Versailles. Topiaries, large reflecting pools mirroring the Manor behind us, then fountains reminiscent of Italian works by Bernini.

Into another, smaller garden, flowers bloomed in patterned colours, the scent lost on the brisk wind. Then through another hedge into an arboretum, with lines and lines of ancient cherry and dogwood trees, all blooming.

Finally, Malfoy paused to lean against the thick trunk of a cherry tree, his hands in his pockets, his eye lifted to the canopy of pink and white.

“Most of the recalled Aurors have been conscripted from other departments. There are few true Aurors. Williamson, whom you met, being one. Weasley is another. Even ex-Minister Shacklebolt has been recalled.

After the Dark Lord, the Ministry had hoped they would not need Aurors, at least not as many as there were. So many were lost during, and before the Last Battle. And many wanting to be Aurors, those we went to school with, were not suitable. So many wanted to join as a form of revenge. So many stupid kids wanting justice for themselves and their families. Potter was one, I suppose, but he actually had talent, from what I have been told. Same with Weasley. There were many in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that wondered why you did not follow suit.”
Malfoy was smirking, lowering his eye from the petals to me, as I stood on the cobbled path still.

“Brains over brawn…so they say,” I asserted pathetically.

Still, Malfoy barked a laugh. “You were probably better for it, Granger.”

I frowned.

“After the Last Battle, I was very angry. I had every reason to be…and I ‘ran away’ from home. I went to America where I knew a few people, and applied for citizenship. I also applied to be an Auror.

In America, being an Auror is like being in the Muggle military. You sign away years of your life to train everyday…work for advancement…hone your body and your mind so that it no longer cleaves your soul to kill.

I started off at the bottom of a class of one hundred other witches and wizards. I was bullied for my size, for my hair, for my accent, but after two months, I was only one of ten who made it through the ‘basic training.’ After three months, I was already working with the American equivalent of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, specifically the U.S. Auror Division, catching bad men…and at times executing them.”

I closed my eyes. Ron had told me how heartless and no-nonsense the MACUSA could be. He had told me that if I ever visited America to be careful of their laws…American Aurors were not the sort of people you wanted to meet in a sticky situation. They were ‘law men,’ but their laws were absolute, and punishment for an infraction was swift, and unforgiving.

I wiped my hand through my short hair again, and opened my eyes as Malfoy continued.

“I became involved with a covert organisation inside the Aurors. It was an organisation much like the one Weasley is part of now…I infiltrated so-called ‘terrorist’ cells, and ‘dismantled’ them. I worked with the MACUSA to capture, and subdue dangerous elements. I worked with the MACUSA to squash any stirrings of a dark nature in the wake of the Dark Lord. Even in America, the Dark Lord had reached deep into the American magical community.
To this day, there are things I cannot talk about. Things I have seen, things I have done. I was an unexpected asset to the USAD and the MACUSA. I had survived the Last Battle, but that was not why I was respected. I had made myself strong, powerful, and most of all trusted.

All that ended the day that our Ministry went to America to collect me. The MACUSA was not going to let me go, not without a fight...but in the end, I came back to Britain to testify against the Dark Lord and his minions. I had been expected to testify against my own father, but when I spoke, my words could not condemn him. My father had been a victim...but I will not glorify what he did and said, Granger…”

I turned my eyes to the path, and the pink and white petals on the ground.

“You know as well as anyone what was said before the Wizengamot. My father was never a hero, and it was not until later did I realise he less of a villain. My father chose the wrong side, and nearly lost the chance to turn it around. But he did...just in time.”

I glanced at Malfoy again whose eye was gazing up at the canopy.

“After the trial, Gumboil made me an offer I could not refuse. I could not go back to America...I had been forsaken the moment I left the country. I could have gone anywhere...France, Australia, or India...but Gumboil’s offer appealed to me, and I took it. It was a big step down from my work in America, but Gumboil groomed me to take his place, and take his place, I shall.

But now, with Potter, I’ve been relegated to Auror status again. And if there is a need, I will go.”

I grasped my right arm and shifted on my feet. “Do you enjoy your work, Malfoy? In America? And here?”

Malfoy smiled...that wily, scoundrel-like smile. I felt my insides quiver, and I hated myself for it.

“I do. I was never one to hide myself away with stacks of books...not that that is wrong...but I prefer action, looking into people’s eyes to see if they are lying. I prefer justice after living a life of injustice and cruelty. I like my job, Granger, I like it because I am proving that I am not Lucius Malfoy’s little monster son.”

The wily smiled had transformed into a smile of repressed sadness, and I had to look away. I
would now have to admit that I had been wrong about Malfoy.

Malfoy took a deep cleansing breath, and moved from the tree to my side. We began walking again, in silence.

Along the avenue of trees we came to a high stone wall. Beyond was a rolling green field with sheep and cattle grazing. The scene astonished me as it seemed the fields rolled on forever to the horizon. I could see no fences or barns, but to my far left, all I could see was trees. A literal forest of naked white trees flowed from the wall running behind me…and just at the edge of the trees I saw a structure, two stories with bluish smoke wafting from a chimney.

“That is where I live, Granger,” Malfoy said from my side, raising his hand to point.

Malfoy began walking along the wall, a worn earthen path marking the way, the cobbles having ended with the entrance through the wall. I stood still for a long moment, taking in the land, the animals, the trees, and the sublime essence of it all.

With a shout, Malfoy called for me to catch up, which I did, jogging along the path to walk behind him. As we neared the tree line, I saw that the structure was in fact a stable. Another opening in the wall, back toward the Manor provided me a view of another large garden, and another cobbled path.

The stables had not been abandoned, but had many horses inside stalls. A small paddock ran out from the back of the stables and into the trees, and as I turned to look back to the field, I saw two horses running and playing among the sheep. I wondered who took care of it all…surely not elves?

The second story of the stables was enclosed with a slate roof and windows very similar to those in my cottage. It was a handsome stable, and as we neared, the horses inside whinnied, and turned their faces to us. As a small girl, I loved horses although I lived in the suburbs and had only ridden once at a fair in the park.

Up some wooden stairs inside the stable, Malfoy let me into the house above.

“A couple hundred years ago, Malfoy Manor retained servants, thus the groom’s lodging. There used to be a servants dormitory not far from here…housing about sixty or so…and a dozen families. The dormitory was torn down during my great, great grandfather’s time to plant a hedge
Maze…” Malfoy said distantly, showing me from the vestibule of the entrance and into a small parlour, windows on either side, a built in padded bench rested below the front windows…the forest in the back and the fields in the front.

I was astounded. Against the back wall, between two windows was a large fireplace made of limestone, and large enough to use for Floo travel. Opposite the entrance, back into the house was a small kitchen, modernised. A door led to a bathroom which must have been magically enlarged…and behind all that, a set of sheer curtains at the very end of the house marked a makeshift bedroom. Behind the centralised bed, and set into the far wall, were wide French doors and a balcony providing a shaded view of the fields and the forest.

All in all, I was amazed. But it was not just the layout of the quarters, but what was inside. A worn leather couch rested before the fireplace, a worn red colour, a matching armchair off to one side of the fireplace. A gramophone rested near the front windows beside the bench, and stacks of records rested against the side of the built in furniture. Bookshelves adorned the walls, and prints of Muggle artwork. The plank floors were covered in old, frayed hook rugs, and as I moved toward the kitchen, I found stainless steel countertops, a sink, and cabinets with glass faces with old dishes inside.

The house was a combination of browns, reds, and greens, giving the place a rustic feel…like something you would see in a ‘country living’ magazine.

It was delightful.

“You live here?” I asked incredulously, moving to the couch before the low burning fireplace.

Malfoy shrugged, moving to the kitchen.

“Did you expect me to live in the Manor?”

I turned, sitting upon the arm of the couch, crossing my arms, watching Malfoy move about the kitchen to make coffee in a pot set upon an antique wood fire stove…the only bit of the kitchen that was incongruous. I suspected the stove was magically fitted however.

“You are Draco Malfoy…”
“And my father is still Lord Malfoy,” Malfoy growled as he lit the stove wandlessly. “I hate London, I wouldn’t live there. So when I came back, I moved here.”

I did not understand the logic of Malfoy’s statement, but accepted it. As I looked around again, I could see that Malfoy had lived in the house. You could always tell if a house is lived in by the way possessions are positioned. The dirty coffee cup on a small desk next to the gramophone, a piece of discarded clothing on the bed, as I could see it through the sheer curtains. I did not want to bother with the bathroom.

I rose, moving to the gramophone, looking down at the record on the turntable, a smile bending my lips. Nat King Cole… Letting my wand slip from its holster and into my hand, I tapped the gramophone. Gingerly lowering the needle, soft music wafted through the room, wrapping everything in warmth and sound.

I stepped back, glancing into the kitchen where Malfoy was watching me with his silver eye.

“You surprise me, Granger. After the Clash, I didn’t think someone like you would like Nat King Cole…”

I straightened, leveling my gaze. “I like many different things, Malfoy. Music depends on my mood, and I felt in the mood to listen to Nat King Cole.

I’m surprised someone like you would even know who he was…”

Malfoy frowned. My comment had been unfair.

“Because I’m a Pureblood?”

I looked away, opening my mouth to apologise.

“I listened to a lot of music in school. And when I went to America, I was introduced to Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Etta James…I can go on and on…but the fact is…I like it. But I also like David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, T-Rex, even the Ramones, the Buzzcocks…and a group called Devo.
Does that surprise you as well?"

I bit my lip. “But they’re all Muggle…”

Malfoy straightened, his hands on his slim hips. “So?”

I shook my head. It did not matter, not really. We did not speak for a long while, even after Malfoy passed me another cup of very strong coffee, him leaning against the counter and I perched on the arm of the couch. Nat King Cole crooned on, and his voice seemed to soothe the tension between us.

“Why a wyrm?” I asked when I felt it was safe to so.

Malfoy smirked, “I would have thought that was obvious, Granger.”

I took my turn to smirk. “Draco…”

Malfoy’s eye lifted to my face at the sound of his name, and I tried to ignore it.

“Draco the dragon. You couldn’t transform into a larger breed…so you picked the wyrm, a beast that is…” I trailed, my skin prickling under Malfoy’s gaze.

Nat King Cole kept singing.

“Do you think Potter will somehow change the past?” Malfoy asked distantly, staring into his coffee cup.

“Not if I can help it,” I answered, my conviction strong.

“So there isn’t anything you would go back and change, if you had the chance?”
I frowned. “I have had fantasies, of course…but, no. I may not be happy with the world as it is, but it is my world, a world I have lived to see. And I may not be happy with my life, but it is mine, and just because I’m in my late twenties does not mean that my life, my youth, or my drive to better myself are any less strong. I still have dreams I want to see come true…”

I felt very depressed all of a sudden. I meant every word I had said, but my life to that point had been lonely, and my dreams stashed away in some unreachable niche in my brain. I really did not know what my dreams were…or what I wanted.

You want love, acceptance, happiness, Miss Granger, how could have forgotten something so important?…Severus whispered.

“And what dreams are that, Granger?” Malfoy asked, his voice muted from the inside of his coffee cup.

I had hoped he would not have asked…

“Oh, the typical things, I guess.”

Malfoy hummed into his cup. Swallowing, he said, “You’ll have to define ‘typical’ for me, Granger, I’m not a girl.”

I rolled my eyes. He surely had been around enough girls in school to have an idea.

“A career, a lover or husband, a home, children, a family…happiness.”

Malfoy stared at me for a long while out of his one eye.

“All of those things are contingent to one’s happiness?”

I shrugged. “Sometimes, sometimes not. My mum always told me that we make our own happiness…someone else told me that not too long ago…” I trailed for a moment, hearing Severus laugh darkly. “But you just don’t make your own happiness, you have to work at it. Mum and Dad always worked together…in their career, in their home, and their love and family…and
together in supporting me every way conceivable.

That is happiness to me. Working together toward a common goal.”

Malfoy set his coffee cup down, his face darkened with some far away thought. To my eyes he seemed sad, and I pitied him for only a moment.

“Potter had that happiness…and he threw it away because he could not let go of the past. Now everything is fucked up…” Malfoy muttered.

I drank the rest of my coffee to hide the trembling of my lips. Malfoy was right. Harry had achieved a type of happiness when he defeated Voldemort. He had achieved happiness by marrying the girl he loved. He had achieved happiness by having the Weasleys, the most caring of people, as his family. And he had happiness because of the love of his friends. But, apparently, it had not been enough. And for that I could hate him.

I was lost in my thoughts, so lost that I did not realise that Malfoy stood over me. When his pale hand reached to pluck my coffee cup from my hands, I gasped. I licked my lips, watching him place it on the nearby counter, and then turn to look at me, a strange smile upon his face.

He reached out his hand, and I, for lack of knowing what else to do, took it. He pulled me gently to my feet, and walked me around the back of the couch to the space between it and the gramophone.

“I feel like doing something out of character, Granger. Ever have those moments?” he asked, still holding my hand gently as he turned to face me, the light streaming through the window to his right making his hair appear like strands of silver as well as making the scar that ran down his face not look nearly as angry as before.

I swallowed thickly. “From time to time.”

Malfoy smiled…the smile that made think there was something wrong with my internal organs.

“Do you dance, Granger?”
I blinked. “Wha…?”

“Dance?”

I nodded dumbly.

“You see, when I feel as if I’m getting too wrapped up in something…or there is something that frustrates me to the point of physical discomfort, I do something out of character…like this…”

Nat King Cole’s ‘L-O-V-E’ began…and suddenly I was in his arms, dancing a quick step. I gawked as we danced, my body bumping into the couch, he nearly bumping into the gramophone. He was laughing at me, the scar stretching to accommodate. But, he was laughing, and it seemed the strangest thing in the world to me.

Slowly, like a glacier melting to nothing, I began to smile. His hand holding mine, his arm about my waist and our haphazard dance steps…it was totally ridiculous.

But, it did not matter. I was laughing. It felt like I had not really laughed in ages. It was hard for me to believe that Draco Malfoy was dancing me around his parlour to one of Nat King Cole’s faster songs, throwing his head back to bark laughter. The man who held me could not be that boy who had called me Mudblood in Second Year. He could not be the boy who had enlarged my teeth in Fourth Year…

We were panting as we laughed, and suddenly the world began to dissolve. Harry Potter did not matter, the deaths did not matter, all that mattered was the silly dance and our laughter.

This was a facsimile of happiness…

And then, the song changed.

Malfoy pulled me closer so that my breasts brushed against his ribs. My cheek rested upon his heart and his arm twisted tighter about my waist.

‘Stardust’…perhaps my favourite song by Nat King Cole. A little over three minutes in length, but
As Malfoy danced with me, it seemed as if time had stopped.

I did not want to read into Malfoy’s actions. Dancing was a distraction for the insane world we had come to live in, and the situations that had entangled us. But he smelled safe and warm, and in his arms I could almost allow myself to forget my fears of what would eventually come. I wanted to feel his arms around me, I wanted to soak in his warmth and scent, and I wanted to believe that I would always be safe in that place, in that moment.

I sighed as Malfoy ran a large hand over my shorn hair to the nape of my neck in a motion that soothed me. We danced in time with the music, my left hand clutching the hard muscle of his shoulder, my right hand enveloped by his, my face inhaling the very essence of him.

I ached. It had been a very long time since I had felt that ache…the ache of longing.

Malfoy held me closer, as if trying to shield my entire body. He released my hand and ran it along my side, while I grasped at the back of his jumper. We were no longer dancing, but embracing, and I was not afraid of his touch.

Taking half a step back, Malfoy placed a finger under my chin, raising my face to look at him. I stared at the scar, his silver eye, and the ghost of a smile on his lips. Even scarred, he was exquisite, not handsome any longer, but attractive in an imperfect, almost ugly way. I pushed my own self-consciousness away and smiled in return, his finger warm under my chin.

The song ended, and the next came on, another slow song…and Malfoy bent his shoulders forward, his face coming to mine…and I shut my eyes slowly.

I had said out of anger that this would never happen again…but I wanted it. I wanted it so badly that my hands shook, and my body burned to be touched.

I felt his breath against my face, and the warmth of his lips…

“Master! Master!” a tiny voice squeaked, accompanied by a slight thumping against the floorboards.

The spell had been broken. Just as unexpectedly as it had begun, the moment of unexpectedness ended.
I opened my eyes to see that Malfoy was looking to a tiny figure standing near the door. He held me fast, but the finger under my chin slid away.

“Squeak, for fuck’s sake, quit jumping!”

The elf, the one I had seen interacting with the Malfoy family more than any of the others, stopped jumping and folded in on itself, staring at Malfoy with overlarge, frightened blue eyes.

“What is it?” Malfoy snarled.

“There be a Floo call, sir, to the Main House. Williamson wants a word, sir.”

I blinked, glancing at Malfoy’s profile. The spell had indeed been broken.

“Is that it?” Malfoy growled to the elf.

“Yes, sir. Squeak is sorry, sir…” the elf sobbed before popping away.

Malfoy sighed, and closed his eye, turning his face back to me. He squeezed my frame, which surprised me.

“Time to get back in character, I guess,” he muttered, opening his eye to look down at my face. “Could you take care of the gramophone, Granger? I can call Williamson from here. I closed the connection on the Floo earlier, and disabled the klaxon…” Malfoy sighed.

With another squeeze that made my eyes widen, Malfoy pulled away, leaving only a cold spot in my arms and against my body.

I moved automatically, shutting off the gramophone as Malfoy moved to the fireplace, stoking it with Tom Riddle’s wand. I felt my face crumple slightly, although I could not understand why…
Throwing a bit of Floo powder into the fire, Malfoy knelt down and called a few words into the flame. I moved to sit at the small desk, my legs suddenly unsteady and my face burning with a blush. I had tears in my eyes, and I knew I ached for the spell to continue, the dream not to end…

“Is Granger safe?”

I shook myself from my newly depressed state at the sound of Auror Williamson’s voice. From where I sat in Malfoy’s little house, I could not see the face of the man whom Malfoy had been conversing.

“She is with me. What’s happened Williamson?” Malfoy growled, clearly alarmed by Williamson’s tone of voice, and question.

I stood, using the light desk chair to steady myself.

“Potter…he caught Macmillan late last night…and somehow managed to extract information about Granger’s whereabouts.”

Malfoy swore, and I stepped nearer so that I could see Williamson’s face over Malfoy’s shoulder.

“Macmillan was under a Vow.”

Williamson nodded. “And now Macmillan is at St. Mungo’s fighting for his life. Potter somehow learned the information by literally extracting the magic of the Vow, and tore through Macmillan’s mind.

Malfoy…no one has ever done such a thing. Macmillan is lucky to be alive, but he’s never going to be the same, even if he does survive. I know he was one your best, but now Potter knows Granger is at Malfoy Manor.”

“He wouldn’t dare come here, Williamson. Potter may have learned how to dismantle a Vow, but there are centuries of wards and protections on this property that it would take ages to unravel!” Malfoy spat, his body quaking with anger.
“There’s more…” Williamson said, his expression grave.

Malfoy fell back on his haunches, running a hand over the right side of his face in a gesture of frustration.

“Tell me then…”

“He’s also broken into a vault at Gringotts, weeks ago, but we’re just learning about it now.”

Weeks ago? Before or after his attack on us outside Hogsmeade?

“The goblins were not going to report it since it was a vault under his parent’s name. However, what he took from the vault is what is important.”

“What?”

“A cloak.”

Malfoy guffawed roughly. “A cloak? So wha-?”

“His invisibility cloak,” I inserted, moving around the couch to sit just to the left of Malfoy. “Merlin…when exactly was it taken from the vault?” I asked Williamson, whose face flickered a hint of surprise, and then amusement.

“Three days before the razing of Hogsmeade.”

Damn. The ambush on the lane…it made sense. Malfoy had sensed Harry, but could not see him. I had not seen Harry either. At some point, Harry must have doffed the cloak while we were in the trees.

“Why didn’t the goblins detain him when he was in Gringotts?” Malfoy asked with an air of annoyance.
“You know how they are. Voldemort could have walked into the bank, and as long as he had a key, the goblins would take him to a vault,” Williamson said with a bit of an ironic laugh.

Malfoy and Williamson spoke longer, but I had retreated to an inner chamber of my mind, a chamber where Severus was waiting.

He has the three Hallows, now all he has to do is ‘conquer death,’ whatever that really means… Severus snarled.

“It just strengthens his chances on changing the timeline,” I said, only my lips moving, but no actual sound coming out for Malfoy or Williamson to hear.

It would never be as simple as allowing him to be immortal, would it? He wants to resurrect someone, at some point in time. With all three Hallows he would never have to fear losing his own life in the pursuit of changing the time line… Severus said, calmer.

“Yes. By being ‘death-proof’ if for some reason he fails in his task, he can go back over and over, resurrecting one or many people. Or, killing one or many people…”

You don’t think he would try to save me would you? I don’t want to be saved, I rather like where I am at the moment… Severus drawled.

“In my head? Don’t I get a say about it all?”

No. You have a task you must perform, Miss Granger. I am here to help you… Severus whispered.

“Who put you there?”

Who do you think?

I rolled my eyes as Severus fell silent again. I did not want to think about his last question. All that mattered was Harry having the Deathly Hallows, and how he would use them. Just as with
Grindelwald, and his terrible plans to subjugate the world, Harry’s plans, or what I suspected of them, seemed just as horrific. And with Harry having the three Hallows only supported Malfoy’s theory that Harry did not care about the consequences of time travel… It frightened me.

“I have someone here demanding to speak with Granger.”

I stiffened at the sound of my name, and looked to the fire and to Williamson’s face.

“Where are you, Williamson?”

Williamson tutted, “Confidential. This Floo call will not be traced, not that I’m worried you would do something like that Malfoy…but let’s just say I’m not in Britain.”

I blinked, and cocked my head.

“Anyway, he’s been quite patient, so let me put him on…”

I slid from the couch to kneel next to Malfoy, then scooted a bit closer to the fire. A face appeared, and I cried out, pressing my hands to my mouth.

“Hey, Hermione…”

I could not believe it…Ron…

“How are you?”

Ron’s face was such a comfort, but I could tell that he was barely containing his anger and his concern. His hair was longer, much like Bill’s, pulled back in a ponytail. Crimson stubble ran along his jaw, and his eyes were just as blue as I remembered. Ron had grown into a handsome man, and I felt an itch of regret begin deep in my belly.

Tears were streaming down my face, and slowly I let my hands fall from my mouth so that Ron could see my trembling lips.
“I’m…I’m fine…”

“I know what’s been going on, Hermione, you don’t have to lie,” Ron said gruffly, his face becoming stony.

I cleared my throat of tears, and looked down to my knees.

“I’m just glad he didn’t…didn’t…” Ron trailed.

“I know,” I answered. “I’m alive. And I’m going to stop him, Ron.”

Ron took a breath, and nodded sharply.

“I just wish I could be there, Hermione…but Mum…she’s been ill ever since George…”

Tears streaked my cheeks anew.

“You know, Hermione…” Ron began, but hesitated, his eyes finding mine. “If you have to…kill him. He won’t stop…you know he won’t…”

I bit my lip roughly.

“I don’t know all of what is going on, but I have an idea. And if there is any chance that I’m right…you won’t be able to catch him.

Get it, Hermione?”

I did not move. I could not begin explaining what I thought Harry was trying to accomplish, it would take too long… But Ron was right. Harry was not going to have a change of heart. The ‘Harry’ Ron and I loved was gone.
“And don’t let Malfoy get in your way either.”

I blinked. Apparently, Ron could not see Malfoy kneeling just by me.

“I do not like the idea of you being with him, Hermione. But I don’t have a choice in the matter, do I?

And I know you…you’re not going to leave this alone even if I begged you to…

I just can’t believe that Harry…” Ron trailed, his voice cracking. “What he did to you is unforgivable, luv. Not just for Ginny or George…but I would kill Harry for what he did to you…”

Ron choked, and quickly cleared his throat, turning his head to look back at something on his side of the connection, and nodded.

“I have to go.

Hermione, remember what I said. And when this is over, I’ll come for you if you want. The thought of you living with the Malfoys just makes me sick to my stomach…especially that git Draco…and I don’t care if he’s listening.”

Ron’s face turned outward in the direction of Malfoy, but could not see him.

“And Malfoy, if I find out you have done anything to Hermione, by Merlin, I will take that other pretty eye. You had better protect her!” Ron growled.

I felt Malfoy’s laughter, and I had an urge to elbow him in the face.

“Hermione, luv…be careful. I know its silly to say, but do. Mum and dad send their love…and…I love you too, Hermione.”
I nodded, overlooking Ron’s nervous words lest Malfoy tease me about it later. “Be safe, Ron.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, Hermione…”

I nodded again, and suddenly the Floo connection was severed and Ron’s face disappeared in puff of green smoke. I wiped the tears on my cheeks, and sat on the floor before the low fire. I wrapped my arms about myself tightly and closed my eyes.

I heard Malfoy rise and move to the gramophone, changing the record. I hugged myself tighter as a low song began. I recognised that it was a record of American country-western music by the sound of a steel guitar, and part of me was astounded at Malfoy’s choice of music.

Part of me was thinking: how the hell did Draco Malfoy, Muggle-hater of an age, decide to play Patsy Cline’s ‘A Church, a Courtroom and Goodbye?’ The man was an enigma.

Slowly, I unfurled my body, moving to stand. As I turned, I found Malfoy in the kitchen again, making more coffee. I wiped my face once more, and moved so that I was near the curtains to the bedroom, leaning against the wall separating the kitchen and the bathroom.

“You realise now that Harry has all three Hallows, our situation has become dire?”

Malfoy was humming along with the next track, an upbeat song with Patsy Cline’s American yodel.

“We have got to go to London. We have to secure…or destroy the Time-Turners.”

Malfoy continued humming as he refilled our coffee cups.

“And now Harry knows where I am, and who has been protecting me…we will have to be disguised…”

Malfoy took up his coffee cup and drank, leaning back against the countertop.
“Are you listening to a word I’m saying, Malfoy?” I huffed.

Lowering his cup, Malfoy peered at me with his functioning eye. “I’m not deaf, Granger. And yes, I understand what you are saying.

If Potter tries to enter the boundaries of the Malfoy lands, even the Deathly Hallows won’t save him. The enchantments that protect this place are probably as old as the Hallows, if not older. It is definitely older than Hogwarts, so I’m not too worried about that.

As for your other concerns, I do not see a problem with what I proposed before. Floo to the Department of Mysteries under Polyjuice, do what we need to do, and leave. Once Potter learns he cannot use the devices, maybe he’ll get sloppy…and then…we catch him.”

I sighed. I somehow doubted it would be that easy. Actually, I was quite sure it would not be that easy. Harry was not stupid; mad, perhaps, but not stupid.

Destroying the Time-Turners…Merlin, I knew I could face time in Azkaban for destroying something so important to the Ministry. There were so few left, and manufacturing a new one was an art reserved for an unnamed and unknown few. The two larger Time-Turners were kept separate due to the amount of time ‘turned’ at each rotation of the hourglass…those would be the ones Harry would seek in any case… The larger Time-Turners were considered masterpieces of chronology, dangerous, and kept in a strong box of goblin manufacture.

I bit my lip as I watched Malfoy sip his coffee with a carefree attitude that made me want to punch him.

“So, the Weasel still loves you. Who would have thought?” Malfoy mumbled into his coffee cup.

I huffed, I knew to expect this, “That is not what he meant, Malfoy. As a friend…he loves me. We have been friends for years, so it is only natural that we love each other.”

“Ah, so you admit you love him…”

He was trying to rile me.
“Love is a multi-faceted concept, Malfoy. I’m sorry you have not grown to realise that.”

I pushed off the wall to move into the parlor, to the gramophone, shutting it off. I then moved to the window to look out onto the rolling green fields and the white dots of sheep grazing.

“Did you ever fall in love with someone, Malfoy?” I asked, slightly surprised at myself.

“A few times, but it was always agony…so I stopped falling in love,” he said from the kitchen, still drinking his coffee.

“That’s a shame,” I whispered, stepping closer to the window so that my breath fogged the diamond shaped panes, much like those in my own cottage.

“What was that?” Malfoy called.

“Nothing,” I returned.

I rested my forehead against the window, relishing the coolness against my skull.

I felt as if everything was futile. Stopping Harry…stopping the feelings, albeit muddled and confusing, I had for the ridiculous man staring at me from the kitchen. I did not know what I wanted, and it seemed my body did not know either.

I shut my eyes and let the cool glass suffice my skin and bones. I soon heard the patter of raindrops on the window and the roof above, and when I opened my eyes, I could see the clouds billowing and breaking to produce a violent spring shower. I straightened, removing my forehead from the glass, and took a step back…falling against Malfoy’s body. I had not heard him move.

“Ah…I guess we’ll have to wait the rain out before going back to the Manor…” he sighed, his hands moving to take hold of my shoulders, steadying me.

I frowned. We had wands. We could Transfigure anything into an umbrella, or cast a Charm to keep dry… I knew Malfoy was smart enough to realise that, but I felt he had some hidden agenda by keeping us in the groom’s quarters a while longer. So, I said nothing, but nodded slowly, my
skin prickling at the warmth of his hands around my shoulders.

“Lunch…lunch first and then some more ‘out of character’ fun? I need the distraction,” he suggested softly, his breath warm against my short hair.

I said nothing, my brow furrowing. Focusing my eyes, I could just see part of Malfoy’s reflection in the window as the light outside was obscured by the growing storm. He was staring back at me.

“Over analyzing will only exhaust you, Granger. We have a plan of action, we will stick to it… that’s all that can be done for now,” he whispered with a hint of reassurance.

I wanted to believe that everything would work out. Remove the devices of our possible destruction; the problem would be solved…wouldn’t it? I bit my lip, and lowered my eyes to the windowsill. I had said I would stop Harry, but what would that mean? Would I really have to resort to killing my best friend? Surely with what Ron had said, he would not hesitate to kill Harry if need be. At any rate, Harry would die, whether he was caught or not. It did not matter if he had the Hallows…just like the story of the Three Brothers, the Hallows could be taken, stolen…

The pressing of lips to the nape of my neck shocked me out of my thoughts, and I forcefully jumped away from Malfoy, whirling about to stare at him with perhaps the silliest expression on my face.

“What are you doing?” I asked darkly.

“Something out of character. Diverting your thoughts away from whatever place you were…”

I blinked, my brow furrowing, my lips turning into a frown. “What is wrong with you, Malfoy?”

My words came out strangely, rough and hateful. I had not meant to sound so…so terrible.

Malfoy straightened, his arms crossing before his chest, the dim light filtering in through the window behind me making his face and his scar seem to appear more hideous.

“There is nothing wrong with me, Granger. I might ask the same question of you.”
I shook my head. “You want to mock me, Malfoy. I will not play this game with you.”

With another turn, I moved to the door leading down into the stables.

“Where are you going, Granger?” Malfoy called, his voice seeming to penetrate the walls of my chest.

“To the Manor. There are more important things to do than to endure your attempts at diversion. I simply do not find it amusing,” I growled. I wanted to continue saying that I was not willing to put myself as part of that diversion, but I was more intent on being alone…to my thoughts.

I nearly ran down the wooden steps into the stables, causing the horses inside to whinny at me. Just outside the open stable, the rain fell in torrents, pouring off the eaves of the stable roof to form deep ruts of erosion in the dirt. Casting my eyes about, I found an old canvas oat sack, and slipping my wand from my sleeve, I Transfigured it into a suitable umbrella. With another bit of wand work, my leather boots were rubber galoshes, and I pulled my skirt up to my knees, tying the linen so that it would not drag in the mud of the field.

I set off, the wind whipping my umbrella, gusts of rain dampening my face. The rain was icy, the wind wickedly cold, but I trudged through the mucky field to the path along the wall that would lead me back to the warmth of the Manor’s kitchens. I ignored the first gap in the wall, since I did not know where it led, and moved as best I could to the next gap and to the arboretum I had walked through only an hour or so before.

My galoshes slipped in the muddy soil of the path, and several times I nearly tumbled to the ground. I was panting, the walls of icy wind hindering my progress, and eventually, the wind took my umbrella.

I paused to watch the umbrella be battered upon the wind and then blow over the wall and out of sight. I sighed, wiping my rain soaked face. My luck had not been very good as of late, and I wondered if it ever had been in my favour.

Each step was a pain, as the mud weighed down my feet and the wind continued to assault my body. I tried to cheer myself with thoughts of a hot bath, some hot soup, and maybe a nice nap in a warm bed.
When my skirt came loose of the knots I had made, I had to walk with the hem pulled up in my hands, cutting down on my ability to affectively balance myself on the path. I was not surprised when my left foot slipped on the path, and I found myself rolling down a low hill into the field. I was cursing all the while, interally and externally. I did not roll far, but I was sure I managed to sprain my left ankle catching the toe of my boot on a large clod of dirt. Lying face down in the field, I huffed a roar of frustration, the rain pounding against my back and my now soiled and muddy clothing.

And despite everything, I began crying as if I had not cried in decades. Of course, I had cried quite a bit in the past few months, and I wondered why I had suddenly become so emotional and so silly.

I rolled onto my back, arms outstretched, crying as loudly as I could, hating my life and wishing I had another.

I was the world’s biggest fool. I knew so much about so many things, but I knew so little about much else. Harry Potter had nearly killed me, twice over. The world I had come to call home was falling apart. I had shunned Harry and Ron although I loved them more than I ever could admit. And at that moment, a part of me had and was still responding to Draco Malfoy as someone more than an annoying little boy who had called me terrible names. I knew nothing of friendship, of emotion, and most of all love.

As the raindrops pelted against my face, I willed Severus to say something witty to break my depression, but he remained silent.

Against my soaking, sodden back I felt the pounding of hooves, I ignored it. If I were to trampled by Malfoy livestock, it would be a fittingly silly death, but one that I would not mind in the least.

However, the pounding of hooves stopped short of me, and sound of boots squishing into the soggy field made me wince.

“For fuck’s sake, Granger…what the hell is wrong with you?” Malfoy’s gruff and angry voice sounded above me. He must have been leaning over me for I could no longer feel raindrops on my face.

I opened my eyes to find a seething, and very wet Malfoy staring down at me with his silver left eye. His hair was plastered to his head, and a riding cloak dripped onto my left hand. As I stared up at him, however, the expression of anger began to drain from his marred face…to an expression that made my heart quiver.
Kneeling down, Malfoy gathered me up against him as if I were a discarded cloak on the ground. His hands ran over my face and head as if to ascertain that I had not bashed my skull, then over my shoulders and arms. As he did this, he pressed his wet lips against my forehead, then his rough cheek as if to determine a fever. I allowed him to kiss my face, too wet and too cold to stop him.

However, when he lifted me to my feet, I fell, unable to place any weight up on my left ankle. Malfoy grumbled something indistinct, and lifted me up into his arms. Naturally, I wrapped my arms about his neck and pressed my face against his damp shoulder. He carried me to the horse he had ridden from the stables, and setting me on my good foot, he mounted, pulling me up as well so that I sat across his lap and low horn of the saddle.

I felt like some heroine in a Jane Austen novel, and I laughed into Malfoy’s neck. He stiffened for a moment, wrapping his arms tighter around me, his left hand grasping the reigns. Turning the mount about, I could see that I had walked a good distance from the stables, and if had I not slipped and rolled, I would have been only a few paces from the gap in the wall.

Malfoy goaded the horse with a light nudge to the beast’s flanks, and I gasped as suddenly I felt as if I were flying forward, about to fall. My experiences with flying on a broom came to the forefront my mind… I did not like flying, and I suddenly did not like riding. I clung to Malfoy as tightly as I could, shutting my eyes and hiding my face in the side of his neck. The jarring gallop of the horse made my ankle hurt worse, and I wondered idly if I had broken it. That would have been my luck… After nearly dying after Harry’s assault, wasting away after a covertly placed curse, a broken ankle should not have bothered me. But, I was miserable, depressed, wet, muddy, hungry, and cold. I had lost control of my world…

Malfoy steered the horse into the shelter of the stables, and with a gracefully and practiced move, he slid off the saddle with me pressed tight against him. Whispering to the horse, Malfoy carried me up the stairs and back into the dry warmth of the groom’s quarters.

He kissed my forehead before kneeling down before me to remove my Transfigured galoshes. I sat on the edge of a the tub in the magically enlarged bathroom of Malfoy’s private quarters. When he pulled off my the left boot, I whimpered, and then froze as he lifted the foot up, pressing a warm kiss to top of my ankle.

The ankle was swollen double its normal size, and as Malfoy moved the joint, I bit my lip. It was not broken, but severely sprained. Malfoy rose, and moved to a small cabinet near the door, pulling out a large fluffy towel, unfurling and spreading across it my shoulders. He then extracted a small kit, opening it to pull out a phial of pale violet liquid.
I said nothing as he knelt before me again, pulling my foot up to rest the heel upon his knee. Drawing Severus’ wand from his sleeve, he whispered a soft incantation, which seemed to numb the pain in my joint. I wondered why he had not used the other wand.

Then Malfoy uncorked the phial and poured a bit of the violet liquid into his left palm. Rubbing his palms together, he began to massage the oily violet liquid into my ankle. Almost immediately the swelling went down, but bruises took the place of the distended skin.

“After a few hours, you’ll be able to walk normally…” Malfoy said softly as the liquid was completely absorbed into my skin.

I blinked slowly, suddenly very tired, but still very cold.

Gently lowering my foot to the floor, Malfoy rose, replacing the phial in the kit from the place he had extracted it. At the door he turned to me, his face impassive.

“Take a bath, Granger. You have mud caked in what little hair you have…”

Malfoy slowly shut the door, and I was alone in the bathroom, sitting dumbly on the edge of the small tub…a regular tub, in my opinion, deep porcelain with clawed feet on the bottom. My own bathtub in the cottage was only slightly larger. I sat for several moments, my brow furrowing in confusion.

He had kissed me, at least three times, and I could still feel the impression of his lips on my foot, forehead…and the back of my neck. Odd, I thought, and very ‘out of character.’ Was this real?

When I stood, I found that there still a small bit of pain in my left foot, but not so severe as I moved to undress, finding that my clothes were literally stained with mud and heavier with rain. I dropped the wet garments on the floor, not caring about them for the time being. I slid my right arm from my wand holster and placed the leather on the edge of the sink, gazing at my reflection in the mirror above. Indeed, I had mud caked about my shorn head, but mud streaked my face and neck as well. I sneered at my reflection and moved to the tub.

It took several moments to draw the bath, but when I was able to sink down into the steamy water, scented with a combination of sage and citrus, I sighed, my voice echoing through the small room. The cold that had permeated my bones was replaced with comforting warmth.
Pulling the curtain about the bath to keep in the steam, I ducked my head under the water and scrubbed. Emerging, I found, to my surprise, a bottle on the edge of the tub, one that had not been there before. Shampoo…Merlin, it seemed like ages since I had to use shampoo.

I also found soap and a cloth, which had seemed to appear from thin air. I tried not to think too much about the spontaneous appearances of spicy scented toiletries, and instead scrubbed at my face and limbs until the water was a bit murky.

Rising from the bath, pushing back the curtain, I found towels stacked on the floor just atop a bathmat. I also found that my clothing was gone from the floor. Wrapping the towels about me, I glanced at the bathroom door, which was still closed. My clothing gone, I moved to my wand, ready to Transfigure the towels if I needed to, but I found a stack of clothing resting upon a small table next to the sink.

Drying myself, I moved to the clothing, eyes narrowed. I pulled the first article up and eyed it suspiciously. It was a soft black camisole. Next was a pair of black lace underwear, cut in a manner that I did not wear…bikini cut, I believed it was called. I found a black blouse, a knit top with mother of pearl buttons down the front and quarter length sleeves. Lastly was a black skirt, much like the one I had worn only moments before, but of a softer linen, with layers that fell at different lengths to ones ankles.

I dressed with a sigh, wondering what had happened to my bra…but as I donned the camisole, I found that it was Charmed so that I would not need the uncomfortable contraption. In fact, after I was fully dressed, I marveled at how soft and comfortable the clothes were, even the lacy underwear that was almost risqué compared to what I owned.

I strapped my holster back to my inner forearm and gazed into the mirror again. My hair was still too short to be considered in the least bit feminine, and I promised myself that I would Charm it soon…possibly the next day…

But as I moved to the bathroom door, I knew I had to consider the man waiting on the other side. Why had he brought me to this little abode? Why had he tried to divert my attentions? Why had he kissed me? Surely there was some ulterior motive. A Malfoy was not a Malfoy unless they had an ulterior motive, I had learned that long ago.

Opening the door onto the small parlour, I found that a table had been placed before the fire, the couch pushed back. Upon the table were two places, two chairs, and two bowls of steaming cream based soup. My mouth watered, literally. Without a proper breakfast, and so much emotion and exertion, food was suddenly the only thought in my head.
I limped to the nearest chair, grasping the back of the cane and wicker, staring down at the soup. It was potato soup with celery, some herbs and cheese. A loaf of hot brown bread rest upon a small cutting board, and glasses of rested empty, waiting to be used.

“Sit, Granger,” Malfoy’s voice called from the kitchen.

I did not bother to acknowledge him, sitting down and eating with no preamble. I was either very hungry or the soup was very good. I did not care about table manners as Malfoy sat across from me, cutting a slide of bread for himself. I did not even look at him as I gnawed on a chunk of hearty bread, and drank from the glass, which magically filled with milk…exactly what I had wanted.

When I had my fill, I wiped my mouth daintily with a napkin, and pushed away from the table to limp to the window. It was still pouring rain, and the sky seemed darker than ever.

“Can’t we just take the Floo back to the Manor?” I asked without turning.

Malfoy was still eating, but I could feel his eye on my back.

“No, I do not have this Floo connected to the Manor.”

I frowned, that statement did not make sense to me.

“It is silly to let a bit of rain keep one from moving about here,” I muttered.

“We can go anytime you’d like Granger. If you hadn’t fallen and sprained your ankle, we could have returned then… But like a fool you ran out into the rain without thinking. We could have ridden back, made quick work of it.”

I rolled my eyes.

“And now you’re here, you’ve been fed, washed. You’ll need to put your ankle up for a bit, and perhaps tonight we can go back to the Manor.”
Malfoy had said this calmly, but with an air of authority that made me suddenly uncomfortable.

I wrapped my arms about myself, the sight of the rain pounding against the windows and my distance from the fire making me cold. Window blew against the stable house walls, and behind the house I could hear the mournful creak of the trees. If only I were warmer, I would have felt comfortable, and perhaps believed I was home in my own little cottage.

I paid no mind to the sound of Malfoy behind me, or the sound of moving furniture. My stomach was full, my mind exhausted with fruitlessly trying to solve so many questions about the world I lived in, and my ankle sore and uncomfortable.

When Malfoy bid me to relax on the faded red couch, which he had moved closer to the fire, I complied without a word. I was sleepy now my belly was full, and the shock of the cold rain and the twisting of my ankle made me content to lounge across the couch. With heavy eyes, I watched as Malfoy Conjured a pillow to place under my left ankle, propping it up comfortably. Then, pulling a pale green throw blanket from the back of the armchair to my far right, he spread he soft velour over me.

When Malfoy seemed satisfied that I was comfortable, my head resting on the malleable leather arm of the couch, my body covered with the throw, and my ankle sufficiently propped up, he took a seat in the armchair, resting in booted feet upon the hearth. I sighed softly, thankful for the modicum of comfort allowed me, but a part of my mind was still functioning.

With my ever questioning nature, that infuriated most people, but was one of my intrinsic characteristics, I asked: “Why did you bring me here, Malfoy?”

I had not meant to sound so taciturn after I had angry fled and subsequently played the fool and injured myself.

“I thought a change of scenery would be nice. Mother actually suggested it. She could tell that the Manor was not to your usual taste, and that you spent most of your time in the kitchens. Father would call it disgraceful...he is quite proud of the Manor. But Mother grew up in a smaller home in London near her cousin Sirius. She has told me many times that the sprawling space and rooms of the Manor never really felt like a home to her,” Malfoy said softly.

I could not see his face from my place on the couch, but I could hear in his voice that he too felt the Manor was not a proper home. Living around so much artifice was an acquired taste, I assumed.
Lucius had always lived in the Manor, so he knew nothing of the close, familiar warmth of a space just for oneself.

“You did not mind that I intrude upon your space?” I asked, my voice distant as my mind begged to be released from such thoughts and to sleep.

I heard Malfoy move against the leather of the armchair. “I rarely have company, Granger. And if it had to be you…well…” he trailed.

I was not offended, I was too sleepy to be offended.

“Why did you kiss me?” I asked softly.

I heard Malfoy sigh softly, and a part of my mind awoke from a doze and I felt more awake.

“It was very out of character, and there was no whiskey about…” I continued. “Did I miss the notice that today was to be ‘out of character’ day for Draco Malfoy?”

He chuckled softly, and I closed my eyes, the light from the fire tingeing the backs of my eyelids a comforting orange and red.

“My life had changed so profoundly that I could no longer recognise it, or myself. I had changed… Harry had changed me. I was afraid, and it had been years since I had last been afraid of anything. I was confused, not just about Harry and his actions, but by Draco Malfoy and his seemingly warm kindness and his harsh mien. The man was an enigma, while Harry seemed to be as simple to read
as a word on a page.

Somehow, I had allowed myself to think of Draco Malfoy, and his family, as safe, when ten years before I would have thought the opposite. I knew that they had their ulterior motives, but I felt that there was no danger for me in those designs. The Malfoys had been slighted, abused, ignored, ridiculed, and used. Of course, their own actions had led to such a state, but it seemed to me that the Malfoys were never really evil, and thus happy to aid someone like me as well as using their care with me to solidify themselves in a position of power, a position they had lost after the War.

The Malfoys would never willingly let me come to harm, they had proven this fact many times. And I suddenly counted myself fortunate. The Weasleys would have done everything they could to protect me, if possible, and as much as I loved the Weasleys, their pure heartedness would not be as protective. The Malfoys had minds much like my own, scheming, logical, multi-dimensional. The Malfoys planned for every eventuality, and did not shy away from the ugliest of truths.

No matter how I felt about the Malfoys, especially the Malfoy heir, I really would have been a fool to leave their protection. And as far as I knew of the Malfoys, they had been kind and truthful with me. I was still surprised with Malfoy senior and his candidness about ‘The Hanged Man.’ After everything, slipping Tom Riddle’s diary to Ginny and the Department of Mysteries, Lucius Malfoy never apologised, but atoned himself by being helpful, civil, and truthful. The man was not some evil patriarch, and I could see that much of that façade had dropped away the few times I overheard him speaking with his son and wife.

Voldemort had made us all behave in ways contrary to our true nature...

I napped, contented in my comfort. However, as I lay halfway between waking and dreaming, a voice spoke over me, soft tones almost caressing my cheeks. The words were spoken with such delicacy and precision that I smiled as I began to let my mind interpret the words.

My feet had been moved, so that both heels were resting upon something harder than the pillow Malfoy had Conjured, and occasionally, a soft trailing tickle would run along the tops of my feet, or over the tips of my toes.

“…Two wax candles stood lighted on the table, and two on the mantelpiece; basking in the light and heat of a superb fire, lay Pilot—Adele knelt near him. Half reclined on a couch appeared Mr. Rochester, his foot supported by the cushion; he was looking at Adele and the dog: the fire shone full on his face. I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw—yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonised in squareness with his physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic
sense of the term—broad chested and thin flanked, though neither tall nor graceful…”’ I opened my eyes and blinked, raising a hand to wipe at my face. I realised that candles had been lit in the room, and that through the windows on either side of the fireplace, all I could see was the darkness of night. I felt like I had not napped long, but apparently the sun had set and night was upon me. A hand moved over my feet again, calloused fingers brushing over the softness of my ankles. “…Mr. Rochester must have been aware of the entrance of Mrs. Fairfax and myself; but it appeared he was not in the mood to notice us, for he never lifted his head as we approached…”’ Malfoy read, his left hand holding a small, battered tome close to his left eye, his elbow resting on the arm of the couch so that his head was slightly turned to the light. I studied his face for a moment, blinking in confusion. He was smiling slightly as he read, his voice taking a slight bit of change when he read the dialogue. By the practiced manner in which he read, I was certain he was well acquainted with ‘Jane Eyre,’ but why he was acquainted with a Muggle written book was a question I did not want to ask. Why did he like Muggle music? For the same reason he liked Muggle books, I assumed.

“She reminds me of you,” he said softly lowering the book from his face.

I swallowed, “Jane Eyre?”

He had known I had been awake, but had made no prior motion to acknowledge it. Malfoy ran his fingers up and down the slope of my right foot, and it tickled slightly.

“A little pixie of a woman, independent, passionate, and moral. Even with your hair so short, you are even more like some fairy thing…” Malfoy whispered, closing the book around a finger in his left hand and lowering to set it on the wide arm of the couch.

I smirked. “And you are very much like Edward Rochester…taciturn, abrupt, and not in the least bit handsome…you don’t have a mad wife in the attic of the Manor, do you?”

Malfoy threw his head back and barked laughter. I smiled.

“No…no wife. And I’m not ugly, Granger.”

I quirked my mouth. “All you need is the dark hair and complexion, and you would be very much like a Mr. Rochester.”

“I may be blinded, but I’m not crippled. It is you who is crippled at the moment…the circumstances of which are as silly as your naiveté, Miss Granger.”
My jesting smile faded, and I moved to sit up on the couch, but did not extract my feet, which had been resting on Malfoy’s right thigh.

“I do not care much for your ‘out of character’ attitude, Malfoy. It makes you the silly one. And I will assert again…it mocks me. I do not like being mocked, or given attentions which are false.

Besides, you hate me. Why aren’t you scrubbing yourself down? How can you bear to touch me?”

There was only a bit of venom in my voice. I was daring him to honestly answer me, not reprimanding him.

Malfoy’s face darkened, and he removed his hand from caressing my small feet. I took the opportunity to pull my toes under the throw, curling up on the couch, staring willfully at Malfoy, awaiting his answer.

“‘Hate’ is reserved for those who have harmed me and my family, Granger. And as far as I know you have neither harmed me or mine. At one time I resented you, and I ridiculed you by any means I could find. But hate you? No. Disliked you, naturally.

The sentiments I had for you in school were brought on by my own resentments and jealousies. And when school was no more, I let my resentment and jealousy fade. Now I am your protector, your keeper…and I would be remiss in my job if I should not keep you.

Believe me, Granger, when I say that I feel no remorse for much I have done in my life. The only regret I have, and always will have is this…”

Malfoy pulled up his left sleeve, turning toward me. Pulling away the wand holster holding Severus’ wand, I could just see the discolouration and scarring of the Dark Mark. Even when Malfoy was wrapped in bandages I had seen that Mark, and had not thought about it, although I knew he had taken it sometime before or during out Sixth Year.

Replacing the holster and pulling the sleeve of his jumper back down, Malfoy settled his arm on the couch again.
“Every action, often times pre-planned, has been deliberate. There are times, of course, where I lose control of myself and do something most people would regret, but I regret nothing.

So, you ask me why I’m not ‘scrubbing myself,’ I will tell you.

I can bear to touch you because you are not a leper, and I’m not going to die from touching a Muggle-born. I cannot understand why you place such a marked difference between us…who is the prejudiced one?”

I lowered my eyes to the pale green throw across my lap. Malfoy was right. I had been the one constantly bringing up the issue of blood purity, I was the jaded one.

“How different, Granger. I am not a good man, I am not in the least bit moral, charitable, or forgiving. In fact, I have been told on more than one occasion that I am unbearable as company…”

He was smirking, and I did not know whether to take him for his word or ignore everything he had just said.

“...And to answer your question...the one you asked earlier when you were dropping off to sleep.

I kissed you because I felt like it. Little childlike kisses for someone who had been acting like a child.”

I blinked at him, my mouth opened to retort, but the mischievous grin on his face, that scoundrel-like smile stopped me short, and my heart gave a painful beat against my ribs. He was teasing me by phrasing his words with a twist of the truth. And I wanted to hide my blushing face.

“I can take you back to the Manor now, Granger. The rain has stopped, and surprisingly it has warmed with the clouds so low and the wind gone.”

I sighed and nodded. I wanted to go back to the Manor, to escape Malfoy for the night and sort out my own feelings. I wanted to remove myself from the gaze of his one argent eye and curl my thoughts inward. And I knew that I would have to begin to prepare myself for a travel to the Ministry in London.
The danger was not over.

Malfoy held my hand as we walked through the field, his wand lit before us, his feet sure on the muddy path. My ankle felt well enough to walk, and the air was warm just as Malfoy had said. He did not speak to me as we moved into the arboretum, the rain having knocked off quite a bit of bloom from the trees.

Just as before, walking through Hogsmeade, Malfoy’s hand enveloped my own, and I felt so like a child. His comments about me being like a child had stung me. And suddenly I wanted him to see me as a woman.

I was attracted to Malfoy, although parts of me did not want to admit it. The attraction had much to do with his protection of me…a silly romantic notion that was a cliché in so many of the books like the gothic ‘Jane Eyre’ or the works of Jane Austen published earlier. The attraction also had much to do with his character, as taciturn and sarcastic as it was. Malfoy had always, ever since our schooldays, been able to mentally and verbally compete with me. He kept my mind moving with questions as well as ways to manufacture new little derisions in his honour.

I wanted him to see me as a woman, and not as a child or a schoolgirl. I knew, however, that I did little to make him see anymore of me than that. I was the Fool. I knew nothing about the love for a man. I was not a virginal innocent, but when it came to passion, I was lacking. And Malfoy was darkly passionate. He had called me passionate, but it was for my work and all the little worlds I had created for myself, none of which had anything to do with love or companionship. I had created a closed world for myself, and as we walked into the garden just outside the lit windows of the kitchen, I knew I had crippled myself from experiencing so many things.

Malfoy’s plan to enter the Department of Mysteries was hindered slightly when we learned just before our departure from the Manor that the Floo to the Ninth Level was blocked. Alastor Gumboil had decided due to growing concerns of security that the Department of Mysteries was to be strictly monitored into who came and went. From a tactical point of view, Gumboil’s decision was not unexpected, however, it put a hitch in Malfoy’s plan.

My security was his immediate concern, and the decision to Floo into the Atrium made moving through the Ministry a bit more perilous.

We stood in the foyer of the Manor, Malfoy speaking to Williamson through one of the fireplaces
while Narcissa fussed with applying a cloak about my shoulders. Only the night before Narcissa had approached me about wearing some suitable clothing to go to the Ministry. While I had worked at the Ministry, I had worn sensible clothing under my Unspeakable robes, a pair of dress slacks and a simple blouse. When I had had long hair, I usually had it pulled back in a bun or plaited down my back, but as it was, I had no hair to style.

“Here, Hermione, take these phials of Polyjuice and slip them into the pocket of your frock,” Narcissa whispered as Malfoy’s voice rose with a hint of anger arguing with Williamson.

I blinked at Narcissa, shoving three phials into a concealed pocket in the dress I wore. I felt silly, wearing a frock made of stiff dark green taffeta, not too extravagant, but not plain either. I had seen many stylish witches in the Ministry wearing such functional dresses, looking more like early nineteenth century governesses than witches. But, it was the fashion of the time, and I, of course did not bother.

The cloak about my shoulders was a heavy traveling cloak, dark brown in colour with darker fur about the edges. An ornate silver clasp held it shut at my throat, and on my feet I wore a low-heeled boots, again further strengthening my masquerade as a fashionable witch—a Pureblooded witch. The only incongruous element was my head, and in a nearby polished bronze mirror I saw that my face and hair still made me look like a little boy in his mother’s nice clothes. I was entirely unhandsome.

Malfoy, on the other hand, was dressed to the nines. He wore a fashionable dark grey suit, slightly different from the ones I had grown accustomed to seeing when he was fitted in his formal DCI position. The suit was antique by Muggle standards, but quite in style with Magical fashion. He wore a neck cloth that wrapped about his throat as if to strangle, he also wore boots that came almost to the knee. If it had not been for the terrible scarring on his face and his messy silver hair, Malfoy would have resembled a gentleman.

“You had better be there, Williamson! I am not submitting myself to the horror of Polyjuice only to find you do not meet us and escort us to the Ninth Level!” Malfoy roared into the fireplace, terminating the call by stepping away.

Narcissa finally straightened the cloak on my shoulders, and took a step back, smiling at her handiwork.

“Are we ready, Mother?” Malfoy asked, moving across the foyer to where we stood, a phial in his hand, along with a pair of leather gloves.
“Costumed, and stocked, my dashing son. Doesn’t Hermione look just adorable?” Narcissa crooned, and I felt as if I were some doll in the Manor dollhouse.

“She’d be tolerable with some hair…but I can only hope she won’t look so sour after the Polyjuice. Who are we again?”

Narcissa shrugged. “Anonymous donors of a few locks of hair. Your father procured them.”

I wondered if the donors were still alive, and smiled wickedly at the thought.

“Here you go, my dear,” Narcissa sang, pressing another phial into my hand. “Same donor as the ones in you pocket. I trust you have yours, my dear,” she said, turning to Malfoy.

Malfoy grunted, readying a phial, flicking the cork out with the fingernail of his thumb. He moved away, obviously wanting a bit of privacy for the painful transformation. Narcissa moved to the fireplaces, leaving me to myself. I sighed, and uncorked the phial, the scent wafting from the bottle assaulting my nose. After Second Year, I would never forget the stench.

Steeling myself with a breath, I up-ended the phial and poured it down my throat. I tried to gulp it down like a pill so that the chunky texture would not linger long against my tongue. I swallowed until it was all down, and gagged.

The effect was instantaneous, and I grabbed my stomach as it felt as though that every cell of my body was rearranging itself. I dropped the phial, but it did not shatter on the marble floor, but clinked and rolled away as I swayed, grasping the post of the stairs to steady myself. Seconds passed, but it felt like the transformation was taking hours, it ended, and I reminded myself that the last time I had used the potion had been to imitate Bellatrix, and that transformation had been better than the first time…when I inadvertently transformed into a human/cat hybrid…

Clearing my throat of the lingering foulness of the potion, I straightened and moved to the nearest mirror.

I had felt hair sprout from my head, and as I gazed into the reflective surface I found that I had long, wavy black hair, beautiful and soft. It fell past my shoulders, down to my back, longer than my own hair had ever been.
I ran alien fingers over my face. I was maybe an inch taller, and my eyes were a brilliant shade of sapphire. My face was young, younger than my original face it seemed, and longer; a handsome face. My breasts were larger, but the frock seemed to be filled in as I looked down. I was lovely.

Narcissa seemed to glide to my side, producing pins from a hidden pocket in her stylish pinafore, as well as a comb to begin sweeping my hair up into a style. When I looked into the mirror again, I found that I resembled a great young lady of superior birth and rank, a girl whose smile shone brighter than my own. I was jealous.

“So lovely, Hermione, but I must say that I think your face is much prettier. I do believe the donor was older than you, by a few years…” Narcissa whispered, placing flatteries upon me that I could not truly believe.

“An hour…and with the phials in your pocket, four at most. I hope it will be enough,” Narcissa sighed.

“I think so. At least, it had better be,” I said softly, my voice still my own, and oddly disproportionate from the face I now wore.

“Yes, it had better be, or all of this might be for nothing.”

I turned to find a man standing nearby, dressed in the dark grey suit Malfoy had been wearing. Of course, I knew it was Malfoy by his voice, but it was more than that. The potion had barely altered the scar on his face, and from that scar I knew him. As if noticing my puzzlement, Malfoy said: “Polyjuice is still constrained to work around curse scars of this nature. It cannot fabricate an eye for me to see through.”

I frowned. “Crouch Jr. could transform into Alastor Moody…” I began.

“That was a bit different…but no matter, I’ve got a further disguise.”

With a false sense of bravado, Malfoy extracted something from the inside of his coat pocket, and again I could just make out the bulge of his wand holster hidden under the inside vest. With a shrug, Malfoy applied a neat eye patch, which obscured the scar entirely.

I blinked, taking in his entire transfigured appearance. He seemed just as tall and slender, but the
hair upon his head was jet black and unkempt. It fell in angles to his shoulders. His left eye was as black as pitch, as were his brows. The features of his face were severe, and I wondered if the donor for the potion were somehow related to Severus Snape.

*I was never so roguishly handsome, Miss Granger…*Severus growled in the back of my brain.

Malfoy’s complexion was dark, and the face he wore seemed that it was prone to brooding. He was handsome and ugly. He was my mental image of Edward Fairfax Rochester sans the eye patch.

“Howarda Rocheate,” I mumbled.

Malfoy’s dark brow quirked. “Not a bad idea, my Jane Eyre.”

I smirked. “Not a bit obvious?”

“A bit. Call me Edward, and to be even less obvious, I shall call you Jeanette,” he chuckled, his thin lips turning up into what would have normally been a grin on Malfoy’s original face, but looked like a sneer on his borrowed one.

Narcissa clapped her hands in delight and pushed us together and toward the Floo. “Go now, my gothic characters,” she laughed, but then turned serious as we neared the Floo. “Be mindful of the time, and be careful. I wish you luck.”

I turned my face to see that Narcissa’s expression was grave and filled with worry, and I couldn’t form a reassuring smile to assuage her fears. I was nervous.

Snatching a handful of Floo powder into his right hand, Malfoy wrapped his left arm around me as we entered the fireplace. I grasped him in turn, and with a bark of his deep voice, we were off…

…and stepping out of a Ministry Floo and into the Atrium.

It was early in the day, and people were moving about the Atrium toward the lifts beyond the central fountain. My heart seemed to pound at the amount of people pressing against me. But
Malfroy’s arm circled tighter about my waist as he pulled me forward, his left eye peering about over the heads of the Ministry employees.

I looked about as well, noting that Aurors moved about the crowd, their eyes casting about. I saw other Aurors stationed along the hall, all dressed in plain clothes, only seeing badges from time to time on the insides of their coats.

Just before coming to the turnstile to check our wands, Malfroy pulled us out of the line of people discreetly, toward the edge of the throng. Malfroy stopped us near a pillar where Auror Williamson stood, arms crossed about his chest, waiting impatiently.

Malfroy spoke softly, too softly for me to hear, and Williamson nodded, his eyes peering down at my face curiously.

“This way…” I heard Williamson say, and we moved into the dark of the sidewall where Williamson tapped the stones with his wand and a door appeared, melting from the stones.

Hastily we moved inside, and I found that we stood in a dark corridor, the only light coming from the very end. Malfroy squeezed my waist, and glanced down at me with his borrowed black eye. We moved quickly, boots tapping against the stone floor. I found that at the end of the corridor was a lift, slightly smaller than the lifts in the Atrium. Williamson ushered us aboard, and I nearly fell as the lift took off, moving rapidly to the right and then down at an alarming rate.

Malfroy held me securely, his right shoulder against the wall of the lift. No words were spoken as the lift jarred again, and suddenly my body was thrown to the right and into Malfroy. I had always hated the lifts, and had always been thankful of being able to Floo from the Ninth Level directly.

Finally, the bone jarring ride over, the lift stopped, and the doors open. A curt recorded voice announced ‘Department of Mysteries,’ and we filed out.

It seemed like ages since I had been in the dark corridors, and the strange scent and cool air brought a smile to my borrowed face. Williamson escorted us to the first door, which led into what I called the ‘carousel’ room. After so many years I, and only a few others knew which door was which. However, inside the ‘carousel’ room, we paused, for there were half a dozen Aurors standing guard, as well as a figure that I had also missed, Alexander Roux.

“Mr. Roux, I am Williamson. We spoke earlier about two consultants coming to inspect the
Williamson said with an air of authority.

I peeked around Williamson’s red cloaked back to my department Head.

Alexander Roux was only a few years younger than my father, and he stood with a regal bearing. Roux’s face, as long as I had known him, was always pale, and his hair always neatly oiled and combed to cover a bald spot at the top of his head. He was a fastidious man by all appearances, but very warm and very well versed in every subject. He was a Pureblooded wizard, but did not prescribe to the questions of blood purity.

“Yes, Mr. Williamson. Shall I escort them?” Roux said softly, his eyes moving from my face back to Williamson. Williamson nodded, and soon Malfoy and I followed Roux through the door to the Hall of Prophecy.

When the door disappeared and we were alone, Roux turned to Malfoy with a smile.

“Yes, Mr. Williamson. Shall I escort them?” Roux said softly, his eyes moving from my face back to Williamson. Williamson nodded, and soon Malfoy and I followed Roux through the door to the Hall of Prophecy.

When the door disappeared and we were alone, Roux turned to Malfoy with a smile.

“Thank you for bringing Jane back to us, sir. I’m so happy that she was able to come so quickly,” Roux said, grasping Malfoy’s hand and shaking it.

Roux had been privy to the plans Malfoy had made. I trusted Roux, and it made it easier for me to return to the Department of Mysteries.

Turning to me, Roux’s smile widened. “Polyjuice or no, I think I would know you, Jane.”

Roux took my hand, and I smiled. “I hope you are joking, Alex. I do not want anyone to know who I am, at the moment…”

We began walking down the long aisles, the only light coming from the globes upon the shelves. Roux had tucked my hand in the crook of his arm, and I felt Malfoy’s blatant stare against my back. I could also feel Malfoy’s unease, not used to the darkness of the Hall, while Roux and I knew it like second nature, never needing to light our wands to move about.

“Of course, Jane. I suppose I am just a bit too excited that you are here.”
Taking a left, down a narrower aisle, Malfoy followed closer, and just before we approached the door that would take us to the Brain Room, he clapped a hand on my shoulder, pulling me from Roux’s arm.

“Ten minutes, Granger,” he growled as Roux blinked and moved to open the door.

I nodded. Ten minutes before we would need another dose of Polyjuice. I was surprised that so much time had passed.

Passing into the green-lit room, Malfoy paused at my side as Roux shut the door behind us, using his wand to ward the door. Roux bustled to the other doors and repeated the action while Malfoy and I walked down the long room to the tank.

Glancing to Malfoy’s face, I could see that he was transfixed by the sight of twelve white brains floating about the liquid inside the tank like languid fish. It was a sight to see, but I had seen it many times.

“Sit here, Jane. Your companion and I will be over by the door to the Time Room. If you need parchment, there is some in the drawer…” Roux said, pulling out a desk chair to the workspace nearest the tank, the desk which Roux usually worked.

I nodded, moving to sit down, pulling a phial from my pocket and drinking it as quickly as possible, making a horrible face. I settled into the chair, pushing forward so that the wood scraped against the stone floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Roux and Malfoy move to the door, Malfoy also moving to down another phial of Polyjuice. His face did not display a bit of disgust for his eye was fixed upon me.

I turned my attentions back to the tank and the floating organs inside. One stopped before me, floating serenely before swimming on again. I knew that the brains could not literally see me, but it seemed they were aware of my presence, just as they had been in my dream.

Minutes passed, the only sound a soft gurgling of the liquid moving in the tank before me. The swimming brains proved hypnotic. I was not disgusted by the fact that I was watching brains swim, but rather soothed… My eyes grew slightly heavy, and my body relaxed. I felt as if I were indeed hypnotised, and that was when I heard the voices.

It was whispers at first, the brains swimming about, and then one brain floated before my eyes,
then another and another, until there were twelve floating about the convex side of the large rounded tank. One brain floated forward, and I blinked, suddenly very aware and very awake.

‘Granger, Hermione Jane…’

It was not a question, but I nodded. The voice, by its timbre, was male.

‘You are known to us.’

I waited. More voices were added to the first. The voices spoke slowly, as if tired, but every word articulate.

‘Your brain has deduced much of what we wanted to tell you…’

Another long pause.

‘Truly superior mind.

He has the Hallows. He will come here. We see our end.’

All twelve voices as one. My borrowed brow furrowed.

‘He comes very soon, very soon. Danger…danger…’

I glanced to Malfoy who did not seem to be able to hear the Titans, but was talking softly to Roux.

‘He intends to go back…back to the night…’

My hands were clenched in my lap, and I gritted my teeth, waiting…
‘The night Tom Riddle was reborn.’

My borrowed eyes widened.

“Why?” I asked, but my voice did not sound…it was my mental voice.

‘You know the answer.’

Yes, to stop a sequence of events that would end in the deaths of so many, and of that of Voldemort in the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

‘He will not spare a life of those present that night. The other boy will still die. He will eradicate any of those connected to Tom Riddle…even those who were not connected to him before that night.’

Malfoy…and others who took the Dark Mark later on. Ministry officials, whole families who were forced to join Voldemort, giants, werewolves, and so many others. But would it stop there?

‘Innocent lives will be taken, none will be spared.’

My lips trembled.

“And mine?”

The Titans did not answer, and that in itself was my answer.

I could see it…the world Harry wanted. It would begin with Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and end with the near desolation of our world. Harry would be mad with power, mad with vengeance…and everything I knew, everything I loved would be gone. I would be dead, Ron, Ginny, all the Weasleys…and the Malfoys would be gone.

‘He cannot see the course, he cannot see the pain. For this, Granger, Hermione Jane, we implore you. Kill Potter, Harry James.’
Tears dripped off my borrowed jaw as I raised my eyes to the floating Titans again.

“Is there no other way?”

The Titans floated and bobbed in the tank for a moment before answering.

‘None. Every avenue has been travelled by us, and all end in unacceptable loss. The dead do not wish to be resurrected only to die again and again. Kill Potter, Harry James. This world must endure for centuries yet. The Fates have apportioned our time, and that time is not yet come.’

“I understand,” I whispered, wiping my borrowed face.

‘Granger, Hermione Jane. Your fate is before you, the path has been chosen. Walk this path without fear, without remorse. This is your journey.’

I nodded.

The Titans dispersed, and suddenly I felt my brain seem to jolt back into my skull. The brains floated about the tank again as if they had not paused a moment to speak to my mind. I blinked slowly, and rose from the desk, seeing that Malfoy and Roux stood watching me on the other side of the tank. They had moved from the door, and I suddenly wondered how much time had passed.

“Message conveyed?” Malfoy asked, crossing his arms before his chest.

“Yes.”

Roux moved around the tank to my side as I swayed slightly as I stood. “Nearly an hour, Jane… are you disoriented?”

I nodded dumbly.
“It happens. You probably felt as if you were hypnotised. In a sense, you were. The Titans speak through the mind, psychically. I am quite used to it, but for anyone else, it is a disturbing experience,” Roux explained, grasping my arm as I moved away from the desk. “Shall I find a Pepper-up?”

I tried to smile. “No, I’m fine. We should be moving on.”

Malfoy moved to my side as well, whispering that I should soon take another phial of Polyjuice, but I did not feel as though I could handle another dose lest I vomit… I was unsettled in mind, let alone the rest of me.

I took the initiative, and walked without Malfoy or Roux’s assistance, pushing into the Time Room, letting the familiarity of the chamber soothe me. I moved to my ‘samsara’ jar and tried smile. As I did so, I felt the potion wear off, my body reconfiguring painlessly. The cold air against my scalp was distracting, as well as Roux’s gasp at the state of my appearance. I ignored his questions as I ran my own fingers along the glass…the humming bird hatching at that very moment.

“The Time-Turners, Roux. Have they been moved?” Malfoy asked, and I turned to watch him hold a phial before him, ready to drink.

“Yes. They have been secured to a place even I was not privy.”

Malfoy downed his potion, tucking the empty phial into an inner pocket of his coat.

“And the other two?” I asked Roux.

Roux seemed to fidget before pointing past me to the very table I had been standing before. I smirked, my hands moving to the drawer underneath my jar.

Inside was an ancient lead box with runes inscribed into the surface.

“Take it with you, Jane.”
I hesitated, and turned back to Roux.

“It is those he’ll be wanting, isn’t it?”

I nodded slowly, glancing to Malfoy’s unfamiliar face.

“Take it with you. Dispose of it if you can. I did not tell the Aurors about it, and I doubt there are only two other people outside this room that know about them. Take them…”

Roux’s face was paler than I thought possible, but the tone of his voice was adamant. I took a breath and turned back to the open drawer. When my hands wrapped about the heavy lead, I felt a strange current of magic run up my arms. It was like a mild electric shock, but not entirely unpleasant. Goblin magic…similar to what I had felt when I had walked through the gates at Hogwarts. I lifted the box, which was not as heavy as I first thought. It was about the size of a shoebox, more rectangular than square. There were more runes around a clasp, but no lock.

Turning the box slightly, letting it rest in my arm, my fingers brushed the clasp, which popped open at my touch. Setting the box on the table next to the bell jar, I opened the lid to find two Time-Turners made of what looked like silver set inside silver velvet cast casings. Normal Time-Turners were made of bronze or gold, and much smaller than the two I stared at in the box.

I considered drawing my wand and blasting the devices into oblivion. But I did not, and closed the lid and shut the latch so that another charge of magic moved from my fingertips up my arms. Tucking the box under my arm, I turned to the two men who had been watching me all the while.

“I wish I had my coat,” I said with a forced smile.

Roux tried to smile back, knowing of my love for Hagrid’s coat and the bottomless pocket. Malfoy only stared at me impassively.

Roux asked if I wanted to listen to the voices from the Death Room, but I told him there was no need. I had an aversion to the room, too many bad memories, and I had all I needed from the Department of Mysteries.

We walked back toward the ‘carousel’ room when Malfoy reminded me that I needed another dose of Polyjuice. I downed another phial, and waited in the Hall of Prophecy for it to take affect.
When Malfoy nodded to me that I looked alright, although my hair was now down around my shoulders.

Roux made his goodbyes before Malfoy opened the door, and was surprised when I threw an arm about his neck and embraced him.

“Thank you, Alex. I wish I could tell you…” I trailed, pressing the lead box tighter in my right arm. “When all of this is over, we’ll have a long talk, yes?”

Roux nodded, his face stricken. As if leaving before he somehow embarrassed himself, Roux strode down the dark aisle and out of sight. Malfoy made a strange noise, like a growl and opened the door.

However, before I could follow him, he had stopped just inside the door, I bumping into his back.

“What is…”

“Sshhh!” Malfoy hissed, quickly drawing his wand from his concealed holster. His other hand groped for mine, and I took his, fear rising up like hot lava in my throat.

Pulling me slowly into the ‘carousel’ room, Malfoy pressed me against his back, much as he had several times before. Danger…there was danger.

I shifted the lead box so that my cloak obscured it. I knew I could not shrink it due to its goblin enchantments, and I really wished, fervently, for my old coat.

Peering around Malfoy’s left arm, the fear seemed to rise all the way to my brain. Upon the polished wood floor about the room were the bodies of the six Aurors we had encountered on our way in. Studying the nearest one, I realised that his throat had been slashed and that his blood was indistinguishable from the floor. But as Malfoy moved us forward toward the exit, I saw that not all of the Aurors had their throats slashed, at least two lay stiffly and I knew the cause. The Killing Curse, I knew the look of the curse better than any other modes or manners of death.

I suddenly had a doubt that Harry was responsible. But then again, no alarm had been raised, and Williamson was not among the dead.
“Malfoy?” I whispered.

“Quiet, Granger.”

Malfoy was scanning the room, and slowly manoeuvred us to the corridor to the lift.

“Is it certain the Floo is blocked?” I whispered.

Malfoy growled in warning, and sternly nodded. I bit my lip. It meant we would have to go through the Atrium. Although going there seemed safer, I could not see it that way. It was near the lunch hour, and soon Ministry employees would be filling into the Atrium.

Finally, we reached the lift, and Malfoy ushered me inside, scanning the ceiling of the lift and casting about as if to find some scrap of a cloak, a drop of blood, anything to tell him that the lift might be unsafe.

“Pull the lever, Granger.”

I blinked, but complied pulling the lift’s lever so that a panel near the door read ‘Atrium.’ The grating and then the doors closed and I took a breath. I wanted to think that we would make it out of the Ministry unscathed…or that whomever had killed the Aurors would not go deeper into the Department of Mysteries and harm Alex Roux.

The lift jerked as the doors opened to the Atrium, the curt voice once again informing the lift’s occupants of its destination. Malfoy stepped out first, grasping my hand again and pulling me along. With his wand still drawn, Malfoy pulled me past the few people waiting for another lift, ignoring the pointed looks at the infamous wand in his hand.

Around the fountains and past a few more people, I noticed that the Aurors who had been standing guard before were gone. I sucked on my bottom lip and bit harder.

Releasing my hand to jump the turnstile, causing the guard wizard to shout, Malfoy effortlessly lifted me over, taking my hand again. We were nearly running to the Floos, Malfoy apparently noticing that we were no longer under the eye of the Aurors. The grip on my hand was crushing,
and I could barely keep up with Malfoy’s wide strides.

“Draw your wand, Granger,” Malfoy snarled, stopping suddenly so that I, again, bumped into his back. He released my hand, and I fumbled to obey his command, trying to discreetly move the lead box from one hand to the other, letting my wand slide out of my sleeve into my palm.

Malfoy moved to stand directly before me, trying to block me from sight. But around his arm I tried to see what he was staring at down the hall. With narrowed eyes I watched as the air shimmered before us and Harry Potter appeared out of thin air.
Harry looked cleaner than I remembered. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but still untidy. His face was clean-shaven, and his clothing: a pair of black leather trousers, matching jerkin, and black linen shirt made him appear like some highwayman. An arrogant smirk curled his lips, and his eyes, sans spectacles, glittered a malevolent shade of jade. But the real testament to his madness came from the famous scar on his forehead. Even from where I stood, I could see fingernail marks along his forehead, as if he had been compulsively scratching the old curse scar.

But what disconcerted me, and explained how the Aurors in the Department of Mysteries were killed, were the two wands he held. In his right, the Elder Wand, and in his left, his old wand made of dark holly and phoenix feather. My eyes widened as the memory of Williamson’s words came to me. Harry had opened his own vault, taken the Invisibility Cloak, had his old wand been stored there as well? My answer was before me.

“It took me a while to realise it, but now that I know, I am delighted that it was you who nearly beat me, Malfoy.”

I blinked. How could Harry know? We were Polyjuiced. Williamson had told us that Harry had tortured Ernie Macmillan, breaking through a Vow to learn where I had been hiding…but…

“And it took you long enough to heal, eh, Potter?”

Harry laughed, but it was mirthless and cruel.

“It would be my nemesis that would be my obstacle. It is only fitting it should be this way.

Now, stand aside, I need to speak to Hermione.”

I stiffened, hugging the lead box to my chest.
“You think I would simply step aside, Potter. Granger is under my protection, and you will have to kill me before I let you even look at her!” Malfoy snarled, his hand pushing me tighter against his back.

I was shaking, I couldn’t help it. Another confrontation with Harry was what I had feared. I was not ready to fight him, let alone kill him.

“She’s mine, Malfoy,” Harry roared.

I slammed my eyes shut and cowered behind Malfoy. I prayed to the gods that someone would come from the Atrium, that the Aurors would make a grand appearance, anyone...just to give Malfoy and I time to make an escape!

“She is herself, Potter. If you do not want to die, I suggest you stand down, or you will rue the day you were born!” Malfoy roared in return, his voice shaking the air and the stones under my feet.

Power... I could feel it coming off Malfoy’s back, such power that scared me, and made me clench my wand tighter in my hand. Malfoy seemed so large before me, like a thick trunk of a hearty oak tree; unmovable. His anger was palpable, and slowly I felt my fear begin to drain away. I could not stop to think about why, but I felt larger as well.

I straightened, taking in short, rapid breaths.

“And so I do!

Avada Kedavra!”

I took a breath, and moved even before Malfoy’s hand pushed me. I rolled across the floor of the hall as two streams of bright light blinded me. I rolled to the side of the nearest Floo, and pressed myself against the stone.

Strangely, a satisfied smirk twisted my lips as I recognised that Harry had used his old wand to cast the Killing Curse. It had been met with its brother in Malfoy’s hand. Malfoy had not vocalised his spell, he was mature wizard, but I could not tell what spell he was using to counter the stream of evil green light from Harry’s wand. Whatever Malfoy was using, the magic came from his wand in a silver stream, almost like a Patronus Charm.
There was no ‘Priori Incantatem,’ there was no time. Malfoy’s protective spell seemed to absorb the fury behind Harry’s Killing Curse.

Harry’s face was twisted, alternating from anger and surprise that his spell was being countered. His other hand twitched, and I opened my mouth to shout at Malfoy to be on his guard.

Even with only one eye, Malfoy saw what was coming, and before Harry could attempt to cast with the Elder Wand, he was blown back by a Stunning hex from Severus Snape’s wand.

*Thirteen and one half inch, black oak with Caladrius feather, Miss Granger*... Severus chuckled to my surprise.

I watched as Harry kicked up to his feet, face like that of a rabid beast. He stalked forward, wild eyes searching, raising the Elder Wand to point it at Malfoy.

“What have you done to her?” Harry shouted.

Malfoy did not answer, but poised his body like a duelist, Tom Riddle’s wand over his head, Severus’ pointing outward.

Voices sounded from the Atrium, but there was no sound of rushing feet.

“Where are the Aurors?” I hissed under my breath.

*Dispatched from this world, Miss Granger*... Severus whispered in answer.

“By Merlin, Malfoy, if you don’t hand her over…”

“What, Potter? You’ll kill everyone in this building?” Malfoy shouted back.

I stared at Malfoy’s borrowed profile, and sighed. Malfoy would fight Harry until one of them was
dead. And I knew that if by some twist Malfoy were killed…I would feel pain.

“Killing you will suffice!”

Again, the Killing Curse, which was deflected almost immediately. I could not see Harry’s face as I had slipped back further against the wall of the Floo, but I was certain he could not believe that his Curse was being so easily tossed aside…or that the reason it would not work was because Malfoy had Tom Riddle’s wand. Either Harry could not see this fact, or he had somehow forgotten.

I knew now that Harry could not kill with the Elder Wand after what Malfoy had told me after their last confrontation, thus Harry’s use of his old wand, which could easily use the Killing Curse.

“Crucio!” Harry hissed, his voice so similar to Voldemort’s.

Malfoy did not fall, but the curse struck him. Using both wands he had shielded himself from the brunt of the curse, and only his face revealed the effect. He grimaced before dispelling the Unforgivable.

Finally, retaliating, Malfoy cast a spell silently, using Severus’ wand. I slid on the floor, closer, to see a stream of white and blue blast toward Harry, too fast for him to defend against. When the spell hit, Harry seemed to stop breathing for a moment before his body was lifted up into the air, slamming him into the arched ceiling high above. The spell was like a living creature, slamming Harry into the ceiling and down to the floor again so that a crater formed about his body from the violent force of impact.

I cried out in shock at the ferociousness of the spell, and Malfoy, stunned by the sound of my voice, turned his face to me, opening his mouth to speak. The distraction had been a mistake, for in a split second Harry was on his feet, swaggering and bleeding from his head, blood dripping from his crushed right arm, the Elder Wand dangling from his hand.

A curse shot from Harry’s holly wand, hitting Malfoy squarely in the chest, throwing him through the air, down the hall so that when he hit the floor, he rolled several times before coming to rest on his side, his back to me.

Blood gushed from his back, and I was suddenly on my feet. Whatever curse Harry had used, it had cause a hole, about the size of a Sickle to penetrate Malfoy’s chest and through his back. I
immediately thought of Muggle guns and bullets. And then I did not think any more…clutching the lead box to my chest, my wand at the ready, I felt my anger consume me…and move me.

Malfoy did not move to rise, he did not move at all.

Surely, he was dead…

And if he was dead, I would feel no qualms in avenging him.

I stepped from behind the wall of the Floo and into the hall. I felt my own magic swirl over me, and I felt the affects of the Polyjuice trickle away so that I stood before my old friend, Harry Potter, with my own face.

Severus remained silent as I met Harry’s eye…my amber against his emerald.

“Give me the box, Hermione,” Harry said, stretching out his hand, his holly wand in his curled thumb.

“No.”

Harry’s eyes flashed even as blood dripped off his brow.

“I command you to give it me!”

I narrowed my eyes. “You command nothing, Harry Potter.”

Harry’s face changed oddly, and he blinked in confusion.

“You thought you had me enslaved?”

He did not answer, realising that his curses had not worked, and he straightened his shoulders the
best he could, raising his holly and phoenix feather wand to my face.

“I don’t want to kill you, Hermione,” he muttered darkly.

“But you’d be content to hurt me, break me?”

Harry’s face softened, and I saw a shadow of my old friend. “You’re mine, Hermione… and Ron… Malfoy’s brainwashed you…”

“Harry, you’re ill. Lower your wand, and let me find someone who could help you…”

I had wanted my voice to sound pleading. I had wanted to quell my anger, reason with Harry, if I could. I did not want to kill him…

*But you must, Miss Granger, for even though he seems like your friend, he will not hesitate to kill you for the box in your arms…* Severus said sternly, pulling my sympathetic feelings out of the way so that I saw Harry for what he truly was: murderous and mad.

Harry shuffled toward me so that there was at least twenty feet between us… and closing the gap. I raised my wand with a snap of my arm, the walnut pulsing in my hand.

“You would fight me, Hermione? Because I killed Malfoy?”

I licked my lips, and said nothing as Harry took another step forward, blood now dripping off his chin. The contrast of his red blood and his green eyes made his face appear like some horrible thing made of nightmares. Harry had been my nightmare ever since that night in the cottage.

“Please, Hermione, just give it to me, and I will make everything all right…” he whispered.

I took a step back, holding the box so tight that I could feel the goblin enchantment hum against my breasts.

“Everything will be all right… we can always be together… me, you, and Ron. No one will have to
My hand trembled, but with one steady breath I stopped trembling. There was no way Harry could make anything ‘all right.’

“I loathe you…” I whispered, and then with a violent flick of my wand, I jumped back, floating softly to the floor as suddenly Harry screamed like some otherworldly thing as the Floos on either side of the hall activated. Instead of the usual green fire, violet fire sprang from the hearths, billowing outward in a wall of hellish heat, engulfing Harry.

I had Conjured the fire only once before, and I had nearly killed myself in doing so. I watched as the violet fire grew, the heat melting the stone floor. A Fiendfyre… Like liquid colour, it swirled and flowed in eddies and torrents. The heat was unbearable even from where I stood, and the air was sucked toward the flame, like a vacuum of terrible power.

With another flick of my wand, the fire poured backward into the Floos again, extinguishing. Smoke filled the hall, a violet smoke that smelled of burnt stone. I kept on my guard, however I was nearly unable to see before my own face.

Harry was mad, but resourceful. He had seen, and survived, Fiendfyre before…

I whirled my wand to form a pillar of clear air around me, my eyes moving through the smoke to see any shapes trying to attack in the haze. I clutched the box as the smoke whirled and began to dissipate. I couldn’t breathe a sigh of relief yet, and I couldn’t go to Malfoy…

“Gotcha!” a voice hissed in my ear as a hand slapped across my mouth. I could smell burnt flesh and leather.

I squealed against the hand, and twisted away, kicking out with my right boot, catching Harry Potter squarely in the groin. I stumbled backward, falling on my arse as I watched Harry, his left arm burnt horribly, fall to his knees. His hair was singed, as was the left side of his clothing. The Elder Wand still hung from his limp right hand, but his holly wand was gone.

I panted as I scrambled to my feet, pointing my wand tip at Harry’s head.

“Bitch!” he hissed, his voice hoarse.
Even mad wizards had their weak points.

The smoke was low to the floor, and I could barely see Harry’s face or Malfoy’s body. I had to run, all the courage I had had to Conjure the Fiendfyre was gone.

“I swear, Hermione, if you do not give me that box…” Harry hissed.

Fear compelled me to run, but fear had also cemented my feet to the floor.

“Things will be very bad for you.”

Even my breaths were trembling in my lungs, but I lifted my chin to stare down at Harry.

“Do it then, Harry. Kill me. If there is anything left your heart or your conscious, I will be there…haunting you,” I said as steadily as I could manage.

Harry’s face contorted into one of pain, and tears filled his eyes. “You already haunt me, Hermione…” he whispered. But his soft, repentant face did not remain in place for long as he struggled to his feet.

“Give me the box!”

I shook violently. “No!” I gasped.

“Give me the box!” he raged, mustering his strength to raise his crushed right arm and the Elder Wand.

“Never!” I screamed back at him, a wince passing along his lips and disappearing.

Harry’s face darkened as his lips began to move…to form an incantation I could not easily recognise, but could tell was in German. ‘Brenn’…and then I remembered…”The Hanged Man.”
With an enormous effort Harry raised his ruined arm so that the Elder Wand moved in an intricate pattern. As he moved to release his terrible curse, I slammed my eyes shut, hugging the box to my breast like a shield of lead.

“Goodbye, Hermione…” Harry whispered before a violent guttural noise came from his lips…

…followed by a terrible scream, and the spray of hot blood against my face.

I had blood in my eyes, but it was not my blood. I stumbled backward, and wiped at my face. Harry’s screams filled my ears, and then I opened my eyes it was to see him clutching his right hand…or where the hand should have been. Just at my feet rested a large, pale, and severed hand with the Elder Wand clutched in its fingers.

With a quickness I did not think possible in my shaken state, I snatched the Elder Wand up from the dead fingers, and held it tight in my left hand, my walnut wand in my right.

I watched as Harry screamed like a wounded animal, falling to his knees again.

I could have killed him then, wounded as he was, but all I could do was watch him writhe like a child, tears rolling from his frightened eyes in torrents. He did not look at me, and did not speak, only cried.

Rolling to his feet, he rose into a crouch, and before I could raise my wand to incapacitate him, he fell into a Floo and was gone.

I blinked after him, feeling as if everything that had just happened was a dream—a bad dream. I was not hurt, Harry had not managed to cast one spell against me. But I…I had Conjured a Fiendfyre.
And in my left hand, pressed against the lead box, was the Elder Wand. I moved the box to my other arm, and extended my hand outward to study the wand. It was just as I remembered it, white wood, long and slender. In my hand it hummed pleasantly, and I realised that I was its new master.

I blinked at the wand, and remembered... My feet moved of their own accord, smoke trailing behind me as my skirts moved. I ran down the hall to where Malfoy was lying on his back, his left eye staring up at the ceiling blindly.

At some point his Polyjuice had ran out so that he lay on the floor with his own face and body. I dropped the lead box next to him as I knelt at his right side, also dropping both wands so that they clattered and echoed through the hall.

“Malfoy?” I asked, fear thickening my voice.

My hands moved to his coat, pulling it open so I could see the oozing hole high on his right side. I knew the spell Harry had used had not pierced Malfoy’s vital organs, but there was so much blood.

“Malfoy?” I asked again, pressing my hands into his chest, trying to feel for a heartbeat.

My teary eyes saw that he had Severus’ wand in his left hand, Tom Riddle’s lying nearby. It had been Malfoy who cast a severing charm at Harry...taking his hand.

“Malfoy!” I screamed at him, but he did not move. I could not feel a heartbeat under his clothing, and I began screaming my agony and helplessness. I fumbled with the wands at my knees, grabbing one and began trying to cast healing Charms on the wound. I was blinded and deaf to everything but my own grief. Malfoy had saved me...again. If only I had not cried out...if only I had not distracted him...

The flesh knitted together, some of the blood soaked back into the wound. I was muttering nonsense under my tears. Mantras...prayers...

“Live...live...I cannot lose you...”

I wept the bitterest tears of my life as I moved the wand over him. Why wasn’t someone coming? Where were the Aurors? Where were the Healers?
“Live, damn you! I cannot lose you, Malfoy!” I screamed, hoping that my words would somehow make him wake up and scold me.

“You cannot leave me, Malfoy! I’ll be alone…” I screamed, but broke down, my voice useless.

I cast more healing spells, everything that I could manage to think of, my hand moving on its own, the glow of the wand showing my teary eyes how much blood stained Malfoy’s dark grey suit.

It was all my fault…all of it!

“Granger…”

A hand grasped my wrist, stopping my wand’s movement, and I gasped as Malfoy was looking up at me, his lips bloodless, his face coated in sweat.

“Cannot leave you? Says who?” he asked, his voice ragged, the strength in the hand that held my wrist waning.

I then did something uncharacteristic, something I swore I would never do again: I fell upon him, kissing his face, his hair, his neck, his hands, all the while bathing him in my tears. When I pressed my lips to his, Malfoy’s hand wrapped about the back of my neck, pulling me closer as if trying absorb my warmth. My hands, which rested on either side of his head, slipped in the blood on the floor, and our kiss deepened.

He tasted like Polyjuice potion and blood, but it did not matter to me. He was alive, I hadn’t killed him!

Pulling away to breathe, I looked down onto Malfoy’s scarred face, unsure of how to compose myself or what to say. He gazed up at me, his face flushed as if blood flow had been restored to his nearly vanquished body, his lips swollen.

“I should die more often,” he muttered, his lips moving to form that scoundrel-like smile that I had grown to find irresistible. “Where’s Potter?”
I pulled away, my lips trembling again. “Not here, or I would not be fussing over you.”

“The Elder Wand?”

I blinked, and looked down to my lap. It had been the wand I was using to heal Malfoy, and healed he seemed, the wound nearly shut in the front. I assumed the wound was sealed in his back as well, but he was in dire need of a Blood Replenishing Draught.

I raised the wand, and showed it to him.

“You’re the master of it now, Granger. Now we have a chance…” Malfoy said softly, the fatigue clear in his voice. “And the box?”

“I would have rather died…” I said tapping the lead next to me, Malfoy’s left eye moving to the box.

“Good girl…”

I saw the Fiendfyre…”

I let my chin fall, remembering how Goyle had died in the Room of Requirement. I wished then that Malfoy had not seen it.

“A violet bird looking thing…” he muttered, his eyelid growing heavy.

“It didn’t stop him, Malfoy,” I said softly, knowing that if he slept he would not die…

“No matter…he took my eye…I took his hand…”

Malfoy’s eye shut, and his breathing evened. As he slipped into a deep sleep, the sound of feet pounding distracted me from staring at the smile on his lips.
“Miss Granger!” a familiar voice shouted, causing me to look up at the source of the voice.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Williamson, Flint, and Lucius Malfoy circled around Malfoy and I, all with faces full of surprise and concern.

“It took you long enough!” I snarled, gathering up both wands, sliding them into my sleeve, and the box, which I hugged to my chest again. “Malfoy needs a Healer, Flint, you take him!”

I sounded just as authoritative as Malfoy, but Marcus Flint, a boy I remembered from school, one of Malfoy’s most trusted, moved at the snap of my voice, gently casting a levitating Charm and leading Malfoy away. I watched wistfully, wishing I could follow, but the three older men were looking to me for explanation.

“Was it not obvious that Malfoy was battling Harry Potter in the Ministry of Magic halls? Where the hell were the Aurors, Williamson?”

Williamson’s dark face drained of blood. “We were attacked in the Department of Mysteries, six were killed…I followed Potter and lost him…”

“And the ones posted along the hall?” I asked, apparently the expression on my face and the glint in my eye frightening the immediate truth out of Williamson.

“Dead…we just found their bodies stuffed into a broom cupboard.”

“There was a barrier preventing anyone to get near, Miss Granger. We could see and hear everything that was happening, but only until a moment ago were we able to dispel it,” Lucius Malfoy supplied at my right, his face as stoic and cold as ever.

“How did you…?” I began, my eyes narrowing to gaze at Lucius’ face. Why was he at the Ministry of Magic Headquarters?

“It is not important, Miss Granger, what is important is that you are safe, and Draco will be attended to.”
I had to nod in agreement, but my eyes turned to Kingsley. Lucius had mentioned he had been recalled with the rest of Aurors, many of which were now dead.

“Malfoy took off Harry’s hand,” I said to Kingsley, pointing to the pale mound of flesh laying a way down the hall. “And the Fiendfyre was my doing. I’m sure the Ministry will take the cost of repairs out of my salary.”

Kingsley smiled. “Perhaps not, Hermione.”

Kingsley still called me Hermione, and it seemed so natural.

“Has anyone been injured?” I asked, remembering Roux.

Kingsley shook his baldhead. “The Ministry is secure. It seems Har-Potter only made it as far as the entrance to the Department of Mysteries, but could not enter. He engaged the Aurors there… and I’m sure you saw the aftermath.”

I nodded, another thought coming to me.

“Are you alright, Hermione?” Kingsley asked, but I had already begun to walk away, past Harry’s severed hand, toward the scorched and still smoking floor. Sliding one of the two wands from my sleeve, I cast a levitation Charm on myself, and glided over the ruined stones to land on the other side.

Moving along the floor, I spotted what I suspected had been forgotten in Harry’s haste. In a pile of muted colours was Harry’s Invisibility Cloak.

The Fates were smiling upon me.

I picked the cloak up from the floor, folding it over the same arm in which I cradled the lead box. I had two of the three Hallows. Just as Malfoy had said, Harry was getting sloppy in his desperation.
When I returned to the two men, I said nothing about the cloak, and reassured Kingsley that I was fine, a bit shaken, but unharmed. I then turned to Lucius, who had retrieved Malfoy’s wands and held them carefully in a gloved hand, surprising him by asking if I could be taken to his son.

Wiscombe seemed very put-out with having to treat Malfoy again, however, was grateful that Malfoy’s wounds were very nearly healed when he arrived at Malfoy Manor. A day of bed rest and some potions would set Malfoy to rights, or so Wiscombe told me as he left Malfoy’s childhood bedroom, the evening after I became the new master of the Elder Wand.

Narcissa and I had waited in the kitchens, as had become habit, and I pondered the new wand resting against the walnut counterpart in my sleeve. I had used the wand to heal Malfoy, therefore I was the true master of the wand… I had taken it from Harry’s severed hand…

Narcissa’s arm about my shoulders kept me from shivering at the memory of the previous hours. Lady Malfoy was upset enough about her son to have to worry about me. I was not her daughter, I was not her ward, in fact, I did not know what she considered me besides a guest in her home.

Later, Narcissa and I waited outside Malfoy’s room when Wiscombe left. Narcissa went in first, and only a few moments later came to the door to bid me enter.

Malfoy lay on his old bed, sitting up, a hand over a small bandage on his bare chest.

“‘A strong ‘impaling’ hex…went straight through me, but missed the vital bits…” Malfoy explained to me and his mother.

“Another from ‘The Hanged Man?’” I asked softly.

Malfoy nodded. “And so was the one he was going to use on you before I cut his damned hand off. He was going to burn you from the inside out, Granger,” Malfoy intoned darkly.

Narcissa pressed a hand to her mouth, shaking her head.
“But he didn’t, and that’s all that matters,” I said, more for Narcissa than Malfoy who smirked, and laid back into his pillows.

“Yes, my dear…but it makes me sick to my stomach…thank Merlin Draco was there!”

I stifled a snort, glancing to Malfoy.

“Mother, tomorrow, I’m returning to my quarters to convalesce,” Malfoy announced, winking at me strangely, making my face flush.


“Never mind that…you’ll have Granger to keep you company. Maybe you can dress her up like you did today. You’ve always told me you wished I had been a daughter…”

“I have never said such a thing, Draco!”

I laughed, I couldn’t help myself.

“Ah, but you should have seen Granger today, Mother. She was almost pretty in her frock dress and cloak…battling against evil…”

“Draco, that’s enough!” Narcissa insisted in clipped motherly tones.

I did not laugh.

“I say ‘almost’ pretty because her hair is too short…”

I lowered my eyes to the side of Malfoy’s bed.

“…she looked like a little boy…”
Malfoy chuckled, but Narcissa glared at her son. He said something more, but I ignored it, excusing myself and moving across the room, gently shutting the door behind me. I did not cry, I had cried enough that day.

I did not like being teased, not as a child, not as an adult. So, when I returned to my rooms on the third floor, the first thing I did was strip out of the frock dress Malfoy had mentioned, and all the undergarments, throwing them to the floor as I stormed to the bathroom.

Looking in the mirror, my angry face could have broken the glass. Instead, I pulled both of my wands from their holster, jerking the holster off to throw it angrily to the marble floor. I abandoned my walnut wand in lieu of my new acquisition. And standing naked before the mirror I raised it to my head.

I did not have to speak the incantation, for the wand responded to my intention…and a shiver passed through me as caramel hair sprang from my scalp in waves. I stared at my reflection until the waves fell to my waist before I pulled the wand away.

I set the Elder Wand aside on the sink counter and studied myself. My hair was not a mess, or frizzy, but sleek and thick. The weight of the hair pulled the curls into waves, and as I ran my fingers through the strands, I wondered if somehow the texture of my hair had changed. I had been ill for so long, under curses that had racked my body almost to ruin. I had heard that people in the Muggle world who lost their hair due to illness usually found the texture of their hair changed when it grew again. Of course, I had not actually lost my hair, it had been cut, but still, my hair was different.

Pulling the hair forward so that it fell over my shoulders, hiding my breasts, I laughed…I looked like Lady Godiva with brown hair…

I was satisfied. I, for probably the first time in my life, liked my hair. It was similar to the hair I had had under Polyjuice…long and pretty.

Malfoy could not tease me.

“Hermione?” a voice called from the door to the bedroom.

I scrambled for something to put on, finding only a bathrobe on the back of the door, one I had
never used. Cinching the belt about my waist, I entered the room just as Narcissa bent to pick up the dark green taffeta frock.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Malfoy…I was going to hang it up…” I said feeling guilty that I had treated the dress Narcissa had lent me so carelessly.

“My dear…your hair!” Narcissa exclaimed as she rose to look at me.

I blinked. “Does it look bad?”

I remembered that my idea of ‘pretty’ was not the commonly accepted notion. Perhaps my hair looked horrible, as it always had before.

“Goodness, no! It is lovely!” Narcissa cried, gliding across the room to me, her pale hand touching the crown of my head, and around my face to the locks that rested against my shoulder. “I had forgotten that when you came here your hair was long… Oh, but you did not do this because of what Draco said?”

“Of course, I did. He’s been teasing me for weeks…” I muttered, my face falling.

“Never mind him, Hermione…it is just the way he is. At least he is teasing you, and not insulting you.”

Narcissa had a point. I did know the difference between teasing and insulting…

“I wanted to see if you were well, Hermione. You’ve said so little since you returned. And I know you kept quiet in the kitchen because you thought you’d spare my nerves…”

I opened my mouth, but Narcissa raised a hand, lowering it to take my arm and lead me to my bed where she sat me down, her next to me. I was surprised at how informal Narcissa was acting, tossing the taffeta dress thoughtlessly over the footboard of the bed.

“Draco told me that Potter said…said that you were ‘his?’”
“Yes,” I whispered, folding my hands against the dark terry cloth of the robe, unsure what to do with them at that moment.

“That bothers me,” Narcissa said distantly. “Why would he say something like that?”

I sighed. “He also said Ron was ‘his’ as well. I can only imagine that Harry meant that we were ‘his’ only friends…”

“Or that he loves you, Hermione…in some twisted regard. If Potter cannot reach Ronald Weasley, he has settled himself upon you. Draco says that he did not cast one spell at you, except at the very end.”

I nodded, pleased to feel my own hair falling over my shoulders once again. “He knew he could not kill me out right, so he chose a more violent end. And I would have been defenseless to stop it if Malfoy had not…”

The shaking I had repressed came upon me, and soon I found myself hiding in Narcissa Malfoy’s thin arms. I rested my head upon her shoulder, but did not embrace her…it seemed too informal…

“I have said it once, Hermione, and I will say it again…Draco will take great care with you…great care of you…” Narcissa whispered.

I did not question her words. Already a seed had been planted in my heart. I had declared that I needed Malfoy when I believed him dead. I had willingly kissed him, wanting to kiss him more when I learned that he had not died. I had even Charmed my hair in reaction to his words. I was a bit more than simply ‘fond’ of Malfoy, but I was ignorant to know if what I felt was even an inkling of ‘love.’

Pulling from Narcissa’s embrace, thoughts of Malfoy banished my courses of shivering, I smiled at her.

“Draco has his mind set about returning to the groom’s quarters tomorrow…you should go with him,” Narcissa suggested lightly.
I blinked at her, my smile fading. “I don’t know…the last time I was there I ended up spraining my ankle and making a complete ass of myself.”

Narcissa smiled, and with a laugh, said, “So I’ve been told.

That little apartment is Draco’s home. I’m just happy that he let you go there. I, for one, have never been allowed to visit. So your visit must say something for his regard for you, Hermione.

I am sure he would want you go with him. I am also sure that you have much to discuss…” Narcissa trailed, her eyes moving to the lead box resting by my bed on the small end table.

I had placed it there soon after returning to the Manor, and had quickly forgotten about it. I glanced at the rune-covered box out of the corner of my eye. I knew I would have to find a place to hide it, eventually. Merlin forbid Harry somehow make it onto the Malfoy lands… Just because I had two of the Hallows, I was not going to let myself think that Harry had been rendered powerless.

I moved my eyes to my old coat resting in a heap near the door. I had stuffed the Invisibility Cloak inside, not mentioning it to anyone, not even to Malfoy. He knew I had the Elder Wand, and at that moment, that was all he needed to know.

Narcissa talked with me a while longer, asking me if I would mind if she bought me a few outfits. I was hesitant at first, asking if it would have to be all frock dresses, knowing that she would not accept my refusals. I liked the dress, but when I had worn it earlier that day, I was not wearing my own face.

“No, no…just some skirts and blouses…unless you would like a frock dress?”

I laughed. I conveyed that a few skirts a bit newer than the ones I usually wore would be nice, and a few summery tops…

“Although I do not want to infringe on your kindness into the summer…”

I was not saying this merely out of politeness. I did hope that everything…Harry…the Hallows…the Time-Turners would be a memory by summer. And somehow, I could not imagine my life in a future tense as easily as I once had.
Finally, Narcissa excused herself, bidding me a goodnight, and left me to my own thoughts. I moved back to the bathroom smiling sadly into the mirror again at my hair. I drew a bath, and slid into the near scalding water. My thoughts did not linger on Harry or Malfoy, but what the Titans had said.

The night Voldemort was reborn…

Little Hangleton, the graveyard, the night Cedric Diggory was murdered…

If one thought about it long, it seemed a logical choice. Voldemort’s location was certain, and after Harry would Portkey back to Hogwarts, Voldemort would have been in a rage…confused by his prey’s sudden departure. In one fell swoop, one could eliminate Voldemort and his inner circle bar one or two. It would be easy in the confusion after Harry’s escape.

The Lestranges would remain in Azkaban, Sirius would be exonerated after Peter Pettigrew was identified in the graveyard, and Albus would not search for the Horcruxes and eventually die. The DA would not need to exist, Umbridge would not need to go to Hogwarts. Severus, if he would be spared, would not have to kill Albus…Narcissa, if she be spared, would not have to take the Vow, and Malfoy would not have to serve Voldemort…

I sighed as I remembered that Harry would not care a whit about Malfoy or Severus, and would probably rather kill them than let them exist in his new world. Harry had called Malfoy his nemesis… However, this sentiment was a gross misconception for many reasons.

Then there was the Resurrection Stone…Harry still had it. If he were planning to return to that night in Little Hangleton, why would he need the Stone? The younger Harry had taken Cedric Diggory’s body back to Hogwarts making it difficult to save the boy. The Titans had said explicitly that Harry would not save Cedric… I could only imagine that Harry would use the Stone as a sort of insurance, lest someone be killed that Harry would want to live…

I was still missing a piece of the puzzle.

I rose from the bath to find my hair a bit curlier as it was damp, and instead of casting a Drying Charm, I wrapped the heavy strands in towel. Finishing my ablutions, I crawled into bed, happy to have hair once again, and happy to have survived another encounter with my best, hated, friend.
Ah, what a glorious day!” Narcissa Malfoy exclaimed, raising her pale face to the cloudless April sky.

I could not disagree with the Lady, and I raised my eyes to the sky. It seemed impossible that only the day before I had nearly faced my death…and the death of Malfoy at the hands of Harry Potter.

Narcissa had taken me out into the gardens after breakfast in the kitchen, insisting that I get some air. I had descended into the kitchen in a new outfit, Narcissa apparently working quickly to find me new clothes; clothes that were comfortable, but too nice and too formal for me to feel like myself.

Walking me from the kitchen garden, around the shadow of the house, Narcissa led me along a different cobbled path than the one Malfoy had taken me down. I quickly found that the second path led about the backside of the Manor, past a beautiful terrace and rose garden. Through a hedge, Narcissa commented that we should walk through the hedge maze.

“It is not very large, but it is diverting,” Narcissa had commented as we entered.

The hedges were not like the one I knew from the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and were not dark and foreboding, but trimmed to appear like green waves of velvet on either side of us, the sun streaming into every bend and thoroughfare.

The floor of the maze was lined with white pebbles, and a strange warm breeze flowed through the manmade passages. Narcissa held my hand in the crook of her arm as we walked, her pale blue dress reminding me of a Victorian dowager, and the cameo brooch at her throat moving slightly so that an ivory carved lady combed her hair with smooth care.

The sun made Narcissa’s pale hair gleam like gold, and her eyes sparkle like moonstones in her smiling face. I could not help but be in awe of the woman. She appeared like a woman just come into maturity, a timeless quality about her thin face, which was a stark contrast to her dark sister...
We walked, talking about how lovely the warm air was, how lovely a shade the sky was, how comfortable my new slippers were, and how lovely my hair seemed in the sunlight, pulled up from my face to fall down my back in near wild waves. It was not long until we reached the centre of the maze, coming to the loveliest garden I had seen yet...a garden in the Japanese style with koi ponds and a central Japanese style gazebo with a hammock, table, and chairs, and hot tea and biscuits waiting.

“This is my favourite place,” Narcissa confided as we sat down in the shade of the flying eaves of the gazebo. “Lucius’ grandmother redesigned this garden after a visit to Japan.”

I nodded, taking a sip of milky tea, a change from my preferred strong black coffee.

“Draco likes it too, but anymore he prefers the solitude of the groom’s quarters and the forest behind. We have deer in the forest...but it has been years since Draco went hunting.”

I blinked. “He hunts?”

Narcissa smiled as she dabbed her mouth with an embroidered napkin.

“And he rides. Sometimes Lucius will find him in the stables, dressed like some woodsman! Lucius used to do the same when we were first marriage...and his father, and his father’s father...Draco, for the most part, as far as I know, stays in his apartments reading, or walking in the fields. Of course, most of his time is spent on one police case or another, but now...”

I turned my eyes away from Narcissa to the lily pads on the ponds surrounding the gazebo. Now...the world was a dark place.

Narcissa, being the lady she was, gently turned conversation to other subjects, none of which I could really converse about, not being versed in such matters of what I would consider ‘frivolity.’

Finally, Narcissa bade me walk with her again, and I was thankful for the change. The maze garden had been lovely, and had my mindset been different and times less worrisome, I was sure I would have truly enjoyed myself. Instead, as we walked, darkness clouded my mind.
I had the Elder Wand, as well as the Bellatrix’s wand, in the sleeve of the fine blouse Narcissa had given me. The pale blue sateen of the shirt nearly matched Narcissa’s dress, and despite the breeze, I was warm in the button up shirt with its long tails that trailed over my hips, making the shirt appear more like a dress of its own. The sleeves were belled and terminated in cuffs about my wrists, but not so tight as to inhibit me from sliding a wand into my palm if need be.

I had left my old coat in my room with the Invisibility Cloak inside the pocket…and the lead box…hidden in a niche under the sink counter in the bathroom. It was surely an absurd place to hide the goblin-warded box, but it was not a place one would think to look. I assured myself that most magical folk would place such important things in a vault or a magically concealed place, but I, being Muggle-born, was thinking of the less obvious choices.

The Time-Turners… The box did not merely contain the conventional idea of a Time-Turner, for each turn of the larger hourglass signified a year and not an hour. In one treatise about the devices, they had not been called Time-Turners, but ‘Revisionist Chronological Devices’ or RCDs. I preferred Time-Turner. ‘Revisionist’ was a word that almost demanded that the Time-Turners be used to alter the timeline.

“Here we are…” Narcissa said softly, rousing me from my thoughts. I had not paid attention to where we were walking, but I realised quickly that somewhere along the way, Narcissa had led me out of the hedge maze, and we stood before a gap in a familiar stonewall, a rolling field before me.

I realised that I was standing in the nearest gap to the stables, the gap I had passed on my angry trek through the rain days before.

Sunlight kissed the fields, and the smell of soil, grass, animals and the nearby forest of white trees made the air like a perfume. My eyes swept over the horses running along a crest of a hill in the distance, the sheep moving in a flock to a shallow stream, birds flying from far away toward the forest.

Narcissa squeezed my hand as a figure moved along the path from the stables, a figure dressed in black riding boots, trousers, gloves, riding crop, and white shirt. I smirked as I saw that Malfoy had decided to continue wearing the patch over his ruined eye, and I stifled a giggle, thinking that he looked like some roguish hero on the cover of a tawdry romance novel with virgins being kidnapped by pirate princes. But as Malfoy moved closer, the wind catching a few strands of white blond hair, my smile faded. He looked like an elfish prince…some fey creature come from the white trees.

“Morning, Mother…” Malfoy said in greeting, stopping to lean against the wall.
Narcissa spoke to Malfoy, but I did not listen. Instead my eyes travelled to the bandage just visible under his shirt where it had been unbuttoned. Had it not been for his pale skin and hair, I would have rolled on the ground with laughter, he did seem like some roguish pirate prince as well as some otherworldly thing. My heart fluttered, and I hated myself for it.

His eye was upon me even as he spoke to his mother, and I blushed, steering my eyes to the crop in his hands.

“Was you hair always like that, Granger?”

I flicked my eyes to Malfoy’s face at the sound of my name.

“Not nearly as long, but the colour is the same,” I answered, trying ignore Narcissa’s knowing smile.

A few more words were spoken between mother and son, and soon I found myself walking with Malfoy for the stables, my hand tucked into the crook of his left elbow. I wondered how I was suddenly in the position to walk quietly with Malfoy, but concerned myself with looking at the bare white trees behind the stables, trying not to think at all.

Once I was installed on the bench below the open front windows, the gramophone softly playing a record of Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli, a cup of hot coffee in my hands, I realised that Draco Malfoy was growing impatient for me to speak about the events of the day before. He sat on the other end of the padded bench, leaning back into the wall, his coffee cup resting on the windowsill, his right leg propped up, his arm resting on his knee.

“If I said your hair looked nice, then would you speak, Granger?” Malfoy grumbled.

“Would you be saying that honestly, Malfoy?” I shot back, raising my coffee to my lips.

Malfoy’s mouth opened, and then shut, his eye moving to gaze out the window. I drank deeply, my mouth resisting the bitterness after drinking Narcissa’s sweet chai-like concoction earlier.

“Your hair looks nice…honestly. Now speak,” Malfoy muttered.
“What about?”

Malfoy shifted on the bench, the wood underneath giving a low groan. “Yesterday. Your thoughts, observations?”

I wanted to grin at him, and his irritation, but I could not.

“I think we’re almost even.”

Malfoy’s pale eye turned to me, his brow knitting. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I set my cup on the sill, and gently kicked my slippers from my feet to pull my legs up under me, warm under the layers of linen skirts. “I saved your life.”

His mouth quirked. “One point to Granger…I still stand at about ten points or so.”

I said nothing, leaning so that my elbow rested on the sill, my fingers moving to a few strands of hair that had fallen about my face, curling them around my forefinger.

“What are you really asking me, Malfoy? Unless a near death experience has addled your brain, quite a bit happened yesterday,” I said softly, turning to gaze out the open casement window.

“Oh…let’s see… Let us start logically. The ‘Titans,’ you called them…what did they say?” Malfoy asked, abruptly taking up his coffee.

I sighed. “A logical place to begin…’ I mumbled. “They told me ‘when’ Harry wanted to go.”

“And?” Malfoy asked, his voice muffled in his cup.

A smirk played over my lips at the sound of his voice. It seemed to be habit that we drank coffee together, mulling over the events surrounding us. I wondered if our tête-à-têtes would always be,
or would it change like so much else in my life?

“June 24, 1995, after sunset.”

I watched Malfoy out of the corner of my eye, and saw that his face slowly drained of what little colour there was, and he slowly replaced his cup on the sill. He crossed his arms before his chest, the bandage crinkling on his breast as he did so. I knew that Malfoy realised the significance of the date, and as his face began to darken with thought, I continued.

“The Titans told me that Harry will leave no one alive. Voldemort…your father…no one.”

“He won’t save Diggory then? Not with the Stone?”

I shook my head slowly. “It puzzled me, Cedric was the first person Harry ever saw killed. If he wanted to change everything, why not save Cedric? But then I realised…if Cedric was not killed, no one would have believed Voldemort had returned. If Voldemort is killed…the Wizarding world would believe that a fourteen year old Harry had somehow managed it…” I trailed, my voice beginning to thicken with emotion.

Malfoy sighed. “But it isn’t just that, is it?”

I shook my head again. “The Titans said that Harry would kill anyone connected to Voldemort. That means even those who were not connected to Voldemort at that time. Harry knows who joined the Death Eaters, he knows who has survived. Even if he killed Voldemort that night, so many people’s lives would be spared. So many would not take the Mark, others would not join the Death Eaters, but to Harry, it would not matter. His mind is filled with lists of names, images of faces of people in this timeline.”

“My mother…Severus…Crabbe, Goyle, the ones in Azkaban…and so many others…” Malfoy whispered, raising a hand to place his marred face into his palm, leaning so that his arm was supported my his knee.

“It won’t stop with those directly connected. They told me that I…”

“It won’t happen, Granger,” Malfoy growled into his palm before lifting his face to stare at me, his eye penetrating my very soul. “You have the Time-Turners, you have the Elder Wand. And I took
his fucking hand!"

My breath quickened, Malfoy’s face dark with a deep anger and power that I had never seen before. But, slowly, sunlight seemed to reenter the room, and Malfoy sat back against the wall again, the darkness fading.

“Last night…I was thinking about something,” Malfoy said softly, his voice sounding weary.

I nodded for him to go on.

“The people Potter has killed so far…all of them had something in common.”

I blinked. “What is that?”

Malfoy smirked. “They all were people who would have tried to stop him in some manner, even the Dursleys. And some of them were people who lived without love.”

I swallowed. Malfoy was right, on both accounts. I had thought of the second account…but the first account was more profound. From the Healer at St. Mungo’s who had died due to injuries, to the Aurors in the Ministry, all of them either had tried to stop Harry from his intended course of action by force, or would have stopped Harry by other means. Some of the people were literal threats to Harry, others were a threat of another sort.

And most I knew personally…

“Ernie?”

“Early this morning…” Malfoy whispered in answer.

Ernie Macmillan had survived Harry for several days, and now I was the only survivor of his madness, excluding Malfoy whom Harry had not shown an interest in until the day before.

“Are you going to destroy them?” Malfoy asked, stealing me away from my thoughts.
“The Time-Turners? I don’t know…I don’t know if I can…”

“Because of some ethical obligation, or literally, Granger?”

I smirked, “Both. I know Time-Turners, normal devices, can be destroyed…but these others…Their manufacture is different, even the materials used are unusual. I would have to examine them to be certain.”

“But not use them.”

“Never.”

Malfoy sighed. “You should start thinking of worst-case scenarios, Granger.”

I let my eyes fall upon my cooling coffee. “I know,” I whispered, clasping my hands about my knees to adjust my legs so that the tips of my toes peeked out from under the hem of my skirt. “I just don’t want to do it right now. I have had no occasion to let myself think about anything else except Harry, the Time-Turners, and the past. It depresses me…and it makes me feel so helpless.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh as the record behind me skipped to the beginning.

“During the War, there was not much time for distractions, or times to feel happy…but we did. It was not often, but it happened.

And now I’m ten years older, and that happiness seems so far away. I cannot remember when I was really happy since then. Happy as in, all consuming, lasting happiness…”

“The ‘working toward a common goal’ happiness?” Malfoy asked, his voice serious.

I opened my eyes and smirked again. “Not exactly.
I just keep wondering how long this diversion is going to last. We run, we fight, and then we come back here to heal…and argue. How long before we have to run and fight again?”

My voice was thick with unshed tears. My soul was tired…so very tired. Thoughts of running away from everything crossed my mind for a split-second, fleeing to Australia or America, anywhere. But as I raised my chin to gaze out the window at the horses running in the field, I knew that I could never leave, and that I was not alone. I knew that everything I had been through would have truly been unbearable had I been alone…

And alone, you are not, Miss Granger. Never alone…Severus whispered warmly.

I smiled again, and sighed as fingers reached toward my face, brushing away the small curls about my temple behind my ear. I turned my face to see Malfoy leaning forward, a smirk on his lips.

“Someday, when we’re very old, we can sit down, drink coffee, and laugh about how exciting our lives had been,” Malfoy said softly, a hint of sarcasm in his voice as he leaned back into the wall. “In the meantime, I guess we’ll just have to go along the path chosen for us.”

I released a small laugh and rolled my eyes. “You are terrible with reassurances, Malfoy.”

He frowned. “I was not born to reassure anyone, Granger. I’m a Malfoy…I tell people to reassure themselves.”

I knew he was joking, but I mirrored his frown, and countered, “Maybe I should have let you bleed to death yesterday…”

Malfoy quirked a brow, his eye patch shifting against his pale cheek. “But you would not have let me die, Granger…”

The playful mood seemed to dissolve on the breeze that came in through the windows. I did not hide my gaze, which rested upon Malfoy’s bandage, and I did not hide the fact I was biting my lips in hesitation.

“No, I couldn’t let you die…”
“You said I couldn’t leave you alone…” he whispered.

I nodded slowly, my gaze traveling up the sinews of his neck to the shadow of a beard on his jaw…

“There’s no one else now. Ron cannot come, and I don’t think I would want him to besides. Ron could not fight Harry like you have…”

“But you fought him, Granger. You tried to kill him.”

I nodded again, keeping my vision set upon his jaw. “I have to kill him. That is my lot. And I know now that I can kill him.”

“Because you hate him?”

I gnawed on my bottom lip, but released it again to open my mouth. My ability to form a sentence wavered, and I closed my mouth again, my eyes falling to my hands in my lap. There was something I wanted to say, to make clear, but I could not find the words or even identify my intention. Finally, I met Malfoy’s eye, which had been studying me all the while.

“I could have killed him when I thought he had slain you. He has taken so much from me over something so selfish. I can hate him now, but that hate stems from my profound pity of him. I cannot muster a bit of sympathy for him, and my pity has turned to disgust.”

I paused, taking a deep cleansing breath, and found that my shoulders were shaking as if I were crying…but no tears would come. I felt sorrow, but my anger made it impossible for me to let my sorrow show.

“You would have avenged me?”

Malfoy’s voice seemed very distant, and the turn of the last word was part in question, part in a smug sense of satisfaction.

I pursed my lips and met his eye again. “Yes.”
Malfoy’s quirked brow raised higher.

“You’re the one who hates me, so why the tears and hysterics when you thought I was dead?”

I rolled my eyes. “You may have established that you do not hate me, Malfoy, but it may come as a shock for you to hear that I do not hate you either.”

Malfoy blinked.

“I cried because I thought I was responsible for the lapse in your attention…when I called out. I cried because I could not handle the idea of you being dead. And I cried because I was frightened that I might have gone through all of ‘this’ alone. As for hysterics? I had tried to incinerate my ex-best friend, and I kicked him in my bollocks, watched you blast his hand off, got his blood in my eyes, and thought I was responsible for your death.

Does that answer your question?”

Malfoy’s mouth stretched into that irresistible smile… “I thought maybe it was because you had fallen in love with me.”

I snorted a laugh. “And you established you ‘disliked’ me the other day…”

“I may have exaggerated a bit…”

His smile had not changed as my eyes widened.

“To your credit, you can kiss quite well. Then again, I was on the verge of death, one can never be sure of much in that state.”

I looked away. “Please don’t mock me, Malfoy. I really cannot abide it.”
Malfy said nothing in retort, and I would not let myself look at him. My eyes moved to the fireplace, to the couch, to the door, to the old hook rugs, anywhere but his face. If he leered at me, I would break. Even if he smiled that scoundrel-like smirk, I would melt.

I had nearly lost him the day before, and I could still feel his hot blood on my hands. I could still feel his lips against mine. Merlin, I wanted to feel…

I knew it was most likely a mistake to feel for Draco Malfoy, but I could not help myself. He was so near.

“Come here, Granger.”

My breath caught at the sound of his voice. After a blanketing silence for what seemed like hours, the sound of his voice, deep and subtly demanding, startled me to lift my face.

He had not moved from his spot on the padded bench, but his right hand was outstretched.

“Come here, Granger,” he said again, with more force.

I blinked at him, and let my legs uncurl so that my bare toes touched the floor. He wagged his fingers in a beckoning gesture, and like a puppet on a string I rose, taking a step so that I stood over him.

He was not smiling, not smirking, only his silver eye conveying anything… With a tug on my left wrist, Malfoy pulled me down so that I sat on the bench with my back pressed against his chest, his right leg still propped up on the bench below the windowsill, his left foot resting on the floor. I sat in the space between his legs, and I could feel the heat of his groin against my lower back.

I only moved to pull my legs up in a mirrored position from how I sat on the other end of the bench, tucking my feet into the warmth of my skirts. And as his arms wrapped about me, I relaxed as if somehow bewitched, my cheek falling against his right shoulder to look out the window at another view of the fields. I let my right hand fall against his thigh and curled the left into my lap as I watched several horses playing in the fields while others grazed near the sheep.

I shivered as Malfoy used his left hand to brush my hair from my left shoulder so that it fell heavily against his chest. I could feel his breath against my neck and I slowly closed my eyes.
I wondered what was happening, but part of me did not want to question the ‘whys’ and ‘hows.’ I was safe…and warm…and contented.

Malfoy held me for a long time, both of us gazing out of the window to the beautiful April day. We could hear the distant whinny of the horses, or the call of returning spring birds. It was soothing, it was secure, and it was so far away from the darkness that lay in wait for another confrontation or near-death experience.

“Granger?” Malfoy asked softly, his breath tickling the small hairs on the back of my neck.

“Hm?”

“Thank you for yesterday,” he whispered, but I could tell that he had said it begrudgingly. I had saved his life, and I knew he was bending his own proud scruples to express his thanks.

“I was returning the favour,” I whispered in return, but I was being earnest.

“If we keep saving each other, we might just make it to that very old age I mentioned,” he sighed, his fingers burying in my hair.

I sighed softly and closed my eyes.

“I have never thought that I would ever grow old,” I whispered. “For so long I had resigned myself to die young.”

“Even after the War?”

I hummed an affirmation. “When one works in the Time Room, you gain a very enlightened view of what the Fates have apportioned you…”

Malfoy did not respond, but curled his fingers in my hair, breathing deeply against my back. His body was very warm, and even the slight chill of the wind coming in the window at our right did
not seem to affect me. Malfoy was the strangest man…rough, taciturn, but surprisingly warm at times, and gentle as he was stroking my hair. I knew the gentleness would not last long, and eventually some scathing word would pass his lips and the mood would change.

But for the time being, I would take what I could get. I figured that he was indulging me, very aware of my growing attraction for him. Any other time, perhaps, my mind would be in turmoil over thoughts that he was not attracted to me in turn, but at that moment, I did not care. I was being the selfish one for once.

“We have time,” Malfoy whispered. “Perhaps not much, but some.”

I stiffened. “How do you figure?”

“Potter has lost a Hallow, he cannot conquer death. You have the Time-Turners, he cannot go back to that night. And he is injured, from your frightening fire, and from my cutting curse. He will have to regroup, and that will take time.”

I considered again telling Malfoy about the Cloak, but said nothing. For some reason I could not form the words to inform him that we had two of the Hallows. I stowed that hesitation and the thoughts accompanying my decision in my mental filing cabinet, to ponder at another time.

I trusted Malfoy. And as odd as it felt to trust him, I knew, deep down, that he would protect me. He already had protected me…but he would continue to do so, not just because I was his ‘ward,’ but also because I was important enough to him and everyone else to be protected. Or so I wanted to believe. It would not last forever, but again, I contented myself to know that I would always have the memory of that protection.

“Maybe a week or more…plenty of time to decide the next course of action. He is wandless again, vulnerable.”

“Wandless?” I asked, rolling my head so that my forehead rested against his jaw.

“Shacklebolt found the remains of his holly wand. Your fire incinerated it.”

I frowned. “He’ll find another. He will take another from a victim. Being wandless could be a motive for him to strike again, Malfoy.”
“It has been considered, Granger. The curfews are still in effect, his face is plastered all over the front pages of the Prophet and the Quibbler. The Muggle authorities have been alerted weeks ago, and the Aurors, what is left of them, are patrolling non-stop.”

“But it was like that before, and Harry eluded them…”

Malfoy sighed, the expansion of his wide chest against my back making my upper body shift against him.

“I cannot think anymore, Granger…” Malfoy growled, anger clear in his voice, his chest rumbling against me. “I don’t want to think anymore, at least not for a while.”

I understood completely, but again I said nothing, even as Malfoy’s hand slipped from my hair so that he embraced me tight against him. His action was the one thing I could not really understand. He buried his face into my hair and inhaled, taking in the scent of the perfumes I had bathed in the night before.

My breathing had quickened at his embrace, but I knew I could not break free if I wanted to do so. Instead, I spoke again, trying to diffuse the confusion I felt inside.

“Are you…are you feeling better?”

My question was light, and a bit inane.

“I am,” he mumbled, his voice softened in the thickness of my hair.

Embracing me tighter still, my eyes widened at the sensation of the heat emanating from his groin as it was pressed into my lower back. I could feel arousal…fire…masculinity…and my mouth was suddenly dry.

Only a flash of panic blinded me for a moment, brought on by the memory of Harry hurting me. The flash was similar to the night Malfoy had drunkenly kissed me, but the moment was shorter, and the memory of Harry was only of his cruel mouth…
Malfoy was not Harry. Malfoy was my protector, the man I had come to regard warmly, the man who had treated me with kindness in his own manner, the man who had kept my mind sharp with bouts of witty repartees, the man who had kissed my face, my sprained ankle, and read Jane Eyre to me as I slept.

I sighed in his arms, feeling that my body was melting into his embrace. I shifted…and in doing so, Malfoy grunted into my hair. The subtle shift my hips had brushed against his arousal. My face burned, and I could not decide whether to be embarrassed or excited. Half of me wanted to get up and run away, while the other half contemplated rolling my hips again.

The latter half won, and I hoped that my internal Severus was not watching.

Malfoy grunted again, and he shifted his body, using his left foot on the floor to rub himself against me. I closed my eyes as my blood began to boil and course through my body like a rampant wave of bliss.

My right hand clutched his thigh as he moved his arms, to battle with my hair, moving it aside so that he could press his face, then his lips to my neck. Kisses, soft, innocent kisses were peppered along the column my throat. But I rolled my hips again, the suggestion lewd, and the soft kisses turned into something else.

His hand grasped my chin, and he turned my body so that that his lips dominated my own, and I relished the taste of his mouth, coffee, chocolate, and other bittersweet flavors that I preferred over sugary sweetness. I hummed as his tongue tangled around mine, and I found myself grasping for his shirt, to pull him closer…hands moving to his neck, his hair…as if I would never let his lips leave mine.

But, we finally had to part to breathe. I opened my eyes to see Malfoy’s face, his brow knitted, his eye glittering, his lips swollen and pink, his hair mussed slightly, and his chest heaving. It was like candy to my eyes, fuel to my internal fire, and I did not care about anything else besides touching him.

I turned on the bench, and slowly I arranged myself so that my toes were barely touching the floor, my left hip against his groin, my back against his right knee. This position let me swivel my upper body so that my hands could slip into his shirt to touch his skin.

I was being forward, but I did not care. Of all the times he had touched me, kissed me, it seemed
only fair that I be allowed to have free-reign to do what I wanted. I touched the pale hair on his chest that began between his defined pectorals and trailed down a firm stomach and out of sight. My fingers traced his collarbone, gently over the bandage, down his ribs, causing his body to jump at the sensation. Pushing the shirt back, my fingers traced his shoulders and down the middle of his chest again.

He watched my face all the while, his right arm resting on his knee, a finger reaching out for a strand of my hair, his left hand on his thigh. I found that I enjoyed Malfoy’s eye upon me, and I wondered what he saw in my face. I had sucked my lower lip between my teeth as I touched him, and when his left hand raised to touch my lip, he pulled it free…the pad of his thumb running over my plump and kiss-swollen flesh.

I kissed him again, my hands cradling his jaw. I kissed him soundly so that it was his turn to hum into my mouth. His hands found my hair, and we drank each other in…

I wanted him. I wanted Draco Malfoy.

The kiss deepened and changed, and blindly, my hands found the belt of his trousers.

“No…” he whispered, pulling back so that his head fell into the wall.

The sound of his voice frightened me. It was a plea; a plea from Malfoy.

Gently, his fingers found mine and pulled them free from the leather belt, letting my hands brush over the bulge unintentionally before they fell against my hip. He groaned softly and closed his eye when my fingers had brushed against him, but quickly composed himself, his right arm moving to rest on his knee again, fingers reaching out to curl strands of my hair about his knuckles.

I blinked at him, and raised my own fingers to the buttons of my shirt, one by one unbuttoning the periwinkle sateen…past the swell of my breasts, when his left hand grasped both of mine…to stop me.

“No, Granger.”

I was nearly panting. No?
Malfoy leaned forward slightly and began buttoning my shirt as if I were little girl.

I certainly felt like a little girl. My advances had been rejected…but I still wanted, I still needed. My belly was hot and itching deep inside, and I needed something to relieve the comfortable discomfort of my arousal.

When the last button at my throat was closed, I slapped his hands away and rose. I considered slipping on my light shoes and running away as I had once before, but instead I glided to the bathroom. I considered slamming the door, but I had already proven myself juvenile in Malfoy’s eyes…

Instead I looked into the circular mirror above the sink, my hands falling to the edges of the bowl to support myself. My face was obviously flushed, and my lips swollen. I sighed out a sob as I pushed off the sink to begin rearranging my hair. So many loose strands had fallen from the knot I had placed to hold the hair back.

As I fussed, my face contorted in the mirror.

I had been rejected.

I knew I was inexperienced, but not inept. I knew I was not pretty, but I was not ugly. And still, I had been rejected. Why did it have to hurt so much?

“Granger.”

He was standing in the doorway, his hands resting on the jambs, his body leaning into the bathroom slightly.

“What?” I asked with a huff, finally managing to arrange my hair as it had been before Malfoy had mussed it.

Malfoy sighed and turned his face to the floor.
“We can’t…” he started, but paused. I did not bother to look at him as my shaking hands moved to smooth some invisible wrinkle near my collar.

“We can’t do what…” he trailed. “We can’t be ‘intimate,’ Granger.”

My eyelids flickered as he spoke.

“I cannot let ‘this’ cloud my judgment. And there are ethical concerns as well.”

I breathed a cruel laugh as I finally moved my fingers to wipe invisible motes of dirt from my sleeves. I could not look at him, could not try to see his face. There was no remorse in his voice, no conviction. His words sounded flat to my ears.

“It is my duty to protect you, work with you in catching or eradicating Potter. You understand that when Potter is eliminated that I will move on to another case…”

With someone else to protect, the dark part of my heart whispered.

“I let my familiarity with you go too far…”

I stopped wiping at invisible dirt at his words, and turned on my bare heel. He was still looking at the floor, but his face expressed determination.

Draco Malfoy was a man who had no regrets…and even if he had regrets, he would never allow anyone to see them. I clenched my fists at my sides and he raised his eye to gaze upon me.

“Then send me somewhere else, Malfoy. Another safe house.”

The words had passed my lips even before I could think them through. I blinked my gaze to his riding boots.

“Find someone else to ‘protect’ me. I will speak with Alastor Gumboil myself, if I have to…”
He did not speak, but I could tell by the way his hands grasped the jambs of the door that he was feeling something…

“I cannot…” I began in a whisper, but found my voice was too racked by emotion. “I cannot stay here…with you.”

His knuckles were white from the grip on the wood, but his face was as impassive as stone.

“I have also let my familiarity with you cloud my judgment. I have behaved inappropriately and informally with a member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I think it best that I be the burden of another officer, one which I do not share a history with…”

The wood whined slightly in Malfoy’s hands before he pushed off the jambs and away from the bathroom door. He strode through the parlour to the door leading down to the stables, and without bothering to look at me, nearly pulled the door from the hinges, jogging down the stairs. I moved slowly across the parlour to the front windows, just in time to see Malfoy flying from the stables on a horse…pushing the animal so hard that I feared it would throw Malfoy.

Across the fields and out of sight, I fell to the bench and stared after him…but no tears came.

_The crimes of love are cruelest of all…_ Severus whispered in my suddenly empty brain.

“Love? There’s no love here, Severus,” I whispered back, my voice hollow, my entire body suddenly colder at Malfoy’s departure, both physically and emotionally.

The wind seemed colder, blowing in the windows, and as if my soul were separate from my body, I moved mechanically, shutting the windows. I stared down at my slippers, knowing that I did not have the will to leave the groom’s quarters. Instead, I rose from the bench and moved to the fireplace, using the Elder Wand to stoke the fire so that it roared in the hearth. I wanted to sleep, to dream some silly dream, and to wake into a world that made sense…

I glanced at the couch, but did not move to it. Instead I moved through the kitchen, through the sheer curtain, to the bed in the middle of the small bedroom. Light streamed in through the French doors, but I paid little heed to the cheery illumination. All I could see were shades of grey.
I lay down on the feather bed, inhaling the spicy scent I associated with Malfoy, and curling up in the middle of the wide mattress, I closed my eyes and let the scent assist me to a dream.

I could hear the sea. It was not the sound of the sea that I knew in Britain, with waves slamming into bedrock, but it was a soft white sound…saltwater on smooth white sand.

“Dear, you look like you have a headache,” my mother asked, and I felt her familiar hand on my left arm.

I smiled and opened my eyes to my mother’s face, warm chocolate brown eyes studying me.

“I’m fine, mum. I was just listening to the sea…” I said airily.

“I can barely hear it myself,” my father intoned with the deep bass of his voice.

I turned to smile at him as well, his strange yellow eyes flashing in mirth from across the table.

“All I can hear are the sea birds squawking…” Narcissa said softly from my right.

“Are we playing a game at ‘guess that sound?’” Lucius sneered playfully across the table, sitting at my father’s left.

“Might as well play ‘eye-spy,’ but it would not be fair… Paris is colour blind,” my mother said with a laugh.

“Really, Helen, I hate it when you call me Paris,” my father grumbled, crossing his arms before his chest, thick arms folding before his loose tunic.

“Paris and Helen…a bit fatalistic…” Lucius mumbled.
“Wasn’t it Menelaus who was the father of Hermione?” Narcissa asked, her pale hands moving to adjust the shoulder of her cream coloured monochiton.

“It was,” I said smiling at my father who smirked, and let his arms fall away from his hairy barrel chest to his lap, covered in a man’s chiton, cinched with a wide black belt at the waist.

“Menelaus is not a very British name, but Paris sounds so…rakish,” my father said with a deep laugh.

“Better than Lucius, Perry, but I think my wife has it worst of all,” Lucius said with an unusual smile, his grey eyes turning to Narcissa, his long silver blond hair falling over the pinned shoulders of his pale blue chiton.

“I like my name, husband. It rolls of the tongue easily,” Narcissa said, beginning to laugh…we all laughed softly.

The sea was still in my ears.

Our table was laid with glasses of sweet wine, fruits and cheeses, and our meal began. Light fell into the little stoa, hitting the right side of my face, warming me. I reached for a piece of unleavened bread and sighed as my hair fell over my right shoulder in strands of small caramel braids.

“Have you seen Draco this morning, Narcissa?” my father asked, a piece of cheese poised at his lips.

“Just before dawn. He said he had some business to finish and he would join us for our little adventure after lunch today,” Narcissa answered.

“Adventure?” I asked holding my wine in my hand, about to drink again.

“Narcissa didn’t tell you, Hermione?” Lucius asked with mock scandal.
I shook my head so that more tiny braids fell down my shoulders.

“Well…now that the Minotaur is dead, we are going to traverse the labyrinth,” Lucius continued with a smirk.

“Oh, I do hope that silly elf who solved it left the red thread so we won’t become too lost,” my mother sighed, swiping back her unruly dark curls from her handsome face.

“It couldn’t be that difficult,” I supplied, the sweet wine lightening my tongue.

“Where did you say Draco was going, Narcissa?” my father persisted, apparently not interested in our afternoon adventure.

“I think it had something to do with the Potter case, but I cannot say for certain.”

I blinked at the name ‘Potter.’

“Didn’t you go to school with someone named Potter, Hermione?” my mother asked.

I frowned. “It sounds familiar. He may have been in the same year…”

“This isn’t the same Potter who murdered all those people, is it?” my father asked, picking up a slice melon from the platter in the middle of the table.

“It is,” Lucius said darkly, leaning his bare elbows on the table, his glass dangling from his hand. “But, it seems that Draco killed Potter in the middle of trying to apprehend him. Several Aurors were killed in the fight, and Draco had no choice…”

“Goodness…” my mother gasped, her soft hand raising to her mouth.

Narcissa sighed and placed a hand on Lucius’ elbow. “Draco has refused rewards from the Ministry, and he seems so distant lately… Hermione, he hasn’t said anything to you about this?”
“No. He doesn’t talk about his work. I have tried asking him, but he says that he doesn’t want to bring work home…”

“It makes sense to me,” my father asserted, his yellow eyes upon me, concerned.

The stoa fell silent, and I could hear the waves very well. My parents and the Malfoys continued to eat leisurely, but I was listening to the sounds outside the palace.

“Hermione.”

I closed my eyes.

“Hermione?”

I inhaled, the scent of the sea, the food, the palace…intoxicating me.

“Hermione, you need to open your eyes!”

I resisted the voice, which was not the voice of any of my company, but a voice that came from the doorway into the passages of the palace. I knew the voice, but did not. It was a deep voice, almost sensual in the way it said my name.

“Open your eyes, damnit!”

The snap of the voice was too demanding to disobey any longer, and I opened my eyes. My little family were talking, but I could not hear them. Instead, I removed my gaze from their smiling, happy faces to the source of the voice.

Standing in the doorway was a strange man, dressed in black robes, buttons seeming to shimmer from his chest, his sleeves, even the pant legs of his trousers. His face was like an ominous storm head, hooked nose, sallow skin, thin lips, black eyes, lank raven hair…
“Get up, girl! You need to go!” he hissed, his yellowed crooked teeth barred.

I obeyed, my chair scrapping on the stones of the floor of the cool stoa. I straightened my chiton, which I realised was as black as the clothes on the strange man in the doorway. I moved around the table in my bare feet, and stood just before the man who towered over me.

“What are you going, ‘nee?” my father asked, turning his head to watch me, using my childhood pet name.

“Just for inside for a bit, da. I’ll be back in a moment,” I said distractedly, realising that none of my little family had seemed to notice the dark man.

The dark man then took my wrist, his long fingers curling about the flesh and bone, and he pulled me inside the cool corridors of the palace. I could only stare at the back of his long, greasy hair as we seemed to run.

“You would not wake up, so I had to come here to collect you. I swear by Merlin’s great beard, girl, this is going to be bad for you! It was not time for me to use you yet!” he snarled without looking back at me.

We ran along the stone corridors, passing murals and mosaics on the walls…leaping dolphins set into a blue and black glass sea. I could still hear the waves even in the darkness of the unlit passages.

Down the steps of the light well we flew, down into the bowels of the palace…down into the labyrinth.

“But…” I gasped, feeling very short of breath, my bare feet aching and cold against the stone. “…we have to wait for Draco…he has to show us the centre!”

The labyrinth was dark, only a few torches lit along the smooth stonewalls of the corridors. I tried to find the red thread on the floor, but I could not make my eyes focus fast enough…the dark man was pulling my arm so painfully…and we were running so fast…

“Shut up, Hermione! Snap out of it, for Merlin’s sake! We are running for our collective lives!” he roared, his deep voice echoing off the smooth walls as we twisted and turned through the
labyrinth.

“I don’t understand,” I cried as his grasp tightened.

“Your mind would not wake up. You willed this dream out of your sorrow, and you are so fucking single-minded that you have made it a trap for yourself. Now I have to save you, so that we can both live!”

I still did not understand. Who was this man? Where were we going?

The torches were gone, and we were running through the dark. How could the man see where he was going?

My feet felt as if they were bleeding, and I was cold… I wanted to return to the stoa for it was warm and I could hear the sound of the sea. My legs were turning to lead, and the man had to pull harder and harder to keep me in pace.

“If you do not move, you are going to die, Hermione!”

I was sobbing. I was being led away from my family by some insane man in black!

I tripped suddenly, and I was falling.

“No!” he snapped, turning to catch me in his arms so that we landed on the ground roughly, his back bouncing off the ground after so much forward momentum.

I wrenched my arm away from his grasp and pushed myself up from his chest.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” I screamed at him, hitting his chest with my fists, although I could not see his face in the dark.

The sound of air moving made me pause for a split second, and suddenly a hand belted me across the face so that I bit my tongue and my ears rang. I fell off the man and to the cold, hard ground…
And suddenly…and shockingly, I was awake.
I had been dreaming.

“Hermione!” a male voice exclaimed, and I realised that I was on my knees, twigs digging into my kneecaps. A pair of hands were bruising my upper arms, and my head was nodding back and forth, being shaken by those hands roughly.

“Lucius! Stop shaking her…can’t you see her eyes?” a female voice cried from behind the silhouette of the man shaking me.

The shaking stopped, and I blinked.

“Mr. Malfoy?” I whispered.

“Thank Merlin, Miss Granger, I thought…” he said hurriedly, the grip of his hands lessening. Lucius Malfoy lifted me easily to my feet, and I realised that Narcissa stood just behind him with a lantern lifted in her hand.

“Are you hurt, Hermione?” Narcissa asked, and in the lantern light I could see that her face was smudged with what looked like soot, and tears had blazed trails through the soot down her cheeks.

I blinked rapidly, my vision moving to Lucius Malfoy who finally released me and took a step back. His face was also smudged, but there was blood also, running from his left temple and down the side of his face. His clothing was in tatters, and I could smell burnt hair.

“Where am I?” I gasped, realising that I too was dirty, but not from soot, but mud.
My hands were muddy, two fingernails broken to the quick. My feet were bare, and the hems of my skirt were torn. My hair was caked with mud and leaves, and my shirt torn in several places, the left sleeve half way ripped from the seam.

Trees were behind me, and behind the Malfoys was a seemingly endless stretch of field. However, as I turned to my right, there was an orange glow on the dark horizon, far away.

The snicker of horses startled me, and I realised that two horses only fitted with halters were tethered to a small tree nearby.

“Miss Granger, what is the last thing you remember?”

I opened my mouth to reply to Lucius, but nothing came as my eyes moved again to the orange glow on the horizon.

I remembered Severus.

Yes, it had been Severus who had dragged me through the dream of my version of the palace of Knossos. Before that was…

“Falling asleep in the groom’s quarters…

Oh gods…where’s Malfoy?”

Lucius glanced to his wife, and my heart skipped a beat.

“What’s happened? Where am I? Why is this…?” I shouted, my muddy hands balling into fists.

Narcissa choked on a sob and passed the lantern to Lucius, gliding toward me to wrap me in an embrace, one arm about my body, the other about my shoulders so that her hand rested on the back of my head. I returned the embrace with one arm, but stared at Lucius, my expression demanding answers.
“The Manor has been attacked,” he said flatly.

My brow knitted as Narcissa shook against me.

“That glow you see on the horizon is the burning remains.”

“But how?” I asked in a whisper.

Lucius’ eyes moved away from my own and to the trees tops above us. “Potter has somehow rallied a group to move against us. That is all I know. We were attacked by no less than fifteen wizards and witches. I do not know how they got through the wards, but the Manor was aflame within minutes…”

Narcissa sniffled and pulled away to grasp my hands.

“It started in the dungeons. It was a fire impervious to any magical means of extinguishing. It moved slowly at first, allowing the group to enter the Manor and begin scouring the first and second floors.”

My breath stopped in my throat.

“When they reached the third floor, the fire had nearly blocked their exit.

We tried contacting the Ministry, but the Floos had been blocked. We could not Apparate or make a Portkey. So we fought,” Lucius said gruffly, his chin raising haughtily as he spoke.

“We killed half of them, and had the elves remove the bodies from the Manor. We lost a quarter of our elves when they tried to douse the fire with their elfin magic…” Narcissa whispered, her sorrow evident in her voice.

I started to shake, partly from the cold, partly from the thought that possibly…possibly Harry had found the Time-Turners I had hidden in the bathroom of my chambers.
“And Malfoy?” I asked, my throat dry, my legs ready to give out at any moment.

Lucius sighed. “We do not know. He was in the Manor, he was fighting with us, as well as trying unblock at least one Floo to get a message through. Narcissa was with him on the second floor when the ceiling collapsed…”

“He pushed me out of the way…and I could not get to him…” Narcissa cried softly.

My lips trembled.

“Draco had told us that you were in his apartments above the stables. When we ran through the gardens, we found that two of the group had moved far across the grounds to the stables, about to set it on fire…

We killed them, but we found that you had gone. We took our horses, but there were more attackers coming, the remainder that had survived. They did not care about the stables, but tried to follow us…on brooms, I think. We cut through the forest. There are ancient protections for those of the Malfoy family in the forest. It is a natural cover,” Lucius finished.

“We found you kneeling on the ground here. Lucius could not rouse you…and he struck you,” Narcissa whispered, casting a disdainful glance toward her husband.

I clenched my teeth. It had not been Severus who had struck me after all…but I could not be angry with Lucius.

“Yes?”

“Are they gone?”

Narcissa glanced to Lucius.

“We believe so,” Lucius said softly, turning to look at the glow on the horizon again, a flash of anger and sorrow twisting his features. “But we’re not taking any chances. We cannot be certain, but we believe that the Manor was not their primary concern.”
I lowered my eyes to the dark ground.

“It was our lives, Miss Granger…yours included.”

I frowned. It was not just our lives; it was the Time-Turners.

“What do we do?” I asked, risking a look at Lucius who was studying me intently.

“We go into the forest, as deep was we can until sunrise, then ride out.”

I nodded slowly as Narcissa squeezed my hand.

Soon, I rode behind Lucius, his horse able to carry more than one rider. It was a stout white Arabian, while Narcissa rode a lighter horse with a dappled grey coat. I clung to Lucius as we flew through the forest, the lantern extinguished so that only the starlight and pale quarter moon lit the paths between the great white trunks of ancient trees.

I did not know how late the hour was, but I could still see a bit of orange on the horizon as Malfoy Manor burned. It was not until we stopped at a stream deep in the forest, feeling safe enough to rest, did Lucius tell me that Malfoy Manor burned twice before, the first time back in the 14th century, the last time in his own lifetime.

“Most things in the Manor are protected from fire…only Fiendfyre could destroy the books, the portraits, and some of our other heirlooms hidden away in the wooden walls,” Lucius said, sitting on a rock by the stream, Narcissa beside him, her head resting on his shoulder as he held her…she slept with a mournful expression on her face. I sat on the other side of the small stream, leaning down to cup cold water in my hand to wash the mud from my face and hands. I had let my battered and bloody feet soak, the icy water numbing the pain before I pulled the walnut wand from my sleeve and healed my feet as well as casting a warming Charm.

In the light of early morning, I could see Lucius’ brow lift at the sight of the wand, but he said nothing. I knew he would ask me about the wand later, but I was thankful that I had remembered not to pull the Elder Wand from my sleeve.

“You said it was Harry…but did you see him?” I asked softly, keeping my voice low as not to wake Narcissa.
“Cissa did. She said that he came only as far as the foyer, and quickly disappeared after we started killing them.”

“Did you know any of ‘them?’”

Lucius closed his eyes. “A few were familiar. I could not tell you specific names, but the ones I recognised were people I had somehow used or destroyed financially. These were people who wanted my entire family given to the Dementors after the War.

I admit that I did these people a great injustice by taking their money or threatening them, but I have been working since then to rectify those crimes. I never thought that those people would take up arms against me themselves…”

I sighed, pulling my feet up under what was left of my skirts.

“I think some of the others are part of a terrorist group from far north…at least one of the faces looked familiar to me from the Prophet.”

I narrowed my eyes. Parvati had mentioned ‘terrorists,’ but I still did not understand what was happening outside my little world…

If Harry had somehow rallied followers…

He was becoming more and more like Voldemort.

Hopelessness…it was all I could feel as I sat with Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, hiding in the forest until it was light enough to return to the remains of their home. Harry possibly had the Time-Turners, and the Invisibility Cloak was most likely ash…

And Malfoy…Malfoy…the Malfoy I had kissed…the Malfoy I had wanted…

He could not be dead, and I could not go on without his help.
The sunrise was bright, and by the time we emerged from the trees at the back paddock of the stables, the day was proving to be as lovely as the one before. Not even the birds singing, the warmer wind blowing, or the majestic blue of the sky could overrule the scent of fire and ash coming from the Manor however.

Stopping before the stables, I slid off the back of Lucius’ horse, my feet alighting softly into the ground just beside the bodies of two men. Narcissa stayed on her horse, loosening the lead rope she used as reigns so that her mount could sniff at the ground and take a mouthful of grass. Lucius jumped down from his Arabian, holding the reigns to walk to stand next to me.

The two men had been placed side by side, dressed in what looked like everyday clothes under a thick black cloak, but my eyes fell to a patch sewn on the inside of their cloaks. The patches were crudely made, and there were only dark red letters upon a heraldic shaped white shield.

W.A.T.C.H. It seemed to be an acronym of an organisation, for both men wore the patch.

The man closest to me on the ground was about my age, it seemed, but I did not recognise his face. The second man was older with white tufts of hair about his temples, but I did not recognise him either. It was obvious that a Killing Curse had struck both men down, but from the scorch marks on the front of the stable, it seemed that they had begun to attempt to burn the structure to my right to ash.

“Not familiar?” Lucius asked.

I shook my head. “What is W.A.T.C.H.?”

Lucius sighed. “I’m not exactly sure of the name, but I think it is: Wizards (or Witches) Against Tyranny, Corruption, and…something that begins with an ‘h,’ maybe ‘hubris,’ or ‘hauteur,’ or something of the sort.”

I frowned, committing both faces to memory. “Vigilantes?”
“Yes. Vigilantes who had turned ‘terrorist.’ They have not just attacked exonerated Death Eaters and former corrupt Ministry officials, but innocents as well. There was an attack in Glasgow…”

“Yes, I heard about it. W.A.T.C.H. was responsible?”

Lucius nodded, glancing back to Narcissa whose horse was walking as it willed, but Narcissa watching us closely from a distance.

“Perhaps ‘Cissa and I will go up to the stables and try the Floo there…”

“Wait,” I said softly, raising my hand up from my side.

Lucius cocked his head and studied me.

“Before calling the Ministry…we should search the Manor. I need to find…” I began, but stopped, flicking my eyes away from the two dead men.

“I read your meaning perfectly, Miss Granger.”

I frowned, and looked up into Lucius’ face. He was grinning…and it unsettled me.

“There are some things that need to be done to the Manor before the Ministry arrives, certain heirlooms that need to be moved…”

I, surprisingly, sighed in relief. Lucius was not one I would trust far, but he was astute…and very Slytherin.

Lucius pulled me up behind him as we three rode toward the Manor through the gardens, taking the arboretum path so that we arrived just outside the kitchens.

In the small kitchen garden, several elves were moving about, arranging at least eight more bodies on the grass. The kitchen itself was intact while the Manor seemed to have been cleft down the middle, the foyer and the more central rooms open to the sky, only a small bit of smoke rising
upward. The far ends of the Manor were untouched, as if the flame was only concerned with devouring the middle of the large structure.

I, again, slid off the back of Lucius’ horse, moving to the row of bodies. Narcissa and Lucius were behind me, Lucius speaking with one of the elves while Narcissa stood by close. My heart pounding, I slipped my hand into hers, and together we walked down the row of bodies, looking at their faces.

“That’s Aubrey Quinn…” Narcissa whispered, pointing to a middle aged wizard with brown hair in the middle of the row. His face was posed, his eyes shut, but I knew he had been struck by a Killing Curse. “Many years ago, in the dark times, Lucius threatened his family if they did not support a motion he was pushing through the courts…two years ago Lucius repaid the Quinn family by making Aubrey a clerk in the lower courts… Aubrey was Lord Quinn’s only son…and not very bright. The Quinns were lesser gentry, and were poor…”

Narcissa did not continue as we moved on. She mentioned more names, none of which I recognised. However, at the very end of the row, one of only three I had seen, was a witch…a witch I recognised.

“It’s Cho Chang…” I whispered, my shoulders shaking.

Part of her hair lovely black hair was burnt away, and her right ear melted by fire, but the damage was post-mortem. She had died from a Killing curse, it seemed. I had not seen Cho for years, not since the Last Battle. She seemed to disappear off the face of the earth after the War, but I had always known that she had grown bitter after Cedric’s death and Harry’s rejection of her advances. I never would have imagined that she would be part of a terrorist organisation…but it did not shock me as deeply as I thought it would either.

“Her mother still works for the Ministry…dear Merlin…I wonder if Lin knew?”

I shook my head, I had not known much about Cho in years, and even less as of late.

Ten bodies so far, and I wondered if there were others in the burnt rubble inside the Manor. Narcissa and I returned to Lucius where he was kneeling down to speak to the one elf whose name I knew…Squeak.

Rising to his feet, Lucius turned to us and said, “There are no more bodies in the Manor.”
Narcissa swooned and I caught her before she fell. Lucius rushed forward and pulled his wife to her feet and I released her, not having the strength to hold her long.

“Draco?” Narcissa whispered through tears.

I studied Lucius’ face. “The elves have not found him…”

My lips trembled. Hope…a small spark, but hope nonetheless.

“Miss Granger, Squeak will take you inside. I’ll be following in a moment.”

I nodded, and turned my attentions to the small elf waiting nearby. The elf and I locked eyes, and I could see that the creature was shaking, not from fear or shock, but from anger. The anger was not directed toward me, but at the bodies lying on the grass behind me.

“Miss will hold Squeak’s hand,” the elf said swiftly, the squeaky namesake absent from the elf’s voice.

I nodded again, bending down to grasp the long fingers of the elf’s hand, and suddenly, with a pop, we were in the foyer, just before the front doors. I had to gasp to catch my breath, the elfish Apparition so abrupt that it had taken the air from my lungs. Even the elf seemed a bit shaken, and I wondered if there was still some residual warding the damaged Manor. I pulled my hand away and straightened, unsure if I recognised anything I was seeing.

Part of the marble floor was missing, having fallen down into what I assumed were the dungeons and cellars below. I had never been in the Malfoy dungeons, although I remembered what Harry and Ron told me years ago. Smoke was still rising from below and the metallic stone odor of burnt rock assaulted my nose.

Before me was what remained of the grand staircase, the wooden stairs reaching only as high as the second floor, but the landing was burnt away. I could not use the stairs to ascend. Sunlight streamed into the debris-strewn foyer, roof beams having falling down into the cleft, glass from shattered windows littered what was left of the marble floor.
It reminded me of scenes from Muggle television, of tornadoes ripping through the middle of houses in America. My father liked those sorts of programmes for an odd reason. However, no tornado had ripped through Malfoy Manor, it had been enchanted fire.

I started to move, the elf close by me, moving as gingerly as possible, afraid that the floor might give way under my bare feet and I would fall into the smoking dungeons below. I frowned at my feet, and drawing my walnut wand, placed a Charm on my them so that the debris on the floor would not hurt me.

On either sides, the wooden walls had burnt away, and I could see into destroyed rooms, all the way into Lucius’ study on one side, and a grand dining room on the other. The second and third floors were much the same, but I realised as I shielded my eyes from the sunlight, the fire had not reached my third floor chambers…and my small spark of hope turned into a small fire inside my chest.

I leapt over a particularly large hole in the floor so that I came to the terminus of the stairs, looking up toward the destroyed third floor corridor leading to my room. I lowered my gaze to the stairs and bit my lip, my eyes traveling down the scorched rug over the wooden steps.

However, my eyes paused on the landing between the first and second floors, and before I thought about the structural integrity of the stairs, I flew up to the landing, falling to my knees.

The elf had stayed at the bottom of the stairs, and I was thankful for its discretion for before me was the goblin-warded box, resting upon a intact piece of rug.

The box was coated in caramelised bloody handprints, and I could smell burnt flesh coming from the surface. I shook…it did not seem as though the latch had been opened. With trembling hands I tapped the box lightly, waiting for some kind of hex to burn my hands as well. I knew the fire could not have produced such bloody handprints, and the box’s enchantment were the culprit.

The wards only hummed when I touched it, and I moved my fingers to the latch, the lead popping open at my touch. Whoever had touched the box was probably sporting hands burnt down to the bone. I could not begin to understand why the goblin formed lead had allowed me to touch it or open it, but it had. And I hesitated to open the lid.

Taking a deep breath, I moved. The hinges gave a low squeal as the lid opened…and I looked down into the box, my face crumpling.
There was only one Time-Turner in the box, when there should have been two…

Hope was dashed.

A cry passed my lips as I looked around me for the second device, seeing nothing.

*Control yourself, Miss Granger, you will attract attention…* Severus whispered.

I heeded his words as I stared at the left most Time-Turner. The device looked to be intact, but just to be sure, I carefully lifted it out of the casing. I blinked as I realised that underneath the Time-Turner was a hidden indentation, and set into the indentation was a silver disc engraved around the edges with decorative waves, and oddly enough, dolphins. The face of the disc was blank and as I ran a finger over it, the metal hummed. I had a good idea what the disc was, but could not be certain until I studied it. However, I knew, even if one Time-Turner was gone, I would know if or when it would be used.

“Thank Merlin for madness,” I whispered, placing the Time-Turner back into its casing, gently shutting the lid and fastening the latch so that the box hummed under my hands, and the caramelised blood and pieces of skin seemed to peel away, leaving the lead unmarked, the runes moving under my fingers.

I sat for a while, my palms against the lead. Harry must have somehow managed to open the box and take one of the Time-Turners. Because he had not both lead me to believe that either the fire in the Manor, or the box itself, led to a hasty removal of the device. I grinned malevolently, I could not help myself… Harry took one device, but not all that would keep me from following him if I needed to…

“I love being a know-it-all,” I hissed, taking the box into my arms, and hugging it tight against my chest.

I began moving up the stairs again, the elf finally taking the cue to follow. I came to the remains of the second floor landing, finding that it was not very stable, and that a gap of at least six metres spanned between the edge of the landing and the corridors on either side.

Only one corridor was blocked by the floor of the ceiling and corridor floor above…and that was where Malfoy had pushed Narcissa out of the way to save her from being trapped.
“Squeak will lighten Granger’s feet!” the elf exclaimed. “Master Draco might be there!” Squeak pointed with a clawed finger to the debris.

I nodded, and suddenly my body felt like it weigh nothing at all, only the lead box in my arms having any weight…but not enough to make me fall.

Rising up to my toes with my left foot, I kicked off the floor with my right, making the wood of the landing groan slightly.

I floated, my body rising up in a low arc, so that when I began to float down, my toes landed on the thick carpet of the corridor, the floor sound. I turned back to Squeak who was watching intently. I wondered why the elf had not followed, but I was more concerned with removing the debris that blocked my way further into the unburned portion of the Manor.

I pulled the Elder Wand, not fearing that Lucius would somehow see it, or the elf mention it. I came to the debris and looking up, could see into the corridor above.

With a violent motion, I cast a spell that would neatly piled the boards and burnt debris on either side of the wide corridor, providing a path for me to move forward. As boards and pieces of rug flew past my face, I prepared myself with thoughts of healing Charms…just in case.

However, as the last of the debris was moved, I found no one under the mess, or behind it… I blinked, running down the corridor, throwing open doors. “Malfoy!” I yelled, but found that every room left intact was empty, and there were no traces that anyone had been in most of the rooms during the fire.

I cast a ‘Homenum revelio’ for any human life, but found none.

Malfoy had somehow managed to escape the Manor, possibly. And my spell did not detect life, but there were no bodies.

I returned to the edge of the burnt corridor where Squeak was waiting across the wide gap.

“He’s not here,” I said softly, my eyes moving the foyer below.
“Master Draco is not here,” the elf repeated in its squeaky tones. “On the grounds…”

I clenched my jaw. “I will look…but I have to go up to my rooms, Squeak…”

“Squeak understands,” the elf said, moving its clawed hands so that again I felt as if I weighed nothing.

I took a determined breath, my eyes fixed upon my goal across the open cleft of the Manor to the corridor above. I held the lead box tightly as I leapt, the momentum of my body propelling me upward, drifting faster than before. I did not take my eyes from the spot I intended to land, and as I neared I knew that I was not going to make it.

I grunted, throwing the box with a wince into the corridor, drawing the Elder Wand and casting a spell to propel me faster…

I found myself rolling in somersaults into the third floor corridor, and with as much grace as I could muster, I rolled to land on my feet just beside the lead box.

“Mistress?” a concerned elf voice called to me. I strode back to the edge of the corridor to see Squeak’s wide eyes staring up at me.

“I’m fine. Go to your Master, and tell him that his son is not in the Manor.”

The elf bowed, and began to run down the stairs and out of sight. I wondered why the elf did not Apparate us both up into the Manor…and why the Apparition into the house was almost painful. Perhaps the Anti-Apparition wards Lucius had mentioned during the attack had prevented even the elves from moving about freely.

I shook my thoughts away and ran to the box, opening it again to be certain that my tossing it had not damaged the device inside. I was pleased to find that the box had protected the Time-Turner and that I had not ruined any chance to stop Harry…

Moving to the doors of my room, I found that the only devastation I could see was smoke damage and striding through the opened doors I also found the pristine white of the room was stained black with smoke high on the walls. Everything else was unburned. However…the room was not as it had been.
The bed, mattress, and end tables were destroyed. The wardrobe was pushed over, clothes spilling out onto the rug...and the bathroom...green marble blasted into shards that led all the way into the bedroom. The room had been ransacked.

I sighed. Somehow the people who attacked knew which room to search. A niggling suspicion formed in my mind, but I tucked it away, as I turned all around, looking at the destruction.

When my eyes alighted upon my old coat, a cry passed my lips. It seemed that it had not been noticed resting near the doors so that when the doors had been forced open, it was hidden. I fell to my knees again, taking up the coat in my arms, setting the box aside, I hugged and cried into the worn leather. And remembering, dug my hands into the bottomless pocket to find...

The Invisibility Cloak.

“Thank Merlin...” I breathed. No one had noticed the coat, no one knew that the Cloak was inside. Somehow, even though one of the Time-Turners had been taken, I was not so unlucky.

“Mreow?”

I froze at the sound of my familiar’s call, and I dropped the coat, casting my sight about until I saw two silver luminous eyes peering out from under the mattress, pulled from the bed and shredded.

“Oh Merlin!” I breathed, climbing to my feet to run to where my familiar was. I threw the mattress back to find my silver cat lying on his side, another pitiful call coming from his mouth.

I drew the Elder Wand again, running the tip over my familiar, finding that the only injury he had sustained was a crushed left paw. I could not imagine how my cat had come to be hiding in my room when he had spent most of his time in the dungeons or in Lucius’ study, but as I healed the tiny bones of his paw, his cries bringing tears to my eyes, all I cared about was the fact that he had survived...I had forgotten about him...and I felt guilty.

When he was healed, I took Malfoy in my arms, stroking his fur, and cooing to him. He smelled like smoke, and it seemed that he was mortified, his heart beating so fast that I was afraid for his health.
“My poor darling…my poor baby,” I whispered into his ear, holding him close.

It seemed that the sound my voice calmed him, and soon he was purring and smelling my face.

“I am so sorry, my darling…” I cried, rubbing behind his ear. “I’ll take you out of here…”

I stood, setting Malfoy on the overturned mattress and summoned the coat and box, applying the old worn leather and shoving the goblin-warded lead inside. Then, I dug for the shrunken haversack in the pocket and pulled it out, enlarging it. I opened the haversack and pointing to the clothes falling out of the wardrobe, bespelled the blouses, skirts, slacks, jumpers, socks, underwear and shoes to ‘pack’ into the haversack. Closing and shrinking the bag again, I stuffed it in my pocket.

Finally, I took my familiar in my hands and slipped him into the regular pocket, which was still big enough to hold him comfortably. Malfoy the cat stuck his narrow face out from the pocket and watched as we strode from the room and into the corridor. I let my fingers brush over his head as we came to the edge of the destroyed passage.

I sighed, casting another charm so that I took a small leap out from the corridor and floated across the gap and down, my toes using the second floor corridor to push off again, across the gap to the remaining stairs. I found Lucius waiting for me at the base of the stairs and into the ruined foyer.

“I see you found that infernal cat of yours,” he commented, his pale eyes gazing to the small head peeking out of my pocket. His voice was not nearly as harsh as it usually seemed, and I could feel my familiar purring heavily against my thigh where the pocket rested.

“He had a crushed paw, but he seems fine,” I said softly.

Lucius nodded and met my eyes. “Draco is not in the Manor at all, Squeak tells me.”

I nodded in affirmation.

“Find some shoes, Miss Granger, you will have to search the grounds. Narcissa is indisposed…she is resting in the kitchens.
I will be calling the Ministry in a few moments…”

“I understand. I’ll go quickly.”

Lucius’ lips quirked. “Do that, Miss Granger.”

I had left my familiar to sit on Narcissa’s lap in the kitchens, giving her a distraction from the destruction around her. I had found the kitchens the same as they had always been, Narcissa informing me that every time the Manor had burned only the kitchens had survived unscathed.

“It is the oldest part of the house…” she said softly.

Her face conveyed her exhaustion and sorrow. I knew she was still keenly aware of what was going on, but she knew she could do nothing to help matters. Narcissa contented herself to stay in the kitchens while I slid onto a pair of slippers I had found near the door leading out into the garden. I believed the slippers to be Narcissa’s at first, but they fit perfectly on my sore feet.

With a soft word that I was going to check the other gardens, Narcissa tried to smile.

“Hermione, dear, please be careful…” she said softly, and my face seemed to want to crumple again as I began out the door.

Part of me wanted to stay with Narcissa and my familiar. All of us, Lucius included, had had a shock. The Malfoys with the attack on their lovely home, and I with the discovery that one of the Time-Turners were gone.

I was becoming tired, but I ran along the cobbled path into the gardens and to the hedge maze. I drew my walnut wand just to be safe. I would have to kill or capture any one left of the W.A.T.C.H. group…if they were still on the grounds.

Malfoy had not been in the Manor, and it gave me hope. The only place I could think to look was
the centre of the hedge maze and the Japanese gardens that Narcissa had said only the day before Malfoy had enjoyed.

My legs were cramping as I ran into the maze, my mind whirling. I did not know the way to the centre, but I ran all the same. At the point that I believed to be halfway, I came upon two figures lying on the pebbled path.

I skidded to a halt, gasping my breath.

A man was lying across the path, but the lower half was resting a way from his upper half. I slapped my left hand over my mouth as I saw that intestines ran like bloody ribbons between the portions. He had been blasted in half.

He was dressed just like the others I had seen, with the tale-tell patch sewn into his cloak. His face was a portrait of agony, his mouth open, his eyes wide, but I did not recognise his face. He, like many of others, was middle-aged.

I swallowed my vomit as I leapt over his body to the second…a woman.

I fell into the hedge, bending over to let vomit come up from deep inside, at the sight of gore, I could hold it back no longer. I spat and sobbed, the image of her face…or what was left of it burnt into my corneas. She had once had blond hair, but since half of her head was blasted away, I could not know for certain who she was, but her right eye was a dark brown.

When no more bile would come, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, casting a cleansing charm over me. And then, without properly looking, I Conjured thin blankets so that they fell over the worst of the gore. I did not want to have to look at these people again. My last image of the scene was the bloodstained pebbles, and I continued running.

I did not come across any more bodies, but I had reached the centre of the maze. The sunlight streaming from behind a puffy white cloud, lighting the garden in serene Oriental beauty seemed to be misplaced after seeing so much destruction and death. In the garden I could not smell the burnt remains of the Manor, and I wondered if I had somehow stepped into some enchanted Shangri-la…

I moved toward the central gazebo, but paused as I saw a breath of wind disturb silver locks, just visible over the railing of the shaded structure. I forced myself into a run again, my light shoes
slipping in the pebbles as I moved between two koi ponds and up two wooden steps to the wide platform.

The table and chairs rested as they had the day before, but in the hammock on the other side of the platform lay the man whom I had worried for the most.

The hammock swayed gently in the wind, and Malfoy’s left arm was dangling from the edge, the tip of Severus’ wand dragging against the wooden floor. I approached slowly, seeing that Malfoy had somehow lashed the wand to his hand. I gasped as I realised why. The bones of his left hand had been shattered, splinters poking through the skin at every conceivable angle.

Coming around to the side of the hammock, I looked down at Malfoy. His clothing from the day before was singed, bloody, and torn. There was blood staining the white right sleeve of his shirt, and in his hand was Tom Riddle’s yew wand, barely held in his soot-blackened fingers. His hair was a mess of ash, blood, and what looked to be brain matter most likely from the woman in the maze. His face was coated in blood as well, but I could not tell if it was his or that of someone else. The eye patch over his ruined eye seemed to be the only unscathed part about him.

The bandage on his chest was bloody, and I could discern that the wound had reopened. But what concerned me most was the puddle of blood under the hammock, coming from his right thigh. A piece of splintered wood had impaled his leg, seeming to enter from the right side, and coming out the inside of his thigh. The blood had stopped, and the puddle underneath had already began to congeal.

I had to move him. I had to remove the splinter, I had to see if the leg were getting the proper blood flow…

Merlin, I wished I spent more time studying battlefield medicine!

Malfoy’s breathing was normal, but he shivered as I Levitated him from the hammock to the nearest chair. He sat with his chin on his chest, his arms falling past the arms of the chair limply.

The first thing I did was pull the yew wand from his stiffened fingers, placing it on the table behind me. I then cast a cleansing Charm over his face and hair, relieved to find that none of the blood was his own.

I decided to handle the splinter in his leg first, and kneeling down at his muddy boots, I grasped
the tattered leg of his trousers, and using a pre-existing rip, tore the fabric up his leg to his knee. I winced as I tore the pant leg a bit more so that it did not jar the splinter so I could see his leg just past the wound.

I felt his leg, checking the pulse further down the limb, finding it strong. I moved my head to look closely at the splinter. Blood had dried as it had flowed down the back of the pale haired calf, down into his riding boot. It did not seem that any vital vessels had been damaged...only tissue damage.

I sat back on my haunches. Perhaps it would be best if I waited for a Healer. I knew Lucius was surely greeting the Aurors at the Manor at that moment.

I sighed, standing, moving to his right arm, trying to determine how the sleeve was so darkly stained. I needed him conscious...he could tell me how he had been injured...

I moved around the back of the chair to his left arm and the wand lashed to his crushed hand. I knew I could fix the damage easily. During the Last Battle, I had repaired similar injuries many times, and with a whispered incantation, I watched as the bones slipped back through the skin and knitted together. The skin sealed and Malfoy’s fingers jerked.

I jumped as Malfoy took a deep, gasping breath, his head falling back against the chair, his left eye opening wide.

“Malfoy!” I breathed, rushing around the chair to stand before him.

Malfoy began coughing, and I Conjured a glass of water for him, but seeing that his right arm did not want to move and that he had Severus’ wand still lashed to his left hand, I helped him drink in sips, his left eye watching me closely.

Setting the glass near the yew wand, I bent down to look at Malfoy evenly.

“Granger...” he whispered, his voice still course even after the water.

“You’re alright, Malfoy...but I need to know...”
“Mother! Father!” he shouted suddenly, trying to push himself to his feet, but fell back into the chair with a pained groan.

I took a breath, and leaning forward, resting my hands upon the arms of the chair, I spoke.

“They are fine. They found me and we waited in the forest until dawn. Your mother was sitting in the kitchen with my cat, and your father was calling the Ministry when I left.”

Malfoy’s concern seemed to lessen at my words, but his eye was not focused, and pointing toward the direction of the Manor.

“The others…?”

“Dead or gone. I counted twelve dead,” I whispered.

“Eight escaped.”

Twenty in all? It seemed to be a bit much to kill the Malfoys and myself, but then again, it seemed that the Malfoys were incredibly hard to kill.

“Malfoy, I need to know where you are injured…your wound has reopened, and I am not sure if I should remove the splinter…I haven’t even looked at your right arm yet,” I said with a untended sob.

Malfoy closed his eye for a moment, and lifted his left hand to me. “Get this lash off, Granger.”

I complied, eventually setting Severus’ wand next to the yew counterpart.

“My arm’s broken…” he whispered, lacking the strength to speak louder. “You need to set it first then heal it…”

I straightened, blinking. I moved to his right shoulder and with a swift motion that made Malfoy grunt, ripped the sleeve at the shoulder so that the fabric slipped off his arm. I took a shaking
breath at the sight of his upper arm, a shard of bone sticking out through the skin of his inner arm and muscle.

“When the ceiling fell…it hit my arm…” he supplied. “Now set it!” he hissed through clenched teeth.

I, again, complied.

Malfoy’s scream echoed through me, and I was sobbing as I began healing the arm and the tissue. I was surprised that Malfoy had not fainted. I had been close myself.

He flexed his hand when I had finished, and raised his arm only to wince, his left hand going to the wound on his chest. I moved forward, helping him to lower his arm. I ripped at the front of his shirt, peeling away the bandage on the front, and then forcing him to lean forward, found that his back was nearly healed.

“ Took a Stunner to the chest…” he grunted, his hands grasping the arms of the chair.

I nodded as I helped him to sit back. Again, I healed him with the Elder Wand until the wound closed completely so that the skin was unmarked and his pain lessened.

“What about your leg, Malfoy…I’m not sure what to do…” I said pathetically.

Malfoy stared down his patrician nose at the splinter impaling his right leg. “It looks like a bit of wainscoting from the first floor…I must have done that when I fell into the dungeons.”

I stared at him incredulously, but knelt down to study his leg again. I told him that I did not think there was an vascular damage, but I was not sure what to do…

“I pull it out, you heal it. Simple enough for you, Granger?” he sneered.

I stared at him, mouth open for a moment and then glared. “You have lost quite a bit of blood, Malfoy…”
“Fuck it, Granger. I need to be able to walk back to the Manor!”

“I can Levitate you, Malfoy…”

He growled, his hand grasping the shoulder of my coat, pulling me toward him. “Just do as I say, Granger…and then I can get you transferred to another safe house!”

I blinked, my face only inches from his. “Are you in such a hurry to get rid of me, Malfoy?” I whispered.

He sneered. “If you had not been here, I might still have my home, Granger,” he hissed, every word dripping with a venom I had not heard in years.

I jerked free of his grasp and straightened. My eyes felt as if they were on fire as I stared down at him, slowly taking steps back and away. His face was a combination of pain from his wounds and anger…which was pointed toward me at that moment.

“Where are you going, Granger? Get over here!” he snarled, his hands clutching the chair again.

I shook my head, my filthy hair falling around my face and body. “Heal yourself, Malfoy…” I whispered, my back falling against one of the Orient green posts. “I have been such a burden to you and your parents, I think it is best I go now.”

Malfoy’s face froze, his brows knitted over his ruined and gleaming silver eye. “What the hell are you talking about, Granger. Get over here!”

“No. I’ll fetch someone for you, Malfoy. I’ve done enough.”

I turned and walked slowly down the steps to the pebbled path.

“Granger!”
I moved around the ponds to the original passage I had used to reach the garden.

“I need you, Granger!”

I froze just as I came upon the passage that would lead me back. His voice had a hint of desperation, and that was what made me pause.

“Granger…”

He sounded weaker, and I turned to find that he had managed to rise from the chair, and using his left leg, limp to the railing of the gazebo, his hands supporting his weight as he stared after me.

I took a few steps back toward him, but froze again as I came to the path leading to the raised platform.

“I want to ask you something, Draco Malfoy,” I called. He could only stare at me, his lips trembling from the pain.

“I will answer only if you help me.”

“I know. But you’ll answer my question first.”

He seemed to consider for a few moment, and then answered, weaker than before.

“Very well…”

I hastened up the path to the gazebo, grasping his left arm, pushed him down into the chair again, kneeling before him and drawing the Elder Wand.

“When has ethics…” I began, my left hand wrapping around the thickest part of the splinter. “…ever…” I readied myself to pull, Malfoy was growing too weak to pull it out himself. “…meant so much to you?”
I pulled with all my strength, what little there was, but the splinter came out intact, and a simple spell on the wound sanitised and pushed out any other foreign objects from the hole. Malfoy had shouted when I pulled the bit of wood out. I winced as his hands cracked the wood of the arms of the chair he sat in.

I dropped the splinter to the floor and immediately moved to begin knitting the tissue with magic, and close the wound.

I, too, was beginning to feel fatigued. I was pouring great deals of my magic into healing Malfoy, and I knew that I could not heal the wound entirely. The muscle tissue had been repaired, but I would have to wrap the leg and wait until later to heal the skin and few layers underneath.

“You did not answer my question, Malfoy,” I said in a whisper, Conjuring clean bandages from the tip of the Elder Wand.

I swayed where I knelt as I began to gently wrap his thigh. My eyelids were growing heavier as I tried to keep the tightness consistent.

“The ethics question?” he asked softly.

I nodded, tearing the bandage to tie it…but a hand rested over mine, stopping my motion. I did not have the energy to lift my face.

“You are asking that because of what I said yesterday?”

I hummed, my eyes beginning to close.

I heard him sigh, using his hand to gently push mine aside so he could tie the bandage himself, my forehead fell against his other knee, my arms falling to the floor so that the backs of my palms rested on the wood.

“I could care less about ethics, Granger, or departmental codes.”
“Then…why?” I mumbled, feeling the last bit of energy drain away.

His hand rested upon my head, and I heard him stifle a chuckle, apparently at the dirtiness of my hair. But then he sighed, the sound of the chair cracking slightly telling me that he as finally beginning to relax.

“I told you before, Granger. I am not a good man…and you are a good woman. Too good for my tastes.”

I said nothing for Malfoy’s words barely registered. I was slipping into an exhausted sleep, a sleep with no dreams to entrap me…

I do not know how long I slept, but it could only have been a few minutes for Malfoy roused me, and I saw Kingsley Shacklebolt and, surprisingly, Charlie Weasley standing on the steps of the platform.

I stretched quickly, my neck very stiff, and rose to my feet as Kingsley and Charlie came forward.

“Charlie? What are you doing here?” I asked in astonishment, covertly checking to see that my wands were safely hidden in my sleeve.

Charlie looked just as I remembered him…ginger hair, sapphire eyes, ruddy complexion, wide shoulders, thick arms…dressed in strange dragon hide clothing that reminded me of body armor, and a cloak of deep green over his shoulders.

“Answering the call, Hermione. Have you been injured?”

I shook my head, gaping slightly. I did not understand what Charlie meant by ‘answering the call.’

Kingsley glanced warmly at me and quickly moved to Malfoy.

“You’ve been to the Manor, I assume?” I heard Malfoy ask as Kingsley moved to examine the wound in Malfoy’s leg.
“Williamson and the others are there... Flint is looking at the bodies in the maze,” Kingsley said, nodding his bald head, apparently satisfied with the state of Malfoy’s nearly healed wounds.

Malfoy pushed himself up, and applying a little pressure to his right leg, smirked at me before picking up his wands and shoving one into either pocket of his trousers.

“Why aren’t you in hiding?” I asked Charlie, turning to the second oldest Weasley son.

“Hiding? I’ve been...”

Malfoy seemed to hiss, causing Charlie’s voice to trail. I frowned, glancing to Malfoy who was glaring at Charlie as if to kill.

“Granger, now is not the time...” Malfoy growled, and I took a breath to purge my frustration.

“We’ve come to collect you,” Kingsley said abruptly, his deep voice breaking the sudden tension. “Williamson is taking statements from your parents now, Malfoy. We will need a statement from you as well... and Hermione, whenever you are ready.”

Malfoy limped past me and Charlie to the steps. Kingsley followed, then Charlie, but I hesitated in the shade of the gazebo. Once again, I found myself, in a span of less than twenty-four hours, totally confused at what was happening around me.

I moved just before I lost sight of the three men, my body still not ready to move as quickly as I needed it to, and protesting with a cramp in my gut when I pushed my legs to keep up. Malfoy limped quickly along the pebbled path, whispering to Charlie, apparently angry by the tone of his indistinct voice. Kingsley skipped a pace to fall in beside me as we walked.

Coming upon the bodies I had passed earlier, I saw that Flint and a witch with cropped blond hair were working to move the bodies back to the Manor. Flint nodded to me as we passed, and I tried not look at the puddle of sick I had left between the torn body of the man and the dead woman.

When we finally reached the kitchen of the Manor, I was about to faint. Kingsley quickly helped me to sit in the nook next Narcissa, who threw an arm about my shoulders and pulled me close so
that we could lean into each other.

The kitchen was crowded with elves and people…and Narcissa and I watched them, their voices too loud and too numerous to understand what was going on. Lucius stood at the far end of the kitchen talking with Williamson, both men occasionally glancing in the direction of the nook. There were other Aurors, some coming in from the burnt Manor while others I could see outside the windows, examining the bodies. At some later point I saw that Flint and the female police officer had brought the bodies from the maze into the kitchen garden…two other officers I did not recognise delivered the bodies from outside the stables.

Malfoy was sitting on one of the worktables, his face contorted angrily as he spoke to Alastor Gumboil and Charlie Weasley. He would turn his eye to me often as my head rested upon Narcissa’s soot covered shoulder.

My familiar was sleeping on Narcissa’s lap, and Narcissa herself was dozing, her cheek against the top of my head. I was sure that the two of us made for an odd picture…filthy, exhausted, holding each other like mother and daughter, but no one seemed to mind, only look at us from time to time with faces ranging from sympathetic to deeply concerned.

As the day wore on, I was able to shut my eyes into a dreamless nap, comforted by Narcissa’s embrace. However, when sunset came, Lucius woke us gently, telling us that we were going to leave the Manor.

“To where?” I asked, rubbing my eyes with my fist, finding that Aurors and police officers were still moving in and out of the kitchen, and that parchments, maps, and bottles of butterbeer littered the kitchen counters and worktables.

“Shacklebolt will be taking Narcissa to the bothy on the far side of the fields. It is protected, concealed in a vale, I will be joining her later.

You, Miss Granger…Charlie Weasley is taking you back to the groom’s quarters…”

I frowned at Lucius as he knelt next to Narcissa. As if seeing that I was a bit confused and still disoriented from my nap, Lucius continued.

“Draco has told me that you wanted to move to another safe house…he won’t allow it. Draco will be with you in the groom’s quarters, and several new wards will be placed. He can explain it to
Come, my love,” Lucius whispered to Narcissa, a gentle hand caressing her cheek, “It has been ages since we’ve been to the bothy…Leak is already there preparing it for us…”

Narcissa took a breath, and with a squeeze, she entangled her arm from about me, rising with her left hand in her husband’s. My familiar followed her from under the table.

“Where’s Draco?” she asked softly. “Won’t he see to Hermione?”

“Charlie Weasley will do that, my love,” Lucius purred, his face softening as he looked at his wife. And then turning to me again, “Thank you for taking care of Draco, Miss Granger…”

I nodded as Lucius led a sleepy Narcissa to the kitchen door out into the gardens. My familiar followed her and she bent down to take the cat in her arms. I did not mind that my familiar was keeping Narcissa distracted, I myself was too distracted to stay awake.

Narcissa turned to me and smiled, her mouth moving to form the words ‘thank you.’ I could see from my seat both Malfoys moving through the warm sunset lit garden, to meet Kingsley who took Narcissa’s arm in his and led her through the hedge and out of sight. Lucius did not reenter the kitchen, but began speaking to Flint over the bodies of the dead.

“Hermione?” a familiar voice asked, and I looked up and before the table in the nook to find Charlie Weasley staring down at me. “You look like you could use a good rest.”

His face broke into a smile that I found so comforting.

“You could say that…” I whispered.

“I’m supposed to take you to the stables…you’ll have to show me the way,” Charlie said with a laugh as I began to remove myself from the nook.

“I can do that, if you’ll tell me why you’re here, Charlie.”
Charlie’s smile faltered as I took his arm and moved to the kitchen doors and away from the sounds of the other people in the room.

“I suppose I can do that, Hermione.”

I glanced one last time to the row of bodies, and to Lucius who nodded to me as Charlie and I walked along the cobbled path. When we had cleared the hedge and was well into the first garden, he spoke.

“You have heard of the Interpol in the Muggle world?” Charlie asked, beginning slowly.

“Yes.”

“The organisation I belong to is similar. My particular affiliation is aptly called the ‘Dragon Riders,’ and ever since the War…well a little before the War, we have been tracking international terrorist organisations. Some organisations had direct ties to Voldemort outside of Britain, other terrorists organisations began to follow Voldemort’s example, or began in opposition of Voldemort…as vigilante groups.”

We moved into the second garden, the flowers glowing in the red sky of the late day.

“Like W.A.T.C.H.”

“Exactly.”

I licked my lips. “That’s why you’re here.”

Charlie nodded, his ginger hair almost the colour of blood in the light. His face was set, serious and grave.

“You did not go into hiding with your family because you have been working?”
Charlie nodded again. “Ron would have been here…at every scene, if Harry had not targeted him…and killed George…”

Charlie’s voice was tight when he said Harry and George’s name, and I could tell that there was not only sadness in Charlie, but vengeful anger as well. Charlie was a very strong man, not just because he had a sturdier build, or that he had worked with dragons, but because he could keep his emotions in check. I had never gotten well acquainted with Charlie, he being away so much, and usually inundated with other people’s attentions when he was in Britain. But I liked Charlie, I trusted Charlie, and as we moved into the arboretum, I was thankful for Charlie’s presence.

“How are you getting on with Malfoy?”

I slowed my pace, pulling my hand from his arm. Charlie turned, his sapphire eyes questioning.

“I don’t want to talk about Malfoy, just yet, Charlie… There’s something I want to know first.”

Charlie breathed in through his nose, and flicked his eyes to the cobbled path.

“I think I already know what you’re going to ask Hermione…”


“Yes…”

Charlie stuffed his hands into the pockets of his dragon hide trousers, which cost more than I made in a year, I was sure.

“If you think about it, Hermione, is it so hard to believe that people would rally to Harry?”

“But he’s killed innocent people, Charlie. He’s mad…”

“Not everyone sees it that way, luv. People outside of Britain still remember him as the Boy-Who-Lived…the boy who defeated Voldemort. Even some people inside the country love him blindly
because he defeated their concept of ‘evil.’ Fanatics, extremists, and so many others have used Harry ever since he started to Hogwarts…and now when things are still so unstable, when the Ministry is reforming and the Old Corruption is being purged, people are doing, and believing things, they would not have believed or done before…

Harry has always been a sharp guy. Even if he is mad, he knows how to manipulate people to achieve a desired end. In this case, he has had some inside help, someone who is very familiar with the Malfoys, and that is what concerns us most.

Williamson and Malfoy have kept me apprised of all that has been happening with Harry. And by looking at the order of events…he needed a group to help him…and the W.A.T.C.H. was the perfect fit.”

I sighed, and shoved my hands into my pockets, my left hand brushing against the Invisibility Cloak.

“Narcissa knew some of them, and I recognised Cho Chang, but who were the others?”

Charlie stepped to my side and took my arm again, pulling my right hand from the pocket to envelop it in the warmth of his side.

“Swedish, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Russian witches and wizards…all with strong ties to Britain. All with a reason to hate the Malfoys. That was what Harry probably used to motive them.”

I nodded. I could not tell Charlie that it was not the only reason why the Manor had been attacked.

We came to the wall, and in the distance, the windows of the groom’s quarters were lit with warm light.

“Let me ask again, Hermione…how are you getting on with Malfoy?” Charlie asked as we started along the earthen path.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly, my eyes falling to the spot in the field where Malfoy had scooped me up with my sprained ankle.
“He’s not a bad guy, Hermione. And I know that after everything that has been said between the Malfoys and my family, it might sound a little odd, but Malfoy is not a bad guy,” Charlie said softly and I glanced up to the side of his face.

“What is that supposed to mean, Charlie Weasley?” I asked with a well-humoured laugh.

Charlie grinned. “You’re taking it the wrong way, Hermione…I’m saying that no matter how he tells you about how ‘bad’ he is…he really isn’t.

He is as tough as dragon hide, and he knows an encyclopedia of spells, but deep down…he’s not all that terrible. I’ve drank with him a few times…believe me, he’s not a bad guy…” Charlie chuckled.

My face burned. I knew what Malfoy was like when drunk…

“The only problem with Malfoy, though, is that he is absolutely dedicated to his work. I mean, I love my job…even though I’m not working with dragons any more, I love it. I get to travel, meet knew people, see the world…but I always come home…I’ve got a great girl in Cardiff…and Mum and Dad, I always go home to see them…I have a life outside of being a ‘Dragon Rider.’”

I smirked. Charlie had a ‘girl,’ that was a first. But whoever she was, I knew she was one lucky witch.

“Malfoy’s life is his work…that’s why I asked how you were getting on with him, Hermione.”

We were passing the gap to the hedge maze when he asked this.

“I…I really do not know, Charlie. But he hasn’t hurt me, or called me a Mudblood in a while. We can talk over coffee…so I guess that is a good sign?”

Charlie chuckled again as we came to the front of the stables.

“It is. He’ll protect you Hermione…it is his job, but I think it is more than that…but that’s all I’m going to say on the subject…” Charlie trailed as Malfoy limped from the shadows of the stables to
“Weasley,” Malfoy said in address, nodding.

“Malfoy…I’m to tell you that two Casters will be here later on to start warding…”

“No need, Weasley. I just need to activate the wards after you leave. You can tell Gumboil that on your way out…” Malfoy said gruffly, his left eye moving from where my hand was resting in Charlie’s arm to my face.

Charlie sighed and slowly released my hand. “Alright, Malfoy, but you had better expect that old Al is not going to be too happy with you.”

“When is he ever?” Malfoy asked with a devious sort of grin.

Charlie, who was prone to laughing, chuckled and clapped a hand on my shoulder, nearly knocking me over. “Keep an eye on her?” Charlie said to Malfoy.

“I only have the one, but whatever you say, Weasley…”

Charlie bade me a goodbye with a quick hug that was a commonplace form of parting for the Weasleys, and took off at a jog across the field to the path. I watched him even as the light faded, happy that I had seen him, and happy that he had been forthright with the truth.

“You need a bath, Granger, I can smell you from here,” Malfoy drawled, causing me to turn on my heel and face him.

Malfoy had seemingly bathed and changed, wearing a faded blue tee shirt that was almost threadbare, and a pair of ragged jeans with holes in the knees and around the pockets. In his back pocket, he had Severus’ wand, and strapped to his right forearm, Tom Riddle’s. He wore what looked to be the most ancient pair of boots I had ever seen, the uppers pulling free of the soles. He still wore the eye patch, and his hair was mussed and damp as if he had just dressed after a bath.

Malfoy looked like a boy…a handsome, one-eyed boy in Muggle clothing…while I…I looked like
some medieval wench who had recently crawled through a pigsty.

I sighed at Malfoy’s words and moved past him and into the stables. “I’ll remedy that problem, then!” I called as I stomped up the steps to the apartments above. I sighed as I entered, kicking off my slippers, seeing that my other pair were just where I had left them under the bench. I doffed my coat, but held to the collar as I moved past the front windows, seeing that Malfoy was moving outside, with Severus’ wand in his hand. Activating the wards, I assumed.

I went into the bathroom, dropping my coat by the door and slipping my wands from my holster, placing them on the edge of the sink. Without further ado, I stripped out of my clothing, knowing that I would have to either wash and mend them myself, or destroy them. I opted for the latter, but would wait until I bathed first.

Finally, after what seemed like years, I sank down into the water of the small tub, citrus and sage pushing away the scent of mud, vomit, blood, and death. I had to refill the tub two times before my hair was clean, and I suddenly wished I my short hair again…
Part XV

Part 15

The sound of the door bursting open startled me, and I sat up in the tub, finding that the water’s warming charm had nearly run out. When the curtain around the tub was thrust back, I stared up at Malfoy, wide-eyed.

He stared down at me, also wide-eyed…the left eye running up my legs…to my face.

“Shite!” he muttered, turning his back to me suddenly.

All I could do was blink rapidly, and slowly raise my hands to cover my breasts.

“Wha…?” was all I could manage.

“Shite, Granger, I thought you had slipped and bashed your head in here…you did not answer when I knocked or called!”

Malfoy moved to the table by the sink, and pulling a big towel from the shelf, stepped backward, the towel hanging from his hand behind his back. I rose from the water and took the towel, hastily wrapping it around me and stepping out of the tub.

“I fell asleep! Get out, Malfoy!” I screeched, finally deciding to be offended.

Malfoy, not bothering to look at me, limped out of the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. I could see by looking at the knob that he had kicked the door in…

By the time I had dressed in a pair of Muggle sweat pants and an old Chudley Cannons tee-shirt, Vanishing my irreparably soiled clothes, and left the bathroom, moving my coat to the outside of
the door, I found Malfoy sitting on the couch, his right leg stretched out. He was leaning back into
the arm of the couch, eating a bowl of what looked to be leftover potato soup.

“More in the kitchen,” he muttered, noticing the hungry expression on my face.

Soon, I was sitting on the other end of the couch; eating ravenously. I got up twice to refill my
bowl from the pot that sat on the stove. I was so hungry, not having dinner the night before, or
breakfast or lunch that day. Finally, I set my empty bowl in the sink, looking out into the parlour
where Malfoy sat, staring into the fire.

He had not looked at me or said a word as I ate, and I wondered if perhaps the shock of the past
day was weighing heavy on his mind.

“How’s your leg?” I asked, breaking the silence. I walked slowly back into the parlour, glancing to
the windows and the darkness outside.

“It’s sore.”

I sat down on the couch, twisting to look down at Malfoy’s bare foot resting near my thigh. His
feet were blistered, I could see, but otherwise were just like any man’s feet...large...and pale...like
the rest of him.

“I could try healing it again.”

“No need, it will be better in the morning...” he muttered, his eye still fixed on the fire.

I sighed. I knew I had to tell him about the missing Time-Turner, but I still felt so exhausted, my
brain moving sluggishly. Severus’ voice had not sounded since I found the lead box, and I
wondered if I had not heard him because I was so tired in body and in mind.

We sat in silence, both of us watching the fire as if it were the only source of entertainment. I
could feel my eyes growing heavy again, and when they finally closed, my head fell against the
back of the couch, my body slumping slightly.
I woke suddenly as Malfoy touched me, and I raised a hand, nearly smacking him in the face. I blinked at him, tiredly laughing. Somehow, in my exhaustion, I let him move my body so that he took my place on the couch, his injured leg and foot resting upon the floor. He had Conjured pillows, one of which he placed behind his back, and one under my head as he cradled my upper body, letting me lay upon the couch. My head rested on the soft pillow, which was placed upon his hip. Summoning the pale green throw from the armchair, he spread it over me. The other candles had been extinguished and only the fire before the couch lit the parlour.

I gazed upward; only able to see up Malfoy’s nose as he half sat, half lay on the couch with me. I knew he was awake, and still staring into the fire, but I troubled myself no longer…and fell asleep with Malfoy’s left arm draping over my waist while he held Severus’ wand tight in his right hand resting upon the arm of the couch.

Malfoy kept guard over me as I slept, and as I drifted from sleep to waking and back again, I eventually felt Malfoy’s eye on my face…and I smiled in my dreamless sleep.

I awoke to the sound of voices. I was still on the couch, but Malfoy was gone. Daylight streamed in through the front windows, which were open to let in a cool breeze. I arose slowly, my mouth dry.

Moving to the windows, I found that Malfoy was speaking heatedly with his father who was on horseback, and Williamson and Kingsley standing in the yard.

“…Imperius! Where is Wiscombe now?”

I blinked, and sat softly on the bench.

“He’s in St. Mungo’s, Draco…and he is not expected to survive,” Lucius said gravely, his eyes moving up to me, and quickly back down to Malfoy.

“Why not Flint, or you, Williamson?”

I could only see the back of Malfoy’s head, and also that he was still dressed in his old Muggle
clothes, with the old boots on his feet.

“I am sure that I was probably an option to them, as was Flint. However, both Flint and I have been in the Ministry Headquarters, while Wiscombe has been in the field. They probably thought it easier to grab him,” Williamson said with a sigh. I could just see his face, and it looked pale… ill.

“Wiscombe is not a high profile man, either. He is unmarried, he lives alone, no one would miss him if he were to disappear for a long period of time,” Kingsley continued, the morning sun glinting off the gold ring in his ear.

“What other Healers can we put on call?” Lucius asked.

“Healer Patil…” Williamson began.

“Absolutely not,” Malfoy growled. “I have involved her once for Granger’s sake, and that was enough. If we were to lose Patil…”

“Draco’s right, gentlemen,” Lucius said with a sigh. “Patil is too important to lose. But we need to find someone…”

Williamson nodded, and I noticed that Kingsley was staring up at me, smiling. I smiled down at him blithely and stepped away from the window.

I assumed that Harry and the W.A.T.C.H. had used Wiscombe to infiltrate the Malfoy lands and to get past the wards into the Manor. But how they knew to use Wiscombe bothered me. Possibly Ernie Macmillan had given Harry the name?

I dressed into a clean black skirt, and a black top with a wide neck and long sleeves tight about my arms. I drew my hair back into a low ponytail and brushed my teeth for the first time in what seemed like ages. I rinsed my mouth, and looking into the mirror again and saw that I had a few scratches at my right temple, but nothing that needed attention.

By the time I had moved to the kitchen for a glass of water, Malfoy was stomping up the stairs, shutting the door behind him while kicking off his muddy boots. He flopped down on the couch, grasping for the pillow I had abandoned, propping up his right leg again. He seemed paler…with a
dark smudge under his left eye, the eye patch obscuring his right eye. I assumed he had not slept a wink the night before.

“I will heal your leg, Malfoy…” I offered again.

Malfoy huffed, grumpily, “Have it. As long as the soreness goes away, I don’t care…”

I sighed and placed the empty glass in the sink, next to the dirty bowls from the night before. I idly thought I should wash them later…

Malfoy tried to pull the pant leg up and groaned when he realised he could not push it high enough for the bandage to be removed.

“Fucking hell…” he muttered as I approached, rising from the couch again, his hands moving to his fly.

I blinked at him as I drew the Elder Wand from my sleeve.

“Granger…don’t look…” he muttered, moving a hand to motion me to turn around. My brow furrowed, but I complied.

The sound of denim falling to the floor made me blush, and then out of the corner of my eye I saw that he had snatched up the throw blanket…I heard him sit down again.

“Get to it, Granger,” he snapped, and I took a breath before turning.

Malfoy sat on the couch, slumping so that his thigh was far enough from the edge of the leather seat cushion that I could tend to the bandaged wound. There were spots of colour high on his pale cheeks and his eye seemed to be fixed somewhere high on the wall behind me.

The throw blanket was placed over his groin. I had not thought that Malfoy preferred to go as what Ron had once called ‘commando.’ Of course, I never thought of Malfoy much before Minerva’s funeral…
His legs were covered in golden hairs, so pale that I did not realise how thickly the limbs were covered until I knelt before him. I placed myself so that my knees were on either side of his right foot, my eyes moving along the inner left thigh to the shadow of the throw blanket blocking my view of what was underneath.

Slowly, I began unwrapping the bandage, finding only a small bit of blood. The wound was not infected as I inspected it, my breath apparently tickling Malfoy for he jerked slightly.

“The wound looks fine...not much swelling...the colour of the flesh looks healthy,” I said softly.

Malfoy nodded, but said nothing, swallowing. I smirked, although my blush deepened as I noticed a slight bulging under the throw blanket. Malfoy feigned a cough, and dropped his right hand to obscure the bulge. I rolled my eyes.

I disinfected the wound again with the Elder Wand, and began moving the tip over the outside wound, watching as the skin seemed to glow a golden colour and knit shut. Malfoy sighed, and I wondered if the sensation was pleasurable...

“No scar,” I commented, moving slightly to begin healing the inner wound.

I placed a hand on his left knee to steady myself, and Malfoy inhaled sharply. I glanced up at him, finding that his eye was upon me. I opened my mouth to apologise, but turned to the wound again, repeating the motion of my earlier wand work on the other side.

Again, Malfoy sighed as the skin healed, leaving no mark.

I paid little mind as I inhaled the scent of him from my position, my head placed above his parted knees, my hand on his left knee.

“Good as new,” I whispered, my breath disturbing the hairs of his inner thigh.

Malfoy groaned, which made my stomach do a somersault, and a certain part of my anatomy become very wet...
I slowly slipped my hand from his knee and moved to sit back on my haunches, moving my eyes up his tee shirt clad torso to his face.

He was staring at me, his eyelid hooded over his pale eye in a manner that I found a bit… unsettling. I cleared my throat and Vanished the bandages on the floor, tucking my wand into my sleeve afterward.

“Granger?”

His voice was deeper than usual, and a part of me responded to that depth…

“Hm?” I hummed situating my wands into the holster through the fabric of my sleeve.

He moved his hand over the bulge in the blanket, and if it were possible, I blushed deeper, knowing exactly what he was situating underneath…

“Did you catch what I said yesterday?”

I blinked innocently, but did not meet his eye.

“When?”

He sighed deeply. “When I said I was not a good man…”

“I caught it,” I whispered, my eyes moving to the discarded denim next to me.

“And I said that you were a good woman?”

I nodded.
He took a breath, leaning forward so that I could feel his deep exhales against the right side of my face.

“I am beginning to believe that you are not as ‘good’ a woman as I thought,” he whispered in a ‘matter of fact’ tone. “That actually, you are quite wicked…like so many others of your sex…but much brighter than those other women.”

I swallowed thickly.

“And if you keep being wickedly brilliant…I might just have to show you how ‘wicked’ I can be…”

I couldn’t breathe…and my chest heaved. I did want to show him how ‘wicked’ I could be…turn my face and kiss him with all my ‘wickedness,’ but before I could move thought into action, Malfoy rose, bending down to retrieve his denims. I watched him move around the couch, dropping the throw blanket and reapply his pants. From where I knelt before the couch, all I could see was his hip and the dip of muscle down to the top of a thatch of course silver curls.

I felt as if I needed to find some private place and…

Malfoy threw the blanket over the back of the couch before adjusting his tee shirt and moving to the kitchen, preparing a pot of coffee.

I had not meant to tease him when I healed him. My only intention was to heal the wound. How was I to know that he did not wear boxers or briefs…or anything under his denims? If anything, he had teased me.

My arousal drained away to something else; something like self-pity.

I did not know if I could…I did not know if I could feel anything…I did not know if sex would be pleasurable again after…

I closed my eyes and set my jaw. I knew I should not even think about it, at least not with the man staring with his one eye at the fire underneath the coffeepot. It was not a matter of who was good or wicked. It was a matter of something else entirely. I wanted Malfoy, and he wanted me, at least a base part of him did…it was very evident and had been literally before my face only moments
But for some reason that was not so obvious, he would not have me. And it was that point that made all the difference.

It made me want to be ‘wicked.’

The sunlight was exceptionally warm against my black blouse as Malfoy and I sat on the balcony outside his small bedroom in the groom’s quarters. Two wicker chairs and a small table fit upon the balcony while the French doors were open behind us, gauzy curtains drifting in the breeze. Malfoy sat at my right, sipping coffee, gazing out into the fields before us. He had claimed that we were going to have a long discussion about recent events…

I still felt absolutely awkward watching him slurp messily at his coffee, as if to annoy me. I held my coffee in my hands, resting the cup in my lap. I was waiting for him to speak, but I half wished he would not, and perhaps disappear. The tension of moments earlier, his provocative words spoken into my ear had not left me.

“All right, Granger…tell me some good news.”

I frowned at him as he placed his coffee cup on the table before us, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

“What do you mean?”

Malfoy turned slightly in his wicker chair to regard me, face to face.

“I do not know where you have been for the past two days, but if you haven’t noticed, my parents are homeless, the Manor is ruined, and twelve men and women were lined up in a row in my mother’s garden…dead,” he growled, his face twisting into a mask of anger.
I blinked slowly, shifting my coffee cup in my hands.

“Some good news would put me in a much more amicable mood…”

I quirked my lips before sighing. Malfoy’s mood definitely needed to be lightened, but I knew that what I needed to tell him would send him into a rage…most likely.

“So out with it…”

I bit my lip, and met his eye. “I have little good news, Malfoy.”

Sitting back into his wicker chair, he ran a hand over the right side of his face, using his eye patch to scratch an itch along his scar.

“Tell me,” he muttered.

I took a breath. “I found the lead box on the landing between the first and second floors. It was covered in blood and burnt skin with a clear handprint…”

“Fingerprints…?”

I shook my head. “There wouldn’t be anything. I opened the box…”

“Both?”

I shook my head again and Malfoy jumped to his feet. As I had thought…he started into a rage.

“You did not hide it properly, Granger! How the hell was it opened? Wasn’t it goblin-warded?”
He was looming over me, a hand grasping my shoulder painfully, and his coffee laden breath hot against my face. I did not move, only lowered my eyes to my steaming cup, hoping he would not jar me so that I spill the scalding liquid in my lap.

“Only one was taken…” I said through my teeth, Malfoy’s grip tightening, but as soon I spoke, Malfoy straightened, falling back into his own chair, a hand over his reddened face.

“One? And why aren’t you in a panic, Granger?” he asked, his voice muffled by his palm.

“Because all is not lost, Malfoy,” I answered. “Whomever opened the box now sports a burnt hand…burnt so badly by a goblin enchantment that we might be able to find them.”

“There wasn’t any mention of burnt hands among the dead…”

I smirked. This was perhaps the only good news I could impart.

“They would have to go to St. Mungo’s or to a private Healer…” I whispered.

Malfoy was suddenly on his feet again, padding quickly into the apartment. I heard the Floo activate and Malfoy growling indistinctly into the fire. I contented myself to sip my coffee, staring out across the fields, seeing that the sheep were laying along the top of a hill, basking in the sunlight.

I knew I should have mentioned the bit about one of the W.A.T.C.H. members having a burnt hand, but I had almost forgotten about it. I had formed the deduction at some point in the back of the mind, and I wondered for a quick moment if Severus’ influence had aided me there… I still needed to think through the fact I had escaped the groom’s quarters the night of the attack and ended up so far away from danger without knowing how I had done it. I could still remember the dream…and Severus. There was also something Severus had said in my dream…

“You don’t think it could have been Potter’s handprint?” Malfoy asked gruffly, startling me from my thoughts as he sat down in the adjacent wicker chair.

“No, I don’t think so. It seemed smaller, like a woman’s hand…”
“There is no record of anyone at St. Mungo’s with a burnt hand…not yet anyway…”

I frowned. “Other Healers?”

“Williamson is working on it. He’s already back in London…”

I nodded.

“Go on then, Granger. Tell me more possibly good news,” Malfoy said, leaning back into his chair to let the sun hit his face.

“Possibly in their pain and haste, whomever took the Time-Turner did not take something else from the box which might help us…”

I set my coffee aside and rose, going into the parlour and retrieving my coat. Sitting in the wicker chair again, I dug into the pocket and withdrew the box.

“Where’s the blood?” Malfoy asked, his head resting back into the chair so that he watched me down his long nose.

“The enchantments…when I closed the box after I found it, the enchantments burnt off the blood and skin. I do not know why, but the warding parameters set on the box are attuned to me…”

I set the box on my lap, and opened the latch easily. Opening the lid, I turned the box so Malfoy could see inside. Gingerly, I lifted the remaining Time-Turner, and grasped the metal disc underneath. I held the disc in the palm of my hand as I closed the box and slipped it back into my pocket, next to the Invisibility Cloak…I knew I had to tell Malfoy about it, as it was an asset.

“This might be the only good thing about the whole situation, Malfoy,” I said opening my palm for his grey eye to see the circular disc and the engraved design.

Malfoy leaned forward to study the disc, but did not move to touch it.
“What is it?”

I smirked. “I’m not one hundred percent certain, but I have an idea.”

Malfoy rolled his eye and sat back. “Which is?”

I closed my fingers about the disc and pulled my fist back to rest it upon my knee.

“Surely you remember how a Protean Charm works?”

It was as rhetorical question…Malfoy had used it in our Sixth Year.

“There’s only one disc, Granger, so how do you believe that some bit of metal is going to be a good thing?” Malfoy sighed, letting the sunlight hit his face with an inclination of his pale neck.

I gnawed on my lower lip. There had been two Time-Turners. And I knew that with regular Time-Turners that my department had enacted an enchantment soon after the fall of Voldemort that could track and record if a Time-Turner was used. With the strict regulation of the devices, it was only natural that the use of one could be recorded. The idea of how to construct a spell to track the smaller Time-Turners had come from the designs of the two that had once been held in the box now in my coat pocket…

“When one of the two Time-Turners are used, this disc records or somehow alerts the user of the second device that its brother is in use…I’m speculating here, Malfoy, but because there are two devices, they could be used together. So if one goes, the other can follow almost directly behind…” I trailed, falling into my thoughts again.

And you know where Potter wants to go, and when, but will he use it on the exact day and wait? He would risk capture if he waits too long, it is not even two weeks into April…Severus whispered.

The disc would somehow let me know when Harry’s Time-Turner was activated, and possibly tell me where he was when he turned the hourglass… I opened my fingers to let the light catch the smooth face of the silver metal disc.
“We must either find him and stop him, or we must follow him back and stop him there,” I whispered.

“I would rather find him now, Granger,” Malfoy mumbled.

I agreed. Traveling back a few hours had been slightly disorienting…traveling back almost thirteen years could be a bit more than simply dizzying. I had no idea what traveling back so far might do to a person—no one knew. Again, there were speculations, but I did not want to think about it at that moment.

“But we would know if he decided to use it in an hour or in a month,” I said softly, moving the disc from my hand so that I slid it into my sleeve, between the backside of my wand holster and against the inside of my arm. If the disc did have a type of Protean Charm embedded in the metal, it would heat up or vibrate.

“So, one of the Time-Turners have been stolen, and the thief’s hand is burnt, possibly permanently damaged. You suspect it was a woman, and it was not one of the dead.

We have a Time-Turner…and a piece of metal. Please tell me you have more good news, Granger,” Malfoy sighed.

I rolled my eyes until they fell upon my coat again.

“We have an Invisibility Cloak.”

Malfoy stiffened, and turned his face to me, shadow falling over his pale brows. “Since when?”

I hesitated.

“Since the Ministry…”

His hands grasped the arms of the wicker chair, his knuckles whitening. “And you said nothing because…?”
“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

Malfoy smirked, and began chuckling deeply. “Two Hallows… I bet Potter is literally beating himself about face with his one hand!”

I could not help but smirk. Harry’s Cloak had been a prized possession even before we learned it was a Hallow. It had been a link to his father…and my smirk faded. The last link to his father and the Marauders, it seemed almost sacrilegious that I had it and that Malfoy knew that we could use it. I did not feel the same about the Elder Wand, it had had many masters, but the Cloak had remained in the Potter family for generations.

I satisfied myself in the thought that Harry had nearly given the Cloak away when he left on the floor of the Ministry hall. Harry had not been thinking…but I had. Did that make me a suitable master for one of the Deathly Hallows? Yes.

“Please tell me you found the Resurrection Stone in the Ministry?” Malfoy chuckled.

“I wish…”

The Stone… Now that Harry had a Time-Turner, why would he need the Stone? I had had this thought many times, anticipating that he might get a Time-Turner, and since he had the means to go back, what use would he have for the Stone?

The only possible use I could imagine was that Harry could use the Stone to save the lives of those somehow inadvertently killed after the quantum shift. If he killed Voldemort… I had already thought out the changes… who would survive, etc. I had also realised that those people who had died in our timeline would probably die in some other fashion in a revised timeline. Harry, most likely, did not see or know that the universe would ‘course-correct’ itself.

There was nothing I could do about those thoughts. And I wondered what I could do.

“Do you remember very much about Fourth Year?” I asked Malfoy, reaching for my coffee.

Malfoy sighed. “Not really. I remember the Tri-Wizard tournament, I remember Diggory dying…"
I remember the Yule Ball…that’s about it.”

I pursed my lips. “Rather vague, isn’t it?”

Malfoy shifted in his wicker chair, resting his bare right foot on his left knee, the shift making the wicker crack. “I didn’t keep a day-to-day diary, Granger. I had more important things to think about…bullying people, getting turned into a ferret by Crouch, Jr., and making sure Pansy kept her clothes on after the Ball…”

I laughed, but stopped, my brows knitting…

Diary…day-to-day…

“Oh!”

Malfoy made a strange face and quirked his left eyebrow.

“Oh? Granger?”

“Just remembered something…that might be useful if things do not turn out…” I mumbled, setting my coffee aside and chewing on the nail of my left thumb.

“I, for one, do hope things ‘turn out,’ Granger, what is that mind of yours concocting?” Malfoy asked with a smooth, almost erotic quality to his deep voice.

“A journal…I kept a journal during Fourth Year…a meticulous study plan, notes about the Tri-Wizard tasks, and details about the days leading up to Voldemort’s return…”

Malfoy sniffed, apparently disinterested.

“If…if we would have to go back, that journal might be useful. It would help in knowing where I was, my fourteen year old self…Harry, Ron, Severus, Albus…who to avoid and who to possibly contact on the off chance there is more trouble than we can be manage…”
“Wait a minute, Granger…when I said a while back to think in terms of worst case scenarios, I did not mean…”

“You did mean this, Malfoy. I don’t think Harry will be found, unless he wants to be…and I very much doubt now that he has what he wants we will see him. The people who attacked your home might continue targeting you, but I have a feeling that they won’t bother with me unless Harry commands it.”

Malfoy, again, ran a hand down the right side of his face. “You are right, Granger, but I would rather put all my energy into finding Potter in ‘this’ time than wait around to see if he is going to use the Time-Turner. We won’t even know that the timeline has changed, will we? At least that part will be painless…” Malfoy grumbled, his hand moving to scratch near the wound on his leg I had healed earlier.

“It won’t be painless, Malfoy. Didn’t I explain that to you? When the timeline shifts…we will cease to exist…”

Malfoy shrugged, “Sounds painless to me.”

I closed my eyes in exasperation.

We did not speak for a long while. I had told Malfoy about the Cloak and the Time-Turner. I had given him my thoughts on the purpose of the disc, and I had mentioned my Fourth Year journal, which was still in a shelf in my cottage in the Forbidden Forest. I had healed him, spoken my peace, for the most part, and now could think of nothing else to say.

I rose from my seat, picking up my coat, and moved back indoors to fall onto the couch, wrapping my coat around my arms. I sat looking at the low fire for a long while before I let my body slide down to lay across the worn leather, my cheek resting against a pillow.

I was unsettled even after such serious discussion about the Time-Turners. I could smell Malfoy’s skin and hear his sinful voice in my ear. I did not want to be ‘wicked’ at that moment, I just wanted to feel as if the world made sense.

I had to kill Harry. The Titans had said so, and Severus had said so…
But I did not want to. Why would I want to kill my best friend? I missed him, the ‘him’ I knew from years ago. I had loved Harry more than life itself for a time…and now I hated him for making my world an alien place.

If Harry had not been mad, I would have been in my own home, sitting in my garden, soaking in the rays of the spring sun. I would be thinking of what to plant in my little garden, and the trees would be budding with leaves to come. Minerva would still be alive, and we would have tea next to the shore of the Lake. Hagrid and I would take walks about the grounds, avoiding the students. I would go to work, and leave, feeling as if I had done something important. I would get a postcard from Ron from some new exotic place, and I would go into Hogsmeade to buy a new bundle of parchment and bottles of ink… Life would be easy and understandable.

I would not have to feel such all-consuming anger toward Harry, or fear. I would not have to feel attraction and growing affection for Malfoy. I would not have to be afraid of rejection, or that I was somehow uglier on the inside that I first thought.

I realised that tears were streaming out the right side of my eyes, and I sniffed, wiping the tears away.

“Crying, Granger?” Malfoy’s voice sounded from the kitchen.

I did not answer him, but listened, as it seemed cookware was being produced from the cabinets.

More tears streamed out of my right eye into the pillow beneath my head, and tears pooled in my left eye against the bridge of my nose. I missed my old life, and the privacy I had in my own mind.

I wondered how long I would have to share quarters with Malfoy. There was only one bed…and I knew that he might allow me to sleep against him on the couch, but in a bed…never. I wanted my own bed in my cottage. I wanted to lay in the cradled softness, the windows open to a balmy night and the sounds of the Forest.

I sniffed again, moving my left hand so that it rested over my ear. I did not want to hear Malfoy’s voice. I squeezed my eyes shut and I breathed through my mouth. My emotions were swirling inside me, and I knew I was on the verge of panic. As long as I kept breathing slowly, I knew I would be fine.
I comforted myself in the thought that my life had changed…and I would end up stronger.

Hours later, Malfoy gave me his bed while he Transfigured the couch in the parlour to make it a bit more comfortable. We had eaten a meal he had prepared, but did not speak. As much as I wanted to ask how Malfoy had learned to cook, his meal of pork cutlets, boiled potatoes and steamed carrots quite well prepared, I did not open my mouth to speak a single word.

Besides telling me the bed was mine, Malfoy had said nothing either…and we remained wrapped up in our own thoughts.

The sudden upwelling of emotions I had felt did not reoccur as I slipped between the expensive cotton sheets and laid my head on the down filled pillow. I had Transfigured a fork, without Malfoy’s notice, into a chain and pendant so that the strange disc would rest between my breasts. I felt it against my left breast as I prepared to sleep, the metal strangely cool even though it rested near the heat of my heart. I prayed that I would never feel anything else from the disc beside its icy, metallic coolness. But like so many little prayers I had uttered to myself, or wished in my mind, I knew that, eventually, the disc would burn me with a warning.

April 7th, I awoke in the early morning hours by a strange sound, and in my half sleeping state I had pulled the Elder Wand from my holster resting beneath the adjacent pillow. I sat up, eyes wide, but not focused to see in the darkness.

It had been a dull ringing sound that woke me, and I realised by the flash of green light from the parlour that a Floo call had been answered. I wiped my eyes with the back of my left hand and turned my head, the headboard blocking my view into the kitchen.

I could hear Malfoy’s voice, but not his words. The tone of his voice seemed angry, but he did not raise his voice as he spoke into the Floo. I could just see the outline of his body through the sheer curtain between the bedroom and the kitchen as I rose up from the bed…his body visible kneeling on the wooden floor between the couch and the hearth. He was dressed in a pair of pyjama pants only, and his hair was mussed and stuck up at all angles in platinum tangles.

I moved to rise from the bed, my toes just hitting the floor when another flash of green through the dim light of the apartment caught my eye. When my heels hit the floor, Malfoy had stalked into the bedroom, swatting at the curtain and moving directly for the wardrobe that rested in the corner of the room.
Opening the doors, he began dressing. I watched him, wondering if he had noticed me sitting on the side of the bed. When he hesitated to remove his pyjama bottoms, I knew he was aware of my eyes, and he turned slowly.

“I have to go,” was all he said, turning back to the wardrobe and drawing out a pair of black trousers and socks, striding out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. He returned to the bedroom again within a few moments, his hair wetted, and combed down, trousers and black socks on his feet. He moved to the wardrobe, pulling out a pair of what looked like Muggle military boots. “You were right, Granger…a woman opened the box and took the Time-Turner,” he said, slipping his feet in the boots, but did not bother tying the laces.

Moving back into the parlour, I watched him take up his wands from the couch, the chest and arm holster, applying both.

Finally, I was on my feet, my nightdress falling to the tops of my ankles, the pendant jingling quietly as the chain fell over my breasts. I still held the Elder Wand in my hand as I moved into the dark parlour, only a misty grey light coming in through the front windows.

“There?” I asked, my voice still rough from sleep.

Malfoy smirked as he finished adjusting the straps to his chest holster, which held the yew wand.

“Someone we know. Susan Bones?” he asked, his left eye catching the small bit of early morning light and glinting eerily.

I balked. “Susan?”

Susan had been one of the kindest people I knew in school. We were never close, being in different Houses, but she had been in the DA. I knew that Voldemort had killed many in her family, and that she had been particularly sympathetic to Harry…but I did not think that she would be part of W.A.T.C.H. Her sympathies for Harry could not be so blinded by the fact my old friend was…insane. Could she?

Malfoy nodded at the name I uttered in disbelief, and quickly turned to lift his leather coat off a hook near the door, and with one last look at me, disappeared through the passage down into the stables. I hurried to the front windows, barely able to see him move through the mist. Within a
moment, he was gone, and I was left to ponder about the life of Susan Bones.

April 10th, one month before the ten year anniversary of Voldemort’s defeat, and I sat alone in the groom’s quarters, Malfoy still not back from what I assumed was the investigation of Susan Bones. I sat on the couch reading Malfoy’s copy of ‘Wuthering Heights,’ having already finished ‘Jane Eyre’ and Ayn Rand’s ‘The Fountainhead.’

I had revised my notes, which I still kept in my coat pocket, adding every detail that I deemed important since I had first started the notes in Narcissa’s study. I had found a lifetime’s worth of parchment stowed in the bottom drawer of Malfoy’s writing desk in the parlour beside the gramophone and added a good twenty pages worth of information to what I had started.

After coming to no new conclusions after a day of Malfoy’s absence, I had turned to his bookshelves, finding mostly Muggle fiction, reference books, codes of the Law of Wizarding Britain and Wizarding America…and so many other books that even I, being a bibliophile, did not have the stomach to read. I had considered breaking through Lucius’ enchantments on ‘The Hanged Man,’ but decided that I would do it the next day if Malfoy had not returned.

The fact I had not heard from Malfoy did not concern me. A strange peace had come over me, as if realising, after twenty out of nearly twenty-eight years of my life, that worrying amounted to more worry. I also knew the adage ‘no news is good news,’ and kept thinking about it, repeating it, until I was not thinking of Malfoy at least once every two seconds in the days that passed.

However, when the dull ringing of the klaxon filled the parlour, I nearly jumped out of my skin. The Floo activated as I lounged with Cathy and Heathcliff. I sighed, and slid off the couch to the hearthstones as a flash of green blinded me.

“Hey there, Hermione…” a familiar voice sounded, and as I wiped my eyes of soot and ash, I realised that Charlie Weasley was looking at me through the green fire.

“Malfoy’s not here,” I said softly, trying to smile.

Charlie nodded, “I know. He was on my end an hour ago. He wanted me to Floo you.”
I blinked.

“Susan Bones is dead.”

I blinked again. “Where are you, Charlie?”

Charlie smirked, “Can’t tell you that, Hermione. But what I can tell you is that Susan Bones is dead from the affects of a curse burn she sustained. Before she died, she gave a location, a place Harry might be. Malfoy and I are going to check on this lead.”

I sighed and bit my lower lip. “Was she part of W.A.T.C.H., Charlie?” I asked softly, crossing my arms before my chest, the pendant pressing into my skin.

Charlie took a breath, his usually jovial face becoming serious. “Yes. And from what we have been learning, she and Cho Chang were two that did not hesitate to rally to Harry. We’re going through names…names of those who attacked Malfoy Manor, and other known associates, and we are finding that many were sympathetic to Harry during the War, or were…fanatics of a sort…”

“Something that goes beyond hero worship, I assume?” I asked darkly.

“Yes. Harry is a cultic figure so some of the members of W.A.T.C.H. and now that Harry is taking advantage of these people, their acts are becoming more brazen and more dangerous.

Hermione, a cell of W.A.T.C.H. attacked the Bulstrodes yesterday, nearly killing the whole family in a fire. This is not the first time W.A.T.C.H. have attacked families who were affiliated with Voldemort, but after Glasgow, and then the Malfoys, the cells have taken on a new fervor to destroy any remnants of Voldemort…”

“It’s Harry, Charlie. It is his influence, I have no doubt. If they have hoisted him up as a type of figurehead, it is hard to say what will happen next,” I whispered, leaning closer to the fire, my eyes fixed on the hearthstones under my palms.

“We have been arresting more members, but it seems that for every one we incarcerate, three more decide to join…”
I licked my lips.

_It was like this once before, Miss Granger, even before I was born, and the Dark Lord was still a charismatic young man who wanted to ‘better’ the world…_Severus whispered.

“Hermione?” Charlie asked, and I quickly raised my eyes to his. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Charlie…what were you saying?”

Charlie’s face seem to become graver still.

“Mum is very ill. Ron told me last night that she has taken a turn for the worse, and that the Healers cannot seem to do anything for her.”

I lowered my eyes again. Ron had mentioned that Molly had been feeling poorly since George’s murder, and it seemed that she had let her sorrow develop into a true ailment.

“Dad won’t leave her side, and Ginny…Ginny has secluded herself from the rest of the family, thinking that all of this…Harry…is her fault.”

I frowned. “Of course not, Charlie. I hope that your family is making that clear to her…”

“They are, but Hermione, you were close to Ginny in school…you know how she can be sometimes. Ron knows even better than I do…after her First Year…”

I raised a hand to stop Charlie, knowing all too well of Ginny’s complexes. Even though it had been years since Ginny and I had spoken, it seemed as if there were some character flaws time had not straightened, and wounds that had not healed.

“Ron might call you if Mum is feeling better, Hermione. Being cooped up in a safe house in Merlin knows where is starting to fray his nerves.”
I smirked. “I know the feeling.”

Charlie smiled, winking, “I am sure you do. Still don’t know how you’re getting on with Malfoy?”

“Well, he hasn’t been around for a few days, so…no.”

Charlie chuckled, and I was glad to see him smiling again. His face was genetically constructed to smile, in my opinion.

“I hate to cut this short, Hermione, but I need to catch up to Malfoy. If anything happens, I will Floo right away.”

I nodded.

“Hermione, take care, alright? If anything happens, Floo Kingsley in London, or Gumboil.”

“I will.”

“Good girl. I’ll talk to you soon.”

The Floo deactivated in another flash of green and I fell back, coughing. I hated Floo calls.

I flicked my wand to my face to clean away the soot and ash, and with a sigh returned to the couch and picked up ‘Wuthering Heights.’ I did not read, however, but stared out the front windows into a grey day.

As much as I adored Charlie, I wished I could have spoken to Malfoy. After a few days of not speaking to anyone but Charlie, I suddenly missed my familiar. When I lived in my cottage, with no one else besides my half-Kneazle, and myself, I did not feel that talking aloud was anything to be concerned about… My mother would tease me for talking to myself, and with a familiar I had a viable reason why I was talking out loud.

In some ways, I began to miss Malfoy’s sarcasm.
Malfoy returned late that night, startling me from my place on the couch where I had fallen asleep, ‘Wuthering Heights’ resting on my belly. He seemed to burst through the door, his leather coat wet from rain, his face paler than usual, and his hair dirty and lank about his face. He looked like the ghost of some tragic hero in the books he had on the shelves.

“Malfoy?” I croaked, the book sliding off my belly to thump against the floor.

He did not say anything, but drew his wand from his chest holster to light the candles. The candlelight warmed his features, and he did not resemble some pale wraith from the moors.

“I cannot stay long, Granger. I came to collect a clean set of clothes, grab something from the pantry and be off again,” he grumbled moving through the parlour, dripping muddy water along the floor, stalking into the bedroom.

I began to follow, only making it to kitchen when he reemerged, shrinking a bundle of clothes and slipping them into his innermost coat pocket. I pressed myself against the front of the sink when he moved to the pantry where magically supplied groceries appeared everyday…an innovation I found particularly nice, and wondered if I could convert my own pantry in my cottage into something similar.

Grabbing some sort of sweet pastry and biting into it, Malfoy hummed, falling against the pantry door as he shut it.

I could only stare at him, my hands grasping the edge of the sink behind my back.

“Weasley called you?” he asked, his voice slightly muffled by a large amount of bread in his cheeks.

I nodded.

“I’ll be off for a while longer, Granger. You have everything you need here. Mother or Father
will surely be by at some point…and I don’t have to remind you not to leave the property?”

I shook my head as Malfoy took another untidy bite into the pastry. He chewed, staring back at me, and swallowed.

“You won’t be able to reach me for a while, Granger, so contact Kingsley or…”

“Gumboil, yes, Charlie conveyed the message,” I mumbled.

Malfoy smirked, pastry packed into his cheeks.

“Don’t mistreat my books, Granger. I’m rather fond of Muggle literature…” he grumbled, stalking out of the kitchen and into the parlour, stuffing the last of the pastry in his mouth.

I followed him, avoiding the small puddles of muddy water on the floor. He stopped at the door and looked around the parlour and past me. Then, swallowing the last of his pastry, his left eye fell upon me.

“No reaction from your little bit of metal?” he asked, his eye moving to the chain about my neck and then to my breasts…making me blush since I had decided not to wear a bra, not expecting Malfoy to return so suddenly.

“No…” I whispered, wanting to raise my arms to cover my nipples that poked through the light grey material of my shirt.

Malfoy’s eye lingered a moment longer before traveling to my face.

“Let’s hope there is never a reaction,” he whispered, taking half a step forward, his left hand raising…but fell to his side again as he opened the door to the stables with his right hand.

He smirked at me one last time, and seemed to fly out the door. I tried to see him go through the front windows after closing the door, but saw only darkness. His coming and leaving had seemed like a dream.
April 22nd was the first day I saw Narcissa since she left me in the kitchens, my familiar in her arms, after the attack on the Manor. It was early when I heard the distinct sounds of horses’ hooves, and looking out of the open front windows saw her staring up at me from the back of her dapple grey gelding.

“Come to the bothy, Hermione…” she had said when I went down to greet her.

It had been only the third time I had left the confines of the groom’s quarters. I had learned on my second excursion outside that two elves took care of the horses housed below my new little home. Pan and Sheff were the elf’s names, and they were not in the least bit personable. I did not bother worrying about the horses or their elfish handlers since then.

Narcissa slid down from her saddle-less horse and embraced me when I first approached, and I was struck at how warm she felt. She seemed much recovered from the events weeks before, and she glowed as we walked back to the paddock, letting her horse roam as we sat on the low stonewall in the shade of the trees.

“I know we should have been by sooner, Hermione, but between working with the elves to restore the Manor, and Lucius having to file complaints to the Ministry against those that attacked us, it has been a bit busy.”

I nodded. “You and Mr. Malfoy are not facing any sort of repercussions from using the Ki-…”

“Oh, of course not!” Narcissa interrupted, her pale eyes widening. “We were defending our home and our lives against criminals.”

“True,” I whispered, my eyes falling to Narcissa’s slippers and skirt. I smirked, knowing that she had ridden her horse without the benefit of a sidesaddle… “But I was still worried about that,” I added.
Narcissa grasped my hand, and we smiled at each other.

“But you need to come to the bothy with me, Hermione…”

I blinked in confusion at the excitement laced in Narcissa’s voice.

“It is Lucius’ birthday.”

I chuckled. “I don’t know if he would appreciate me being his birthday guest…”

Narcissa tried not to laugh, but said, “My husband would probably be glad, Hermione. Having only me and the elves to talk to has driven him a little…oh, I’ll just say it…he’s being a prat.”

I snorted a laugh. I could imagine what Narcissa meant if Malfoy was any indication on how the men of the Malfoy family acted when they were bored or annoyed.

“Your coming is really more for me than him, anyway…” Narcissa muttered, patting the back of my hand.

I smiled, feeling very happy that someone like Narcissa Malfoy wanted me. In another time, I would have never imagined that Narcissa would be talking and sitting with me like a friend. It was strange what the Fates dealt a person, but on the account of Narcissa, I did not mind.

I asked if I should wear something different from the skirt and black blouse I wore the day Malfoy and I sat on the balcony, and Narcissa laughed and said that I looked fine enough to join her and her husband for a birthday lunch. I blushed slightly…Narcissa wore a two piece dress that reminded me of something from the Victorian era with a dark blue bodice, a high lace collar and matching skirt that was slightly bustled in the back. She wore her hair in almost the same manner as I, pulled from the temples in a loose braid over the rest of her beautiful pale hair. It was hard to believe she was old enough to be my mother.

“A gift?” I ventured meekly.
Again Narcissa laughed, her voice like twinkling bells, “Unless you have been able to sneak past Draco’s wards and go to London to shop, you and I both will be giving only the gift of our company, my darling.”

I smiled as Narcissa, again, squeezed my hand.

After deciding to walk to the bothy, which Narcissa told me that a shortcut through the forest would shave off a half hour, I moved to the front of the stables, using my wand to shut the windows. I did not bother Summoning my coat, the late April day sufficiently warm.

Narcissa and I walked hand in hand through the fields. She left her horse to graze where it liked, telling me that if she needed the intelligent gelding, it would come at her call.

“You should have Draco teach you to ride, Hermione.”

I shrugged as we turned into the forest.

“You know he has not been back for days…” I started, but trailed, our feet seemingly to find a path carved between the roots of the large white trees.

“I know. Have you been afraid by yourself?”

I shrugged again. “I have lived a little more than eight years alone in the Forbidden Forest, and even then I had to worry about werewolves, manticores, and a three headed dog encroaching on my home…”

“What about the centaurs?” Narcissa asked, her face conveying her curiosity.

“I have a truce with them…and now…a friendship, after Harry killed some of their herd.”

Narcissa nodded, “Yes, Draco told us…” she said darkly, and I could sense that she was barely containing her anger at the idea of a wizard killing centaurs. I wondered what type of affection Narcissa had for the centaurs that she seem so angry, but I did not ask.
I never pried into her matters, and I was still learning that if Malfoy’s mother wanted to impart some information to me, she would do so in her own time…but not wait too long to do so. I was very fond of Narcissa. She was the opposite of every preconceived notion I had of her as girl, and this fact delighted me.

We walked through the trees, sunlight lighting patches of our path. The only other time I had been in the forest has been the night I dreamt of the Palace of Knossos, and then I was not aware that I had been in the forest at all. And when the Malfoys and I had escaped deeper into the trees the night of the attack, I had been so anxious that I did not notice the character of the forest. Nevertheless, as we walked, I could feel that this forest was not so different from the one I called my home. It was a magical forest; that much was certain. I could feel old power under my feet and in the massive white bark trees that seemed like columns around us.

“Did centaurs live in this forest?” I asked, my voice airy as my eyes moved along the floor of the forest and over the dark soil and dead leaves.

Narcissa hummed to herself. “They still do…”

I glanced to her, surprised.

“In the southern reaches, they only come into this part on special occasions…Beltane, Midsummer, Samhain…all the important days. They have lived in this forest as long as the Malfoy family has lived here.”

I cocked my head, “Do you speak with them?”

Narcissa laughed. “Of course. Not often, but Lucius and I have several times since we have been married.”

“Are they friendly?”

She squeezed my hand. “In their way they are. I do not know what the herd is like in the Forbidden Forest, but this forest…what the centaurs call Temple Wood, the herd is friendly to the family, but the centaurs have their own ways and we never interfere.”
I hummed to myself as Narcissa and I stepped over a particularly thick, white root.

“I obey the laws of the Forest, and never cross the boundaries…” I said softly.

“That is the way of centaurs. You must never impose yourself, and you must always be respectful. Centaurs can be great allies, or great enemies…the Dark Lord found that out,” Narcissa mumbled, her eyes growing distant.

I agreed with her, hoping to draw her thoughts away from the old times.

“You don’t have any malignant beasts in your forest?”

Narcissa shook her head. “Lucius’ grandmother wanted to introduce manticores to thin out the Thestrals…needless to say she was not a very bright woman and his grandfather quite wise.”

I smirked. “I haven’t seen any Thestrals…”

“They stay near the centaurs, for some reason, but there are a few near the bothy. Do you see many in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Many. They stay near the school grounds…where Hagrid feeds them. He shouldn’t, but Hagrid is just so…so…caring in a manner that is almost harmful.”

Narcissa said nothing, and I remembered then how Lucius had campaigned for Buckbeak’s execution. I knew I could not feel anything but the warmest love for Hagrid, and I would not apologise for my care for him to even someone like Narcissa Malfoy whom I had grown to admire and care for a great deal.

Our conversation continued on…the trees…the brooks…and other wildlife of the forest. It was not long until the forest path led us into downland of more rolling hills of green. We moved along the edge of the forest until the downland became more rugged, and to a deep vale, surrounded my thick black bark trees, was the bothy.

We had walked at least forty-five minutes, and the bothy laid another ten minute walk from the
edge of the forest, the terrain sloping upward into the vale. The bothy, from the outside was almost like my cottage, built into the deepest part of the vale with chalky limestone walls, a wooden roof, and stone chimney coming from the shingles. The bothy looked smaller than even my cottage, and there was not a single window. Compared to the groom’s quarters, the bothy was a hovel.

Narcissa released my hand and pushed upon the low door, smiling mischievously. I prepared myself, for, I did not know what, when I followed her inside.

And then, I knew I should have known better to judge the humble bothy by its outside walls. The Malfoys were a Wizarding family.

The inside of the bothy, as Narcissa closed the door behind me, was at least as big as the foyer of the Manor and nearly as high inside. It reminded me of ancient castle halls that I had seen in films as a little girl. Enchanted stained glass windows ran on either side of the hall, and in the far back was a fireplace, that was bigger than any I knew in Hogwarts, with a raging fire. There were curtained sections for the Malfoy’s bedroom with an ancient four-poster bed large enough to sleep at least two small families, and a bathing area with a large tub and water closet tucked into a far corner. There was even a kitchen with a smaller fire, built much like my cottage kitchen with stone counters. But in the middle of the hall was a luxurious common area with medieval style couches and chairs, tables and chests. Hanging from the timbered ceiling were wrought iron chandeliers with what seemed like millions of enchanted candles.

All in all, I had stepped into the Malfoy home of the tenth century…complete with armor and tapestries on the walls. It was nothing short of breathtaking.

Lucius sat in a chair near the fire, reading a book, his booted feet upon a low stool. He had a pair of glasses perched on the end of his patrician nose, and his face was perhaps the most unguarded as I had ever seen it. Lucius Malfoy was a handsome man at fifty-three.

“Ah, Miss Granger…did ‘Cissa drag you through the forest for my birthday?” he drawled as Narcissa and I approached.

Slipping his glasses from his nose and setting them inside his book, which I was amused to see was Tolkien’s ‘Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers,’ he rose to his feet, smiling faintly.

I smirked. “I’ve been invited for lunch.”
Narcissa grinned mischievously. “I told her that my company, and Leak’s jokes were getting to you…and also I would not have to suffer you being a ‘prat’ on your birthday, I brought her for company for us both.”

I wanted to snort, but bit the inside of my cheek instead.

Lucius, however, laughed. “I am afraid to learn the truth, Miss Granger, so let us have lunch and talk about other things besides my birthday…”

I found that lunch with the Malfoys was very enjoyable. Both Malfoys were interesting to converse with, both very intelligent and articulate. We spent our lunch, of fantastic French cuisine, laughing. I never imagined that I would laugh with Lucius Malfoy. Again, in another time, it would have seemed impossible. As we talked, I began to see where Malfoy picked up his mannerisms. Lucius was sarcastic and at times cryptic, while Narcissa spoke almost in verses. It was hard to believe many times that either Malfoy was ever involved with Voldemort…and even though I kept that thought in the back of my mind, I still enjoyed their company and grew to like them…even Lucius.

When lunch was over, Lucius informed me that the bothy was indeed the first Malfoy hall, built when the Malfoys came in the seventh century. It was uncertain how ‘Norman’ the Malfoy family was, but Lucius believed that the Malfoys were not actually from France, but came earlier with the Viking invasions, later taking a more ‘Norman’ name in the eleventh century. From the bothy, the seventh century Malfoys began claiming the adjoining forest and downlands, setting up intricate wards that existed into the twenty-first century.

“With Potter and his followers, I am still trying to see how much damage was done to the original wards. Through the centuries every Malfoy heir has added their own protections, and to be honest, the weakest point was at the gates leading to the Manor…”

I frowned, but Lucius assured me that the lands were safe from Muggles and outsiders for the time being. The wards were fortified every equinox and solstice, family rites were made on a nearby hillside where stones had been erected even before the Malfoys came to Britain, but were used by the family since it was a point of magical power.

“Nothing like the nearby henges, but enough to keep my lands intact and the family safe…” Lucius said softly as the three of us drank tea.
I found Lucius’ accounts of the Malfoys quite interesting…the forest, the bothy, and the Manor all were pieces that had stayed in the Malfoy family for generations. I could see how Malfoy could be so proud.

“And your family, Miss Granger? Do Muggle-born witches and wizards keep records of their family and their lands?” Lucius asked, making sure to sound as unbiased as possible, for my sake. I found his efforts comforting.

“Some do, I am sure. Some Muggles make a hobby of genealogy, but as for me, I did some research in school, out of curiosity. I found that I had ancestors who were wizards, but magical ability seemed to skip generations, appearing here and there through time. My closest magical relative is a great, great, great, great grandfather…on my father’s side. He was a Granger from Ayrshire, and he went of Hogwarts. He was a Ravenclaw.

After that, it seems that there were no magical children, and magic was not something known or talked about.

From what I could piece together, my family, the Grangers, were in Britain since the fourth century…and I found my first magical relative in the earliest records of Hogwarts…another paternal grandfather,” I paused, and then said very clearly, “He was a Slytherin.”

Lucius smirked, and I smiled back. I knew Lucius would be quite amused with the fact that I had a relative, albeit many generations before, was a Slytherin. Of course, not many people would appreciate this bit of my family history…the Weasleys would have found it ghastly news.

“No Hufflepuffs?” he asked.

I shook my head. “The few magical relatives I had who attended Hogwarts were everything but a Hufflepuff.”

“That is comforting,” Lucius laughed, and Narcissa pretended to scold him. I could only laugh with him.

My magical and Muggle heritage was not as important to me because I had never been raised to cherish it like many of the people I had as classmates. I loved my small family, and I loved that I was a witch, but the importance of blood purity and family lineage were not something instilled in
me as a girl.

We talked of other things, books, in particular, until Narcissa realised how late the day was becoming. I was in no hurry to go back to the groom’s quarters until Narcissa mentioned that a Floo call might come, and that she was sorry to have kept me for so long.

I ended up being escorted back by Lucius.

He did not take my arm, nor did I want him to. Even though we had talked easily, I was still not entirely comfortable with the man.

The sun was getting lower on the horizon as we walked through the forest at a quicker pace than Narcissa and I had. I did not mind.

“Let me be frank, Miss Granger…” Lucius said as he watched me step over the large root Narcissa and I nearly had to climb over earlier in the day.

I nodded.

“I did not like the idea of you in my home, at first. However, now that I know more of you, and more of the circumstances of what Potter has been doing, I must admit that I would not have had anyone else by my son’s side.”

I paused in our walking and blinked at him. Surely, I was misinterpreting Lucius’ words. He continued walking, not noticing my confusion, and I had to jog to catch up.

“You are a very intelligent young woman, resourceful and, if you’ll pardon me for saying so, very Slytherin.”

I smirked.

“I realise that Potter is…or was, very close to you, but I can see that this attachment has not clouded your judgment. I also know that my behaviour toward you and your friends has made you view me with great aversion. I will not apologise for my actions, and I know that it might anger
you.

However, I will say that if I had not done exactly what I did, I would not be the man I am today. And hopefully, the man I am today is not totally one that you view with biased contempt.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but said nothing, closing my mouth again with a snap.

“It is my hope that my son will never make my mistakes. And he nearly did, several times. He carries the same Mark as I, and that is the biggest regret I carry. Please do not judge Draco as you would judge me, Miss Granger.”

Finally, I spoke.

“Judgments change, Mr. Malfoy, as do emotions. My memory is very keen, but the pains I felt ten years ago are fading. Time heals many wounds, but not all. We must learn from those wounds.

I have forgiven you long ago, as I have forgiven so many others. The old times are just that…old…and hopefully to be overcome.

I am indebted to you and your wife…and your son for my life. This kindness will not be forgotten, however.

I will admit, Mr. Malfoy, that I am wary of you because of past actions, but I am not going to stupidly ignore your wisdom and experience. I am not one to hold a grudge…it takes too much energy away from more constructive matters. There is no merit to hating, fearing, or being resentful toward you, Mr. Malfoy.”

Lucius did not pause, but smiled…a true smile.

“If only others thought as you did, Miss Granger.”

I breathed a laugh as we came upon the end of the forest path. We walked in silence into the fields, the sunlight streaming through the white trees in a red and gold cast of light. At the yards of the stables, Lucius paused and turned to me, his face softened as if I had uttered some magic word
so that I was seeing his true face for the first time.

“Miss Granger, I would like to tell you something that I would like you to promise to keep to yourself.”

I cocked my head, but nodded.

“My son…Draco…it may seem to you that years ago I was quite harsh in handling his welfare. I assume, being the bright young woman you are, it might seem that those actions were inspired by my care of him…to protect him in the most brutal manner. And with my harsh manner, I had, in almost every way, failed Draco. I have tried for ten years to make up for my failures, and after ten years, I am beginning to feel as though I have protected him as a father should protect his beloved child.

But he is a grown man now, and my protections can only go so far. I cannot protect his pride when he feels a failure, and I cannot protect his heart from being broken…

Miss Granger, I am concerned as to the source of your feelings toward my son. Surely, you have considered your feelings toward him, from where they spring and why…

I just do not want you to hurt him when you might suddenly realise you only feel for him because he has saved your life, or because he has protected you. So, I will just ask now.

Do you care for my son because of recent events? Do you view him as a ‘knight in shining armor?’ Or are your feelings for him based upon something more than your need for Draco to protect and maintain your survival?”

I narrowed my eyes and shifted my weight slightly. Lucius was a quick study, I had to give him that. Moreover, he was straight forward whereas Narcissa whittled the truth out of me, bit by bit.

I had to answer Lucius. His questions stemmed from his love for his son, and I could not dance about the question or lie. Lucius was being very honest, so I also had to be very honest in return.

“Mr. Malfoy, I have known your son for many years, and although I had not seen him between the Last Battle and Minerva McGonagall’s funeral, I found him to be very changed from the boy I knew. Your son was my tormentor at Hogwarts, and I resented him. However, after nearly ten
years, I have found him to be very much a ‘like’ mind.

The questions you have posed to me, I have asked myself many times. You assume that I have feelings for Mal-Draco, and I admit that I do… It is not just because he has saved my life many times over, or that he has risked his life to protect me…those things just add to how I feel about him.

The day Harry attacked us at the Ministry; I thought I had lost Draco. I was prepared to avenge his death by killing the man who had been my best friend. I could not lose Draco, I could not go on alone…”

I choked on my words, lowering my eyes to the ground…but took a deep breath and met Lucius’ eyes again.

“I cannot honesty say that I love Draco, because I really don’t know what that kind of love is…I have not experienced it yet. But I know that that day, I was ready to fight, and possibly be killed because I thought Draco was dead. And ever since then, whenever we have to run, whenever we have to fight, he is the first thing I think about…even before my own survival. I don’t want him to protect me forever, I want to fight beside him, prove to him that I am not weak…prove that I care for him not to need to be protected.”

I stopped, knowing that I was going to begin repeating myself, because these were the sentiments that repeated through my brain every day.

Lucius gazed back at me, his unguarded face shifting so that he smiled and turned his eyes away and to the fields.

“I feel safe when I am near him, which I never would have felt ten years ago. I love sitting with him, drinking coffee, and bantering about what is happening to all of us, or what had happened years ago. I want to be near him, I want to talk to him, and these last few days have been awkward without having him to speak with…and be near,” I said softly.

Lucius turned his pale eyes to me again.

“When all of ‘this’ is over, I will still want to talk to him and be near him in some manner. I know this because it is just not ‘want’ I feel…I enjoy being near him, talking to him…” I finished.
Lucius and I stared at each other for what seemed a long while, until, finally, Lucius grinned and I automatically put myself on guard, out of habit.

“Does he know all of this?”

I breathed a laugh and shrugged. “I don’t know. Draco teases me too much and it makes it difficult to read his feelings.”

“He learned that from his mother,” Lucius muttered, but held his soft smile. “Why is it that you call him by his surname? Narcissa was curious as well.”

I smirked. “He calls me ‘Granger.’ I don’t think I have ever heard him say my name…”

Lucius chuckled, moving into the stables, I followed, stepping onto the stairs as Lucius took a horse from its stall and mounted without the need of a stirrup.

“You should try saying his first name, and see what happens, Miss Granger.”

I shrugged. “If he ever comes back…”

“Oh, he’ll be back…most definitely for Beltane. Now that he’s an adult he is required to be here for Beltane. And now that you are under Malfoy protections, you are required to witness the rites, Miss Granger… It is a rare privilege,” Lucius said, seeming to use his knees to guide his mount nearer the bottom of the stairs. “Narcissa will surely tell you all about our traditions for Beltane…I just hope that nothing happens before then…” he finished darkly. “I bid you a good night, Miss Granger. My birthday has certainly proved enlightening.”

With that last, somewhat cryptic statement, Lucius raised a hand and goaded his mount to take off from the tables like a streak of white, Lucius holding to the mane and egging the horse faster.

I could only smile smugly at the senior Malfoy as he disappeared across the field. I turned and made my way up the stairs and into what had become my temporary home. I drew my wand to light the candles and stoke the fire. I moved to prepare a small dinner and eyed Douglas Adams’ ‘So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish’ resting on the arm of the couch.
April 30th I was drinking coffee in the kitchen although coffee might have been considered inappropriate in the late afternoon. I had awoken late, for the night before, the klaxon on the Floo sounded as I was sleeping, and I rushed to the fireplace.

Charlie Weasley’s face greeted my sleep-fogged vision. He looked as tired as I felt, and I sat on the floor with heavy eyelids, listening to his words that were slow to sink into my brain.

“Bones’ dying words have led us on a wild goose chase. Although we managed to round up more members of W.A.T.C.H., we’ve come to a dead end. We have searched Little Hangleton from top to bottom…the old Riddle house and the caretaker’s house have remained empty for the past thirteen years…the cemetery had nothing… To be honest, Hermione, we have searched every known location of Voldemort in Britain…and Harry’s travels during his schooldays. There’s nothing.”

I nodded. “I am not entirely surprised. He hid with Dudley Dursley for weeks without notice, and there is no where else in the Muggle world that would be familiar to him.”

“But it still does not mean that he could be hiding among Muggles.”

“True,” I conceded, but felt it was very unlikely.

“W.A.T.C.H. have their own safe houses, and of course, we cannot torture these people for locations, but we have to check everything…even the obvious places.”

I sighed. “I cannot think of an specific place he might go, Charlie. I just know where he could not be.”

“You’re certain that he would not escape somehow into the Forbidden Forest?”
I shrugged. “If he can get through the goblin enchantments, manage to avoid the wrath of the Lord of the Forest, who knows? But I think it is unlikely. Magorian has probably stepped up the patrols, informed what other sentient creatures he can, and is just waiting for a chance to tear Harry limb from limb. If you make a centaur an enemy, you have an enemy for life. It would be foolish to go into the Forest.”

Charlie sighed, and rubbed a large hand over his weary face. I wanted to ask about Malfoy, but Charlie bit his lip and turned his eyes away. Something was wrong…

“Mum is going to go any day now, Hermione. Every time Ron calls, I know its news that Mum is gone. And there’s nothing anyone can do about it.

Did the War seem as hard as this, you think?”

My lips were quivering and I felt tears begin to spring from my eyes.

“I don’t know, Charlie. So many people died then…and so many have died this time. At least with Voldemort, you knew whom to fight. There was a much clearer delineation between who was right and who was wrong. We don’t have that luxury now.”

Charlie sighed, “I know, and that is what makes me sick, Hermione. The W.A.T.C.H. people…they want something to be changed, and not a change that can be done by petitioning or protesting, but something that can only be done by changing the past.

Malfoy’s told me what you believe about the timeline, Hermione, and I’m no quantum-whatever like you are, but I want to live my life knowing that I’ve worked to get to this point…even though Mum is dying, Ginny’s having an mental breakdown, and Dad is wearing out to nothing…I love this life.

That’s why we have to stop him, Hermione…no matter what!”

The tears were flowing down my cheeks at the intense emotion in Charlie’s voice. Just in the moments we had spoken through the Floo, I felt I had gotten to know Charlie Weasley much better. He was a passionate, caring man, just like so many of the men in his family. I loved the Weasleys; they were down to earth people, finding happiness in each other. I wondered how the Malfoys found happiness…I knew that they loved each other fiercely, and maybe it was just my unfamiliarity with them that made me feel I was still an outsider.
“I just wish there was a way to salvage Harry for Ginny’s sake,” Charlie whispered, gaining control of his emotions again.

“There’s nothing left to salvage, Charlie,” I whispered back, trying and failing to gain control of my own emotions.

“I know, as much as I hate to say or think it, I know. I just cannot understand this, Hermione…anything that Harry’s done.”

I wiped my tears away. “Harry has been so abused, Charlie, and so much had been thrust upon him at a young age…there is no one in the world who could handle it all and come out unscathed after everything is said and done. Just think about it…you’ll understand.”

Charlie nodded and we did not say anything for a long moment.

“I wish I had more news…better news, Hermione.”

“It is a dark world, Charlie…”

“Yeah…” he whispered, moving his eyes to mine.

I tried to smile, tried to be reassuring, but I knew that I was in no position to reassure anyone about anything.

“Drink to the gods tomorrow night, Hermione,” Charlie said softly.

Beltane…

“I will, Charlie. Good night…” I whispered.

The Floo call ended, and I was suddenly very awake. I had curled up on the couch, gathering the
pale green throw blanket to place over my cold feet. I sat for a very long time in the dark, staring at the embers in the fireplace.

I cried for hours, my fingers outlining the disc resting between my breasts under my nightdress. I cried for Charlie, I cried for all the Weasleys, I cried for Susan Bones, Cho Chang, Minerva, the centaurs, even the Dursleys, and I cried for myself…and I cried because I wished Malfoy was sitting next to me, telling me not to cry…teasing me. When I could cry no more, my body cold, I crawled back into Malfoy’s bed…the scent of him worn off the sheets where I had held it too tightly and rubbed my face too often.

I woke late.

As I stood mulling over my coffee in the late afternoon, the sound of hooves against hard packed ground made me move to the window. Narcissa slid off her horse lightly and stepped quickly toward the stables. I took one last sip of my coffee before she knocked on the door, entering.

I moved into the parlour as she looked all around, her lips parted, and I remembered that she had never been in the groom’s quarters before.

She stood in the small vestibule, distractedly shutting the door behind her. Narcissa was dressed in an uncharacteristically plain dress of pale green linen, a silver girdle belt about her thin waist. The sleeves were long and belled, and the collar was a simple scoop neck revealing her pale neck, shoulders, and prominent collarbone. She wore her hair free and it fell down her body like silver threads of silk, shining even in the muted light of the apartment. On her feet, she wore thin slippers matching her medieval dress. But what puzzled me were the markings on her arms and legs. It seemed to be silver painted runes, but I, with my love of ancient runes, could not decipher the repeating symbols.

“So many Muggle books!” she declared before noticing that I stood near her. “What sort of books are they?”

I stifled a laugh. “Fiction, mostly. Mostly all British authors.”

Narcissa made a strange face, which I interpreted as a type of sarcastic attempt at surprise. She moved to the kitchen and opened the pantry, seemingly satisfied that the enchantment was working. She peeked into the bedroom, and then into the bathroom. Coming back into the parlour she stood next to me as I leaned against the back of the old couch.
“It isn’t bad, it is very much Draco’s style, but I never thought it would be so small.

Do you like it, Hermione?” she asked, turning her eyes to me.

“It is about the same size as my cottage. I would make the bathroom a bit more…luxurious, but other than that I do like it,” I admitted.

Narcissa hummed to herself and gave the parlour another look before turning back to me.

“You haven’t forgotten that we make a bonfire tonight, did you, Hermione?” Narcissa asked me, barely containing a childlike excitement, grasping my hand suddenly.

I smiled. “Beltane. I haven’t forgotten.”

Narcissa smiled widely, and shoved her left hand into a concealed pocket in the side of her shift dress. She produced her wand and what appeared to be a shrunken package. Moving to the counter bar of the kitchen, she placed the shrunken item on the surface, and quickly resized it so that I found it was indeed a package. In fact, it was a clothing box, shiny blue on the outside.

“This is for you…for tonight.”

I opened my mouth to protest.

“Not a word, Hermione. Beltane only comes once a year, and this year is the first in a long time that the Malfoys have had a guest to help celebrate. Now go open it, I want to make sure everything fits…and then get you ready.”

I frowned, but moved to the box as Narcissa commanded. Pulling up on the lid and setting it aside, I found I was looking down at pale violet fabric that shimmered slightly in the light. I lifted the garment from the box so that the taffeta-like material fell toward the floor. It was a shift dress much as Narcissa’s except it was sleeveless. The material, which I knew was not taffeta for the fabric was far softer, but was not like satin or silk. The shoulders were gathered slightly, making the dress seem like a chiton…and I swallowed, remembering the dream.
“Pale violet is a wonderful colour for you, Hermione…” Narcissa said distantly, moving to my side, her hand grasping the middle of the dress and pulling it close to my bared arm. The colour did look nice with my pale skin tone.

“There are slippers in the bottom, and a silver girdle belt…we’re going to have to get started now to make it in time…” Narcissa mumbled.

I blinked, not understanding. When I would celebrate Beltane in the Forest, I did it alone, lighting a small bonfire wearing whatever I felt like wearing, and usually drinking a bottle of Firewhiskey to commemorate another solstice.

However, the Malfoys seemed to have their own traditions, so I did not protest when Narcissa ordered me to bathe while she set out the dress in the bedroom. She instructed me to not dress, but wear a robe and join her when I was finished.

By the time I left the bathroom, my hair still wrapped in a towel, I could tell Narcissa was growing impatient in her excitement. Taking me by the hand, she had me sit down on the edge of the bed, next to the dress, which shimmered slightly in the late day sun.

“No undergarments…and the necklace…”

I bit my lip…I would not ever consent to remove it.

“You can wear it if you must. Now…let’s do your hair first…” Narcissa said more to the towel on my head than to me.

I kept my lip firmly between my teeth as Narcissa pulled the towel away so that wet waves fell over my shoulders heavily. I closed my eyes as she pulled her wand to point it at my head and with a silent spell, cast magic on my hair that made my shiver. I was glad I did not have a mirror, but I could feel the hair lifting to stand in every direction and gentle tugs against my scalp. Narcissa hummed, pleased as the spell ended up and my hair fell again over my shoulders.

I opened my eyes, my fingers moving to the strands that had fallen over my arms. The hair had been braided into tiny plaits almost to my scalp.

“Very nice…you make me think of Bouddica…”
I cocked my head and frowned, but Narcissa began laughing. I remembered what Malfoy had said about Narcissa wishing he had been a daughter. I very much felt like the doll again.

“Next are the runes…now, my dear, you need to think of an image. It has to be something very important to you, maybe something you want…think of it very clearly, and I’ll do the spell.”

I frowned deeper. “What spell?”

Narcissa smirked…deviously.

“Malfoy family secret…but don’t worry, it is not going to harm you. You see the runes on my arms and legs?” Narcissa asked, pulling at the skirt of her dress to reveal the runes running up her thin, pale leg…and then pulling back her right sleeve to show me the same markings. “Women wear the runes…they mark your body and begin at your heart. The Malfoys have specific rites for men and woman for Beltane and Samhain…Imbolc and Lughnasadh are lesser events with rites that are lax… But for Beltane, we wear the runes that only Malfoy men can read. It can be symbolic for the wish of good weather, good fortune, love, family, etc. I have no idea how they are supposed to read the runes, but they can. I suppose it is something passed down from father to son, I only know how to cast the spell…”

I sucked on my lower lip again. I was having hesitations at being a part of a Malfoy family Beltane.

“Now…picture that important thing…if it is an abstract thought, associate the feeling with an image. Close you eyes…”

I complied, mostly curious at what the rune would look like.

“Picture it…” Narcissa whispered almost as a hypnotist would say to the one being hypnotised. “Picture it…”

I did not know what to ‘picture,’ but I asked myself what I wanted the most.

Love…Severus whispered.
And suddenly I felt magic dance across my skin, over my limbs, down my torso, over my breasts, around my waist.

“Interesting…” Narcissa mused, and I opened my eyes, the spell over.

I raised my bare foot from the floor as Narcissa stood again, dropping her wand into her pocket. Running from the top of my foot and up my leg were tiny dark green runes…all identical, and all foreign to me. The runes reminded me of the astrological symbol for Taurus the bull, but it was slightly different with several dots and a dash running through what would have been the head of the bull.

The runes looked more like freckles than marks, but over my heart, just at top of my left breast was the largest rune, and I shrugged slightly, looking to Narcissa.

“I’ve never seen these before, granted, even if I could remember all that had ever marked me, I still would not know what it means…oh well…I’m sure Lucius or Draco will tell us…”

I almost asked that Narcissa not mention it, I was half afraid at what the answer would be.

The next hour was spent getting me dressed, and the shift fitted just right. Narcissa was enjoying herself immensely, while I tolerated her attentions. I adored the woman, but I was never one to dress up in pretty clothes, let alone dresses.

After sunset, Narcissa Transfigured one of Malfoy’s books, Carl Jung’s ‘Man and His Symbols,’ into a full-length mirror, placing me stiffly before it, dressed in the whole outfit. What I saw in the mirror made me blink, and gape.

I had not been transformed into some pretty doll…I was myself. I wore no make up, no fancy clothes, and instead I found that the dress was not so elegant as I first thought, but simple and beautiful. My hair was pulled back into two silver combs, the braids falling down my back while near my scalp the unbraided hair twisted in intricate waves. My face had a clean creaminess about it and the pale violet of the shift offset my amber eyes so that it seemed my eyes glowed with a preternatural light.

The dress was warm and soft despite it having no sleeves, the collar dipping to the top of my unbound breasts. The silver girdle wound about my waist tightly; accentuating my natural
hourglass shape, silver fringes hanging loosely at my left hip. The hem of the dress fell loosely about my ankles, and the matching slippers seemed too light to wear outside the apartment, but they were comfortable and warm. However, to finish the look were the runes tracing my limbs and trunk of my body. I looked like some half wild, half divine creature…a creature who could not be mistaken for anyone but Hermione Jane Granger.
Narcissa and I walked to a place she called Horned Hill, the place that Lucius had mentioned as the location of the small henge. From the stables, the walk took half an hour over several hills out into the fields. We passed a brook wending between the downlands, and several oak trees dotting the hilltops and vales.

Narcissa had told me before we had left the groom’s quarters that I could carry my wand in the side pocket of the dress, I still kept my two wands concealed from everyone, but Malfoy. Narcissa also told me that I could not join the initial ceremony and lighting of the bonfire. I had to stand outside the innermost stones while a spell would be cast so I could not hear Lucius’ words since I was not part of the family. She explained that centuries before when the Malfoys had servants and others living under the family’s protection that they would stand where I would stand as a spectator in the family rite. I would join afterward when the rites had been said. The walk to the stones would be done in silence as well, and so we walked the only sound being the distant wind, and brays of the sheep.

All the while, as we walked, I wondered if Malfoy would be there. Narcissa had said nothing to the fact Malfoy would be missing the family rite, but Lucius had said that Malfoy would definitely be back by Beltane…and it was Beltane. I was growing anxious just to see him.

I berated myself for feeling like some silly schoolgirl hoping to see a crush, but I could not help myself. After weeks of not even hearing from him, I was beginning to fear that he was keeping something important about Harry from me. I felt as if I had been cut out of his loop, and out of his realm of protection, and out of his feelings. It had been frustrating me ever since he had left.

Narcissa took my hand as we neared Horned Hill, the only light coming from the cloudless starry sky and a half moon. In the absence of any other light, the moonlight and starlight was enough.

Horned Hill lived up to it name, the silhouette of two tall stones making up what I believed to be the east and west markers. The western stone was slightly taller than the eastern stone, but both were as large as those in the inner circle at Stonehenge. The north and south stones were as tall as a man of good size. Smaller stones between the cardinal stones formed the inner circle. A second circle of good size boulders similar in size to a hippogriff formed the next ring, and the outermost circle was made of smaller boulders about the height of a standard chair. In the centre of the circle
were four slabs of stone, each about the size of the bed I slept in at the groom’s quarters. These slabs seemed more like benches, marking the cardinal directions. And in the very centre of the circle was the brush for the bonfire. The central portion was large enough that a line of people could dance easily between the intended bonfire and the benches.

Narcissa led me to a space between the inner and second circles, motioning that I could sit upon one of the hippogriff sized boulders. Pressing a finger to her lips, she smiled, moving around the stones. There was a strange hum as she entered the inner circle, and I glanced around, unable to see the entire centre portion for the large horned stones. I did not move however, pleased with my perch atop the boulder, folding my hands in my lap, and wondering how many people had been in my exact position through the centuries.

A sudden flaring of light in the centre circle signified midnight, and the bonfire lit. It was then I saw Lucius, his long, pale hair pulled back in a thong high on the back of his head. He was dressed in what I thought to be Death Eater’s robes, but on closer inspection, I saw that under the robe he wore a sleeveless jerkin of black leather, his pale arms visible as he moved his lips, and raised a rowan branch before the fire.

The hum I had felt had been the activation of a silencing sphere around the inner circle.

Narcissa stood next to him, her pale eyes flickering with reflected firelight. I noticed that she seemed to repeat everything Lucius said.

Another flash of fire, a pale green colour, and Malfoy seemed to appear at Lucius’ right. From the angle I sat, I could not see Malfoy’s entire visage, just the right side of his face. His hair seemed to have grown in the weeks since he had been gone, and it hung about his face in shaggy silver strands. He was not wearing his eye patch, and I could see that his scar had also seemed to heal in his time away, the skin not nearly as red. The mark did not look as ugly as it had. Malfoy was wearing a sleeveless jerkin as well, but it was open down the front…and I thought I saw he had a mark over his heart…a rune. I could not be sure from my vantage point.

Lucius stopped speaking, and turning to Narcissa, moved with her about the circle so that Malfoy took his father’s spot.

Pulling a small hawthorn branch from his robes, as if producing like a Muggle magician, Malfoy’s lips moved. By the tension in his shoulders, I wondered if his left, silver eye was pouring that tension into the fire. He raised the hawthorn branch once, and brought it down in a slicing motion so that it hung from his right hand limply. He paused…and turned to look at me.
My breath caught, not expecting him to notice my presence.

He smiled strangely, and turning back to the bonfire, spoke again, this time Lucius and Narcissa repeating his words. Both hawthorn and rowan went into the fire producing a flash of magical fire in silver and green.

Then, Lucius and Malfoy did something that made me gasp and raise my hand to my mouth. Producing a small blade from their robes, they simultaneously cut the palm of their left hands, closing their fingers so that blood pooled in their palms.

More words, and both men opened their hands and turned their palms downward so that their blood fell to the stones and soil beneath their feet.

As this happened, a wave swept through me—a visible wave of magic pulsed from the centre circle and outward in every direction, disappearing in silver light over the hills and over the lands.

Blood magic was how the Malfoys were able to maintain their protections. Blood magic was the most powerful magic a witch or wizard could perform, and I had been privy to one of the Malfoy family’s most powerful spells. I assumed that the actions I had witnessed and the words I was not allowed to hear were all parts of one spell. It would be impossible to break such an intricate spell, and I supposed that was the point of casting it.

“Stuck up there, Granger?” Malfoy asked from the inner circle, and I realised the silencing sphere had been dispelled.

I smiled, which made Malfoy blink at me with his left eye as he adjusted his eye patch over his right, apparently only taking it off for the rite.

“No. I was literally awed to silence and inaction,” I called back, honestly.

I leapt down from the boulder easily, my braids swaying around me. “Can I come to the fire?”

Malfoy nodded as Lucius and Narcissa moved around the circle to be near. I entered slowly, still feeling a residual pulse of magic in the inner circle. Glancing down to the stones under my feet, I watched as Malfoy’s blood was soaked quickly into the ground. I looked to his hand, and found that the wound had been sealed and only a thin red line adorned the palm.
“When the family was larger, they would sit on the benches and talk about the plans for the coming summer,” Lucius said, his eyes moving over my arms before glancing to Malfoy who seemed to be doing the same thing. Narcissa glanced between husband and son curiously, and then looked to me. My eyes pleaded with her and she nodded, not asking the obvious question.

“Since we are a small number, ‘Cissa and I will sit to the north and the two of you can sit to the east,” Lucius finished, meeting Malfoy’s eye, an amused glint of silver in those orbs.

Malfoy sighed and inclined his head the bench nearest to my back, and we sat, I on the inside. Lucius and Narcissa sat to my right, Narcissa closest to me.

“There is not much to talk about, Father. Plans for the summer? Kill Potter…save the world. That just about sums it up,” Malfoy said with the sarcasm I had missed in the past weeks.

“Miss Granger?” Lucius asked, his eyes, now filled with mirth, resting upon me.

I sighed. “What Malfoy said…unfortunately.”

Narcissa frowned, not at what had been said, but at the truth of the sarcastic statement.

“Well, I, not having the task to either kill Harry Potter or save the world, will have the Manor repaired by Samhain at the latest. The entire house is being redone to purge the French influences and to return to the Manor of our ancestors...in a more ‘Manor House’ style,” Lucius said with flair.

I smirked.

“’Cissa?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes, and I had to keep from letting a laugh escape.

“I want to redo some of the gardens...perhaps.”
It seemed suddenly that there was nothing more to be said, and Lucius sighed.

“Even with a guest this year, Beltane is just as dull as ever.

We should have had more children, my dear, then we could have songs, a dance, food…and the elves could provide some entertainment. Alas, the elves are rebuilding our home…” Lucius drawled, the Malfoy sarcasm simply flowing through the night air. “Miss Granger, I am sorry that this Beltane was not more interesting for you.”

I smiled. “It was interesting to me, being an outsider.” Outsider…it sounded so cold, but I could not think of a better word to use.

“Should have seen Beltane back when the ‘Dread Lord’ was alive, Granger. If you find Beltane boring now, you should have seen it then…” Malfoy whispered, leaning close to me, the heat from his body hotter than that of the bonfire. “But, Samhain is always fun with our family. We have a party, dance, eat, drink, play ‘find the naughty, drunk wench in the hedge maze,’ and wake up in the morning in the dungeons or in the stables,” Malfoy said aloud for his parents to hear.

Narcissa snorted a laugh, glancing to her husband.

“Of course, most of our usual guests are in Azkaban or dead now…” Malfoy muttered with no hint of remorse. “Even Imbolc is better…”

Lucius’ voice interrupted Malfoy’s musings.

“These plans of yours, Miss Granger, I should inform you that Draco has given ‘Cissa and I detailed descriptions of what you might have to do…” Lucius said darkly, his eyes meeting my own.

I stiffened, wanting to glance at Malfoy, berate him, but I could not. Instead, I sighed.

“Then you know that the possibility of having to travel back thirteen years is becoming more and more likely?”
Lucius nodded as Narcissa’s face fell. “Potter will not be found until he decides to use the Time-Turner.”

“We have not found a trace of him, Weasley and I have scoured every possible place, arrested scores of W.A.T.C.H. members and sympathisers…but we are putting ourselves in a dangerous situation by holding these people, all for the sake of capturing one,” Malfoy supplied, and I finally gazed at him, his expression grave, his mouth tightened in anger.

“The anniversary…you have considered that?” Lucius asked Malfoy.

I blinked. The 10th Anniversary of the Fall of Voldemort…it was ten days away.

“You need to prepare for the eventuality,” Narcissa added softly.

I agreed. Plans had to be made, contingencies covered.

“We can help you there, Miss Granger,” Lucius said, wrapping an arm about his wife’s waist.

“But let’s talk about something else. It is Beltane. Let’s remember that the Dread Lord is gone, and we are still alive…the timeline has not changed yet!” Narcissa asserted with a good deal of force, sitting straighter against her husband.

I smirked. She knew my theory about Harry changing the timeline, and I wondered how long she had known. Hours? Days? Longer? I doubted that she had known for very long.

Conversation seemed to fall from the air to die on the stones below. We all were too consumed with thoughts of Harry Potter, Voldemort, the past, and the future. I was staring thoughtfully at the bonfire, when Lucius rose, straightening his robe and reached down to take his wife’s hand.

“I bid you both a good night…Draco, your mother and I are going back to the bothy, I leave you to the bonfire,” Lucius said, his eyes moving to me and back to Malfoy again.
Narcissa smiled at Malfoy and I, and quickly followed her husband out of the inner circle and into the night. I watched them disappear into the darkness, and my eyes scanned the horizons. Far away, on a distant hill kilometers upon kilometers away, was a speck of another bonfire…and it cheered me after so many maudlin thoughts about what had to be done in the coming days. I wondered how far it was to the Malfoy bothy from Horned Hill, and why the Malfoys had left so suddenly.

“They are going home to finish the rites,” Malfoy muttered as if reading my mind, leaning back on the bench so that his palms rested upon the worn surface of the rock. As he did so, his robe slipped from his shoulders to reveal his pale, muscular arms. The leather jerkin spreading open and I could see that there was indeed a rune upon his chest, just above his heart.

“What rites are those?” I asked absently, trying to place the rune into a context I might know.

Malfoy turned his head to me, his hair falling into his face. “Take a guess, Granger…”

I smirked, trying not to think too much. “They are Lord and Lady…”

“They are the randiest parents I have ever heard of…it is a wonder that I don’t have about twelve younger siblings.”

“Contraceptive Charms…” I mumbled.

Malfoy snorted, leaning forward so that his bare elbows rested on his knees.

“What does the rune above your heart represent?”

Malfoy glanced down at his chest and grinned.

“Why haven’t you asked what your runes mean?”

I licked my lips. “I don’t know if I want to know.”
“It means ‘heir.’”

I frowned.

“My rune. It means ‘heir,’” Malfoy repeated. “Someday it will said ‘lord,’ but I’m contented with ‘heir’ for the time being.”

“And your mother’s?”

“That’s private, Granger.”

I found Malfoy's answer amusing, and sighed.

“Want to finish the rite?”

“Hm?”

Malfoy rose to his feet and moved around the bonfire to the west ‘horn.’

“There is actually a little more to our version of Beltane than this, Granger,” Malfoy called from behind the west marker, returning to the light of the bonfire with a bottle of what looked like wine and a goblet made of pewter.

“And you were waiting for your parents to leave?” I suggested as Malfoy sat down cross-legged on the bench, facing me.

Malfoy smiled mischievously, opening the wine and pouring a large portion into the goblet resting on the bench. I turned to him, adjusting my dress to ape his body position.

“So drinking is part of your rites of Beltane?” I asked softly as Malfoy set the bottle beside the bench and took the goblet into his hand.
“Isn’t it for everyone?” he asked in mock horror.

I raised an eyebrow. “I drink at Beltane…and all the other observances…usually Firewhiskey,” I said in a sigh.

Malfoy pursed his lips in feigned distaste and raised the goblet.

“You have heard of some people celebrating the Goddess and Great Horned God on Beltane?”

I nodded.

“Well, it is a more modern convention of the ancient origins of Beltane. Beltane is the celebration of summer…basically, but it is a fertility rite…maybe not as much as Imbolc, but you understand what I am saying?”

I nodded again.

“The Malfoys make a toast which pertains to Beltane…especially if the circumstances are just right. But first, we toast. The Malfoy heir, which is always male, and then the lady…”

Malfoy raised his glass, “I drink to thee, my Lady,” he said softly, his lips wrapping about the rim of the goblet, drinking deeply.

When he lowered the goblet, he smirked, pressing the pewter into my hand. I grasped the stem, looking into the darkness of the cup.

“It is a good wine…” Malfoy insisted. “Now you toast, Granger.”

I hesitated, “We might be heading into the possibility of certain death, Malfoy, does this thought bother you at all?”

Malfoy frowned at my words, and that I was not toasting him, “With Potter? Of course, it bothers me. Death means defeat.”
I sighed. “I am afraid, Malfoy, as much as I hate to admit it…and no matter what precautions we take, nothing will the be easier…”

My eyes moved to the bonfire. I would have to kill Harry. I would have to go back in time to possibly see faces of those whom I had loved and lost. I would have to conceal my very existence, and face Harry alone. I had no preconceived notion that Malfoy would go with me, and fully expected to return to 1995 alone. But there was a small hope, that if I would have to go to my death, Malfoy would go with me.

I could not say why I felt that way, and I could not ask Malfoy out right to die at my side.

“Where have you been?” I asked, my voice no louder than a whisper, turning my eyes to Malfoy’s face.

He wrapped his hand around mine as I held the goblet. “From Wales to Ireland, Scotland to the Canary Islands…on a chase after a shadow. The only possible place we can conceive to catch Potter is Hogwarts…in ten days.”

I looked down to his hand around mine. “You want me to go, don’t you? As bait.”

Malfoy smirked. “You mentioned once that you did not mind being used as bait, so why the hesitant look in those honey eyes now?”

“I don’t want to go…I don’t want to have to see the people who will come…I don’t want to be stared at…”

“You’re going, Granger. Besides, the ceremony will be small…it is some placing of a commemorative marker upon the grounds…and you can use a cloak like you did when I first saw you again after so many years…like a shield,” he said, pausing. “It could be our last chance to stop him…”

“I do not think Harry will even bother appearing, Malfoy…but others might come, others like the W.A.T.C.H., and more innocent people could be hurt or killed,” I mumbled, Malfoy’s hold over my hand loosening so that the base of the goblet rested up on his crossed right knee.
I sighed. I sat among enchanted stones, close to the man I had missed and thought about for weeks. It was Beltane, a time when the world of the spirit and world of the flesh were so near. It was possibly because it was Beltane that I could feel that the inevitable seemed closer, and I wondered if I had made some colossal blunder somewhere along the years after the Last Battle

“My life as been wasted…” I muttered.

Malfoy touched my face. “Not yet.”

I snorted and raised my eyes to Malfoy. Earnestly, “You have no idea…”

He grasped my chin between his thumb and forefinger, smirking down at me. “What did you want to be, Granger?”

“I wanted to be wicked…” I answered.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I have been too good…”

Malfoy released me, and helped me raise the goblet of wine to my lips. “Drink to me, Granger…I drank to you…” he whispered, his silver eye glinting in the bonfire’s light.

I did not feel very comfortable about toasting the Malfoy heir, but I raised the goblet, knowing that Malfoy would annoy me to no end if I did not. “I drink to thee, my Lord.”

I drank, and drank deeply, just as Malfoy had in his toast to me…the Lady, and found that he was not lying when he said it was a good wine. It was a red wine, but I, knowing so little about wine at all, knew not much more than the colour.

I swallowed, finding that the bitter aftertaste was not entirely unpleasant.

“Very good. Now I’m going to tell you what your runes mean, Granger,” Malfoy said in a voice
that immediately had me on edge.

He plucked the goblet from my hand and drank more, moving to refill the cup. Pressing it into my hand again, I drank…I had a feeling that whatever Malfoy was going to tell me, might be more palatable with some alcohol coursing through me. I drank the rest of the goblet, noting that Malfoy seemed genuinely surprised when he found the goblet empty. He did not refill it.

“My mother told you that these runes could only be read by Malfoy men?” Malfoy asked.

I nodded…the wine already coursing through me. I did not drink wine for that particular reason.

“What she said was true. The runes are part of a system developed by an ancestor who used to the runes to guard his writings on the spells he was creating. After several generations, the Malfoy heirs began using it for other purposes. That being said, you will never know what the runes mean…and I know that that fact must burn you…”

I said nothing, but stared at Malfoy’s face in the bonfire light.

“But I digress…your runes. The runes that symbolise something very important to you, something you might want…desire.

Do you know what they might mean, Granger?” Malfoy asked moving his left hand to touch the runes on my right wrist.

“I do not know, Malfoy, and I would rather not delay the inevitable truth…so tell me.”

Malfoy’s eye glittered as it moved over my bare arms.

“Let me see your legs…”

“They are the same.”

Malfoy sighed, “I’m not asking you to strip, just let me see…”
I bit my lip and unfolded my right leg so that my slipper rested on the stone, the toe just touching Malfoy’s folded legs. I moved to lift the hem, but Malfoy’s left hand slid up my leg, his fingertips grazing my skin so that the hem was lifted to my knee and the dark green runes were visible.

“Granger?” he said in slight questioning, his eyes moving down my leg.

“What?” I huffed.

“What were you thinking about when my mother cast the spell?” he asked softly, his left eye moving up my leg to my face.

I tilted my head slightly, staring at the rune on Malfoy’s breast, honestly trying to think of what to say in answer. I knew I could not tell Malfoy about Severus’ voice whispering to me, or that I had grown anxious at the thought that I would see him after weeks of missing him…

“I cannot really say. I was a bit overwhelmed by your mother trying to dress me like I was a doll…” I whispered, my sight sharpening over the strange rune, which I could still not associate with the meaning Malfoy had supplied.

Malfoy smiled, his fingers tracing down the top of my leg to the top of my foot.

“What does it say?” I asked, shivering slightly at his touch.

He grinned.

“My name.”

I lifted my shoulders to sigh, but stopped short, blinking. I stretched my left arm outward, and lifting it to the firelight, I squinted at the runes. A blush crept up from my chest to my cheeks.

“You’re lying,” I said in a very matter-of-fact tone.
Malfoy’s right hand grasped my left wrist and pulled my hand to place it over his heart. I opened my mouth to protest as my palm warmed, his heart beating steadily and strongly. I met his eye.

“You only say that because you know that it is true. You were thinking of me when Mother cast the spell.”

I shook my head, ready to vehemently deny his words. Of course, I could never know for certain what the runes meant…but I knew…I knew that Malfoy was speaking the truth.

The knowing glances between father and son were a type of confirmation.

His hand moved from my ankle to cup my cheek, but I refused to see whatever emotion was playing over his face. I could not bear to see that he was laughing at me.

“You are wicked, Hermione…” he whispered.

My breath caught…he had said my name, and it had sounded like music falling from his lips. A single tear slipped down my warm cheek, but I did not cry. Malfoy shifted to kneel before me, and pressing a kiss into my forehead, another tear fell. His lips moved over my face as my hand slipped from his heart to grasp his leather jerkin.

Our lips met, and I surged upward to meet his mouth, tasting wine in his kiss. He held my left hand in his, his fingers weaving through mine to pull my arm to wrap about his neck.

Falling back onto the bench, Malfoy hovered over me so that he knelt between my knees, my skirts riding up my thighs. I sighed into our kiss, my hands moving about his neck while his left hand slid up my thigh, pulling my dress to my hips.

Malfoy pulled away slowly, his fingers moving to the girdle belt about my waist.

I stared up at him, at his reddened lips, his mussed hair, his shimmering silver eye. I was gasping, my hands moving to remove the patch he wore so that I could see his face without any part being obscured. Even with a scar running from his hairline to near the corner of his mouth, I found his pale hair and skin bewitching in the bonfire’s light. The girdle belt opened, and Malfoy pulled it away so that it fell to the ground next to the wine bottle.
“Say my name again…” I whispered as my fingers moved to push at his jerkin, which he shed at my wish.

He smirked, his arms gathering me up and against him so that he embraced me tightly.

“Hermione…” he whispered in return, the combination of his voice and the crackling of the bonfire sounding like a chord of music upon the air.

I shivered as our lips met again, and his weight pressed against the cradle of my hips. Our lips moved leisurely, our tongues twisting lazily as we began to memorise the taste and shape of each other’s mouths.

Everything, even the flames seemed to slow down in time. Only my thoughts and consciousness seemed to move in real time, and all I could think of was Malfoy.

I had wanted him, wanted to be near him for weeks. Again, I was not sure when I began to feel as though I needed him. I was not sure when respect had turned to admiration and admiration into need…need into want…want into something that I wondered was love… I wanted to swallow him whole, hold him forever, take him deep inside, and never let him go. I wanted him to be mine.

We shifted as he kissed my neck, his hands moving to push my dress further up my body, but paused at my ribs. I held to Malfoy’s neck as he lifted himself to peer down into my eyes. This face was as expressive as I could ever remember, but there was hesitation about his mouth, and what I considered to be disbelief in his brow.

I licked my swollen lips, fingers playing through the silk of his hair to his shaven cheek, to his pointed chin. My other hand swept over the rippling muscles of his back, and I wanted to smile… but his expression did not change.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice deepened by my desire.

Malfoy groaned softly as my finger ran down his chest so that a fingernail flicked over the left nipple near the base of the magically coloured rune.
“You…” he whispered, “Are you…?”

I frowned. I knew what he wanted to ask…was I sure about continuing? Was I comfortable with exposing my body to him? Would I be afraid of his attentions after my best friend had abused me so abominably? I knew what he wanted to ask for I had asked myself those questions the day that he rejected my advances.

My answer was to lift my knees, my feet planted on either side of Malfoy’s, I pushed my body upward, my dress slipping so when I gently lowered myself again my bare bottom was upon the stone. I kicked off my slippers; the bare soles of my feel touched the stone, not feeling the coolness of the night or the ancient white rock.

Malfoy could only blink at me as I lifted my upper body to sit before him, he falling back on his haunches. I grasped my dress and pulled it over my head, the pendant fell between my breasts, firelight catching the polished surface. I dropped the dress behind me and stared into Malfoy’s face.

“What do the runes say?” I asked softly.

Malfoy pursed his lips, his eye moving from the pendant to my breasts, down to my navel and the soft roundness of my belly…further down to my parted thighs and the dark curls hiding my sex. In dark green, the tiny runes ran in lines up my body, converging to the larger rune over my heart at the top of my left breast.

He swallowed as his right hand moved so the tips of his finger brushed the rune over my heart.

“My name…” he answered.

I nodded. “That is your answer, Draco…”

His eye flashed at the sound of his name on my lips, and just as Lucius had said, the effect of my saying Malfoy’s name was surprising. Malfoy…Draco…smiled, a smile that beamed of a brand of satisfaction, and happiness I had never seen from him before. I had recognised his name, speaking it with such a care that his hand shook as he finished tracing the rune.

I sat before him, leaning back on my palms, the tiny braids of my hair swaying against my back. I
could not present myself in a manner any more open than I was at that moment. Malfoy’s mouth quirked into a lop-sided smile as he noticed my eyes taking in the pale hair running down his chest, over bone and muscle. His thick upper arms, wide shoulders, even the shadow of the Dark Mark on the inside of his left arm, it was all attractive to me, for it only was the shell of what I was growing to love more and more on the inside. Draco…

“Then I shouldn’t waste any more time…” he mumbled, a hand undoing the front of his black trousers, the other reaching out for me.

He pressed himself against me as we fell into a deeper, more desperate kiss. The slowness of moments before was replaced with an obsessive need to press as much skin and warmth into me as a possible. My breasts were squeezed against his chest, his heart frantically pounding against my once ruined nipple.

Moving against me, I could feel Draco slip from his boots, and wriggle out of his trousers so we were finally skin to skin.

I could feel his hard length against my bare hip, pulsing with every brutal beat of his heart. The feeling of sticky dampness dripping from the tip of that stiff flesh to my belly made my heart, in turn, beat faster. I was aroused, and I wondered if I had ever felt so hot, so wet, or so ready in my life.

My sex life had been nonexistent for five years, and before that, it had only been with Ron a few times. I had slept with a blind date my parents had set up in Australia while I had visited for a summer. It had been a Muggle doctor friend…and it had been only to scratch an itch and nothing more. I couldn’t recall the man’s name.

But I pushed those thoughts out of my mind, for I knew the man who held me, who kissed me, whose cock was twitching as I thrust my hips against him. This was a man who had saved my life, protected me, kept my mind and soul from falling into a pit of all-consuming depression, amused me, made me coffee, and had kissed me before in a manner that had led me to care for him a great deal. He was my Edward Fairfax Rochester, coarse and taciturn, hot blooded and gentle. My proud Fitzwilliam Darcy. Most importantly, and most honestly he was my…

“Draco…” I whispered as he pressed kisses into my shoulders, moving to kiss the tops of my breasts, his embrace moving lower down my ribs.

He growled as my fingers wove into his hair, my hips bucking against his as his tongue traced around my left nipple. I knew he was being very careful with me, taking his seduction at a slower...
pace than he would have liked…but I loved him for the care he took, and the concern over my reaction to the situation we had placed ourselves into…

I groaned as his mouth enveloped my nipple, his other hand moving to palm my right breast in his large hand. My breathing was strained with overwhelming delight. Draco’s mouth suckled at my breast, and every swipe of his tongue sent a shot of sweet joy through my body causing my skin to moisten with sweat, my eyes to dilate, my toes to curl, and my core hum and ache with need.

His tongue moved to lave my scarred nipple, the tip tracing along the thin reminder of the violence that had allowed Draco to save me… He glanced up to my face, his left eye soft with emotion. I was not afraid, and I was not going to let past events dictate the course of my future life! I wanted the man whose hands moved to grasp my shifting hips to keep them still. I wanted him to touch me, to banish all other memories of the wrongs committed upon my body.

Draco’s lips kissed my breasts one last time before he moved to my lips again, sliding his body against mine so that the dampness of my centre could no longer be contained, and I felt it trickle down my thighs and buttocks. I was in a frenzy to touch him, my hands moving down the rippled muscle of his back and sides, to grasp the globes of his buttocks, pressing his hips harder against mine. He grunted as I lifted my knees higher, the sticky, hot wetness of my core pressing against the underside of his cock, the organ pulsing against my clit.

I groaned as Draco’s mouth left mine, his cock sliding against my core, lubricated by warm juices. He lifted his upper body from mine, gazing down at me as he knelt between my thighs. A silent question was posed by the knitting of his brow and the quick thrust of his hips against mine. I rose up to answer him, curling my left arm about his neck. He grasped my hip and nodded, silver hair falling in wild tangles around his handsome face, his eye moving to the point where he and I were pressed the tightest together.

Grasping my hips, he lifted so that he could pull back his hips from mine. In the firelight, I could see his organ for the first time, and the pale, course curls above. I did not have a suitable basis for comparison, but Draco’s cock intimidated me…more thickly veined than long, but long enough, with a slight arc upward. This view of Draco’s sex lasted only a few seconds as the tip swiped along my damp slit until the head slipped into a natural indentation of my body, as if that was where his cock always had belonged.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Hermione…” he whispered, his voice ragged.

I held tighter to him as he laid me back into the stone and his cock slipped just inside me.
“I don’t care, Draco…” I whispered, my right hand brushing a fringe of silver hair from his eye.

He did not answer, but bowed his head so it rested against my collarbone. And I gasped as he pushed inside…just the head. He was gasping, his voice whispering too low for me to hear.

Pushing in again, I winced as my body was stretched, stretched as it had never been before. It was not painful per se, but slightly uncomfortable and odd. When the tip of his cock budded against my womb, I whimpered, not out of pain, but a sensation that I could not identify.

Draco lifted his face to me again, searching, thrusting very shallowly in and out of my body. I bit my lip as his hips rocked a bit wider, in a slow motion. My body was full, and I was not in pain, and when Draco’s movements came to be half strokes in and out of my pussy, I twisted my hips to assist him, eliciting the most beautiful whimper from his throat.

The fire flickered over our skin as we moved, my legs wrapping about his waist, changing the angle of his pursuit…and I came. He had buried his face in my neck, panting and groaning into my skin, only pulling away to kiss my face as my centre contracted around him, or to pull my hand from clutching his ass to place fingertips over my clit.

I came again and again, each time he ground his teeth, and whispered something that my lust fogged mind could not decipher. We were sweating; our voices raw with moans, whimpers, and half formed expletives when our passions overwhelmed our senses. When Draco’s hands moved to grasp the edge of the bench to seek leverage, his thrusts were harder, deeper, but I loved the strength in which he filled me, the movement of his muscles under his back, his buttocks, his arms and chest, arousing me. The brushing of his pubic hair against my clit sending me into raptures with every thrust…

He was losing control, losing the battle to make our lovemaking last forever. His hips thrust wildly, and I came once again when his cock jutted at a new angle inside me, causing my back to arch involuntarily and the last of my body’s moisture coat the inside of my thighs and his sac, which had been slapping against my other opening like a rapping hand upon a door. I screamed my release in a voice that did not seem like my own.

Through my orgasm-skewed eyes, I watched Draco in the firelight, his body shimmering silver and gold… He whimpered as he thrust once and froze. My swollen pussy could feel a slight hum. He thrust again, gasping, and froze; the hum in my belly had become warmth. I raised a weary hand to cup his cheek, his eye squeezed shut as he thrust rapidly into my body, causing my voice to ring out, when suddenly his thrusts weakened and I felt his cock seem to swell and release so that I lost myself in my overwhelmed senses, my eyes sealing shut. My skin itched, and at every point where the runes had traced my skin, I could feel magic, like pinpricks, sinking into my flesh and disappearing.
Draco’s head rested upon my breast, and through his dried, kiss swollen lips, I heard him whisper a Contraceptive Charm, his fingertips brushing over my lower belly. I sighed, as felt a tickle of magic there…wrapping an arm about his shoulders and letting my mind slip into a happy daze. My eyes could just see the stars high above us, the stars and stones having been the only witnesses to our mating.

The bonfire had nearly died, and even with Draco’s body pressed to mine, the magic of the Beltane rite was over as he pulled his spent cock from my clutching body. He sat up, pressing a kiss at the corner my mouth and moved to dress himself, his trousers and jerkin, then boots and finally cloak. I moved as if in a dream, reapplying my dress and trying to find my slippers…but Draco moved before I, and knelt between the bench and dwindling fire to place the shoes upon my feet, helping me to stand to slip the girdle back around my waist.

He drew Severus’ wand from his cloak and Vanished the goblet and wine, and wrapping his left arm about my waist so that I was tucked inside the warmth of his cloak, we walked a circle about the bonfire, and exited the innermost ring by the eastern horn. As we did so, the bonfire died completely, leaving only the scent of rowan and hawthorn smoke.

We did not speak as we began to walk from Horned Hill, the starlight so incredibly bright that I could not believe that there was such a beautiful silver light… I was weary as we walked, and soon I was scooped up into his arms, my cheek pressed to his left shoulder, my body enveloped in his warmth. His hair was the same colour as starlight, as was his eye, his skin, and in my sleepiness, I wondered if he had somehow been born from the stars high above. This silly thought was one of many as I slipped further and further into a beautiful dream of the downlands, the white forest, the Horned Hill, the stars and stones, and Draco Malfoy whom had toasted me as ‘his’ Lady.

I awoke with sunlight warming my bare feet as they stuck out from the blanket where I lay in the bed I had come to know as my own while I lived in Draco Malfoy’s quarters. The French doors to the balcony were opened, and a warm breeze smelling of horses, grass, and the forest wafted over my exposed feet, rousing me slightly.

My face had been pressed into Draco’s shoulder as he lay on his back at my right, his face turned away, and the majority of the blankets pulled over to his side of the bed. The air was so warm that I did not mind that he had filched the blankets as we slept, but I pressed myself tighter against him, my nose burying in his pale locks, smelling wood smoke and ancient stone in the platinum strands.
My left hand, which had been resting on his ribs, moved downward to his hip, causing him to hum in his sleep and shift slightly. I paid his movement no mind, and closed my eyes again. My left leg thrown over his left leg, my upper thigh brushing against his erection…my head pillowed upon his left arm, which was curled about my shoulders… I fell asleep again, feeling strangely happy that I had started to think of him as Draco.

When I awoke again, I found myself alone in bed, the sunlight falling against my bare thighs, the day having progressed. It was the day of May 1. I rose slowly, wrapping the thin blanket about me, padding from the bedroom into the kitchen where I found a note on the counter. A pot of coffee had recently been made and I felt more aware at the scent. I was alone in the groom’s quarters, the windows open so that a warm breeze blew in from the forests behind the stables, the air laden with the smell of trees.

‘H-

Weasley and I have left for Godric’s Hollow. Take today to begin preparing for the 10th, compose your notes, your thoughts, etc. Father will be by later to give a package and a better explanation. Can’t put everything in this note, I’m sorry. Plan to be back tomorrow.

-D.’

I placed the parchment back on the countertop, gnawing on my lower lip.

Godric’s Hollow. Memories of Harry and I going to the place where his family had lived, Bathilda Bagshot’s house, Grindlewald, and so many other images flashed through my mind. It was unlikely that Harry would return to the Hollow, but surely there was some sort of lead to take Draco and Charlie there.

I sighed; the disc shifted on the pendant, but remained cold. I moved through the apartment, and was soon bathed and dressed. I was leaning against the counter, sipping the coffee Draco had made, my body still buzzing from the night before. However, no matter how much I thought about how my body felt so warm, my thoughts would revolve back to Harry.

“Do you think we will really have to go back?” I asked aloud.

You will do what you must, Miss Granger. If it means moving through time, challenging the will of the Fates, you must go…Severus said inside my mind, his voice soothing to my fears.
The Fates…it was a term for the abstract concept of how the universe functioned. Some people called it God, or Allah, or some other name for a supernatural, omniscient being, but I called it the Fates…the set progression of time and space. The universe was a mysterious place, and humanity had only begun to understand the immediate mechanics of the colossal machine.

I crossed my ankles as I rested back against the stainless steel countertop, having decided to wear a pair of worn denims with the knees literally worn out. Over the jeans, I wore a black tank top, leaving my arms bare to feel the softness of the May day blowing in through the windows.

In such a peaceful place, with such wondrously warm light, it was hard for me to believe that I would perhaps have to bend the rules of the universe as soon as the disc resting between my breasts would warm up.

I sipped my coffee, turning around to look at the parchment I had left on the counter behind me. Draco’s handwriting was foreign to me, but the way the words were angled to the left and the violent strokes of the quill on the parchment made me imagine his long fingers moving…the scratch of the nib cutting into the fibres of the parchment.

I realised that I was missing him again.

“Is this love?” I asked.

_That is a question I cannot answer. It is different for everyone, Miss Granger…Severus whispered, and fell silent again. I smiled into my coffee, finishing the cup and setting it next to Draco’s note._

The sounds of hooves in the yard made me lift my head. Lucius had come.

The Lord of the Manor entered much as Narcissa had the day before, his eyes scanning the parlour. He had a box under his arm, and placed it on the writing desk before moving to the armchair by the low ember fire. I joined him, sitting on the couch, after offering a cup of coffee, which Lucius refused, curling his lip in distaste.

“Draco developed a taste when he lived in America…the same with the Muggle music and books. I applaud his varied tastes, but there are few new interests he brought back from the Colonies that I found palpable.”
I could only smile wanly, and then asked for the explanation Draco had written about in his note.

Lucius smirked. “Most likely another wild chase, Miss Granger, and perhaps the last lead before the tenth.”

“The Aurors have not searched Godric’s Hollow?”

“They have, back in February when Potter escaped,” Lucius drawled, crossing his riding boot over his left knee. “The so-called terrorists being detained are being treated as ‘enemy combatants’ by the Ministry, and much of the information being obtained is through liberal uses of Veritaserum. Madame Hopkirk is sparing no expense to stop Potter now…now that he has terrorised Britain by his own actions and the actions of those like W.A.T.C.H.”

“What will happen to those people?” I asked, my mind shifting to the possibility of human rights violations, which seemed prevalent in the Magical as well as the Muggle world.

“Many will be tried and sent to Azkaban, others will be released and watched, some will be given to the Dementors…it will be a process that will last years…all because Harry Potter decided to turn the world upside down,” Lucius spat.

I could not find Lucius’ disgust surprising, part of me felt the same way. However, it had not just been Harry that brought protest organisations over the boundary to ‘terrorism.’ My only real fear about the terrorists was the Ministry reaction…the violation of human rights, and the possible loss of civil liberties for every witch and wizard as a result of ‘terrorism.’ No matter if Harry managed to go back and change the timeline, both worlds, his ideal world, and the world in which I sat in that very moment, were both dark, both troubled… The difference with my world was the fact that I, and people like me, still existed to work to turn the dark into light.

“’Cissa and I have put together a package for you, Miss Granger,” Lucius said softly, having purged his anxiety and disgust, to incline his head to the box on the writing desk. “’Cissa had Leak salvaged what he could from her stores in the Manor. There are phials of Polyjuice potion for you and Draco…same donors as last time. There are some Blood Replenishing Draughts, Veritaserum, pain reducing potions, and other necessaries.”

I nodded. Potions that was standard for Aurors to carry in shrunken kits on their belts.
“There is also a set of dragon hide clothing for you, a set ‘Cissa has had for many years. She is sure it would fit you…”

I blinked at Lucius.

“You should wear them any time you leave the boundaries of our lands, Miss Granger. They will deflect lesser offensive spells, giving you a better chance at defending yourself.”

I nodded, my eyes moving to my wand holster resting on the kitchen counter. I had not slipped it on yet that day. Lucius followed my eyes and I quickly diverted my gaze.

“I have noticed that you carry Bella’s wand. I meant to ask you before, but I kept forgetting.”

“Has Narcissa noticed?” I asked softly.

Lucius chuckled. “She does not miss much, so yes, she has. Do not look so concerned, Miss Granger. The fact that you carry mad Bella’s wand does not concern us, but it is interesting to us nonetheless. Both you and my son carry two wands that were never yours originally. It is strange to have two wands, to start, but two wands who had other masters is even more unusual.”

I said nothing for a moment, locking eyes with Lucius.

“The Dark Lord had my wand for a long time, and it was destroyed. He gave up his wand, and I secreted it away for years before Draco found it. When he touched it, the wand seemed to weep…”

I frowned. “Literally?”

Lucius nodded. “I kept it in a chest in my study, trying my best to forget about it. Draco found it when he returned from America to testify before the Wizengamot. The wand wept a phoenix song, and reacted to Draco as if it had always been his to use. He already carried Severus’ wand, as it had been willed to him, but he only uses it for specific spells, using the Dark Lord’s wand for everything else.”
The oak wand had been willed to Draco? Why? Severus did not answer.

“Using both wands has served him well... just as Bella’s wand has seemed to serve you, Miss Granger.

We also know about the Elder Wand, and I, for one, leave you to it. I know many men have desired its power, but I would wish the cursed bit of wood and core on no one.”

I knew exactly how Lucius felt. The Elder Wand was tainted with blood, and had been for generations. I did not want anyone to know that I had the wand, lest I be targeted.

Lucius’ fingers ran to his boot and with a wince, he produced a stiletto from the leg, and flipping it in his hand, moved to pass the handle of the blade to me.

“Take this as well, Miss Granger,” he said softly as my fingers moved to wrap about the handle of the blade, my hand fitting about the green inlaid stone as if the handle had been made for my grip.

Sliding it from Lucius’ outstretched hand, I found the blade light in weight, the foot long silver, doubled-edged blade was visibly sharp, the tip delicately dangerous. I twisted the stiletto in my hand, the green stone of the handle cool against the fleshy parts of my fingers, the cross below the handle carved into the shape of dragon’s heads on the ends. It was a wicked weapon, and I glanced to Lucius, questioning in my eyes.

“Sometimes magic can fail us, Miss Granger, although it runs through our blood. That is a weapon to be used just in case magic should fail you...” Lucius intoned softly. “Wear it in a concealed place... your inner arm, or boot. If you should be captured and bound, put it in a place you could reach, although it is technically a stiletto, it is enchanted and can cut through any material you might be bound with,” he instructed, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, placing his chin upon his hands.

I nodded, rising to move to the kitchen counter. Drawing the Elder Wand from the holster, I Transfigured my coffee cup into a sheath that I could strap to my arm or leg. I left the dagger on the counter, but applied my wand holster to my barred arm, sliding the Elder Wand next to the walnut wand.

“If you should have to go back, Miss Granger,” Lucius spoke from the chair, and I turned moving to stand behind the couch so that I could study his face. “If you must go back thirteen years, you
know the rules about contacting your past self or anyone whose fate might directly impact your own…”

“Yes?”

“Do not contact me, and if Draco is with you, do not allow him to reveal himself to me.”

I bit my lower lip.

“The Lucius Malfoy that existed thirteen years ago is not who I am today. Of course, I am sure you find this to be obvious. However, the night that my Mark burned, the night the Dark Lord was reborn, I had already begun to make plans to break away. The signs leading up to his rebirth were clear. I wanted out…most of us did after so long.

I do not want anything to alter the events after that night in the cemetery. I must go to Azkaban the following year…I must suffer to change. Do you understand, Miss Granger? I must try to kill you in the Department of Mysteries, I must fail to obtain the Prophecy!” Lucius hissed, his face contorting into one I remembered from years ago, a face that frightened me when I was a girl.

I was not frightened of Lucius Malfoy now.

“I understand…Lucius…” I whispered, the sound of his name strange on my tongue, but not entirely alien.

Lucius smirked.

“The only person…the only one I could think of to use if you absolutely must contact someone in the past…is Severus.”

My breath caught. I had not given myself the time to think so far ahead as Lucius apparently had, but Lucius was right to mention Severus for many reasons.

“Severus was the paradigm of discretion, and I doubt that he would be shocked to meet a much older Hermione Granger in 1995. He could hide truths from both his masters, and he did so until
the very end…”

I felt a shift in my mind, as if Severus had moved somewhere into a different room of my mental palace, but he said nothing.

“But I hope that the situation will not require you to be seen by anyone in the past.”

I agreed. “I hope that I will not have to go…but it seems like it will be so.”

Lucius nodded, rising from the armchair.

“But Potter will not hesitate to change everything by simply killing the Dark Lord before the old bastard was supposed to die. He will not hesitate to kill anyone who gets in his way of his goal either. You know this better than I, Miss Granger. You also know that there is nothing left of the boy you loved and knew. The taint of madness sullies even Potter’s memory as a charismatic boy weighed down with a heavy burden we all placed upon him.

Voldemort’s,” Lucius paused, shivering at saying the name, “influence is strong on Potter even after death. Voldemort’s arrogance was his ultimate undoing, just as it will be with Potter.”

I bowed my head. I could not disagree with Lucius. Already Harry had lost the Elder Wand and his treasured Invisibility Cloak. He had to recruit outside help to steal a Time-Turner, which cost the lives of several men and women.

Lucius spoke kind words of parting, asking that I visit the bothy soon. I promised I would try, but Draco’s instruction that I prepare for another confrontation on the tenth consumed my thoughts. I walked down to the stable’s yards as Lucius mounted his Arabian.

“Miss Granger, I am glad that you were present for our small Beltane celebration,” Lucius said with an air of regality that I found far too insinuating. It was obvious by the playful smile on his lips that he knew, to some extent, what had happened after his retiring Horned Hill with his wife. I blushed slightly…I did not need a man old enough to be my father to tease me about my feelings for his son. “I know that ‘Cissa has grown exceptionally fond of you, more so now that she knows what your rune represented…”

“Do you realise how mortified I was…?” I muttered, my eyes falling to the yard.
Lucius chuckled. “The first Beltane after Narcissa and I were married, her runes represented my name. Mind, ‘Cissa and I were married at the arrangement of our parents, and it was at least a year after our marriage that we were even intimate. However, by Beltane, her feelings changed.

I had loved her since the first moment I saw her…” Lucius chuckled, reigning his horse so that its hooves clopped against the ground.

My chest squeezed at Lucius’ words.

“Draco has chosen to protect you, Miss Granger, and I see that you have not taken the significance of that protection lightly… Cherish it, girl. My son is by no means perfect, and we are a very proud family…but my son’s affections are of a sort that befits women of royal blood and bearing, but you will own his heart, do not abuse it.

The rites of Beltane have given him room to hope, do not dash those hopes, Miss Granger.

Though I may object to your birth, your blood, you are a formidable witch. Your superior mind makes up for a hundred inferior births…”

Lucius’ serious face sobered my emotions, and the flash of his pale eyes conveyed a warning that I understood immediately. His lips softened into a slight smile, and suddenly he was off, his mount gliding over the ground and away.

I moved a hand to my heart and grasped the material of my tank top. I sighed as a stiff breeze blew my free hair about my face. I missed the tiny braids I had had, and bit my lip, wondering if I could attempt the beauty Charm on myself later on.

I returned to the apartments and began going through the box Lucius had brought. Just as he said, there was a kit of potion phials that could be attached to a belt, or set into a pocket of a cloak. All the phials were shatterproof, and the kit itself was made of dark green dragon hide to further protect the potions.

The clothing, black dragon hide, was a two piece outfit of loose fitting trousers and a jerkin-like top, sleeveless and obviously cut for a woman to wear. In the bottom of the box were gloves that went with the outfit, and were long enough that they would protect the arms from the wrists upward. In a shrunken box, which I enlarged, I found a pair of matching boots…my size that were
long in the leg and reached at least to mid-calf.

It was armor of a sort, much like Charlie’s dragon hide outfit. And it surely cost a moderate sized fortune. I ran my fingers over the scaly, black surface and sighed as I replaced it inside the box, sliding the lid down again.

I drummed my fingers on the top of the box, staring at the horn attached to the gramophone. Less than ten days…it did not seem like time enough to prepare for anything let alone a possible battle at Hogwarts again. I had already mentally prepared myself for an onslaught upon the grounds, no matter how many security measures had been taken. I had so many scenarios in my mind that I knew I was beginning to obsess over probabilities, contingencies, and strategies that I was beginning to think of nothing else.

I moved from the writing desk to kneel in the floor before the stack of records below the gramophone, trying to find something that would bring my thoughts around to something else…to give my mind a break.

Glenn Gould’s 1955 version of Bach’s ‘Goldberg Variations.’

I found another cup and poured more coffee, taking it, and the stiletto with me as I sat down on the bench before the front windows, leaning back as Draco had into the wall. I sat my steaming coffee on the sill and pulled the blade from the Transfigured sheath, staring at the edge in the sunlight. An enchanted blade, one owned by Lucius Malfoy was surely priceless. I dared not touch the edge, but studied the carved dragonheads in the crossing.

The sprouting of a thought came to me, but quickly died. Severus had nothing to say.

I slipped the blade back into the sheath and set it next to my cup. I stared out of the window and listened to Gould’s lovely interpretation of Bach, and let my mind float to some serene place as my eyes chased the clouds in the gorgeous May Day sky.
May 2\textsuperscript{nd} in the evening, I was moving in the kitchen to begin preparing a dinner for myself. Draco had not returned, and I resigned myself to the idea that he would not return for dinner and possibly not another meal until late the next day.

However, as I was about to put my favourite recipe for orange chicken into the magicked oven, the door opened with a bang, nearly making me drop of the pan of chicken onto my toes. I lifted my head to glance over the counter from my crouch.

Draco moved into the parlour, throwing his leather coat onto the arm of the couch, muttering obscenities under his breath as he next threw his wand holsters with the coat. His hair was a mess, windblown, his cheeks reddened. I slipped the chicken into the oven and straightened, studying the state of his clothing.

The lightweight black jumper he wore had Sickle sized holes burnt into the threads, and there was a mark of soot on his neck. The only part of him that was not dishevelled was the patch over his right eye. I opened my mouth to greet him, but he continued muttering and strode into the bathroom without one look at me. When the door slammed shut, I shuddered. He was angry, but not in a rage as I had seen him at least once before.

The sound of water running calmed me, and I continued to prepare a meal…fixing a bit more white rice than I had originally planned, and more steamed vegetables. I set out two plates on the counter bar and Conjured two stools to sit on either side. By the time I heard the water shut off and movement from the bathroom, I had set out the flatware and produced bottles of butterbeer.

I sat down on the stool inside the kitchen as Draco exited, steam following him as he emerged, the patch gone, a towel wrapped about his waist, he rubbed at his hair with another towel as he moved past me and into the bedroom, again with no acknowledgement to me.

I gritted my teeth as I filled both plates with food. I could hear him dressing in the bedroom, and I wanted to call to him…go to him…
Beltane had been a mistake. My chest filled with dread.

One night Cinderella… I was so stupid to ever think that I…

Draco sat down across from me, dressed in an old tee shirt and jeans. I was wearing something very similar, my hair pulled back into a ponytail. He grabbed a fork, but paused to stare across the bar at me… me who was as tense as the metal utensil in my fist.

“Another wild chase,” he muttered, and I knew he meant Godric’s Hollow. “But Weasley did find the supposed leader of W.A.T.C.H.”

I relaxed enough to ask: “Oh?”

Draco nodded slowly, and I refused to meet his eye, staring down at the steaming food on his plate instead.

“Dennis Creevey.”

I shuddered again. “Dennis?” I asked incredulously, raising my eyes to Draco’s face, which was paler than usual, and grave.

Draco nodded. “Potter Loyalist even at Hogwarts. After his brother’s death, Creevey began W.A.T.C.H. at Hogwarts… and has been recruiting ever since. He took up his Colin’s love for photography, and became independently wealthy. However, after Hogwarts, he took W.A.T.C.H. underground, hid his involvement. Charlie Weasley and I finally cornered him in Godric’s Hollow, Creevey and about twenty others.”

I swallowed thickly. I remembered when Colin had been killed during the Last Battle. Minerva had sent him away for his own safety, but Colin sneaked back and was killed almost instantly outside the front doors of the school. I was not sure how his younger brother had coped, but now I knew… W.A.T.C.H. had begun, from what I understood, as a protest group against ex-Death Eaters and anyone else involved with Voldemort who had somehow escaped prosecution after the War. Add resentment, anger, and revenge… and W.A.T.C.H. had become a terrorist organisation.
Draco began eating while I was lost in my own thoughts, and slowly I began eating as well, mechanically.

When we had eaten our fill, I began clearing away the dishes while Draco watched me. My thoughts had circled around again of thoughts about Beltane. My hands shook as I placed the plates and silverware into the sink. Intimacy was a foreign concept to me, and I had no idea how approach it. I hated myself for thinking that I had to rely on Draco for instruction. I hated that I knew so little about how to act. I wondered if I should have approached him when he first entered. I wondered if I should have embraced him or kissed him. I was happy to see him safe.

I also wondered why he had not spoken to me when he returned…

“Hermione?”

I had been staring down into the sink with a dirty fork in my hand. I jerked my head up at the sound of my name. My name sounded almost pretty coming from Draco’s lips.

I met his eye.

“Quit second-guessing everything,” he said, his elbows resting on the counter, his hands folded before him.

I frowned. He was not that good at Legilimency, and I knew that my doubts had been clearly written on my face. I dropped the fork into the sink with a clatter, and turned to Draco who had risen from his stool. I watched him walk around the bar to stand just before me, his hair still slightly damp from his bath, and sage and citrus wafting off his skin with the scent I had applied to be his alone.

“About the other night…” he said softly. He stood very close to me, and my lower back rested against the edge of the sink. I set up my eyes upon his chest, the defined muscles underneath.

I tried to prepare myself for whatever Draco was going say. I knew he was to tell me that Beltane had a mistake, that I was nothing more than a victim he had been obliged to protect, that I was a nice woman, but not one that he would want, or that we could be ‘just friends.’ I knew that when, or if, I stopped Harry, all of the wonderful conversations over coffee, no matter how morbid they had been, would stop. Draco would move on to the next case, protect someone else… I had been different because Draco and I had a history.
“I’m sorry that I pushed you into…” he began, but trailed, his hand rising to rest his large palm over the ball of my right shoulder.

I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth and narrowed my eyes, waiting for the blow.

“Are you alright with what we did?” he asked gently, and I managed to raise my eyes to his Adam’s apple.

I had to answer him. “I was fine, Draco” I whispered. The sound of his name seemed to make him shudder…and I wondered if it were from disgust.

“It may have been too soon after what Potter…” he trailed again. “Why aren’t you looking at me?” he asked using his left hand to delicately lift my chin so that I was gazing up into his face, into his one eye.

I knew he could see my emotions, my fear, my hesitation, my self-loathing, and slowly I began to see his anger…

“You silly girl…” he whispered, his thumb moving to pinch my chin slightly. “You thought that I was going to tell you that I regretted Beltane, didn’t you?”

I blinked and wanted to deny that he was absolutely correct, but I said nothing. I just stared at his pale brow, the scar that marred and obscured his eye, the shape of his nostrils at the bottom of his long, thin nose, and the indentation between his nose and his top lip. I avoided his gaze.

“I regret nothing in my life, Granger…nothing!” he growled, using my surname like a weapon in the way his voice coursed over my face. He stood very close, and I could feel the heat of his body against my own.

I took a half-breath, remembering Lucius had said almost the same thing.

“I acted as I wanted to act, did what I wanted to do, said what I wanted to say. Do not second-guess what I know to be true, Hermione,” he whispered, his thumb running along my bottom lip.
“And…and what do you know to be true?” I whispered.

The corners of his mouth lifted into that smile, the smile that turned my insides to a gelatinous mass…that scoundrel-like smile.

“I toasted you as my ‘lady,’ Hermione. It was not mere formality…” he whispered, bending his body so that his face was just before mine.

Draco kissed the corner of my mouth, then my temple, his hands moving to tenderly hold my upper arms, pulling me upward so that I had to stand on the tips of my toes. My bottom nearly rested on the edge of the sink as he claimed my mouth wholly. It took me a second to allow the sensation of his kiss course through me, and when the kiss took hold of me, I found that my arms were wrapping about his neck. Open mouthed kisses, tongues tangling; I could taste our dinner, and the indescribable taste that was Draco’s only.

His words had not quite set me at ease, but the way his left hand ran through my hair, his right hand grasping my hip underneath my shirt, I put my unease aside. For now, I was Draco’s ‘lady,’ and I was content with just that. As his lips moved to my left ear to my throat, I did not care about how long I would be his ‘lady.’ If only for that moment, I would be able to keep that contentment so that if his feelings would change, I would have something to remember and cleave to for a long while.

When we parted, I was smiling. I could not let my fears and doubts show, I could not let this moment end. Draco ran a finger a long the side of my face and murmured that he would put on the gramophone while I should close the windows for the night. I nodded, glancing down into the sink, all the dirty dishes put away.

The record began, and from the gramophone’s horn came Enrico Caruso’s voice singing ‘Mi Par d’Udir Ancora’ from ‘I Pescatori di Perle.’ I smirked, slipping my wand from my holster to flick the Elder Wand, magicking the windows shut. Draco moved away from the gramophone, humming along with the Italian tenor, and sat on the couch, propping his bare feet upon the adjacent armchair.

“Did you nick the record from…?” I began, feeling a stirring in my mind, but did not hear Severus to know he was slightly agitated.

“I did,” Draco said over the music, turning on the couch to regard me.
I moved to sit on the other end of the couch, slipping the wand back into its place. I wanted to ask if he only intended to borrow the record, but I knew that that question would lead to a line of questioning I was not ready to submit to…no one knew that I could hear my deceased Potions Master in my head.

“I also nicked a David Bowie album…and a few other things that I thought needed liberated from the dungeons.”

I smirked.

Draco and I talked a while longer, mostly about music, then books, then the Malfoy lands, and finally…the one thing that I had been thinking about for days. Harry. Everything came back around to Harry, as if he were some overstretching shadow one could not escape from or hope to avoid.

As we talked, Draco had managed to coax me over to his side of the couch so he could throw an arm about my shoulders and I could stretch my legs out across his knees. It was an intimate posing of limbs, but many years ago, I had lounged with Ron and Harry in much the same way in Gryffindor Common Room. With Draco Malfoy, however, every touch of his fingers upon my neck or in my hair sent delightful tiny shivers up and down my spine and into my pelvis.

“One thing that has bothered me from the beginning of this case…” Draco trailed, the forefinger of his left hand curling a strand of my hair about the long digit. “Where did Potter get ‘The Hanged Man?’ It is banned in Britain, America, France, and just about every other European nation…Those who do have a copy keep it secret.”

Draco turned his left eye to me and smirked. “You still have the sealed copy?”

I nodded, resting my chin on Draco’s shoulder so that my forehead rested against his cheek.

“Someone had to give it him. You cannot buy ‘The Hanged Man’ and you will never find it by any other traditional means. The black market has no use for books like ‘The Hanged Man,’ so the only option is that someone gave it to him…”

I frowned. “He may have inherited it…from Sirius.”
Draco shook his head softly, not dislodging my head from against his cheek.

“No…Mother inherited everything from Grimmauld Place. Aunt Dromeda did not want anything, and the things the Order removed were later destroyed.”

I quirked my lips in thought. The last time I had been in Grimmauld Place was just after the War, and I had no reason to ever return. I could not know if Harry or Ron had returned, but I knew the house was empty even when the police searched it. But there were many things removed from the house that I knew for a fact were kept in the Potter family vault…

It was not a sound assumption, but it was possible. Of all the ‘dark’ items Harry, Ron, Ginny, and I removed from that house, one book could have been overlooked. Granted, I had made a mental inventory of the books in the Black family library, and I did not recall a book entitled ‘The Hanged Man.’ Of course, after thirteen years, even my memory was a bit fuzzy at times.

“There are a lot of things that I don’t understand,” I murmured, my breath hitting Draco’s neck. “And I cannot keep thinking about those things if I want to keep sane and focused.”

Draco hummed in agreement, his right hand falling to my denim clad knees. “And focus is what is needed, Hermione…” he whispered.

May 8th was a day of preparations. The days before had been spent in reacquainting myself with the so-called art of flying. Draco was an excellent flyer, he had been at Hogwarts, and that skill had only grown in his adult years. He kept a third generation Firebolt in a cupboard at the bottom of the steps of the groom’s quarters, as well as a Nimbus 3000A, which I was put upon. The Firebolt, naturally, was a faster broom, and I was informed in no uncertain terms that by the tenth I was to be able to handle something more than the Nimbus 3000A.

“We might have to make a quick escape at some point, and nothing can outstrip a Firebolt third gen,” Draco said as we flew side by side over the fields, barely skimming the ground.

I missed the old Shooting Stars from school. I had never cared much for flying. It was not as if I had no talent for flying or was afraid of heights, I simply preferred the ground.
For the days leading to the 8th, I flew on the Nimbus, daring myself bit by bit to do some more advanced manoeuvres. I had watched Harry and Ron long enough to know the mechanics of braking manoeuvres, banking manoeuvres, how to dodge an unfriendly projectile, how to roll… I only fell off my broom twice. The first time I landed face first into the ground, breaking my nose. The second time, I fell and dislocated my shoulder. Both times, I had been alone, but fixed myself easily, and never mentioned my mishaps to Draco.

He had been called away twice from the groom’s quarters, but was never gone longer than a few hours. I had begun to pack my coat with things I thought I might need if I were unable to return to the groom’s quarters. I learned I could shrink my broom and considered placing it in my bottomless pocket as well.

However, by the night of the eighth, I had cleaned the kitchen and bathroom without using magic, and sat on the couch with a copy of ‘Return of the Native,’ waiting. I could hear Draco below, setting his broom in the cupboard, his footfalls loud on the stairs.

“Are you ready?” he asked in the door, slightly winded.

I blinked at Draco. “For what?”

Draco sighed, dropping his arms to his sides. He was dressed in the grey suit, which I had come to consider his ‘official’ attire as DCI Malfoy. Only his hair was mussed and his cheeks a bit pink, obviously from flying at some break-neck speed over the downlands. Only the day before did Draco inform me how he had been coming and going from the Malfoy lands…flying across the downlands to the backside of the lands to the edge of the Temple Wood, through a Muggle farmer’s orchard and beyond the wards to Apparate. Overall, it took twenty minutes by broom; it would take hours on foot.

“Last flying lesson?”

I snapped ‘Return of the Native’ shut on my lap, and sighed. Rising, I glanced out the front windows; seeing that moonlight bathed the fields with silver light. Night flying was not high on my list of things to do in my life. I had a hard time flying in daylight, but I knew that Draco would persist…I was getting hungry for dinner, having waited until he returned to begin preparing a meal.

I followed Draco down the stairs to the cupboard below. He extracted his broom and passed me another, not the Nimbus, but a brother to the Firebolt he held in his hand. I said nothing, but my
insides itched. In a matter of days, I had been practicing on a professional racing broom after years of never flying, and as we walked out into the stable yards, I wondered if I would have to heal some other broken limb that night. I was not confident, but I could not let Draco see my hesitation.

Draco mounted and kicked off first, and I followed, my hands grasping the handle as tightly as I could manage. I kicked off and gasped as I rose fast into the air. With a slight dip of the handle I hovered next to Draco, my mouth dry, my face drained of blood.

“Try to keep up…” he said, raising his voice slightly as his body seemed to shift down to the lay parallel over the broom stick…and suddenly he was off, his coat trailing behind him as he disappeared from sight in the moonlight.

I sucked at my bottom lip and shook my head. There was no way I could keep up, I had not even pushed the Nimbus to its top speed, and I was nervous about even trying a Firebolt.

I shifted my ankles in the brackets and growled to myself. I was Hermione Granger, there was nothing I was not proficient at doing, and angling my body, adjusting my hands, I took off.

The Firebolt 3\textsuperscript{rd} Gen. had an acceleration of 185 mph in ten seconds with built in Shielding and Sticking Charms so that traveling at such a rate was not entirely unpleasant. And so I flew, gripping the broom and gritting my teeth as I felt wind cut at my back as the Shielding Charm activated upon movement before the broom.

I caught up with Draco in five seconds, blazing past him and turning so that I flew straight at him at possibly the rate of 140 mph. I heard Draco shout angrily as I banked over him so that I fell behind him, so close that I could almost touch the tail twigs.

“Are you barking mad, Hermione? What the hell were you trying to do?” he shouted over his shoulder.

I grinned. I could fly a Firebolt, but I knew that my turn had been sloppy and had it not been for the Sticking Charm I would have flown off the broom down to the ground far below. I felt strangely exhilarated with Draco’s irritation, and the speed in which I flew. I wondered, suddenly, if the exhilaration had been my own emotion or that of my internal Severus…

We slowed as we flew high over Temple Wood, the moon shining down upon us. Side by side, we sat up, the Cushioning Charm making the ride comfortable. Draco stared at me as I balanced on
my broom, my hands on my hips. He sighed, straightening his jacket and adjusted the black cloth patch over his right eye.

“You’re packed for tomorrow?” he murmured.

I frowned. “We’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow night. The ceremony does not take place until sunset on the tenth, and I thought it would be better to get there before the rest of the world decides to descend on the place.”

I gazed across the tops of the white trees and the budding leaves in the moonlight. Temple Wood was beautiful in the moonlight.

“Besides the Minister and her entourage, twenty high ranking Ministry officials, dignitaries from neighboring countries, and other guests, there will be about fifty Aurors from our Ministry, twenty-five from France, and another twenty from America. That does not count Hogwarts staff and former students who fought against the Dark Lord… Invitations have not been sent to my family, or the families of those who were affiliated with the Dark Lord, of course.”

“And why am I going?” I asked idly, soaking in the moonlight against my bare face and arms.

“Because you are expected to be there, as is Ron Weasley…who is not coming, and technically neither are you. But you will be there, hidden in your cunningly Transfigured cloak, with your wands at the ready.

This could very well be our last chance to take out Potter,” Draco growled, and I could feel his cold silver eye against the side of my face.

I closed my eyes. “I hate this…I hate waiting,” I whispered, my hand moving to the pendant under my shirt, a pendant that remained cold.

I heard Draco shift on his broom. “And you’re not alone in feeling that way, my dear.”

I opened my eyes and turned my face to gaze at Draco, who was smiling slightly, his eye gazing at
I will have to follow him back... to thirteen years ago, and I'm frightened of what I will see there..."

"I?" Draco asked, balancing to cross his arms before his chest.

"I will not assume that you would go with me..."

"Of course I will, Granger. No matter how brilliant you are; you need someone to help you. We've come this far... together..." he muttered.

My chest burned, and my lips quivered.

"We don't know when he will use the Time-Turner, and we do not know if he will show up at Hogwarts..."

"Let's hope he doesn't. Let's hope nothing happens, that even the protest and terrorists groups will keep away. Let's hope that we can sit on the grounds with all the other people hoping to bury the past and enjoy the weather, take a walk around the Lake, and go home knowing that we had survived another day..."

"Home?" I asked softly.

My home was a place I had not set foot in for a long while. My life had been put on hold. I had not slept in my own bed, tended to my little garden, let my familiar play in the Forest, talked with Hagrid or the centaurs for weeks. Where was my home?

Draco blinked at me, he knew that he had misspoke, and I wondered why he would think that the groom's quarters or the Malfoy lands would or could ever be my home.

"Home... which is here for the time being, Hermione."
The sound of my name sent shivers through me. But I knew Draco was right; for the time being, my home was inside the boundaries of the Malfoy lands. I was protected inside those boundaries.

Our silence settled over us, much as it had over the forest below and the hills beyond.

“Come along,” Draco said softly, shifting on his broomstick and taking off. I quickly followed so that we flew low over the tops of the trees, and into the downlands, skimming the ground. I felt my hair break loose from its sloppy bun and fly behind me.

We flew higher, Draco glancing back at me in a sign that I should mimic his manoeuvres. We flew straight up into the starry sky, barrel rolling, falling, twisting in manoeuvres that I knew from Quidditch, but all executed at a speed that would have seemed impossible ten years before.

Over the forest again, and into the trees so that I had to weave about the pillar-like trunks so quickly that I was panting with having to pull upon the handle of my broom. I kept Draco in sight as we moved faster and faster, climbing up through the trees at a steep ascension, dropping again so that we began to brake as we reached the floor of a vale.

Ahead of me, Draco dismounted in such a manner that made me gape. He jumped from his broom, his boots slipping from the brackets, and in the jump, tucked his broom under his arm as he boots slid into the chalky ground of the vale, coming to a stop with a satisfied smirk on his lips.

I quirked my lips as my broom slowed enough so that I also could kick from the broom, using the levitation of the wood to drift to the ground, the Firebolt slipping into my hand as I, too, slid across the ground, coming to a stop just next to Draco.

Draco gaped slightly.

“You’ve been holding out on me, Granger. You could handle a racing broom all along…” he muttered, his eye flashing in the moonlight.

I said nothing. I knew that I could not have managed the Firebolt, or the landing by myself, for I could feel Severus’ presence moving through me for certain when I had landed. Severus had said so little since Beltane, but I could feel him in my mind, and during flying, I knew I could feel him in my limbs.
Draco moved his broom into his right hand as he took my hand and we began walking up the vale.

“Mother invited us to dinner,” he said softly, sensing me disorientation in the dark.

I nodded, gripping my broom in my left hand as we walked into the deeper darkness of the vale. I wanted to somehow fix my hair, my clothes, but as Draco placed our brooms against the stark white wall of the bothy, he moved his fingers to pull a few tangles free from around my face.

“It is an impromptu dinner, Hermione, stop biting your lip…Mother won’t mind…” he whispered, for even with one eye, he could see better in the dark than I could.

I wanted to open my mouth and tease Draco that he had tricked me, and now in my dishevelled state I was to be a spectacle of ridicule. But I knew, I knew now that Draco would not intentionally set me up to be derided by his family, or anyone. How I knew this, I could not say, but as his fingers moves about my temple to push back a curl, and the manner in which he stepped closer toward me so that I could feel his breath on my forehead, I knew that I was Draco Malfoy’s ‘lady.’

“Let me make a toast…to happy memories.”

Draco had risen from the table and stood at my right, a crystal glass of red wine in his pale right hand. The candlelight that lit the hall of the bothy made the crystal sparkle.

“To happy memories,” the dinner party repeated as we lifted our glasses to our lips and drank deeply.

Lucius sat to my left and Narcissa across from me as we sat at a small dinner table near in the central portion of the hall, the table loaded with a dinner that I suspected was quite meager for the Malfoys. A beef roast, potatoes, wild vegetables in vinaigrette, and buttery rolls…all of which were delicious, but not high cuisine. The wine was perhaps the only somewhat luxurious addition to the dinner.

We had eaten our fill, and had been sitting around the table, talking about innocuous matters. Draco commented on my impressive skill on the broom, Lucius mentioning that he was running
out of things to do since he had the elves working to restore the Manor, Narcissa complaining that she wished she could go into London to begin arranging the installation of new hedge rows for the gardens. The conversation was light, and we laughed often. Draco’s toast made everything seem more serious.

To happy memories…

I knew exactly what he had meant by the toast, and I held onto those laughs and smiling faces, imprinting them deep into my soul. At any moment, I would only have those happy memories to hold onto… The world had grown so dark.

“…tomorrow afternoon. Longbottom has seen fit to give up Severus’ old quarters again. They are hidden and safe, and more importantly, far away from any of the other guests who will be staying at Hogwarts for the ceremony,” I heard Draco say, and I shifted my attention to him.

“Foreign dignitaries? Do you know who exactly?” Lucius asked, apparently noticing something Draco had said while I was not listening.

Draco shrugged. “I’m not the head of security, and that being said, my only official capacity is to act as a shadow during the whole ceremony.”

I turned my eyes to Lucius who was dressed much as he had been the day he had come by the groom’s quarters.

“An attack during the ceremony might seem too obvious, but it is a possibility.”

Draco nodded. “It is just not W.A.T.C.H., but other groups who have not connections to Creevey’s little cult. Granted, there are have been threats against the Ministry, against myself and Charlie Weasley ever since we captured Creevey, but I’m not too worried about it now.”

“Why?” Narcissa asked, her hand upon her heart.

Narcissa and I had shared many concerned glances through the months, and at that moment, we shared one more.
“Most of the people who would cause a problem are now incarcerated in Azkaban. There was a hierarchy working in W.A.T.C.H. and with Potter once again missing, the group has been in disarray. Creevey was the one ordering these people in the beginning, but when Potter showed up, asking for help, Creevey deferred his power to Potter. Now Potter is gone again, Creevey in custody, leadership of the group has been lost. The higher-ranking people have been arrested… organisation is lost. There is only one person who might pose a problem, since we haven’t caught him, but it seems as if he has disappeared since the arrests began. But W.A.T.C.H. is not going to act without Potter…”

I frowned. What Draco was saying made sense, but surely, a group like W.A.T.C.H. had backup contingencies? Moreover, who was this ‘person?’ Draco had not mentioned it to me. I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth.

“How many Aurors?” Lucius asked, picking up his glass again.

“More than enough to protect a small group of people at a memorial service, Father. I find it foolish, to be honest. What’s the Muggle phrase, Hermione? ‘Putting all your eggs into one basket?’” Draco asked, turning to me.

I nodded, but glanced at Lucius and Narcissa out of the corner of my eye. The sound of my name had made Lucius smirk strangely and Narcissa hide a giggle behind her napkin.

“The Ministry needs defending, as does Azkaban. Sending so many to one place is what happened in the old times when the Dark Lord took the Ministry!”

I lowered my eyes to my lap. Draco was right. Strategically, sending so many Aurors to Hogwarts was folly.

“I agree, son, but once again, how can we force the Ministry to see reason? Hopkirk is only thinking of catching Potter. She is a bright witch, but so many have come to believe that if Potter is caught or killed, the organisations that have been terrorising the country will suddenly have no reason to protest or kill.

I don’t believe it was done intentionally, but the media has aligned Potter with the terrorists. One cannot exist without the other, or so many believe. Hopkirk is beginning to believe this as well.

Our leaders cannot always be so wise…” Lucius trailed, drinking from his glass deeply.
I glanced to Draco, whose face had darkened in thought. I knew that Lucius’ words went beyond Minister Hopkirk…to the Dark Lord…to Dumbledore…

Those who had been in power were not necessarily those who were wise enough to wield that power, and those who had the power did not want to lead.

“The Prophet has been printing names of those involved with W.A.T.C.H., and now the masses are in a frenzy, asking for blood. Letters are being printed, eliciting sympathy for the victims of groups like W.A.T.C.H., while others are calling for vigilante justice to stop groups like W.A.T.C.H. Emotions are being manipulated while logic and safety are being tossed aside.

The only logical suggestions coming from the public are in defence of the Ministry, for the re-opening of Hogwarts. The world has become a darker place than I could have imagined….” Lucius trailed, his eyes lowering to his empty plate.

There was sadness in his voice, but his words had made sense. I could see now why Draco had considered his father an asset for strategy. Lucius glanced to me and smiled. We were not so dissimilar in the way our minds worked.

“The only thing that can be done, my darlings, is to be safe and vigilant. We all know that stopping Potter is paramount. We know that he will not hesitate to use who he can to shield himself. We know that he will not hesitate to kill to achieve his goal…” Narcissa said, sitting straighter in her chair, meeting our eyes. Her voice was laden with power, and I felt a thrill pulse through me. “You know what you must do, and you must not hesitate…” she said, her pale eyes meeting mine.

I trembled, but nodded.

“In the meantime, let us have some dessert, and talk about other, happier things while we still can,” Narcissa suggested.

No one disagreed.
The Malfoy family and myself sat around a low fire, the night having grown quite cold. Lucius sat in an armchair closest the fire while Narcissa sat on a couch nearby, lounging gracefully against pillows, a hand playing over Lucius’ left arm. Draco sat in the adjacent armchair while I sat on the fur rug at his feet, leaning back against his knees occasionally. My familiar lay upon my lap, purring contentedly as I stroked his grey fur.

I could feel Draco’s fingers curl into the back of my hair as he playfully argued with his father as to why Muggle world literature was important for Pureblooded witches and wizards to read. I listened, a smile upon my face, half in amusement, half in surprise that Draco felt so strongly about Muggle literature. Narcissa contented herself with listening as well, and to be fair, taking her husband’s part from time to time.

“You only say that because you lack the proper context, Father. Of course, we know so little about Muggle culture, but the underlying themes of most novels are universal. Love, greed, murder, family, mystery; those are in the novels you have read, and those are all themes in even Wizarding literature.

You have been enjoying Tolkien’s books, haven’t you?”

I smirked, wondering if the Malfoy patriarch had finished ‘The Two Towers.’

“I have been enjoying them, there are many parallels between ‘Middle earth’ and our world.”

Draco sighed. “But there is more than that. There are underlying themes that are not so common in our world. For instance, allusions to the Christian faith and Muggle world mythology, if you understood those allusions, the book would be so much…richer to you.”

Lucius rolled his eyes. “Would you like me to start reading religious texts as well, Draco? Or better yet, start reading Muggle sociology books?”

Draco guffawed. “I’m sure you already have done that, Father. You act like I’m asking you to prescribe to the Muggle world as if you had to give up your wand! All I am trying to say is that you should not be so ignorant of the world as a whole…or at least stop pretending you are ignorant
of it all.”

Narcissa was smiling, and I was laughing quietly. Draco’s passion for Muggle literature honestly surprised me, and I was sure the same could be said for his passion for music. However, I was certain that he still held a bias for most Muggles, only really knowing them in his books.

“I admit that Muggle literature has its merits, it is diverting, but son, you can never change my mind when it comes to my personal preferences,” Lucius drawled coolly.

I could not see Draco’s face from where I sat on the floor, but by the smirk on Lucius’ lips, either Draco was mirroring his father in a smirk, or was rather upset.

No one spoke for a long while after Lucius’ calculating words, but slowly Narcissa rose, and I knew it was the cue that the night had grown late.

I pet my familiar’s fur once more before picking him up in my arms and moving to Narcissa.

“I am the worst Mistress for a familiar…” I said softly as Narcissa took the slender half-Kneazle from my arms and gathered the animal into one arm.

“I doubt that. If times were different, he would be at your heels.

I used to have a cat when I was a girl, Ambrosia was her name, and she was a golden tabby cat. Andromeda gave her to me for my seventh birthday, and ‘Brosia lived up until I moved into Malfoy Manor. She was the best company…”

I rubbed behind Malfoy’s ear and he purred gratefully.

“I have no idea when I’ll be able to go home…” I started, but stopped as Narcissa cupped my cheek with her free hand.

“He will be safe with us, Hermione. You have more pressing matters to attend to…” she whispered.
Goodbyes were made at the door of the bothy, embracing Narcissa and nodding to Lucius. Soon I was in the air again, speeding through the sky behind Draco, distracted by thoughts that I could not set aside in my mind. Narcissa had asked me an important question between dinner and our conversations around the fire.

‘If you and Draco can stop Potter in the past, will you be able to return to the present?’ she had asked quietly as the two men moved to the fire to drink a glass of brandy.

All I could say to Narcissa and her stricken face was: yes…

I had not lied, but a one-word answer was not entirely sufficient. If Draco and I managed to survive…traveling back to the present was a tricky proposition. We had to be sure that we had not inadvertently altered the timeline, even in the slightest. Then, we would have to set the Time-Turner for a time close to that we had departed. It sounded easy when one listed it in one’s head, but it was not that simple… There was a possibility that we could not return via Time-Turner… and we would have to wait thirteen years to reveal ourselves again. We would also have to bring back Harry’s body lest someone in the past found it…hiding it might not suffice given that the Ministry would want to see Harry’s body…

I faltered on the broom and fell behind.

I had to stop allowing myself to feel for the fact I would have to kill Harry. I had to kill the part of me that wished I could convince him to stop…because it would never happen. Harry would never stop until he was satisfied with killing and destroying the past.

All those people I knew thirteen years ago, all of them would suffer more because of Harry, and in traveling into the past, only Draco and I would ever know how much damage Harry had done to our world.

Draco glanced back at me, frowning and slowed so that we flew in formation over the trees. He motioned with his hand over his face, and I released one hand from the broom to wipe away tears. I had not realised I was crying. Draco frowned as we slowed, the lights of the stables coming into view.

When we landed, I tripped, rolling twice on the ground before coming to my feet again, gritting my teeth. Draco said nothing as we moved to the cupboard at the bottom of the stairs and set the brooms inside.
I moved past him up the stairs and into the apartments, kicking off my boots and going into the
bathroom to bathe. Draco did not bother me while I sank into the tub, scrubbing my hair and skin
with a fervor that would make one think I had some obsessive compulsion. I wanted to scrub away
my fear…

When I finally came out of the bathroom, wrapped in one of Draco’s large blue cotton towels, a
smaller towel around my hair, I found him staring at me from his perch on the arm of the couch,
his hands resting on his knees, the grey suit gone and only a pair of black silk sleep pants on. The
patch was gone and his wand holsters sat on the armchair by the empty fireplace.

“What?” I asked innocently, adjusting the knot in the towel.

He shook his head and moved past me, closing the bathroom door slightly. I took his place on the
couch, seeing through the crack in the door that he had stripped out of his pants and turned the
small tub’s showerhead on. He did not close the curtain completely as he scrubbed his hair
quickly. I could just see the line of his right side, his back to me. The line of defined muscles
along his ribs, his shoulder, downward to his hip, along his thigh to the edge of the tub. His skin
was a pale alabaster, and his hair, even wet was like platinum. The hair on his arms and legs was a
slighter darker, and drops of water clung to the air as he showered.

When he emerged, I began rubbing my hair with the towel about my head. He had dried himself
sufficiently to reapply the black silk pants, but it stuck to him in places—his buttocks and the fronts
of his thighs.

Draco stepped toward me, his signature citrus and sage wafting off him. He bent down, and
grasping my jaw, kissed me. I blinked in surprise as he kissed me, before closing my eyes and
reaching out for him. When I wrapped my arms about his neck, he lifted me so that the towel I had
for my hair fell to the floor. My toes dangled above the floor as his arms snaked about my waist,
lifting me against his body.

Lowering my feet to the floor, he broke the kiss to move to the armchair and retrieve Severus’
wand, Charming all the lights out, locking the door, closing the windows…and in the dark he
grasped my hand and pulled me toward the bedroom where only the French doors were open to let
in a cool May night breeze.

Twirling me slightly so that I had to grasp the front of my towel to keep my skin covered, I found
the backs of my knees against what I considered Draco’s side of the bed. In the moonlight, I could
see his eye, his damp hair, and the few drops of water trailing down between his pectoral muscles
along platinum hair.
He reached down and caressed my face, sliding my heavy, damp hair over one shoulder as he kissed along my shoulder and throat. I placed my palms against his chest as his kisses turned to gently nips and tiny nibbles.

“Draco…” I said softly, trying to stop him and look into his face again.

He only hummed into the skin of my throat, his arms embracing my tightly.

“Draco?” I asked more firmly, pushing against him.

Reluctantly, Draco pulled back to grasp my shoulders to gaze down at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Draco quirked an eyebrow. “What do you mean? I thought it was obvious.”

I breathed a laugh. “Let me rephrase the question…why are you doing this?”

“Do you not want me to kiss you?”

I sighed. Although it still amazed me that Draco Malfoy, of all people, wanted to kiss me…I did not want him to ever stop.

“It is not that.”

Draco frowned. “The truth then?”

I nodded. “Always the truth.”
"I toasted to happy memories..." he whispered, his breath hot against my skin.

To happy memories...yes. I realised as I stared up into his handsome face, albeit scarred, that he was just as worried about the state of our world as I was. It was a fatalistic and stupidly romantic notion to think that we had to have happy memories to counter the hideous truth that we might die...but it forced me to acknowledge how long I had let my biases of Draco Malfoy cloud the truth of the man he really had become. Sly, intelligent, cunning, manipulative, beautiful, gentle, real, and caring; this was the Draco Malfoy that had grown from the War and the Last Battle. This was the Draco Malfoy I was falling in love with, the Draco Malfoy that would not exist if Harry changed the past...

"I see," I whispered, sliding away from him to move to my side of the bed.

Draco’s face seemed to fall as I moved away from him, but as I stared at him from across the bed, I smiled as my fingers worked at the knot in the towel.

"To happy memories," I whispered as the towel fell to the floor by the bed.

I sighed as I moved onto the bed, kneeling in the middle, my hair falling over one shoulder, obscuring my left breast, my knees parted so that the damp, dark curls above my sex were open to the cool air of the room.

Draco growled deep in his wide chest and moved forward, crawling to meet me in the middle of the bed, his arms gathering me against him as my head tilted back to receive his kiss. My hands found the elastic waistband of his pants and tugged gently. Draco groaned as the silk swept over his skin, causing his erection to spring against his body.

A part of me wondered if I were kissing him correctly, if my hands moving into the thatch of course curls above his cock aroused him. I wondered if he loved me...

Pulling me closer, I could feel his organ throbbing against my belly, the hairs on his sac brush against my hip as we moved so that he lay on his back on the bed, I falling with him. He sighed, breaking the kiss, my body partially across his, my moonlit shadow falling over his pale body.

I lifted myself up, my hands resting on either side of his ribs. I threw my leg over him so that I straddled his slim hips, my centre pressing against his cock. I tugged my hair back over one shoulder and leaned down to kiss his face as his hands rested on my thighs. I kissed his hair, his
temple, his ruined eye, the tip of his nose, his chin, and finished by devouring his mouth.

I wanted happy memories.

I licked and kissed at his throat, his shoulders, down to trace my tongue about his flat nipples, my cheeks brushing against the pale hair upon his chest. Draco’s heart was beating a frantic tattoo against his ribs as I touched him, rocking my hips slightly so that he gasped…fingertips digging into the skin and muscle of my thighs. When I bowed my back so that I was kissing the hard muscle of his belly, Draco growled, rolling me so that he lay atop me, moving in the bed, he kissed the insides of my thighs, edging closer to my core.

I stiffened as his breath puffed against my nether curls, and when he threw the backs of my knees over his shoulders, I whimpered, his breath tickling me. He glanced up my body as his mouth descended. The face between my thighs was not Harry’s face…shaggy, platinum hair flowed over my fingers. Draco’s mouth closed over the nubbin of flesh and nerves, but there was no pain, only agonising pleasure as tiny shocks ran through my body. Applying suction and flicking the tip of his tongue over my clit, I writhed, my left hand fisting into the sheet beneath me.

A digit was inserted into my body and my back arched. There was no pain with Draco…only divinity of touch. I felt as if my body were on fire, flames licking inside my belly, in my chest, a blush creeping up from my heart. A second digit was inserted and with a beckoning motion, Draco curled his fingers.

I shattered, my voice ringing out as my back arched so profoundly that I nearly sat up in the bed. I shook, I convulsed, and my thighs quivered as Draco released the suction on my clit and gently withdrew his fingers from my core, the sticky essence on his fingers visible in the muted moonlight. He crawled up my body, moving so that he lay outside the cradle of my hips.

I was gasping as he turned me onto my left side, pushing my right leg forward bending it before me, my face turned to the left. Draco pressed his body against my back, his cock against the swell of my bottom. With sticky fingers, he grasped my jaw and turned my head so that I could kiss him. I could just taste myself on his tongue. Pulling away from the kiss, he presented his fingers for me to taste…and taste I did. I licked at his long fingers as he situated himself behind me, the tip of his cock resting between the warm space between my thighs.

I moaned as he thrust his hips forward, his cock sliding against my thighs and outer labia. With two small, quick kisses on my lips, Draco released my jaw, his right hand moving to cup my bottom, adjusting my body, his own pressed tightly against mine. And with a grunt from between his lips, which rustled my hair falling over my neck, he was inside…
“Hermione,” he whispered my name like a prayer.

A violent thrust sent his length blazing into my body, and I whimpered loudly through clenched teeth. It was not exactly pain, but a sudden fullness that made my insides compress and contract. My right hand flew back to clutch at his hip while his right hand moved over my side, to my breast, grasping it in his palm, the nipple peeking around between his fingers.

Draco began moving, sliding against me, into me…in and out, in and out, each time angling his thrusts differently until I cried out. He pressed his face into the back of my shoulder, and I could feel his face contort into one of delight. He had found that legendary spot, and repeatedly let the head of his cock brush against it. I whimpered with every thrust, my right leg moving higher, my knee near my chin.

I sobbed into the pillow under my head as Draco moved, only missing one rhythmic stroke to straddle my left leg to thrust deeper into my body, his hands upon my hip. I could see him from the position I lay, see the dim silhouette of his muscular body over mine, the rippling of his stomach, the tension in his arms. His lips were parted and sweat trickled slowly down the left side of his face. His eye was warm with affection, with lust.

I swallowed a cry as his hands manipulated my body to move until I was grasping the headboard with both hands, my weight on my knees, my back arched, my head thrown back, my toes curled. Draco grasped my hips, thrusting into me from behind.

Sex had always been safe, in the sense that when Ron and I had been together, we never did anything that seemed daring or different. I was wholly untried, and because of that, every time Draco thrust into my body, it shook and a cry ripped from me. If it were possible, I felt as if my body were about to spontaneously combust.

A large hand wrapped about my shoulder and suddenly I was pulled back so that my back straightened as Draco’s pelvis shifted downward and up. His arms curled about my waist, his right hand grasping my left breast. I bounced against him, his breath fiery against my neck and exhaling deep growls. His cock was a piston, lubricated by my own essence, willed to move by the animalistic desire to reach a brand of completion and resulting sublime oblivion.

My hands reached back to grasp the rippling muscles of his buttocks, trying in press him in closer, to force him deeper, to devour his organ, to scratch the itch inside my once cursed womb. I needed him to hold me tighter, I needed him to slide against me, I needed him to moan into my ear, I needed him to pinch my nipple, and I needed him to fuck me harder…harder…harder…
…until I exploded.

Draco held me close as my body went lax, even as he snarled, filling me with his seed. I was wet...the combination of my juices and Draco’s seed trickling down my legs to pool at my knees in the mattress below. I was undone, every tendon and muscle in my body quivering. The man who held me was not as far gone as I, and gently, he laid me down, falling beside me, pulling me into his arms. I wondered if he were somehow afraid to let me go.

My eyelids were heavy, but my body hummed still, my core twitching.

Draco moved, sitting up in bed to look down at me, my legs twisted, my arms limp upon the bed, my hair falling over my face and chest. He sighed, using a finger to push away the strands that fell into my face.

I groaned softly as I shifted onto my back, my left leg bent so that my knee was upraised. Draco’s head turned to my belly, and leaning down, he pressed a kiss into my left hip, whispering a Contraceptive Charm…easily cast without the aid of a wand. Magic moved through my womb… and it was not painful.

Sitting up again, Draco’s face turned to mine, but the moonlight had changed, and I could no longer see his features clearly. He ran his fingers from my hip to my heart before lying down again, and pulling me against him, and when he had situated our bodies to fit together, he pulled the blankets over us both.

I closed my eyes, thankful to be warm since the night air through the French doors was growing colder. The heat of his body trapped beneath the blankets was a natural sedative. Sleep came with no true dreams, just warmth…and Draco Malfoy.

To happy memories…
Part XIX

Part 19

For some reason, after so many years, I had begun to enjoying flying on a broom. I supposed it was the feeling of wind about my body, or the freedom I felt. Vaguely, I remembered Harry saying that he only felt free of his responsibilities when he flew. I pushed those memories away as I flew next to Draco through the Temple Wood, to the edge of the Malfoy lands.

When we landed in the dim forest, the sun having just set, Draco automatically took my hand as we passed between the largest oak trees I had ever seen...larger than those in the Forbidden Forest. Two oak trees bent toward each other so that it looked like a gateway into a younger section of trees. As we passed through, our brooms in hand, I felt magic shimmer over me, allowing me to pass. On the other side of the trees, I glanced back, seeing only tall bracken, the oak trees gone. The air was colder, and carried a heavier scent of chalky soil.

We paused, shrinking our brooms. I sighed as I slipped my Firebolt into the bottomless pocket of my Transfigured black cloak. My gloved hand brushed against the dragon hide clothes the Malfoys had given me. I had donned the clothes only hours before, finding the boots comfortable, the trousers flexible, and movable, the long gloves and shirt warm. I managed to duplicate Narcissa’s beauty Charm on my hair, but I pulled the braids back into a tie. My wands were strapped in the holster over my right sleeved glove, my bottomless pocket filled with the phials of potions, several books, including ‘The Hanged Man,’ a basket of food under a Stasis Charm, the goblin warded box with the remaining Time-Turner, and my broom. Inside my left bootleg…Lucius’ enchanted stiletto. About my neck, slipped under the dragon hide top was the pendant, the disc pressed against the inside of my left breast.

“Ready?” Draco asked quietly, arranging his black cloak about his shoulder, reaching out a hand for me in the dim light of the non-magical side of Temple Wood.

Draco wore an outfit almost identical to mine except for the sleeve gloves. He struck an imposing figure in his dragon hide armor, cloak, and shaggy platinum hair. He did not wear the patch over his scar, and as I took his hand, I found that even with his ruined eye, he did not appear hideously marred. Harry had not taken away Draco Malfoy’s fey beauty.

I stepped toward Draco, into his arms, falling into an embrace that only tightened as the world compressed around us, and we Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts.
We did not stumble as our booted feet hit the ground, and we parted slowly, Draco pulling up my hood before donning his own. It was dark in the north, darker than it had been in Temple Wood.

“The Anti-Apparition wards have been adjusted just for the Commemoration tomorrow…” Draco whispered as he took my hand again and we moved to the gates.

Instead of two Constables, there were six at the gates, braziers lit to illuminate the area. When we approached, Draco stepped forward.

“Sir, right on time…” a Constable said to Draco.

I did not bother noticing the Constables, all chancing a look at their superior officer, but to the castle beyond. The windows from the Great Hall to the highest tower were lit as if there was a castle full of students. I swallowed a small sob.

My eyes moved back to the gates, and the faces of the Constables who watched Draco and I move through the goblin wards. The effect of the goblin enchantment had not become any more pleasant since the last time I had passed through it. Pulling through, I sighed in relief, not bothering to glance back to the gate, but to the front doors of the castle instead. Standing at the open doors were three figures, one of which I knew by its size.

I released Draco’s hand and rushed ahead, the hood of my cloak falling back from my face as I broke into a jog.

Hagrid…

Merlin, I could see his fat tears before I ever reached him, bounding up the steps to jump into his crushing embrace. Hagrid had been my constant and my best friend ever since I came to live in the Forest.

“Mione…” Hagrid sobbed, as he pressed me into his thick fur dress coat, smelling of the Forest and wood smoke.

After what seemed like hours, Hagrid set me gently on the stone threshold of the castle, his huge
hands resting heavily on my shoulders. The torches inside the Entrance Hall lit my face as Hagrid studied me.

“I’m alright, Hagrid…” I said softly, tears streaming down my cheeks. I rubbed at the tears with the back of my hand, the edge of the dragon hide soaking up the wetness. “I’m so sorry that I couldn’t write…”

Hagrid shook his shaggy head. “I know, ‘Mione. I know you couldn’t…”

I nodded. Someone had told Hagrid about the Harry’s attack, and my seclusion.

“You look much better, Hermione,” another voice sounded from behind Hagrid, and my large friend stepped back to reveal Neville Longbottom.

Neville also seemed to appear in better health since the last time I had seen him. He had put on a healthy bit of weight, and filled out his regal dark red robes handsomely. Even the smile on his face reached his eyes—he was glad to see me.

The other figure on the threshold stepped forward and I found that Charlie Weasley held my hand in his calloused palms.

“‘Mione…” was all he said, almost in a whisper.

Though Charlie’s mouth was stretched into a handsome smile, I could see that there was a deeper pain in his blue eyes. I frowned. Molly… But before I could open my mouth to ask Charlie anything, Draco’s hand was pressed into the small of my back, he finally having reached the threshold.

Neville and Hagrid stiffened at the sight of Draco, but Charlie nodded in greeting.

“Headmaster, I assume you have arranged for the same quarters as before?” Draco asked, his voice taking on that ‘official’ tone I had come to recognise.

Neville nodded. “Everything is ready. However, I must protest Malfoy…”
Draco raised a hand and effectively silence Neville. Neville’s face reddened.

I stepped away from Draco, slightly uncomfortable with his cold treatment of my old friend. I knew I had been guilty of treating Neville in a similar manner, but I did not insult him out right. Neville was the Headmaster.

“Hagrid,” I said, hoping to diffuse the tension. I stepped toward my friend, “Shall we walk for a bit before it gets too dark?”

I did not bother to glance at Draco as Hagrid’s face broke into a relieved smile and he offered his arm. Together, Hagrid and I moved from the front doors, and I could feel Draco’s eyes upon me.

It was too dark to walk very quickly, but Hagrid and I often walked the grounds on moonlit nights to the shore of the Lake, watching the Thestrals fly over the surface of the water or the Squid languidly stretch in the starlight. We often walked in the summer, when cool breezes blew from further along the Lake, cooling us as we talked about whatever came to mind. Hagrid’s conversational topics were limited to the Forest, its creatures, and Hogwarts, but I never minded—it was a welcome distraction most times.

As we moved along the ground toward the Lake, we did not speak until we were far enough away from the front doors so we would not be overheard.

“I’ve been reading the papers, ‘Mione. Is it true what they say about Harry?” Hagrid asked finally as we reached the pebbled shore of the Lake, the moon rising over the hills.

“I’m not exactly sure what the papers are saying, Hagrid.”

Hagrid drew a huge handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his eyes.

“The murders…did he really kill those Muggles who raised him?”

I sighed, patting the back of Hagrid’s tree-like arm. “He did, Hagrid. He has killed many people.”
“I just can’t believe that he would hurt you, ‘Mione…it doesn’t seem real!” Hagrid sobbed, quickly blowing his nose into the handkerchief.

I nodded in agreement. None of it seemed real. Sometimes I wondered if I were simply stuck in some dream…part fantasy, part nightmare.

“But he did, Hagrid, it is real,” I whispered as we moved toward the three tombs of the three Heads of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

We paused only for a moment to look at the tombs in the moonlight before moving on toward the path that would take us to Hagrid’s Hut and the edge of the Forest.

“I’ve got a bundle of mail for you…” Hagrid began as I hesitated to follow him further away from the front doors and from Draco.

I had not intended on walking so far, but Hagrid’s mention of mail made me realise that for weeks I had been missing any correspondences from the Ministry. In the confusion and shock that followed my attack, I had not thought to mention to Draco that my mail should be forwarded. Of course, for a long while I was too ill to even bother with mail if I did have access to it.

I held to Hagrid’s thick arm as we trudged through the dark up the well-worn path. I could just make out the steep pitched roof of Hagrid’s hut as we approached. And when Hagrid let me inside the warmth of his home, the candles lit upon a wooden chandelier over the large table before the fire. I climbed up onto a kitchen chair as Hagrid shut the door behind him and moved back into the bedroom behind the ragged curtain.

Hagrid’s black eyes swam with tears as he set a bundle of letters tied with twine before me on the table. He muttered that he would fix some tea, and I nodded, pulling at the knot about the pile of parchment envelopes. It had been a long while since I had tasted Hagrid’s bitter brew.

Letters from the Ministry, flyers advertising sales in Diagon Alley, a postcard from Ron just before I was attacked, a notice from Flourish & Blotts telling me a book I had ordered was now available, and finally…a packet, the thickest of all my mail. It read: ‘H. Jane Granger, care of: R. Hagrid, Hogwarts.’

I opened the packet, and pulled parchment from the envelope. It was a roll of parchment, folded so that it fit into the large envelope, laying flat in sections that fell together in fan-like folds. But the
bulk of the packet was loose sheaves underneath the folded roll, most wrinkled terribly, and others torn. I consulted the top roll of parchment first.

Hagrid set the kettle over the fire and chipped mugs upon the tabletop, sitting down to stare woefully into the fire. I wanted to smile at my old friend, pat his hand, reassure him, but as my eyes fell to the words printed on the parchment, my heart seemed to freeze solid.

‘March 21, 2008, Dear Hermione,’ I read, my mind moving back to where I was when the letter was written. I was at Malfoy Manor on the Equinox, Draco healing from his wounds after fighting Harry in Animagus form. Harry was declared ‘dark,’ and a criminal combatant.

‘Dear Hermione,

I wish I could be writing to you in better circumstances, sending some bit of happy news, or wishing you a happy holiday of some sort. But through the years, time has not brought us into such a confidence with each other. We have not been the closest friends, and I can only hope that you will understand that I’m writing this letter with every bit of my love and admiration for you.

Hermione, there is no other person than you who could stop my husband from turning the world upside down. And for this I implore you…’

Hagrid had risen and moved to pour tea into the mugs, and I paused in my reading to gaze up at him.

“It’s from Ginny,” I said softly as Hagrid’s beetle black eyes moved to the pile of folded parchment.

He nodded, sitting down across from me.

“Go ahead and take your time, ‘Mione,” Hagrid whispered, sitting back in his chair with his tea.

It was almost eerie to see Hagrid’s solemn face, and hear his mournful voice. All through the War, Hagrid had been such a positive force, always smiling, always warm, even when times were at their worst. I turned my eyes back to the long letter, but did not read for a moment.
“Hagrid…” I started, but paused again. I raised my eyes to gaze at my old friend and his watery eyes. I could not tell Hagrid that even Ginny’s words condemned Harry…

I continued reading, unfolding the parchment.

‘And for this I implore you…kill Harry if all else fails. You and I both know that is the only way to stop him.

After what he has done to you, you must know that he will not simply kill those who stand in his way, but he will maim, torture, and irreparably damage a person. Hermione, I am only now hearing details of what Harry has done to you, Dad has told me…after me repeatedly asking. And now with George…and all the others, my sorrow has found a deeper depth.

You should know, Hermione that if I had known how profoundly disturbed Harry had become, I would have warned who I could.

Our marriage had been a dream to me. I have loved Harry since I was a girl, and I stood next to him through good and bad times. It was not into our second year of marriage did I find that I could not stand by him any longer.

At first, I thought it was the stress of his work. Capturing escaped Death Eaters, protecting witnesses to be brought to the Wizangamot trials…something that had been bothering all of us at that time. But it wasn’t this stress...

Harry began spending his time in the study, all of his free time at home. He did not look at me any longer, he did not sleep next to me, he did not speak to me. I lived with a ghost of man, who went to work during the day, and returned home as if he was not sure if he belonged there.

And suddenly, he remembered me, and for several weeks, I believed I had my husband again. We ate meals together, we slept in the same bed, and we even began talking about the future…children. Then, one evening, I called Harry to come to dinner…but he did not respond. I went into his study to find him sitting in the floor, the fire raging, books and papers all over the rug.

I called to him to come to dinner; he did not move…I moved closer to him, thinking that maybe he was asleep sitting up. I touched him, and that was when he turned on me like a rabid animal. He hit me, snarling. Hermione, his eyes seemed to glow with hatred. I had only seen it once before, just after Dumbledore’s death. Those eyes hurt me more than his fist across my face.
Harry tried to apologise even as I healed my face. He clung to me as I went to Floo to the Burrow. He seemed so sorry…and so childlike. My heart broke when I left him, but I could not allow a cycle or a pattern of abuse to begin. Deep inside my soul, I had known something was wrong even before Harry began retreating into his study for hours and hours.

Ron began telling me how Harry began to deteriorate. Ron would go to the home Harry and I made in Islington, pound on the study door and yell at Harry for hours. Harry would never open the door or answer. Kreacher was the only other living creature that could slip through the wards and enter the study. With Ron being Pureblood (though Kreacher still called all Weasleys ‘blood-traitors’), Kreacher responded to his requests. Feed Harry, see to his health, and if possible, inform Ron about what Harry was doing in the study...why he did not answer, why he would not allow his best friend to enter.

Kreacher could only tell Ron that Harry was still alive, that he was working on papers, and that Kreacher could not engage Harry in any sort of dialogue. From what Ron told me, the old, evil elf seemed upset that Harry was not ordering him about like a ‘good’ Master should. In the end, Ron and I had no real idea why Harry was acting so strangely.

When the Ministry terminated Harry’s position, Ron did not protest. Harry had been absent from work for weeks. I had filed my suit against him, and had been hovering over divorce papers with a hesitant quill for weeks. In the end, I called St. Mungo’s to send the newly formed ‘police’ department to the house in Islington. The Ministry took Harry by force, and soon the Healers declared Harry ‘insane.’

I had little to do with any of the events; I could not bear to see Harry. Dad seemed to take care of the formalities of Harry’s committal, and finally sat me down to tell me that Harry could not remember who I was...his wife.

The last thing that I did concerning Harry was ask Kreacher to gather up Harry’s papers and bring them to me. The elf did this just after the police finished their reports. And enclosed are those papers.’

I paused in my reading to lift Ginny’s letter so that I saw the first of the stack of parchments, a page with more blots of ink than actual words. The scrawl was familiar, a scrawl that I remembered so well from school. Harry’s handwriting.

‘I wanted them because I had to know why...why Harry had divorced his very soul from mine. I had to know what it was that drove him to hit me, to forget me.'
I poured over every page, trying to understand, but most of what was written was foreign to me. It seemed like the writings of a lunatic, but then I remembered one thing, one actual helpful bit of information Kreacher was able to give Ron. The books...

Harry had confiscated quite a bit of so-called ‘dark artefacts’ from the homes of Death Eaters. Most of the artefacts the Ministry kept, others, mostly books, were sent to Hogwarts. But on occasion, Harry brought home a few books, having either paid the Ministry to keep the spoils or smuggled the books home under the noses of his superiors. That was how he acquired ‘The Hanged Man.’ It had once been the property the Dolohov family.’

I closed my eyes. Dolohov… Merlin, it was almost too obvious. The cutting curse that nearly killed me in my Fifth Year had most likely derived from ‘The Hanged Man.’ Through the years, it had been Antonin Dolohov’s face that often appeared in my nightmares. He had been the first man to ever, truly hurt me, and I never forgot his mad face.

‘The only thing I could discern from these pages was that Harry somehow wanted to change the past. Of course, Harry often said things to me, wishing that our world could be different. If only Dumbledore had lived, Sirius, Fred, even Snape… Sometimes I could see his eyes grow distant, as if thinking of what the world would be like if those people were still alive.

He also writes about the Hallows in these pages, and again, I remembered him telling me about ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers.’ He would grin every time he mentioned the Invisibility Cloak in our vault. In these pages, I think you’ll be able to see why he wanted the Hallows again, after vowing never to use Elder Wand (you remember as well as everyone how he replaced the wand in Dumbledore’s tomb and resealed it after the Last Battle) or seek out the Resurrection Stone.

And then he writes about your Third Year, about saving Sirius from the Dementors. Not until now did I let myself believe that these maniacal writings and his erratic behavior were seated in some deeper obsession that could not be repressed by the Healers. Merlin, Hermione, if I had known, I would have killed Harry myself.’

Tears welled up in my eyes as I came to the end of Ginny’s letter, and I pressed my hand over my mouth to keep from crying.

‘Hermione, please stop Harry.

You might wonder why I would ask this of you…given that if Harry were to go back and change
everything, I would have him again. If Harry goes back, everything we have fought for will have been for nothing. It is unfair for Harry to have the power to decide who lives and who dies…and how the future should be.

*Do not hesitate, Hermione, do not pity him. Harry James Potter is dead, he killed himself when he gave up living for the future…for the people who loved him. And do not pity me, I lost my husband years ago. I tried to compete with the past, and I lost.*

*Do not waver, Hermione, do not let Harry take away the possibility of our lives changing for the better after all the terrible things we have seen and done.*’

I sobbed aloud, and found that Hagrid had moved to kneel next to me, his large body blocking the warm flow of the fire. He pulled part of his handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped away my tears with the very corner of the fabric.

‘I wish you luck, my old friend. Please be careful, and please forgive me for the so many things I could have done to relieve you of this burden. You most likely will never see me again, Hermione, so I wish you all the happiness in the world…that you find a love more true than the one I had for the boy who saved my life.

*All my love, Ginny.*’

I dropped the letter onto the tabletop and embraced Hagrid, crying into his beard like a little girl. Ginny had resigned herself to disappear.

Pity the living, and above all, those who live without love.

Everything Harry had touched was tainted. In the beginning, it had not been so, Harry was unspoiled and innocent, but with madness came selfishness, with selfishness came cruelty, and with cruelty came evil. Harry was no better than Voldemort and the Dark Lord’s quest to live forever. Harry did not want to live forever, he wanted to become God.

The sound of Hagrid’s door opening and shutting did not alarm me, but it alarmed my old friend who pulled from our embrace to stand to his full height.

“What are you doin’ here?” Hagrid growled, his deep voice threatening to whomever had entered.
I turned in the chair to find Draco standing just inside the hut, not bothering to even acknowledge Hagrid, but stared at me, his face full of concern.

“Hermione,” Draco began, stepping toward me, but Hagrid, with a speed and grace I did not think possible from such a large man, moved between us, blocking my view of my protector completely.

I wiped my cheeks of any excess tears, and glanced quickly to the letter and pieces of parchment resting with the other items I had received in the post. I stood from the high chair and touched Hagrid’s arm, moving around him so that I came to stand before him. My back pressed against Draco’s chest as he moved forward to address me, but found that I had turned to smile at Hagrid.

“Hagrid, it is alright. Draco is not here to cause any problems, he came to find me, to see if I was safe,” I said gently, but saw that Hagrid was staring coolly at Draco.

“Safe? Safe! Of course ‘Mione is safe here,” Hagrid grumbled.

I felt Draco exhale into the braids of my hair pulled back in a cloth tie. Draco was not angry, or offended by Hagrid, but I could tell he was uncomfortable standing just behind me.

“Hagrid, Draco and I have been…” I trailed as Draco’s hand moved against the small of my back on the outside of my cloak. “We’ve been working together since I was attacked. He has protected me since then, and I…trust him.”

Hagrid seemed to sigh, and slowly moved to his chair behind the table, taking up his tea. I also sighed, knowing I would be unable to convince Hagrid that Draco was not a threat, but moved to my chair again as Draco moved to lean against the wide jamb of the door, crossing his arms before his chest and smiling smugly.

I positioned myself so that I could move my eyes easily to regard either man, but I turned my attentions to Ginny’s letter. I folded the parchment back as it had been and slid the papers back into the large envelope. Closing the tab, I rested the packet on my lap, while arranging my other mail, most of which I would Vanish.

The silence in the hut was almost painful to my ears. My eyes were scratchy with unshed tears and my mood quite sullen. All the same, I tried to smile at Hagrid as I finally took a drink of strong tea.
“The ceremony, when does it start tomorrow?” I asked, trying to brighten the inflection in my voice, but failed.

“At sunset. Have you seen what they’re puttin’ on the grounds just where Neville cut the head off that snake?” Hagrid said, brightening a bit at the chance at conversation.

I shook my head, blinking in confusion.

“A fountain! I saw the original plans, and I’m glad they ain’t goin’ with the first idea…a great snake wrapped about a sword…utter nonsense.

Nah, it is a fountain like the one in the Ministry…a smaller version, I s’pose. A plaque will be placed with the names of those killed…none of the bad sort, mind, but names of witches and wizards, centaurs and giants…all those who died a hero.”

Draco made a noise, but it was not a scoff or a guffaw. I did not turn my eyes to him.

“We will be there, Hagrid,” I said, reaching across the large table to pat his hand.

Hagrid smiled, his black eyes shining.

With as much gentleness as I could, I finally made my goodbye, promising to sit near Hagrid in the back of the rows of chairs at the ceremony. After so many ceremonies, Hagrid and I had earned out seats in the back rows…he because of his size, I because of my aversion to most people.

I slipped my mail into my bottomless pocket before hugging Hagrid again, new tears spring into my eyes. I had missed my old friend, and the simple pleasures of drinking tea and talking about magical creatures with Rubeus Hagrid. Finally, Draco and I left the hut behind, taking the dark path up to the castle, a path we had walked so many times when we were students.

Draco held my hand tightly as we trudged along the dark path, and I hesitated to mention Ginny’s letter. I had not lied to Hagrid, I did trust Draco.
“Ginny sent me a letter,” I said softly as we entered the castle through a door that led into one of the many empty corridors. Torches lit the way as we moved toward the Portrait Hall, taking a route that led down into the dungeons. It was not the route I used when I entered the castle, and I knew Draco was recalling the route toward the Slytherin Dormitories.

“When?” he asked, his voice more like a grumble, and I wondered if he were angry, his hand crushing mine.

“After the Equinox.”

The dungeon passages were cold, and we passed the Potions classroom, past Horace’s quarters, stopping before a particularly wet and mildew covered wall at the end of a short corridor. Draco released my hand to press both of his palms against the damp stones, and the door appeared.

I sighed, I did not have the capacity to ponder how the wards that secreted Severus’ chambers, or how I had never noticed the short corridor that terminated in a dead end. I did not have the capacity to marvel at the fact that Severus’ enchanted windows seemed to overlook the Lake, or that dinner was set out on the table in the middle of the room.

Passing inside, Draco shut the door behind me. I stood dumbly in the parlour, unfastening my cloak to toss it over the back of the wingback chair before the low burning fireplace. Draco mimicked my actions, but moved to the bedroom, which was open, the bed turned down.

I shook my head, trying to compose my thoughts.

“Do you remember what you told me about what the Aurors noted in their report?” I said as Draco moved in the bedroom, pulling off his dragon-hide armor, throwing it on the bed. I walked to the door and leaned on the jamb watching him as he sat on the end of the bed and pulled off his boots, letting the black hide and heavy soles fall to the floor.

“Which report?” he asked, standing again to undo the front of his trousers.

He glanced to me once, his face twisted in a scowl. Opening the chest of drawers, he pulled out a pair of plain white sleeping pants with a drawstring.

“After Harry was taken to St. Mungo’s.”
Draco nodded, moving to the far side of the bed, twisting out of his tight trousers so that I had a prefect view of his backside, the taut muscles of his back, his ass, his legs. I blushed, and averted my eyes.

“The parchments you mentioned…the ones that were lost…”

“Yes, Granger, I remember,” he growled, bending down to lift the sleep pants up his legs. I chanced a glance…the shadow of his sac and flaccid cock against his thigh.

I bit my lip at the sight of his organs and the fact he called me ‘Granger.’ He was annoyed, and I wondered if it was because I had walked with Hagrid and left his sight for a while leaving his protection without asking permission. My face burned even as Draco adjusted the ties of his pants.

“I have those parchments in my cloak,” I announced, crossing my arms before my breasts.

Draco whirled, his left eye flashing, and he stalked toward me, and my heart raced.

“Let me see them.”

I bit my lip again, and moved to my cloak, digging through the bottomless pocket. When I extracted the bundle, I found that Draco was sitting at the table, pouring pumpkin juice into his goblet. I passed the parchments to him, but did not sit down. Even Hogwart’s familiar foods did not tempt me. In fact, my stomach was knotted painfully

I stood next the wingback chair, and studied Draco as he sat back in his chair, shirtless, as his left eye studied the parchments. It seemed almost a sin for Draco to sit half-clothed in Severus’ parlour. However, as his pale hands switched from one parchment to the other, I began to see Draco’s face beginning to relax, his scowl slipping. What replaced the scowl was a subtle expression of alarm.

Coming to the last scrap, Draco scanned the page quickly, dropping the paper into his lap, his eye raising to stare back at me.

“Have you read these, Hermione?” he asked gently.
I shook my head, and let my eyes fall to the floor under my dragon-hide boots.

“Most of it is nonsense, but most of it only proves that your theories are correct. Potter has been planning his actions for years…who to kill, who to contact, who to spare. Names, dates, events, all mentioned…all that we now know.

If we had had these parchments months, even years ago, he could have been stopped!”

Draco grasped the parchments, and furiously threw them across the parlour so that most fell into the dinner on the table, some floating into the bedroom, others into the darkened bathroom. Draco rose from the table, jarring it so that the pitcher of pumpkin juice tumbled off the table, spilling icy juice upon the floor.

I winced as Draco moved away from the table, a hand pressed over his mouth, bare feet pacing across the floor. I pressed a hand to my upset stomach as I watched the pale man pace, his right hand clenching into a fist.

Slowly, I began picking up the pages, my eyes prickling with tears.

Of course, Draco was right, I could see Harry’s notes as I collected the parchment. Notes on the night Voldemort was reborn, notes on Time-Turners…names of books that were so obscure on the subject of the Time-Turners that I was surprised at Harry’s thoroughness. There were lists of names, even descriptions of how and why these people should die. There were notes on spells taken from ‘The Hanged Man,’ spells that would kill but would not be detected by the Ministry. And as I picked up the last few pieces, I began reading notes on why Harry needed the Resurrection Stone.

‘I cannot lose Hermione and Ron, and no matter how things will change, I fear I will lose them. I cannot lose them to death while I will continue to live on…forever…’

I licked my lips as I picked up the last piece of parchment…a drawing of my face sketched in pencil upon the edge of the torn piece. Harry must have drawn it from memory, a memory he had of me at the Yule Ball.

If these parchments had not been taken by Ginny…hidden away…
I stifled a sob, kneeling just inside the doorway of the bedroom. I could not imagine the guilt Ginny Potter felt.

Draco held me as my cried tore from my throat, the parchment falling from my arms as I threw myself against him. He had come to my side, and we held each other, falling into the floor so that his knees cradled me, holding me close. His hands ran over my back, my shoulder, my hair, my face, as I cried.

I had cried so much that I did not think that my pain and sorrow could ever pour from me again, but it did, and Draco Malfoy tried to soothe me.

When kisses were pressed into my cheeks, drinking my tears, I returned those kisses.

“Draco…” I whispered, his thick arms wrapping about me like coils of cable. “Draco…”

Part of me felt as though I was the most pitiable creature in the world. Part of me wondered if the universe was punishing me. Part of me wondered if I should have died long ago… But no… I would live, I had to live, even if it were to ascertain if I truly loved the man who licked the tears from my face.

Draco held me as we slept in Severus’ bed. I slept so deeply and so comfortably against him. When I woke in the morning, Draco was still curled around me, his body poised as if to shield me from some invisible danger.

Desperation, it was desperation.

May 10th had come, and I knew that I could not cry.
Mafalda Hopkirk was a handsome, older witch, and from where I sat in the back row, Hagrid to my right, I could see that her brilliant blue eyes matched the dark blue of her robes. The Minister of Magic stood upon a dais, the commemorative fountain gurgling at her back. As Hagrid had said, the fountain was of a similar design to the much larger Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Ministry. The fountain’s figures on the grounds were not golden, but silver, and the statue of the goblin was the only feature missing from its brother in the Atrium. It was a safe representation, and not original. I did not care for the fountain.

“We must endure if we are to stabilise our world…”

I had tuned out the Minister’s speech about equality, freedom of expression, zero-tolerance to terrorism and threats to the stability of the Wizarding world. Instead, I let my eye move over the assembly of approximately one hundred people in the rows of chairs before me. The assembly would clap on cue, but I paid little mind.

I had the hood of my cloak pulled low, and though I recognised many faces, they did not notice me.

Around the assembly, perched high upon the castle behind me, at the edges of the Forest, on the shore of the Lake; were Aurors… Even Draco was somewhere close, for I could feel his eye upon me, somewhere behind me, perhaps perched upon the battlements of the Astronomy Tower.

I fidgeted with my hands in my lap at the thought of Draco being on the Astronomy Tower, flicking my eyes to the tombs on the shore far to my right.

There had yet to be any stirrings of an assault by some ‘terrorist’ force upon the assembly. The security measures taken were extreme. Every person who entered the grounds had been searched physically and magically. No glamours, no Polyjuiced faces, no enchantments…the goblin enchantments nullified most magic so no one could cast even the simplest of spells into the crowd or at the Minister who had two grim faced Aurors standing on either side of her as she spoke without the aid of magic.

Finally, a list of names was read, those who had died in service to the Ministry and to the service of a better world. I scoffed as the names were read and a plaque at the base of the fountain was unveiled. I scoffed as the assembly rose to their feet, clapping.

Time had decided the heroes and the villains in the minds of the people…
When the ceremony was over, I sat just as I had at Minerva’s funeral. I waited as people filed past me, not bothering to take note of me. Some were people I knew very well, some were people I esteemed, and some were people I doubted had anything to do with the War or the Last Battle at all… Deep down, I felt that the commemoration of the Last Battle was a mockery to the memory of those who had died.

Hagrid had left my side early on, apparently just as unsettled as I had been. When the last person left the assembly area to commune with many others before the front doors or near the gates, I rose from my seat and walked toward the fountain. The visitors had viewed the fountain before the ceremony, but I had not.

The sun’s rays were still lighting the grounds as I walked around the fountain, my hood still low over my face. It was a bit warm, even for a May evening with a cloak and dragon-hide armor, but breezes off the Lake still held a cool bite. I stopped before the plaque and read the names. Colin Creevey, Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin, Remus Lupin, Fred Weasley…there were about fifty names, and I knew all of them. One name was missing, and I wondered why…Severus Snape.

No tears were shed.

(Of all of them…you were the one who sacrificed the most…” I whispered.

But was it enough, Miss Granger?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It seemed that no matter how much was sacrificed for Harry or the ‘greater good’…it was never enough.

My eyes opened as a hand slipped under my cloak to curl about my waist, and at the touch of fingertips upon the skin of my hip between the bottom of the dragon-hide shirt and trousers, I knew who stood just as my left. My hand moved to cover his as his fingers caressed my hip, making my thoughts turn away from the names listed on the plaque and the memories I had of each person.

“What a farce,” I whispered, turning to gaze at the warm light upon Draco’s scarred face, the sun setting before us over the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

The corner of his mouth rose into a smirk. “Maybe in another ten years it won’t seem like a farce…maybe in another ten years the political implications of the Last Battle won’t matter,” he
whispered, his fingertips running along the crest of my hipbone. It was a very intimate gesture, and I shivered slightly, a subtle shock running down to my core at his touch.

“No attack, no ambush, no Potter…” Draco whispered, turning to me slightly, the shadow of his body falling over me so I could see his face in a silhouetted light.

“I’m glad,” I whispered, my hands burying under his cloak, sliding along the dragon hide of his armor shirt, so that I embraced him.

Draco sighed, his fingers pushing back my hood, my braids fell over my shoulders. He grasped my face and stared down into my eyes.

“You want this to be over as much as I do, Hermione…” he whispered, leaning down to kiss me just between my eyebrows. He pulled back and continued to stare down with his icy left eye.

If Draco had both of his eyes, his gaze would not have been so unsettling, but as it was…

“I want it over, I want a lot of things, but I won’t delude myself that all of…this…is going to end well,” I said, my hand moving to gesture to the fountain, the castle, the grounds… “Waiting for Harry to act, waiting for a confrontation is worse than the confrontation itself.”

Draco’s hands caressed my face as I pressed myself against him.

“I think it is beginning to drive me mad, Draco…” I whispered, closing my eyes, the bright orange rays of the setting sun warming my forehead as Draco tilted my head to kiss me.

I fell into his kiss, finding that Draco Malfoy’s kiss was the only thing that was keeping my mind and soul from slipping into a dark, inescapable place. The anxiety I had been experiencing, the fear, the hesitation, it had all come upon me so suddenly. It shocked me how quickly my life had changed. New Years had been quiet, with me curled up before the fire of my cottage, Crookshanks curled up at my feet. I had been reading a copy of Carl Sagan’s ‘The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark,’ which my father had given me during my Christmas visit to Australia. It was a fun read, even more so as I drank my celebratory whiskey. By the Equinox, Minerva was dead, I was a victim of a cruel sexual assault by my best friend, and I was staying in Malfoy Manor…I was hearing Severus Snape’s voice in my head, and I was slowly falling in love with Draco Malfoy.
I was in shock, but I kissed Draco with every bit of my soul. Out of everything, out of my shock, I did know that I felt a type of love for this man. He had protected me, and as he held my face as the sun finally disappeared, I believed that he had protected me because I was worth protecting.

I pulled away from him, my palms resting against his dragon hide clad chest. The darkness of the coming night was casting us both in grey light. I did not know if he loved me, I could not know his mind or his motives, but I also could not let my doubt consume me. I needed Draco’s help more than I needed his love. Considering ‘love’ would have to come later…

“You cannot go mad, someone has to keep their head straight,” he muttered, his lips quirking into a lop-sided smile that made my heart flutter. I doubted he knew how that scoundrel-like smile affected me.

I chuckled as Draco removed his hands from my face to push my braided hair over one shoulder, and replace the hood over my head. Humour…no matter how dark, how ironic, was the only way to diffuse the gravity of our situation. And we walked away from the fountain and the plaque, with smiles on our faces.

No one noticed me, some of the guests still milling about the front doors of the castle, but plenty took note of Draco, his pale face and hair unmistakable. We passed into the castle, past the Great Hall where even more people had gathered, where the Minister was talking to the press. We moved into the Portrait Hall, and I looked up toward Gryffindor Tower. I considered making a trip up the stairs to stand before Minerva’s portrait and beg her to speak to me.

Hagrid had told me as we waited for the ceremony began that little had changed in the castle since I was last there. Neville was working to find a replacement for Minerva’s post as Transfigurations Professor, as well as trying to find someone suitable to teach Divination. Minerva’s portrait still had not roused from its slumber. Letters had come from the families of the students, pledging support to Hogwarts, hoping to have the Board of Governors reopen the school early so that the students could catch up on their studies. Hagrid had also told me that Neville and Albus’ portrait were working on a new DADA curriculum and searching for a suitable instructor.

I stood inside the Portrait Hall, hoping to hear the voices of students, but heard only the whispers of portraits. The torches lit automatically as the light from the high windows faded. I licked my lips and turned back to the Entrance Hall, Draco just at my side. I slipped my hand into his, and together we made our way back down into the dark of the dungeons to Severus’ chambers.

Ten years had passed since the War ended.
I awoke with a start, and immediately grasped the pendant resting between my breasts. I had dreamt that the disc had begun to burn, but as I wrapped my hand about the metal, I found it oddly cold.

Draco had not stirred from his place beside me on Severus’ bed. His left arm was still draped over my hips, but had slid to my lap as I sat up. We still wore our dragon hide clothes, our wands still holstered to our bodies, and our cloaks laying across the foot of the four-poster bed.

I rubbed my eyes and sighed. Nerves…my nerves were fraying, and my anxiety was keeping me from sleeping. I turned to gaze down at Draco’s peaceful face. He slept deeply, his left eye moving under the lid, the remnants of the right eye twitching as if trying to keep in synchronisation with the left, but failing. His skin looked flawless in the light coming in through the enchanted bedroom windows; a false moon shining into the room. Draco Malfoy was a handsome man, even more so when his face was unguarded in sleep.

However, I did not let my eyes linger on his ivory skin and the long pale lashes against his cheek. Instead, I carefully extracted myself from Draco’s arms to slide from the bed to move into the moonlit parlour and into the bathroom, whispering a lighting spell to the candles.

I ran water into the basin and splashed the cold liquid into my face, grabbing a towel to dab at my face, gazing into the mirror. Black essence swirled in my irises, and I let the towel drop to the counter, leaning forward to gaze into the mirror.

“What is it?” I asked in a whisper.

I could feel him moving behind my eyes, now that I was awake. He had said so little, but I could feel him there…just where Draco had kissed my third eye earlier in the day.

I leaned forward so that the end of my nose nearly touched the surface of the mirror. Severus’ presence was ink floating in my eyes.

Behold the Man!
Severus’ voice boomed through my head, and before he spoke again, I grasped my head in my hands, and in doing so slammed my forehead into the mirror…shattering it.

I gasped and stumbled back, falling against the side of the tub and into the tiled floor.

“Granger?” I heard Draco, distantly.

_Behold the Man!_

I gritted my teeth, Severus’ voice was so loud.

I could feel blood trickling down my face, into my eyes, into my mouth. And again, Severus’ voice screamed…

_Behold the Man! Hurry!_

I shook my head violently as if to dislodge Severus’ presence, which was spreading out from my third eye, just below the gash on my forehead and the glass embedded within. My vision was blurred, but I could see that the candles were lighting in the parlour and Draco moving toward the door.

“Draco…” I rasped.

_Behold the Man!_

I whimpered as I felt my perception shift…and suddenly I was no longer in the bathroom, but in the parlour, tearing through the bookshelves lining the walls. Books flew all around me as I moved from one wall to the other. Draco’s voice rang out, but I did not hear him…all I could hear was my voice, distorted, uttering…

“Behold the Man…”
And then my hands, which were slick with blood, grasped a battered paperback book. Fingers ripped at the cover so that the blank backside of the cover was visible.

Written in a hand that I remembered from rolls of parchments turned back to me after a Potions Class, were several lines.


“Severus…”

I had fallen back into Draco’s arms, Michael Moorcock’s ‘Behold the Man’ in my bloody hands. My perception was back into the forefront of my brain, and Severus’ presence was silent and still.

Draco rolled me so that I knelt on the floor of the parlour, so that we were face to face. Draco’s mouth was moving, as was his wand, but I felt and heard nothing. I stared at his marred face as I began to feel my body again. My lips were trembling, my eyes were wide, and my face…hurt.

“What time is it?” I managed to ask, my voice dulled as if my ears were full of water.

Draco frowned as I felt that he healed the gash on my forehead, and slowly lowered Severus’ wand from my face.

At my question, Draco’s eye moved about the room, which I had torn apart at the behest at the consciousness residing in my brain. Finally, his eye fell upon a small clock left untouched on the shelf closest to the door leading out of the chambers. It was a small golden clock with an ivory face.

“Two-ten am.”

I could hear him perfectly, and I clutched ‘Behold the Man’ to my chest.

“What the hell is going on?” Draco asked, trying to wrench the book from my hand.
I pulled away, and struggled to my feet. Two-ten am and counting.

I stalked to my cloak in the bedroom and returned to the parlour, shoving the book into the bottomless pocket, whirling to face Draco who had also risen, Severus’ wand still in his hand, his face twisted into one of ultimate frustration. I grasped the back of the wing-backed chair after throwing my cloak across it, my eyes moving to the face of the clock, my body turned in anticipation.

“Granger.”

He was angry, and I waited. Two-eleven am.

“I do not have the time right now, Draco, but I will explain afterward,” I muttered distantly, still tasting a tinge of blood against my tongue.

“After what?”

Draco moved across the parlour and grasped my left shoulder as I turned further to see the clock.

“Harry’s getting ready to use the Time-Turner.”

“What?” Draco asked incredulously.

I sighed, my hand moving to the chain about my neck, pulling the pendant from under my shirt, but Draco grasped my wrist painfully and I dropped the chain.

“How do you know?”

Two thirteen am.

Draco jerked my hand away from my chest and the chain, and I felt the disc press against the inside
of my left breast.

“How do you know?” he asked again, grasping my chin, and twisting my face to gaze up at him.

My jaw twitched, but I did not move a finger to push free of Draco’s touch.

“How do you know?”

“Severus.”

His brow furrowed, but I turned my eyes toward the clock again.

Two fourteen am.

I stood stiffly, and began pondering Severus’ written words.

‘May 11th, 2:18 am, you are scarred.’

I truly did not know if Harry was going to activate his Time-Turner, and I wondered why I had said those words to Draco. Severus’ voice had screamed to me, and his presence had taken over my limbs…just as he had the night Malfoy Manor was attacked.

Two-sixteen am.

I knew his voice and presence must be the embedded spell, what had kept me alive after Harry’s assault. But when had the spell been placed? Surely, it had to have been while Severus was alive, ten or more years ago. But when, and why had I not ever noticed?

“What is happening, Granger?” Draco snarled in questioning, grasping my shoulders, trying to shake me, as if to rouse me from a stupor, but I was in no stupor, I was waiting.

Two-seventeen am.
My right hand moved to the chain about my neck again, and finally I turned my vision away from the clock to Draco’s reddened face.

“We cannot be here when we use it, Draco. We cannot be seen…you know the rules…” I started, my breathing becoming laboured, my chest heaving so that the disc lodged tighter against my breast.

I grasped the chain in my fingers, ready to pull the pendant free.

“The cottage! We will have to go to the cottage and I will need…”

I trailed as I felt an itch against my left breast.

The disc.

My fingers fumbled with the chain, trying to pull the pendant free from my shirt…but I was too late.

“Hermione!”

I was screaming.

The pain Harry inflicted had been much worse, but pain was still pain…and the disc, which I had assumed correctly was spelled with a Protean Charm, did not merely heat up when the Time-Turner Harry had stolen was being used. The disc burned white hot and light could be seen through the dragon-hide shirt.

I fell to my knees, jarring my body painfully as I clawed at the chain. I was screaming…and screaming…but my logical brain was far removed. When the disc had burned sufficiently into the skin of the inside of my left breast, I managed to rip the disc free so that it tumbled out of my shirt, which was not burnt in the least. The white-hot glow of the pendant rattled to the stone floor and quickly began to dim.

Draco was trying to tear away my shirt, but the dragon-hide would not yield. My screams had
subsided and I panted, lying on my right side, the long chain, and pendant on the floor before me. My vision tunneled for a moment as I stared at the disc, now only silver in the candlelight.

Draco was mumbling as I forced myself to sit, grasping the disc in my shaking hands. Turning the disc so that the engraved side, with its Grecian border and small dolphins was face up, block letters read: ‘Epimetheus: Origin, May 11, 2008, 2:17 am, local time. Destination, June 23, 1995, 4:27 am, local time. Prometheus: 12.908 turns, engage within 2 hours.’

I branded the block letters into my brain, just as the disc had branded me. Twelve point nine zero eight turns…engage within two hours.

I winced as I rose to my feet, the burnt skin on the inner slope of my left breast sore, and itching. The pain would have been unbearable, but I pushed the pain and nausea away. I moved to my cloak, and thrusting my hand inside the bottomless pocket, found the lead box, just where I had left it. I winced again as I replaced the chain about my neck and let the now cold disc fall against the front of my dragon-hide shirt. And then, drawing the Elder Wand, stalked into the bathroom, repairing the mirror and moving to the medicine chest, finding a pain-relieving potion that I hoped was still potent. Uncorking the small bottle, I downed the entire concoction and immediately felt the pain from my burn being pushed away to be dealt with later.

However, as I exited the bathroom, intending to don my cloak, Draco grabbed me by the forearms and whirled me around so that I fell against the table in the middle of the room, nearly knocking it over.

“What the hell is going on, Hermione?” he hissed, using my first name for poignancy.

I leaned against the table, my vision tunneling again. Slowly, I lifted a hand to swipe away some of the tiny braids that had fallen into my face, and let my eyes focus upon the pale skin of Draco’s neck.

Swallowing thickly, I said, “We don’t have much time, and I cannot explain everything, Draco. We need to go to the cottage now, and prepare.”

Draco blinked at me, his mouth open to speak. “He’s done it? He’s really done it?” he asked in quiet disbelief.

“Yes,” I whimpered as Draco’s fingertips dug into the dragon hide sleeves on my arms. “We have
The next few moments were a blur of movement, running, and wincing on my part. We had left Severus’ chambers, cloaks flying behind us, running through the dark passages of the castle dungeon. I did not allow myself to think, but buried my hand in the pocket of my cloak to feel that the goblin-warded box was still in my possession. We came to the troll statue, and Draco barked out the password. Soon we were sprinting down the long tunnel out into the Forest.

The quality of light on the Forest floor was very poor, but Draco could still see the well-worn path among the trees. However, before I could run further, he clasped my arm to stop me.

“Brooms are faster,” he grumped, extracting his shrunken Firebolt, wandlessly resizing it. I nodded in agreement, and hastily found my own broom in my pocket, mimicking his action.

“Keep to the trail, do not deviate, or we will have a problem,” I rasped as we kicked off the ground.

He nodded, his silver hair almost like a beacon in the poor light filtering from the sky between the trees.

Adrenaline kept my senses keen, but anxiety had me trying to keep up with Draco as we streaked through the trees, keeping to the path, weaving between the tree trunks. What would have taken at least twenty minutes in walking, took five when flying. The cool night air seeped down the front of my shirt, caressing the burnt skin of the inner slope of my breast, and I took a shaky breath as the pain lessened.

Severus’ words had been right…right on time.

Coming into the clearing, Draco seemed to jump from the air to land like a large cat, gracefully planting his booted feet on the ground just inside the feeble wards. I dared not attempt his landing, and angled the broom downward to slide off, my boots sliding across the unkempt, damp grass of what had once been my garden. I flashed a look at Draco and quickly shrunk my broom again, stuffing it in my pocket.

Throwing the door open, the candles lit automatically, some of the household Charms still working despite the fact that dust lay upon everything, and one of the windows in the kitchen was broken by a branch that obviously had been blow from one of the trees around the clearing. I tamped down my feelings as my eyes scanned my home.
I would need the day diary…I had kept that thought fresh in case I were able to return to the cottage. I had only hoped that I would not need it if Harry had managed to go back thirteen years before.

Draco entered the cottage, slamming the door shut behind him. I paid him little mind as I flew to the bookshelf over my writing desk, my eye scanning the spines of the book until I found a red leather book entitled ‘Year 4, 1994-1995.’ Jerking the book from the shelf, I stuffed it in my pocket and moved to the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked, exasperation clear in his voice.

Moving to the cupboards I began pulling a few cans of soup, bottles of butterbeer, a stasis-Charmed loaf of bread, which was still fit to eat, and knife from one of the drawers. Conjuring a clean towel, I wrapped the bread and knife inside. And adding more to my pocket, I knew I had at least another good meal stowed in my pocket if I needed it.

I scanned the parlour and kitchen again, trying to think of anything else that might be of use. With a sigh, I ran to the fainting couch and took an afghan Minerva had made me, wadding it up as tightly as I could and adding it to my pocket. After finding clean bandages in the bathroom, I could think of nothing more we would need.

I could tell Draco was seething, but I ignored him as he stood in the middle of the parlour, arms cross about his chest, his mouth set in a harsh line. I could not waste time…not our time in the year 2008 to explain.

“Time?”

Draco sighed, extracting Tom Riddle’s wand and casting an intricate Charm, which I did not recognise, and in glowing green numbers and letters, the exact local time floated upon the air. May 11, 2008, 3:11 am.

I had time. Moving to the island counter, I pulled the goblin-warded box from my pocket, and set it on the stone top. Draco finally moved from his spot in the parlour to stand at my side. Opening the box, I felt my heart compress. We really had to go back.

I gingerly lifted the Time-Turner from the box, examining the pins at the sides, which held the
large hourglass in the middle of the circular frame. One pin was a series of small dials, base ten numerals to a one hundred thousand super base on one side of the decimal separator, and to one-one hundredth on the other side. I narrowed my eyes…one could travel billions of years with this infernal device. Set the hourglass to turn one way, you went back, in the opposite direction, forward. One tiny clamp held the hourglass from slipping in either direction, and I knew that I had to be very careful lest I be inadvertently sent back or forward.

With a little bit of difficulty since the dials were quite tiny, I set the Time-Turner to 12.908, all the while holding my breath. When the dials glowed fainting silver and the coordinates were accepted, I took a breath…

“Are you sure that those numbers will take us where we need to go?” Draco asked softly, both of us staring down at the device in my hands.

“Merlin, I hope so.”

“I thought that this was your field, Granger,” he growled, reverting to using my surname.

I barked a sardonic laugh. “Time travel is not as specific as you might think…Malfoy.”

Draco’s eye flashed dangerously in the candlelight, but the danger was quickly squashed as I took his arm and pulled him into the middle of the parlour, pulling upon the chain of the Time-Turner to extend its reach.

Most Time-Turners were made to only allow up to two people to travel. If the regular Time-Turners were any indication, the one I held in my hand was the same. The disc had read the names Prometheus and Epimetheus, the brothers of foresight and hindsight. I wondered if that was what these Time-Turners were called. It seemed I held Prometheus…it was a fitting name.

Lifting the chain to place it over Draco’s neck, I stood closer to him, my fingers moving to the clamp.

“Wait.”

My fingers paused and slowly I glanced up at Draco’s face.
“We have to do this now?”

I swallowed, stepping closer to him so that my left side was pressed into his chest.

“We have a time limit, it seems. So, yes, we do this now. I am not exactly sure how to calculate the exact settings to follow Harry back… I only have an idea, and we do not have the time to figure that out…

Why? Are you scared?” I asked quietly.

Draco grinned. “Absolutely. You know what it’s like to time travel, I don’t.”

I sighed. “And this trip might be less than pleasant,” I mumbled. I had considered that traveling back almost over twelve years would not be comfortable. I licked my lips. I would simply have to utilise whatever healing potions from my pocket and rely on my wands to deal with whatever pain might come.

“But we have to do it, eh?” Draco whispered, his arms moving to wrap about my waist.

I nodded slowly, staring at my fingers poised at the clamp. “For our world…”

I glanced up at Draco who eye moved from my fingers to my face. He sighed and then nodded, resigned.

He held me tighter and I felt a wave of sorrow sweep through me…and released the clamp.

“…and for us…”

My assumptions about time travel reaching backward or forward in time in terms of years had been correct. It was very unpleasant to be sure. As soon as the clamp released, the hourglass began to
whirl, and soon I had my body pressed against Draco’s painfully. I had one arm about his neck while the other held the Time-Turners frame in my fingers. We could not speak, we could not breathe, but could only watch as the cottage around us flew about us.

Black blurs indicated movement, but we could not discern who or what the figures were doing. Light seemed to flash on a steady pattern, and I realised it was the rising and setting of the sun, the lighting and extinguishing of candles…years were passing.

Finally the flashing was not so bright, and I realised we had come to the time in which no one lived in the cottage. I knew we were close to the end of our journey.

However, when the hourglass stopped, our bodies were thrown to the floor as our travels came to a violent halt.

Pain was an understatement, and once again, I hated that my assumptions were correct. The pressure in my head was unbearable, and every bone seemed to crack…and I wailed with what little breath I had into Draco’s chest, rolling off him, but not so wracked with pain that I rolled upon the Time-Turner, it was our only way home again.

My lungs burned from lack of air and I gasped, my chest heaving, the burn on my breast hurting as bad as it had when the disc first burned.

Distantly, I knew that Draco had recovered before I, and he shrugged out of the Time-Turner’s chain. He did not speak, but moved to lift me into his arms while I cradled our only hope of returning home in my arms.

Kicking open the door the bedroom, his voice growled a spell and I heard a rumple of noise, and soon was laid upon a clean mattress that would be the bed I slept in more than twelve years from that point. Draco’s face swam before my eyes, and in the pale early morning light suffusing through the dusty panes of the windows to my right, I saw that his face was bloody…blood coming from his damaged eye, his nose, and ears.

“Can you hear me?” he asked softly, his hands moving to brush away the braids that had fallen into my face.

Slowly, I nodded.
“Are you alright?”

I nodded again, the pain only a slight discomfort.

Pulling the chain of the Time-Turner from around my neck, he studied my face.

“You look as bad as I feel…”

I wanted to smile, but found myself too tired. My adrenaline rush had waned.

Draco rose from the bed and pulled his wand, casting another Time Charm. I turned my eyes to the glowing green numbers and letters. June 23, 1995, 4:29 am. We had arrived two minutes before.

“We did it,” I whispered. Draco turned to me and nodded gravely.

“And now we have less than a day before the Dark Lord is reborn.”

Yes. Less than a day to strategise.

“You need to secure that thing,” Draco said softly, his grey eye moving to the Time-Turner in my hands.

I had left the goblin-warded box behind and I wanted to kick myself. I would have to find something to keep the Time-Turner safe from being broken, but it would have to wait until other pressing matters were attended to first.

Summoning my strength I tried to rise from the bed, but found that I was far too tired to move just yet. Draco frowned, and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. His wand still in his hand, he waved it over my face, and I felt blood being cleansed from my skin. He repeated the action upon his own skin and sighed.

I then dug into my bottomless pocket. My fingers found the bandages I had stuffed into the pocket only moments before, and carefully, I wrapped them about the Time-Turner. Then, finding the
afghan Minerva had crocheted, I wrapped the Time-Turner again, sure that it was cushioned sufficiently before placing it back inside the dark, vast recess of my pocket.

“You need to let me look at your chest, Hermione. I know that that thing burned you,” Draco said, pointing to my chest.

“Yes,” I said softly.

Draco unhooked my cloak, and then, helping me sit up in the bed, gently worked my top off over my head, my braids falling heavily against my back. I took the pendant from around my neck, and passed it to Draco who slipped it in my cloak pocket.

The cottage was cold even in an early June day, and I shivered as the air hit my bare skin. I still had the sleeves on my arms, but the air licked at my breasts, hardening the nipples, and causing goose pimples to form on my skin.

Draco tossed the shirt aside, smirking as my hands moved to cover my breasts.

“Shy?” he asked, his voice a deep purr.

“Cold,” I supplied, soberly.

He said nothing more as he moved from the bed and into what would be my kitchen. The sound of cupboards opening startled me, the hinges making a terrible sound. When he returned, Draco had candles in his hand, candles that I knew had not existed when I first arrived at the cottage years later. This thought perplexed me…but I stowed it away in my mind.

Charming and lighting the candles to float and burn, I began to see how dusty and disused the bedroom was…and how coated in grime the carved wardrobe was in the corner of the room. However, I could also see how badly the disc had burned me. A circle of red was burned into the inside of my left breast, the diameter the size of a Galleon on the inside of my left breast. The skin was an angry red, and swollen, but burnt scabs of a sickly yellow in the shape of a Grecian pattern.

“Hold still,” Draco whispered as he stowed Tom Riddle’s wand, and pulled Severus’ dark wood wand. Pointing the tip just a fingerbreadth from the burn, Draco whispered, and cool blue light flowed from the wand tip to be absorbed into my skin.
Immediately the itching went away, as did the swelling. It felt as if someone had pressed an ice cube to my skin, and it felt wonderful.

Another spell, this time a golden colour, cleaned the wound, and the sickly yellow scabs healed, leaving strange scars of tiny dolphins and a Grecian border of geometric curls, like waves for the dolphins to jump out of a mythical sea. A last spell of a green colour took away the lingering pain, and I sighed. The burn had not been large, but it hurt nonetheless.

Draco smirked as he slipped Severus’ wand back into the holster on his arm and flicked his eye back to my face. I wanted to smile in thanks, but my jaw quivered instead.

With a light sound, which sounded like a wistful sigh, Draco helped me reapply the dragon hide shirt and lay me back in the bed, wrapping my cloak around me. Then he lay down beside me, gathering me against him so my head rested upon his shoulder.

“We should rest a while, yeah? The sun will be up in a few hours…” he whispered before uttering a ‘Nox’ on the candles.

I agreed. There was nothing to be done until we had sufficiently recovered from such a draining trip from one point in time to the other. Draco whispered that he would watch over me until dawn…and then he wanted to know exact details about why I had pulled us both back through time.

“Severus told me.”

Draco blinked, breadcrumbs sticking to the corners of his mouth as we ate in the sunlit floor of the cottage parlour. We had slept for a few hours, and then rose to eat a breakfast of the food I had stowed in my bottomless pocket…tepid cheese soup and bread. The butterbeer was forgotten as we realised that the water running into the cottage was fit to drink.

“He has been telling me a lot of things through the months,” I said, trying not to smile at the ridiculous expression of shock on Draco’s face.
Continuing to chew his bread, Draco spoke as soon as he swallowed.

“If my life was not so insane, I would be telling you how stupidly impossible you sound, Hermione.”

Finally, I smiled.

Draco sat before me, muscular legs crossed so that he had his left hand on his left knee, his elbow on the other, a chunk of brown bread poised before his mouth in his large hand, cheesy soup soaking the grainy morsels.

“It is the spell Parvati discovered. That is the only explanation. At some point Severus cast a spell upon me, obviously before he died…which lay dormant for years. I first noticed it the night Harry attacked me. But I’m sure that I had been hearing it before then…like a subconscious thought.”

“But why would Severus cast a spell on you without your notice, and what sort of spell?”

I dipped more bread into the Conjured bowl of soup and ate before answering.

“I can only assume that he was compelled to cast the spell, but why, I cannot say. I thought for a second that it had been Albus who had told him to do it, but at this point, I doubt that.

As for the type of spell, I can only assume it was something that would allow a piece of him reside in my mind. Severus’ voice is not just some expression of my wild imagination…”

I paused, my eyes fixing upon the bowl of soup resting on the floor between us. I had not heard Severus’ voice since he screamed the title of the book he needed me to find. I could not goad Severus to speak to me, he did so in his own time. But the idea that a piece of Severus Snape resided in my head reminded me too much of Horcruxes. Perhaps he had made me a Horcrux…but he would need to somehow splinter his soul to do so. That usually meant killing, or it had meant so to Voldemort.

I did not know how many people Severus had to kill through his years as a spy, and the only person I knew for a fact he had killed was Albus. It was almost impossible to know when I could
have been made a Horcrux, or if I was a Horcrux at all.

“The night the Manor was attacked, I dreamed about him...about my parents and your parents...but I dreamt of Severus leading me away from something. When your parents found me, I had been sleepwalking through Temple Wood.”

Draco frowned.

“Severus had saved me.”

Voldemort had been connected to Harry because Harry was a Horcrux...and there had been instances that Harry could speak with Voldemort’s voice, but had Voldemort ever willed Harry to physically move?

“And last night...almost thirteen years from now, Severus woke me because he knew that Harry was about to use the Time-Turner.”

Draco’s frowned deepened. “How can that be possible?”

I sighed and took a drink of water from a Conjured cup Draco had made since we did not have dishes. I then pulled Michael Moorcock’s ‘Behold the Man’ from my cloak, passing it to Draco. He dropped his bread in the soup and took the book.

I studied his face closely as he examined the book, read the back cover, and then the inside cover and Severus’ words. Draco’s pale brow shot up as he read the words written inside, and gently he closed the book and set it on the floor.

“You realise what this means, don’t you, my dear?” he growled, raising his face so I received the sight of his scoundrel-like smirk.

Again, my core rippled with arousal.

“It means that we have done this before, and we are doing it again...”
I smirked. “Yes.”

Draco smiled, his hand reaching out to touch my cheek warmly…but slowly his smile faded.

“But we still do not know if we stopped him…Potter. Or if we successfully made it home.”

My smirk turned into a sad smile. “Yes,” I repeated.

“But we know when to go…I suppose that is the only great thing about Severus writing in the book.”

“True,” I conceded.

“He would have to pick some book about time travel, wouldn’t he?” Draco chuckled, but I could tell that it was strained.

“He always had excellent taste.”

“That he did.”

We continued eating in silence, lost in our own thoughts, which were not in the least bit cheerful.

By midday, we were both laying on the bed, having doffed our cloaks and boots, opening the bedroom window, the June heat beginning to be too uncomfortable in the stuffy cottage. Draco was reading ‘Behold the Man,’ and I had finished reading my day diary for my Fourth Year. I had managed to unseal ‘The Hanged Man’ within an hour, which had caused Draco to howl with laughter. Lucius had underestimated me again, Draco said.

I found that reading the German was challenging, but started from the beginning, finding that the earlier chapters were merely tales of various sexual conquests. The beginning was considerably tame compared to the later parts. I hardened myself as I read on, noting the spells described, the incantations and the wand movements detailed. The spells were all dark magic, but none that I had
ever studied. I skipped past the part I had read months before, and moved to the end. ‘The Hanged Man’ was not a long book, but it was loaded with information that my mind assimilated quickly. When I finished, I slammed the book shut, startling Draco.

“Would your father mind if I incinerate this book?” I asked, angrily, shifting against Draco’s side.


I was surprised at how slowly Draco read, but I also realised that the Muggle nature of the book was most likely foreign to him. Then again, Draco had hundreds of other Muggle books, and surely he was informed as to the life of Jesus Christ…

“Plenty.”

“And you remember all the spells?”

I nodded. I had an eidetic memory when it came to things I had read. I could still see every page, every word of ‘Hogwarts, a History.’

I threw the book across the room, and into the kitchen, pages flapping violently on the air, and as it flew, I drew my wand. With a blaze of red, ashes of what was ‘The Hanged Man’ floated down to the floor.

Draco was staring at me, gaping, the spell having whizzed over him without any warning from me. He laid his book on chest and began laughing.

“What? Do you do that to all poorly-written books, my dear?”

I smirked, slipping Bellatrix’s wand back into my arm holster.

After a good laugh, which lightened my mood considerably, we settled into the bed again, Draco finishing his book and I curled against his side, staring out the open window to the overgrown garden and trees. I wondered if the centaurs had noticed our presence. If so, they seemed to pay little mind.
“Not bad,” Draco yawned, closing his book and dropping it gently on the dusty floor next to the bed. “But I don’t think I can form any clear opinions about it now…maybe later…” he mumbled, closing his eye and relaxing back in the curved bed.

I smiled.

I wondered, if everything went well, would I be able to share moments like this with Draco Malfoy again? Laying in bed, or lounging on a couch, reading together…curling into each other. The light, the bed, the faint smell of his citrus and sage, and the warmth, it was all a piece of a greater happiness.

I knew that my younger self was encouraging Harry Potter to practice for the Third Task…and that she, my younger self, was happy just to be next to Harry and Ron. It was strange how time changed one’s idea of happiness.

I turned my face toward Draco and realised that he had been watching me looking out the window. Raising a pale hand to my face, he caressed my cheek with his knuckles. It was a simple motion, but it only made my happiness surge. And when he kissed me, holding my face in his hands, I smiled into his lips.

How could Draco Malfoy have been the one to make me ever feel so happy? Thirteen years before, I would have never dreamed it. I could have never imagined that he taste so wonderful, or feel so strong under my hands. He had always seemed like a pale wisp of a boy, something the wind could blow away…only his sharp tongue and cruel wit keeping his feet on the ground.

Draco Malfoy had grown into a man to be respected, feared, and loved…and I love him was what I wanted to do.

My fingers slipped between his hard belly and the waist band of his dragon hide trousers, and wrapped about the stiff length that was hardening further at my touch. The way he groaned into my kiss as I hovered over him made my core heat with liquid fire.

Clothes were tossed aside, but we kept out wands strapped to our bodies. As deep as we wanted to lose ourselves, we kept a piece of our minds set on the possibility of attack…it was how we had come to live our lives after the War, after everything we had had to do.
Draco rose to kiss my breasts as I straddled his hips, his tongue lapping at my nipples, his lips grazing over the now healed burn, his nose burying between my breasts to inhale my scent. My fingers slipped through his silken hair, down to his pale chest, still lost in trying to compare the boy to the man.

The man was stronger, his body thicker, more powerful, more substantial than the boy had ever been. The boy was a vague resemblance to the man under me. I had hated the boy…but the man…

Draco choked as ran my tongue along the underside of his cock, my short fingernails grazing the insides of his thighs. I had had little experience with ever pleasing man orally, but it did not matter. I wanted to hear his voice calling out, groaning my name, or perhaps confirming his feelings with some combination of small words. I would not say I loved him until I knew for certain that he felt the same way. If his actions had been any indication…

I took his length, my eyes moving to his face, his silver eye watching me, his mouth opened in a pant. Satisfied to see the beginnings of his undoing, I closed my eyes and began applying suction to the thick flesh between my lips. He grasped my hair, and I grinned internally, moving to try to take all of him into my throat. Breathing in through my nose, I hummed as I felt his cock twitch and his voice grind out a curse.

My centre ached as I listened to him groan, moving my head to imitate a motion more suited for another act. He whined, and finally he moaned my name.

Draco took the upper hand when he rolled me on the bed, ravenously kissing my face, plundering my mouth with his tongue. And when he slipped inside me, I was the one to call out his name.

Pulling me to him, I found that I was sitting on his thighs, he kneeling in the centre of the bed, arms curled about me, his silver eye burning into my own eyes…muscles pumping as he thrust up into my body. His body throbbed with power, and I held to his neck, eyes moving over the way his pectoral muscles rippled under his chest holster, gazing down between our bodies to watch in fascination as his thick cock slid in and out, heady, thick juices trailing between us.

He muttered that I should touch myself, his hands moving to grasp my hips, slamming me down harder. With one hand firm about his neck, I did as I was told…and came with just a light touch.

Draco gritted his teeth, examining my face as all sense of time and meaning slipped away. My head fell forward, but Draco continued moving, twisting us so that I straddled him again, his chest heaving under his holster, sweat making his skin glitter like quicksilver.
“Move…my dear…” he panted, his thick arms thrown back, Severus’ wand poking out of the holster on his right forearm, his hands behind his head.

I nodded, and began swiveling my hips, faster…and faster.

His hands found my breasts, grasping them roughly, but not painfully. I whimpered as his left hand trailed down my body to my core, a finger tickling toward my clit, and when he found it, I squealed as my pussy clamped down around him.

Draco hissed, but still let his finger circle about the nubbin of nerves and flesh. I was no longer swiveling my hips, but forcing them down cruelly so that Draco’s cock brushed against my womb, and the pale hair around his organ was matted down with sticky essences.

I cursed as he pinched my once ruined nipple, and closed my eyes, my upper body feeling suddenly very light…and falling.

“I’ve got you, luv…” he whispered as he pulled me down, wrapping his muscle bound arms around my much smaller body.

“Draco…” I gasped, my cheek pressed against his shoulder.

“Hang on,” he whispered as I felt him shift, and suddenly he was thrusting harder and faster than ever.

I whimpered and clutched at his shoulders. I could not take much more, and I fell over a precipice again, down into the oblivion of climax. Draco growled, fighting against my clenched body to finish, and with a throaty roar he filled me, my name on his lips.

And then he said it…like a manic prayer.

“Love you…gods, I love you, Hermione…only you…”
My hips jerked at his words ripping a weak cry from his lips. I held to him with my hands and my core.

Proof. Undeniable proof. And my heart felt as if it were about to burst. I kissed his neck, his cheeks, already scruffy after a day without shaving. He returned my attentions, dominating my senses and my mouth, rolling us over again on the bed, still firmly lodged inside me. His hands sought to touch every bit of my face before slipping between our warm, sweaty bodies to brush my clit.

I moaned as he pulled out of my body, quickly missing the fullness I had felt and the heat of his presence inside me. His tongue traced down the midline of my body, and I watched him slide down the bed through my lashes, the late June daylight streaming in through the western facing bedroom window…making his skin glow.

My back arched and Draco mouth closed over my mound, the tip of his tongue lightly flicking my nubbin, sending electric shocks of my spine and through my limbs. Another swipe of the tip of his tongue forced a cry, and Draco rose up, grinning at me like a mischievous boy.

Crawling up my body, he lay on my right side, again gathering me against his warm body. Kissing the side of my face, he wrapped his arms about me. Again, I was struck at the desperate grip he had on my body, and the manner in which he curled about me. In his arms I felt so small, so safe, so beautiful… And for a while, I again forgot our situation, and that we were not in our time.
The morning of June 24, 1995, Draco woke me with a hiss, pulling away sharply to grasp his left forearm. We had slept through the night as if we had not slept for years. I could only deduce that the trauma of such a long travel through time had caused us to sleep so soundly. However, as Draco sat up in the bed, still nude for the day before, he gritted his teeth and released a curse.

The Dark Mark was black on his skin, and I gasped as the snake seemed to slither sluggishly.

“Why now?” he gasped as I rose from the bed and began dressing.

I shook my head, my braids flying. “I cannot say, Draco—could He know that you are connected again through the Mark?”

Draco winced as he began to manage the pain. “I don’t think so, it never worked that way before.

Father said that just before the Dark Lord was reborn, the Mark stung, but He did not know who was left among the Death Eaters, not for certain, not until after the night in the cemetery.”

I frowned, and passed Draco his trousers as he stood from the bed. I allowed him to dress while I drew my wand and cast cleansing Charms on both of us.

“Time?” I asked softly, after Draco donned his jerkin.

His face still strained, he cast the Charm. It was 11 am.

At noon, Draco called to me from the parlour, calling my name. I had been in the water closet, washing my face and eyes of sleep. I moved to the door, and peeked into the parlour to see Draco kneeling before the empty hearth, his head looking up into the flue, his wand lit to peer into the dark.
“Have you seen this?” he asked, extracting himself and turning to look at me with a strange grin on his lips.

I frowned, moving to kneel next to Draco as he grasped my hand and pulled me forward so that we were both nearly sticking our heads into the soot coated flue. Lifting the lit yew wand high, he used it to point to a particularly large, smooth stone. I could tell that Draco had brushed some of the soot away.

Carved into the stone were Greek letters reading ‘Δράκων.’ I mumbled the phonetic Greek to myself as Draco pulled me back into the parlour.

“You could not see it until you were sitting just at the hearth, looking up. I was just thinking about that night Potter attacked you, and this fireplace—and then I saw it,” he grumbled, canceling the charm on his wand and slipped it back into his chest holster.

“I have never seen it before,” I whispered, my eyes focusing distantly on the soot smeared over Draco’s hands.

“You can read Greek, can’t you?”

I nodded. Yes, I could.

“What do you think it means?” he asked softly.

I could not answer, my mind whirling.

“It is too odd to be a mere coincidence,” he continued.

I agreed. The only explanation seemed so implausible, ridiculous even.

‘Δράκων’ was Draco—literally ‘Drakon’ in Greek. The name of an ancient Greek lawgiver by whom the world ‘draconian’ had been derived. And, obviously, it was name of the man who knelt next to me.
“Mysteries upon mysteries,” I mumbled.

And no more was said on the matter. Draco too befuddled, and I too overwhelmed with more immediate matters to ponder.

By two pm, the pain had lessened in Draco’s arm, and once again we sat in the parlour floor, eating. I had gone to my day diary again, reading back through what I had written in my Fourth Year.

I paused at my entry for March 6, 1995 and scowled. It had been the day of a Hogsmeade visit.

“I’m really a fool, Draco,” I muttered, glancing up to Draco who was finishing one of the sandwiches I had packed in a basket with a stasis Charm.

“You say that so often, my dear,” he mumbled, his mouth full.

I quirked my lips, noting that he had called me ‘my dear’ quite often.

He sighed, chewing the last of his sandwich, “Why are you a fool?”

I showed him the entry for March 6th.

“One place your Aurors did not look.”

Draco’s eye widened for a moment, and then he smirked. I frowned deeper.

“Sirius used the cave, a cave that is outside the enchantments of either Hogwarts or Hogsmeade. A perfect place to hide.”

Draco nodded. “He cannot be there now. Sirius Black would see him.”
I nodded, but added. “Sirius did not stay in the cave all spring. He had Grimmauld Place. But to be honest, before the Third Task, Sirius had to be close by. He was in the Hospital wing after Harry returned from the cemetery.”

I hated myself for not remembering that day, or the cave. Sirius had used it from March, and intermittently during the rest of the school year. Harry could not risk being seen by anyone, not yet, not until later in the day and in the cemetery at Little Hangleton. If Sirius were to see Harry. I shook my head. Needless to say, Sirius would seriously confuse Harry’s plans.

“Oh, if we could go back right now, back to the day he attacked us outside Hogsmeade, we could stop him,” Draco sighed, stretching his legs so that his dragon hide clad limbs lay on either side of me.

“Too late now.”

I stared at Draco’s boots, thinking, and then I remembered something.

“The other night, when we had dinner with your parents, you mentioned something…” I began, my voice unsure.

Draco nodded, a bottle of butterbeer poised at his lips.

“About a man who disappeared around the same time Harry did—before you arrested Dennis Creevey?”

“Aidoneus. He was a relatively new W.A.T.C.H. member. Creevey mentioned during questioning that Aidoneus was close to Potter.”

I frowned. “Close, how?”

He shrugged before taking a drink. “Uncertain. Creevey’s response to Veritaserum was limited. The bastard purposely built up a tolerance to the stuff.”
I sighed. There was something bothering me, an intuition, perhaps, I could not tell for certain. The fact that the name Aidoneus literally meant ‘unseen one’ was almost slap in the face as far as clues went; I almost wanted to laugh.

Shoving my unease down, I studied my day diary closer. It was a dull diary with very few personal thoughts, but it did contain detailed observations of the events of the day, the weather and the phases of the moon. What few personal remarks were on the grades I received in classes—mostly complaints as to Severus’ grading method.

Severus, his voice had been silent, and it was disconcerting me. I knew that within a few hours I would be seeing him…but I wondered why exactly.

Why did I need to expose myself and possibly create a paradox? Obviously, I had, Severus had written ‘June 24th 1995, 7:15 pm, contact.’ I knew I had to have told him about the specific times and dates so that he could write them in the cover of ‘Behold the Man.’ He also knew that I needed to convince him that I was somehow in his confidence, speaking words that had a significance, words that no one besides himself and possibly Albus knew in June of 1995. Lily, ‘Tuney, whom I knew to be Petunia Dursley; Spinner’s End, Severus’ home; 1969, the year he had met Lily Evans; and again, with his last words: ‘Half-blood Prince.’

It seemed it would take over an hour to convince him of something as he had written ‘8:45 pm, the task’ before the keywords.

Why did I need Severus?

‘The task’ obviously meant stopping Harry in the cemetery, which meant Apparating to Little Hangleton—and then I realised…

“You have never been to Little Hangleton, have you?”

Draco blinked. “Of course not. I never had to go, the Aurors and Charlie searched the place. I was more concerned with Creevey and Godric’s Hollow.”

I bit my lower lip. “And unless your Mark burns for summons, you would not be able to go to the cemetery with the rest of the Death Eaters?”
Draco shrugged, grabbing another sandwich from the enlarged basket. “I doubt it. Father said that unless the spell of summons came through his Mark, it was very difficult to Apparate anywhere near the Dark Lord. The old bastard was paranoid that one of his own would try to ‘off’ him.”

I bit my lip harder. Damn. That was why we needed Severus. Severus could get us to Little Hangleton.

I flipped to June 24 in my diary, then to the 25th—and there, written in my own hand was the comment Harry had made about Severus.

‘Dumbledore sent Snape off to do a task. Snape is a spy for the Order of the Phoenix.’

This had happened the night Voldemort was reborn, but I recorded it later since Harry did not tell Ron and I what had happened until later. I suddenly wondered what the task had been.

Draco and I sat on the floor for a long while, in silence. I forced myself to eat, but already, my stomach was twisting in anxiety. I judged the time by the way the light streamed into the parlour, and wished in my soul that sunset would never come.

“We have to time it perfectly, we cannot risk Voldemort or the Death Eaters to see us when we get to the cemetery.”

Draco sighed. We had finally begun talking about contingencies.

“You have the Cloak?” he asked, scratching at the silvery stubble on his jaw.

I smirked, never having once seen Draco Malfoy with any hint of facial hair. “I do. But only one of us can use it.”

He nodded, “It should be you. I can hide by other means, if I must.”

I did not question his words, and continued on.
“Voldemort and the others must be urged to leave as soon as Harry Portkeys back to Hogwarts with Cedric’s body. Harry will be laying in wait until his past self leaves.”

Draco began placing the left over food back in the basket, but said, “I wonder whose wand Potter has now?”

I paused. I had not considered that Harry would need another wand after I had taken the Elder wand and his old wand had been destroyed in the Fiendfyre. Surely one of the W.A.T.C.H. members would have procured a wand for the most wanted man of 2008? Ever since Ollivander had died in 2002, wands were not as easy to obtain, at least, not wands of Ollivander’s perfection.

Conversation moved on as the day’s light began to change.

“We will have to take Harry back with us…I just hope that when we confront him that he has the other Time-Turner.”

“Because they only can allow two?”

I nodded, forgetting that I had told Draco about the Time-Turners earlier that morning.

“We cannot allow his…body…to be found in this time. Even a body would seriously complicate things,” I muttered.

“And if one of us is killed, what do we do?” Draco asked, mixing seriousness with a smirk.

I pressed my lips together between my teeth. Could one shrink a body?

“Burn the body. We have to take Harry’s body back intact so the Aurors can verify that he is no longer a threat.”

Draco turned his eye away from me, and slowly rose, casting a stasis Charm on the basket and shrinking it again.
“There cannot be a trace that we were here, Draco. Not a trace.”

Draco walked into the kitchen, and I heard him slam a fist into the stone countertop of the island. I twisted my body to gaze back at him.

“If I am killed you will have to burn my body, Draco, there is not other way around it. You must Vanish the ashes as well. If you are…” I trailed, taking a shaking breath. “If you are killed, I will have to do the same.”

Draco whirled around to look at me, his teeth clenched, his silver eye flashing. He stalked towards me, falling to his knees, and grasped my face between his hands.

“Neither of us will be killed, Granger, do you understand me?” he hissed through his teeth, his breath hot on my face.

My chin quivered, and my eyes watered. “We have to consider all the possibilities…”

“Consider, yes, but it will not happen!”

Tears fell from my eyes as Draco pulled me into a tight embrace, and I could feel how his body quivered with suppress anger, and suppressed fear. It was comforting to a degree that Draco Malfoy was also feeling as I did, as if we were somehow being punished by the Fates.

But no matter how I considered my life as unfair, the only bright point was how I felt for the man who held me. I knew that it would take a long while to believe that the man I loved was Draco Malfoy, but I knew, deep down, he was the man I was meant to love, the man my mother always called ‘the one.’ I could not explain why I knew him to be ‘the one,’ I simply did. I supposed that was how it was, how it always had been when a woman found happiness with a man. I was not so naïve to think that that happiness would last forever, but I hoped it would last for far longer than I could foresee.

Time had not changed the deep dungeon passages. So deep in the earth and rock, only geologic time would ever shift the way the rock patterned the floor, or shift the puddles of water dripping
from tiny stalactites dangling from the ceiling. In the dark, Draco and I moved, our cloaks and our
dark clothes swathing us in the blackness. Wending our way up from the stone troll guarded
passage, we moved like shadows, making no noise.

The castle was full of life high above our heads, and I could not help but have my chin quiver—in
thirteen years, the corridors would be devoid of life and human warmth. Draco squeezed my hand
as we finally entered the corridor with the concealed door into Severus Snape’s chambers.

Torches lit the corridor, but we continued, Draco drawing his yew wand and casting a detection
Charm, revealing that there was no one in the dungeons.

It was 7:00 pm.

Harry had entered the maze for the Third Task at 7:15 pm.

Draco moved his wand to dispel the concealments on the door, and then quickly dismantled the
wards. I wondered if the wards had been removed in our time for I had never noticed them the one
time I had passed through the door.

Only our cloaks whispered as we passed inside, noting that the candles were not lit and the
fireplace cold. I did not push back my hood as I moved toward the gramophone, turning to face the
doors, glancing at the little clock on the shelf.

7:01 pm.

Draco, whose hood also obscured his pale hair and face, replaced the wards and stowed his wand.
Moving to my side we glanced out the enchanted window and over the Lake.

“We wait,” he whispered.

“We wait…”

If I had not known, I would have led myself to believe that Draco and I had not travelled through
time by the looks of the parlour. Almost nothing had changed between the years. The only
difference was a framed picture on the mantle, moving sluggishly. I studied it in the dim light and
realised I was looking at a black and white photograph of Eileen Prince, the same photograph that I
had found of her when she was captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team. I wondered what had
happened to the photograph thirteen years later.

As I looked about the shelves and to the table and chairs in the middle of the room, I realised that
no one besides Severus and possibly Albus had set foot in the rooms. My eyes moved to where I
had pulled ‘Behold the Man’ from the shelves, and I could tell that either Severus or someone later
in time had changed the arrangement of the books. Next to ‘Behold the Man’ were Wizarding
treatises on time travel, and Stephen Hawking’s ‘A Brief History of Time,’ along with other
Muggle fiction books. ‘The Time Machine’ rested next to ‘Slaughterhouse-Five.’

I bit my lip as my eyes landed upon the face of the clock again.

7:14 pm.

Harry and Cedric would have entered the maze, and Severus would be entering the door across the
room.

“I’m scared, Draco,” I whispered, my hand finding his.

Draco smiled and pulled me close, bending his knees to place a kiss on my forehead under my
hood.

“Don’t be—not yet.”

When the wards fell upon the door, Draco pulled me into the corner of the room, his back pressed
against the shelves, pulling his wand, and blinking at it—and we both realised that Severus would
know Tom Riddle’s yew wand, and possibly attack us before we could speak.

Draco lowered his arm, obscuring his wand in his cloak while I slipped the Elder Wand into my
palm, but hid it.

The door opened, and immediately upon Severus Snape’s arrival the fireplace roared and the lamp
over the table lit. My breathing was strained as a black clad figure with swirling robes entered,
closing the door behind him. He did not seem to notice the two dark figures in the corner of the
parlour at first for he was clutching his forearm. He did not turn to us, but instead stalked into the bathroom, the wall sconces lighting automatically.

In the light, I could see Severus’ face, sallow skinned, and his raven wing black hair, lank about his severe face. His lip was curled, out of discomfort. We watched as he dug through the wall cabinet, and withdrew a phial, pulling the cork out with his yellowed, crooked teeth, and spitting it into the sink. As he threw the potion back, I managed to contain my emotions, and watch as his Adam’s apple bobbed to swallow.

It was surely a pain-reducing potion, for Severus’ head lowered; I could tell that relief softened his features. His black eyes closed for a moment as he leaned his fists to the counter, letting his phial clatter into the bowl of the sink.

I knew he had only come into his chambers during the wait of the Third Task to find a potion to relieve the pain of the Mark. Draco had managed to push his pain aside hours before, a mental feat that I knew I could never perform.

Finally, Severus turned, ready to march back out of his rooms and rejoin the throng of people on the grounds. However, as he left the bathroom, he drew his wand and cast a Stunner in our direction.

I did not even blink as Draco silently cast a shield charm, absorbing the Stunner until both spells fizzled to nothing.

“Identify yourselves!” Severus snarled, and my heart gave a lurch.

I had missed that face, acerbic and cruel.

Draco’s hand squeezed mine one last time before I stepped forward into the light.

Severus’ body stiffened as I lifted my hands, the Elder Wand curled in my thumb, and pushed my hood back to fall to my shoulders. I could feel half-formed tears in my eyes, but I did not weep. My face was otherwise emotionless as I stared at Severus Snape, and he stared back. I felt a nudge in my mind, but nothing more. The embedded spell in the seat of my brain kept any attempts at Legilimency from penetrating my mind, and when the living Severus’ mouth moved in anger, I finally let myself smile.
“Who are you?” he hissed, raising his wand to point at my face.

Draco moved like a ghost to stand just behind me, waiting for another hex. Severus, at the sight of Draco’s tall and shadowed form, hesitated. Surely Draco seemed like some Dementor-like creature in his black cloak, his pale face hidden in deep shadow.

“We are not here to harm you, Severus,” I said softly, still smiling, a warm smile since I was confronted with the physical manifestation of the man I considered a friend.

“That is irrelevant, miss. Who are you? I will not ask again!” Severus hissed, his onyx eyes glittering out of anger.

I quirked my lips as I glanced to the clock again.

7:18 pm.

“There is not much time, Severus, so listen very closely, and do not attempt to hex me or my protector will no doubt make you wish you had listened to my words.”

Although my voice was light, the weight of warning was not lost on Severus. He lowered his wand to a resting position at his hip, standing to his full height to gaze down his long nose at me.

I nodded once. “You will not believe me, Severus, but I will prove to you that everything I say is the truth, and that what will be said will not leave this room. There is no time to perform a Vow, so we will have to trust each other.”

Severus’ eyes told me that his trust was not easily bought by a person who did not identify themselves, and I knew that his suspicion was only natural.

“Voldemort,” Severus winced, “will be reborn tonight. This must happen. However, a series of events have been set in motion, which will change the course of this timeline irrevocably if we do not stop it.”

I stepped closer into the light of the lamp, and gazed at Severus.
“Do you not know who I am?”

Severus’ brow rose as his eyes scanned my face, and his mouth moved to form my name, but did not speak.

I nodded. “Thirteen years from now, Harry Potter will travel back to this night in order to kill Voldemort and all his followers. If this happens, this time line will overlap with mine—destroying it. We have followed Harry back to stop him, and we need your help.”

Severus crossed his arms before his chest, and I knew that he was not entirely convinced…of something.

“Hermione Granger, from the future, has come back to stop Harry Potter from destroying the Dark Lord and his followers?” he muttered, and then barked a laugh. “Why should I help you? I could be helping Potter!”

I sighed. “Severus, we are risking a paradox by even being in the same room with you, so I suppose I should tell you that in my time line Harry defeats Voldemort in 1998, and the world is freed of that mad man’s taint.

In my time line, Harry went mad, and for some reason decided to change everything by travelling back through time to kill Voldemort in 1995. His memories of my time line will lead him to kill every Death Eater, Death Eater’s families, those whom Voldemort used…people who are not even involved with Voldemort in 1995! Innocent people, entire families, magical creatures, Muggles, anyone connected, even by association, with Voldemort will be killed…all because Harry Potter remembered their names in my timeline!” I cried, hoping to the Fates that Severus would understand my quick explanation and the wider implications of my words.

Severus’ brow furrowed.

“You are Hermione Granger, that I can see…but who is your protector?” he snarled.

I glanced back to Draco, unsure what to say to Severus’ question. But I did not have to speak as Draco stepped forward, pushing back his hood.
Severus’ reaction was surprising. He stumbled back a step, his arms falling to his sides. The surprise at the realisation at who I was did not even compare.

“Draco?” Severus gasped.

Draco nodded. “Everything Hermione has said is true, Professor. We need your help.”

Severus’ mouth worked, but I knew that he was still not entirely convinced. I knew he believed that we were a part of some plot which had nothing to do with Harry Potter.

“Severus… You left me keywords to use. I can only assume the words were chosen because of what they mean to you. Thirteen years from now, I know their significance…but no one, not my past self or the fourteen year old Harry Potter would understand.

Lily and Petunia, ‘Tuney Evans—you knew them as a child. Harry’s mother and aunt, you met them in 1969 near your home, Spinner’s End…”

Severus’ face contorted, and once again I was staring at the tip of his wand. I could feel his anger.

“…my Half-blood Prince…we desperately need your help!” I sobbed, the tears finally spilling down my cheeks.

At the sight of my tears, it seemed Severus finally conceded the truth of the situation. I wiped my tears away hastily, and continued.

“Draco’s Mark can not lead us where we need to go, Severus.”

Severus frowned, glancing to Draco. “You were Marked?”

Draco nodded.

“What happened to your eye?”
Draco grinned. “Can’t really tell you that, Professor, we really do not have the time…”

Severus smirked, and it made my heart lurch again. And then, turning his dark eyes to me again, sighed.

“What do you need, Miss Granger?” he asked, slipping his wand into his sleeve.

It almost seemed too easy to explain to Severus that we need him to lead us to Little Hangleton. He was hesitant to agree, but when I told him that he would have time to return to Hogwarts to see Harry return—with a dead Cedric Diggory, he agreed.

“To avoid a true paradox, I can be Obliviated, but Albus would have to do it…he…”

I then revealed that I had the Elder Wand, which made Severus shudder. I realised that he knew the significance of the wand, but had kept his knowledge hidden.

“I don’t think you should have your memory modified, Severus. At some point you need to write down information so I can find it in the future,” I said, gazing at Severus from across the table. We had sat down when I told him we had approximately an hour to speak, five minutes of which would have to spent moving outside the castle and into the Forest for us to Apparate to Little Hangleton.

“What information?”

I glanced to Draco who sat on the sofa across the room.

“Times and dates.”

I then told him about the book, the title, and the exact words written inside.

Severus nodded, understanding.
“It will be done, Miss Granger.”

I went on to tell him what I could, keeping certain information to myself. Severus did not ask about his future self, and I knew that he refrained from asking, knowing that by asking could lead to a true paradox. I also wanted to tell him about the embedded spell, but that information would lead to Severus forming a conclusion that he had indeed been killed at some point in the future.

“Severus, you have helped me more than you know,” was all I could say. “And I have cherished your assistance.”

Severus’ face tightened, and he leaned back in his chair, his hands clenching on the table top. I knew that in his mind, I was still associated with my younger self, and I was not exactly a person whom he would accept praise.

“Potter,” Severus growled. “You said that he was mad. How?”

I glanced past Severus to Draco again. Draco rose from the couch to move to stand behind me, his hand on the back of my chair.

“It is not exactly known why, Professor, but we have speculated that his madness was a culmination of traumas in his youth. There are some things we cannot tell you, but needless to say, the stress of being the Boy Who Lived did not result in Harry Potter becoming a well-balanced adult.

The machinations that allowed Potter to defeat the Dark Lord in 1998 severely distorted his concept of the world around him. Dumbledore’s manipulations, the Dark Lord’s ferocious attacks on Potter’s mind made Potter into what he needed to be, the slayer of the darkest wizard of our time. In the end, however, those manipulations have proven to do more harm than good,” Draco explained in an even voice.

Draco and I had been over the cause of Harry’s madness many times—either in discussion or in our minds. And we had come to the same conclusion. Between Voldemort and Dumbledore, Harry Potter had been made a monster.

“He has become obsessed with ‘cleansing’ this timeline of Voldemort—every person, every trace. I suppose that he wants to create a world where he is freed from such heavy responsibilities. It sounds idyllic, wonderful, but in truth, this world will never be so great.
We die. All of us. We die because Harry cannot stop us from remembering Voldemort and the darkness that has already engulfed this world, even before Harry was born. But Harry cannot see this, he will not see it,” I whispered, feeling Draco’s hand against my shoulder blades.

Severus frowned. “And if he succeeds in slaying the Dark Lord, he effectively signs the death warrant for us all.”

I nodded. “Just because he kills one does not mean he will spare all.”

Severus sighed. “And you did not take this up with Albus because he is instrumental to Potter’s killing the Dark Lord?”

“Yes,” I gritted out. “Albus’ arrogance is one of the causes why our world is…”

“Fucked,” Draco supplied.

Severus barked a laugh, and I felt myself smiling slightly.

“Do not be mistaken, Severus, Albus is a good man, but he is flawed, shortsighted. But aren’t we all? I just know that in thirteen years the world is slowly recovering from what Voldemort has done. It is not a perfect world, and things have been difficult, but it is a far better alternative than what Harry has in store for us if we do not stop him.”

I glanced at the clock, 8:08 pm.

“We don’t have much time, Severus, and we need to get to the cemetery before Harry and Cedric arrive. He will be summoning you at 9:00 pm, approximately. Not until He summons you will you be able to go, and when you do, we cannot be seen, He cannot know you are there.”

Severus sighed. “I was not to go at all, Miss Granger.”

I licked my lips. “Yes, I know. That is why we cannot be seen.”
Severus frowned, his face twisting horribly. I rose a hand to stop him from speaking, and said, “We know a lot of things, Severus, and believe me when I say that our allegiances are our own. We serve no master. For us, that time has passed.”

Severus relaxed, but moved to cross his arms before his chest. “You know where He is?”

“Yes, and that, with the help of Peter Pettigrew, He will be restored. He needs Harry, the Harry of 1995 to achieve this.”

“Then why won’t the future Potter kill both Wormtail and Dark Lord before He can be reborn?”

Draco moved his hand to my squeeze my shoulder. I watched Severus’ eyes take in this familiar motion, but he said nothing, only tightened his lips disdainfully.

“Potter wants to reveal himself to the Dark Lord and his followers before he kills them. His past self will Portkey back to Hogwarts, telling everyone that the Dark Lord had returned…”

I interrupted, feeling that Draco was not sure how to explain.

“When the reformed Order of the Phoenix goes to Little Hangleton to investigate, instead of finding an empty cemetery and small clues verifying that Voldemort was back, they will actually find the bodies of all assembled tonight. Voldemort dead, Pettigrew dead…”

“And my father,” Draco finished, clenching his teeth.

“The Harry of 1995 will be made a hero, he would not be able to explain how Voldemort was killed and everyone will assume that he had, at last, destroyed the Dark Lord. Meanwhile, the Harry of 2008 will systematically begin killing others. Whether he does this secretly or not, one can only guess. But I know that this is how it will start…” I trailed with a sigh.

Severus’ dark eyes glittered in the lamp light and his thin lips turned upward. “You have been trying to understand a mad man, Miss Granger?”
I smirked. “Every time we confronted him in 2008, we could not really sit down for tea, Severus.”

Severus returned the smirk. “You have changed, Miss Granger, and I, for one, am happy that time has not led you to become an eternal lackey to Potter and Weasley.”

I snorted a laugh, but did not know whether to be flattered or offended. It made no difference, though, I was simply happy that Severus Snape was smiling at me.

“I assume that is what happened to your eye, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco said nothing, but glanced down to me.

“We both have been attacked by Harry, Severus, and both of us came very close to death. But do not be mistaken, we have not followed Harry back because we want some revenge, we are here to…”

“…to save the world, yes, Miss Granger, I have deduced that much.”

Draco stifled a chuckle and I rolled my eyes. The dynamic between the three of us was what it would have been like if Draco could hear Severus’ voice in my head. I liked the dynamic…all of us witty and sharp-tongued. If times were different, I was sure we would have a wonderful time talking over dinner or tea. Alas, time was running out.

We then left his chambers, leading Severus down deeper into the castle. When we were finally outside into the Forest, Severus was laughing that had he known about the passage out, he would have used it long before.

“You know about it now,” Draco chuckled.

Draco had shown Severus his Mark before he left the parlour. Severus grimaced at the sight of it, and then made a crude comment to Draco about his thoughtlessness.

“I was sixteen, Severus; most sixteen year olds cannot think beyond themselves,” Draco had countered.
We stood in the Forest and I closed my eyes, taking in the wind, trying to calm my nerves. Severus was rolling back his left sleeve and in the fading light, I could see the irritated skin over his Mark. Draco’s burned, but not like Severus’.

“Will He know?” Draco asked Severus, and I knew that Draco had meant us—if Voldemort would know if Severus brought two companions…

“No.”

I licked my lips as I glanced to Draco. It was nearly time.

“Aurors descending, it might convince Him to stay, Miss Granger, fight to prove that he was back…” Severus trailed.

I laid a cool hand upon Severus’ arm and smiled. Severus’ face flushed a strange shade of pink and he turned his eyes away.

“You can convince him to leave, Severus,” I whispered.

Draco smirked and laid his hand over mine.

“We have to trust you, Professor. And just so you know, I trusted you always.”

Severus nodded.

“As did I,” I whispered and again Severus’ face flushed. “Time?” I asked Draco who drew Tom’s wand and cast the Charm.

8:57 pm.

Severus opened mouth, doubtless to ask about Draco’s wand.
“It is a long and complicated story, Severus,” I supplied.

Severus smirked again, and I wondered what he face looked like when he actually smiled.

“Be on your guard, Severus. We have to assume that our Harry, the Harry from our time is already at the graveyard. Remember, you must remain hidden until after the younger Harry Portkeys away…”

Severus scowled. “I have a better idea, Miss Granger, if you do not mind.”

I frowned, but nodded slowly. “You have to be back in the stands by the time Harry returns to Hogwarts, and you must…”

“Appear as if I am surprised. Yes, Miss Granger. I have been worked sub rosa longer than you were—no, not longer as you have been alive, but for a long time,” Severus sighed, then added, “I appreciate your concern, Miss…Hermione, but I have done far more dangerous things than this…”

I took a shaky breath and nodded, grasping Severus’ arm tighter. In turn, Draco’s hand moved to grasp Severus’ wrist and with one last look at each other, we waited for the Mark to burn in summons.
The world expanded around us, and I saw that we stood on the very edge of a dark cemetery. In the distance, I could see a small chapel with a yew tree in the yard—very near the glow of fire and wand tips among the stones.

The first thing the three of us did, realising where we were was to draw our wands, Disillusion ourselves, and kneel close to the ground. The Dark Mark floated high in the sky, and distantly I could hear Harry’s muffled cries, and Voldemort’s voice.

“Go, Severus, be safe!” I whispered desperately, my hand finding Draco’s.

I could not tell if Severus had Apparated away, but I could no longer feel his physical presence at my side. Instead, Draco and I moved to kneel behind a large gravestone, scanning the cemetery. We could see a reborn Voldemort in the centre of the yard…and dark cloaked figures standing in a circle around him. We could not discern one Death Eater from the other, and I knew Draco was trying to see which was his father.

Tied to a particularly ornate marker, was a fourteen year old Harry Potter, and lying in the distance was Cedric Diggory, and beyond him, the Tri-Wizard Cup.

Everything was in place, just as Harry had described it to my younger self. However, what I needed to find was the older Harry hiding, somewhere.

“The Cloak, my dear…” Draco whispered.

“Do you see him?” I whispered back.

“No.”

With a Disillusioned hand, I pulled out Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, draped it over myself and my other cloak, and was soon completely obscured from sight.
“I’ll move up toward the chapel. You move a bit closer to the Dark Lord. Wands out—both of them,” Draco hissed.

He could not see me nod, or that I already was pulling my wands from my holster, but I could just see him, barely.

“Draco?” I whispered.

“What?”

I pulled the hood of the cloak up and kissed him, awkwardly, missing his mouth and kissing his cheek. I then felt his hands on my face, and we kissed properly, Draco’s tongue tasting the inside of my mouth before quickly pulling away.

“Go. Now!” he hissed.

Suddenly, he was gone, and I could no longer see or hear him. I was alone, and I shivered as I heard Voldemort’s cruel voice drifting between the stones. Steeling my resolve, I moved. Under the Cloak, I did not need to crouch, but instead lightly stepped around the stones, dancing over the uneven ground. I stopped short of the circle of Death Eaters, kneeling behind an above ground stone sarcophagus, able to watch the circle of people from between the stone box and the ground as it was lifted up on stone feet.

“Crucio!”

Voldemort hissed the Unforgivable, his yew wand pointing to the Death Eater from the left of where I hid. Immediately, one of the black clad figures began to writhe on the ground. I could see Harry’s wide eyes, his arms working against the bonds that held him to Tom Riddle’s grave.

“Get up, Avery…”

I had stopped listening to Voldemort’s high, thin, and cruel voice, and instead began scanning the graveyard. Surely, Harry was hiding somewhere nearby, watching as I was, the events that we had both considered the past.
Besides the many stones, the yew tree, and the chapel, there were not many places one could hide oneself completely. I had the Invisibility Cloak, and I was the only one completely hidden from view. I then scanned the graveyard for Draco, focusing upon the chapel and the yew tree, the place he said he would go, but saw no one.

“Master, we crave to know…we beg you to tell us…”

It was Lucius’ voice, louder than before, and I realised that it was Lucius who stood nearest to me.

He voice was so placating, so strange. It was the voice he used when addressing Voldemort, and not the voice I had come to know thirteen years later.

I listened to Voldemort’s explanation as to why he had lost the night he tried to kill the babe Harry Potter. I listened to his explanation as to how he came to be reborn, the plot with Crouch, Jr., and the death of Bertha Jorkins. To me, it was almost ancient history, but to the Death Eaters, and the younger Harry tied to the stone, it was shocking.

“Crucio!”

I nearly cried out as I watched Harry’s young body writhe against the stone marking the grave of Tom Riddle, the Muggle father of the man called Voldemort. My heart was breaking as I watched his beautiful emerald eyes roll back in his head, but I could do nothing. I could not risk being seen, or casting a spell to stop Voldemort’s cruel spell. The only satisfactions I could imagine were the day the horrible man would be destroyed—and that I knew many more spells more terrible than the Cruciatius.

Finally, it was over, and Voldemort instructed Wormtail to cut Harry’s bonds. I knew what was to happen next, and I bit my lip. Priori Incantatem.

I again turned my attention away from the circle, and began searching the graveyard again. I saw no one.

Voldemort spoke, and I wondered if the old bastard simply liked hearing his own voice. Harry had his wand again, and was stumbling, the Death Eaters circling about like a pack of hungry wolves. I finally moved from my spot and glided around the circle so that I was across from the yew tree and Cedric’s body.
“Avada Kedavra!”

“Expelliarmus!”

I gasped as light filtered the night sky, and Harry and Voldemort’s bodies rose into the air, floating past the yew tree and into the yard below the chapel. The Death Eaters clamoured to follow, and I moved again, passing the grave of Voldemort’s father, pausing next to Cedric Diggory’s body. I grimaced as I studied his blank, young face.

Phoenix song alighted the air, and I turned away, moving to stand just where Voldemort had been earlier. Bursts of light came from the golden thread between their wands, and I remembered what Harry had told Ron and I about seeing Cedric, the old caretaker, Bertha Jorkins, and his parents, but I could not see anything but spheres of gold magic.

Then I remembered—I needed to get out of the way! Harry would run to Cedric’s body, casting hexes, Voldemort casting hexes.

Skipping to press myself behind old Tom Riddle’s stone, I panted as I heard Voldemort’s cruel and incredulous voice.

“Stun him!”

My eyes widened as the younger Harry Potter dashed toward me, but then dove behind a marble angel, rolling before coming to his feet again.

“Impedimenta!”

Death Eaters were falling, trying to catch up, and I bit my lip as I watched. Even though I knew Harry would make it to Cedric’s body and Summon the Cup, my nerves were on edge.

“Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!”
Harry stumbled to Cedric’s body just a few yards from me. I could see the sweat and blood on his face, and his frightened emerald eyes.

“ACCIO!”

The Cup flew into Harry’s outstretched hand and I whimpered as with a ‘whoosh’ Harry Potter, the Harry I had once loved, was gone.

“UGHHHH!”

Voldemort’s scream was deafening and I cowered lowered behind the grave marker.

I knew the time had come; the fourteen-year-old Harry was gone. I rose up from behind the stone and stepped back, still safe under the Cloak.

“He’s gone, my Lord!” one of the Death Eaters gasped, having recovered from Harry’s hex.

“Yes, you fool, I can see that!” Voldemort screamed, grasping his white, skull-like head.

Dark energy swirled around the man, but I did not cower, as I once would have as a girl. The man who called himself Voldemort ceased to frighten me years ago.

“Crouch will bring him back!” Voldemort hissed, more to himself than to his minions.

My body whirled as I heard a sound of twigs cracking behind me, and in the dark, I saw a body raise up from a crouch, a figure that had unruly, long hair, and luminous green eyes.

Merlin.

“My Lord!” Lucius shouted, pointing toward the chapel, and all eyes turned, even mine.
Harry Potter was behind me, though he could not see me, but it was not Harry Potter all eyes had turned to. Instead, it was a glowing shape on the top of the embankment, growing more distinct as it approached the group.

My heart lurched again, and I grasped my chest.

It was a Patronus, in the form of a doe.

My lips moved to form Severus’ name, and the pressure of dread and fear lessened. I could tell that the future Harry had paused from creeping any further forward toward Voldemort.

‘Dread Lord, I must offer apologies for not coming at your Summons. Pardon your humble servant…’

Severus’ voice drifted across the graveyard, and I knew Harry was seething behind me, only a few yards away.

‘Let me make up for my absence by informing you that Potter has returned to Hogwarts and has revealed your location to Dumbledore. Aurors will be descending upon you at any moment. I beg you, Dread Lord, please away as quickly as possible. Your loyal servant will dispatch Potter soon.’

The Patronus shifted, and Severus’ voice continued as the doe’s head bowed.

‘I pledge my everlasting faith and loyalty, my Lord.’

And with that, the spell ended, the doe dissipating into a small burst of silver magic.

It seemed Voldemort was stunned, as was his Death Eaters, and then with what seemed to be silent signal, the black-clad figures, one by one, Apparated away. Only Wormtail and Voldemort remained.

“My Lord?” Wormtail asked, still cradling his silver arm.
“Let’s away, now is not the time, Wormtail…” Voldemort hissed, and like two columns of inky, black smoke, they disappeared upon the wind.

I was a panting, tears in my eyes.

Severus had successfully convinced the group to scatter… Voldemort would doubtless call Severus to him for an explanation, and the Death Eaters would lament that they could not finally take on the Ministry.

I whirled back to see Harry, but he was no longer where he had been.

I could not breathe. What if Harry had somehow followed Voldemort?

“No! NO!”

I gasped, whirling again to see a familiar shape standing just where Voldemort had been.

“Damn you, Snape!” Harry screamed, grabbing his dirty black hair with his left, pulling at it so that chunks seem to fall loose. A dirty bandage was wrapped about the stump of his right hand, and I could see blood and yellowness on the bandages where infection had doubtless set in.

I blinked from under the cloak as Harry spun around in the same spot. He wore rags of what had once been fine clothes. And his face was scratched terribly. He certainly was dressed to play the part of a mad man. The only incongruous elements were the fine cloak over his shoulders and the cracked stone set into a ring on his left ring finger.

The Resurrection Stone.

It was as Harry was slapping his stump into his scratched scar that Draco seemed to seep into existence from the darkness, standing just past the yew tree. I opened my mouth, but said nothing, gripping my wands tighter in my hands.

“Potter!”
No! Draco could not face him alone, and not so suddenly!

Harry whirled, snarling, flicking his hand so that a hidden wand in his sleeve slipped into his left hand.

“Malfoy…”

Again, I could not breathe, but I ran as if my legs were not my own.

*This is no time to be daydreaming, Hermione*… Severus voice scolded.

I was gasping, the sound of Severus’ voice shocking me. But I ran—around Harry, around the stones until I stood on the embankment between Harry and Draco. I *had* to be the one to confront Harry.

I wrenched away the Invisibility Cloak, throwing it at the base of the yew tree, shaking my hair free, and adjusting my wands in my fingers.

“You,” he growled.

Draco stiffened at my unveiling, and began to move to stand before me, but angrily, I stretched my arms out to stop him.

“This is my duty!” I snarled.

I could not understand it, my insides were still quivering, but my voice, my body, was resolute, and I knew it was not Severus’ doing. Slowly my insides began to catch up with my exterior, and all the anger, all the grief I had felt from Harry came back.

Even in the dim light of the evening, I could see Harry’s hate etched across his twisted features. He seemed much older than a mere twenty-seven. His malice, his pain had aged him beyond his years.
I swallowed and lowered my hips, planting my feet upon the dark ground, my wands rising in a defensive position to duel. I had never, truly dueled in my life, but it seemed that my body knew how to poise itself.

“This ends now.”

Harry’s severe mouth quivered and his eyes flashed.

“Yes, Hermione, it must,” he said, and for a moment I saw lucidity pass over his features and was gone again.

Harry raised his mangled hand before me, and fell back on his left foot, his other wand raising. It was a dark wood wand, but I neither had the time to consider its construction nor did I have time to blink.

“Crucio!” he screamed.

But I had no need to vocalise as I cast a Stunning hex with the Elder Wand, the light of the spells crashing together. Then with my walnut wand in my left hand I cast a shield Charm, which combined with the Stunner, canceling the torture Curse.

My feet slid in the grass a foot or more, as did Harry’s, from the force of the spell.

Harry laughed, much as Voldemort had moments earlier and lowered his wand.

“Is it fair that you have two wands—and a protector behind you, Hermione? I only have myself and one wand…” he mocked.

“This is not supposed to be fair, Harry,” I gritted out, adjusting my body again.

“But you were always so fair-minded, Hermione. And isn’t dueling confined to the rules?” Harry shouted.
I took a cleansing breath and said, “This is not to be a duel, old friend. This is an extermination.”

Harry’s eyes widened for a moment, but I stepped forward, my dragon hide boots pounding into the ground as I cast a disarming spell with the Elder Wand.

“Protego!” Harry snarled.

The spell was easily cast aside, but I countered with the walnut wand, a banishing hex, ‘Gebannt’…one which Harry attempted to counter, but caught part of the spell and was blown back down the embankment, rolling to a stop against one of the gravestones.

I advanced quickly, but Harry kicked up to his feet, his face inhuman.

“Sectumsempra!” he screeched, but I jumped as the spell flew past me, my feet coming to the ground, sliding down the embankment.

I circled Harry, my eyes upon him as my feet moved. I came to stand at the spot where Voldemort had been reborn, my wands training on Harry as he turned to face me again. I caught sight of Draco, moving quietly around the edge of the embankment, his wands drawn, but at his sides.

“You ruined everything, Hermione…and Snape…and Malfoy…everything!” Harry muttered.

I did not reply to him as he stepped toward me, standing atop old Tom Riddle’s grave.

“I’ll try again, and again, and again, Hermione, until it is all right,” he spat.

I clenched my teeth. I would have to kill him.

“It would have to be you, wouldn’t it? With your perfect sense of right and wrong?

Tell me, Hermione, do ever dream of what the world would have been like if Voldemort had never been reborn? What the world would have been like if we could have lived without fear?”
Harry’s voice was still wracked with emotion, but no longer anger—it was pain.

“I should have gone back to the night my parents were killed, or the day Voldemort was born!”

I shook my head, “No, Harry, it would have made no difference.”

Harry’s pained face shifted once more into a bestial snarl. “No difference? No difference? It would have made all the difference to us!”

It was no use trying to reason with him, he would never see that by killing one dark wizard another would surely rise in its place. That was how Fate worked. Mankind must suffer, it was what we did best. Without suffering, we would never be able to see ahead or advance.

“It is over, Harry…” I whispered.

I moved to cast—cast a spell from ‘The Hanged Man.’ A severing curse, ‘Trenne,’ aimed at Harry’s neck. I was above casting Unforgivables.

“Erebus!” Harry screamed, and I blinked in middle of casting.

Erebus was not a spell.

Suddenly a dark blur appeared before Harry, like a Patronus of blackness, forming into the shape of a human figure.

Draco appeared at my side as I let my focus shift from the spell to the figure standing before Harry. I could see that the figure was human, but I could not see its face. It was something like a Dementor and fear seeped into my heart.

“Did you think I would come here alone, Hermione? You have your Malfoy—I have Erebus,” he cackled terribly.
I blinked at the figure that stood like a sentinel before Harry. Harry moved to stand at the figure’s side, and I noticed that the black figure was slightly taller, its frame slightly larger. I narrowed my eyes at the figure as slowly an arm raised with a gloved hand, a finger pointing at me, and not a wand.

I felt Draco’s wand tip poke sharply into my back and I winced.

With great bravado, I moved, not bothering to think about the figure—mental shouting, ‘Gebannt!’ and banishing the blot of darkness into the air. I did not hesitate, did not bother to see the figure being thrown through the air and out of sight. Instead, I advanced on Harry, whose eyes were wide with fear, back stepping up the embankment toward the yew tree.

“Zerfleische!”

I gasped as a spell just missed my face, but cut my cheek under my right eye, the wound so deep that it went to the bone. Blood ran down my face, but I squashed my reaction to the pain. It had been a ‘maiming’ hex from ‘The Hanged Man.’ The German word was literally translated as ‘tear to pieces,’ and it was a spell of a high degree of bodily harm.

I continued moving, Harry back stepping until he bumped into the trunk of the yew tree.

I raised my wands, preparing to cast the severing curse. I poured all my pain and grief into the wand motion, all my hate. The frightened man had once been my friend, the best friend I had ever had. My thoughts raced back to the boy I had seen tied to the gravestone, and back to the man before me. They were completely different people to me.

It pained me to know that Harry—the older Harry had gone mad, when he could have been so happy. I could not entirely blame Voldemort or Albus; it had been Harry who had decided to immerse himself in the past.

My lips moved to incant the spell silently, the spell that would take Harry’s head from his body and end the nightmare.

“Erstick!”

I screamed—but the spell had not been mine.
I blinked. Time seemed to nearly stop as I watched a red jet of light burst from Harry’s wand and float past me, my body twisting to dodge the curse. I exhaled as I turned, my eyes following the jet of magic. Behind me, Draco’s mouth opened in a yell of warning, but no sound came. He had begun to move to dodge, Severus’ wand in the middle of casting a counter Charm. Instead, the jet of red struck him in the chest and I could see the breath being stolen from his lungs, visible breathe sucked out into the night air.

Draco’s body flew backward, his cloak flapping on the air, his long silver hair flying free, and his face pale with shock. His body arched high, and in the slow progression of time, I watched in horror when he landed, his head smashing into the statue of a marble angel, shattering the stone wings before he hit the ground, disturbing the grass and dust. His silver eye was open wide, his mouth open slightly, and he did not move.

“NO!” I screamed, and time reoriented itself.

Harry was cackling, his stub of a right hand against his belly as he bent over laughing.

I whirled back to face Harry, breathing through flaring nostrils, my wands up to attack.

“Harry Potter!” I screamed, and before Harry could straighten to gaze back at me—he was hanging upside down.

Levicorpus!

Gefesselt!

Harry’s laughs had turned to bestial screams as he found himself hanging by one leg from the branches of the yew tree, his arms bound behind his back. His wand had fallen to the ground below and his hair hanged in matted tangles. Also hanging, from his neck, was the Time-Turner.

“Hermione!” he wailed, struggling to free himself and failing miserably as the Conjured ropes dug
into his leg and arms.

With Harry incapacitated, I turned to move to Draco, my eyes burning.

“Hermione!”

I paid Harry no mind as I slid down the embankment, stumbling to run to Draco’s side.

“No…”

I collided with the black clad figure of the one Harry had called Erebus, falling back to land on my ass. The voice was otherworldly, and an icy hand of fear gripped my heart.

No, Miss Granger, you must finish!

My chest was heaving, but I jumped to my feet, spinning to move around the figure of Erebus to get to Draco. I had to get to Draco.

No! Potter first!

I shook my head roughly even as the figure of Erebus glided to block my path again. I sidestepped in the other direction only to be blocked.

“Move, damn you!” I screamed, my wands rising.

And then I found my face in the ground. I had been struck. I could only see darkness for an instance, the force of the blow nearly knocking me out cold.

Regaining my bearings, I snarled, climbing to my feet again, only to have my wands knocked free from my hands and my body fly halfway up the embankment to Harry’s snarling, laughing body.
“Kill her, Erebus, kill her!” Harry spat, but was ignored as Erebus’s gloved hand rose, again a finger pointing, but not at me.

The black phantom was pointing to Harry.

“Draco! Draco!” I screamed, again ignoring the phantom.

Again, I ran, spinning around the phantom, but found that I had been caught, a black-gloved hand wrenching away my cloak, the fastening below my throat ripping so that my Transfigured cloak fell to the ground.

I did not make it two steps past the phantom before I was struck again, this time across the face and belly so that I flew back into the embankment again.

*What are you doing, Hermione? Potter! You must finish Potter!*…Severus roared.

I shook my head again, trying to shake off the ringing in my ears from the strike across my face. I crawled to my feet again and found that Erebus was again pointing at Harry.

I struggled to calm my breathing, and knelt down again. Harry’s protector would not let me pass to see to my own, my Draco. I could not see my wands anywhere, and I tried to summon them with my mind, but they did not come as they should have.

*Stop wasting time, Hermione. Kill Potter before he manages to free himself!*

I winced, and spat blood from my mouth crudely. I could feel a molar was loose in my mouth from Erebus’s cruel punches, my cheek was bleeding far more than it should.

My hand slipped into my boot where Lucius’ dagger was strapped to my leg. I had not forgotten about the enchanted blade, for I had felt it hum against my skin as I moved. Slipping the cool metal in to my hand, I stood, staring at where Erebus’s face should have been. With a jerk of the phantom’s arm, it pointed at Harry.

Straightening my back, I took a deep breath, trying to see Draco’s body, but was blocked by
Erebus’s dark aura and clothing.

I turned, taking a few wobbly steps up the embankment to face Harry, the stiletto in my hand.

“Erebus!” Harry screamed, his eyes moving to the blade in my right hand.

“He won’t help you, Harry.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and his face contorted, even more distorted as he hanged upside down.

“You cannot kill me, Hermione,” he snarled.

I stepped closer so that I was feet away from Harry’s head, which hanged as low as my belly.

I spat more blood and winced as my cheek twitched and the cut stung.

“I can and I will.”

Harry began laughing, straining at his bonds again, the yew tree whining as Harry jerked.

“No, you cannot and will not. If you kill me…Ron will hate you! I will hate you!”

I licked my lips and took a step forward.

“I HATE YOU!” he screamed at me.

I lifted my chin to stare at Harry down the bridge of my nose.

“Ron wanted me to kill you…do you want to know why?
Harry cackled, his eyes flashing. “Ron would never say that.”

“Because of what you did to me…to George…to Ginny…to Minerva…to Aberforth…to Trelawney…and yes, even to the Dursleys. I am sure there are many others…other who have been hurt by your madness, Harry.

So let’s just say, both of your friends have left you…because of you…Harry,” I whispered, shifting the handle in my blade in my palm.

“LIAR! This is a lie, you, Malfoy, all a lie! You belong to me! Me!

How dare you do this! HOW DARE YOU!”

I blinked at him—he was trying to delay the inevitable. And with a grunt, I lifted the stiletto and rushed forward, grasping the chain of the Time-Turner off his neck….

…and burying the stiletto into his heart.

I stumbled back just as Harry’s blood spurted from his chest, hastily slipping the Time-Turner about my neck. Harry’s face was coated in his own blood, but he stared at me, mouth open, and only guttural words coming out.

“I…” he gasped. “I did not think you’d actually do…it…” he rasped as his blood began to pool on the ground below.

I choked at the sight and smell of his blood and his face, which was smoothing out in death into one I recognised, and had once loved.

“I…loved…” he gasped, eyes wide, “…you…”

I took a step forward as the blood began to lessen, my eyes moving from the green handle of the stiletto buried deep in Harry Potter’s chest, to his flickering eyelids and his long, gurgling exhale.
When my hand touched his bloody face, I let out a sob.

It was finished…

But…

As soon as Harry’s last breath was spent, something happened that I would have never expected.

A flash of light seemed to explode from Harry’s dangling body, followed by a violent wave of magic. I found myself flying backward, and the Time-Turner on my chest glowing…

The latch securing the hourglass snapped free and suddenly the cemetery disappeared in a rush even as I flew. What was possibly only three seconds, turned into minutes as my eyes stared at the Time-Turner, hanging by its chain about my neck, whirled and turned—turning time.

All I could think was: fuck.

I landed roughly, my temple caught a weathered grave marker somewhere in time, and I saw and thought no more.
I could not feel Severus’ presence in my mind, and I was frightened. It seemed that the magical shockwave that had come from Harry’s body wiped out all traces of the embedded spell.

I had no idea why Harry’s body had released such magic upon his death, but then again, I had read that when a great wizard died, sometimes, just sometimes, his magic dies with him, and when it does, there is a wave or an explosion of power like a final death throe. When Albus died, phoenix song had filled the air…

I wondered if Harry had lived on, not mad or obsessed with the past, would his death also have been so—so fitting?

I had killed Harry Potter. Not Voldemort. And now they were both dead, like so many others.

And Draco, was he dead? I had not had the chance to know. But still my heart ached.

The last conscious thought I had had was of me flying through the air and the Time-Turner forcing me through time. But had I been going forward or backward? Technically, knowing how Time-Turners worked, I assumed I had been going forward in time since the device had been used by Harry to go back. The pegs that held the hourglass were pinned with springs, but I did not think I had gone forward twelve point nine zero eight years…or turns…

It was then I opened my eyes.

I had been aware of my body for quite some time, and the pains and aches in my face and limbs. I was also aware that a Time-Turner was on my chest, no longer spinning, but the hourglass caught between the frame the dragon hide of my shirt. Gently, I lifted my hands to hold the hourglass to keep it from moving, but I did not move otherwise.

I was lying on the ground, and above me were stars, so bright and so beautiful, I wondered how I could see them so clearly. I could even see the ribbon of the Milky Way as if I did not have the earth’s atmosphere to distort it, no other lights, no pollution. But it was not only starlight that lit my hands and body for my eyes to see.
I turned my head to my right, and high in the sky was something that I could not immediately identify.

Red, glittering rock seemed to float in the sky before the stars, like red ice balls, broken and streaked across the dome of the stars. I knew the largest piece by its features and let out a moan.

It was the moon, but it was not. The moon had been fractured and broken, pieces scattered across the sky like a shattered glass bead.

I lurched to sit up, clutching the Time-Turner in my right hand.

“Gods…” I whispered as I looked all around me.

I was not sitting in the cemetery at Little Hangleton, I was not sitting in grass.

Sounds, gentle and haunting, came to my ears, and I realised that my boots were in water while the rest of me sat up in pure white sand. I was on the shore of a great black and calm sea. The red moon reflected off the surface of the water, bathing everything in orange light.

Behind me, the white sand shore seemed to stretch on forever, and the horizon behind was barren. The black sea before me was the same with no hint of a sunrise or sunset. There was a breeze, balmy against my skin, but there was no scent of sea upon the wind.

The featureless landscape frightened me so profoundly that I felt tears streaming down my face, the salt stinging the cut on my face. My mouth was open, my lips trembling, but I could not cry.

Where was I?

When was I?

I blinked away my tears as I turned my head about in every direction, seeing nothing.
I climbed to my feet, and sighed. Glancing down at the Time-Turners knobs I frowned. Every numerical place read ‘9.’ If Draco had been with me, I knew exactly what he would say.

‘We’re fucked, my dear.’

Yes, we were.

I chose to walk in one direction along the shore, and walk I did. I walked and walked, finding that my boot prints were quickly washed away by the small tide of black sea water. I stopped for a moment and tasted the water. It was fresh, not true seawater at all.

I continued walking, comforted that if I would need water I had a whole ocean of drinkable water. But the fact that I did not have a wand, or my cloak was disconcerting. I had no food and no means of protection if I needed it.

It was then I began calling out.

“HELLO! IS THERE ANYONE HERE?”

My voice was lost on the breeze.

I called again and again until my throat ached and I had to stop walking to let my left hand dip into the water to drink. It seemed hours passed, and again, I sat down, still clutching the Time-Turner. I searched the pockets of my pants and found a spare hair tie, which I used to secure the Time-Turner so I could have both hands free. Satisfied the hourglass would not move and send me somewhere else in time, I walked on.

Time seemed illogical in this place, for I walked and walked and had not yet seen the sun. The stars did not change either as they would if the earth were rotating on its axis. I tried to identify constellations and stars, but found none that were in the least bit familiar. The only star I could identify was Betelgeuse, but I could not see Rigel, Bellatrix, or the three stars Alnitak, Alnilam, or Mintaka that formed Orion’s belt.

Had I travelled so far into the future than even the stars had shifted so much? If so, why was the earth still in existence? Surely, the Sun would have gone nova and our solar system would be finished?
I wished Severus would answer me.

I carried my boots after I grew tired of dumping sand out of them, and walked on…and on…and on.

I was weary, I was heartsick, I was frightened. The shore was featureless, never changing, and the tide’s monotonous sounds began to hurt my ears. Nothing changed; even the breezes off the water came in thirty-second gusts with two-minute pauses in between. Everything was artificial, and I dared not attempt to go ‘inland’ into the white desert.

My pace slowed, my bare feet slipping in the sand. My shoulders fell, my face ached, and I wanted to sleep.

I wanted Draco. I wanted to go home. I wanted my cat. I wanted coffee.

Then I stumbled, dropping my boots in the sand, the Time-Turner swinging about my neck. My hair fell into my face as I knelt in the sand, resting my palms in the sand. My head hurt with unshed tears and fear. So, I cried. I cried my sorrow by screaming it. I screamed as loudly as I could, knowing that no one would hear me—there was no one at all.

I pulled at my hair as I cried and threw my fists into the sand.

I was being punished for killing Harry, surely.

“Why? WHY?”

A splash in the water started me and I fell to my side in the sand—a glitter caught my eye and I gasped.

A dolphin. A dolphin leapt from the water, twisting in the air to fall into the water again.

I snorted a sob; it did not make sense that a dolphin could live in fresh water. Then again, very little
made much sense in this place. The dolphin jumped again, and I was on my feet.

With a happy cackle, the dolphin called to me, its voice echoing for eternity, and I found myself walking into the water, forgetting my boots.

Life, there was life where there should be none. And joy coursed through me, and I laughed on my tears. The warm water passed over my ankles, but as I continued walking into the water, I found that it was no deeper the further I walked.

I stopped as in the distance the dolphin jumped again. I frowned. Logic? There was no logic to this world. The lack of logic was part of the reason dread had settled into my belly. Was the dolphin in the distance even real?

Merlin, I wished Severus would speak.

I continued to walk, however, the shoreline disappearing behind me. I ignored a mental warning that I might fall into the water and drown being so far from the shore. The dolphin arched into the air, and sometimes swimming so that all I could see was its dorsal fin. Other times it would turn to cackle at me, making me smile. But never once did it get too close or did the splashes it created pelt against me.

The resistance of the water around my ankles made my pace slower, but the dolphin did not seem to be any hurry, then again, I was not sure why I was following either, or if somehow the creature had wanted me to follow at all, but follow I did.

It was strange that I would be following a dolphin since I had the image of dolphins emblazoned in my skin, and that I remembered seeing mosaics and frescoes of dolphins on the walls of my dream palace. I twisted my lips into a sardonic smirk. There was no such thing as a coincidence to me at that point.

Hours passed, or so I thought, until, finally, the dark horizon changed. There was red light reflected in the waters, like the sun beginning to set or rise over the sea. My spirits lifted, simply because I was seeing something different. The light was not bright or blinding, but it was enough to light the water under my feet, and I could see deep into the sea.

Schools of silver and blue fish swam behind me, and despite myself, I giggled.
How odd.

I kept walking, a bit slower, wiping sweat from my brow. I wanted to stop, to sit down, but I was afraid that I might sink into the water. Illogical, I knew, but then again, logic…

The dolphin leapt again, and as my eyes traced its slick form as it dove back into the water, something changed.

In the distance, I saw the shape of something—something I could not make out until I began to run the best I could through the water. Ahead was what seemed to be platform in the water, and figures atop what appeared to be marble.

Three figures, sitting on a stone bench, reminding me of the ancient Greek sculpture of goddesses, their stone heads missing, the drapery wet and thin, sculpted out of marble. However, the three figures did have their heads, and were made of flesh, but were wrapped in thin white gauzy fabric. But it was not just three figures, it was three figures and a spinning wheel.

When I set my barefoot on the platform, I stopped, sitting down on the edge, curling my legs under me. I was extremely tired, and my mind was overloaded by what I was seeing only six or so feet across from me.

Three women: the first, at the spinning wheel was young, possibly no older than fifteen, Clotho. The youngest sat to my left. Next was a woman closer to my age, her belly rounded slightly, but not pregnant, with a rod she measured the red thread being spun, Lachesis. And on the far right was an old woman, her face wrinkled, and in her withered hands she held a pair of golden sheared, carelessly cutting the thread as it was passed in her direction so that red thread fell to the white stones below her bare feet, Atropos.

“We have been waiting, Hermione Jane Granger,” the youngest woman, the maiden, said, looking away from her spinning wheel to me, her voice melodic and sweet.

Clotho had my face, my face when I was a girl.

“Right on time,” the mother said, her voice imbued with love.

Lachesis was me…
“Just as we foresaw,” the crone wheezed, her voice as ancient as her face.

Atropos was me as well, only older.

I was the Moirae, and I wanted to claw my eyes out. However, all I could do was stare at them, gazing. Then I asked the only question that had been on my mind.

“Am I dead?”

All three began laughing, but never once stopped what they were doing—apportioning lives and time.

“No, Hermione, you most certainly are not!” Atropos said with a cackle in her old voice, her shears snapping. “You have simply come to the time when man no longer lives on this world.”

I blinked. “What?”

“It is quite simple, really,” the girl, Clotho said with a giggle.

“You have travelled past the point of travelling. The world is still here, but your race is not, and has not been for millions of years,” Lachesis continued in my voice.

“Of course, you already knew that,” the crone said with sigh, pulling the red thread from Lachesis’ fingers to cut again.

I frowned. “Then what are you three doing? If there is no one else…”

“Oh, we do this for every living thing. Of course, we are only apportioning time for the fish and creatures of the sea, but it is still a job,” Lachesis grumbled.

The Fates where nearly unemployed—how lovely.
“But you are not really the Fates, are you? This just some manifestation…”

Clotho giggled. “Perhaps.”

“We take many forms, Hermione, this is just the one most fitting for you,” Lachesis whispered.

I licked my lips and sighed. “God?”

“God? Are you trying to make a joke?” Atropos snapped in time with her shears.

I shook my head dumbly.

“We are time, the universe, we are as much a ‘god’ as you are, Hermione.”

“Then, there is no God?”

All three laughed again, their faces glowing with mirth.

“We cannot answer that—you wouldn’t understand.”

I cocked my head. “Try me?”

“No, sorry, we cannot do that,” Clotho responded glibly.

I nodded, confused.

“You are overlooking the most important question, Hermione,” Lachesis said, again smiling at me.
“Which is?”

“How do you get back to where you need to be, because honestly, luv, you cannot be here,” Atropos wheezed.

“It was an accident,” I supplied.

“We know,” they said in unison.

I shifted to sit against my right hip, rubbing my wet feet together.

“So this…” I said moving my arm to gesture at the sky and sea, “…is what the earth will become?”

“Yes, in a few billion years. And in about an hour it will all disappear.”

I blinked again.

“The end,” Atropos cackled.

“And we move on to another place,” Clotho beamed, apparently ready to leave Earth.

“So you need to go very soon. It will not do to leave you here when this world explodes, nasty business…very painful,” Atropos added.

I did not know whether to laugh or scream. Why did the Fates have a sense of humour? I sighed, it made their jobs easier, I assumed, granted their humour was far too dark and ridiculous for my taste.

“You need to go back to that boy you love. We’ve already seen your life, Hermione…”

I opened my mouth.
“…but we cannot tell you about it,” Lachesis sighed.

“That device about your neck, take it to Atropos,” Clotho suggested.

I hesitated, my hand moving to the Time-Turner resting upon my chest. Slowly, I rose and padded across the platform to sit next to the crone.

“Ah, I don’t have to cut anything for a while, not until the grand finale,” the crone wheezed, setting her shears upon her lap.

I stiffened as the older version of myself turned to me, her fingers moving to take the Time-Turner in her spotted hands.

I studied her face, her lank grey hair.

“You won’t look so bad, my dove. If you had to cut thread for millennia do you think you would have time to be pretty?” she cackled.

I shrugged, thinking of no other way to respond.

Atropos’ fingers, despite being old and swollen with what I supposed was rheumatism, worked nimbly, adjusting the dials on the side of the Time-Turner.

“We really respect you, Hermione, we thought we should tell you. For a mortal, you have caught the eye of the universe. Just remember that everything that has happened and will happen is for a reason,” Lachesis said softly.

“But don’t worry. You’re almost done with all this time business, you’ll have other business to attend to soon,” Clotho added.

I was not impressed by the words of two women who bore my face and told me Earth was going to explode in an hour.
“Harry…all of this…why?” I asked.

“This is just one course of history among many,” Clotho said softly.

“But why did he kill to get the Hallows when he could have spared those lives?” I sobbed, I still could not understand Harry’s motives in killing to get to Hogwarts, killing the centaurs…

“He intended to set himself up to play our role, inadvertently,” Lachesis answered, her measure rod upon her lap.

“In his desire to change the course of history, he wished to bring the dead back as those who would work his will—loyal agents—to have the power over life and death is not a power meant for man,” Clotho answered.

“You were meant to stop Harry Potter, that was what you were born and groomed to do.”

I sniffed. “Free will? I have no free will after all?”

Atropos cackled. “At any point, you could have stopped, Hermione. You could have chosen to die during your War, or after Potter attacked you. You could have run away, but you did not. Your will changed the course of history, to its preferred course or future.”

I blinked. “Preferred future?”

“Yes, a future that will ultimately lead to a desired end, the place in which you now exist, resting with us at the end of the world,” Clotho chimed brightly.

“You must go back and finish what has begun. Though we knew you would come here, there is much more to do. You mustn’t question the sequence events to come, but trust that now Harry Potter is now dead in your experience, everything will work out to a preferred end,” Lachesis said with a reassuring smile.
“Time travel is dangerous, far too dangerous for humanity. It was not meant for humans to meddle with our work, but that is a flaw that cannot be remedied now, but can be prevented from affecting the future,” Atropos grumbled, fiddling with the Time-Turner.

“Can you tell me when this is?” I asked finally.

Clotho giggled. “Approximately nine billion years from your time.”

I took a breath and sighed. “Some cosmic catastrophe?”

“Something like that. Of course, you’d probably laugh if we told you the exact reason,” Lachesis said softly, her eyes glancing her measuring rod.

“Not for some interstellar bypass?” I asked, a smirk on my lips.

All three laughed…and continued laughing.

“You’re joking!” I cried, eyes widening.

“No, luv, it isn’t that,” Atropos wheezed fixing the last dial.

“But it is something just as silly. You needn’t worry, Hermione. By now, humans are gone…”

“Extinct?”

Atropos coughed a laugh. “Evolved and gone from this place. That’s enough questions, luv.”

“Yes, it is getting late,” Lachesis agreed.

“That will do it!” Atropos pronounced, grasping my hands to hold the Time-Turner, the safety catch still broken. “You’ll just have to let it go and you’re off.”
I glanced down at the Time-Turner and then back up to the Fates.

“It will stop when the dial runs down?”

The three nodded.

“We would refrain from using that one again, however. It cannot be fixed for the time being and travelling forward would lead you somewhere you do not want to be,” Lachesis whispered, her voice laced with warning.

I stood from the bench and moved to stand before the three.

“Just release it whenever you’re ready. You will appear before the chapel in the cemetery at Little Hangleton. Of course, where you are actually standing would be the North Sea in your time…but we’ll help you get to where you need to go,” Lachesis explained.

I sighed, shifting on my bare feet.

“You’ll be fine, luv. Trust in yourself. This has happened before…” Atropos said smiling, and I realised that she was missing most of her teeth…Merlin, I hoped I would have my teeth, all my teeth until the day I died.

“…and it will all happen again. And remember, as a time traveler, you must be aware of paradox, and every possibility!” Clotho declared.

I nodded. “Thank you,” I said with an air of confusion.

The Fates were smiling at me.

I stared at them for a moment and then shifted on my feet again.
“What are you waiting for? Waiting for us to impart some great cosmic truth? Go, girl, go, your life is no going to wait forever!” the crone admonished, grasping her shears and brandishing them menacingly.

I snorted a laugh before smiling, tears streaming down my cheeks. I did not know why I was crying exactly, but it did not matter. I was going back, back to Draco.

“Goodbye,” I whispered.

The Fates smiled and nodded.

I held the Time-Turner before me and let my finger slip, and the hourglass whirled, propelling backwards through time, and with the help of the Fates, through space.

I vomited when time stopped moving. I was on my hands and knees, expelling everything I had eaten and a great deal of black bile onto the grass.

Through blurry eyes, I found that, as the Fates had said, I was in the cemetery, just before the chapel. Fighting down more dry heaving, I fell back to my haunches. I glanced down to the Time-Turner, and sighed as I noticed that the hourglass was cracked. I could not use it again, not safely. I touched the chain to remove it, but thought better of it, and let it drop against my chest.

Before me, just as I had left him, was Harry.

With a groan I stood, skirting around my pool of sick and moved to look at Harry. He was dead, and had been dead for approximately two hours for the blood on his face had dried. His open emerald eyes had begun to form cataracts and his mouth was open, his tongue already stiffened against the roof of his mouth.

I did not study him long, and instead whirled around, running down the embankment to where Draco had fallen.

Except he was not where I had last saw him.
Ire clouded my vision, and I screamed, “DRACO!”

I began searching the ground. There was a small puddle of blood where he had lain, and in the grass, blood was smeared to where my cloak lay in a bundle. I began running about the stones, searching, calling his name.

“What are you looking for?”

I stumbled as I turned toward the source of the voice, and fell between the stones. Scrambling, I rose again, cursing myself for not locating my wands before searching for Draco.

The voice was distorted and otherworldly, and it came from the phantom that had struck me who stood just beside Harry’s hanging body. From where I stood, Harry’s body—the position struck me.

The Hanged Man.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to reconstruct my angry resolve to locate the man I loved, living or dead.

“What is Draco?” I asked softly, not moving from my place among the stones.

I was defenseless. If I had to fight the phantom Harry called Erebus, all I had were my fists, and I was not so great with fist fighting. Punching, a jab was the only thing I was good at.

“He’s gone.”

I frowned. “Gone? Gone where?”

“From this place.”
I gritted my teeth, ignoring the pain in my loose molar, but could taste blood in my mouth again. I clenched my fists to compensate for the pain and strode toward the phantom, letting my eyes scan the ground for my wands I had dropped. When I came to the bottom of the sloping embankment, I still had not located my wands.

“Are you looking for these?” the phantom asked, producing both of my wands out the liquid darkness of his cloak.

“They do belong to me, yes,” I growled.

The phantom then did something unexpected. He tossed the wands at my feet.

I did not hesitate, and took my wands up, and aimed them at the phantom.

“Give me a straight answer. Where is Draco?” I shouted.

The phantom did not answer, but floated toward me, forcing me to back step into the clearing among the stones, where the Death Eaters had assembled.

“He has travelled to another time.”

My breath stopped and my eyes widened.

“What?” I whispered.

The phantom floated before me, right into the tip of the Elder Wand. I began to hyperventilate—the phantom was corporeal for my wand poked into unyielding flesh of what would have been its chest if it were not shrouded in darkness.

Erebus, the son of Chaos, the personification of darkness and shadow, otherwise known as Hades—death.

“Travelled to another time?” I asked incredulously.
I grimaced, sticking my walnut wand into what I believed to be the chest of the phantom.

“Explain…NOW!” I screamed.

The phantom’s black form seemed shift before me and slowly it floated back slightly.

“When Potter’s magic left his body, you were thrown back, and then you disappeared. Draco Malfoy was clinging to life, suffocating slowly, blinded after striking his head on the stones.

He crawled to the cloak ripped from you, and found a Time-Turner in its pockets. He released the safety, and he also disappeared.”

I blinked rapidly.

Draco was alive, or he had been when the Time-Turner I had been wearing propelled me into the far, desolate future. He could have travelled anywhere in time. Into the past…into the future.

Then I remembered.

With a cry I ran to my cloak, ignoring the phantom, tucking my wands into my holster, I began to furiously dig into the bottomless pocket. My fingers brushed against metal and I pulled.

The disc pendant fell into the palm of my hand, and quickly lighting a wand, I searched the face of the disc.

There was nothing.

Both Time-Turners had been used. The one I had pulled from Harry was used first, the disc would have burned the times and the number of turns. Then I frowned at the disc in my hand with the Grecian border and the tiny dolphins. The Time-Turner had travelled as far forward as it could go—nine billion years.
Nine billion years, I shook my head. Nothing, not this world, would have existed that long. The sun would have begun to die; at five to six billion years it would have turned into a red giant, swallowing the earth as it expanded. Then again, our current science was theory, at best.

Damn. Draco could not have followed.

I rose, turning to the phantom that had silently moved to place itself just behind me. I stumbled away, taking my wands again.

“You would not be able to follow even if you knew where he had gone,” the phantom’s voice seemed to echo across the space between us. “Your device is broken.”

I began to hyperventilate again.

I had lost Draco, not to death, but to time. He would not come back, and I could not follow. He had the only functional Time-Turner, and I was stuck in 1995 with Harry Potter’s dead body, and a phantom Harry had brought with him.

I scowled at the shadowy head.

“You were with Harry, yet you did not help him, you passively watched me and Draco travel away, and yet you stayed here, why?” I ground out.

The phantom’s form seemed to flicker in the darkness and I considered relighting my wand.

“I was waiting for you to return.”

My brows furrowed, and I took a step back my back falling against one of the above ground stone sarcophagi.

“Who are you?”

The phantom floated downward and I saw booted feet meet the ground.
“I thought you’d never ask, Hermione.”

I shivered at the sound of the distorted voice speaking my name, and began to hear distinct masculine strains.

“I am Aidoneus, also called Erebus.”

Epithets of the Greek god of the Underworld, Hades. I wanted to vomit again.

“But that will be addressed later.

To answer your previous question, Draco Malfoy travelled to the future. Two hundred and twenty years into the future.”

“How do you know?”

The phantom’s hands came out the darkness that composed its main body. The gloved hands folded together before what I assumed was its belly.

“I know.

After living there, he came to learn many things. So much new technology…such a different world than he could have ever dreamed. But no matter how dazzled he was, he could not forget the one he had left behind—his Hermione.

Two hundred and twenty years… Hermione was long dead, and Draco Malfoy could not bear his life without her. And so he travelled again, having finally learned the basic mechanics of the Time-Turner, a device he learned was called Prometheus. Hermione, he learned, had taken Epimetheus, the brother. However, when he tried to learn what had happened to the woman he loved, he found no information about her after the day of the tenth anniversary of the defeat of Voldemort. Draco even searched for information about himself. He, too, had disappeared from the annals of history.
It was then he decided to go back.

But he miscalculated, the Fates being fickle, and did not arrive in this cemetery in 1995, but after many trials, many other times, he arrived in the year 2008, in January before Harry Potter escaped from St. Mungo’s and W.A.T.C.H. members attacked the Malfoy Manor. It was then he had to make a decision. He could not reveal himself to anyone and cause a paradox, so he decided to plant himself to be close to Potter, disguised as an eccentric wizard, a wizard who called himself Aidoneus, the ‘Unseen One,’ or more fittingly, Erebus, the god of darkness and shadow.”

My knees gave out at the words, which slowly changed in pitch and tone. And as my eyes rolled back into my head, and I began to fall, arms caught me before I hit the ground.

Erebus was my Draco…
Realisation led me to many conclusions. He had orchestrated everything from behind the scenes. He had been the one to tell Harry when to attack the Manor. He had been the one to tell Susan Bones where the goblin-warded box had been hidden. He had been the one to inform Harry when Charlie and his past self were getting to close to discovering his location.

And why?

To make sure that I killed Harry exactly when the Titans had said—in the exact place.

He had placed himself next to Harry, whispering in his ear, an Iago of sorts.

When I opened my eyes, it was to see a face obscured by blackness. I was on the ground, the phantom Erebus leaning over me. I sat up sharply and leaned back against the stone behind me.

Erebus peeled away his gloves, and then, a pale hand plunged into the darkness, pulling a familiar wand, an oak wand.

I was gasping as the wand waved before the face, and like black smoke being waved away, a visage came into view. Long platinum hair fell about wide shoulders, reaching down a dragon hide clad chest and bare, muscular arms.

When I could see the face of Erebus, I cried out, my hands flying to touch the ivory skin and silver hair.

Draco. It was my Draco!

But his face was not as I remembered it, and I stopped short of throwing my arms about him and pressing myself against him.
Draco’s face was as pale as I remembered, but the right eye that had been destroyed, peered down at me. It was not the same colour as his left, but a pale blue that seemed almost white. The scar remained, but had diminished into a pale violet mark down his face. He looked almost as I remembered before Harry attacked us outside of Hogsmeade, except the eerie colour of his right eye.

If the sun were up, or if I had lit my wand, I was sure that the blue depth of the eye would be just as shocking in the dim evening light, only the stars and a three-quarter moon in the sky. However, it was not just the new eye, which was as natural as the left eye, it was the faint lines in his face, and the dark stubble that shadowed his strong jaw. He seemed older, not too much older, but older. He wore a ring of silver in one of his ears, and he reminded me of Bill Weasley, for a claw or tooth dangled from the ring.

His mien was strange, not like the Draco I knew, but he studied me with his mismatched eyes, and his hands moved to slip his wand away, Severus’ wand.

“Surely, you wish to pry answers out of me, my dear, but we do not have much time. The hour is late, the Order will be coming soon, and we must erase all traces that we were ever here.”

His voice seemed deeper, more controlled, and I wondered, as he helped me to my feet, if the man underneath the mantle of a black phantom had truly been Draco Malfoy. The phantom has told me a version of events, but I did not have the time or energy to breakdown the words and analyze them.

Draco’s cloak, the cloak of Erebus, was still made of wispy shadow as he strode across the graveyard and fetched my Transfigured cloak. I limped to his side, my hips, and legs sore from my travels, and allowed him to dispel the Transfiguration and set Hagrid’s hand-me-down coat upon my shoulders. The collar was slightly torn, and I sighed.

I watched Draco Vanish his blood from the ground with Severus’ wand, repair the angel statue, and move to walk up the embankment to Harry’s dangling body. He stopped just beside the body, and I closed my eyes for a moment, the image of the man I killed burnt into my corneas. Hesitantly, I opened my eyes and struggled up the embankment.

Draco Vanished the blood pooled on the ground, as well as the blood on Harry’s body.

“Even during the War, I had never killed,” I whispered as I stepped closer to Harry.
Leaning down, I forced Harry’s eyes shut.

“Ron and Harry had killed, but I had not. Not with a Killing Curse or by any other fatal method… But now I have, and I did not even use my wand,” I whispered, straightening, my eyes falling upon the green stone handle of the enchanted stiletto.

I grasped the handle and pulled with my last reserve of physical strength, jumping back as one last spurt of blood spewed from the wound in Harry’s heart. Draco quickly Vanished the blood.

I wiped the blade into my dragon hide pants before kneeling to slip the stiletto into the sheath strapped to my leg, lamenting that I had lost my boots for the ground was quite cold.

Gently, Draco managed to cut Harry down, levitating him to the ground. I cast about, found the Invisibility Cloak, and held it in my arms, relishing the warmth of the enchanted material over my bare fingers. Kneeling again, I sat at Harry’s side, pulling his arms from his bonds and laying them over his heart—left hand and the stump at the end of right arm. With ease, I pulled the ring set with the Resurrection Stone from his left hand and dropped it in my bottomless pocket. Forcing his jaw shut, his face seemed almost peaceful despite the violent and painful nature of his death.

I sat for a long while, staring at Harry’s face, the scratches he had made with his fingernails and the bruises on his jaw. His hair fanned out about his head in black knots and tangles, but in the dim light, he almost appeared handsome. His clothes were rags, and I glanced to Draco who stood on the other side of Harry, his odd eyes staring down at Harry’s face. There were so many things I wanted to ask, but knew I was far too tired to be able to assimilate the answers.

I turned my eyes to Harry again.

My old friend, the source of so much joy for some, and so much agony for others. He had turned the world upside down, tempted the universe with his pain, and I had killed him because I had been destined to do so, how did that destiny begin? Had it been because I had decided to hide myself from the world? Had it been because I had worked with time? Had it been because I had been so innocent, even into my adult years?

Severus’ voice would not answer me, and I knew then that whatever spell had been used to place him in my consciousness was gone.

I began to cry, frame-shaking sobs. Even though Draco was near, I did not know him. Harry was
dead, and Severus had left me. There was no one in the world that I knew.

I fell upon Harry’s cold body, resting my head near the wound I had created, grasping his ragged clothes, and letting my tears soak into his unmoving chest. If only, if only I had not hidden myself away, maybe Harry would not have…

No, what was done was done, but it did not stop me from weeping.

I had done my duty. Ginny, Ron, Severus, and so many others whom I had loved, had told me that I, and I alone, had to kill Harry James Potter. And so I had, but I did not feel one bit safer, one bit vindicated in killing the man who had killed so many I loved. I felt sick, and dirty. Darkness had welled up inside me, a darkness that would never go away. Perhaps that was what everyone felt when they killed another person.

But I felt no guilt, just loss.

We could not take Harry back with us.

I stared coldly at Draco, or the man that looked like Draco, and closed my eyes in tired agitation.

“One of us could go back, and then return here…” I began.

“No. It is too dangerous, Hermione.”

We had not planned on the fact that we would only have one Time- Turner, and I mentally cursed myself for not considering that before, it was wholly unlike me. Then again, so was murder.

I leaned back into the yew tree. We had wrapped Harry’s body in the afghan Minerva had made, which I had slipped into the pocket of my coat, so that I could not longer see my friend’s dead face. Harry’s body reminded me a parcel with a crocheted red and gold wrapping, and I knew that my brain was beginning to shut down.
Draco stood silently in the same spot he had as he had watched me cry over Harry, expelling all my grief. The shadow cloak he wore still moved even when the wind was still, and it unsettled me. I could not allow myself to consider his strange attire, how the shadows fell open like a regular cloak would, or how worn his dragon hide clothes appeared underneath.

I focused all my mental energy on what to do next. The Order could not find us, and Harry’s body could not be found. We could not travel back together and Draco had told me that we could not shrink the body.

“We hide it. We hide it under a stasis Charm until we go back, and then retrieve his body,” I whispered, my eyes running along the afghan.

“Hide it where?”

I closed my eyes.

“In one of the tombs, or make a barrow.”

I could not believe what I was saying, but it was the only course of action I could think to take.

“There is a tomb under the chapel, the entrance has been sealed. We could place the body there and reseal the tomb for now.”

Draco’s voice was flat and emotionless. I hated it.

I nodded, not opening my eyes. “Let it be so,” I whispered.

I let my head fall back into the trunk of the yew tree, and kept my eyes shut. I listened as Draco moved Harry’s body, and walked away from me, toward the chapel.

I fell into a doze soon afterward. I tried to ignore the aches and pains in my bones, I tried to ignore the smell of death that I had not noticed before in the cemetery. I tried to ignore my fear and apprehension of Draco, and the questions I had.
And when I did, I slept.

This has happened before, and it will happen again…

A hand upon my forehead woke me, and I jumped, my wand, the Elder Wand, flying into my hand, the tip digging into the throat of the man kneeling before me. My eyes met Draco’s.

“What?” I hissed.

Draco did not flinch and did not move away.

“It’s time to go.”

I blinked at him, lowering my wand. He rose and stepped away, and from the shadows of his cloak, pulled a Time-Turner from the darkness, the chain about his neck.

I hesitated. I pulled the brother device from around my neck, and double-checking that the hourglass was secured, placed it in my bottomless pocket.

“Everything is taken care of?” I asked hoarsely, using the tree against my back to help me stand.

“Everything, even the puddle of sick…” Draco said softly, and I could hear a small sliver of humour in his voice.

I pushed my emotions down, and moved to Draco who was adjusting the dials on the side of the Time-Turner.

“May 11th, 2008, 9:00 am,” he said, his left finger on the catch to release the hourglass.

I nodded, as I limped to his side.
He seemed to sigh as I came near, closing the gap between us with a half step, draping the magical chain about my neck. He then pulled me close, and I found myself engulfed in shadow. Draco’s arms felt the same, he even smelled faintly of citrus and sage. I wrapped my arms about his waist, resting my uninjured cheek against his wide dragon hide clad chest.

“Hold tight, my dear…” he whispered.

And we were off again.

I did not mind the suffocating trip, I did not mind grasping to Draco, or the flashing light of the sun arcing across the sky almost five thousand times. I, in fact, did not mind anything at all, but wanted to sleep, heal myself, and take a long hot bath.

Harry’s death—my murder of my best friend, was pushed far into the depths of my mind to stress over later.

The jarring of time around us did not knock us from our feet as it had before, but it did cause us to collectively fall to our knees.

Birds were singing in the morning light, the scent of death was gone, and all around us the blue sky and billowing clouds seemed to seep through our dark and ragged bodies.

Draco was on his feet almost immediately, his wand out to check the time. I turned to see faint green numbers and letters, reading the time and date Draco had said. We were back.

However, if it was truly our timeline, our world, remained to be seen.

Draco took me, by Side-Along Apparition away from the graveyard and to the gates of Hogwarts. He did not tell me where he was taking me, or asked me any questions; he did not speak at all. However, when we arrived at the gates, he barked to the Constables guarding the gates.
“Scruggs, take her to Longbottom, now!”

I wavered on my feet and fell into the arms of the Constable I remembered from before. And I was quickly pulled away. The other Constables moved to speak to Draco, but he was watching me watching him as I was pulled through the goblin enchanted wards and onto Hogwarts’ grounds.

Draco said nothing to the Constables and was gone again, a whirl of shadow even in the light of a beautiful May morning.

When I collapsed, the Constable hoisted me up into his arms and took off at a run across the grounds to the Entrance hall, the doors open. In my dazed state, I barely thought about the fact that I was passed from one pair of arms to the other, not until the arms that carried me, spoke.

“Have you done it, Hermione?”

The voice was familiar, and I opened my eyes as I was being carried to the Headmaster’s office, to see the face of Ronald Weasley.

“Ron?” I croaked.

“Yes, dear heart, it’s me.”

I studied his face, the thin ginger beard on his face and the way his eyes moved as he carried me to the spiral staircase.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe now.”

His words, soft, were a balm to my sore heart and body, and I pressed my face into his shirt weeping silently.

Kicking open the door to the office, Ron strode inside and set me in the Headmaster’s chair. I could hear the voices of the portraits, and the voices of Charlie Weasley, Kingsley, Hagrid, and Neville.
“Call for Poppy!” Ron called as he began removing my coat.

I opened my eyes, my body hunched in the chair as saw that Hagrid held my coat while Charlie ran to the Floo. Neville was arguing with Albus’ portrait and Kingsley was kneeling beside me, his wand waving over my body.

The ‘whoosh’ of the Floo startled me, and soon Poppy Pomfrey was fussing over me, pouring potions down my throat. I gagged and spluttered, but almost as soon as the potions hit my stomach, I was feeling much more aware of my surroundings and myself. A sting on my cheek and at my temple told me that my wounds were being healed. Poppy tried to force another potion down, but I growled at her, snatching the potion to drink it myself.

“Would you all just back away!” I grumbled, every person in the room leaning over me, talking and shouting excitedly. But at my words, everyone had backed away, and I could finally see their faces properly.

Ron, Charlie, Neville, Kingsley, Hagrid, even Poppy and Albus, studied me closely as I managed to stand up from the chair, leaning my palms upon the desk before me.

“I assume that this is my time line?”

All frowned, some glancing to the other, unsure of what to say, or unsure as to what I meant.

I sighed. “Call Lucius Malfoy or Narcissa here. I need them.”

Charlie was the only one to move, a grin sliding across his lips, and I knew then that I was in my timeline. Only Kingsley or Charlie would know why I needed the Malfoys.

I waited patiently, but the rest assembled were not so patient.

“Where’s Malfoy?” Ron asked.
“And Harry?” Neville added.

I waved their questions away as I heard the Floo activate to allow a person to pass, and striding up to the desk was a face I was happy to see. With a cry, I slipped around the desk and fell into Narcissa Malfoy’s arms.

“Thank Nimue!” Narcissa cried as she gathered me into her thin arms.

Everyone in the room, except Charlie, seemed shocked, but I paid them no mind as I cried into Narcissa’s pale blue satin dress, much like the one she had worn when she had walked with me to the groom’s quarters the first time.

“Lucius is with Draco and Williamson. Mr. Weasley,” Narcissa said to Charlie, “You will be needed soon. They are bringing the body back here.”

Charlie was quickly gone, but I ignored the movement and the voices as Narcissa stroked my dirty hair and cooed to me until my tears dried. Gently, just as my mother would have, she led me back to the chair behind the desk.

“The timeline has not been changed, Hermione. Everything is as it should be.”

I shook my head. “Not Draco, something happened…”

Narcissa’s eyes widened for a moment, but she smiled. “He’s alive, that is all that matters for now.”

I could not argue.

Producing a lacy handkerchief, Narcissa wiped away my tears before turning to the assembled bodies.

“She needs rest, gentlemen. I am sure your questions can wait until later?”
All eyes were upon Narcissa, shock etched upon their faces. For Narcissa Malfoy, wife of a Death Eater to be standing in the Head’s office was unexpected and unimaginable. However, all began filing out of the office, even Ron, who glanced wistfully at me, pain marking his features. Even Poppy, who had been hovering near the Floo, left, leaving Narcissa and myself…

…and Albus.

“Mrs. Malfoy, it is a pleasure to see you again,” Albus said brightly.

Narcissa whirled upon the portrait, a sneer contorting her lovely face.

“Do not speak to me, Albus Dumbledore, I have no use for you!” Narcissa hissed.

My sobs turned to laughter, quiet laughter.

Albus was too stunned to speak, and watched silently as Narcissa led me into a tiny parlour behind Albus’ portrait and laid me down on a red fluffy couch, wiping away a bit of dirt from my chin.

Sitting on the edge of the large couch, Narcissa adjusted a cushion under my head, her eyes moving down my body to my bare feet. With a sigh, she moved to wave her wand over my feet, cleaning them, pulling out what looked to be a small thorn. Again, she was at my side, stroking my healed cheek.

“Harry’s dead…” I whispered. “I killed him.”

Narcissa nodded.

“And Draco… He’s not Draco any more…”

I was nearly asleep, though my mind was clear.

“I missed him so much, I love him so…” I trailed as my eyes closed.
Distantly I heard Narcissa begin to cry, but it was not like cries, not of sorrow, but of relief.

I slept, but did not dream.

When I woke again, it was to find Ron leaning over me, his face grave. I could hear voices in the office, but were muffled as a curtain cordoned off the little parlour and candles were lit.

“It is the evening of the eleventh, Hermione. You’re safe…” he whispered, his fingers curling around one of my braids.

“Malfoy brought Harry’s body back, and it has been verified. Harry’s dead.”

I swallowed. “I killed him.”

Ron nodded, “We know. It was what you had to do, Hermione.”

No more tears came, and I was glad.

“…ow is it that you aided Potter in rousing W.A.T.C.H. to action, Malfoy?” a male voice shouted…a voice that I thought belonged to Williamson…or Charlie.

“What’s happening?” I asked in a whisper to Ron.

Ron’s eyes had moved to the thick red curtain and he forced a smile. I stared at his face, and the beard…

“Gumboil is trying to figure out why Malfoy helped Harry before you went back into the past.”

I blinked. How did Ron know?
“Malfoy has been giving his statement for the past few hours. Charlie, Williamson, Malfoy Senior, Gumboil, and Kingsley have been interrogating him since they brought Harry’s body back from Little Hangleton.”

“So…” I began.

Ron grinned. “Yeah, we know about the Time-Turners. But don’t worry, no one else knows—not Neville or Hagrid, or anyone who saw you earlier that did not need to know.”

I sighed. “What has Mal-Draco been saying?”

Ron shrugged. “When Charlie asked why Malfoy did not simply Apparate to safety after Harry was…” he trailed with mournful sigh. “Why he used the Time-Turner, he said he was not in his right mind. He said that he saw you disappear, and in his panic, all he could think to do was try to follow you…”

I frowned. But Draco would not have known where to go. The disc had been in my pocket, and I had travelled beyond time to a strange place that seemed more like a dream than reality.

“The future, he said he was found by a kind wizard. It seems that Little Hangleton becomes a bit of a tourist attraction to future generations—not because of Harry, but because of Voldemort…”

I licked my lips. “And?”

Ron sighed. “And he says he spent two years in the future. He was medically treated and released, all the while careful not to reveal himself or his origin. In the two years, he learned how to use the Time-Turner…apparently he had some problems using the device, and when he worked out the problems, he then realised that he could not simply return to the point in which he had left, and went back further to the point just before Harry escaped.”

Draco, in the shape of Erebus had mentioned this to me.

“He orchestrated everything, the master holding Harry’s strings from the point he contacted W.A.T.C.H. But how Harry had been convinced that Malfoy was not Malfoy, we’ll never really know.”
I nodded. I would find out, with time.

“…the body, we might be able to end this nightmare!”

I winced at the sound of voices on the other side of the curtain.

Ron smirked. “Nothing to worry about, luv.”

I was not exactly convinced by Ron’s words, but settled back into the couch again.

Ron and I talked a while longer, avoiding the subject of Harry as much as possible. It was then I learned that Molly Weasley had passed away.

“It’s been hard on Dad, even now that he can go back to the Burrow. Ginny has left, moved off somewhere to be closer to Bill and Fleur in Egypt. I have my own flat in London, and Charlie’s engaged to a bird from Cardiff. Charlie might move back in with Dad now Mum’s gone, but who knows?”

I grasped Ron’s hand, but said nothing. Ron’s smiles were sad, he had lost his mother, brother, and now his best friend. I felt terrible for him, but knew that he did not seem to hate me after Harry…

“It’s funny how the universe works, isn’t it?” Ron asked softly.

“Yes…”

All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again.

That was what the Fates had said to me.

“What will you do now?” he asked me.
I blinked at Ron. I honestly had not thought that far ahead.

“I don’t know…”

Ron stroked my cheek. “You’re a brilliant witch, luv. You can do anything, you can go anywhere, you’re just that damn brilliant.”

I chuckled.

I just wanted all of this nightmare to be over. I wanted to fall into Draco’s arms and laugh with him, argue with him, listen to Nat King Cole with him, listen to his voice reading me the rest of ‘Jane Eyre,’ have him teach me to ride a horse, fly with him, cook dinner together…

I wanted to see my cat, and talk with Narcissa about Temple Wood. I wanted to make Lucius Malfoy smile genuinely. I wanted to walk through the Forest and thank Magorian again for his confidences. I wanted to clean my bedroom in my cottage and expunge the presence of Harry. I wanted to see my parents, and tell them that I loved them. I wanted to hug Alex Roux…. I wanted my life to include love.

I told Ron about Severus, seeing him in the past. I told him about the spell and how I could no longer feel Severus there between my brows—how I missed him.

Ron was repulsed at first, but seeing how much Severus’ help had meant to me, Ron sympathised. I told Ron that I had lost so many mentors, that it was hard to know what to do with my life.

“Do what you want, luv.”

I smiled at Ron, and just then, the curtain was pushed back, light falling over my face.

“Ron, it’s time,” Charlie’s voice said softly. I did not move to look at Charlie, but I knew what he meant. It was time to take Harry’s body to the Ministry to be examined, and then cremated.
Ron pressed a chaste kiss into my forehead and left my side. I rose from the couch and moved to the curtain, watching as Charlie, Ron, Kingsley, Gumboil, and Williamson left the office. I dropped the curtain behind me, padding with my bare feet to the desk, sitting down in the chair, noting that I must have slept a long while since the sky was dark outside the windows.

Turning my eyes to the portrait of Albus, I saw him staring back at me, his hands folded under his bearded chin.

“Albus,” I said with a nod.

“Miss Granger. I trust that you are much rested?”

I scowled, but nodded.

“I must congratulate you on your success.”

I hissed. “You mean cleaning up your mess?”

Albus sighed, defeated. “You could say it that way. I am sure that your success did not come without a great deal of pain.”

I grinned darkly. “I murdered one of my best friends—for the greater good. Of course, there was pain involved. Pain when I stabbed Harry Potter through the heart, and pain in realising that I made myself a murderer.”

The portrait nodded. “A burden I have laid upon you, a burden that never should have been, it was just the same with Severus.”

I said nothing in retort.

“From what Mr. Malfoy has described, when Harry died, there was a flash of light and wave of magic?”
“Yes?”

Albus sighed. “And how did it effect you?”

I bit my lip. Albus could not know about the embedded spell, or Severus’ involvement. Severus may have served opposing masters, but, first, he was a master unto himself. Would he have told Albus thirteen years ago?

“It knocked me away from his body.”

Albus’ blue eyes glittered. “And nothing more?”

I was resolute. “And nothing more,” I repeated.

Silence fell in the office as Albus and I stared at each other. I still held an extreme dislike for the man who was Albus Dumbledore. I still considered Vanishing the paint on the canvas.

“You have changed, Miss Granger,” he said finally, moving his hands to his lap. “Experience has changed you.”

Of course, experience would change me. That was how human life worked. We learn and grow through experience, and how our minds are set affect how experience changes us. I had known that truth for most of my life.

“I only hope that experience has not hardened your heart or damaged your wonderful capacity of love.”

I scowled. “Why should it?”

“Because of what you had to do.”

“Kill Harry? Of course, it has changed me, but it has not hardened my heart.”
I am wounded; so deeply, that it will take a very long time to heal. But, if you are asking me if regret will somehow change my heart, or the way I love—it won’t.”

Albus smiled. “Regret is a dangerous thing, Miss Granger, and you know that better than most. You understand my concern, do you not?”

I did. Regret had twisted Harry. Regret had changed many of us who had lived through the War. But people like Lucius, Draco, who lived with no regrets had come to terms with their past actions with easy acceptance. I knew I had to be the same; else, I would never be able to move on with my life.

I rose from the chair and moved to lean against the desk, closer to Albus’ portrait.

“Albus, I will learn to regret nothing. I must learn to regret nothing.

Not so long ago, the Fates told me that everything happens for a reason. This is something that most people tell themselves through their life, perhaps to be able to cope to the events of their life, but I know now, without a doubt, that everything…everything happens for a reason, whether we like it or not.

And coming straight from the voice the Universe itself, I was convinced.

All of this has happened before, and it will all happen again,” I whispered, my arms cross before my chest.

Albus’ eyes shimmered, but not from his usual twinkling, but from tears. It was strange to see a painting cry, but cry it did, silently.

“I will try to find comfort in knowing that I have saved my world. That is the only comfort I can find now.”

I straightened and moved to the steps leading down into the main part of office, before stopping and turning to Albus once more.
“You will never see me again, Headmaster, so if there is some bit of information that you need to impart, do it now—a prophecy, a riddle, anything.”

Albus wiped his tears and regarded me soberly. “Just one thing, Miss Granger.”

I blinked. “Oh?”

“Severus…years ago, a week before I had him kill me that night on the tower, said something to me about you, something I have never forgotten.”

I turned back to Albus, my hands falling to my sides.

“He praised you highly, and expressed an interest in what sort of woman you would become when you were older. He did not say anything specific about his interest in you, per se, but he told me, in his own words, that you would find a book called ‘Slaughterhouse-Five’ and be quite enlightened. He said that your love for books would not be wasted, as you would convert the knowledge within into wisdom of the human race.

I thought that maybe he was talking to himself when he said these things to me, but I remembered his words, finding them strange. Not all of these words seem so strange now, except the title of the book. Do you know ‘Slaughterhouse-Five,’ Miss Granger?”

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

“That is all I can tell you, Miss Granger. Your role, your skill, and your power have kept you alive, able to fulfill your role. And I am grateful to you.”

I turned away. I had no need for Albus’ placating words. He called to me, but I kept walking. There was nothing more to be said, and I hoped, even thought I said it in earnest, that I would never have to see Albus’ Dumbledore’s face again.
The castle was empty, though the torches were lit, and I saw no one as I walked into the lonely Entrance hall. I lingered before the open doors, the night air warm coming into the castle. Distantly, at the gates, I saw the Constables standing in the light of braziers, talking amongst themselves.

With Harry gone, I wondered if security would change, if Hogwarts would reopen earlier to accommodate time lost. I glanced to the clear sky and sighed. I wondered if groups like W.A.T.C.H. would begin to disappear with Harry’s death, or would their conviction only strengthen?

I turned away from the door, walking barefoot toward the dungeons. I was not sure what I was going to do, or where to go, but I wanted to go to Severus’ chambers once more and look for Kurt Vonnegut’s ‘Slaughterhouse-Five.’ If I were interpreting Albus’ words correctly, Severus possibly left me another message in the book.

When I came upon the corridor leading to the hidden door, I found that the door was standing open and that lamplight lit the threshold. Music was playing from within…and I knew it was David Bowie’s album ‘Low,’ for ‘Always Crashing the Same Car,’ had finished and ‘Be My Wife’ began. It was perhaps my favourite album, and I knew that only one person would be playing David Bowie records in Severus’ chambers.

I gently pushed the door open wider, and peeked inside.

The centre table was loaded with a dinner fit for royalty, a bottle of red wine open and filet mignon on the plate. The scent wafted toward me, and for the first time in what seemed like many days, my stomach growled and my mouth watered.

I could hear water running in the bathroom, but I moved into the parlour, passing the food, and going to the gramophone beneath the window, picking up the dust jacket for the record on the turntable. Gently, I moved the needle back to the fourth track on the ‘A’ side began, ‘Sound and Vision.’ As if on cue, the sound of water stopped. I stood very still as the bathroom door opened, studying the front cover of the dust jacket and David Bowie’s profile.

The sound of a chair scrapping on the floor made me turn, and in the chair facing me, was Draco Malfoy.

Under the lamp, his hair was almost completely white, longer than Lucius’ and pulled back in a tie of green velvet ribbon. His clothes were different, the shadow cloak gone, and he wore a loose fitting white dress shirt, buttons only down halfway up his body, and blue jeans, similar to the ones he wore at the groom’s quarters, his feet bare.
“You must be hungry, come eat,” he said softly, raising his face to me, his mismatched eyes reminding me of the photograph of the man on the dust jacket I held—one silver eye, one pale blue eye—with a thin, mostly healed scar running over the right side of his face.

He was clean-shaven, and I could see that he had a new scar on his chin, near the curve of his jaw. His mouth was relaxed, and the lines I had noticed before seemed shallower.

Turning back to the gramophone, I turned the volume down and set the dust jacket aside. With tentative steps, I moved to the table, and slowly sat, still feel a bit of soreness in my back. Without prompting, I grasped my knife and fork and began eating, ferociously.

Every bite was heavenly, and every sip of wine soothing to my throat. My stomach gurgled happily as I ate, and I ignored Draco’s pointed stare until my plate was clean. He had barely finished half his meal when I dabbed my lips with a napkin and threw it on the plate. I then met his gaze.

“You need a bath next, and some clean clothes,” he whispered.

I crossed my arms before my chest. “Answers first.”

Draco mimicked my pose, dropping his silverware onto his plate, crossing his arms before his pale chest.

“Answers need questions first, my dear.”

I quirked my lips, amused.

“You told me that you travelled two hundred and twenty years into the future, and there was no record of us?”

Draco sighed and relaxed, resting his elbows on the edge of the table. “That was a different timeline, before you returned to the cemetery. I might ask where you went, but I have learned patience…”
I scoffed. “Since when?”

“Since having to wait to catch up with you through time.

I told you I spent two years in the future, in the year 2220 Common Era, two hundred and twenty years from now, from 2008. But I did not tell you that I, in my idiocy spent another three years in the fifteenth century, and another four years in the eighteenth century, all of which I had to hide myself in a place I knew no one would find me. So in the year 1428, I built your little cottage in the Forbidden Forest, and every time I travelled, trying to get back to 1995, I started and ended in your cottage.”

My jaw had dropped, but slowly my eyes narrowed. His words were similar to that of someone reading directly from a text, so matter of fact. “I cannot believe what you’re saying.”

It was then Draco began laughing, throwing his pale head back to howl with laughter, clutching his sides as he did so. I did not know whether to take his action as meaning that he had been trying to play a joke or not. I watched him laugh, his face softening, his eyes, mismatched, glittering with mirth. And I began to see the man I knew, the man who had protected me, the man who had made love to me on the ancient stones at Beltane.

“But there wasn’t anything…” I began as Draco’s laughter began to subside, but paused. “The Greek inscription on flue stones…”

“Drakon, 1429, that was the only mark I left behind, something that time would have a difficulty erasing. I built that cottage with what I could obtain at the time, and even then, leaving the confines of the Forest put me at great risk of being discovered.

I made the tunnel into Hogwarts, I placed the statue of the troll, I nicked food from the Kitchens late at night, I saw what our world was like, and how it would be, and it only made me mad with the desire to come home.”

He was leaning over the table slightly, his eyes piercing mine, every word growing colder, and more painful for him to utter.

“Nine years I can never have back, nine years that I did not have you by my side!”
I shivered as he sat back in his chair and grabbed his fork and knife again. The gramophone had fallen silent, and the ambience of the room was uncomfortable.

“Then your eye, the cloak you wore—it came from the future?”

Draco chewed his meat thoughtfully, his eyes drifting to a point past me. “Yes.”

“And you did not reveal yourself?”

He shook his head, cutting his meat.

“And you only went to the places you mentioned?”

Draco did not answer, but ate quietly, his face stony and alien to me again. I wondered suddenly what he really did see in the future, and in the past.

I grasped my wine and drank, my eyes still upon his face. I wanted to know if he truly was the man I knew, albeit nine years older than I. The time he spent travelling explained why he seemed older, but it did not really explain why he felt like a complete stranger to me.

Loss gripped me again, and I felt a tear streak down my once wounded cheek. Draco did not notice.

Mumbling that I needed a bath, I rose from the table and strode toward the bathroom, shutting the door behind me, drawing my walnut wand to seal and ward the door. Then, angrily, I slid out of my clothes and stared at myself in the mirror above the basin.

I was filthy, coated in dirt, dust, dried sweat, and grains of sand, caked high up my legs around my ankles. I knelt to brush the sand into my fingers and examined it in the light, and realising that my travel to the end of the world had been real.

All of this has happened before, and it will happen again…

I could only assume that the lapses in time, looping over and over again, is what the Fates had
meant. But for me, as I stood in the bathroom that Severus had called his, slipping into the tub of hot, scented water, my travels, I hoped, were at an end.
I went home.

I had slept in Severus’ quarters, alone, finding that Draco had left while I bathed. A piece of my heart died when I could not longer see him. I blamed myself, knowing that my reluctance to acknowledge that he was the man I knew and love had forced him away.

I slipped out the castle, and walked. I found that my old coat was folded across the nearest wingback chair in the parlour, and I donned it. Remembering what Albus had said, I found Vonnegut’s ‘Slaughter-house Five’ and slipped into my pocket, I would read it later when my mind was not reeling.

When I came out of the tunnel, I considered resizing my borrowed broom, but decided to walk instead. I had found an old pair of my boots and old clothes waiting for me when I woke, things I had left behind in the Severus’ chambers.

My feet were still sore, and I walked slower through the trees. I did not feel the eyes of the Forest upon me, and I wondered if Magorian had received the news that Harry was dead. In fact, the ambience of the Forest seemed different, brighter, safer.

After an hour, I finally came to the clearing, finding that the weak wards were still in place. I gazed upon my home wearily and slowly entered, drawing my wands and automatically began casting simple household charms, the layer of dust disappearing off my meager belongings.

The first thing I noticed was that the bedroom had been changed. Standing in the doorway, I found that the brown bloodstains had been removed and the bedding was fresh and new. A heavy pale green comforter rested atop the cradled bed, along with an envelope, with my name on the front.

With a sigh, I snatched up the letter and fell into the bed, charming the window open. Leaning back into fluffy, new pillows, I kicked off my boots and opened the letter. I smirked, realising that the parchment was taken from my writing desk, and that the ink was of a particular shade that I used, the ink from the well off my desk as well.
The letter was more a note, short, and in a hand that I remembered.

‘H-

Changed the bedding, cleaned the flue, I will leave other charms to you.

I will now say that I find the changes you have made to my cottage suitable, although I built it remembering the cottage from 2008.

Must work for now. I think I might still have my position as DCI, maybe…

Call upon you when I can.

-D.’

I smiled, even though I felt a strange knot of dread in my stomach.

Time had changed something inside me, something I could not identify, something I did not like.

Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, I dropped it on the bed and rose, padding into the main room, barefoot. Kneeling upon the hearthstones, I drew my wand again, lighting it. Sticking my head into the flue, I could see the Greek inscription, and the date. I stared at it for a long while, noting that Draco must have used his wand to burn into the stone centuries before.

I sat back on the hearth and canceled the charm, slipping the Elder Wand back into my holster. I stared blankly at the floor.

Draco had spent nine years outside ‘our’ time. In the fifteenth century and the eighteenth century, and the twenty-third century. Besides having a tale to tell, I could only imagine how lonely he must have been, and how frightened.

One mistake made out of desperation had cost him nine years.
Grief, it was the only thing I could think to feel. I would never know exactly how much time I had spent wandering at the end of the world, but I did not think it was nine years—hours, a day at best, but not years.

I rose, and glanced into the kitchen, and just where I left it, the lead box rested on the island counter. With a whimper, I dug through the pockets of my coat, and drew the broken Time-Turner, replacing it, and the disc, into the goblin-warded box. Draco still had the brother—one he had finally learned how to master after so many mistakes.

I shut the box and the latches locked magically. Moving back to the fireplace, I tapped the mantle with the end of my wand, and a secret niche I had made years before when I first moved into the cottage opened. Sliding the box inside, I tapped the stone again, and seamlessly, the stone melted back into place. Draco would have to give me the other Time-Turner—it was too dangerous to keep.

I wanted to believe that when both devices were safely hidden in the warded box, the nightmare of the past months would end. It was a naïve thought, I knew, but it was all I could manage to wish for…

Looking about my home, the home that Draco had built for himself, I found the only thing missing was my familiar. Perhaps even with my familiar, the cottage would seem foreign to me. No matter how many of my books were on the shelves, the clothes in the wardrobe, all of it was foreign. The mystique of how and when my cottage had been made was gone. I had spent years making the little place a home, and after months of longing for its solitude, it really did not feel like home.

Something was missing, something was not right.

Draco had built it with me in his thoughts, an infinite loop—of paradox.

Two weeks passed, and only when the Floo of my cottage activated did I realise how much time had passed and that it was nearly the end of May. For two weeks I had been reading over my notes, staring at the goblin-warded box, staring at the weave of the Invisibility Cloak draped over the chair of my writing desk, staring at the strange red glow of the cracked Resurrection Stone and the Peverell family crest incised on the surface.
“Hermione?”

I shifted on the couch, craning my head to look back at the fireplace. I had been staring into the kitchen all afternoon.

It was Ron, and I was quickly informed that it was May 26th. I was so appear at the Ministry the next day, at the request of Alastor Gumboil.

“It is just questioning really, nothing that you would need representation for…not that you’d need it anyway…”

“Since I have apparently done nothing illegal?” I asked softly, wishing I could manage a snarl ala Severus.

“Not really. You were working with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in an unofficial capacity, and anything that could be construed as ‘illegal’ has not been enacted by…”

“Nullum crimen, nulla peona sine lege,” I murmured, eliciting a quizzical glance from Ron’s greenish Floo lit face. “Never mind…”

The laws governing the use of the Time-Turners was quite clear, however, there was no laws for Time-Turners that could move back and forth in time by yearly increments. We had not altered the timeline, no ‘grandfather paradox’ had occurred, as far as I could discern. Draco had covered himself, or so it seemed.

“I hate to say it, love, but you look like hell,” Ron said softly, snatching me from my thoughts.

I smirked. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Are you feeling better?”

I sighed. I felt rested, the minor aches and pains nearly gone. The worst of the damage to my body had been dealt with the night Draco and I returned to Hogwarts. However, the emptiness I felt in my chest had only grown.
“Physically,” I answered.

I knew I was in shock, and by closetting myself away in my little—correction, Draco’s little cottage, I was not doing myself any good. The ‘old’ me had always hid herself, Jane had always retreated into her shell and never really grew up. I was not Jane anymore. And slowly, the emptiness filled with anger.

“When do you need me at the Ministry?”

“Nine in the morning…” Ron answered, his voice suddenly tainted with uncertainty as he watched me move from the fainting couch to kneel before the fireplace.

“And why are you the one calling me?”

Ron’s face turned a strange shade of green due to the firelight.

“Charlie is with Malfoy, sifting through a Pensieve.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

Ron cleared his throat before answering. “Just after you and Malfoy disappeared from the graveyard, the current Malfoy extracted Harry’s memories before brain death set in. Everything from his childhood to the moment you…you…stabbed him.”

Just before ‘brain death.’ I bit my lower lip. I wanted to see the memories pertinent to Harry’s decline; I wanted to know why—was it simply his overwhelming regret that forced him to tear my world apart?

“Listen, love, I know haven’t been around when you needed me, and Merlin knows that I wish now that I had been… Things…us…it was just too complicated for far too long. And now with Harry…gone, I know it is the worst time to try and make up for things…”
I raised a hand to stop Ron. The past was the past, especially when it came to our relationship, and its many failings. It also seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Your dad, Merlin, the funeral!” I balked.

Ron smiled sadly. “It’s alright, love. We didn’t say anything because…well, we did not think you would be up for it…hell, we were not really up for it either.”

I bit my lip harder. I had been so selfish for far too long.

“Mum had been ill even before Harry escaped from St. Mungo’s…”

In my selfishness, I had not even known that Molly had been ill; I had not seen her for years. It made me think of my own parents, whom I had not written or called in months. Anger melted away to guilt.

“You need to get out, Hermione. Staying in that cottage is not doing you any good.

Tomorrow, after the questioning, you should consider going away for a while—a vacation…”

I smirked. “And where would I go?”

Ron shrugged. “Australia, to you Mum and Dad’s? Or the States? I know someone you could stay with if you’d want to do that.”

“Who?”

He grinned. “I will tell you only if you promise you will take some time away, love.”

Ron’s tone changed, and I realised the same man whom I lectured when we were younger was lecturing me. It made me feel awkward, and silly. I had been so self-righteous during out schooldays. It made me sick.
I was only half listening to Ron as he continued lecturing me about how closed my life had been, and how I should seriously consider a lifestyle change, but every word was something I had considered. The past months had been filled with Harry’s looming shadow, his actions, his pain. I had immersed myself in Harry Potter, and I was drowning still.

I needed a change, a change of scenery, a change of mindset, a change of career…

Ron and I exchanged a few more words before the call terminated. I stared at the empty fireplace for a long while, my eyes moving up in the only Greek character I could see inscribed in the flue—the delta of Draco.

The Anti-Apparition wards, as well as the goblin enchantments protecting Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest, had been lifted a week after I returned to Hogwarts, Harry Potter’s blood staining me. From outside the wards of the cottage, I was able to Apparate to Hogsmeade the evening after speaking with Ron. I walked along High Street, seeing that the rebuilding of Hogsmeade was nearly completed. I had lost count of the weeks since Draco and Harry had nearly razed the village to the ground.

I wandered aimlessly, cloaked even though the evening air was too warm for such heavy costume. No one seemed to notice me, however, and after so many months of fear, it seemed as if all the residents of the village were out for fresh air. The curfew notices had been taken down, and every shop seemed to be having a sale, as if in celebration of Harry’s demise. The shadow had been lifted. I remembered the ambience had been similar after Voldemort’s defeat.

It was this ambience that disturbed me.

I still had not bothered to read anything about Harry in the press, but as I passed an outdoor rubbish been outside Scrivenshafts, I found a wadded up Daily Prophet, only the headline visible. ‘Harry Potter’s Link to Terrorists! The New Dark Lord Defeated!’

I wrinkled my nose and continued along High Street, the gas lamps lighting as the light failed. I considered stopping in at the Three Broomsticks, but thought better of it. I did not want to be noticed. The Hog’s Head was closed, and had been ever since Aberforth had been murdered, so I walked on.
By the time I stood on the lane above the Shrieking Shack, the late spring sunlight was gone and only the sky was painted a brilliant orange and blue overhead, the sun having set over the mountains. I buried my hands into the pockets of my Transfigured Cloak, and in the left, bottomless pocket, I felt two of the Hallows. The Elder Wand was still strapped in the holster on my inner right forearm, with its dark walnut sister. In fact, I still wore the dragon hide armor, the only thing missing were the boots, which I replaced with an old pair of black hiking boots I had found in the bottom of my wardrobe at the cottage. I had only plaited my hair, and besides not carrying the Time-Turners, I was outfitted much as I had been the night Draco and I had went back in time.

When my fingers found the shrunken Firebolt, I withdrew it. After resizing the broom, I stared at it as it hovered before me on the lane. With a sigh, I mounted and kicked off the ground to hover fifty feet from the lane below, able to see the wooden shingles of the Shrieking Shack to my right.

As I held to the handle, I wondered if I, hypothetically, could still fly as well as I had when Severus’ spell was still active. With a determined huff, I tilted the handle forward, and I was suddenly off.

Exhilaration rippled through me as I flew over the mountains, over Hogwarts, over the Black Lake, and over Hogsmeade. I rolled, I dove, I imitated Quidditch manoeuvres, and most importantly, I did not fall off. It seemed I could still fly. Whatever skill sets I learned by way of Severus still remained.

I flew toward the mountains again, slower, enjoying the sight of the dusky sky and the lights of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade like a carpet of twinkling lights below me. When I landed, my boots skidding across pebble strewn rock face, I found myself just at the crack of the cave Sirius had lived in during 1995, and as I propped the Firebolt near the entrance, drawing my wand to light my way, I remembered Hagrid had also used the cave with Grawp over ten years before.

The interior was just as I remembered it from the visit Harry, Ron, and I had made in Fourth Year, small, dark, dry, and the ground littered with bones of small animals. Moving the lit tip of my wand about the chamber, I found a small pit in the corner near another crack, and realised it was a fire pit. With a flick of my wand, I lit a magical, heatless, and smokeless fire, bathing the cave in yellow light.

On the far, back wall, to which I glided, my finger moved over the stony surface. There were several names carved into the rock.

I stepped back to stare at the crudely carved letters, able to see the very hands that carved the words. Sirius’ scrawl was far finer than Hagrid’s, and slowly my eyes clouded with half formed tears. I wondered to myself, was there any justice in this world?

The Fates, upon literally meeting them, had imparted no profound truths.

All this has happened before and all this will happen again—or something of the like, had not been some mysterious or enlightening phrase.

This fool, I, had travelled far, and learned almost nothing.

I sat down before the magical fire, digging through my pocket again. Thinking of ‘enlightenment,’ I drew out Kurt Vonnegut’s ‘Slaughterhouse-Five.’ Just as ‘Behold the Man,’ it was a paperback, slightly worn about the edges, and a coffee stain darkening the lower corner of the pages. Opening the cover, Severus’ familiar signature adorned the book, but as I flipped along the pages, I realised that in the middle the pages were devoid of the usual print and that Severus’ severe handwriting covered the yellowed paper. Flipping back to the first handwritten page, I found my name, and the date.

‘7 April 1998. Hermione, by now Albus is dead, and you, and Potter are preparing to leave the protection of the Order. I cannot stress the folly of your actions, but by the time you read this, I assume the deed has been done. The Dark Lord, I hope, is dead, and I will have gone from this world.

The night of June 24, 1995, when you and Draco Malfoy appeared in my chambers, and my delivery of you both to Little Hangleton, seems to have worked—to result in what you achieved to do—the Dark Lord left the graveyard after my words, and now I should impart what happened after you travelled back to your time.

After I revealed my Mark to Fudge and Potter in the Hospital Wing, Albus sent me off to placate the Dark Lord, as it was my job as a spy to gather information. Needless to say, I endured quite a bit of pain in explaining why I sent a Patronus to the graveyard, or how I knew to do so. The timing of Potter’s return to the graveyard and my Patronus had been perfect, but still the Dark Lord had doubts. After much Cursing, and mental poking and prodding, I was again in the Dark Lord’s “magnanimous” grace…’

I paused; able to detect Severus’ trademark sarcasm even in his written words, and the memory of his wit, warmed me.
‘From that point on, I am sure you know what happened. The Half-Blood Prince has been revealed. You know that I have become Headmaster, and you know more than I will about how this story will end.

The one part of the story you may not know is what I did to you the night you and your friends went to the Ministry. Here, I must add how stupid it was for you to go there, simply because Potter had a “vision” of Black. But I digress, you were grievously injured by Antonin Dolohov. The night when you returned, I cast a spell upon you.

For months, I had tortured myself over the encounter I had with your future self. Seeing you and Draco, obviously, was a shock, but seeing you together, working together, nearly shocked me into an early grave. I knew I could not ask much about your future, or my future, lest I create a paradox, but I knew just by looking at your older faces, that I did not make it through this trial. Not that I ever expected to live, but to know, for certain, that either I died in service to one master or the other was unsettling.

Then I remembered to write down the information you mentioned, the times, the dates, the keywords. All the while, I wished to speak with you more, not about your future, but of the things you had learned about me. It was a vain thought, a selfish wish, to be able to speak to someone who knew enough about me to talk about my past. No one besides Albus truly knew about Lily or my childhood. Potter got only a glimpse, and misinterpreted it.

The more I thought about the words I was writing in Moorcock’s book, the more I began to think of the how and why—how you knew to contact me, why you sought me out. It was not simply to get to the Dark Lord, was it? No, I will never truly know.

However, I began planning. You told me the Dark Lord would fall. And I, in my self imposed posture of servitude to the ‘greater good,’ consulted with the one person I could trust at Hogwarts.

Your old Head of House.

It might surprise you, and possibly the whole world, that Minerva and I were always quite close. She had always been kind to me when I was student, despite me being in Slytherin. When I began teaching, she was the first to welcome me. It had nothing to do with her role in the Order, what small a role it was, or because Albus pushed her to be friendly; it had to do with the fact that we both had questions about Albus’ judgment. Do not mistake me, Albus is, or was, a brilliant wizard, but at times very short-sighted. He was not “Slytherin” enough, and Minerva was more “Slytherin” than she would like to admit.
Together, Minerva and I gave your younger self gentle nudges, advice, and on my part, tough mentoring. You are a bright witch, far too talented for the likes of Weasley or Potter. You are an amalgamation of all the qualities of the four Houses, and due to that, Minerva and I had no reservations as to what we did to you the night you survived the confrontation at the Ministry.

The spell is a variation of the spell used to create a Horcrux, however, it differs from a Horcrux in the sense that a piece of my consciousness is transferred to you. A part of my magic, my soul, my mind, and my personality was transferred to you. In return, my life was shortened since it is not just my soul being transferred. But, not everything of me is transferred, of course. Magic still has its limitations, and this explanation is simple, at best.

A spectral consciousness now exists in you, lying dormant until needed. You will hear me, see me, and at times, I will be able to use your body to protect you. My skills and abilities will be your skills and abilities...

This spell is called “syneidesis phantasma,” which I am sure you know is literally “conscience ghost” in Greek. Of course, the spell’s name is nearly nonsense, but if you are reading this, after the fact, I am sure you understand its relevance.

There are also conditions as how long the spell will last, and in this case, when Potter is dead and the timeline maintained, the spell will end. The spell cannot last forever, though it is powerful. The spell will protect you, guide you, and impel you to save yourself and aid you in accomplishing your goal. If all goes well, then this book, these words still exist, and you are reading them now. Potter will have been stopped, you, and hopefully Draco, will have survived, and somehow you managed to return to the time in which you came to me that June night.

As for the details of the spell “syneidesis phantasma,” consider it an original creation by the Half-Blood Prince.

I wish you well, Hermione. By speaking to you, I am assuming that you consider me something more than a sour, ugly, taciturn Potions Professor. I only hope that when the time comes and the spell is enacted, that my life, imparted to you, will not hinder your regard for me. In some ways, you remind me of the woman I loved long ago, but in some ways you are so much more than she could have ever been—true to your heart, sharp in your mind, and extraordinary in spirit.

Warmest regards, Severus T. Snape, aka the Half-blood Prince.
At the postscript, I laughed aloud. Severus was presuming a little too much, but still, a tiny part of me wished his sentiments to be a reality. As it was, I was not sure how to feel about Draco Malfoy.

I closed the book, and staring into the fire, stuffed it back into my pocket. I sat for a long while musing over my old Professor’s words. The note had been brief, but to the point.

‘Syneidesis phantasma,’ eh? A Half-blood Prince original. It would be an interesting bit of research to learn the specifics of the spell. Moreover, if Minerva had been privy, I knew the spell was surely complicated. It was not until my adult years that I learned that despite the subjects both Severus and Minerva taught, both were on a Masters level in Charms, Arithmancy, Transfiguration, Potions, and Theory. They were exceptional mentors. I only had a Masters proficiency in Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Theory, and Transfiguration…my mentors had levels in all of those plus a few more.

I was young still, and I had my health.

I smirked into the fire. Yes, I had more years left to live. I had lived through Voldemort, and I had lived through Harry Potter. Another battle, another war was in me yet, but as my eyelids drooped slightly, I knew I would need a bit more time to rest before fighting another day.

I dozed, sitting on the cold stone floor of the cave, surrounded by dry bone carcasses, the magical fire flickering near the toes of my boots.

I did not dream as the fire glowed through my eyelashes, but my mind went to places beyond my own body and the cave. I could see vague outlines of faces, familiar faces of people I had known and loved. I saw Remus’ face first, his crooked smile and the premature age lines in his face. I then saw Tonks’ face, heart-shaped and pretty. I saw Sirius’ face, dark and brooding, but before my eyes lightened with a handsome smile. I saw Cedric Diggory’s handsome face and stony grey eyes, and the slight mischievous glimmer that I remembered so well. I saw Severus’ face, just as I remembered it the night Draco and I had gone back to 1995, and the smirk, almost smile on his thin lips. And lastly, I saw Harry’s face, a mental photograph of him just after he learned that Sirius had offered to take him from the Dursleys, that face was one of pure joy, the expression, the feeling Harry had used to save Sirius from the Dementors.

That Harry, the joyous, innocent Harry, was the boy I wanted to remember—the boy I had loved with such devotion that I followed him everywhere. It pained me to think that somewhere along the course of time, Harry had evolved into some twisted, mad thing.
When the image of Harry hanging from the yew tree drifted into my mind’s eye, I shivered. He was indeed The Hanged Man, a sacrifice that Fates demanded in order to let my timeline persist. I wondered if, perhaps, Harry had not been so wrong after all…

No. If Voldemort had not been reborn, if all those I had loved had not died, I would never have learned what it was to grow, or love, or learn to truly find myself strong.

I opened my eyes, pulling myself from my doze.

I was strong, just as I was sly, loyal, and intelligent—the best of all the four Houses of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry just as Severus had written. As I stood, brushing crushed bone dust from my Transfigured cloak, I set my face. I was stronger than I gave myself credit, and then, as I extinguished the fire, standing in the deep dark of the cave, I knew all I needed to do was grasp what I wanted, and what I wanted was justice and truth.

Alastor Gumboil was a large man, not exactly fat, but large and wide through the bones of his shoulders and chest. He had the most piercing green eyes bar Harry Potter’s, and his thin fiery orange hair was neatly combed back into a long ponytail. All in all, he reminded me in some ways of an elderly Bill Weasley—just the hair and wide shoulders, but not much else. Gumboil was not handsome like Bill, but he was just as scarred. Obviously, as I sat across a table in a drab interrogation room, pretending that the gaze I held with the man was some sort of sad attempt at a staring contest; Gumboil was a man who had had a rough, if not violent, career in law enforcement.

It was nearly five in the evening. I had given my statement, answered questions, from the complicated to the borderline inane, since nine that morning. For some reason, I felt as if Gumboil was testing my mental stamina, or trying to coerce some admission of a buried guilt from me. I, knowing myself quite well, did not crack under the mental pressure. I had done nothing wrong. I did what the Ministry believed to be the correct course of action; I had killed Harry Potter, my best friend, in order to save our world from eventual decimation.

It seemed to me that I was being treated as a criminal combatant. I was annoyed, to say the least.

All day, the only person I had seen was Alastor Gumboil, and I had counted the number of wild orange hairs on his pale pate at least six times.
We had sat silently for nearly twenty minutes.

“Would you like to work for me, Miss Granger?”

Flabbergasted. I was utterly flabbergasted, and my mouth dropped open of its own accord.

“Pardon?”

“I’m offering you a job, Miss Granger. With all the restructuring in my department, we could really use an intermediate officer to liaise between the Police Service and the recalled Aurors. You have connections with highly important international agencies, the Dragonriders, the Aurors, and my officers in the Police Service. You can handle sensitive information, and you know how to handle Malfoy…”

My mouth worked, but nothing came out all the while Gumboil was speaking, until he said ‘Malfoy.’

“DCI Malfoy and I…” I began, but Gumboil interrupted.

“That is no longer his official title, Miss Granger. In fact, between the various branches of the MLE, we are not really sure how to address him. He will be promoted to Detective Superintendent in a matter of days, but he is also an Auror, and a Dragonrider—a unique position that only someone as tenacious as Malfoy could handle.

As for you, you have proven yourself to work well with him, which is why we want you in our department. Between the two of you, the Ministry can stop worrying about the instability outside these walls and begin to change what is inside these walls…”

I closed my mouth and rested my elbows on the tabletop; my chin perched atop my hands, staring at Gumboil coolly.

When Gumboil finished, I spoke, softly, calmly.

“So, the statement I just gave you, Dra-Malfoy’s role in the attacks involving Harry Potter and
W.A.T.C.H., all of that—after all of that—and you are offering me a job?”

Gumboil nodded, crossing his arms before his thick chest, obscuring the ID badge on his chest.

“I am not going to be prosecuted by the Ministry for any infraction, nor is Malfoy?”

Gumboil nodded again, his chin wobbling.

I began laughing, moving my hands to bury my face into my palms. It was ridiculous, utterly… There was so much else to resolve, my feelings for Draco Malfoy being first on my list. There was also the question of the job I did have in the Department of Mysteries.

When my laughter died away, I raised my face to Gumboil.

“I’ll have to get back to you about that…”

Gumboil, again, nodded.

“Are we done here?”

“Yes, Miss Granger. You are free to go. However, if we need you to supply any more information, at an inquest, perhaps, please make yourself available.”

I frowned. “Inquest?”

“If the Ministry deems it necessary. So far, the Wizengamot is pleased with your and Malfoy’s statement, corroborating the story as to Harry Potter’s criminal actions and intentions. Malfoy managed to extract Potter’s memory strands before his ‘brain death’ and our Forensic teams are preparing those images for the Wizengamot to view…”

I began to tune out. I wanted to see those memories for myself.
Eventually, I was allowed to leave, saying that I would honestly think upon Gumboil’s offer. I found myself moving around beyond the turnstile in the Ministry Atrium, having collected my walnut wand. The Elder Wand was concealed in the bottomless pocket of my Transfigured coat, which in late May was not a cloak, but a light jacket that fell just to my hips over the dragon hide pants I had worn the day before…

The hall between the Floos had been repaired and had it not been for a strange dark stain high in the ceiling where the cleaning crews had not noticed the blood, I would have never known that Draco and I had battled Harry Potter in the Ministry. I paused in walking, ignoring the stares by the other Ministry employees Floo-ing home for the day. I stared at the stain.

I had not bothered to hide myself from curious eyes when I came that morning to the Ministry, and with the lack of press, I believed that perhaps my name had not been mentioned in the newspapers…

My eyes moved back down to the floor, unmarked except for scuff marks. This had been the spot where I had Conjured Fiendfyre, and I believed Draco to be dead. It seemed like a dream or something that had happened in another life.

“They repaired it the day after,” a voice said near my ear, and I jumped, my walnut wand slipping from my holster to my hand. I turned quickly, my wand tip digging into the underside of a pale, sharp jaw.

Draco Malfoy stood just behind me, his chin raised so the walnut did not dig sharply into his skin. Some Ministry employees paused to take in our interaction, but as I lowered my wand, they walked on, shaking their heads in confusion.

“I see that I should never startle you again, Hermione,” he said softly. “However, you should have felt me, or heard me near…”

His tone was condescending, as if scolding me like one of his officers.

I almost wanted to take Gumboil up on his offer just to prove to Draco Malfoy how ferocious I could be, if needed.

He stared down his nose at me, his mismatched eyes studying my face, my clothing, his face emotionless.
“We should talk.”

I agreed.

“Can you come with me to…home?” he fumbled.

I blinked. His voice changed slightly when he said ‘home,’ but I knew what he meant. The groom’s quarters—it had been home to me for the time I had spent there. Draco had not meant the cottage. In my mind, that place was not a ‘home,’ but merely a shelter we both had used when we had need of it. It was a stopping place, a respite of sorts, but I knew as I walked next to Draco toward a Floo, that the cottage he had built was never meant to be a home.
I ended up sitting on the bench looking out the front windows of the groom’s quarters, facing east, the warm setting sunlight staining the outlying fields a fantastic gold colour. I spotted Lucius’ white Arabian atop the nearest hill, rolling in the grass happily while a line of sheep moved past, surely moving to the small brook to drink.

I twirled my walnut wand between my fingers, leaning back into the wall as Draco moved about in the kitchen, making coffee. I had slipped out of my boots at the door and sat with my bare feet propped upon the padded bench, my right elbow resting on the windowsill.

Placing a steaming mug next to my elbow, Draco sat down across from me, his strange eyes also moving to the fields.

I took my mug and drank; the semi-bitter brew was so familiar that I did not realise until that moment that I had missed Draco’s coffee.

“Gumboil offered me a job.”

I had to break the silence. I also had to be honest about my unease.

Just sitting close to Draco Malfoy unsettled me. I studied him, knowing that he knew I was studying him. He did not seem to mind that my eyes lingered on the faded scar on his face, or his long silvery blond hair pulled back into a ribbon. I stared at the strange eye, almost excepting it to swivel to look at me as Mad-Eye Moody’s had. But the eye was real, I could see the tiny capillaries, red and healthy, and moisture on the surface as he blinked slowly.

He seemed younger than the night he dispelled his shadow cloak, the lines not as pronounced under his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. Draco was now older than I was, but it did not take anything away from the handsome face I remembered. He wore clothes I was accustomed to seeing him in, grey slacks and a white dress shirt. In the Ministry, he had worn a green silk tie and grey jacket, but immediate doffed the clothing when we came to the groom’s quarters having used to bothy’s Floo. It seemed Narcissa and Lucius were no longer primarily using the older residence, the furniture in crates, and small sundries in boxes.
However familiar the surroundings, the clothes, the taste of the coffee, I still could not feel as if everything was just as it had been.

“I know. Gumboil has been asking me how easily you could be trained as an Auror.”

Draco’s voice was rougher than I remembered, but not as restrained as it had been the night in the graveyard.

“What did you tell him?” he asked, turning his face from the window slowly to meet my eye.

I shuddered, but tamped down my discomfort, clearing my throat. I caught my wand in my hand, slipping it into its holster again.

“I would think about it.”

“You would honestly want to work in the MLE?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. All this…” I gestured between the two of us. “Travelling through time… I don’t think I want to have anymore to do with it.”

It was true. When I thought about the Time Room, and even my beloved ‘samsara’ jar, a knot of dread would form just between my heart and throat. I did not want to have to relegate time any longer. It repulsed me. However, I was not sure if I wanted to track down terrorists, place myself in danger, or do the paperwork on an arrest either. I honestly was not sure what I wanted to do, but I knew what I wanted…

“You realise how tedious the job can be, not to mention, on the reverse, how dangerous.”

I nodded. “I am only considering, Malfoy.”

Draco blinked, and if possible, his face paled.
I had called him ‘Malfoy’ after lovingly calling him by his first name. I almost wanted to slap myself.

Draco took a drink from his mug, slowly, and just as slowly, he placed it on the wide sill.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, and then sighed, my fingers playing along the rim of my own mug. “Something has changed…and not just the fact you now have a right eye again, or the clothes you were wearing that night…something has changed you, nine years spent lost in time…and I…I don’t know what to do, or say to you. I’m just as lost…”

It had come out stilted, uncertain, but it had come out honestly. I, however, could not look at his face, and stared at the padded bench top.

I closed my eyes as Draco stood, expecting him to walk away, however, when I opened my eyes again to that interesting spot on the bench, I found I was staring at Draco’s belt buckle. He had moved across the bench to sit before me, my bare toes neatly tucked under his left leg.

Lifting my chin with his cool fingers, I averted my eyes to stare at the windowsill.

“Many things have changed, Hermione, but not my feelings for you. If my feelings had not been so strong, we would not be sitting here now, drinking coffee,” he whispered and my eyes moved automatically to his face.

“I told you, what seems like decades ago, that we would sit down someday, drink coffee, and laugh about how exciting our lives had been. I also said that if we kept saving each other, we might live to see old age—well, we’ve done it. We’ll keep doing it, we will live far beyond our expectations.

I want to keep saving your life, and I want you to keep saving mine. Because, Hermione, I have loved you longer than the few weeks we have spent in this house.”

My jaw trembled, even as he held my chin.

“I travelled through time, just to be here, with you, once again, and you say and act as if you do not know me…”
His whisper was thick with emotion, and in his mismatched eyes I could see him, the man who had toasted me as his ‘lady,’ the man who saved me time and time again, not because I was his ward, but because he wanted to keep me alive. And as I looked at him, his lips curled into that smile that I so loved, scoundrel-like, and irresistible.

It felt as if more shadows that had been hiding his true self were being dispelled, and slowly I began to see my Draco Malfoy, my Draco.

“I know you…” I whispered, my right hand moving to grasp his shirt. “I want to know…” I leaned forward, my left hand grasping his shoulder. “I want you…”

I kissed him. His lips were soft and warm, and I could taste coffee. My hands moved over his shoulders and chest, while his arms warped around me, and suddenly, I was in his lap unable to kiss him enough, deep enough, hard enough. Those lips felt as I remembered them to feel, those arms, the warmth of his chest, it was all there, all the same.

I hummed into his mouth, my fingers finding his long tresses, pulling them free of the ribbon. His hair was like wet platinum, smooth, straight, divine between my fingers. I clung to him, reacquainting myself with the cavern of his mouth, the sharpness of his teeth, the curve of his lip, the point of his nose and chin, the texture of his eyebrows, the ragged line of his scar, the line if his jaw, the tender fleshiness of his earlobes, the contour of the shell of his ear, and the taste of his skin at his pulse point. Time had changed little about the man I had grown to care for, and the true differences, I knew, would take time to get used to, especially the icy blue quality of his new right eye.

Finally, when we pulled apart just enough to gaze deep into each other’s eyes, I smiled faintly—even with his kisses, I was not undeterred. I wanted to know, and I wanted details.

“Tell me,” I whispered, my arms about his neck, sitting in his lap like some child, “Tell me what happened that night…”

He smirked, but looked away. “Only if you tell me where you went.”

“Fair enough.”

Gently taking my waist, he removed me from his lap back to the bench where I sat close to him, burying my toes under his fabric-clad left thigh. He drank his coffee again before speaking, and I
watched him as many emotions played over his face. His hair was down about his shoulders, and even though he was Lucius Malfoy’s son, Draco was not so similar to his father. In the fading light outside, he reminded me of Narcissa, or Sirius Black.

The lamps and candles lit automatically as I waited, and the new light sources made Draco appear too pale, like a handsome ghost or fey elfish prince.

“I was dying,” he began, but paused to seek out my face. Our eyes met, and he continued. “The curse Potter cast had not been aimed at me, originally. He was aiming it at you, and being the intelligent witch you are, you dodged, but for some reason, that I cannot explain, I could not dodge as quickly as you.

I fell, hit my head, and I could not breathe. I could not dispel the Curse, and every spell I tried failed… And then, you killed Potter. I had stopped struggling, finding that if I laid very still, I could manage to breathe short, tiny breaths.

I saw the light, and saw you flying through the air. Even as you flew, your figure flickered into nothing, and I was left staring at the point you had been. The Time-Turner was spinning as you flew, and I, in my irrationality, began to crawl. My vision tunneled, but I found your cloak, and the other Time-Turner.

My memory gets hazy at this point, and I knew that I was not thinking clearly. I released the latch on the Time-Turner, somehow looping the chain about my neck, and the I remembered nothing.”

I stared at Draco, as he stared back at me. His face was grave, his voice dulled by trying to restrain an emotion, but what emotion, I could not tell.

“When I woke up, it was day. I could breathe a bit better, but I still was not able to use my lungs properly. I managed to roll onto my back; I was still holding the Time-Turner. With the last of my energy, I propped myself up on a grave marker, and I saw that the chapel was in ruins, the yew tree three times the size I remembered, and in the middle of the clearing, where Voldemort had been reborn, a strange marker. It was a prismatic crystal…

I stared at the prisms radiating off the marker for a long while, until someone clasped my shoulder, and I nearly fainted. I could hear a man’s voice, but the light reflecting rainbows off the marker dazzled my eyes. I suppose I was in shock, because the next thing I remembered was being dragged along a path from the graveyard to a large house in the distance, and being put in a bed. A man, whom I later learned was a wizard by the name of Ptolemy Nix, tended to me—tried to take the Time-Turner from my hands to heal me, but could not manage to pry it from my fingers.
Days passed, maybe weeks, before I was able to move to secure the Time-Turner. I hid it in my cloak.

Lem, as I was instructed to call him, lived in the old Riddle House, and had lived there for thirty years. To make a long story short, I learned where I was, when I was, and it took me another week or two to let the shock sink in.

I could not speak, due to the aftereffects of the Curse, and I communicated by writing. I did not tell him my name, but did tell him my predicament. Lem had seen the Time-Turner and deduced much. He turned out to be a ‘scientist,’ of the Wizarding sort. He informed me that the graveyard was a type of tourist spot in the twenty-third century, mostly for morbid types who had an interest in our time—their history. The marker was a commemoration of the life of Cedric Diggory, who becomes quite a celebrity of sorts in the future.”

Draco paused, smirking. I returned his smirk as together we drank our nearly cold coffee. He rose, plucking my cup from my hands and went into the kitchen. He continued even as he poured the dark potable into our mugs.

“Lem informed me, slowly, that the future was very different. The concept of Magical and Muggle is far different. This is due in part to a world war sometime in the early twenty-second century. The world population is only a fourth of what it is now, and there is no longer any segregation between Magic and Muggle. I deduced that most of the people who died were Muggle, and due to the wars, the magical communities revealed themselves, no longer afraid of persecution. Muggle science and Magic innovation combined…”

Draco returned with our drinks and passed my mug to me before sitting close to me again.

“Lem was what he called a ‘synthetic outfitter.’ He made synthetic organs, or at least, designed them. That was how I regained the use of my right eye.”

I drank deeply from my mug, peeking up to stare at Draco’s eye.

“Lem was aware of temporal paradoxes, and all the dangers of my travel to his time. However, Lem was a gracious host, and after a year, I was able to talk, literally talk to him. I told him that I could not reveal the how or why I had travelled, or even my name. Lem understood. I told him that I needed to ascertain that ‘our’ timeline had been saved, and so Lem let me access a computer database, far faster and superior to anything Muggles have now.
I had only ever touched a computer once, while working in America, and nearly blew the damn thing up—too much innate magical energy…” he muttered.

I smirked. I was happy that Draco even knew what a computer was, it was pleasing to find that my own prejudices about Pureblooded Wizards were being disproved.

“Our timeline was safe. However, after my parents died, there was no heir, and these lands went to the nearest living relative, which happened to be Teddy Lupin.”

I frowned. “How?”

“It has nothing to do with my mother’s side. It seems that the Lupins and the Malfoys are related, distantly. A great great aunt Malfoy married a Lupin… At any rate, by the time I learned that little Teddy inherited, the Malfoy lands were property of the Ministry, no Malfoys.

I knew that, I, in having come to the future, had taken myself out of my normal timeline. And then, I began researching you.”

I sighed. Draco clenched his jaw before speaking again.

“I had no idea where you had gone, or when, but when I was researching, there was no record of you, not after a record of employees at the Department of Mysteries from 2007. Up until Potter’s attack on you, the records were detailed, afterward, there were only mentions of you possibly being a victim of Potter’s whose body was never found.”

I bit my lower lip, my hands tight about my mug.

“The only person, it seems, to have made it through was Ron Weasley. He married, but I could not discern whom, had a litter of more Weasleys, and died a rich and very old man.

As for Potter, his body was never found, not in 1995 or 2008. That told me that somehow, someone had disposed of his body. And then, I remembered the black figure who had arrived, unknown to us, with Potter. Erebus, Potter called him, but I knew who he was—the missing W.A.T.C.H. member, Aidoneus. E. Aidoneus was his name, and no one knew what he looked like, where he
came from, just that he was near Potter.

The day I remembered the name of Erebus Aidoneus, Lem then showed me a project he had just completed, the ‘Shadow Cloak,’ or as Lem called it ‘umb clocca.’ It was to be used by Aurors of that time, but the current Ministry did not like the price they would have to pay to acquire one.

I then learned the exchange rate of the future.

I traded him my Firebolt for a Shadow Cloak.

It seems that brooms in the twenty-third century is a novelty, and Quidditch is confined to national teams only. Brooms are only used, specifically, for Quidditch since the manufacturers number only one, there is no market, and a third generation Firebolt, is, of course, an antique, worth two dozen Shadow Cloaks…

I knew, as soon as I saw Lem’s Shadow Cloak, that Erebus Aidoneus wore one, and the only way someone in our time to have one was to know Ptolemy Nix.

I had two new purposes: get back to you, somehow, and to pose, without the knowledge of anyone, as E. Aidoneus. I laughed for over an hour at the name I apparently would take.”

I chuckled softly. Draco had enough foresight to see what he would have to do, and the role he would have to play.

“A piece of a puzzle locked into place for me, and all the while I was studying the Time-Turner to travel back, I began remembering things—how Potter had known to show up at the Ministry that day, how he was able to get through the wards at the Manor, how he was able to use the Time-Turner at all. It was because I must have told him. If I did not tell him, I would not be able to get him to the graveyard that night. I had seen him die; I had watched you bury the blade into his heart. If I did not help him, the nightmare might never end.”

I touched his hand as he said this, and his fingers curled about mine, warm and alive.

“I set the dials, said my goodbyes to Lem, expressing my eternal thanks, and off I went.”
Draco closed his mismatched eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Only I ended up in the fifteenth century, standing in the middle of tiny graveyard, the chapel new, the yew tree not even planted yet. I cast the Charm to check the time, and I nearly threw the Time-Turner to the ground.

It was early morning, and the first thing I did was Apparate, certain I had not been seen. I was angry, and was not thinking clearly, and I ended up neck deep in the Black Lake. I had wanted to go to the gates. I knew, even in the fifteenth century, that Hogwarts was open…

I Apparated again, this time to the cottage, only the cottage was not there…” he trailed.

He squeezed my hand and turned his gaze out into the dark beyond the open window.

“I’ll spare you the details, mundane as they are, but I built that cottage with my wands and two bare hands. None of the creatures of the Forest interfered, though I could feel them watching.

The inscription in the flue…”

I nodded.

“…I added that as an afterthought, remembering we had found it in 1995. I had to keep the timeline intact, and I had to keep the interior of the cottage fitting with the time I was in—no fancy water fixtures or toilet, just a plain water closet. I laid the basic wards and household Charms, and for a long while, I lived there. I was hesitant to try the Time-Turner yet…

I told you other details, and I told you about my foray into the eighteenth century. Most of that time I spent in the cottage, resetting wards, finding that only one individual had found it, using it as a hunting lodge, it seems, and let no real traces other than heavy boot prints in the dusty floor and ashes in the fireplace.

I began computing the time, the dial settings, occasionally stealing into Hogwarts to nick a book or two. I began planning my defense to the Ministry after I returned, I began planning what I would say to you when I saw you in the graveyard, if I saw you in the graveyard.”
He paused again, his right hand rising to caress my cheek, his thumb moving to brush my lower lip.

“I waited nine years. I watched myself near you, how my hands itched to push you out of the way to kill Potter myself, it was agony. Watching you kill him, watching you disappear, it killed me. I watched my younger self also disappear, knowing that I was gone again for another nine years…

I extracted Potter’s memories, and watched his eyes deaden. I walked the perimeter of the graveyard five times. I stared at your cloak for an hour, and then, you appeared again, just below the chapel, spewing your guts out into the grass.”

I breathed a laugh. “I’m surprised my head didn’t explode after traveling billions of years…”

Draco’s brow quirked, “Billions?”

I nodded.

“Except for what I learned about Potter in the months I was his so-called ‘right hand man,’ I’m done with my tale, it is your turn, my dear.”

There was no mirth in his voice, and I gazed into his eyes again.

“The Time-Turner broke,” was all I said at first, Draco taking my other hand in his. I bowed my head as I stared at the way his fingers tangled with mine. Draco pressed his mouth against my forehead, not to kiss but to feel my warmth. Lifting my face slightly, we sat leaning toward each other, foreheads pressed together. It was a strange pose, but comforting that he, after assuming such a ‘shadowy’ role, was still human.

“I woke up in a strange place. And there was nothing but stars, a broken moon, white sand behind me and a black sea before me.”

“Where were you?”

“Home…just before the end of the world.”
Draco breathed in deeply, startling a few stray hairs about my face and neck.

“I cannot really explain it, but I met the Fates. Even now, it all is like a dream, indistinct in my head.”

“How long were you there?” he asked in a whisper.

“I don’t know.

They fixed the Time-Turner, setting it to go back to 1995. They said that everything would work itself out, in the end.”

Draco huffed a laugh, sardonic, but did not move his forehead from mine. “Sounds like something my Mother would say.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

We sat silently for a long while, I shutting my eyes as leaned into each other. I listened to his deep breathing and shivered at the way the side of his thumb brushed against the mound of Venus. I was beginning to reconcile the man who had made love to me on Beltane with the man who was arousing my by just a simple caress on my palm. I certainly was not the same woman he knew; I was a murderer, among other things.

However, killing Harry, in some way, was what I was supposed to do. The Fates had said I was born to stop him—did that literally mean killing him? I felt particularly numb about Harry, and knew that perhaps in weeks, months, or years, all of my emotions would come gushing out of me in a terrible torrent of bile and self-loathing.

For the moment, I could only feel glad that Harry would no longer be able to hurt anyone else I knew and loved. And that feeling would have to do.

“It is hard to explain everything that has happened to me, everything that I have felt, and I understand why, why you did not come to me, or stay with me just when we returned,” he whispered. “For nine years, you were a dream to me. A goal to be attained, a place to return to, and
then to see you again in the graveyard, it took everything I had to keep from going to you. I knew that everything had to happen just as it always has and always will happen. I had no idea whether or not you would return, and for two long hours, I swallowed my fear…”

“But I did return, and we made it home, the timeline is safe, the future you saw, it may not be our future now,” I whispered.

Draco hummed, lifting his head to kiss my forehead. He released my hands and cradled my face in his palms, forcing me to meet his strange eyes. I tried to smile, but my lips trembled too much.

“What have you to cry about, Granger?” he teased in a near whisper.

Tears streamed down my face into his palms.

“I remembered, when I was in that other place, how I was so alone.”

That dread had not left me.

“I have spent so many years alone, never wanting to be connected to anyone, how foolish I have been, Draco…”

He sighed, wiping my tears. “You have said that once before, and then, I did not really think you believed how wrong you had been.”

“Now I know. Walking on a beach at the end of the world will put a great deal of things into perspective.”

He chuckled. “I almost wish I could have seen it myself.”

I frowned, shaking my head slightly in his hands. “It was beautiful, illogical, and barren. I prefer the ‘now.’”

Draco brushed the last of my tears away, his hands moving to mine again.
“Speaking of the ‘now,’ what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“The job? Are you going to remain secluded in our little cottage in the woods?”

I honestly was not sure anymore. As appealing a change of title would seem, I loved working the Department of Mysteries, but I no longer had a stomach for anything related to time. I knew Alex Roux would not mind letting me work in other sections, but the thought of the Time Room knotted my stomach.

As for the cottage, leaving it would mean trying to find a flat in London that was close to the Ministry, or a house secluded enough that I could outfit it magically. All of that took money, more money than I currently had in my vault at Gringotts. I would have to stay in the cottage until I had saved enough, or worked out a proper budget for renting a flat.

It all seemed so overwhelming.

“I need time to think about the job. After school, Harry and Ron practically begged me to go through Auror training with them, and I nearly conceded. I had the marks at Hogwarts to pass the entrance levels into the training programme, but I was never confident with the physical components, flying, etc…”

“You’re a fair flyer now, my dear.”

I sighed. “That was Severus’ doing…”

Draco said nothing for a moment, staring deeply into my eyes. “But you can fly now.”

I nodded. I could fly now. I had also proven myself nimble enough to avoid unfriendly spells, with training I knew I could improve. I also knew how to duel; another skill set Severus had given me. On top of all of that, I knew every spell from ‘The Hanged Man,’ which could be modified into offensive or defensive spells easily.
I exhaled loudly. If I wanted to be an Auror, I could be an Auror. But the question was: did I want to be an Auror? I was more cerebral, not physical.

“And the cottage?” Draco asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I don’t know. It is not as if I really ‘own’ the place. I could not sell it. And I really cannot afford…”

“Stay with me…”

I blinked at Draco, rapidly.

“What?” I asked with a little more force than I had intended.

Draco set his jaw and pursed his lips. “Stay with me, here.”

My brow furrowed. I understood what he was saying, and part of the reason as to why he was saying it, but deep down, something did not settle well in my gut. As much as I wanted to stay near Draco, as easily as we had lived together only weeks previous, my hesitation was forming my lips to say—no.

Instead, I twisted my tongue and asked: “Why?”

It was an inane question.

Draco straightened his back and pulled away from me slightly. He still held my hands, but I could sense his irritation. The fact that I could still irritate him was comforting on my part.

“I would like for you to stay. I am sure Mother would also enjoy having you near.

I’ll even let that silly cat of yours stay as well, if that makes you happy.”
I cocked my head and stared at him. I answered him just the same as I answered Gumboil.

“I will have to think about it.”

I did think about it, and concluded that I simply was not ready to settle into a comfortable little life with Draco Malfoy.

I loved the man, as infuriatingly handsome, charmingly acerbic, stunningly sarcastic as he was… All the more tender attributes Draco had were hidden deep under a tough skin of scathing words and derisive glares, and I wondered if anyone knew who he really was besides his parents and myself.

Draco Malfoy made me feel alive, priceless, beautiful, free.

However, I still left without a proper goodbye. I escaped to the States, and with help from most unlikely places, I set to prove myself to myself. I needed a path to seek my justice and truth. I needed to feel worthy of his love; I needed to miss him as much as he missed me.

And miss him, I did, desperately.

The owl came in mid October while I was sitting on a park bench in Central Park, New York. After watching pigeons, the sight of an eagle owl startled me. With a screech, the owl dropped a letter in my lap and took off again before I could thank it.

The leaves were beginning to change in Central Park, just in patches of soft wood trees as I sat near the backside of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I glanced about, wondering if any of the joggers, or birdwatchers had noticed the eagle owl.

With a sigh, I took the letter into my hands, and turning it over to the front, saw my name in ornate, flowing script. The back was sealed with green wax, and a crest that I figured was a family crest.
though I had never seen it before.

Malfoy.

I opened the envelope, which, to my surprise contained another envelope, this time a glossy embossed black envelope. Pulling it out, I realised it was an invitation. Impressed by the ornate design of the invitation, I opened it by pulling a velvet ribbon, and written inside, in the same script as my name, was Narcissa Malfoy’s insistent invitation to Samhain celebrations at the newly rebuilt and remodeled Malfoy Manor. Festivities were to begin at ten o’clock, and no costume was necessary, it would be provided.

At the bottom, under Narcissa’s signature and Malfoy family seal, with the motto of: ‘tempus edax rerum.’ I blinked at the motto, and felt my face crack with a smile. The Fates really did have a sense of humour.

In a rushed hand, Narcissa scribbled: “If I must resort to threats, Miss Granger, I will. Be at Samhain!”

I folded the invitation and slipped it back into the envelope, in turn, slipping it into my bottomless pocket of my Transfigured dark blue pea coat. My fingers brushed the Invisibility Cloak and the chain that bound the ring with the Resurrection Stone. The Elder wand was in its arm holster, along with its dark sister.

I stared out across the Great Lawn to the East Side, and let my smile fade.

I was the master of the Hallows, and only on occasion did I realise it. I only ever used the Elder Wand; the Cloak and the Stone had remained in my pocket ever since that night in 1995.

Draco still had the remaining Time-Turner, but I had given up stewardship of the devices, leaving the broken piece in its goblin-warded box, still hidden in the now empty cottage.

All the while I had been in New York City, I wondered why Draco had never found me. I had left the groom’s quarters as if possessed that night. My feelings for the man had been strong, but still I submitted my resignation, and packed the cottage, leaving Britain two days later. I had not written to him, or his family, I had not contacted anyone besides Ron, and that had not been correspondence of a personal nature.
Perhaps it was because they believed I needed the time away, Ron had mentioned that I should leave Britain for a while, and I did. However, Draco never sought after me, and I felt a little, no, very stupid. I felt stupid for two reasons, one being that I was totally besotted with the creepy ferret, and the other being that he did not find me, when deep down, in my secret heart I wanted him to show up in New York, stopping me on the street, in Times Square, in Battery Park, in Brooklyn, and kiss me senseless. I only allowed myself one minute of self-denigration before I set my face to occupy myself with my work and training.

Training was part of the reason I was in New York.

I stood up from the park bench and stretched. Adjusting my coat over my jeans, I started along the path that led along the perimeter of the Great Lawn, jogging in my military issue boots toward the East Side.

My hair was fixed just the way it had been at Beltane, and it moved over my shoulders heavily as I jogged past people walking their dogs, or older couples enjoying the cool October day. In New York, no one knew me, and that fact was almost as good as the solitude I had in the Forbidden Forest. I had been told that in New York, everyone is alone.

I jogged into the streets from the park, and along the sidewalks. No one paid any mind that I was not outfitted like a jogger, no one looked at me at all. I grinned as I ran across a street and into an alley, all the while letting my wand slip into my hand. Jogging in place before bare stretch of wall, I tapped the brick four times, and a heavy metal door melted into existence before me, and through it I went, up a set of stairs that did not taper until I reach the top of the building, six stories up, and into a studio flat. Through another door I stopped jogging, sweat beading my brow. I magicked the door shut, locked, and warded it before doffing my coat to through it over a ragged armchair down into the studio’s main floor.

Angled roof windows gave me an unobstructed view of the Park, and I flopped down into the armchair, my back pressing painfully into one of the Transfigured buttons on my coat. I did not mind it, as I stared out across the Park, and the spots of yellow and orange among the dark green trees. However, I turned my eyes to the walls, and the canvases stacked against them…

“I did not hear you come in,” a voice sounded behind me, coming from the kitchen area, which had more jars of paint and dirty brushes than it did cookware. “How was training?”

I did not turn to the voice.

“Hard. I’m afraid to take off my boots for the blisters.”
There was a clattering of pots in a cabinet and then the hiss of gas before a ‘whoosh’ of fire igniting a stove burner.

“Ron told you it was going to be rough. When do you finish?”

“This weekend. Then I’m in.”

Melodic laughter filled the kitchen even as I heard more clattering of dishes.

“You may have been the brightest witch in school, but I am having doubts about your sanity, Granger.”

I smirked as I watched the lamps in the Park begin to light as the sun set.

“Guess what?” I called as I heard water being filled into what I suspected to be the only clean pot in the flat.

“What?” the voice called back.

“I got an invite to the Samhain celebration at Malfoy Manor.”

More laughing.

I sighed and shifted in the armchair, my eyes moving to the far side of the studio and the large canvas set upon an easel. It was the scene, just as I had described it: broken moon, bright stars, the black rippling waves of an ocean and the red giant sun beginning to rise or set behind a pedestal, where three faceless women sat apportioning fate and time.

I jumped, startled due to my fatigue, as a figure strode past me, and fell into the couch adjacent me, and I studied the figure that lounged back, a head wrapped in threadbare towel.
Pansy Parkinson was wearing only a pair of pink underwear and a damp dark green tank top. I wondered why she had a towel about her head when her inky black hair was as short as a boy’s. Pansy stared back at me, a smile on her small mouth.

“I got one too.”

I cocked my head. “Are you going?”

“Hell, no. Ron did not get an invitation, so why should I go?”

I blinked at Pansy.

I had been staying with her for months. To be truthful, I was still in shock that we had managed to stay in the same room for more than a few minutes before the insults began to fly. When Ron had suggested I stay with Pansy, I stared at his letter for a long time, thinking that he meant someone else. Pansy Parkinson lived in New York City? Why? She was apparently a painter. How did Ron know her so well?

It seemed while I sequestered myself away for eight years, much of what I knew about Pansy Parkinson had changed. After Hogwarts, and her parents’ shame of being on the wrong side of the Last Battle, Pansy had decided to strike out on her own. She knew people, and she was Slytherin. Pansy moved to New York, disinherited, but far from destitute. She procured her studio flat from a wizard she knew through her mother. And from there, she started painting—magic paintings that sold for a high price. Pansy was famous in the States.

How Ron came to be reacquainted with her was merely by coincidence. He had been in New York for work, which I learned much later on was not just on British Ministry affairs, but American, Canadian, Mexican, French, Spanish, and a list of other countries. Ron was an Auror associated with the international Dragonriders, but worked on a less ‘covert’ level than his brother Charlie. I had known Ron was working with an international Auror group, which, again, I learned much later on was a group called F.O.I.L. or Federation of International Law. Magical law, of course, well versed in the varying law systems of all nations with magical peoples.

The acronyms had begun to make my headache.

Simply put, F.O.I.L. was the larger organisation that encompassed the Dragonriders. Charlie’s branch dealt with international terrorism, Ron was more or less an Auror with a worldwide
jurisdiction. Pansy called Ron: “The C.I.A. to Charlie’s F.B.I.” I was amazed she knew what those organisations were.

Pansy met Ron a Wizarding club in Soho seven years before, and, had been lovers ever since.

“I’m making spaghetti, hungry?”

I shook my head. I was too tired to be hungry; I had purposely spent the last of my energy jogging back to her flat.

Pansy shrugged and jumped from the couch to stride gracefully on the balls of her feet into the kitchen.

It was hard to believe that she was the same girl who had mercilessly tormented me in school or that she was the girl who stupidly screamed the night of the Last Battle that the Slytherins should grab Harry and toss him out to Voldemort.

She was not nearly a pug-faced, but she still like a stick with clothes placed upon it. Pansy was not pretty, for that matter, neither was I. When Pansy opened her door to me months before, I expected some scathing remark, but instead found myself being embraced as if I were some dear, old friend. It puzzled me.

Ron had told Pansy part of my ordeal with Harry—and Draco. Pansy never brought up the subject unless I mentioned something first, and then she would silently listen as I poured myself out to her. I was still wondering if I should have trusted her after she began the painting on the easel, the black waves lapping at the base of the pedestal, the spinning wheel turning slowly. The painting unsettled me, and Pansy usually kept it covered when she was not working on finishing it.

“Where did they take you this time?” Pansy called from the kitchen. I could hear her adding spaghetti to the pot, throwing in a bit of salt.

I finally decided to peel off my boots, wincing as I did so.

“Washington State, just below Mount Rainier, near a military base.”
“And?”

I sighed as I let the last boot drop to the floor.

“I fell off my broom once, trekked ten miles through rough terrain, and nearly hexed the instructor’s head off when he ambushed me from the high ground…”

Pansy laughed again. I made it to my socked feet and hobbled into the kitchen, leaning against the bar counter, watching Pansy push all the raw spaghetti down into the pot. I looked about, paint splatters on the last of the clean mugs, dishes rotting in the sink, and many other nasty things I did not like to see in a kitchen where food was being prepared. I had never pictured Pansy being a slob.

Drawing the walnut wand, I cast a series of spells until the kitchen was sanitary for food preparation.

Pansy smiled back at me as I frowned.

“And you finish by the weekend?”

I nodded.

“I bet that will be a record,” Pansy uttered sarcastically. I knew she did not mean her words to seem unkind; it was a manner I was slowly getting used to with Pansy.

Stepping away from the boiling pot, Pansy moved to the bathroom door, which led into the kitchen, and pulling the towel from her head, threw it in the general vicinity of her laundry hamper. Again, I frowned.

“Ron will be pleased though. He was worried that the American instructors might put you off.”

“They are alright—a lot of talk. The range of spells they use is impressive, but it is obvious that have not studied magical theory, that there can be degrees to a spell’s intensity.”
Pansy hummed as she began to prepare to heat a canned sauce. It was not a gourmet meal, but at least it was not take-out. Pansy acquainted me early with the joys of New York Chinese take-out.

“Better than London’s,” she had said.

I tried of watching Pansy stir the boiling pot, and moved into the bathroom, and took a quick shower. I felt as if I had brought back half of Washington’s dirt with me. I had only just Apparated back to New York, in the trees of Central Park to sit down when the eagle owl came.

I Summoned clean clothes from the bedroom open to the loft while I toweled off. I heard Pansy squeak when a pair of underwear and a long sleep shirt came sailing past her. I stifled a giggle. By the time I had fixed my hair into a ponytail, the braids dried, and left the bathroom dressed, Pansy was filling two plates of spaghetti and sauce. Together we moved into the common area before the windows, sitting down to eat and stare out into the dark Park below.

“Are you going back to Britain after you finish?”

I paused mid-bite. I had not thought that far ahead.

“I suppose it depends if they will allow me to take the position Gumboil offered me back in May.”

Pansy shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, I’m just a simple painter,” she guffawed.

“I wish I could paint, or write, or do anything creative, Pans.”

She had insisted I call her ‘Pans’ since Ron did. I did not ask why Pansy had been so friendly and kind, but I had a feeling it was partly because of Ron, and Harry’s cruel insanity.

“Ah, but I wish I could be a F.O.I.L. operative. You have a steady salary. You acquiesce to no one…”

“Except a superior.”
“Who cares? You have jurisdiction to do what you want. And no one at the Ministry in London can top that. You realise that you and Ron are people to be feared, don’t you?”

I began eating again. It was true what Pansy had said. But I was not seeking that kind of power. I just wanted to do something where I could truly make a difference. Relegating time was tedious, and a waste of talents I had even before Severus’ spell was enacted.

I had written to Alexander Roux just before I began training with the American branch of F.O.I.L., I did not want to lose his confidences. Alex wrote back immediately, conveying his understanding as to why I had chosen to leave the Department of Mysteries. I was much relieved. I wrote back to tell him that I would see him soon, if he would not mind having his old subordinate back in the darkness of the tenth level. Alex looked forward to my return.

“I did not decide to put myself through the five month-long fast-track hell of training just so I could ‘lord’ over someone,” I answered after eating a few more bites.

Pansy smirked, and began to say something, but stopped. I knew what she was going to say.

I had endured the most difficult Auror training known to wizard kind, subjected myself to one month stranded in the Amazon, three weeks in the Siberian steppes, and many more weeks on last minute training exercises to various, dangerous locations in the world, because I wanted to prove to Draco Malfoy that I could protect myself from here on out. I was not weak; I was not defeated because of everything we had done to stop Harry Potter.

At least, that was Pansy said quite often. Strangely, she was absolutely correct.

“You have become a warrior, in the truest sense. You were probably always that person, and it took Potter and Draco to show you the truth,” Pansy said to me when my fatigue made me wish I had not committed myself to my new path in life.

However, as we sat, eating overcooked spaghetti, scantily clad, I felt like Hermione Granger, the real Hermione Granger, the woman I should have been eight years earlier. I felt alive, and I liked it.
My passing recommendation from the F.O.I.L. instructors read something like this: ‘Granger’s physical aptitude is far higher than what was expected when the agent enrolled in the accelerated courses. However, Granger is hesitant to fight, using her intellect to avoid confrontation, and clever negotiation to diffuse situations before they become physically hostile.

Though Granger has passed every physical examination, it is the recommendation of this committee that Granger be placed in an advisory capacity. This capacity could be best described as a ‘liaison.’ Her communication skills, understandings of all magical disciplines, her history as member of the Order of the Phoenix, her keen perception, and unwavering determination to mete justice for victims and accused inside a structure of law, makes her suitable to act as the British liaison to the international organisation F.O.I.L. and its Muggle counterparts the MI6, C.I.A., and the DGSE.

Granger is the first trainee to break every training record since F.O.I.L. was founded in 1666, and glowing recommendations are attached to this document from every trainer Granger encountered during her five-month fast track. We at F.O.I.L wish Hermione Granger the best of luck in her future endeavors and look forward to her progress in her new position within the organisation.’

It was a stunning cover letter, I supposed, but Gumboil and Williamson had not bothered to read it when I sat down to tell them why I returned to the MLE.

“You said that I could work in such a capacity, Gumboil, as a liaison. Here I am, now qualified, now ready, and now you have an answer to a question you asked five months ago.”

Gumboil regarded me hesitantly, and Williamson, I could tell was slightly disappointed that I would not be joining his ranks on an official level.

By the midday of October 31, I had finished my business with the Ministry, managing to see Alex Roux as well. I walked along the Atrium, dragon hide boots tapping against the floor as I strode toward the Floos. My cloak fluttered out behind me, as did my tiny braids. I was a vision in black, armed, armored, and the newest employ of the MLE, F.O.I.L liaison, and second only to Williamson as Head Auror. Gumboil and Williamson could not contain their smiles when I signed my contract papers despite the fact that I was in many ways their superior when it came to jurisdiction.
“You should have been here eight years ago, Granger,” Gumboil said, dropping the ‘Miss’ before my name. “The Weasleys have spoken highly of your skills, as did Potter—when he was worth a damn.”

I kept my face passive.

“I’m sure Roux was sad to lose you. But for you to pass the F.O.I.L written examinations in over a month, and the physical exams in four, well, it is just a testament to determination,” Williamson added.

I said nothing.

I was not a police officer, I was not an Auror, I was a F.O.I.L. liaison, which meant that I was the watchdog of every magical law enforcement agency in my assigned location. I would not fight, I would not apprehend, I was not someone like Draco or Charlie who literally fought crime. I was the last word of the law, and I was the last person who would literally fight. Fight, I could, but would I? Not unless every police officer and Auror were dead.

All the training had been to prove that I could handle myself if need be, but the trust test had been to prove that everything I had been through, the War, Harry, had not rankled my sense of justice, had not skewed my perception or my mind. It did not matter what Gumboil or Williamson thought of me, I was the ‘brains’ of the MLE, not the muscle.

I represented the connection between the MLE and every department of the Ministry, from the Department of Mysteries to the Minister’s office. I was a warrior with no real weapon except my mind.

When I walked through the offices, I could feel eyes upon me. I knew the ratio of men to women was off in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but I could handle men easily, my two best friends had been male. I had a new badge inside a wallet, tucked into my pocket. With that badge, I could tell everyone in the Department to get on their knees, beg, and roll over. I was the person that told where the Aurors where to go, the police officers where to investigate, I was the mysterious hand of justice in the magical world that moved through darkness and ate secrets. Therefore, I ignored those eyes, just as I ignored the others in the Atrium.

I did not see Draco.
However, when the invitation’s Portkey activated hours later, I stood on the drive before a Manor I barely recognised. It was nearly ten, and already other guests were Portkeying near me. Some people I recognised from the Ministry, some I did not. I recognised Kingsley Shaklebolt, Millicent Bulstrode, Theo Nott, Blaise Zabini, and many of the older guests.

The Manor was no longer in a French-style, but just as I remembered Lucius saying, a traditional manor house style. It reminded me of Stourhead, which, I wondered had influenced the choice of style, as it was not too far away. There was an extra story, and the windows were smaller. Only the central portion of the house really reminded me of Stourhead, especially the porch, but the Manor was not just Palladian, but of Cotswold influence as well. The exterior was a darker stone while the front entrance was much as I remembered, and it was there I saw Lucius and Narcissa greeting their guests.

A few disdainful glances passed over me, but again, I ignored them as I began walking toward the elevated entrance. I waited as more guests moved by me, all dressed in fine suits or gowns. I listened as Narcissa explained that no one needed to dress for the gathering, tonight a novelty would choose their costumes for them.

I waited at the base of the porch, until I was the last guest outside, and hurrying to catch up with the guest ahead of me; I came to stand just before the Lord and Lady of the Manor. From the lamplight hanging over the door, I knew Lucius and Narcissa were studying me closely.

“Have you come to slay a dragon, Miss Granger?” Lucius drawled, his eyes moving over my dragon hide clothing.

I smirked.

“Perhaps.

Pardon me for being late, Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy,” I said placing a hand over my heart and bowing—dragon slayer indeed.

Narcissa laughed, and I suddenly found myself in her arms. I watched Lucius smirk and quickly turn to go inside the Manor. I watched as he entered the door, a sparkle of enchantment working over him, and suddenly his clothing changed, and a mask obscured his face.
I understood now what they had meant by novelty.

“It is so wonderful to see you, dear. I was so afraid you would not come!” Narcissa cried holding me at arm’s length to study my face.

The guilt I had been repressing trickled out.

“I apologise…I really…” I began, tears thickening my voice.

Narcissa cooed, smoothing a pale hand over my face.

“It has been difficult, Hermione, we understand this—there is no need to apologise.”

I shook my head. “To Draco…I…”

“Shhh…” Narcissa cooed again, embracing me. “He’s here.”

“Does he know I’m here?” I asked in a whisper.

Narcissa moved to hold me at arm’s length again. “No,” she said with a wicked smile.

I pursed my lips. I should have known.

We stared at each other for a long time, and then Narcissa’s face darkened. “I can imagine how you might feel, Hermione, as if all of this past year has been a dream. I have felt much the same. In fact, to me, looking at you now is like a dream.

I want to be angry with you, Hermione, but I cannot. Draco, however…” she trailed.

I lowered my eyes to my boots.
“Do you love him?” she whispered.

I bit my lip. I had not expected Narcissa Malfoy to be so forthright.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you allow yourself to love him, if you wanted?”

I felt my brows furrow. “I want to.” Somehow, I felt as if Narcissa had bewitched my tongue to speak my inner truths aloud.

“I know he’s changed. You have changed. Just looking at you now, it is hard to believe that you were that girl Draco brought here, clinging to life.

And Draco—the fiery passion he had, I thought I would never see it again when he first returned to us. That is why you need to go in the door, and see for yourself. Our Draco has not been lost,” Narcissa breathed, her fingers brushing over my cheek again.

I raised my eyes and tried to smile, but it came across as a grimace.

“It’s Samhain, dear, and when we steal away for Horned Hill, you will come with us.”

Narcissa’s hands on my shoulders steered me to the door, and already I could hear people laughing, music playing, and feet dancing. I glanced back once to the woman I had grown to care for, and my heart swelled at the sight of the tears in her pale eyes.

I stepped through the door, and immediately I felt magic breeze across my skin. As I took another step into the foyer, the magic seemed to coat me like a viscous liquid, and I watched the dragon hide melted into a gown of the same material and colour as the shift I had worn on Beltane.

A mask covered my face, but not my hair, and as I whirled to find a familiar polished bronze mirror upon the foyer wall, I saw a strange face staring back at me. I could see through the mask as
if there was no mask on my face, but what I saw in the mirror startled me. The mask was divided into thirds. The right side was a portion of a small face of a girl, the far right eye closed, the right side of her mouth open. The middle was my face in total, distorted with one bright yellow topaz for a right eye open. The left side was like the right side, a portion of an old woman’s face, left eye open wide, tiger’s eye stones as the eye itself. Together, the three faces composed one, made of what looked like white marble except for the jewels.

I wore the face of the Fates.

The dress, which on closer inspection was not a gown, but a Greek chiton, dipped low in the front and back, revealing the insides of my breasts, and the circular brand upon my left breast. My dragon hide boots had disappeared, and instead I wore light sandals. My arms were bare, my wands gone.

Immediately, I began to panic.

“It is alright, dear,” Narcissa’s voice sounded behind me.

I turned to find myself face to face, rather, mask to mask, with a white, nearly featureless face. It was unnerving, to say the least. Narcissa wore a beautiful pale blue ball gown, her hair coiffed in silvery ringlets atop her head.

“Your clothing has been Transfigured, and if you feel your arm, your wands are still there, just Disillusioned,” she said, her voice slightly muffled by her mask.

I felt my right forearm, and just as Narcissa said, my wands were there.

“Come along, the dancing has already begun…” she said, taking my hand.

Pulling me through the foyer, she led me through a wide corridor into a part of the house I never remembered before, then again, the Manor had been rebuilt, and only the foyer seemed somewhat familiar. We entered a parlour, which led off to a larger room, a dinning hall of sorts, but served that night as a ballroom. Open doors lined the outside wall, leading to the terrace I remembered passing the morning after W.A.T.C.H. attacked.

There was quite a crowd in the room, and at the far end, a group of musicians, who were masked,
played song after song. It was a ball like those I imagined in Jane Austen books—intricate country contra dances. Masked guests sat in the outlying parlours and along the walls of the room, talking, smoking, and drinking, with house elves scurrying about the periphery.

Just as the dance ended, Narcissa released my hand, and I found myself quite alone.

I spotted Lucius near the terrace, dressed in dark blue robes befitting a gentleman of the eighteenth century, a hawk mask obscuring his face, the eyes set with sapphires that gleamed in the candles floating over the middle of the room.

I took a step forward and was suddenly blocked by a tall man in a brown frock coat and white leggings. He wore a mask that resembled a basset hound, and I suddenly wondered how the charms worked when the guests passed through the door.

“Even though your mask is a bit frightening… I’ll ask—do you dance, lady?”

Though muffled, I knew the voice. Theo Nott. His gloved hand was stretched toward me and he bowed, I had no other choice. I was not even sure if I could dance. However, as I stood in line, across from Theo, my feet moved with the music. I had never learned how to English Country Dance, yet I moved as if it had been something engrained in me.

Soon, I was dancing with other partners, weaving my way through the line, until I was faced with a mask that made me miss a step. A black-gloved hand grasped mine and we moved, facing one another.

It was a dragon’s mask, a diamond for the left eye, a terrible scar blinding the right. The mask was black as well, making the features seem to be shadowed. However, as I turned away to move to the next partner, I saw that a long length of silvery hair streamed from a ribbon at the back of the man’s head.

He had not acknowledged me, surely, he could see a part of the scar on the inside of my breast where the chiton hanged so loose.

The dance ended and I was curtseying to Theo again. He held my hand and led me from the dance floor; I was too distracting trying to watch Draco that I was not paying any attention to Theo’s words. A drink was pressed into my hand, and I stared at it dumbly. How was I to imbibe anything with a mask on?
“The masks are an illusion, see?” Theo explained, taking a glass from a tray as a house elf scurried past. Lifting the wine glass to his mask, the glass seemed to fade through and he tilted his head back to drain the crystal.

I cocked my head; it was an interesting bit of charm work. Theo set his empty glass on the wide wainscoting and urged me to drink.

Red wine.

Beltane night slipped into my mind again, and I scanned the room for the only black mask I had seen so far. My eyes moved to the door to the other parlour, and, finishing my glass, I stepped around Theo to peer inside. Draco was not there.

“Would you like to have another dance? I promise I won’t ask again…”

Theo had always seemed like a decent fellow, even though he had been in Slytherin, and I relented, again.

I danced three more times, the last not with Theo, but a man in a strange multicoloured mask that resembled the face of a peacock. I drank several more glasses of wine, all the while scanning the room for Draco.

Quickly, I found myself upon the terrace, too hot, slightly intoxicated, and frustrated. I had come, just as Narcissa had asked, and I wanted to see Draco again. I wanted to show him that I could stand on my own, hold my own, and be worthy of his strength by revealing my own. Leaning against the stone balustrade of the terrace, I knew my reasoning was quite inane.

Months of having to rely on myself to survive made me realise how stupidly immature I had been. I had worried about what people thought about me, when I really needed to worry about what I thought about myself. I had come to the conclusion that I did not like myself very much.

Fighting my way through the rainforests of South America, beset upon by dangerous magical beasts, chased by dark shaman, I realised that I had to get my head out of my arse and start facing the truth of myself. I was intelligent, I was strong, I had the ability to exude confidence, and just like everyone else in the world, I was worthy of love. Why it had to take something like Auror training for me to realise who I was? It was, well, overkill, but it worked. All that remained was to
find the man I had thought about all those months putting my mind and body through the insane rigors of training.

My eyes scanned the gardens beyond the terrace. Just as Narcissa had said, the kitchen garden to my right had been changed, into a rock garden, it seemed, but out toward my left, the hedge maze was the same. Bluebell lights lit the passages, and in what I assumed was the middle with the Japanese gardens, was lit brightly. Below the terrace, couples walked, drinks in hand, laughing.

With a sigh, I made my way off the terrace and into the gardens, lifting the hem of my chiton as I walked over the cold ground. I scanned the masks of the other guests, not seeing the Malfoys—any of them.

I whirled into the dark of the hedge maze, the Bluebell lights at every bend, and began to walk along the pebbled path. Memories of the gore I had come upon made my fingers on my right hand bend toward the handle of my walnut wand. It was an irrational reaction, and I stopped just past the first light. I could hear laughter further in, and the sound of shoes scrapping against the pebbled path.

I swayed on my feet for a moment, realising then how intoxicated I truly was.

The crunch of footsteps into the pebbles, albeit careful and quiet, had me whirling again, my wand tip pressed into a pale throat. I narrowed my eyes, staring up into a black mask, a diamond eye sparkling in the blue light.

“I was going to ask if you’d be interest in playing ‘find the naughty, drunk wench in the hedge maze,’ but it seems that you are not in the mood.”

His voice was slightly muffled, but as he raised his gloved hands in a gesture of passivity, I tore the wand from his Adam’s apple and slipped it discreetly into the Disillusioned holster.

“We would have about an hour and half to play, if you were in the mood, my lady,” he said softly, hands still raised, stepping closer.

“Until midnight?” I whispered.

The dragon mask nodded. “Would you be interested?”
Behind my mask, I smirked. “But you know this maze better than I do, it would not exactly be fair.”

He took a step forward; I took a step back. In the blue light, the contours of the mask seemed much more frightening, but the loosely plaited silver hair spilling over his left shoulder seemed to reflect the light, which by lying over a dark cloak, made him appear quite imposing. The clothing, the cloak, the jerkin, which was zipped closed, was the same things he wore on Beltane, and again, I was curious as to the enchantments used to costume the Samhain guests.

“I would give you a head start, my lady,” he said with a bow, his hands finally moving.

“How long?”

Rising to his full height, I knew he was smiling behind his mask. “One minute. However, the point is that you ‘try’ to hide, and I find you.

I’m sure we won’t be the only ones playing this game.”

I sighed. If this was how it was to be…

I took off running before he could move or speak.

I began laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. My feet navigated me deep into the maze, passing couples hidden in the shadows, and all the lascivious sounds accompanying an impromptu encounter. I paid no mind to the other guests, running with my skirts in my hands, faster than was most likely proper, but I ran. The Bluebell lights became fewer and fewer, and only a low orange moon lit the white path.

Even behind the illusionistic mask, I had a hard time breathing, and taking another corner, I stumbled into the Japanese garden. From the height of the hedges, I had not realised I was so close. Braziers burned along the paths and the pond seemed to glow seem inside the water, an eerie shade of green.

I paused to take in the splendour of the garden; it was just as I remembered it, and devoid of any
other guests.

The sound of pebbles sliding over pebbles made me freeze for a split second, and again, I took off, running along the path between the ponds toward the gazebo. Sandals slapping against the wooden platform, I slipped into the shadows as a black figure flew into the garden, diamond eye flashing the brazier light. From the dark, I watched the maimed dragon move about the garden before moving along the perimeter, cloak fluttering behind the dark, hard figure of a man obscured underneath. My breath quickened as he disappeared into a shadow, not emerging.

I took half a step forward, still inside the shadow, my eyes casting along the garden. I began to turn on the balls of my feet, silently.

When arms wrapped about me, pinning my arms to my sides. Instinct kicked in, and I moved, or tried to move, to slip free from the crushing embrace.

“I found the wench—game over,” a voice whispered, and I stilled. I needed to be able to control my ferocious instincts, distinguish friend from foe a bit quicker. It would come with practice, I knew.

“It wasn’t much of a game, you know,” I whispered.

“True, but we don’t have time to play it properly.”

The sound of laughter filled the garden, and near the southeastern corner, two figures emerged from the maze, a lady in a fine ball gown of the deepest red, stumbled into the light of the braziers first, a mask of red obscuring the face, but long black curls fell over wide, bare shoulders. I was not sure who the woman was, but the man in the peacock mask pursued her, gloved hands snatching the woman about the waist and wrestling her to a bench near one of the ponds. It was a real struggle, I could see, for the couple embraced, falling onto the wide bench, limbs tangling.

“Blaise and Millicent, interesting,” Draco Malfoy muttered behind me.

His embrace loosened, and I was able to turn to look up into the dragon mask. Pulling his wand from the darkness of his cloak, he dispelled his mask, the dragon’s face dissipating like black smoke. Soon, I was also unmasked, our eyes meeting as he slipped the yew wand away again.
Draco’s face, again, seemed younger than when he revealed himself in the graveyard, and I wondered by what spell or potion had returned his face to the youthful visage I loved. Of course, the strange mismatched eye remained, as did the scar, but his face seemed more expressive, the serious mien that had made him appear so alien gone.

I opened my mouth to speak, but found his gloved finger pressed against my lips, his other hand pulling me deeper into the shadow of one of the orient green posts of the gazebo. His body was pressed into my back, and as he leaned to whisper in my ear, his lips brushed against my throat.

“That…” he whispered, pointing to Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode, “is how the game is played.”

I watched the couple, as they also dispelled their masks, to kiss properly. I had not seen Blaise Zabini for years, but knew that he was the Director of St. Mungo’s. And Millicent? She owned half of Diagon Alley, albeit under a different name.

Blaise pushed Millicent down into the bench, his gloved hands moving to the shoulders of her dress, and with a wrench, rent the fabric so that I could see her pale, heavy breasts, and the wanton expression on her face. As dark lips moved her the column of her throat, downward to a dusky nipple, I wanted to turn my eyes away.

“They never liked each other in school. Millie was not Slytherin enough, and Blaise too much so,” Draco whispered, his fingers brushing a few small braids from my shoulder. When his fingertips met my skin, I realised he had taken his gloves off—skin to touch skin.

“And yet the twine about each other so beautifully.”

Blaise ripped Millicent’s dress down the front, revealing smooth, ivory skin, terminating in ebon curls, the destination of Blaise’s kisses and flickering tongue.

The sound of Millicent Bulstrode’s voice ringing out startled me, and in reaction, Draco pressed me into the pillar of the gazebo, my cheek pressed against the green pained wood. His hands were upon my hips, running a path to my waist; I swallowed as his finger bunched the skirts of my thin chiton.

Blaise Zabini’s lithe body was soon unrobed before my eyes, and I held my breath at the beauty of his form, his braids falling about his face, hiding Millicent as he kissed her. Dark hands slipped
behind her knees, pushing them about her shoulders. I shuddered at the lascivious sight of a thick, turgid male organ disappearing into the witch lying upon the tatters of her red gown. Millicent hissed as the slow penetration, her hands grasping Blaise’s shoulder.

“Here is where the game gets interesting…”

I had almost forgotten about Draco and his hands moving about my front, fingertip tracing the scarred brand on the inside of my left breast.

Blaise snarled, all tenderness gone, his hips snapping against Millicent’s in a violent thrust that ripped a scream from the witch. I winced out of habit at the sound of a scream, but I knew better than to think that Blaise Zabini was somehow hurting the witch. Millicent was never svelte or skinny like her schoolmate and best friend Pansy Parkinson, but Millicent was not unattractive. Her muscular build and square jaw were not nearly as unfeminine when compared to her curves, the shape of her lips, her navy blue eyes, and gorgeous wavy hair. She could break Blaise Zabini, not the other way around.

However, as fingers curled about my left breast, I knew I had to pay more attention to the man pressing his hips into my bottom than the couple roughly copulating nearby.

“Must we watch this?” I asked in whisper.

Draco chuckled softly.

I was aroused, despite myself. I knew I was intermittently rubbing my thighs together to stave off the flow of essences further down my legs. When I had stepped through the front door of the Manor, it seemed that the enchantments wanted me to have no underwear, and it annoyed me.

“We ‘must’ not, but we ‘want’ to…”

I stifled a groan as Draco’s hips twisted into mine, and I could feel his erection digging into my lower back, his hand squeezing my left breast as Millicent’s cries were offset by Blaise’s grunts and moans. My fingernails dug into the pillar as that hand slipped from my breast down the front of my loose draping chiton. The fabric shifted and I knew that he could touch me, but he did not, the pads of his fingers only tracing my belly and a line back up the midline of my body to my throat.
“If only we had more time… But we’ll have time after,” he whispered, his hands manipulating me so that I leaned back into the pillar, the sight of the couple still burned into my mind.

“After the rite,” I uttered, rearranging my dress, and my mind. I would not let Draco Malfoy mentally rankle me, as much as I had wanted to see him, as much as I wanted to explain myself, as much as I wanted to feel him inside me again, I knew it would happen all in due time—when everything was in a condition that I could act.

Draco smirked, and pressed closer into me, his erection hot against my belly. My hands twitched at my sides, and slowly my fingers found his cloaked shoulders, moving to the leather jerkin and under the cloak to the sinews of his biceps. He felt warm at every point we touched, alive, real…

“You left without saying goodbye, Hermione,” he muttered. “I was so angry—for approximately one week.”

I turned my eyes away.

“And then, after the anger slid away into doubt, I received a letter from Pansy in New York. You were there, and I was not to come. Then a letter from Weasley, telling me what you were doing.”

I sighed.

“What possessed you to apply to that organisation, Hermione? What possessed you to leave without a word, without an apology, a goodbye?” he whispered, his hands crushing into my hips as if to weld my body into his.

I steeled myself and met his eyes.

“You. You told me that you went to America to change yourself, to prove to everyone that you were not Lucius Malfoy’s ‘little monster son.’ I went to prove myself to myself.

Being stronger here,” I whispered pointing a finger into my temple “is not good enough when the rest of me is so weak.”
Draco’s face was impassive and the sounds of lovemaking seemed so far away.

“You were never weak, Hermione, body, soul, and mind. Was it necessary that you train to be a F.O.I.L. agent to prove this well known fact to yourself?”

I smirked despite the softness of Draco’s voice.

“I have found a place where I no longer need the protection of an outside party. I have honed my mind and body into a device that I find pleasing. I like myself again.”

Draco pulled me closer, if it were possible. “My wish to protect you was for nothing?”

I frowned, my forehead resting in his shoulder.

“No. No, I wanted your protection, but now I just want your love, without having to fear that I would shatter and break if I would ever lose you or your love.”

Draco stiffened in his embrace around me, and I could feel anger swell through him and then recede. I wondered what he was thinking. After five months, I had not just worked to change myself, I had worked to be the woman who could live next to Draco Malfoy, a woman he did not have to fear for, but love wholeheartedly. Fear had separated us before, even when we were together, a fear that made it impossible for me to fully understand anything except my own mortality. I had faced death, now I needed to embrace love.

“We should go,” he whispered.

I blinked at him, unsure how we were to go unnoticed by the couple in the throes of a ‘loud’ passion nearby. However, I realised as Draco’s arms wrapped about me, we did not have to move at all, as Apparition took us.

“Since you have been gone, the wards have been reset to what they were when my grandfather was alive,” Draco said after I found that we stood far below Horned Hill. “Tonight we finish resetting the wards for only those with Malfoy blood.”
Draco took my hand as we began walking toward the henge. Glancing back toward the Manor, all I could see was a faint glow of bluebell lights in the gardens. Before us, the stones rose into the moonlight, ancient and still. I began pondering Draco’s words.

Narcissa was not of Malfoy blood, having been born a Black, and I wondered what the Malfoy marriage rites involved. Perhaps a Blood Bond?

As we neared the crest of the hill, we stopped, turning to look back toward the Manor. Below us, Lucius and Narcissa began walking up the slope, Narcissa holding her skirts in one hand, holding to Lucius as they ascended. Both were also unmasked.

Once at the crest, Narcissa took my hand and pulled me away from Draco into the circle, to the place I had once witnessed the Beltane rite.

“We can speak, Beltane was a very sacred rite. Samhain is also sacred, but it has a greater element of fun…” Narcissa laughed softly, smoothing my hair as a mother would.

Beyond the centre circle of stones, two bonfires were lit by father and son, the western fire a bright red, the eastern fire a strange silver flame. Draco and Lucius stood in the south, staring at the fires, their pale eyes reflecting the colours.

“I am not sure how much you know of the ancient Celtic rites, Hermione, but you know that we Malfoys fortify our wards at the equinox. Samhain is such a rite, as is Beltane. However, at Samhain, we divine the future of our lands after passing through the fires…”

First, we purify ourselves… In the old days, everyone attached to the Malfoy family did so, and then took a seat upon the outer stones. The Lord and heir set the wards, and then we divine the future of our lands.”

As Narcissa spoke, I could tell, like myself, she was slightly intoxicated. The flush on her pale cheeks made her appear younger, and the smile on her lips playful. Taking my hands again, she and I moved to the north, into the inner circle.

“There is no real ceremony here, we just walk together between the fires.”

Narcissa stood at my right, and with a squeeze of my hand, we walked together between the narrow
space between the magical fires. However, as we passed, I felt magic trickle over my skin, as if I had walked through an invisible portal, much as I had when I had entered the Manor hours before. Stopping on the other side, I glanced down to my bare hands and arms, and once again, I found I was marked with tiny runes, golden and shining in the firelight. It was not the rune I had worn at Beltane, it was instead something familiar to an Elder Futhark rune called ‘pertho,’ which referred to chance and fate. More in keeping with the Norse origin of the rune, it meant ‘orlog,’ better known as ‘wyrd’ or Fate.

However, as Draco and Lucius walked north through the fire, I saw no runes on their skin, none that were as visible as mine. Narcissa was also covered in tiny dark blue runes, but I was too interested in my own to think of hers.

The rune was not truly ‘pertho’ for it had four dots, on over the top and bottom and on either side.

“Now that we have been purified, the women step outside of the circle,” Narcissa whispered, leading me just past the inner stones.

I was dazed, however, trying to discern the rune. The runes tingled over my skin, and gazing down to my breast, a larger rune rested where the rune signifying Draco’s name had been. Glancing up again, I saw that Lucius stood near us, his lips moving silently, a knife poised, the tip balanced on his palm. I frowned, eyes moving to Draco, who mirrored his father’s stance, a silver blade balanced with the tip in his palm, uttering what seemed like an incantation silently.

With a swift motion that made Narcissa and I gasped, father and son grasped the handle of their blades and slashed their palms, much as they had at Beltane. My vision was transfixed on Draco, whose mismatched eyes burned into the blood welling up in his palm. The red and silver firelight cast a strange glow on the blood as Draco and Lucius tipped their palms, trickles of viscous blood spilling into the stone under their feet.

Instead of a visible and palpable wave of magic flowing through me, magic flowed under my feet.

“A blessing of blood to the soil that nourished the family, a thanks for harvest, for the health of the animals and other creatures that live on our lands,” Narcissa explained in a whisper. “The guests will not have noticed, but we know…we know that our home, the soil, the grass, the trees, has sustained and protected us. Beltane was a blessing for growth, Samhain is a blessing for harvest, and protection for the winter…”

I swallowed, and nodded. Blood magic—generations and generations of Malfoys had given their blood to the land I stood upon. The Malfoys were not evil, arrogant people. They were people, just
people who were thankful for the land they were born and died upon, were thankful for the alliance with the magical creatures, the ordinary animals…

I wondered that if perhaps everyone knew the Malfoys as I knew them at that moment, would they have been so hated?

Narcissa squeezed my hand, and I met her eye. With a smile, she turned me to look out into the dark fields toward the Manor, but the fields were not dark at all.

“This is why we love Samhain,” Narcissa whispered.

The rolling fields glowed brilliant silver and gold as light rose up in what seemed like reverse rain drops of glowing colour. My mouth curled into a smile, even as my heart swelled.

“Magic—as the generations add their own magic, the land gives up some of the magic in turn. Hundreds of years of magic seeps up from the ground for a few hours, from here to the forests... The centaurs come near to see it…”

Beauty, overwhelming beauty. The light came just to the outer circle of stones, and I had an urge to run through the fields like a child, trying to catch the innocuous globules of glowing magic like butterflies.

“What do you think?”

I turned, coming face to face with Draco.

I shook my head, my mouth flapping uselessly. Draco smiled that lop-sided smile I had missed.

“We’re going to play with some old bones, you game?”

I snorted. “You divine with bones?”

Draco smirked. “Mother does. She brought the tradition with her from the Black side of the family.”
My grandmother used apple peels, and my great grandmother acted as a haruspex and eviscerated some poor lambs…”

Draco Malfoy’s brand of sarcasm never failed to amuse me. And I knew then, as he took my hand, his eyes moving over the runes, that I loved him and would love him for as long as I had breath in my body.

My choice of career had not surprised Draco, and as we walked along the glowing fields, my hand in his arm, he told me that after Pansy’s letter informing him where I was, he pulled strings to learn how I was progressing through the training programme. What he had meant by ‘pulling strings’ was Ron.

I was not angry, I was not truly surprised. Somehow, as I watched the floating globules of magic reflect in Draco’s eyes, I knew that no matter where I went or what I did, he would know. Draco was a man of information just as I was one to hide that information.

“If it is what makes you happy…”

“It does.”

“And now you’re working with in the MLE?”

I nodded.

“Then you are home, to stay,” he said softly.

I said nothing, but pressed my cheek into his shoulder. I was home to stay, as long as I knew where home was, and who would have me.

“My mild winter and a marriage—what do you think, Granger?”

He used my surname to tease me.
We laid then in the fields just below Horned Hill, the bonfires out, Lucius and Narcissa back at the Manor, continuing to celebrate with the guests. The magical haze over the fields was still glowing under our backs and all around us.

“A mild winter would be nice. The last winter was downright deadly in the north,” I muttered, staring up at the reddish moon above us.

Draco rolled to his side, having doffed his cloak for us to lie upon, his jerkin unzipped. Upon his breast was the same rune, heir, which he had at Beltane. His mismatched eyes scanned my face as I lay with my right arm behind my head, my elbow digging into Draco’s shoulder as he moved.

“And a marriage?”

I closed my eyes. How was I to know that Narcissa Malfoy was not simply making up what she saw in the bones she tossed on the stones between the bonfires?

“If you’re waiting for me to propose, you’re going to be waiting a while,” I murmured, my lips curling into a wicked smile.

Draco chuckled, his fingers moving to push back the open space of my chiton, staring at the larger rune over my left breast.

I opened my eyes to stare at his plait of silvery hair swinging near my face as his eyes examined the rune, and the circular scar.

“Should I tell you what it means this time?”

I sighed. “You should tell me why I have a rune marking me this time, since your mother did not hypnotise me and cast the spell.”

Draco glanced down into my face, moving to lean over me completely, his right hand resting near my waist.
“I could say it is a Malfoy family secret…” he whispered, ‘that’ smile crossing his lips. “But what Mother told you at Beltane is correct. At Samhain, however, the other side of Beltane, the runes represent not what you want, but what you are. My rune does not change, I am still the heir. Mother’s was ‘Lady,’ as Father’s was ‘Lord.’”

I swallowed. “And mine?”

The grin widened. “The ‘Intended One.’ Surely, you can see that there is a familiar rune, surrounded by other marks? ‘Fate.’ My ancestor was not very original with some runes. However, the marks, are not just dots.”

He lifted a finger to push apart the dress, barring my breasts to the air, and to his sight. Pressing his fingertip to the ‘dot’ on the top of the rune, he sighed.

“That is my name…”

Then to the next. “And that.”

To the bottom ‘dot’ nearest the softer part of my breast. “And that.”

Then to the outer most. “And that…”

I was having difficulty breathing when he touched the last mark, and I stared into his face, frowning.

“You probably could not see my rune since it is a dot on the runes on you arms, but on your breast, it is quite clear,” he whispered.

“So, I am…”

“My intended. That is what the rite has revealed.”

The Fates had spoken. Everything happens for a reason…
All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again…

I shook my head, not out of disbelief, or dismay, or refusal of what Draco had said. I shook my head because, lying in the field, I realised that I, even with free will, had been journeying along a path toward that very point.

I could be happy, even after everything, the War and Harry. The Fool could become The Empress.

“What do you think?” I asked, my hand moving to tug on Draco’s hair.

Draco feigned a wince, falling down toward me so that his face was only inches from mine.

“I think, Granger, that I made me mind up a long time ago. While you were enjoying the view at the end of time, I had nine years to know exactly what I want.”

My smile was strained.

“Do not let your guilt for whatever sin you think you may have committed make you ever smile like that,” Draco growled, his fingers tugging on my braids painfully. “I want you, Hermione. It took long enough for me to realise it, to know I wanted it—and during that time, we did not even exist in the same point in history.

And now, we’re here, on Samhain, and we’re alive. And I want you.”

I licked my lips, my lungs seeming to be on fire.

“The question is: what do you want?”

I smirked. “I have almost everything I have ever wanted.”

“Almost?”
I nodded. “I have found strength in myself. I have found how to forgive myself for so many mistakes. I have found what it is to love, as inane as that sounds. The only thing I want now is to find a place to call home,” I whispered.

Draco’s face was unreadable, his mismatched eyes boring into mine. He pulled away, and I frowned. However, he pulled away to shrug out of his jerkin, letting it fall to the glowing ground around us. He moved to kneel at my side, the light making the skin stretched over the muscles of his chest and shoulder glow. Pulling the ribbon free from his hair, he shook his head, the long silvery tresses falling over his shoulders and back.

I sat up, gazing at the man at my side. I knew that I would never be able to resist the beauty of his seemingly silver skin, or the width of his shoulders, the defined muscles of his chest, to the way his leather trousers hanged from his narrow hips. He was a specimen of a man, only a few scars marring the perfection of his face, his back, his knuckles. Even though I considered him beautiful, I did not see him as weak either. He bore his scars handsomely, he was a fighter, a warrior, and as I caught the fingers of his left hand with mine, raising it to my eyes, I knew he was not so haughty as not to use his fists when he needed to.

I released his fingers with a smirk, and began slipping from my sandals. Sliding the girdle belt from my waist, it seemed my dress peeled away automatically until I sat on Draco’s cloak with the violet coloured fabric pooled about my hips.

The corner of Draco’s colourless lips lifted as he unbuttoned his trousers, but did not push them down his hips. Instead, he reached out to me, and we fell to the cloak covered ground again. I was gathered into his arms, pulled over him, my braids falling over his face as I kissed his lips, tasting wine, tasting citrus, and smelling sage.

My five months to his nine years, it was unfair.

His hands pushed my dress from my body until the full extent of the cold night hair covered my body in goose pimples. I lifted myself to look down at him, his blond hair spread over the darkness of the cloak while light surrounded us. His hands moved to my face, pushing back my caramel strands.

“I asked you once, and I will ask again—stay with me,” he whispered. “Stay with me…”

My chest constricted at the emotion in his voice. And I did what I should have done five months
earlier, I nodded my ascent.

Draco chuckled at my crumbling face, and rolled me so that my tears did not fall. His hips slipped between mine, and with a twist, the leather was no longer biting into the insides of my thighs. My warm centre was further warmed by his cock pressing against me and my lower belly.

He held my wrists at either side of my body, the muscles in his chest rippling as he leaned over my, the tips of his platinum hair teasing my right nipple.

“Say it aloud…” he whispered insistently.

I licked my lips, wanting more than anything to move my hips.

“I will stay with you…” I gasped.

Draco’s grin turned feral, his mismatched eyes glowing in the magic around us, which was beginning to dim. With a slip of his hips, the tip of his cock pressed into me. I groaned as he gazed down between our bodies, past the thatches of dark and light curls to the point where we would eventually join.

Releasing the bruising hold on my wrists, Draco pulled back to his haunches, kneeling before my open thighs. Grasping his erect, thick organ, he pressed the tip along my soaking flesh, teasing me. Gazing through his hair at my face, the feral smile softened again.

I was being tortured. After five months of fantasising…

In the darkness of the Amazon, thankful I had read that stupid book Lucius had let me borrow, I would sleep at night, high in a tree, dreaming of Draco Malfoy’s flesh inside me, I would dream about his mouth upon me. The dreams ranged from the simple to the sadistic. Draco Malfoy had to be the one to awaken my libido, and since it had been roused, those five months had been spent distracting myself, when I could, with various scenarios. I blamed ‘The Hanged Man’ for some of those scenarios, and no longer felt guilty for having read the book. It had only been the latter half that was truly a perversion…

I growled as Draco grinned, as he teased me by brushing the sticky tip of his cock over my nubbin, as he teased me by shallowly penetrating my core. I learned while I was pushing my mind and
body to the limits in those five months, that I would take initiative if I did not get what I wanted. Of course, I never liked being teased.

I moved, suddenly, and for the first time since our reunion after the War, I startled Draco Malfoy by pinning him to the ground, straddling his hips. His trousers were around his boots, and as he gaped at me, I felt my arousal heighten to a new level. His gape did not last long, and instead, irritation marked his brow.

However, even as he began to speak, I grasped his cock, eliciting a groan, and impaled myself roughly. I exhaled loudly, my head thrown back as I pushed him deeper inside. It was slightly painful, but the fullness was just what I wanted.

“Fuck!” he gasped as I began to move over him, twisting my hips in a rhythmic motion, my hands slapping, palms down, upon his chest, my right hand covering the rune over his heart.

I laughed, half growled, as his hands moved to my hips, sliding up to grasp my bouncing breasts. I stared into his strange eyes as I swayed over him. In my gaze, I told him of the last five months of my life. I told him how I wanted to be strong for him. I told him how I wanted to be near him always. I told him how wrong I had been about so many things. I told him how frightened I had been without him. I told him that if marriage is what it took for us to be able to drink coffee, listen to the gramophone, talk about our lives and grow old together, I would be his, as he would be mine.

I told him what a Fool I had been never to notice how he had protected me, as my Emperor.

Losing myself, and losing my rhythm, my hips slammed against his, my body falling forward. He caught me in his arms, just as he always would as our hips met over and over again in a brutal joining.

One arm about the back of my neck, the other about my waist, he groaned as he crushed me in his embrace. With an errant whimper from his mouth, I shuttered. I bit into his chest causing him to growl, rolling me on the cloak, my eyes rolling back into my skull, as it seemed my entire body had been electrocuted. I could feel Draco’s breath on my face, and then on my back as he pulled me to sit upon his lap. He had managed to kick off the remainder of his clothing while my mind and body reeled.

I was on my knees, my hands balling his cloak into my palm as he entered me again. I knelt back into his body, our faces pointed to the dim glow the Manor, and over the dimming fields. A large hand wrapped about my throat, forcing my head to rest upon his left shoulder, his fingers moving to flick at my soaked nubbin as he thrust slowly.
“Home…” he growled.

I whimpered, just able to breathe, but not to speak. I was in a vulnerable position, but with every thrust, every rasp of his fingers over my clit, I knew that I was in the position Draco preferred. Dominant, guileless, irresistible, at times tyrannical, but gentle and loving; Draco was the ruler, The Emperor.

“Home is this…”

I gasped, as his strokes were suddenly deeper, pressing against a part of me that made everything illogical except him.

“Home is…us…”

His thrusts were faster, and I groaned hoarsely as I felt something inside me release. Boneless, I crumbled back into him, his hand moving from my throat to hold me upright. Moisture coated our thighs, but Draco did not stop, even as he laid us on our sides, pushing my hair away from my face to kiss my throat and cheeks.

Manipulating my body, he entered me again, and I sobbed as my senses were overloaded by everything that was Draco Malfoy. I held him, my legs wound about his waist, my arms about his neck, letting him worship my body. His kisses were desperate; his moans betraying his simmering need for completion.

“Love…” he gasped, cradling my face in his hands, bending to kiss me.

I hummed against him, I knew what he wanted to say, his body, his face, his eyes, it said it clearly.

“Me too…” I whispered.

Draco’s back arched and his thrusts were erratic, and with a terrifying roar, he filled me, his body glowing with cold sweat. His hair was damp about his face, his brow furrowed, his mouth open, every muscle in his shoulders and neck strained.
His seed was scalding inside me, and as he slipped from my body, I felt that seed trickle from my core to the cloak below. Collapsing on me, I held him fast, drawing his cloak around us. The magic seeping from the ground was like a mist now, the moon higher in the sky and more yellow than red.

Our skin was cool and damp, our clothes discarded, and we lay in the open night, November 1, 2008. I was exactly where I wanted to be—albeit cold.

“Alastor, there is absolutely no excuse for this!”

Alastor Gumboil sat behind his desk as if to use it as a barricade. The portly man was actually afraid of me, but I could not let that fact deter me.

“If the Press were to learn that some of our men were abusing these prisoners, well, the Ministry would have no choice but to sack those men, you, and most likely me in the process. The public may not like these people, but these people are still human beings!”

Alastor’s chins wobbled, finally turning his eyes to me after staring a hole at the door in his office for ten minutes of my tirade.

“I understand what you’re saying, Granger. But what can I do about it?”

I stood before Gumboil’s desk, palms upon the surface leaning toward the man who was by all appearances my superior in the MLE, but in truth was a subordinate when I mentioned my F.O.I.L. credentials as a Chief Investigator and my position as an Auror.

“You can allow these people to have their legal representation in the interrogation room. You can add surveillance, and for fuck’s sake do not use an officer whose families are victims. What the hell were you thinking letting Skye Bulstrode interrogate Dennis Creevey two months ago?”

“That was Detective Superintendent Malfoy’s decision, not mine.”
I stepped back from the desk, stung.

Draco has been promoted to Alastor Gumboil’s old post, Gumboil was the DCS.

“Then I should take this up with him?”

Alastor nodded.

I sighed. “You should have said something, Al.”

“I was enjoying watching you turn red in the face, Granger.”

Alastor sat back in his office chair, folding his hands under his chins.

“I agree with everything you have said, Granger. I really do. Unfortunately, some of us cannot disconnect the fact that these people have set themselves against the Ministry as domestic terrorists. So many people have been affected, and you know probably better than I, how emotion can overrule logic—let alone due process and justice.

We cannot all compartmentalise as you can. And as for Malfoy, I have a feeling that he is not happy about the situation either…”

I pursed my lips and threw a few strands of hair over my dragon hide clad shoulder.

“I just want it known that if we cannot handle a few men from exercising their ‘emotions’ upon detainees, we are not fit to incarcerate them.

I don’t know if you keep up with current events in the Muggle world, but there is quite a problem with habeas corpus. We are British and we penned the writ, it is a foundation of the Muggle and Magical law. We need to get these people processed, given a trial and judged accordingly. The state of limbo for these people is going to bring down the full fury of the Wizengamot on us, Al.”
Alastor nodded. “I know. But, you need to talk to Malfoy. You are our resident F.O.I.L. liaison, Granger. You can make these things happen…”

I blinked at Alastor. He was right. I was just wasting my breath being angry with Al. If I wanted the one hundred and ten detainees in Azkaban to have a trial, all I had to do was begin scheduling the trials with the Wizengamot, arrange for counsel for those who needed it, and put surveillance on the detainees until the Wizengamot made a ruling.

I nodded to Alastor and turned for the door.

I moved passed a few cubicles, eyes following me. I ignored them as I moved across the large room that acted as Police Headquarters in the London Ministry.

“Oy, Granger! Don’t you need to be somewhere in an hour?” Marcus Flint’s voice rasped out as I passed his cubicle.

I paused mid step and glanced back at the man. I blinked, and then seeing Flint’s close-mouthed smile, grinned back.

“Workin’ up to the last minute then,” Flint called back.

I shrugged and continued down the aisle, my eyes settling upon a dark oak door with the words “Draco S. Malfoy, Detective Superintendent” emblazoned on the door in silver.

Reaching the door, I entered, not bothering to knock. I did not find Draco Malfoy behind his desk, which was piled with parchments and various dirty coffee cups. He stood before a Transfigured mirror, adjusting his clothing, heavy robes over what appeared to be a pair of brown corduroy pants, and a green tunic. His hair was loose about his shoulders. His attire was far different from his usual grey suit, which was hanging over the back of the only chair in the room. Since his hair had grown, Draco usually pulled it back, much like his father’s, but to see it loose… I took a deep breath and closed the door behind me.

“What are you doing here, Granger?” he growled, turning toward me.

I crossed my arms before my chest, shifting my weight to one hip. He always called me ‘Granger’ in the office.
“We have to be somewhere in little more than an hour…” he began, his face clouded.

“How is it that you now find out about Bulstrode assaulting Creevey?”

Draco sighed, the anger draining. “Now is not the time…”

“When is the time, Malfoy? I just gave Al a piece of my mind, only to be informed that I was meting it out to the wrong person!” I growled.

Draco moved to his desk and snatched up his wands, shoving them into the side pocket of his trousers. His face clearly expressed his annoyance, but I held my ground.

“If this gets out to the Press… By Merlin, we are going to have a major problem.”

“It’s being taken care of, alright, Granger? Bulstrode has been suspended, he’s a good kid, and I’m not going to sacrifice him just to soothe the Wizengamot or F.O.I.L. Measures are being taken…”

“What measures? We need to get these people taken care of, out of the way. Azkaban is not an oubliette!”

Draco whirled, and grabbed my shoulders, startling me.

“Enough!”

My eyes were wide as I looked up into his mismatched eyes, he was angry, he was anxious, and I knew that he was right. Now was not the time for me to begin crusading… If Draco said that he had matters in hand, I knew I had to believe him.

I relaxed in his hands. “Fine…” I said softly. “But as soon as we get back, we are going to get these people counsel and a trial—media circus or no. This needs to end.”
Draco’s hard line of a mouth softened, and he smirked. “Agreed. Now, you need to get your arse out of here. I’m sure Pans is pulling out what little bit of hair she has left, and most likely frightening your parents.”

I chuckled as Draco’s hands slid from my shoulders to cup my face. Placing a small kiss between my brows, he released me. We said nothing more as I left the office, shutting the door with a sigh.

“Less than an hour, Granger!” Flint called from across the room, standing to slip into his own cloak and leave the office.

Glancing at the wall clock, I gritted my teeth. “Shit!”

I was going to be late to my own wedding.
The Fool, the Emperor, and the Hanged Man
Extended Ending

The Empress and the Emperor

My mother hated me for exactly one week after I told her everything that had happened—from the point Harry escaped in February 2008 to the point I said ‘yes’ to marrying Draco Malfoy in November 2008. She was angry because I had not come to Australia after being attacked. She was angry because I had quit my job in the Department of Mysteries and switched careers to possibly the most dangerous job in the Wizarding world.

However, when I told her that the Malfoys and the Grangers were going to meet over dinner two days after Christmas 2008, my mother, Helen Granger, was livid.

“We’re just now going to meet the man you are going to marry, along with his parents?”

My father was bemused. His only complaint was that Draco Malfoy had not done the traditional thing in coming to him to ask for my hand. Other than that, Paris Granger was looking forward to meeting his future in-laws.

“Isn’t Lucius Malfoy the same man we saw in the bookshop with Arthur Weasley?” my father asked, his strange yellow eyes flashing.

I then informed my parents who the Malfoys were. I explained my old prejudices, and my happy realisation that the Malfoys were not a family of evil sycophants to Dark Lords. My father shrugged, seemingly indifferent, my mother was nervous.

When the night of the dinner arrived, my parents had been back in London for only a day. It was difficult for them since none of the people they knew, neighbors, friends, would not know the Grangers. Of course, my parents had made a wonderful, new life in Melbourne.

The restaurant was one that Draco had picked. A mixture of Muggle and Magic, not far from the Ministry, the restaurant was quite up-scale, and quite private. Draco, staggering our parents, had also arranged the seating arrangement.

The first half hour, and first two courses were spent in near silence. Neither family seemed to know how to speak to each other. Of course, I knew it was going to be awkward—a Muggle family trying to identify with a Pureblooded Wizarding family. I wondered if just by having the families meet if we were making history.

“Wasn’t it Menelaus who was the father of Hermione?” Narcissa asked.
I glanced to Narcissa who sat at my right. She smiled softly. All through the dinner, it had been Narcissa who had truly tried to make an effort at civility.

“Yes, but Menelaus was not a very ‘British’ name, according to my parents,” my father answered from across the table.

“Paris hates his name, but it is part of the reason I married him,” my mother asserted with an awkward smile.

“A bit fatalistic, but interesting,” Lucius murmured, a wine glass poised in his hand.

I sat very still, staring at Draco who sat between my parents. Draco cocked his head, his mismatched eyes narrowing to stare at my face.

The conversation was very much like that from the dream in which Severus saved me.

“I have to apologise, we do not mean to seem so cold, but to be honest, we’ve never really talked with Muggles,” Narcissa began, but stopped, glancing to me. I knew Narcissa was concerned that by calling my parents ‘Muggles’ she had somehow offended them.

“And we are not accustomed to dining with Wizards,” my father added with a smile. “Most of what we know about Wizards is from our daughter.”

Lucius set his wine down. “Your daughter is a fair judge of Wizarding kind. I am sure this is due to the manner in which you raised her.”

It was a compliment, something very rare from Lucius Malfoy. The fact that he willingly sat down with Muggles was a rare thing indeed.

My parents could only smile humbly.

“Hermione tells us that you are a police officer, Draco?” my mother asked, turning the attention to Draco.

From that point on, conversation came easier. There were even a few moments of laughter, Lucius trying not to laugh was what amused me the most.

As I watched the two families, I realised how much times had changed, for the better. With Voldemort gone, Harry gone, perhaps the Wizarding world would learn that the Muggle world had much to teach the close-minded. I knew Lucius would never embrace Muggle culture as Draco had, but the fact Draco Malfoy, the bane of my existence in our schooldays, to love Muggle music and books was something I could have only fantasised about when we were twelve years old. On top of all of that, Draco Malfoy was the man I was going to marry.

I pinched myself under the table until I had a bruise on my thigh.

I knew the Malfoys had made their peace with the fact that Draco wanted to marry me. I had proven myself to the Malfoys, I had shown them that I was not some lesser being by being Muggle. I was strong, I was powerful, and Draco Malfoy loved me.

When dinner ended, Draco was guffawing at something my father had said, and my mother was
speaking across the table with Lucius about Muggle dentistry and the difficulty of obtaining the right to practice.

“Things are looking up,” Narcissa whispered to me, her pale eyes moving around the table.

I nodded.

“Lucius did not want to come. There are some prejudices that he will not give up… I just hope that by meeting your parents that prejudice will fade.”

I nodded again.

“You don’t mind that I’m—Muggleborn?”

Narcissa grinned. “No. I do not. Lucius had his reservations, but…”

Narcissa paused as the waiter came to take our dessert dishes away.

“After the Dark Lord, Lucius was desperate to shed anything of that time. He has tried to change his thinking, but after decades of being told that Muggles are inferior, it is hard.

It was hard for me, growing up in the house I did. However, ‘Dromeda and I were different from the rest of the family. My marriage was arranged, and out of duty, I followed my parent’s wishes, as did Bella. ‘Dromeda truly was the free spirit.

When she married Ted Tonks, I lost her. Not because I wanted to, but because my parents and the Malfoy family forbade me to ever associate with her…”

I bit my lip. “But now?”

Narcissa’s face brightened. “Now she Floos me. She sent me pictures of Teddy. I saw her in person the other day in Diagon Alley, and touched her for the first time in years.

I made quite a scene, Narcissa Malfoy crying like a baby against her sister, in front of Teddy no less.”

Narcissa’s eyes moistened, but she smiled all the same. “It is a sin to force families apart.”

My throat closed up at those words, and I looked about the table again. My parents were smiling, Draco was smiling, and even Lucius was smirking. Narcissa grasped my hand under the table and squeezed before letting go, nodding to me.

These people were my family, just as were so many others who were not at the table. Ron, Charlie, all the Weasleys… Harry too, when he had been sane, and whole.

Families evolve. Some die, others are born. I met Draco’s strange eyes and smiled, knowing that tears stood in my eyes.

Out of impossibility, the man across the table was soon to be my family.

My home.
Pansy was two seconds away from having a meltdown, Charming my hair into thick ringlets. Ron had come by twice to tell the bridal party to ‘get our heads out of our arses, the groom is about to begin hexing the guests.’

My mother was standing as still as a statue near me, having exhausted her store of tears, even the ones she was saving for the recessional.

The wedding was being held a Hogwarts, the only place where all the guests could agree to gather. Coming to the decision to have the wedding at Hogwarts had been done hesitantly. Lucius would not allow the Weasleys to come to the Manor, and that had been a major obstacle. Narcissa did not intercede, admitting that she did not ever care for the Weasleys, except Charlie who had always worked well with Draco.

June 24, 2009. It was a date that would have many significances for Draco and I. We wanted forever engrain a happier event upon the calendar on that particular day.

“Last one!” Pansy gasped.

My mother began to fidget, and I could tell she wanted to say something.

“Out with it, Mum, or forever hold your peace,” I teased.

My mother sighed. “I will never understand these things, dear. Aren’t these people Anglican or… something. Our family has been part of the Church of England for ages…”

“Mum!” I gasped. “Say any more and I’ll have to hex you.”

My mother’s eyes widened and her face paled. I knew exactly what she was thinking: I do not know my own daughter any more!

I did not have the time to explain the varying theologies of the Wizarding world. The Malfoys had their own ways, and within ten minutes, I would be a Malfoy.

Pansy had been chuckling all the while.

“You’re not even wearing a proper wedding dress! I can see your breasts!”

I rolled my eyes, turning to look into a full-length mirror. The bridal party had been placed in Professor Sprout’s old office adjoining the greenhouses. The ceremony was to take place just inside the Forbidden Forest, the light streaming through the trees creating a beautiful canopy over the guests, and a small circle birch trees as the place where I would marry.

The dress in question was the dress Narcissa had given me to wear at Beltane, modified slightly so that the swooping collar split, the violet coloured top becoming a halter of sorts, the silver girdle cinching the dress together. The hem was shorter at the bottom.

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My mother could see my circular scar, and she wrinkled her nose in distaste. However, I thought looked quite beautiful, wild, but beautiful with ringlets piled atop my head so my bare back was exposed. I stood in my bare feet, silver circlets about my ankles and wrists.
“Is there anything else, mum?” I asked in a tired voice, catching her eye in the mirror.

My mother, whom I empathised with, looked away.

“Are you happy, dear?”

I whirled about and went to my mother, taking her up into an embrace, wrinkling her pink dress suit slightly, but not caring.

“Incandescently so. After everything, I would have never thought that one day I would marry,” I whispered. “I did not think I would live to see this day…”

I pulled away, glancing to Pansy who nodded and quietly exited the room.

My mother managed a few more tears. “I know we’ve talked about that, Hermione, and I, for one, am glad that this day has come. I have my reservations, of course, but what mother would not?”

I smiled.

Soon, I ushered my mother out, telling her I wanted a few minutes alone. I counted to twenty and opened the door. Narcissa had been waiting, just as she said she would, and I shut the door behind her.

The first rite of a Malfoy marriage began with the snap of the door.

The wizard who had married Bill and Fleur was our officiate, and Draco and I stood apart as was the custom for the type of marriage to which I was a participant. Beyond the ring of birches, the guests watched.

Hagrid was the most visible, being the largest, standing in the back of the assembly. I saw my parents, Narcissa in the front. Charlie and his girlfriend, a pretty blond witch with brilliant blue eyes. Ron and Pansy, holding hands next to my mother, Arthur, who was allowed to sit on a Conjured stool next to Ron, trying to smile despite the exhausted and drawn pallor of his face, Alex Roux and his wife, Marcus Flint with the widowed Angelina Weasley, Williamson and Kingsley Shacklebolt, Neville and Poppy Pomfrey, Parvati Patil, and so many others I had known in school or from work. They all watched as the ordinary Wizarding rites were read and Draco and I spoke in the correct places.

“As it is custom with the Malfoy family, the assembly will depart while Lord Malfoy finishes the rites,” the old wizard proclaimed.

The assembly had been informed beforehand, and slowly left the trees for the grounds beyond where house elves had set up a pavilion for the guests to sit, have refreshments and wait for the couple to return from the wood.

When Narcissa explained to me the marriage rites, I had been curious.

The old wizard departed as well, and in his place stood Lucius Malfoy, dressed in light grey robes,
the sunlight seeming to make him glow. As I studied him, I was struck by the mental image of a stereotypical Druid, however as he drew a long blade from his robes, I held my breath.

“Marriage to a Malfoy is a blood bond, Hermione. You must be very certain in your feelings for Draco. This marriage is just not a legal contract, but a blood contract. It can never be broken. There is no divorce. Estrangement, perhaps, but never divorce.

The ritual is not without pain either. You will be slashed over your left breast. Draco will ‘claim’ you, and depending on your answer, he will cut his hand, much like he did at Beltane and Samhain, and heal you with his touch,” Narcissa told me weeks before the wedding.

Lucius pressed the blade into Draco’s hand.

Draco Malfoy stood in the patch of sunlight in the birch circle, dressed in the clothes I had seen him wear in the office, brown corduroy pants and green peasant top. It was not ceremonial by any means, and my own dress had been chosen for me, but as Draco stood in the sunlight, a gleam catching the blade in his hand, he looked human, not fey, or magical. He was a man, the man I loved.

With an apologetic turn of his lips, he stepped toward me, and grasping my right shoulder, pushed the dress off my left shoulder with the tip of the blade.

“I pierce thee, lady,” he whispered.

I did not wince as the blade slashed my chest and blood immediately began to trickle from the cut. It was not too shallow, but not too deep either.

“By healing you, you become mine, forever and a day. What say thee, lady?”

His voice was soft. His eyes were set upon mine, gazing down at me, and the wound on my breast.

I swallowed.

“I am thine, my lord,” I whispered.

Visible relief moved over his face, and switching the blade to his left hand, he raised his palm upward, and with a slash, a splatter of his blood fell upon my exposed breast. Dropping the blade so that it stuck upright in the dark soil under our bare feet, Draco sighed.

“I shall heal my own…”

Blood against blood—I felt a hum of magic begin to throb against the wound and spread through my body. A particular burning began on my right hip, a burning I had anticipated.

I did not need to see for I could feel the wound knitting together; the blood split soaking back into its source. It was a strange feeling, but not unpleasant. I stared into Draco’s strange eyes, seeing that he too could feel the blood magic working between us, and into those eyes I fell.

I glimpsed our life together, there was happiness, there was a child. However, as the spell between us began to end, I saw something else.

Fire.
I saw us, not far into the future, fighting, back-to-back, fire surrounding us. I saw Draco’s mismatched eyes glow with anger, a frightening grey and blue, while my eyes glowed golden. There was pain, fear, fire, and death.

The last image, however, was of peace: Draco, I riding across the Malfoy lands on horseback, Lord, and Lady.

“I have witnessed the union of two who will continue the blood, who will continue the line. The heir has become the Lord, the maiden has become the Lady.”

Our vision had ended, and we gazed at Lucius who was smiling, his voice having proclaimed the marriage.

Draco pulled his healed hand away from my healed breast, and with an uncertain smile, fixed my dress back on my shoulder.

“So mote it be,” we whispered to each other.

Lucius embraced us both, which seemed out of character, and immediately dispelled his robes to disappear through the trees towards the wedding party. Draco and I stood in the sunlight in the birch circle, staring at each other.

“Did you see it, Hermione?” he asked, pushing his hands into his pockets.

I nodded. “Are visions something standard with Malfoy weddings?” I whispered.

Draco smirked. “Supposedly. Mother had one with father, but before that it had been a few generations.”

I nodded. “So?”

Draco frowned. “So we wait and see what happens…”

I was not comforted. Narcissa had told me much about the rites, even the ones only known to the Malfoy women. My fingers went to my right hip, rubbing the skin through the fabric. A rune would be there, just as Narcissa had said, and cast the spell. The rune that would mark me for all time with Draco’s name, it had been part of the bonding spell, and I wondered if Draco knew about that part of the rite.

“I almost forgot…” he said pulling something from his pants pocket.

Grasping my left hand, Draco unceremoniously slipped a platinum ring upon my finger, a thin band with an incised Greek border only visible in the bright sunlight.

Then Draco chuckled. “Your father would have my balls if I did not give you a ring.”

I blinked. I had never noticed Narcissa wearing a ring, but she also being a Malfoy bride, had a rune on her hip…

Taking me into his arms, Draco held me tight, my face burning into the front of his shirt.
“You’re thinking too much again. The vision, don’t think about it now.”

I sighed and returned the embrace, pulling back to look up into my husband’s face. “I’m just wondering if what we saw was to happen in the order we saw it, or if it will happen at all.”

Draco kissed my nose, the closest part of me to his lips. “Not now. Ponder upon it later. Your parents are surely about to run away with all the wizards about…”

Draco was right, he was right very often.

I kissed the bottom of his chin and laughed as he lifted me so that we were face to face. Spinning us inside the sacred circle of birches, we kissed. My mother was correct about one thing, the wedding was not like any wedding I had ever heard of, but then again, Draco Malfoy and his family were not a *typical* family. I could not help but feel a bit of pride that I had managed to become part of it.

Just because I felt as if I had everything I had ever wanted did not mean that my journey—the Fool’s journey—was over.

The vision I saw on my wedding day was forcefully filed away in my old, rusty mental filing cabinet. I had my career, I had a husband, I had a home in the Manor, I had family who cared for me, I had a familiar who had given up its mastery over me for my father-in-law, and nine months after my wedding day, I had a child.

My son, whose name I had little decision in with three Malfoys hovering over his bassinet, named him Scorpius Hyperion.

If I still had Severus Snape haunting the halls of my mind, I knew what he would have said. I even had documentation as to how he felt about Malfoy names.

Scorpius Hyperion had been born on March 22—he was not a Scorpio. He had been born between eight and ten in the evening—Hyperion as a Titan associated with the sun.

Ridiculous name.

“Perry… Something normal, for Merlin’s sake!”

My husband, Draco Malfoy was rocking a three year old to sleep, scowling at me to keep my voice down. Ever since Perry had been born, Draco and I had fought as to what to call the boy. He was already confused since only I and my parents called him Perry, using the only salvageable syllable in his middle name as a suitable nickname.

“Your father is Perry. *His* name is Scorpius.”

“Only his on birth records.”

We were both irritated. We were never so long away from the Manor for work, only a few hours at
That day was the day Dennis Creevey’s trial ended, and his sentence pronounced: the Dementor’s Kiss.

It was the last trial of so many before it.

For the past three years, the Wizengamot tried and sentenced the members of W.A.T.C.H. Only three of the one hundred and ten were allowed to leave Azkaban to live lives under the scrutiny of the Wizarding community. Eighty-five were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment in Azkaban. The rest were given the Kiss. Dennis Creevey was the last to receive the Kiss.

All the while, the MLE, F.O.I.L., and Charlie’s ‘Dragonriders’ effectively dismantled the various organisations from moving violently against the people of the Europe and Britain. After three years, there was a fragile peace. The Ministry restructured, the Minister finally gained her bearings.

After three years, I had been wounded thirteen times from curse fire intended for one of the accused, experiencing the comfortable rest reserved in one of the beds open at St. Mungo’s for Hit-Wizards. I rarely spent more than three hours in St. Mungo’s before Draco took me home. He had also sustained wounds in the line of duty; being sent to St. Mungo’s fourteen times, teasing me that he was ‘one up.’ When I had signed up as the liaison, I had hoped that my battling days were over, but my soul and body knew that I was to take endure much more penance for killing the ‘Saviour of the Wizarding World’ that night in Little Hangleton.

In three years, we argued, scaring the MLE office when at least three times hexes began to fly. In three years, we only dueled twice, usually at home, only to fight to a draw and laugh about it.

With the end of the trials, we both hoped to spend even more time at home with Perry.

Gently, Draco rose from the couch in the sitting room we had between our chambers and our son’s. Distantly I heard my familiar hiss, the cat having switched Malfoy allegiances again to Perry whom doted on the cat and liked to dress it in some old doll’s clothes he found in an old trunk in the attic.

I lay back on an adjacent couch, still feeling sore from a blasting Curse had I caught the edge of the week before while walking with Creevey from the courtroom. Another botched assassination attempt on Creevey ‘winged’ me and severely injured another Auror instead.

When Draco returned, he sat, not on the couch; he had been on, but on the seat cushion next to me, just at my hips.

Mismatched eyes gazed down at my face, which I knew was dirty. I had been the one to help transport Creevey to Azkaban for the Kiss. Any visit to Azkaban meant you would walk away dirty…

“We need a vacation.”

I smirked. “Maybe we’ll get one once Perry is at Hogwarts—in eight or so years.”

Draco sighed; he seemed far too tired to spar with witticisms. It was late, past midnight. I had been angry with Draco for letting Perry stay up so late. The pale little boy with tawny curls and brilliant aquamarine eyes was hard to resist when he blinked those sweet eyes up at his father.

Draco was the soft one; I was the ‘mean mummy.’ I have no idea how that arrangement came
“We might need to leave sooner than that,” Draco whispered, the tip of his finger tracing my eyebrows.

“What do you mean?” I asked wearily.

“I saw Weasley today, after you left.”

I frowned. “Ron?”

Draco nodded, his long blond plait falling off his shoulder, down his back.

“He is supposed to come by the Manor tomorrow evening.”

My eyes widened. “Why?”

Draco’s hand moved to my hip, his fingers tracing the rune visible between my shirt and jeans.

“He wanted to talk to you. You were too busy today…”

My mind whirled. In three years, Ron and I had kept in constant contact, by either Post or Floo. Ron had relocated to America with Pansy, married, and started his own family.

“Intelligence has come up through the oddest channels…” Draco began.

“Why am I hearing about it from you?” I asked, not intending to sound so angry.

Draco ignored my anger and slid his hand up my side to the sore spot on my ribs.

“Creevey… Today was far too important to distract you from your job.”

I sighed, moving a hand to grasp Draco’s knee. “What’s the word?”

“Something, or someone has been targeting Centaurs…”

I opened my mouth to interject, already to moving to sit up, but Draco held me in place.

“Not Magorian, not the Forbidden Forest. It started in Ireland and moved to the Highlands. The information actually came from Magorian to the Lord of Temple Wood. Mother was the one Lord of Temple Wood contacted, and Mother conveyed the information to Ron while we were trying to get everything done with Creevey’s trial and sentencing.

This is news that just came today.”

My jaw was clenched tight. “That’s why you want a ‘vacation?’ For your parents at the bothy and Perry? So we can leave?”

Draco nodded. “Until we know exactly what is going on, we might need to get away from Temple Wood, off the lands for a while.”

I could only stare at my husband. It was only two weeks until Beltane and the renewal of the
wards. I could see in Draco’s mismatched eyes his alarm. Our lands, the lands that had been my home, our home, would surely protect us?

“The vision.”

Draco’s eyes widened slightly. “No.”

He was saying it out of reflex, but he knew what I said was true. The vision we had shared on our wedding day, surely the news I was hearing from my lover’s mouth was a precursor to that vision.

We stared at each other for a long while, and I yelped as suddenly Draco lifted me into his arms, holding me desperately close.

“I’m not ready for another battle, not when things are finally beginning to settle,” he whispered into my hair.

I agreed. I was not ready either. I had hope that at least for a few years; our family would have a bit of mundane normalcy.

The vision had been of fire, battle, but in the end, it had been peace. I tried to comfort myself in that peace I saw, and I hoped my husband remembered it as well.

It seemed that Draco and I had been born to battle, a destiny that we could not shirk. The Fates had said nothing about my future, only my destiny of killing Harry Potter. For some reason, I could not shake the feeling that perhaps my killing Harry would somehow impact the future course of events, the battle I knew I would see soon.

“Whatever it is, we’ll face it,” I whispered against Draco’s neck. “We know that we will be together, no matter what happens.”

He held me tighter, causing me to wince for my sore ribs.

“Together, forever and a day,” he whispered back.

He kissed me softly, cradling my head in his large, pale hands. We were both exhausted and worried. Nevertheless, as we pulled apart to gaze into each other’s eyes, I knew that we both were seeing the same future, a future that we deserved.
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For the ‘FEH’ Masterlist, including drabbles and extra content:

https://ianthe-waiting.livejournal.com/78765.html

If you would like to keep in touch with what I am working on, or leave a comment, please email me at ianthewaiting@gmail.com

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