## Duality

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**Category:** F/M  
**Fandom:** Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling  
**Relationship:** Daphne Greengrass/Harry Potter, Hermione Granger/Blaise Zabini  
**Character:** Harry Potter, Daphne Greengrass, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, Draco Malfoy  
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### Summary

HBP AU. It's hard enough being a teenager; add nefarious plots, the Dark Lord, and house rivalries into the mix. A story about enlightenment, darkness, growing up, and getting over yourself.

### Notes

**Author's Note:** This fic is something I started writing ages ago and have been continuing for years (my plot bunny spun out of control). The growth and development of my writing is very clear to see throughout, and I’m basically just posting this here to have another option to view it uncensored off of FFnet, where I've censored it down to an M-rating.

Additionally, if there are any other warning tags you think I should add, I'd appreciate it if you'd comment! Thank you very much and I hope you enjoy!

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by **andafaith**

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Duality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first official Slug Club meeting, outside of the Hogwarts Express, was more of a get-to-know-you event than anything. Slughorn had shoved Harry into a corner with Daphne Greengrass, sloshing drinks over their robes as he pressed them into their hands. "I think you two will get on just swimmingly!" he said, then bustled off to Hermione, who was paired up with Blaise Zabini. It looked as if the two had come to a silent understanding to remain, well, silent toward each other.

Greengrass simply looked bored at the whole affair and swirled the alcoholic beverage in her hand idly as she stared at him. Her blue eyes were quite pretty, he could admit. They sort of reminded him of Luna. "So, Potter, nice to officially meet you I guess," she drawled, taking a sip of the amber liquid without wincing.

Harry had a feeling it was Firewhiskey, but wasn't too sure. It smelled a lot like that bottle Seamus had snuck in at the beginning of the year. "Yeah," he replied. "Nice to meet you too." The whole affair just felt awkward.

She was one of the few girls who were in the Slug Club, so he could always ask her about that, he thought. "What made Slughorn decide to invite you?" he tried to ask amiably.

"My father, I suppose. He was apparently one of Slughorn's little collections back then. No surprise you're here though. You're the equivalent to gold to someone like Sluggy." Greengrass finished her drink quickly and set it down on one of the multiple tables in the room.

"The night's not going to get any better," she said, "might as well drink y'know." She picked up his empty glass and took a sip.

"Nodding, Harry decided to try the amber coloured beverage. It burned like hell on the way down and he felt it go straight to his head with a shiver. Greengrass was smiling at him when he looked back at her. "This stuff's foul," he muttered, frowning at the glass and setting it next to Greengrass' empty one.

"The night's not going to get any better," she said, "might as well drink y'know." She picked up his empty glass and took a sip.

They stood in silence for a little bit as she finished off his drink and he somehow ended up with another glass of the foul liquor in his hand. The second or third gulp wasn't so bad. Their eyes wondered around the room at its occupants. McLaggen was boasting loudly in the corner to a Slytherin boy, who looked fairly unimpressed. Zabini and Hermione had moved on to competing in, possibly, the longest staring contest in the history of Hogwarts. Harry shifted awkwardly on his feet when he glanced back at Greengrass and caught her looking at him. She pushed her dark hair behind her ear and smirked.
"I don't suppose you want to get out of here?"

Harry nodded. "Love to, actually."

Greengrass' smirk widened and she grabbed his sleeve. His brows furrowed as she dragged him off and he tripped at first before following her, yanking his sleeve out of his grip. "What are you doing?" he asked quietly and she put a finger to her lips, gesturing for him to follow her. She was leading him toward a door, her head twisting around, and her watchful eyes seeking out the occupied students and Slughorn, who was deep into one of his soliloquies.

"Come on," she whispered, opening the door to what he thought was a broom cupboard, but when he followed her through it, he found himself in a nearly empty Slytherin Common Room.

Harry stood uneasily and winced when she shut the door behind him, not liking the position he had gotten himself into. "So, what do you guys do for fun?" she asked in a normal tone, leading him over to one of the sofas in front of the fire. Harry trailed reluctantly, her hand gripping his sleeve and shoving him down onto the sofa.

"What do you mean?" he asked, staring at the other occupants. They didn't seem effected by his presence, didn't even spare him a glance.

"Gryffindors. I dunno." Greengrass reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver box of some sort, which was revealed to hold really fancy looking cigarettes. "Want one?" she offered, holding the box toward him.

Harry shook his head, raising an eyebrow as she lit it with her wand.

"We play games, I guess. Quidditch," he replied to her earlier question.

"Ah, yes, you're the seeker - captain - after all," she said after taking a drag. As she spoke, smoke trickled out her mouth.

"You can smoke in here?" Harry asked, uncertain.

Greengrass shrugged. "No one really cares."

"I've just never seen a wizard - witch - smoke before," he said, trying to get comfortable on the stiff leather couch. He didn't feel right being there, it reminded him too much of second year when they were after the supposed Heir of Slytherin, Draco Malfoy. Malfoy was nowhere to be seen in the common room, which was a relief.

With a small laugh, she said, "Well, it's frowned upon for purebloods - being such a Muggle habit - but I'm a halfblood so... The whole blood status thing is ridiculous anyway."

Harry's mouth formed an 'o' and he nodded apprehensively. At least, for a Slytherin, she didn't seem half bad so far; it was almost odd being there, chatting in a half way decent way without having to draw wands. He felt out of place though. "You look very uncomfortable, Potter," Greengrass observed, raising an eyebrow.

"It's just weird being in here," he said truthfully, sparing a glance toward the other members of Slytherin going about their own business, studying and socializing.
"We could go my dorm if you'll feel more comfortable. Not all of us are as hostile as some people."

"I'm fine here," he replied quickly, with a nod, glancing at the entrance that he supposed was to the girl's dormitories. It would be ten times worse in her dorm room. "I probably can't get up there anyway."

"Just immobilize the stairs; easy to get in and out that way." Greengrass flicked her cigarette into the fire and stood. "Come on, I'll show you."

Harry sat still, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Erm..."

Sighing and rolling her eyes, Greengrass grabbed the hem of his sleeve again and pulled him up. She was surprisingly strong for a girl, he noted, as he was once again being led around by her. He didn't know why he was, exactly. He could have been back at his dormitory - reading the Half Blood Prince's book - by now if he had just escaped right away. But no. He felt like such a pushover.

With a wave of her wand, the staircase remained as it was as she pulled him half way up it. "See. Easy," she said with a small grin.

"Right," Harry responded, looking down at the solid stairs beneath his feet. "Maybe I should go."

"Don't be such a spoil sport, Potter, come on."

She led him further up the stairs to the last door on the left. "You've probably never been inside a girl's dormitory before, might as well fulfill your curiosity."

"I'm not curious, to be honest," Harry said in a small voice, nervousness growing in the pit of his stomach. His arm that wasn't being held by Greengrass hung limply at his side and his eyes darted around the corridor, just waiting for Pansy Parkinson or Millicent Bulstrode to pop out of the woodwork to hex him to a pulp or taunt him.

Greengrass opened the door and ushered him in, shutting the door behind her.

"Doesn't really look that different from my dormitory," he blurted out when the first thought came to him. His eyes followed the trail of pants and bras on the floor and he felt his stomach twist. Maybe it was a bit different. The green hangings on the four poster beds were different from the deep red ones on his bed. The windows were also enchanted, since they were under the lake.

"I suppose not," Greengrass admitted as she removed her robe and threw it on the trunk at the bed closest to the door. He shifted on his feet again. She was in her uniform, but she had forgone the Slytherin tie and he was pretty sure that the oxfords the other girls wore weren't that see-through. If she got caught in a drizzle, she'd probably...

He didn't want to think of that.

"Well, now I've seen your dormitory. I think I'll just..." he muttered quickly, looking at the door and slowly moving toward it.

Greengrass followed his footsteps. "Just?"

He looked down at her left forearm and breathed a sigh of relief when he noted her forearm was
completely unmarked. He could see her nipples poking through the fabric of her oxford. Her hips swayed as she walked. Harry glanced up at her face. She looked positively predatory, her blue eyes sparkling. She didn't look dangerous, though - at least.

Greengrass was quite striking, he could admit.

Harry fingered his wand in his pocket; yet, slowly, but surely, she had successfully backed him against the door. His hand curled around the door handle and her hand folded over his. "You're a lot shyer than I thought you were," she said with a smile.

Harry didn't know how to reply to that. He just twisted the handle, but her hand on his deterred him from doing that. "I think I'll go now."

He must have been more inebriated from the Firewhiskey than he thought.

"Shh," she whispered, placing a finger on his lips and his nerves tingled, making him back straight up against the door, as far away from her as possible.

She was staring at his lips and he licked them consciously, his eyes wide. The last time he was this close to a girl was with Cho under the mistletoe, and that ended very badly. She wasn't going to -

His breathing picked up a little and his heart beat erratically against his chest, threatening to explode, as her lips touched his.

Greengrass kissed him tentatively - gentle - but he didn't respond. His brain registered the fact that she was kissing him, but his lips wouldn't move. Harry wasn't sure that he should kiss her back, or even if he wanted to. Part of him was all for it - the stupid rebellious side of his brain. The other part just wanted to flee very quickly after her tongue swiped across his lips, forcing a response from him.

\textit{I should pull away now.}

No. Not yet.

Yes, pull away, damn it.

He opened his mouth slowly and started to kiss her back as she balled up the front of his robes in her fists, moving to kiss him more forcefully. \textit{No. This is wrong, this is very very wrong and I shouldn't be kissing her right now.} His glasses pushed up the bridge of his nose painfully, and he fought for air, breathing through his nose as he sank into the kiss.

\textit{But it's very very good too.}

She tasted like exotic smoke and liquor that left a bitter but, surprisingly, pleasant taste in his mouth as she pulled back, staring at him with heavily hooded eyes. Her lips were tinged pink and she licked them, staring at him intently. He felt a rush of warmth flow through him and he didn't move from his place, plastered against the door, until she grabbed the front of his robes again, pulling him down for another kiss.

His brain wasn't working right - it \textit{couldn't} have been working right.

This time he responded to the kiss right away. Then his brain kicked in, yelling at him to stop, but that oh-so-rebellious voice was \textit{moaning} in his head. It felt so - \textit{good}. Her soft body pressed fully
against him and his arms swung into action, wrapping around her waist as he felt confidence rise within him, causing him to deepen the kiss.

This was *nothing* like kissing Cho. There was so much... *life* in kissing Greengrass. It was a bit wet too but not overly so. It left his brain in a whirling daze, where he couldn’t exactly think straight half the time, but it certainly wasn’t unpleasant.

When she pulled away this time, she smiled. “Not bad, Potter,” she whispered, her voice thicker than usual. Heat pooled in the pit of his stomach, and he felt his mouth forming a half satisfied grin as Greengrass hauled him forward toward the bed.

Alarms went off in his brain when she pushed him down and straddled his lap, planting kisses on his neck. All the blood in his body was starting to drain south and, carefully, he pushed her away. “I... shouldn’t,” he said, barely recognizing his own voice. It was deeper. Rough.

She placed a finger on his lips, silencing him, as her mouth found a particularly delicious spot below his ear. He moaned at the feeling of her tongue slipping over his skin – her mouth sucking lightly. *No*, he would have to be *delusional* to turn this down. Merlin, that felt *bloody amazing*. The sensation shot straight to his groin and he would for-sure have to run back to his room or find an empty bathroom after he left.

But...

Maybe a little more wouldn’t hurt.

He reluctantly pulled her head away from his neck and kissed her again, tasting, swirling his tongue around hers and she gently sucked on the tip of his, moaning into his mouth. Her arse slid along his lap, making contact with his hardness, and he groaned, pulling away from her. Greengrass was pushing his robe off his shoulders and his hands gripped her waist. It was getting incredibly warm all of a sudden. He felt as if he had a fever.

He let go for a moment to get the robe off and she grabbed his hand, placing it on her cloth-covered breast.

Harry stopped breathing, staring at his hand, unsure of what to do. He gave her breast an experimental squeeze, just lightly, feeling the softness of it in the palm of his hand. He traced his fingers over it, feeling the nipple harden underneath them. Air flooded his lungs when she arched against his hand, moaning. Glancing up at her, he stared at her throat and licked his lips. The smooth creamy expanse of her neck and chest looked very inviting.

He leaned forward and licked at a particular vein that stuck out, turquoise and plump under his tongue. Her hands threaded through his hair, nails massaging his scalp and he sighed contentedly against her neck. Everything felt heightened at least a thousand times more than usual. His fingers sought out her nipple and he rubbed it between his fingers, kissing up to her ear, feeling every noise she made vibrate against his lips.

If she didn’t stop writhing in his lap, he swore he was going to come right there in his trousers. He held back a whimper. Greengrass’ hands moved to her front and he felt her unbutton the white oxford. Her fingers then moved up to his tie as he focused on sucking on that same spot that had made him come undone. She mewled in response to it, encouraging to him to continue as she unbuttoned his shirt. He wondered briefly when she had removed his tie, he didn’t even feel it come off.
The sensible part of his brain that was warning him to stop seemed to give up and he threw himself into just feeling.

Harry practically ran with it.

His hand parted her open oxford and came in contact with bare skin, her naked breast, and he moaned, biting his lip. She pushed him onto his back only seconds later and he stared up at her; her skin was flushed; her pupils dilated so much he could barely see the blue of her irises. Her breasts were out in the open. God, he never had seen anything so erotic in his life.

Her hands moved to his trousers and unbuckled his belt. Every muscle in his stomach twitched as her hand made contact with it. Greengrass’ skilled fingers undid his fly quickly and he almost couldn’t believe it. It was happening. She wanted to… she wanted to…

Harry couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

He stiffened when her hand disappeared underneath the waistband of his boxers and wrapped around his cock. No. No, please don’t come, he pleaded in his mind, closing his eyes, a loud groan spilling from his lips.

Her tits brushed against his bare chest as she leaned over him, her hand moving over his erection. He didn’t think he could get any harder. Greengrass’ other hand grasped his and placed it over her thigh, moving it up under her skirt. “Fuck,” he breathed.

“Feel,” she whispered into his ear, sliding his hand into her pants and pressing his fingers against something that felt like a large bead underneath very soft skin. He rubbed against it, slowly. Her muffled moan against his neck and the feeling of her fingers spreading pre-come over his shaft made him jerk upward with a breathy groan as he came all over the inside of his boxers.

Bloody hell.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a small voice, staring up at her wide-eyed.

Her finger pressed against his lips once more. “Shh, don’t apologize. You’ll last longer this way.”

Last longer? His head didn’t feel any clearer. Almost felt as if his brain was melting out his ears. Last longer for what…? Oh God, she didn’t mean. His hand was still down her pants. And it was so wet and hot, and he moved his fingers slightly lower, feeling; he slipped a finger inside her and groaned. Hell, was he supposed to fit in that?

Greengrass hummed contentedly and leaned back to remove her shirt and unzip her skirt. He watched her, moving his fingers around inside her, pumping slowly, curling them upward – she seemed to like that a lot. “Fuck, you’re good with your hands,” she moaned, arching.

She was getting wetter, his thumb moved toward that bead underneath her skin and he curled his fingers as he rubbed it, watching her reaction. Greengrass bit her lip hard, concealing a moan that bubbled up suddenly and he felt her clench – pulse – around his fingers. Harry gaped, imagining that tight, wet, heat around his cock and it throbbed to life in his damp boxers.

Removing his hand from her pants, he stared at the thick opaque liquid dripping down his fingers and had the overwhelming urge to taste it. He gave it a timid lick, watching her. It wasn’t bad… bit
bitter, musky, kind of sweet too. It was different. Quite good, actually.

Greengrass’ lips parted as he sucked her come off his fingers. He stared up at her, licking his lips where some was left behind. Her mouth descended upon his, desperate and needy. Her tongue slid along his, tasting – teasing. Greengrass sucked and licked at his lips, nipping gently. He moaned against her.

_Hell._

When she pulled away, she moved off him and he stared after her, almost protesting until he realized that she was just removing the rest of her clothing. Her lithe form was revealed unhurriedly. Her skirt slipped over her hips, pooling around her ankles, only to be followed by her shoes and knickers, giving him a nice view of her round arse as she removed the tiny garment. His breathing sped up, his nerves feeling as if they were going to jump out of his skin any second. She threw her shoes into a corner, followed by her socks, and crawled over to him, her breasts jiggling slightly at the movement.

Harry couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. His glasses were slightly askew on his face, but he wouldn’t remove them no matter what, he wanted to see everything. Greengrass kneeled next to his feet and tugged off his shoes, staring at him hungrily. Her eyes roved over his body and he suddenly felt self-conscious, but all it took was a sly grin from her and he relaxed as she removed his socks next, trailing her nails over the soles of his feet. He wasn’t very ticklish, but it felt really good. His cock twitched at the sensation of her nails on any part of his skin, it seemed.

“Lift your hips,” she said, pulling at the belt loops of his trousers and he complied. She tugged them off, boxers and all, and he kicked them into a pile at the end of the bed. When he looked back up at Greengrass, she was staring at his cock. She licked her lips and he held back a moan, imagining what the tongue would feel like _there_. Harry bit his lip, hard, pushing away the image his mind had conjured.

When she straddled him again, he could feel her wetness against his painfully pulsating cock. It was so bloody good. He bucked involuntarily against her, causing her to smile and rub back against him. Merlin, they really were going to…

**Sex. Have sex – no – shag. Yes. God.**

Her dark hair draped over one shoulder, obscuring one of her breasts as she leaned down to kiss him, slipping her tongue between his lips. Her hands pushed the shirt over his shoulders and slid it out from under him and his arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, hands exploring the naked soft skin of her back.

He could do this forever. There wasn’t anything better than this; it was like flying… better than flying. Exhilarating. It left him breathless. She pulled away slightly, speaking, “Just a second.” Greengrass reached for a wand near them and she muttered something, pointing it toward herself. He figured it was some sort of contraception charm or something. He’d heard about those from Seamus.

Blood pounded in his ears when she looked back at him. This was it… Merlin, this was it! His toes curled and he nearly whimpered.

Greengrass grasped his cock in her hand, positioning it at her entrance. He braced himself. Slowly, agonizingly slow, she sunk down on him and he couldn’t help the noises that escaped him. _So good… so bloody good._ She fit him like a tight, hot, glove and he never thought it could get any
better than this, right now. Then she moved and fuck-

*So close.*

He cursed himself in his head, thinking of distractions. Snape, yes… McGonagall – naked McGonagall and naked Snape. That was working. He could finally look at her properly, watch her move. His hips moved on their own accord, trying to meet her half way, trying to match her rhythm. He could barely keep at the pace; she was going too slow – he needed more. His hands sought her breasts and he flicked his thumbs over her nipples briefly, before trailing down her skin. It was so smooth, how did she get it to be so soft?

Greengrass moved quicker and he matched the pace perfectly, gritting his teeth as the increased friction begged him to come.

*Naked Snape.*

Lightly, he ran his fingers through the small thatch of hair and into her silky folds, seeking that bead that made her moan so much. He *had* to make her come first. He *had* to last. That’s all he knew. He could feel her clench around his cock every time he touched her – *clit*? He wasn’t sure it was called that but he really didn’t care at the moment – and groaned at the same time she let out a breathy whimper, moving her hips harder against his. Pounding. It was too much – he couldn’t breathe properly. Thought he would pass out from the pleasure of it all.

*Please, just let me last… just a bit longer,* he thought. He didn’t care how long he lasted. He wanted so much more – longer. He could do this for hours, days – *weeks.*

He rubbed her feverishly, feeling her tighten…tighter and tighter until – *fuck.* Her back arched, her body trembling, she stilled over him, screaming. *Amazing.* She looked so wild – unrestrained. He gripped her hip with his other hand, thrusting up into her quickly, needing to come… *so so* close. *Almost- *

His eyes rolled back into his head, moaning, cock buried deep as he spilled inside her.

Greengrass leaned against his chest, her hair spread over her back, while he came down from his high. Their skin stuck to each other slightly, slick with sweat, as she moved to kiss him deeply, panting against his lips. Her luxurious tongue swept over his.

“Wow,” he breathed, after they parted. She laid next to him, her leg tangled with his, their bodies touching.

It was over much too quickly, but Merlin it was bloody *incredible.*

“Wow,” Greengrass said in agreement, her chest heaving slightly. “You’re… too brilliant for your own good,” she said, turning her head toward him with a smirk that he found to be quite sexy on her.

He smiled at the thought. Daphne Greengrass. Yes, she was *definitely* sexy. His mind paused and he sat straight up when he realized what he just did. Merlin, he lost his virginity to a bloody Slytherin. And he barely even knew her on top of that! He should have been horrified… but, oddly, he didn’t feel all that bad about it. His brows furrowed slightly.

Shagging must have messed with his brain.
“What is it?” he heard Greengrass ask, she trailed a hand down his back and he shivered at the touch.

“Nothing, it’s just probably late,” he said lamely, but it was the truth. It had to be past curfew – why weren’t the other girls returning yet? “Aren’t your room mates going to be back soon or something?”

Greengrass laughed. “They usually stumble in around midnight or whatever. Don’t worry about them. I set a spell on the door so no one can get in.” He looked toward her as she got up and walked around the four poster bed, unabashed by her own nakedness. She was incredibly confident. Self-assured. Harry felt so exposed, sitting nude atop her bed; it was covered in Slytherin green, reminding him of everything that he just did.

He recognized the silver case as she held it out to him, offering him a smoke. Staring at it for a moment, hesitantly, Harry picked one up and inspected it while she lit hers and inhaled deeply, standing there naked and smoking. Greengrass was doing just that when he looked up at her. And that was one thing he never thought he’d find unbelievably erotic, but, oddly, it was. He needed to get out of that room before he ended up tackling her to the bed and taking her.

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Placing the cigarette in his mouth, he searched around for his wand, when it was thrust right under his nose. Apparently Greengrass used it the whole time. Well, at least she gave it back. He flicked it toward the fag, thinking the incantation, and it lit.

As soon as he inhaled, he wanted to cough, but held it in for a second and cleared his throat after he exhaled. It wasn’t… unpleasant. It burned a little, but it tasted of her, which was quite nice. His head started to feel light on his third puff and he sank into it pleasantly.

It was calming.

He felt way less tension pressing down on him to get out of there. He just relaxed and inhaled, blowing smoke out of his mouth a moment later.

Greengrass was watching him with that lovely smirk on her face. “You look good like that,” she said, her eyes grazing over his skin, where a slight flush followed. She sat heavily across from him, leaning back against one of the bedposts. Her long hair covered her breasts, thankfully, keeping his eyes from diverting their attention from her face.

“Yeah?” he asked and she nodded.

“I supposed I’ve corrupted you enough for one night,” Greengrass said with a smile. “You probably don’t do anything like this often.”

Harry grinned. So he was that good that she didn’t even suspect that he… hadn’t even done anything of the sort? “Do you?” he asked, suddenly curious.

“No, not really,” she replied. “Once or twice.”

“Oh? Who?” Harry felt a bit of jealousy surface but he pushed it back down, thinking it incredibly irrational. He only slept with her – it was probably a one off or something like that. He could kick himself for giving in that easily.

Taking a long drag on his cigarette, he accepted the fact that he gave in. It was worth it enough.
Yes, it was… worth it. It was bloody wonderful.

“Now that would be telling,” Greengrass said with a faint smile. “You’d probably never want to see me again.”

His stomach flipped at the thought. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you… again.” Yep, he was going straight to hell. He wanted to continue fucking a Slytherin girl, what would Hermione say? Well, Hermione was the least of his worries, really. Ron, on the other hand… They couldn’t know about this.

This seemed like a pretty safe bet though. No strings attached, kind of. At least, it seemed that way. No one to endanger in the process because he doubted he’d ever want to pursue a serious relationship with Greengrass.

“Even if I told you who I slept with before?” she asked, a cheeky expression slipping over her face.

“Probably not.” No, definitely not, who cares? He had her for now and there were future possibilities! He had to refrain from thinking about it too much lest he need another go. Hormones were troublesome little heathens. It was late and… she was probably tired, even though he would if he could.

“How about,” she started, “you tell me yours if I tell you mine?”

“Okay.” A sudden bout of confidence swelled in his chest and he wanted to laugh. He actually hadn’t felt this… free in a while. It was like all the pressure was off and he was just Harry for this moment.

“You first.”

“Daphne Greengrass,” Harry said with a smile, bringing the cigarette to his lips.

“Mhm, and?” Greengrass’ expression was expectant.

“No one else.”

“Are you… kidding?” Her lips parted and her eyes widened. “You mean, I… I was your first?”

Harry nodded, exhaling smoke.

Greengrass shook her head in disbelief. “Are you naturally talented at everything?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said sheepishly, his faint grin threatening to spill over into a smile. “But now it’s your turn.”

“That’s hardly fair. You haven’t slept with anyone else.”

“A deal’s a deal.”

They both grinned.

“Fine,” Greengrass relented. “Harry Potter, definitely the most satisfying.” She smirked and he
couldn’t help but smile. “Zacharias Smith, blame lack of judgment on my part for that one. And Draco Malfoy.”

“And I’m the most satisfying?” Harry said, concealing his very pleased grin. This was definitely good. He was so much more satisfying than Draco ruddy Malfoy and Smith. Hah. If he were the type to gloat like Malfoy, he wouldn’t give it a second thought.

Greengrass – he wondered if he should refer to her as Daphne now – nodded. “Don’t let it go to your head too much.”

“I’m not as arrogant as most people think,” he replied, flicking his dead cigarette into some container that Greengrass held out to him.

“I know.”

“Why did you want shag me anyway? I mean… you seemed… very adamant,” Harry asked, choosing his words correctly.

She hesitated.

“Truthfully? You’re attractive and nice. You have absolutely gorgeous eyes. You also seem to be somewhat open-minded when it comes to people. How could I resist?” she drawled, smirking.

So it wasn’t because he was the famous Harry Potter, the ‘Chosen One’, or anything. That made him feel even better about this predicament. It really wasn’t so bad that he lost his virginity to her. Not only was it worth it for the sake of really a good shag, but she thought of him as just… him. Even if half of her reasons were superficial reasons.

Hermione did say that he had never been more fanciable than he was this year.

The clock chimed, telling them it was definitely past curfew – twelve o’clock – and he sighed. “I suppose I have to go then.” Harry reached for his trousers at the end of the bed, waving his wand to clean up the mess he made inside his boxers.

He got up and pulled them on, looping the belt through the buckle after fastening the fly. As he dressed, Greengrass watched him; he felt her eyes on him the whole time. Only when he was buttoning up his shirt, did she get up. He heard her move across the floor toward him and she placed a hand on his shoulder. Greengrass was still starkers as ever. “Let’s meet again sometime,” she said quietly into his ear, half hugging his back.

Harry gazed down at her when she moved away. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

He shrugged on his robe and moved toward the door, turning around to look back at her. She was standing less than a foot away from him. Greengrass stood up on her tip toes and kissed him lightly, he could feel her hand slip into his pocket briefly before pulling away. “Goodnight, Pot-Harry.”

“Goodnight, Daphne.”

As he left, he reached into his pocket to find Daphne’s soft, lacy knickers and he smiled to himself. Now he just had to get out of the Slytherin Common Room unscathed.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
"Harry! Where have you been?"

Hermione's voice carried through the Common Room as he entered and he winced. He could only imagine how he looked. He wasn't expecting them to wait up. His hair was always a fright anyway, so it didn't really matter if that was messy. Ron was sitting on the floor with his chess board set up, and he looked up as Harry entered.

When Harry didn't reply to her question, Hermione stared at him suspiciously.

"I didn't see you after Slughorn's meeting, I was worried."

"I'm fine - great, actually. I just went to clear my head a bit." That sounded good, truthful. Not really a lie at all.

"What's that on your neck, mate?" Ron asked as he got up from the floor to join his two friends. Ron moved Harry's hair away from his neck and Harry swallowed thickly, clasping a hand over it.

"I, er - well..." was all he could manage to get out.

Hermione laughed. "Ah, that makes sense. I didn't see Greengrass after the meeting either."

"Daphne Greengrass?" Ron exclaimed and Harry shushed him, hoping no one in the dorms heard that and came down inspecting the noise. "You were...snogging a bloody Slytherin? Gross!" he
continued more quietly, but Ron still stared at Harry as if he had suddenly grown twelve heads.

"Ron!" Hermione scolded, folding her arms over her chest. "Harry can kiss whomever he likes. Not like he has to get your permission to snog someone."

"But...how the hell could you even do that?"

"It was... good?" Harry asked, grinning. "Very good, actually."

Ron’s face started to turn green as he wrinkled his nose, frowning. Hermione slapped him on the shoulder. "Be considerate, Ron. Greengrass isn't that bad."

"She's kind of... nice for a Slytherin," Harry added, nodding, earning an obviously amused grin from Hermione. It felt awkward talking to his friends about this. He didn't want to give them any hints that they did more than snog. That was one secret he was willing to keep for as long as humanly possible.

Ron huffed. "She probably just wanted to snog the 'famous Harry Potter', all Slytherins are dirty gits like that."

"Actually, no, Ron. We talked about that," he said, irritated by Ron's sudden childish hissy fit, but trying not to show it. It wasn't as if he accidentally poisoned the Chudley Cannon's - all he did was kiss a Slytherin. Well, more than kiss, but Ron didn't need to know that.

"Right," Ron said doubtfully, then sighed, flicking his wand at his chess set. "Kiss 'whomever you want' - I'm going to bed."

They watched Ron huffily walk up the stairs, his chess set tucked under his arm. Hermione leaned close to him, sniffing the whole time, causing Harry to shift away from her. "You've been smoking too."

"Daphne smokes," he explained. Hermione would get all over him for smoking; he could only imagine the lecture.

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Neither did I. She's... different," he concluded with a slight grin.

"Good. I think... you need that." Hermione still looked at him suspiciously, obviously itching to ask him something, he knew it. He knew her long enough to know what that gleam in her eye meant.

Sighing, he chewed the inside of his cheek. "Just say it, alright, Hermione? Whatever you have to say or ask."

"You slept with her, didn't you?"

Harry wasn't expecting her to be that observant. He gaped. "I..." Merlin, why couldn't he form full sentences?

After he finished stumbling over responses, during which Hermione stared at him very patiently, waiting. "Whah - what gave me away?" he stuttered, staring at her warily.

"The hickey, you smell a bit like smoke and definitely sex. Plus, your belt isn't threaded through as many loops as it usually is, your clothes are messier than usual - that smile on your face when you came in. You certainly look like you've been thoroughly shagged," Hermione explained quietly in one breath, like she was rattling off an answer from a textbook.
Had she ever thought of working in espionage or as a detective before? Harry wanted to say that, but what blurted out of his mouth was: "Just don't tell Ron. He'll probably hate-"

"You were safe, weren't you?" she interrupted, giving him a stern look.

Oh bloody brilliant, Hermione could be just as bad as Ron's Mum sometimes. "Contraceptive charm, yes."

"Good." She paused. "Ron won't hate you. He's just jealous or something, I'm sure. Whatever goes through that brain of his."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I slept with a Slytherin, after all. He'd probably retch if he heard about it, or something, and I'd never hear the end of it," he whispered.

"Secret's safe with me," Hermione replied with a small grin. "I should probably get off to bed. It's really late."

"Yeah, me too. G'night." He shockingly wasn't tired in the least. Usually after he had a wank, he could easily fall asleep, but shagging was so much different from wanking. It was like a really good, long, mind-clearing flight. So this was what it felt like to be a normal impulsive teenager... It wasn't half bad.

Harry retreated up to his dorm, to find Ron skulking on the edge of his four poster bed, his red hair shining bright copper in the moonlight. "Why Daphne Greengrass?"

He held back a groan, expecting the third degree. "It just happened, Ron, not like I planned it or anything," Harry said in a quiet voice, glancing around at the other occupants to make sure they were still asleep.

"So... how was it?"

"Excuse me?" he had to ask again, because he wasn't sure he heard right.

"How... was it?" Ron repeated as Harry moved over to his trunk and sat to remove his shoes.

"I told you - very good," he replied, slipping his socks off and undoing his belt.

"No, I mean... like, snogging."

"I don't know what you mean." Harry started unbuttoning his shirt, remembering the way Daphne's hands had felt when they did unbuttoned every single button, her hands brushing over his skin. His cock twitched at that single thought.

He looked over at Ron to see his blue eyes staring at him nervously. "I've never... kissed anyone so I really don't know how to do it."

It dawned on him what Ron was asking. "Oh." He blushed. "Well... you just move your lips and swallow occasionally because your tongue is going to be involved at some point and there's a lot of saliva, um..." He really didn't know how to explain how to kiss someone. "I think it would be better if you found someone who could... demonstrate."

"You stuck your tongue... in her mouth?"

"Mhm." Harry stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed.

"Obviously she didn't bite it off then."
Trust Ron to expect the worst from a Slytherin.

"No. Sucked on it though. That was... bloody brilliant," he said absentmindedly, trying to push away the thoughts that started to flood his brain. Merlin, he couldn't talk about this.

"Sucked on it?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Is that all then?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Thank Merlin! He hated awkward conversations like that. Ron was way too contemplative for his own good, over a lot of awkward things.

"Goodnight."

His mind wandered to the knickers in the pocket of his robes after that particular word. What if a house elf came in the middle of the night to collect laundry?

"Night."

He waited till Ron was breathing deeply enough to be sleeping so he could retrieve the pants from his pocket. She definitely had good taste in knickers. Blue, not overly lacy - very feminine. He stashed them under his pillow quickly, with his wand, and settled against the bed, trying not to think of all the possibilities surrounding Daphne Greengrass and her knickers.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
At breakfast, Ron was tremendously quiet toward him and Hermione kept grinning like an idiot over her eggs every time Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table, briefly. Daphne was sitting next to Blaise Zabini, which made him lean over toward the bushy haired brunette and ask, "So, how did last night go with Zabini?"

Hermione snorted. "He wouldn't say a word to me until Slughorn got involved. But he didn't insult me or anything; we just talked about homework the whole time. He's quite good at Arithmancy but that shouldn't be any surprise. He's second best in our class."

"He has to be pretty peeved off that he gets beat out by a Muggleborn witch every year," Harry commented with a grin, spreading jam over his toast, glancing up at the Slytherin boy next to Daphne. She was talking quite animatedly with him until she rolled her eyes and got out her silver case, passing it to Zabini. Then, her eyes met his across the room as if she had detected him staring at her.

Harry quickly looked down at his plate, hoping he wasn't spotted staring by anyone else. His grin widened. "Guess she's not the only one who smokes," he muttered aloud, almost an afterthought.

He thought back to Daphne's words before she dragged him up those infernal stairs. Zabini was definitely a pureblood, he was certain of it. Why would he… do something that's frowned upon?

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed when he looked up at her. "What?"
"Zabini, silver case," he murmured, glancing out of the corner of his eye toward Ron, who was chatting with Lavender about Quidditch.

"Right," he heard Hermione grumble in disapproval. "Nasty habit."

Harry just smiled in response.

He didn't even realize that he had Quidditch practice that morning until Ginny accosted him in the corridors after breakfast. He was too occupied with reflecting upon last night to even think about Quidditch practice. He'd rescheduled the one they were supposed to have yesterday night because their two beaters had been recovering in the Hospital Wing from some nasty hexes – compliments of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

A practice without beaters never went well.

But practice didn't go any better than the last one. Ron had some major mental issues to get over and the fact that he and Dean weren't getting on well made matters worse. Ginny's boyfriend always came to watch them practice, so what? Hermione often came to practices and Ron didn't mind. He could at least keep his resentment off the Quidditch pitch and stop glaring at Ginny every time she approached him. Ron always lost it though, and Ginny wasn't even being challenged by his defense. The Quaffle sailed straight into the hoop without Ron even noticing.

When he walked out of the Gryffindor locker rooms with Ron, he spotted Daphne about twenty metres away, leaning against one of the pitch supports, a cigarette dangling from her fingertips, and looking in his direction. Giving her a small grin, he turned to Ron. "I'll see you later, I have to… go," he said awkwardly, trying to find an excuse but not thinking of any. He was planning to work on his Transfiguration paper after practice, but he could always get that done later.

Ron's brows furrowed. "Oh." Then the red-haired boy must have spotted Daphne because his lip curled. "Oh, have to go snog your girlfriend?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Ron, I have to go snog the life out of her."

"Well don't let me stop you." Ron glowered and his shoulders slumped as he walked off toward the castle, grumbling.
Just brilliant, another ruddy thing to deal with.

Harry sighed and ambled over to where Daphne was standing, stubbing her cigarette out with her boot. "What's wrong?" she asked when he approached.

"Ron's being a right git, as per usual," he explained, glancing over his shoulder at 'said' git, who was watching them. He'd obviously decided against stalking back to the castle.

"I see that. So he… knows?" Daphne drawled, raising an eyebrow.

Harry fervently shook his head. "Not about everything. He'd probably kill me." He paused and gestured toward the locker rooms. "How about we go in there and talk."

"Alright."

After they entered, he quickly shut the door and cast a few charms on it so no one could get in or hear their conversation. Daphne took off her robe, but he saw that she was wearing less… tantalizing clothes than she was last night. He'd never seen a Slytherin in denim before, but then he remembered that she was a halfblood as well, so that would explain the Muggle attire.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" he asked, sitting across from her on one of the benches.

"What made you think I wanted to talk?"

"Well, you were waiting for me, so obviously you wanted something," he replied, leaning back on his hands.

"Just wanted to see you, I guess. We didn't have much of a chance to talk." Daphne smirked and crossed one leg over the other.

"That's not my fault. You basically assaulted me."

"That wasn't exactly my idea in the first place," she said with a faint smile. "But, you have to admit,
it was definitely worth it. I don't know why I didn't do it sooner."

Harry swallowed thickly. "Sooner?"

"Yeah. Like a year or so ago. Never got the chance. You're always around your friends and I could only imagine the reaction I'd get from everyone – your house and mine – if I went up to you and asked 'hey, Potter, fancy a shag?'''

Spluttering, Harry managed a laugh. "No, that wouldn't have gone over well. Ron would have a coronary. I'd probably just… not respond. I don't really know how to deal with girls." He grinned sheepishly.

"Exactly, but you're better with girls than you think." Daphne nodded, her gaze dropping to his lips then back up to his eyes.

"You're just… being nice." Merlin, it felt weird saying that to a Slytherin. Not all Slytherins could be bad though. She was definitely proving that.

"It's true," she said with a wave of her hand. "You just don't know it. You're like one of the most insecure blokes I know from what I have to go on."

"Well, you're very… forward." He didn't think he was that insecure. Just when it came to girls because he really had no idea what he was doing most of the time.

"They say opposites attract."

"I probably wouldn't have thought much of you if you hadn't…" he looked for the proper term, "asserted yourself."

Daphne gave a short laugh. "Good things come to those who wait for the opportune moment."

Harry just grinned. She looked really nice when she smiled.
"So, I suppose we should get to know each other better since we shagged and everything. Have any hobbies besides Dark Lord hunting?" she drawled, with an amiable smile splashed across her face.

"Erm..." Harry trailed off. "No, I think that pretty much covers it," he said dryly. "My day's not complete without uncovering some nefarious plot, overcoming vast odds, and defeating evil."

"Typical," Daphne remarked.

"How about you?"

"I don't do much, to be honest. I'm really boring in comparison to you."

"There has to be something you do for fun though," Harry said, encouraging her to speak. He didn't want to spend the whole time talking about him.

"Well," she started, worrying at her bottom lip. "I read, study, do all the archetypal academic activities. I'm a dab hand at potions too; better watch your back in class." Harry grinned. He didn't have to watch his back; he had the Prince to do it for him. "Oh and I go racing every once in a while with a few friends, I guess."

"Racing?" Harry's brow furrowed. "What do you race?" He'd heard of Muggle car races, there was no way that Daphne could leave the school to do that.

"Broom racing, round the school. I've gotten a few detentions over the years but it's bloody good fun," she explained with a wide smile. "You should come with me some time." Daphne paused, looking him up and down. "That is, if you're any good on that broom of yours."

Harry scoffed. "I'll have you know that I'm plenty good and-" a slow smile spread across his lips "- I'll probably kick your arse."

"We'll see about that." Daphne reached into her pocket and pulled out her infamous silver case, she held it out to him after readying her fag.

Harry shook his head. "Probably shouldn't, Hermione got all over me because I smelled like smoke
last night."

"Ah." Daphne snapped the case closed. "She's quite observant."

"Too observant," Harry corrected with a nod of his head. "She forced it out of me that we shagged. Too much evidence against me."

"She knows about this?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Thankfully, Hermione just let it go with some rather… embarrassing questions."

"That's a relief. I'd never hear the end of it from Blaise if it got 'round school. She can keep a secret, right?" Daphne looked uneasy at this information.

"Of course," he assured, thinking about last night. "I've a feeling she's keeping secrets of her own."

Her eyebrows shot up. "What do you mean?"

"She said I 'definitely smelled like sex' and it just made me wonder…” he said distantly, thinking of the conversation. What did she mean? Then again, she was a Prefect, maybe she had caught people at it before and smelled it.

"Hm. Maybe she's not as much of a prude as I thought."

"Oi, she's my friend," Harry countered quickly.

Daphne shrugged in response. "Sorry. I don't come with a filter."

"I've sort of noticed."
Smiling, Daphne leaned back, which made her shirt pull taught across her chest, the button holes threatening to pop open. It distracted Harry for a moment, but he resolutely looked back up at her face. They lulled into a comfortable silence. She stared, a small smirk on her face.

She really was quite pretty.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, narrowing slightly, as her smirk widened. "Like what you see, Harry?"

He stuttered, his eyes traveling down her form, then quickly back of up to her face. "I- yes," he managed to say, a slight flush creeping up his neck.

"Good."

Before he knew it, Daphne had crossed the two feet of space between them and slid onto his lap. Her face was only an inch away from his and he could feel her breath against his lips. He threw caution to the wind and leaned up to kiss her, crushing her to him with his hands on her back. This was the best part of their conversation so far. Harry's nerves tingled all the way to his toes.

It didn't take her long to pull away, a few inches, still comfortably straddling his lap and sill smirking that sexy-smooth smirk of hers. "I really like this arrangement. Talk then snog," she said. "It's perfect."

Harry gave a lopsided grin. "I couldn't agree more."

"Helps that I've always had a thing for you in your Quidditch uniform."

Daphne closed the gap again, not coming up for air until absolutely necessary, her tongue dancing against his in ways that made his mind whirl. Harry moved his lips across her jaw when she pulled away, gasping. He breathed deeply in between peppering kisses over her neck. His hands slid down from their place on the small of her back to cup her arse.

Moaning, she pulled away from him. "We probably should stop or else we'll be late for lunch."
Harry looked up at her and smiled. "I honestly can't say I'm hungry."

"Me neither."

Daphne pulled him in for another kiss and, fortunately, that little protesting voice in his head never interrupted once.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Hermione and Ron seemed to get used to him slipping in late for lunch nearly every other day, after two weeks of doing so. The only time that Daphne seemed to catch him was before meals and sometimes during his free period. They’d probably ‘christened’ nearly a quarter of the broom cupboards in Hogwarts. Ron still gave him dirty looks every time he crept into lunch late and hadn’t spoken to him since that day after Quidditch practice. Hermione seemed torn between lecturing and keeping quiet, but always chose the latter, probably not wanting to betray his secret by asking very obvious questions.

Harry had to admit, his and Daphne’s arrangement was definitely more than perfect. He’d never been more calm or collected or himself, really. He felt so free and almost… happy.

“Hogsmeade this weekend,” Hermione told him stiffly as he piled on a plate of food to eat before he had Defense Against the Dark Arts with Snape. It wasn’t going to be a pleasant afternoon, but with his mind so clear, he didn’t even think Snape could bring him down.

His head snapped up when Hermione mentioned Hogsmeade. Did that mean he should take Daphne with him? Somewhere secluded? He could just imagine the reactions they’d get if they showed up at The Three Broomsticks and started snogging in one of the booths. She’d probably not care in the least about it – beside the Zabini factor – but he wasn’t ready for their arrangement to become public. It had only been about two weeks. He could keep his hands off her the rest of the time.

The feeling of someone’s fingers pulling at his hair brought him out of his reverie. “Nice one, mate. New girl?” Seamus asked as he sat next to Harry, reaching for a particularly large turkey leg on one of the platters.

Harry brought his hand to his neck, knowing exactly what was there. His hair covered that particular mark most of the time and none of the glamours he casted seemed to work for an extended length of time. It didn’t help that Daphne rather liked that… place. “Kind of,” he muttered, taking a large bite of his food.

“Who is she?” Seamus’ tone was curious.
“Can’t tell you,” Harry replied, glancing up at him with a grin.

“Come on, mate,” Seamus pleaded through half a mouthful of turkey. “Tell me the juicy details. Is she well fit?”

Harry chewed his food purposefully and nodded slowly, looking over at him, ignoring Hermione’s disapproving looks toward their chatter – or non-chatter in Harry’s case. Ron’s face turned a bright shade of puce.

Seamus smiled broadly. “Aw, you can tell me who she is.”

“Bloody Daphne Greengrass…” the red-haired boy growled quietly from across the table.

Looking toward the grumbling Gryffindor, Seamus’ eyes widened and glanced back at Harry, his mouth parted in surprise. Obviously, he’d heard.

Never in his life had he ever wanted to throttle his friend as much as he had now. Harry glowered at the boy and stood up. “What the fuck (Hermione exclaimed, ‘Harry!’) is wrong with you, Ron?” he asked in a dangerously low tone.

Ron stood, towering over him by a couple inches, but Harry didn’t back down. They glared daggers at each other. “I know what you’ve been up to. How could you?” Ron seethed. “Dirtying yourself with that filthy Slytherin. You’re no better than them.”

Harry lunged across the table, grabbing Ron by the neck of his robes, only to be pulled back by Seamus and Dean, dragging Ron with him. Some kind of monster inside him roared to life. His fingers clenched white fabric around his neck, Ron yelped in surprise at his friend’s attack but, slowly, Ron managed to wiggle out of his grip. Both stood on each side of the table. Harry had his wand out in a flash, ready with the first curse on the tip of his tongue-

“Mr. Potter! Weasley!”

Glancing toward where the voice came from, McGonagall was striding down the row in between the house tables. “I will ask you to put that away,” she clipped in a stern voice and Harry complied reluctantly.

When she reached them, she looked between them. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Ron’s being a git, as usual-” he said at the same time Ron had grumbled loudly. “-Harry’s seeing a Slytherin!”

Harry flushed slightly at Ron’s words. He really wanted to keep that a secret. It made him wish he had obliviated Ron from the start. Such a bloody little hypocrite, asking how to snog, when he knew full well what he was asking about – and who!

“I see.” McGonagall looked from Harry to Ron, her sharp gaze assessing the situation. Harry was aware that every eye in the Great Hall was on them and wanted to disappear right there at that moment. It was too early for this to get out. At least only Seamus knew for sure – maybe a few others surrounding them. Bloody Ron just had to go and open his huge mouth!

“Twenty-five points from Gryffindor – each!” Professor Mcgonagall said, her eyes narrowing.
“Consider this a warning. If I see you two fighting again, I’ll have no choice but to give you detention.”

Harry sighed in relief as his Transfiguration Professor pivoted on her feet and prowled back to the Head Table. He liked to save his detentions for Snape to give, and Hogsmead was coming. He didn’t want to spend the whole weekend doing some kind of unsavoury deed while everyone else was out having fun.

Deciding that lunch was officially spoiled, he left the Great Hall amid the animated chatter, most of it surrounding him and some mystery Slytherin. He felt like stomping all the way back to Gryffindor Tower to get ready for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“So what do you do at those secret meetings with Dumbledore?” Daphne suddenly asked, her head turned toward him. She was splayed out on the grassy floor of a meadow in the Room of Requirement, a cigarette perched between her fingers. The twilight, provided by the room, casted shadows on the lines of her face.

Harry looked up at her from the Prince’s book and his Potions essay, for Slughorn, barely half finished. The Marauder’s Map laid off to the side, tracking Draco Malfoy in the dungeons. “How did you know about those?”

Daphne snorted. “I’m a Slytherin, Harry. I have my ways.”

Rolling his eyes, Harry sighed. Now that he had gotten to know her a little better, he shouldn’t have been so surprised. She had done her own Polyjuice experiment in second year to figure out if he was the heir of Slytherin, after weeks of studying Hermione’s mannerisms. He wished he had thought of studying Crabbe and Goyle, but then decided that there really wasn’t much to study when it came to those two. It surprised him that someone besides Hermione would come up with something like that, but – after he thought about it – that sneaky method of gathering information was such a Slytherin tactic.

“He’s teaching me things, that’s all. Stuff for Voldemort,” he said, hoping he was vague enough. Daphne’s cheek twitched slightly at the mention of ‘Voldemort’, as if the Dark Lord was more of an irritation than something to be frightened of.

“Pfft. I s’pose he’s taken an awful lot of interest in you over the years.” She flicked her ashes off to the side, into the thick grass. A trickle of smoke curled from her lips. “Like an obsessive ex-boyfriend.”


“Imagine the Prophet if that happened.”
Wincing, Harry frowned and shook his head. “Never gonna to happen. I’d rather be eaten alive by a Blast-Ended Skrewt.”

Daphne laughed quietly, smiling wide up at the stars. He smiled in response. It was hard not to feel at ease around her.

“So,” she paused for a brief moment before continuing, “how’s that essay coming along?”

He stared down at the parchment and shrugged. “Could be worse. I’m half done with it, at least. Hermione’s been getting on me for it for the last few days.”

Sitting up, Daphne crossed her legs and turned toward him. He quickly covered the map with the Prince’s book. “’Guess I could help you out with it. Did you mention the three types of dragon’s blood that can change the properties?” she asked, looking down at his half-written essay, raising an eyebrow.

With a sigh, Harry settled into the essay – and with the help of the Prince and Daphne, his essay was completed in record time. By the time it was done, the edge of his palm was blackened from scrawling out all the notes that would probably be useful to remember for the end-of-semester exams. Daphne rattled off information, random things popping up, in quite a Hermione-like fashion that he was comfortable with. However, he had never taken notes while Hermione did it, but Potions was the one class that he knew he needed all the aid that he could get. Snape certainly wasn’t any help over the years.

“Are you going to Hogsmeade?” Daphne asked after she read over the revised version of his Potions essay.

“Yeah, most likely. Why?” Harry discreetly folded up the Marauder’s Map and tucked it into the Prince’s book, after noting that Draco Malfoy had been in his room for the last hour.

She shrugged. “Want to meet at the Hog’s Head or something? Some place where no one goes, of course. S’bad enough that Weasley let out that you’re ‘dating’,” she formed air quotes with her fingers, “a Slytherin. Probably wouldn’t be too proper to drag you into the Three Broomsticks, tempting as it is.”

Grinning, Harry packed his stuff into his school bag. A date at the Hog’s Head sounded vastly better than Madame Puddifoot’s. He was planning to ask Daphne, but wasn’t sure if it would be comfortable for her, being in semi-public with him. There was a lot of suspicion going around Hogwarts. “I’ve been to the Hog’s Head before. If I can sneak away without attracting attention, I’ll be there, but don’t hold me to it.”

“Brill.” Daphne plucked a cigarette from her silver case and lit it with her wand, then offered the case to him.

Harry stared down at it with some reservation, but grabbed at a fag anyway. To hell with it, if I’m going to die fighting Voldemort, might as well live a little. Thoughts of meeting with Dumbledore later swirled around his head as he tapped his wand against the tip of the cigarette.

OoO
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“You smell like smoke again,” Hermione huffed into his ear; he could feel her stern gaze boring into the side of his face.

Harry didn’t look at her.

Dumbledore wasn’t teaching him much of anything and it was frustrating. Glimpses of Tom Riddle’s life flashed quickly before his eyes. What Dumbledore showed him was quite disturbing, possibly useful, but it was too early to see its purpose. Was there a purpose or did Dumbledore just want him to get to know the enemy better?

“So I do,” Harry blankly replied to Hermione’s remark.

How was he going to defeat Voldemort by traveling into just a few memories that Dumbledore could gather? It seemed quite pointless. Voldemort was powerful – he should learn some sort of advanced magic, at least. He was reminded of Lupin in third year, teaching him the Patronus Charm. Professor Lupin was more help to him than Dumbledore was currently.

“You’ve been smoking.” Hermione was just a faint voice in the distance to his thoughts.

Harry kept staring into the flames in the common room fireplace. What was there to gain from psychologically profiling Voldemort? “Yup,” he said, aloof, exhaling a long sigh.

Well, on the upside, this way he might be able to understand the way Voldemort thought, but that was quite the mystery to him even after what he saw. Dumbledore still wouldn’t tell him what happened to his hand either, but Harry had a feeling it was all connected somehow. That ring…

“It’s a nasty habit, Harry! Addictive… do you want to kill yourself? There’s too much at stake for that!” Hermione exclaimed as quietly as she possibly could into his ear. Harry wasn’t paying much attention, but he could feel the frustration rolling off her in thick waves.

He ignored it.
It wasn’t as if he had the chance to defeat Voldemort. He’d probably die in the end. In what way could he avoid that? Voldemort had fifty-some years on him! And Harry’s magical ability, in his opinion, was only sub-par at best.

No, there wasn’t any way Harry could beat him.

*The power that the Dark Lord knows not…*

Well, Harry didn’t know what power he had either.

Love? Was Dumbledore fooling himself with that? How could love destroy Voldemort?

Why not get Snape to brew the Dark Lord a love potion then? Slip it into his drink, set him on Malfoy. But oh! Big accident: Snape accidentally got his greasy DNA into the brew and Voldemort falls in love with the git. Voldemort’s obsession turns to Snape. The world is saved! Snape and Voldemort live happily – or miserably – ever after.

The corner of Harry’s lip twitched into a faint grin and he shook his head. Daphne must have been rubbing off on him.

“Harry? Can you hear me?” Hermione waved a hand in front of his face and he blinked, turning toward her.

“Hm?”

“Honestly!” Hermione stood up and placed her hands on her hips. “You boys are all the same!”

His brows furrowed as he watched her walk away, stomping up the stairs to her dormitory. He thought he had heard her… Something about smoking being bad for him. Yes, she had point – it was.

Harry shrugged to himself and retreated to his dormitory, only to be attacked by Seamus. Did the badgering ever cease?

“So, Daphne Greengrass, eh?”

Harry rolled his eyes and started unbuttoning his shirt. The rest of the boys were downstairs in the common room, thankfully. It was bad enough that Ron and Seamus knew about Daphne. “Just as long as you don’t tell anyone that.”

Seamus gave him a calculating look, his eyes narrowed. Then suddenly, he nodded, a smooth grin spreading across his face. “You’re keeping it a secret?”

“No, Daphne Greengrass, eh?”

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“Slytherin, Gryffindor… Probably a good idea,” Harry answered, shrugging the shirt off. *Not to mention the possible ramifications that would result if something like that became wide-spread knowledge,* he added in his head.

“Yeah…” Seamus trailed off but he perked back up with a smile. “So tell me about it.”

With a sigh, Harry stripped down to his boxers after kicking off his shoes. He shrugged. “Not much to say.”
Groaning, Seamus fell back on his bed dramatically. “You’re killing me.”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Harry told him, with a cheeky grin, before sliding beneath his covers.

“I hate that saying.”

Smirking, Harry reached over to his bedside table for his Potions text, ready to settle into the Half-Blood Prince’s notes.

“Merlin, you have one of the fittest girls in our year and you’re not gonna brag about it?”

“Don’t need to,” Harry replied, disinterestedly, opening the book to his dog-eared page. Hermione always hated it when he dog-eared the pages. He grinned at that and looked over a potion’s table in the chapter on Sleep Potions, containing the ingredients for Dreamless Sleep and their properties.

“You’re no fun – just as bad as Dean. He won’t even tell me about Ginny.”

Sighing once more, Harry set the book down in his lap. “Okay, I’ll tell you,” he relented.

Seamus bolted upright, sitting on the edge of the bed with a wide smile. “Knew you’d come around, mate.”

“Daphne’s great.” He left it at that.

Seamus hung on his words, obviously hoping for more.

His face fell after a few seconds of silence. “That’s it?”

Harry didn’t respond; his eyes were fixed on the page, barely registering what he was reading at the moment.

“No one gives me any decent wank material anymore! What happened to you lot?”

Frowning, Harry glanced out of the corner of his eye at the Irish boy. “Maybe because you use our ‘stories’ as ‘wank material’.”

“You didn’t know that - I only just told you!”

“Your silencing charms aren’t that great, you know.”

A look of horror crossed over Seamus’ face and he slunk back against the headboard, deflated. Satisfied that he’d shut up Seamus’ badgering for a while, Harry picked up the Prince’s book and read.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Duality: Blaise Zabini and Opals

oOo

Daphne was sitting at a table at the Hog’s Head with Zabini when he arrived, slipping in after the barman, under his invisibility cloak. The pub’s customary stench of, what seemed to be, goats hit him by surprise. It must have gotten worse in the last year. Harry stood in front of Daphne and Zabini’s table, invisible, watching them and shifting nervously on his feet.

“Well there is a little reason why we’re here.”

Zabini quirked an eyebrow.

Daphne rolled her eyes.

“You know how I’ve been skipping lunch a lot lately?”

The dark Slytherin boy nodded.

“I want you to meet the person I’ve been seeing and I want you to keep an open mind.” That sounded more like an order than anything.

Zabini leaned back in his chair, his fingers dancing around the edge of his snifter of, what Harry supposed to be, an alcoholic beverage. “As I assume you wish to keep this a secret, since you dragged me to this awful establishment” he paused, a menacing grin spreading across his face, “-what’s in it for me?”

“Knew you were going to say that.” Daphne took a sip of her Firewhiskey. “I assure you, if you open your mind and play nice, it’ll be mutually beneficial. For all of us.”

The Slytherin boy’s eyes narrowed.
“And, if you don’t play nice, I’ll just obliterate you and you won’t even remember having met this person, nor will you remember this conversation,” she spoke in a cool business tone, smirking toward a slightly contemptuous Zabini.

Harry’s brows furrowed, but he figured that he was safe enough to reveal himself and possibly not get hexed on spot. He wasn’t expecting Zabini to be there on his supposed ‘date’, of all people. So, taking a deep breath, trying to gain a bit of confidence, he pulled the cloak off to the side.

Neither of them flinched as he was revealed, as if they expected that he was there the whole time, which was rather disappointing. He was hoping to get some sort of reaction out of Daphne, but she just grinned. Zabini’s eyes narrowed further into icy, calculating slits.

“Glad you could make it,” Daphne said, gesturing to the chair next to her and sliding a glass of Firewhiskey over to him. “I don’t know what you drink, so I got the standard.”

“Erm-” Harry stared hesitantly at the glass and took his seat, avoiding Zabini’s gaze. “Thanks, Daphne.”

“Potter,” Zabini’s deep voice rumbled from the other side of the table. Harry looked up and the boy gave him a curt nod.

“Zabini.” Harry nodded back with a wary look.

The Slytherin boy turned toward Daphne. “So you’re… fucking Potter?”

Harry’s neck burned from the flush that was creeping up over his skin. Without any hesitation, he downed the Firewhiskey in one gulp, grimacing slightly at the burn as it went down.

“Among other things,” Daphne replied, reaching into the pocket of her deep green cloak and removing her silver case.

The way Zabini was eyeing him, Harry felt incredibly uneasy. What was Zabini to Daphne? A friend? Or was he more like a big brother, like Ron, who wished to beat the seven shades of shit out of Dean every time Dean came in from snogging Ron’s sister? Of course, if that were the case, then the situation Harry was in was exponentially worse, considering that he and Daphne went far past snogging the first night they met. That wouldn’t bode well at all.

“I see.” Zabini slid the silver case toward himself with a sigh. “And here I was concerned that you got yourself back with that Smith bastard.”

“Bastard’s about right,” Harry concurred, thinking of the annoying blonde Hufflepuff, who seemed to cause trouble for the hell of it.

Pausing from lighting his cigarette, Zabini’s lips twitched into a smirk. “Well, I believe we’ve found something we agree on,” he drawled around the fag.

Harry grinned. Smith bashing was one thing he didn’t mind doing – too bad Snape bashing was out of the question, or they’d be there all night. Daphne passed the silver case to him; he plucked a cigarette from the confines, joining them, and grabbing another glass of Firewhiskey from the selection of drinks lined up about the table.
“Harry’s not as bad as you think, Blaise, you just have to get to know him better,” Daphne said, smoke trickling out her lips as she spoke.

Looking doubtful, Zabini shrugged one shoulder.

Harry stared at both of the Slytherins apprehensively, sipping his Firewhiskey and waiting for the nicotine buzz to hit.

“Fine.” Zabini seemed to shrink a little upon relenting. But his aloof aura didn’t disappear for a second as he brought the cigarette to his lips, inhaled, and blew a smoke ring toward the Gryffindor boy, looking uninterested with the whole affair. “I’ll keep an open mind,” his detached voice articulated.

The trio at the table was silent for a while, the quiet sounds of an almost empty pub settling around them. Harry drew deeply on his cigarette, finally feeling the nicotine buzz kick in, and he settled back into his chair, throwing a lopsided grin toward Daphne.

The bell on the door to the Hog’s Head jingled as it opened and Harry was abruptly torn out of his buzz when he noticed Zabini stiffen and glare over Harry’s shoulder. Please don’t let it be Ron, please don’t let it be Ron...

“Hey, Potter.” He heard the distinct voice of Zacharias Smith and mumbled a curse. Merlin, say his name once and he appears? Harry turned slowly, glancing over his right shoulder. “Zabini.” Smith nodded politely toward the Slytherin boy and turned his eyes on Daphne, leering. “Greengrass.”

Harry stared at the blonde-haired Hufflepuff. “What do you want, Smith?” Daphne asked sharply, her piercing gaze boring into him.

“Clearly, I’m here for a drink, but this is so much more interesting,” Smith replied with a, somewhat, maniacal grin. “So which one are you ‘seeing’, Potter? Or did Weasley forget to say ‘Slytherin’s’” when he announced it to the Great Hall?”

Harry rolled his eyes, glancing back at Zabini, who looked torn between being disgusted or murderous, his lip curled severely. “I’m not seeing multiple Slytherins, Smith,” Harry replied, calmly, his nose wrinkling in annoyance as he downed the rest of his second Firewhiskey.

“Ah, wonderful,” Smith commented with an odd glint in his eyes. “Then you won’t mind me asking Greengrass here to join me for a drink.”

Stiffening, Harry felt the urge to glare and his jaw clenched, his hand tightening around his empty glass. Smith and Malfoy – there was no difference between them at all.

“Not on your life,” Daphne responded coldly.

Zabini was as still as a statue, glaring daggers at the Hufflepuff. It didn’t even look as if he were breathing. A long cherry grew at the tip of the cigarette between his fingers as it burnt down.

“I could make it worth your while,” Smith leered suggestively, goading Harry even further. Hexing him right about now sounded terribly satisfying.

“You couldn’t make it worth it for the fucking Giant Squid.” Daphne smirked, leaning back in her chair, taking the last drag on her cigarette.
Smith sneered. “I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“Didn’t even deserve a response.”

The Hufflepuff boy’s cheeks flamed red and he glared at the girl. “Stuck up bitch,” he muttered, his narrowed eyes grazing over each member of the unusual trio. “Whoring yourself out to Potter now, eh?”

Harry started to get up, his hand curled into a fist, longing to brain him – forget hexing the bastard! – but Daphne pulled at his sleeve and he settled back down into his chair.

The nerve of that prat!

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Daphne stated smoothly.

A tight scoff spilled through Smith’s lips. “It’s obvious, Greengrass. You’ll spread your legs for anyone. Boy Wonder worth your while? Or maybe it’s Zabini who you’re after – trying to make him jealous by slagging yourself arou-”

A jet of red light cut off Smith’s callous rant and the boy fell backwards to the floor in a heap of tangled Hufflepuff robes.

Harry looked back at Zabini, who had his wand out. The Slytherin stared at the stunned body with little interest as he tucked his wand back up his sleeve. “Much better,” Zabini said with a satisfied smirk.

Daphne grabbed Harry’s sleeve again, willing him to follow, and they got up from the table. Harry had the urge to kick the Hufflepuff while he was down as they stood around the boy. Removing her wand from her robe pocket, Daphne pointed it at Smith. “Obliviate,” she whispered and the boy’s memories of the past conversation completely erased.

Harry relaxed a little.

“Make yourself useful, Potter,” Zabini uttered, struggling to lift the weight of the tall lanky Hufflepuff as he bent down to pick him up. Harry hesitated, his brows furrowing, but he reached in and grabbed the back of the boy’s robes anyway. They hauled him upright, distributing the weight between them.

“What are we going to do with him?”

Zabini and Daphne didn’t answer as Harry was led toward the bar, helping the Slytherin boy drag Smith along with them. The grizzled-looking barman raised his eyebrows as they approached. “Can I help you?” he asked in a gruff voice.

When Zabini plopped Smith’s limp body onto a stool at the bar, Harry stumbled, grabbing onto the edge of another stool to keep from tipping over onto the grubby floor. He glared at the Slytherin boy, who was brushing off his robes and smoothing over the fabric. Zabini brought out his wand and did a quick scourgify over his robes.

Ponce, Harry thought, but paused in the middle of rolling his eyes to look back over at Zabini and Daphne bewilderedly.
How was it even possible that those two could do magic outside of Hogwarts without having a Ministry Owl flocking down to attack them? Were they of age already? He reminded himself to ask when Daphne’s birthday was, just to check.

“Could you take care of him? He’s been quite the nuisance,” Daphne asked politely, passing – what Harry believed to be – a satchel full of Galleons toward the barman.

The old man looked over at the blonde Hufflepuff. “Obliviation, I presume?”

“T’d rather that be kept between the two of us, Mr. Dumbledore.”

Harry blinked. Mr. Dumbledore? He narrowed his eyes toward the old barman. There… was a resemblance between him and the headmaster. They must have been related somehow – Harry wasn’t even aware that Dumbledore had family this close to the school. He’d always looked strikingly familiar though, he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“No worries, Greengrass,” Mr. Dumbledore assured, “all swept under the rug.”

“Brilliant.”

Harry looked between Daphne and Zabini, then to Mr. Dumbledore confoundedly. “Come on, Harry – got to go before he enervates Smith.” Daphne swiftly grabbed the sleeve of his arm and pulled him along out the bar. Harry faintly paid attention to the jingle of the door closing before removing himself from Daphne’s grasp.

“Mr. Dumbledore?” he asked incredulously.

The two Slytherins stopped and turned toward him. “Yeah. Aberforth Dumbledore,” Daphne answered, her forehead crinkled a bit at the centre. “Aberforth Dumbledore? He was a part of the old Order of the Phoenix – Dumbledore’s brother! That’s why the old barman looked so familiar – he was in that picture he had in his album.

Daphne raised an eyebrow while Zabini simply stood there indifferently, his arms crossed over his chest. “Yes, Harry. Aberforth Dumbledore,” she repeated slowly, as if he didn’t understand what she was saying. “Decent bloke.”

He followed them blankly, deep in thought.

Dumbledore never mentioned his brother – ever. Considering Aberforth was so close to the school wouldn’t they see each other often…?

Well, not all families were as close as the Weasleys. Maybe Aberforth was a lot like Percy, except the opposite? Percy ran off to the Ministry and was vastly different from the rest of his family; and – if Harry wasn’t mistaken – he’d heard something about Aberforth and goats before. No wonder the pub reeked of them. But Dumbledore’s family could have been more like Percy…

Harry shook his head, his forehead hurt from being creased for so long.

The three walked along, avoiding the High Street of Hogsmeade where most of the students were running around. Harry thought of taking out his invisibility cloak and throwing it around him, but the...
path they were on was very deserted.

He wondered what Ron and Hermione were doing. He had left them at Honeydukes while Ron emptied his pockets for a huge pile of Chocolate Frog Cards, desperate to finally get Agrippa to complete his collection. They were probably at The Three Broomsticks wondering where he was, and he felt a brief guilty twinge burn through his stomach. Even if Ron was being a prat and not exactly talking to him, he still felt guilty for ditching them.

“Is anyone going to say anything?” Daphne asked, glancing at the both of them on either side of her, quirking an eyebrow. The snow that was falling down collected in her dark hair.

“I dunno,” Harry replied, grinning. “What do you want me to say?”

He noticed that Zabini seemed to be off in his own world as he looked over at them.

“Anything – I’m not very fond of silence.”

Then why would she be friends with Zabini? It didn’t seem as if he spoke that often.

Harry was just about to open his mouth to ask her when her birthday was – seeming it quite appropriate as he was curious anyway – when a deafening scream from ahead cut him off. Jolting, Harry whipped his head in that direction.

Were they being attacked?

But how could Death Eater’s know that they had Hogsmeade weekend, they didn’t give them enough time to-

His mind stopped and all fingers pointed toward one thing:

_Malfoy._

It had to be Malfoy.

That ruddy bastard was planning something. He must have been itching for a Hogsmeade weekend to come so he could round up the Death Eaters.

Without a second thought, he took off running toward the screaming, grabbing his wand from his back pocket. A hex was on his lips as he came up over a hill, only to stop dead in his tracks, his heart pounding.

No Death Eaters.

Katie Bell was high up in the air, her mouth wide open – screaming and screaming. A dark haired Hufflepuff tried to pull her to the ground, anguished shrieks of half-formed cries of help pouring from her lips. There was something very _wrong_ with Katie… something not right at all. Her eyes were completely blank, unseeing. Harry rushed forward and tugged hard on Katie’s robe with the Hufflepuff girl. 1

What was wrong with her? Was she cursed?

No one else was around them.
Who could have cursed her?

With one hard tug from the both of them, Katie fell and sprawled out atop them, struggling, painful cries ripped from her throat. They tried to hold on to her but she was writhing too much that they could barely keep their grip. Katie’s arm came in contact with his nose and he winced, his eyes watering. Katie’s squirming increased, she was kicking, her limbs flailing so wildly, they had to let go.

Harry quickly got to his feet and stared from her to the Hufflepuff girl. “What happened?”

“I don’t know! She just started…” the girl broke off into a sob. “I-”

Looking around for anyone who could help, but finding no one, Harry exclaimed over Katie’s screams, “Stay here – I’m going to go get some help!”

He took off running down the path toward Hogwarts, hoping he would run into Professor McGonagall or someone who could stop the curse, at least, on the way. The path was deserted, hundreds of metres of snow-covered land stretched between him and the castle. *It had to be the Cruciatius Curse*, he thought. But… he’d never seen anything like that before. Whatever hit her… it was horrible.

*What could have caused it?*

A large human shape appeared at the edge of the path, obscured by the rapidly falling snow that was starting to turn into a furious blizzard. Harry sped up as fast as his legs could carry him. “Hagrid! Hagrid!” he yelled, panting, hoping the half-giant could hear him.

“Harry!” Hagrid boomed, his hair and beaverskin coat covered in a thick sheet of snow. “Jus’ bin visitin’ Grawp, he’s comin’ on so well yeh wouldn’–”

“Hagrid, Katie’s hurt back there – cursed or something –” he yelled over the howling wind of the snowstorm.

“Cursed?”

Harry nodded frantically and then nodded back toward the path. “This way!”

They took off back down the path toward where he had left Katie with the Hufflepuff girl; he hoped that she wasn’t dead by the time they got there. If it was something like the Cruciatius Curse, she’d probably have gone mad by now.

But it took them no time to get there. The girl was leaning over Katie and Zabini and Daphne were standing off to the side, their wands out, inspecting the area. Harry stopped next to them, his lungs burned and his glasses were dusted with sleet, but he could still see enough through him.

“Get back!” Hagrid shouted. “Lemme see her!”

The Hufflepuff girl backed away from Katie, tears running down her face, almost bowling over Zabini as she got out of the half-giant’s way.

Hagrid looked over the twitching and screaming Gryffindor before scooping her up in his arms.
Without a glance at the other four people on the path, he took off toward the castle, Katies screams fading with the distance.

Harry caught his breath, looking over at Daphne and Zabini, who were still alert, obviously looking for an attacker. “What happened?” he asked the Hufflepuff girl, who seemed to have calmed down a little bit, but barely. She was practically hysterical before Hagrid took Katie away. “Was she attacked?”

“No. She was carrying a package… and it tore…” The brunette pointed a shaky finger toward a wet and mangled brown-paper package on the ground, split open enough to reveal greenish glitter.

Harry walked forward and crouched down next to it. He looked up as Zabini and Daphne joined him; their wands prodded at the brown-paper but didn’t go anywhere near the elaborate opal necklace that appeared when Zabini moved a bit of the paper aside.

“I’ve seen that before,” Harry said faintly, trying to remember exactly where.

“I think I have as well… that shop in Knockturn Ally? Bargain Burkes?” Daphne asked, levitating the necklace out of the package.

Harry nodded. “Borgin and Burkes.”

“Yes, that.” She looked over the necklace. “One hell of a curse on it,” she muttered.

Harry turned back toward the Hufflepuff girl, who was shivering. “How did Katie get hold of this?” He gestured toward the necklace.

“She came back from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was a sur¬prise for somebody at Hogwarts and she had to deliver it. She looked all funny when she said it – then we were arguing… and –” Her eyes widened and her lip quivered. “Oh no, oh no, I bet she’d been Imperiused and I didn’t realize!”

Imperiused? Harry’s brows furrowed. “Did she say who gave it to her?”

“No… she wouldn’t tell me… and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn’t listen and… and then I tried to grab it from her… and – and-” she wailed, her sobs renewed.

Sighing, Harry stood up, careful not to bump the necklace that Daphne had under control by her wand. Zabini looked quite distant, but that wasn’t anything unusual. Awkwardly, Harry patted the girl’s shoulder, trying to comfort her a bit. He looked over at the other two, who seemed to be having a silent conversation with their eyes; they were staring at each other so intently.

“We better get that up to the school,” Harry interrupted and they both looked at him.

Daphne led the way, levitating the necklace far enough ahead of them so none of them could come in contact with it. Zabini trailed alongside Harry and the Hufflepuff girl, who seemed reluctant to move. She was shivering so much.

The necklace he had seen at Borgin and Burkes years ago. It was in the case that Malfoy was looking at when Harry was hiding from him and his dad. Malfoy must have remembered it. It had to have been Malfoy who gave Katie the cursed necklace – and Imperiused her as well!
Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he realised that Zabini was staring at him carefully. “You know who did it.” It wasn’t a question.

Harry hesitated. He was very unsure of Zabini on the subject of Malfoy, especially after what he had seen on the train earlier that year. “Maybe. Do you know who did it?” he asked, hoping Zabini would answer a lot less ambiguously than him.

“I believe we both know who did it,” the Slytherin boy stated evenly. His deep voice carried clearly through the whipping wind of the blizzard.

Harry looked over at the Hufflepuff girl, who was hugging herself as she walked, her sniffs and sobs drowned out by the wind and snow. “It was Malfoy, wasn’t it?” Harry asked, narrowing his eyes toward Zabini.

A smirk spread across his face. “Of course, Potter, who else would be this idiotic?” the Slytherin boy questioned rhetorically, seemingly amused.

“Idiotic?” Harry’s brows furrowed. They were nearing the school; Daphne kept glancing back at them every few metres.

“Even you can’t be that thick to not see it.” Zabini rolled his eyes and Harry’s eyes narrowed further in confusion. “Stirring up trouble. Casting the Imperius Curse on a Gryffindor – of all people – and that high profile necklace. Idiotic actions like that practically scream ‘Draco,’” Zabini elaborated in a bored tone.

Harry sighed. “I know it was Malfoy. I’m not thick.”

Zabini scoffed quietly as they walked up the stairs. “Could’ve fooled me.”

Harry didn’t respond, dropping the subject. He held open the door for the Hufflepuff girl. It wasn’t a good idea to get on Zabini’s bad side when they had more pressing matters to deal with.

“So,” Daphne’s voice echoed through the cavernous entrance hall, “where do we take this thing?” She pointed toward the necklace and raised an eyebrow.

Shifting on his feet, trying to think of what teacher to bring it to, he almost sighed in relief when Professor McGonagall bounded down the stairs. “Potter!” she called, advancing upon them. “Miss Greengrass, Mr. Zabini!”

The stern Professor looked from student to student in suspicion. “Hagrid says you saw what happened to Katie Bell – upstairs to my office at once, please! What’s that you’re levitating, Miss Greengrass?” she asked, staring at the opal trinket with interest.

“It’s the necklace she touched – it’s cursed,” Harry said, Daphne nodded to back him up. Zabini stood off to the side like dead weight, staring at the group.

“Good lord,” Professor McGonagall breathed.

Filch skittered across the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor in the air with a very eager glint in his dark eyes. “No, no, Filch, they’re with me,” McGonagall said hastily.
McGonagall took off her outer cloak and wrapped it around the necklace as Daphne broke the levitation charm. She handed it to the caretaker. “Take this necklace to Professor Snape at once, but be sure not to touch it, keep it wrapped in the cloak.”

Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall to her office in silence through the drafty corridors. Her office was just as he remembered it from his Career Advice session with her in fifth year. The blizzard outside wreaked havoc on the windows; they were so white he could barely see anything outside. Harry pulled his damp cloak around tighter, feeling the need for an incredibly hot shower when he got back to his dormitory.

Closing the door, McGonagall swept around to the other side of her desk and stared at the teenagers expectantly. “Well?” she asked sharply. “What happened?”

The Hufflepuff girl related her story, slowly, her sobs interrupting when she came to certain parts. Harry stayed silent, glancing at Zabini and Daphne from time to time. Zabini kept a neutral expression, staying still as a statue, while Daphne shivered slightly, inching closer to the fireplace.

Alright,” Professor McGonagall said when the girl finished just before she got to the part where Katie had touched the necklace, sobbing uncontrollably and unable to get another word out, “go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for the shock.”

After she left, McGonagall turned back toward Harry and the two Slytherins. “What happened when she touched the necklace?”

“She was in the air,” Harry explained, “I heard her scream and we pulled her down.” He paused, thinking he had to tell someone about Malfoy. “Professor, could I see Professor Dumbledore, please?”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Daphne’s brows furrow as she looked at him.

“The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter,” Professor McGonagall said, her eyes widened slightly.

“Away?” Harry repeated, feeling frustration nipping at the back of his teeth. Dumbledore was always away lately! Harry never got to see him when it actually mattered.

“Yes, Potter, away,” Professor McGonagall replied sternly. “But anything you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I’m sure.”

Harry dithered. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Professor McGonagall, but she was much less likely to believe a theory. They had no proof against Malfoy. He knew that Professor Dumbledore would possibly believe him if he told him that Malfoy did it.

Gritting his teeth, he severely hoped that Zabini would back him up. “I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor.”

The room was absolutely silent, save for Zabini’s quiet exhalation through his teeth.

“That is a very serious accusation, Potter,” Professor McGonagall said slowly, her eyebrows raised high upon her head. “Do you have any proof?”
“No, but…” Harry looked over toward Zabini, who smirked. Guess he wasn’t going to get any help from him. He couldn’t tell Professor McGonagall that he had followed Malfoy into Borgin and Burkes during the summer and overheard an odd conversation between him and Mr Borgin – well, he could, but not in front of Daphne and Zabini.

“He must have done it.”

Professor McGonagall’s lips pursed. “Mr. Potter, that there is no way Mr. Malfoy could have attacked Katie Bell with that necklace.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Daphne and Zabini shared a glance. “How do you know, Professor?”

“He was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicion, Potter,” she said, stalking past them toward the door, “but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all.”

As she held open the door, she threw apprehensive glances toward the two Slytherins who lead the way out of the office. Harry sighed dejectedly.

If Katie was supposed to give the necklace to someone, who would be the target?

There were a few people at the school that he knew Death Eaters would target. Dumbledore, probably Slughorn… or even him, but that wasn’t Voldemort’s style. Voldemort wouldn’t order an attack like that on Harry. He seemed to enjoy direct confrontation when it came to him. But if it wasn’t Malfoy who gave Katie the necklace – and obviously Zabini and Daphne thought it was Malfoy as well, which was pretty damning considering they were in the same house and had to share living quarters – then Malfoy must have had an accomplice, at least.

Daphne snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Harry. Still with us?”

Harry shook his head, blinking out of his reverie. “Malfoy had an accomplice.”

“Obviously,” Zabini deadpanned.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Harry asked, frustrated with the Slytherin boy at the moment for not backing him up. Then again, it was highly typical of him.

“There’s no proof,” Daphne spoke for Zabini in a clipped tone. Zabini gave a curt nod. “We can’t make accusations until there’s proof. It’s the first rule of making accusations.”

There were rules to making accusations? Slytherins were barmy sometimes. Harry merely raised an eyebrow in response.

“So, we’ll just have to get something on him,” Daphne continued with a smirk.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. If there was ever a time that he believed in Luna’s Wrackspurts, it was now.

“Sorry?” Harry wasn’t sure he heard correctly. He thought he had just heard Daphne Greengrass, a Slytherin, say that she wanted to find proof against Draco Malfoy, a fellow Slytherin – proof that
could very well get him expelled?

“Told you he was thick,” Zabini commented idly, leaning against the wall of the corridor.

Daphne batted at the Slytherin boy’s arm. “Shut up,” she muttered harshly then turned toward Harry. “I know you heard me: We’re going to find proof.”

“I thought you…” He didn’t know how to phrase this, he looked pointedly at Zabini. “Aren’t you his friend or something?”

“Friends – annoyances. Apparently they’re the same difference, considering you and Daph, Potter,” Zabini answered, his eyes shining with obvious mirth.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Zabini just called him annoying… did that mean that he found Draco Malfoy annoying? “So he’s an annoyance,” he stated.

Zabini just rolled his eyes.

“Stop being such a cock, Blaise,” Daphne interrupted. “Yes. Draco’s an annoying little twat,” she clarified, glancing at Harry.

He knew not to press anything further. This was almost too good to be true. “How do we get proof?”

“Leave it up to us.” Her mouth formed a menacing smirk. “I’ve been waiting to burn Draco for years, I’ll find something. He might have some condemning material lying round his room, so it may be that simple.”

He really hoped so, because if Malfoy was willing to cast the Imperius Curse on someone to get a cursed object into the castle, for whatever intended target, there had to be something worse coming.

Harry had a bad feeling about that. He’d have to keep a keen eye on Malfoy for the time being.

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Direct and Paraphrased Quotes/Works Cited/Reference:


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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good…” Harry whispered under his covers in his dormitory. He could hear all the other boys’ snores from the next bed, telling him that they were asleep, for sure.

He’d been keeping a close eye on Malfoy on and off for the past few hours, watching the pointed ferret prowl around the school. He’d told Hermione earlier – Ron had passed out almost as soon as he collapsed onto the sofa when they returned – about the attack on Katie Bell and she thought he was absolutely mad with his theory about Malfoy. She, like McGonagall, obviously believed proof was needed and apparently wasn’t aware that Malfoy was acting suspicious.

Given Harry’s recent – begrudgingly admitted – obsession with the blonde Slytherin, Hermione was even less apt to believe him. Especially after he told her what McGonagall had said about Malfoy being in detention – but that didn’t mean he wasn’t behind it.

Who was the accomplice?

Staring at the map, his eyes searched the dungeons and the seventh floor corridor where he usually spotted Malfoy. But now, according to the map, Draco Malfoy wasn’t in his dormitory anymore, like he was earlier with Zabini and Theodore Nott… Malfoy was in the Astronomy Tower – pacing. After curfew.

Then he noticed that Daphne was out and about as well, but he had to look twice; she moved quickly. Her name streaked across the page as if she were running… Harry’s brows wrinkled. That’s weird.

Was she in trouble?

Harry got up and threw his invisibility cloak on. Why was she moving across the page so quickly? He ran down the stairs as quietly as he could and exited the common room, slipping past the Fat Lady, who was snoring loudly in her portrait.
Hurriedly, he trekked to the corridor where Daphne resided a floor below him, stopping just around the corner. He looked at the map under the light of his wand. She seemed to be staying still at the moment, until –

She was heading straight toward him!

Harry looked up and noticed she was on a broom; his eyes widened, watching her. She did tell him that she went ‘racing’ every Saturday, but if this was racing… He watched her pause at the end of the corridor and look around the corner and up the stairs he just came from. He could hear Filch’s distinct footsteps and Daphne flew toward him, but this time she flew lower, heading at him, full speed –

Harry completely forgot that she couldn’t see him.

**Bang!**

They were sprawled out on the floor, and the sound of Filch’s slinky footsteps quickened, pattering against the stone floor. Harry’s cloak was tangled around his feet as he tried to get up. His arsebone was surely bruised as it took the brunt of his fall. A hand pulled on the back of his shirt, and he realized he was being dragged and shoved into a broom cupboard, Daphne close behind him – she kept her finger over his mouth.

“Shh,” she hissed, unnecessarily, as they heard Filch pass.

“Well, well, Mrs. Norris, what do we have here?” Filch’s slippery voice sounded, loudly. “A broom, I wonder how that got there…”

The doorknob on the broom cupboard jiggled, but didn’t open. Harry’s heart thumped loudly in his chest, he shooed Daphne’s finger off his mouth. He couldn’t see a thing in the dark broom cupboard, but he could feel her eyes boring into him.

When Filch’s footfalls faded in the distance, he could hear him grumbling about ‘bloody lazy students mucking up the castle’ to his cat. Harry let out a sigh of relief when it went silent and he felt Daphne slunk down onto a shelf. “For once I can thank Merlin that this cupboard is always locked when people are inside it,” she whispered.

Harry tried to open the door. “I didn’t hear you lock it,” he mused, glancing in her direction out of the corner of his eye despite not being able to see anything. She stayed silent. He pulled out his wand and tried to do an unlocking spell but the door wouldn’t open.

He raised his wand again determinedly-

“You’re wasting your time,” Daphne interrupted, lighting her wand. She adjusted her position on the shelf she perched upon. “This is the cupboard. I thought everyone – or at least every boy – knew that?”

The cupboard? As much time as they had spent in broom cupboards, hiding away from everyone, he had never seen the inside of this particular cupboard before.

“What exactly is the cupboard and why can’t we get out?” He glanced back at the door. If only Hermione were here, they’d be able to.
He wondered if she was out doing Prefect duties tonight. If she caught them in here, he’d be safe enough, but if another Prefect caught them, it spelled detention for him and Daphne. Hopefully they checked the Astronomy tower first – Malfoy was bound to more than occupy their time. His map was probably on the floor somewhere and he didn’t want to risk picking it up in front of Daphne.

Daphne snickered, her eyes shining. “You’ve never brought a girl here?”

Harry shook his head. “Of course not, why?” he asked curiously, looking around at the usual dusty cleaning supplies that plagued a few cupboards throughout the castle. It didn’t look like any special cupboard.

“This is the snogging cupboard of the century. Draco tried to get me in here a million times before I finally relented.”

His lip curled at the mention of the very reason he was locked in a cupboard. Not that he minded being locked in the cupboard with Daphne – often it was one of the most enjoyable experiences of his life. But if they were stuck and had to wait for someone, to spell open the door… that wouldn’t do well for the ridiculous rumours flying around. “Snogging cupboard?” Harry asked. “I thought they’re all… fit for snogging?”

Daphne shrugged. “The Weasley Twins cursed it in second year. Most people call it ‘the mistletoe cupboard’.”

Then it hit him.

“Are you serious?” Harry’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. When she nodded, a wide grin spread across his face. “We’re trapped in here till we snog?”

“Mhm,” she replied with a smirk, standing up, lifting a hand; their bodies brushed against each other in the cramp space of the cupboard. His stomach tingled anxiously as he glanced at her lips; her tongue slipped out to wet them. Her wand clattered to the floor, casting strong shadows over their faces, but through the darkness he could see her clear blue eyes staring up at him.

He felt her hand on the back of his neck and, capriciously, her lips met his in a searing kiss, tasting of nothing but smoke and Daphne. Harry had to force back a moan, his mouth opened slightly and she took advantage, caressing the tip of his tongue with her own. Her fingers gently slid against his skin beneath the collar of his shirt, sending shivers up and down his spine. His hands rested on the small of her back, and she pressed even closer.

Every time they kissed it seemed as if the experience got better and better. Three days was much too long to go without this.

Harry fell back against the door, his hands quickly sneaking through her parted robe to tug at the hem of her shirt and caress the skin beneath. Gasping as Daphne nipped at his lip, he felt the overwhelming urge to just tear the fabric between his fingers. Her hand crept down his front and ghosted her fingers over the growing bulge in his pyjama bottoms, stroking ever-too-lightly through the fabric – barely touching him.

He whimpered, trying to rub against her, but her fingers were always a tiny breadth away. More… Hell, he needed more.

He pulled away from her, panting, and lowered his mouth to her neck, kissing from her ear to the
joint of her throat, all the way down to her collarbone. He pressed his tongue against her pulse, feeling it beat erratically as he sucked at it, determined to leave a small red mark behind. Daphne keened and he felt it hum against his lips. His mind was whirling, dizzy, his blood rushing south as she hooked her fingers under the elastic of his waistband and inched it down. She tempted every bit of skin uncovered. Her hand brushed over his cock.

With a growl, he flipped them around, pressing her hard against the door. “Tease,” he murmured, kissing along her jaw, feeling it hum with throaty laughter. He could only imagine what she’d look like if he pulled away: face flushed, eyes half closed and heavy with desire, and that beautiful dazed smile spread across her face.

Harry hurriedly tugged at her clothes, pushing the cloak off her shoulders, pulling up her t-shirt just enough to knead her naked breasts. Daphne’s fingers weaved through his hair and pulled him in for another kiss. Licking at her lips, they parted and he swirled his tongue along hers. His thumbs swept over her nipples, rubbing circles. Her hands snuck under his shirt, nails raking delicate paths down the skin of his back in a way that set his nerves on fire.

Daphne knew every one of his weaknesses – especially her bloody nails, pressing against his skin; they made it feel as they were directly connected to every oversensitive nerve ending in his body. Every place they touched tingled intensely, spreading all the way down to his toes.

Harry reached down and lifted her thigh, hitching it around his hip, needing to get as close as humanly possible. She yanked at his shirt and he heard it rip, pulling roughly against his shoulder. Breaking away from her kiss breathlessly, he pulled back and wrenched his shirt over his head, throwing it to the floor. Her hands immediately sought the expanse of skin on his chest and he brushed his fingers over the fly of her jeans.

He needed nothing more than to feel every inch of her bare skin pressing against his. His lips moved back to her neck to that spot below her ear and she whimpered, her nails digging into his sides as he laved at it with his tongue. Unpracticed fingers struggled with the button of her fly before crudely ripping it open with a rough and desperate tug. The zip took less than half a second. When he slid his hand down the front of her jeans, denim scraping the back of his hand, a coarse groan spilled from his lips.

It never ceased to amaze him how wet and hot she felt against his fingers – how tight she was when he pressed them inside her, making her arch against him with a shuddering gasp.

Slowly, he pushed her jeans down over her hips and she kicked them off, sending her shoes with them. Her hand crept around his hip to grab his arse, his aching cock slid against her stomach through the fabric of his bottoms. He bit his lip at the contact. Daphne moved her hand away and he heard her whisper the contraceptive spell – she always liked to use his wand for that. It fell to the floor with a dull thud.

Harry leaned down to kiss her briefly before lifting her shirt over her head. He pressed against her then, relishing in the feel of so much soft skin against his. Daphne lifted herself up, hands gripping his shoulders – legs wrapping around his waist. Moving his hands to her arse, he balanced her weight against the door, rubbing against her centre. She had teased him enough, now it was his turn.

He dipped his hand in between them and sought her clit, rubbing lightly – and then lighter and lighter till he was barely touching her. Needy, anguished gasps and sounds flowed from her mouth.

“Please, Harry…” Daphne breathed, trailing off into a loud moan as he removed his hand and
rubbed himself against her over and over again. Fucking hell. He felt her wetness seeping through his pyjama bottoms.

Hastily, her fingers delved into the waistband of his bottoms and he slowed as she slid the waistband down over his cock. Harry’s eyes met hers, his glasses askew, her eyes wide and pleading. “Fuck me,” she whispered, her voice ragged, and his answering moan rumbled deep in his throat.

That was yet another weakness that made him even more painfully desperate.

Without an ounce of thought, he thrust inside her, burying himself to the root, stretching her. It was like sinking into a hot wet dream of absolution: no Malfoy, no Voldemort, no prophesy, no high expectations. Harry sunk into a world where nothing existed except him and Daphne and this incredible need – this unbelievable feeling. He pulled nearly all the way out before slamming back into her and she let out a moan that sounded closer to a shriek.

She looked exquisite. Her eyes were drunk and lidded and focused on him; her cheeks were stained with a bright flush; her lips swollen and red, begging to be ravished; her body spread out beneath him, wrapped around him, and so much closer to him than anyone had ever gotten before.

Daphne’s fingers wound into his hair, her fingernails massaging, pulling him closer to crush her mouth against his. Her jagged, breathy, whimpers against his lips compelled Harry to quicken his pace, finding the perfect rhythm – dying to make her come undone around him. Her body trembled against him, pulling him closer and closer – warm and flushed slick skin on skin – their bodies rippling against each other with every breath – with every thrust of his hips. Harry felt her heels dig into his back adamantly and he thrust deeper inside her than he thought possible.

His name poured from her lips as he moved his mouth to her throat, sucking a hot wet trail up the side of her neck. Daphne often left marks – she had a thing for it – and he couldn’t help but return the favour with interest. The moment he felt her pulse around him, deliciously throbbing around his cock, he thought he’d lose it right there, but it was much too soon. He moaned roughly against her, his legs struggling to balance her weight against the door.

But Harry kept his pace. Clenching his eyes shut, he focused on the soft smooth skin of her neck beneath his lips, trying not to think of just how deep he was buried; how wet and tight and so bloody amazing she felt. Her trembling cries rang in his ears – his name rolled off her tongue in a way that made his heart thump agonizingly against his chest.

“God, Daphne,” he murmured breathlessly into her ear before his lips ghosted over her earlobe. He nipped at it, earning a whimper. She was so fucking maddening. Every single noise that escaped her – every gasp and sigh – seemed to caress his skin, warm and tingly like static burns. The feeling collected in the centre, pooling at the base of his cock and aching frenziedly.

“Her cunt clenched around him, tighter and tighter, urging him to come. Fraught with need, he snaked his fingers down her stomach to her clit. Daphne keened loudly at the friction. He could feel every pulse, every clench of her cunt, against the tips of his fingers and around his as he stroked her.

He knew she was close again.

The aching was about to burst and shatter. Not caring about rhythm, he thrust inside her, needing release right now. The need clawed at his senses – he yearned to feel her dissolve around him once more before he came. Panting, his jaw clenched as he tried to hold back, he nearly growled into her ear, “Come. Now.”
She screamed.

_Fuck._ If he knew it was that simple, he would have done that a long bloody time ago.

He tried to keep his eyes open, watching her, fighting as they involuntarily shut as he spilled inside her – her walls caressing every last inch him, pleading for the last drop.

They collapsed against each other and fell into a boneless heap on the floor. He didn’t realize how hot and stifling the cupboard felt until he opened his eyes and his brain crept its way back into his head. Daphne clutched at him and he held her, trying to catch his breath. He couldn’t believe his luck as he stared at the girl in his arms. How in the world could it feel this amazing every single time? It was… perfect. Too perfect.

Daphne’s blue eyes met his and she smiled, detangling herself from him a bit. “Remind me to run into you more often,” she said, her breathing still a bit harsh.

Harry grinned. “As long as you remind me to thank Fred and George.”

“Oh, I’ll be thanking them with you.” She pulled back and rested herself against the door. It felt oddly cold without her so close. “So the infamous invisibility cloak returns,” Daphne mused, staring at the shiny fabric peeking through their piled clothes. “Did you enchant it yourself?”

Pulling up his pyjama bottoms, Harry said, “It was my dad’s.”

“It’s nice.” Daphne paused, her eyes running over his bare chest and back up to his face. She was about to say more but there was a noise from outside the door, like footsteps, pacing on the stone floor. “Did you cast a silencing spell?” she whispered.

Harry’s mouth fell open. “No,” he breathed, focusing on the footsteps. The corner of a piece of raggedy parchment was peeking out from underneath his invisibility cloak. He swiftly pulled it out from underneath to check and see who was out there.

Daphne watched him, remaining very silent and still.

When he saw who it was, he blew a sigh of relief. “It’s just Hermione.”

“Well, that’s awkward,” Daphne muttered, standing up to put her clothes back on and cast a few cleaning spells. Harry followed suit, hoping that Hermione wouldn’t scold them too much. Or give them detention – she was quite the stickler for rules and maintaining her prefect status.

“What is that thing anyway?” Daphne asked, gesturing to the piece of parchment in his hands as she hurriedly tugged her jeans over her hips.

Harry shifted on his feet and distracted himself by picking up his invisibility cloak. “It’s a map of the school,” he replied quietly.

Her brow creased in the centre. “And it shows you where people are?”

“Yes.”

He looked up at her to see that she had an oddly excited glint in her eyes. “Brilliant. I would have
never thought of making something like that – had to take ages.”

“I didn’t make it,” Harry countered sheepishly. “Another thing of my dad’s.”

“Ah well, it’s still bloody brilliant.” Daphne paused and looked him up and down before reaching over to straighten the hem of his shirt. “Are you ready?”

The footsteps sounded even louder and more exasperated than before. “I s’pose.”

Sharing a quick glance, Daphne opened the door.

Hermione was standing in the middle of the corridor doing her best expression of McGonagall and Molly Weasley combined. “Have you two ever heard of silencing spells? I could hear you from the Head’s office!”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. Considering that the Head’s office was nearly half way across the castle, that was pretty bloody impressive. He didn’t think they were… that loud. Daphne looked rather unfazed and maybe just a touch pleased at this information. If the circumstances were a bit different – if it wasn’t after curfew and if their relationship wasn’t secret – Harry probably would have laughed at the awkwardness of the situation.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized with a small, and very brief, embarrassed grin.

“I should give you two detention!” Hermione threatened, waving her hands in the air – bright red sparks flew out her wand as she did.

“Go ahead, Granger,” Daphne intoned with a smirk, “it was certainly worth it.”

He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at the expression on Hermione’s face. Harry could have sworn that her eye twitched for a second. Hermione’s teeth mashed together audibly as a deep blush settled about her cheeks. She really was overreacting. “You-” she stabbed her finger at Daphne, advancing on her, “-are – a – very – bad – influence!”

Harry looked back and forth between the girls, all signs of laughter gone from his face. Daphne must have taken lessons from Zabini, because she was the absolute picture of indifference. “It’s not like I try,” she responded.

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh. “Smoking, shagging in broom cupboards after curfew! What’s next?”

“Sneaking out of the castle for a weekend on the town, illegal recreational drugs, defiling Snape’s office, shagging in the middle of the Great Hall during breakfast-?” Daphne paused her sarcastic tirade, smiling, “the list could go on.”

Snorting in amusement, Harry covered it up with a cough under Hermione’s stern gaze. “And what do you have to say about this?”

Harry shrugged a shoulder. “Nothing really, I think she covered it all.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, looking up at an indiscernible place above their heads. “Just-” she gritted out, inhaling loudly through her nose, her nostrils flared, “-go back to your dormitories before I change my mind.”
Knowing not to look a gift horse in the mouth, Harry grabbed Daphne’s hand. “Thanks, Hermione,” he said quickly before retreating down the corridor toward the stairway with Daphne in tow.

At the landing of the divide of the stairs, he paused, turning toward Daphne. They both broke out in quiet laughter, mostly out of relief in getting away with it or embarrassment. “Well that was fun,” Daphne commented.

“I’ll probably never hear the end of it, but yeah.”

They stared at each other and Daphne moved forward to give him a quick kiss. “I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow. Blaise and I are working on the Draco situation, so I’ll send you a letter if we get something.”

Harry nodded in agreement but, when she made to leave, he stopped her. “Wait - what were you doing flying around the school?”

“Racing,” Daphne said with a smirk. “I was ahead too, until I ran into you.”

“I can’t say I’m sorry.” He really wanted to kiss her again before she had to go. That would be a much better apology.

Harry slowly moved forward, but the sound of footsteps approaching interrupted him.

“I should go – I doubt Granger will let us off so easily if she catches us loitering on the stairs.”

Daphne paused. “Goodnight,” Daphne said, throwing him a smile before she pivoted on her feet to descend the five flights of stairs to the dungeons.

“Goodnight…” Harry watched her contentedly until she disappeared around the corner, his heart feeling lighter than it had ever felt in the last few weeks.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Harry found himself in a broom cupboard four days later with Daphne, after she had sent him a letter with the location of their meeting. He hadn’t seen her at all lately and, oddly, sort of missed her, but she and Zabini were probably busy searching for proof.

As he watched her light up a cigarette, he wondered if he should take her to Slughorn’s party, or even if she would agree. They needed to keep their relationship a secret – he knew that – yet, everyone was already speculating on the possible Slytherins that he could be involved with anyway. So, why not?

However, since she was already in Slughorn’s little group, she’d probably ask him, or they’d talk about it sometime…

Harry shifted uncomfortably. The cupboard they picked for this meeting was much more cramped than the average cupboard.

“I could probably tell you everything about Draco Malfoy except what he’s up to,” Daphne finally spoke, with a frustrated sigh over her cigarette. “I don’t know if what we have is tangible proof, though.”

Harry stared, his lips slightly parted in surprise. They worked fast. “What do you have on him?”

Reaching into her bag, he waited in anticipation, hoping with all hope that it was bloody good – did Borgin and Burkes give receipts? If they did, that would be excellent proof. He doubted a blackmarket shop like Burkes would do that though.

Her hand was clutched around a rather large bottle of – familiar looking vomit-coloured potion? “Polyjuice,” Daphne said with a smirk. “What I’m guessing is that Draco paid someone to sit his detention while he took care of business, but this is a hell of a lot of Polyjuice to save.”

“How is that not ‘tangible proof’?” Harry asked, grabbing the bottle and flipping it over in his hands, as if it would reveal another secret on the other side of the bottle.
“We could have brewed it ourselves and pinned it on him. It’s our word against his when we have this type of evidence,” she explained. Her words settled sickly in his stomach, mostly because they were so recognizable, and he had the intense feeling of déjà vu.

Tom Riddle versus Hagrid.

When he looked up at Daphne, he saw her in a different light. Tom Riddle had said something along the lines. Slytherins thought like that – they were a very devious lot after all. He hated to say that it was brilliant. The average Gryffindor would have gone straight to McGonagall without a second thought. Daphne analyzed the situation first. She wanted concrete proof.

It made sense.

There was a knock at the door of the cupboard. “It’s Blaise,” a low grumble of a voice sounded from outside.

Daphne quickly unlocked it and flung it open to let in her fellow Slytherin counterpart involved on the mission. “Any luck?” she asked after he closed the door. The lock clinked shut after him.

Harry stared at both of them and wondered where in the world Zabini would sit in this awfully tiny cupboard, but Daphne skittered over onto his lap without warning, which solved that problem. He shifted in his seat again – she was a lot heavier than she looked. She took a long drag on her cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

“Draco’s getting Greg and Vince to Polyjuice into girls but that was all I could get out of their minds.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. He asked, “Their minds?” at the same time Daphne idly commented, “Kinky.”

“*Legilimancy*, Potter. It’s not exactly difficult, but I was strapped for time and didn’t want it look suspicious by going through too much. I’m sure I went unnoticed – I only got some of the surface thoughts and images.”

“Right,” Harry muttered, reminded sorely of Snape. No wonder they worked fast if they were resorting to *Legilimency* for information.

Daphne moved a bit on his lap, obviously trying to get comfortable. “So, other than his obviously kinky side, we know he’s working for the Dark Lord. There must be something he’s up to that’s incredibly important…” Daphne muttered aloud.

“How do you know for certain that he’s working for the Dark Lord?” Harry asked. He had suspicions and would believe it in a heartbeat, but he also knew that Daphne was careful about every little piece of information she came across. There must have been proof of correspondence or something.

“We paid Theo and gave him a time-frame of twenty-four hours to do anything and everything to coerce Draco into giving him information.” Daphne paused. “He got all up close and personal with Draco’s Dark Mark.” She grinned as if it were amusing, but Harry didn’t see anything amusing about that.
“How is that anything to smile about? He’s a Death Eater!”

“You didn’t know?”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “Know what?”

“Draco doesn’t have much of a sexual preference – Theo was rather reluctant.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Wait. You paid Nott to sleep with Malfoy?” Harry frowned, a disgusted look marred his expression. “And all this only took… four days?”

Daphne shrugged. “It’s not like we had anything else to do and I didn’t exactly pay Theo to sleep with him. I paid him for information. Draco sort of trusts Theo. But anyway, we know for certain that he has the Dark Mark – Theo confirmed it this morning.”

Harry grinned suddenly, his mind whirling. The Ministry noted in the *Daily Prophet* every week that any person with a Dark Mark, or anyone who had a connection to “You-Know-Who”, was wanted for capture. The Dark Mark was pretty damning evidence.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. “The Aurors… we should send them a letter.”

Daphne’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Send an anonymous tip!”

“Anonymous?” That wasn’t exactly his idea.

“False accusations can’t be pinned on us in case he finds a way to hide it from them-”

“His father was caught by the Aurors a few times before they actually had the Mark as proof he was a Death Eater,” Zabini drawled. “Old Malfoy probably found a way.”

“But why wouldn’t he hide it when Nott… slept with him?” Harry asked, thinking that it would have been the smart thing to do.

Shrugging again, Daphne blew out a puff of smoke. “I’m guessing he was caught unawares. Theo’s very quiet and Draco trusts Theo to be loyal to him. Arrogance can really bite you in the arse sometimes.”

Harry nodded in agreement and looked over at Zabini’s indifferent expression. “I’ll write the letter tonight then.” *After Quidditch practice,* he added in his head.

“Actually,” Zabini started with a smirk, “I’ll write the letter.”

“Why would you write the letter?” Harry asked, his forehead creased in the centre.

Leaning back against the far wall, Zabini shrugged a shoulder. “I know some good forging spells that won’t tip the Aurors off on my handwriting.” The Slytherin boy’s eyes grazed over his form. “I doubt your extra-curricular activities include learning illicit practices.”

Harry snorted. Trust Zabini to demean him for not breaking the law. “So I should just leave it all to you?” he asked uneasily, glancing up at Daphne. He had never felt so… inactive in all his life. He was used to acting right away – being the key player in the whole mess of things. This was decidedly different. He was almost useless.
“Yes, leave it to us,” Daphne said with a nod, vanishing her dead cigarette with her wand. “Your job is to keep a keen eye on Draco to see where he goes and what he’s doing in the meantime. He disappears at half-four in the morning, at lunch, after dinner, and usually late at night – around ten or eleven.”

Harry quickly catalogued those times in his brain. At least he could do something. He’d been keeping watch on Malfoy, but not always during those times. That’s what he was missing – a proper schedule. He usually studied with Hermione after dinner and was busy actually eating lunch. Then, otherwise, he was asleep. Malfoy was incredibly sneaky. Did he know that Harry was watching him?

“Then, hopefully, he’ll be caught unaware when the Aurors come to arrest him,” Daphne muttered, staring at the door. She waved her wand and it unlocked.

She and Zabini stood. “Wait a few minutes before you leave. And Millicent’s been rather suspicious of me lately, so I’ll send you a letter of when we can meet.”

Harry nodded in agreement and silently watched them walk out, only to have Zabini turn back. “Oh and, Potter,” he said with a wide smirk.

Harry raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“You owe me eighteen Galleons for your share in Nott’s part.”

Harry just sneered in return and heard Zabini chuckle as the door banged shut behind him. It wasn’t as if it were Harry’s idea to pay Nott to sleep with Malfoy for information. Slytherins played dirty. While admirable, that was almost ridiculous.

With a sigh and a quick glance at his watch, he cursed and stood up, impatiently counting to thirty after their footsteps faded, hoping that thirty seconds was enough time. He was already five minutes late to Quidditch practice!

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“I played like a sack of dragon dung,” Ron said dejectedly, his shoulders hunched over as they walked toward the castle. ¹

Harry sighed internally “No, you didn’t - you’re the best Keeper I tried out, Ron. Your only problem is your nerves.” ¹

“No, I was horrible…” Harry was about to cut in but Ron continued, “And I’ve been an absolute git lately.”

“Can’t deny that, but you weren’t… horrible. You’re a great keeper.” He tried to be encouraging, but it was difficult sometimes when Ron persistently wanted one hell of a pity party.

“Yeah… I’m sorry – it’s just that she’s a dirty snake. Slytherin.” Ron heaved a short, irritated sigh. “Dunno how you can snog that.”

Harry rolled his eyes and asked, “Have you looked at her lately?”

Frowning, Ron’s eyebrows raised. “So it’s… about… that?”

“She’s really lovely, Ron. As a person. I mean, sure, she’s a Slytherin but she’s-” Harry paused, grinning to himself. “-she’s beautiful and nice and brilliant – smart – and a great friend and really good in” Bed. He snapped his mouth shut. Ron didn’t exactly know about that detail. He wondered if he should tell him – he always told Ron everything and keeping this secret from his best mate was… almost torturous.

“Good in what?”

“Potions,” Harry recovered with a nod.
Ron’s face screwed up into an incredulous expression. “Potions?”

“Yeah, Potions – she’s just as brilliant as Hermione in a few of things.”

“Right,” Ron muttered doubtfully.

“And,” Harry started with a grin, “she’s helping me with the Malfoy situation.”

“What?” he hissed; the redhead’s eyes widened so far Harry thought they’d pop out of his skull.

“We’ve been spying on him and gathering information and stuff – she’s really good at that.”

“Oh,” Ron mumbled dumbly. “Well, that… she… not bad.”

“Yeah, Ron.” Harry gave a small chuckle low in his throat. “She’s ‘not bad’.”

Ron dragged his feet, but he was standing a bit taller than before. He’d obviously forgotten about his awful Quidditch performance already. “You should meet her sometime.” Harry watched Ron carefully, waiting for some kind of emotional explosion. That was Ron’s style.

But Ron just reluctantly shrugged a shoulder as they walked up the stairs to the front doors. “I dunno, mate. I mean… where would we?”

“Where do you think I go during lunch most of the time?” Harry asked, grinning over at his best friend. He was rather glad to have Ron back and talking to him properly.

“You’re gone for the whole lunchtime just with her?” A disgusted frown pressed over Ron’s lips. “What do you do?”

Harry shrugged. “Plan world domination; shave Mrs. Norris; fumigate the Gryffindor common room to keep out the ferret; talk; snog; shag – all the usual stuff.”

Oh, shite.

Spluttering and choking, the redheaded Gryffindor blew out a short puff of air, his cheeks taking on a decidedly red hue. “Shag?” Ron stared at Harry as if he’d grown ten heads and told him he was Voldemort and Dumbledore’s lovechild.

“Yeah.” Harry swallowed thickly. Maybe that wasn’t the best way to tell Ron. “Shag.”

“When did this start?”

Well, at least Ron seemed to be taking this a lot easier than Harry thought he would.

“I don’t think I should tell you that,” Harry said hesitantly, his eyes glancing around for anyone within earshot of their conversation. Thankfully, that was no one.

Ron glared. “Just tell me…”

“First night we met.” Merlin, that was painful to get out. Harry winced, waiting for the onslaught of Weasley rage from hell.
“Wow.” Ron deflated suddenly. “Why doesn’t that ever happen to me?”

“Er – I just got lucky, I guess?”

Now this was turning awkward. Great.

“Was that why you were late….?” Ron stared at him; a gloomy yet curious glint flittered through his dark blue eyes.

Harry shook his head. “No, we were going over Malfoy stuff. It’s not like we go at it like nifflers, Ron.”

Harry pushed open the tapestry to take their usual shortcut up to Gryffindor Tower, Ron was still staring at him with his lips pressed together in a frown. He almost jumped in surprise when he found himself looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked at the lips, snogging as if the fate of the world depended on it. ₁

It wasn’t right to stare. A culmination of feelings gathered and collided – as if the proverbial shite had finally hit the fan. Harry already knew he had a soft spot for Ginny – yes, she was attractive, who wouldn’t? – but… jealousy wasn’t a natural feeling for him. He didn’t even know where the hell it came from. This was almost like watching Daphne as she traipsed around the school with Zabini. Or when he sometimes watched Zabini huddle around Daphne in the cold while they smoked in one of the outdoor alcoves of the courtyard.

“Oi!” ₁

Dean and Ginny broke apart and looked around. ₁ Her lips were red and swollen and Harry’s stomach clenched. He needed to go find Daphne, right away; he needed to get away from here now before his mind whirled into a thought he really didn’t want to think. His mind chanted over and over again: This isn’t right. This isn’t right. This isn’t fucking right. It felt similar to betrayal looking at Ginny like that.

He wanted to cover the few feet between them and –

Not fucking right.

“What?” Ginny said snappishly. ₁

“I don’t want to find my own sister snogging people in public!” ₁

“This was a deserted corridor till you came butting in!” ₁

Dean backed off against the wall, throwing an embarrassed grin toward Harry. ₁ Harry felt his lips quirk up for a moment, out of impulse, his mind whirling toward where Daphne could be. This isn’t right. The feeling of jealousy settled sickly in his stomach: The jealousy toward Dean and Ginny’s oh-so-out-in-the-open relationship, their wide-ranged acceptance (by everyone except Ron), jealousy toward Dean for… no, he couldn’t think that.

That was the thing that was even more wrong than the rest. Ginny was Ron’s sister and he practically grew up with her. Thinking of her as extremely attractive with incredible legs and –
No, he couldn’t think of that either. Did Daphne look at other guys and think of the same things? Hopefully she did, he’d feel less guilty for staring at Ginny sometimes. But hell, if she did, he’d have to hex whoever that was – hopefully till the bastard ended up in the hospital wing until the end of next year.

“Er… c’mon, Ginny,” Dean said, shifting on his feet, “let’s go back to the common room…”

“You go! I want a word with my dear brother!”

Dean spared a glance toward all of them before shuffling out of the corridor, looking relieved to be able to get away. Harry itched to follow him but his feet were glued to the floor, his eyes barely wavering from Ginny.

“Right,” Ginny said in a clipped tone, tossing her hair out of her face and glaring at Ron, “let’s get this straight once and for all. It is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them, Ron—”

“Yeah, it is!” Ron exclaimed. “D’you think I want people saying my sister’s a—”

“A what?” Ginny shouted; her eyes held a challenging glint as she drew her wand.

“A what, exactly?”

“He doesn’t mean anything, Ginny—” Harry cut in, trying to diffuse the situation. He should have fled with Dean and went to go find Hermione or Daphne or some girl… to talk to for odd advice over his state.

Right, like that would go well: ‘Hermione, I think I might like this one girl, but I’m sort of seeing another girl and I really really like the girl I’m with. But is it normal to like someone while you’re kind-of in a relationship with someone else? Or am I just going absolutely mad?’

“Oh yes he does!” she said, her red-cheeked face staring up at Harry. “Just because he’s never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss he’s ever had is from our Auntie Muriel—”

Was it wrong to think she looked kind of brilliant when she was angry?

“Shut your mouth!” Ron bellowed, the flush crawling up his neck was turning a sickly colour of maroon.

“No, I will not!” Ginny yelled, her teeth gritted together audibly. “I’ve seen you with Phlegm, hoping she’ll kiss you on the cheek every time you see her, it’s pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done yourself, you wouldn’t mind so much that everyone else does it!”

As soon as Ron pulled out his wand, Harry instantly stepped between them. Much to his dismay, it really didn’t do much.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Ron shouted, trying to get a clear shot at Ginny around Harry, who stood in front of her with his arms outstretched. “Just because I don’t do it in public—”

Ginny maniacally screamed with laughter, trying to push Harry out of the way, but he held firmly in place. “Been kissing Pig, have you? Or have you got a picture of Auntie Muriel stashed under your pillow?”
A streak of orange light flew under Harry’s left arm and barely grazed the hem of Ginny’s sleeve. Knowing Ron’s idiotic temper, Harry pushed Ron up against the wall before he could fire off another spell. Ron struggled underneath his weight.

“Don’t be stupid-”

“Harry’s snogged Cho Chang!” Ginny shouted in a rough wet voice, sounding close to tears. “And Hermione snogged Viktor Krum, it’s only you who acts like it’s something disgusting, Ron, and that’s because you’ve got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!”

She stormed away, glancing back at them with one last penetrating glare; her footfalls stomped heavily against the stone floor as she disappeared around the corner. Harry quickly let go of Ron with an inaudible sigh of relief; the look on Ron’s face was murderous. They both stood there, breathing heavily, until Mrs. Norris seemed to appear out of nowhere and started curling herself around Harry’s feet.

“Come on,” Harry said quietly, as the sound of Filch’s footsteps grew louder outside the tapestry.

After extracting Mrs. Norris, they hurried up the stairs and along a seventh floor corridor. Ron shouted, “Oi, out of the way!” at a small girl, who jumped in fright and dropped a bottle of toadspawn and Harry hardly noticed sound of shattering glass amid his reeling thoughts.

It’s not right, it’s not right, it’s not right. Don’t even think of Ginny that way, you’re with Daphne and Daphne is… He needed to talk to a girl who wouldn’t laugh at him or admonish him for thinking all that. Hermione was out of the question for the latter reason and practically everyone else was out of the question for the former reason. If he wasn’t seeing Daphne, he’d be comfortable enough to go to her with it, but he was… seeing her. She’d probably… he didn’t even know what she’d do, actually. It was better to be safe than sorry.

Colours and scenes twisted and twirled in his mind: of half form thoughts of kissing Ginny; of snogging Daphne – the form of Daphne morphed to Ginny; feeling the soft skin of Daphne’s thighs as he hitched her leg over his hip. His mind tumbled back to the thought of snogging Ginny and Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry shouting things like “betrayal of trust” and “supposed to be my friend”…

Merlin, if only Sirius were alive, Harry was sure he’d know how to deal with this kind of thing. Sirius did allude to his… less than proper exploits in his Hogwarts days a few times. He probably knew how to deal with guilty girl trouble. But the guilty twinge that flowed through him every time he thought about Sirius arose and he swallowed thickly. Exhaling a small sigh, Harry projected his mind somewhere else – anywhere else. He liked to keep his mind busy so he didn’t even have time to think of Sirius.

Unfortunately, Ginny popped up and then Daphne – pressed against the wall of the corridor. Then Ginny again, with her flushed skin; Daphne, with her swollen lips-

“D’you think Hermione did snog Krum?” Ron asked abruptly, as they approached the Fat Lady. Harry gave an awkward start and wrenched his imagination away from a corridor or cupboard where Daphne and Ginny mutated from one to the other – like some absurd metamorphagus that couldn’t make up her damn mind on who she wanted to be.

Ron’s teeth gnashed together. “Dilligrout,” he muttered darkly to the Fat Lady, and they climbed through the portrait hole into the common room.

Harry raced straight up to his dormitory with Ron close behind, determined to get to his map. Despite everything he still had a job to do. He had to keep an eye on Malfoy, and maybe find out where Daphne was at the moment. She said she’d send word when they could meet again, but he didn’t think he could wait that long.

Ron was back to being silent as they both stripped off their Quidditch uniforms and Harry prodded at his map, whispering to it. Malfoy was in the Slytherin common room, which was to be expected. Zabini was prowling around the same common room, but he didn’t see Daphne anywhere. His eyes followed up over the floors, looking for her name. Snape was walking along the third floor corridors near the room that had Fluffy in it in Harry’s first year.

Daphne had to be somewhere…

He lifted the paper up and examined it; she wasn’t on the fifth or sixth floor. He almost jumped when he realized she was outside the common room. Her little dot remained stationary. What in the world would she be doing there?

“I have to go do something,” Harry muttered over to Ron, who merely grunted in response. He quickly folded up the map and stuck it into the pocket of his pyjama bottoms with his wand.

Swiftly, he swept out the door and down the staircase to a nearly full common room, which was practically alive with chatter. Hermione was in the corner studying with Neville, while Colin Creevey whapped his wand on the Wizarding Wireless to get it to change songs. A few first years were gathered in a circle playing with their familiars – Harry almost tripped over a little blonde-haired boy chasing after his gerbil. After skirting past a group of giggling girls, Harry made it out the portrait without any questioning, only to find the corridor completely empty.

The portrait hold slammed shut and it echoed through the corridor.

Harry’s brows furrowed and he pulled the map from his pocket to check and see if she was still there. It didn’t take him that long to get out of the common room – she had to be there. He opened the parchment, looking round for any lurkers standing in the corridor, but it was pretty late. Everyone must have been inside.

“Harry.”

He started and his heart beat frantically as he whipped his head around; his eyes grazed every possible surface around him, but he couldn’t find anyone. Yet… the voice came from right next to him…

Fabric rustled and Harry turned toward it, pulling out his wand. “Who’s there?”

A disembodied head appeared floating in the middle of the corridor just a foot away from him; blue eyes met his. “Just me – I found something. I was trying to break in but it wasn’t working very well.” Daphne spared a glance at the sleeping portrait of the Fat Lady. “I got as far as stunning her.”
“You can do that to portraits?” He looked back at the Fat Lady with his eyebrows raised.

“Apparently. I didn’t think it would work, but she started shouting at me and I didn’t want a horde of Gryffindors to come barreling out to hex me.” Daphne sighed and glanced up at him with an anxious look in her eyes.

“Where’d you get the cloak?” Harry asked, looking her up and down, half her body was invisible.

“Knicked it from Theo – bloody Charms expert,” she explained quickly, grabbing his arm and throwing the cloak over him. “You have to see something.”

All thoughts of snogging her or talking to her or anyone about the earlier incident had vanished immediately.

“What is it? Are the Auror’s here already?” Harry eyes roved over his map as he lit his wand to see everything more clearly. The cloak around them smelled a lot like Firewhiskey and éclairs.

“No, Blaise sent the letter an hour ago – I followed Draco after you left for practice. He’s quite the sneaky git. Got away from me a few times, but I found him.”

Harry’s heart almost stopped. “You know where he’s been going?”

“Yes. And I’m gonna show you.”

OoO

Direct and Paraphrased Quotes/Reference:


OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“He’s been going to that room you used last year for your Dumbledore club-”

“-The Room of Requirement.”

“Yeah, I barely made it through the door, but I think I know how to get in there. It works with visualizations, right?”

Harry shrugged, shuffling his feet along at her steady, quick pace. They were nearing the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. “That’s what I did with it before,” he spoke quietly. The portraits around them were starting to ask who was there when they heard their voices and obviously saw no one.

“Alright, I’ll do that. But, honestly, I’ve no idea what he was doing so I don’t even know if this is important and it’s driving me mad. I mean, I didn’t catch him doing anything, but why else would he go in there?”

“Obviously he’s up to something.” Harry glanced down at her, slightly amused by her frustrated rant – he’d never seen her like that – and she nodded, staring up at the wall.

He paced along with her, three times, underneath the cloak, trying to keep up to her quick and even steps. When the door appeared, he swallowed thickly.

This was it wasn’t it?

He had no idea what he’d find in there.

Daphne gave him a small smile and grabbed his hand, pulling him forward toward the door. He had the urge to smirk in a sort of triumphant way.

It opened.
Harry could see Daphne glancing up at him out of the corner of her eyes as he stared at the piles among piles of castoffs. He was pulled forward inside and the door slammed shut.

It was a bloody storage/rubbish bin and that was the last thing he expected. A room full of torture devices and dark artifacts hidden behind junk would make sense, but this? Pure rubbish. The piles and piles of sherry bottles made him think of Trelawney. She must have put those there – he remembered seeing that in fifth year – this was a place to hide things, wasn’t it?

What would Draco Malfoy hide in here?

Daphne lit up a cigarette and the scent wafted over to him, sobering his confusion a bit. “Could I have one of those?”

She shrugged and handed her lit one over. He took a drag as she pulled out another for herself. So, they needed to find something that Malfoy would be interested in. It was probably full of dark magic that did Merlin-knew-what and it would probably curse them. Finding it in a huge pile of scrap, trash, and random bits and bobs was going to be hard.

“Did he give any indication of what he was doing? Was he in a certain area?”

Daphne shook her head. “I have no idea what he was doing in here.”

“Well… this is going to be a long night.”

“Probably.”

Harry inhaled the smoke deeply, feeling the light floaty tingling feeling that was a nice long nicotine buzz coming on. He felt substantially calmer and ready for this.

He took one side of the room while Daphne took another. Underneath massive heaps of old wands, scattered Playwitch and Playwizard magazines (he turned red as he idly flipped through one of them) he found an old sofa that probably dated back to the 1800’s. Obviously there was nothing under there. Harry started sifting through the rubble, finding things with less dust on them because he knew they would have been stirred recently, which would give him clues of where Malfoy had been hopefully.

Daphne burst out laughing on the other side of the room and he looked up, alarmed. “What is it?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“Someone either really likes or hates the Human League – there’s a whole pile of them.” She held up an old record. “I didn’t even know they were a magical group but that makes so much more sense.”

He looked over the area she was in and saw piles among piles of records and an old magical phonograph. Daphne shoved it on the phonograph and tapped it three times with her wand, letting the odd techno beat wash over the room.

Hearing the music, he really couldn’t blame the person who wanted to throw the records out.

They quickly got back to work, searching. On the upside, the music did make time pass faster as they searched, even if it was sort of atrocious. After avoiding the incredibly balanced tower of desks, Harry came across an ancient cabinet covered in a rather dusty cloth.
He stared at it for a second – it looked kind of familiar, but he could have seen it anywhere in the castle in the six years before someone decided to stash it. With a sigh, he clicked it open, wondering if a pile of china was going to come tumbling out to attack him.

But it was completely empty, save for a dead bird lying at the bottom of it. His lip curled in disgust, yet as he gazed at it, his brain went straight toward Unforgivable Curses.

“Daphne?” he asked loudly over the music, looking toward the direction he last saw her.

Her head popped up over the piles of rubble. “Did you find something?”

“Maybe…” Harry stared back at the bird. “It’s… a speculation, but what if he’s just practicing Unforgivables in here?” The dead bird looked quite fresh, after all.

Faintly, he heard Daphne crawling through the piles of junk noisily as he ruminated over the possibility that Draco Malfoy was simply practicing the Dark Arts. Still, that was much too anticlimactic for him to accept as a valid theory. The thought settled sickly in his stomach; he felt as if there was something he was missing.

“It would make sense, I suppose. No one’s obviously been in this room for years, except Trelawney and Draco. It would be completely rotten otherwise,” Daphne said from beside him. Cold glass bumped against his arm and Harry looked down to a bottle of sherry in Daphne’s hands. “I doubt Trelawney would hide dead birds in here.”

“Trelawney,” he muttered with a small amused grin, gazing up at her.

“Found her stash.” Daphne held up a bottle. “She has a whole trunk full of them – I don’t think she’d mind me nicking one. She’s all set up here.”

She popped open the bottle with a flick of her wand and took a sip, her eyes fixed on the dead bird. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Draco was practicing Unforgivables, but he’s sixteen – he’s probably past those by now.”

“Is there a spell to figure out how the bird died?”

“Pfft. If only magic were that easy,” Daphne drawled, tipping the bottle back. She held it up to him and he shook his head, declining the offer. “Never thought it was this complicated when I got my letter.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “But you’re a halfblood. Didn’t one of your parents have magic?”

“Yeah, but I grew up with my mum, she’s a Muggle. I never met my father,” she explained quickly. “We’re getting off topic.”

Harry nodded, sensing that she really didn’t want to delve into that particular subject. “Right. Malfoy.”

“Malfoy,” Daphne agreed, taking a long swig of Trelawney’s drink of choice. “After going through all of this, we still don’t know what the fuck he’s doing up here.”

“At least we know where he’s running off to. And the Aurors…” Hopefully that would be the end of it – watching Draco Malfoy being dragged out the front doors of Hogwarts by the MLE.
“Yeah.” Daphne nodded, shifting on her feet. The music was starting to get annoying. Harry’s cheek twitched as a particular song played for the fourth time.

“Can you turn that off?”

Daphne gave a laugh. “Don’t like it?”

“No, not really.” Harry shook his head, staring down at her with a slight grin.

Daphne pointed her wand in the direction of the phonograph. “Finite,” she muttered. “I suppose there’s only so many times a person can listen to Don’t You Want Me before they reach their breaking point.”

“I have the song stuck in my head and that’s bad enough,” Harry said, sighing and staring down at the half-empty bottle of sherry in her hand with a raised eyebrow. He didn’t see her drink that much of it. She only opened it a few minutes ago.

Slowly, Daphne turned toward him, a grin stretching across her face. “Guess we’re done here?” she asked quietly.

Harry nodded, a dejected expression marring his face as he glanced around at the rubble. He wished that they could find something more… incriminating.

“But I don’t want to leave. Pansy and Millie are going to give me the third degree.”

“It’s probably really late.” Harry felt a yawn coming on and tried to suppress it. He moved a hand up to his mouth to cover it. He should have been in bed at least, an hour or so ago. At this rate, he’d have one hell of a time getting out of bed in the morning.

“I suppose.” Daphne grabbed his hand as he started toward the door. She took a swig of the sherry. “You know, with a little sprucing up, this place could be quite awesome.”

Harry stared around the disaster area of junk once again and highly doubted that, but shrugged. The only thing that was “awesome” about the place was the room itself. He felt another yawn coming on and looked over at Daphne. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Nah – I’m incredibly wired. I drank a whole teapot full of coffee before I came to get you,” she said while they exited the Room of Requirement and walked slowly down the darkened corridor.

“No wonder.”

She draped the make-shift invisibility cloak over her shoulders and he realized that it was a lot different than his own invisibility cloak. Hers looked like a sheet while his was like liquid silver that formed perfectly around a person’s body. Maybe his dad was much better at Charms than Nott.

Harry looked up at her to see her staring straight back at him and the dark circles round her eyes made them seem more blue than usual. “I completely forgot what class I have in the morning, do you know?” she asked, stowing the bottle of sherry away and lighting up a fag.

“We’re in Transfiguration together, love,” Harry replied. “You okay?”
Shrugging, she took a long drag on her cigarette. “Long day, I s’pose. Probably should get to bed – dunno if I’ll end up sleeping. I don’t feel like sleeping or anything.”

Harry yawned at the prospect of getting to a bed. He then noticed her swaying pronouncedly as she walked. “Are you sure you’re going to make it to the dungeons alright?”

“Yeah, I can make it,” Daphne said looking down along the corridor. “Floors gone all wobbly for a moment though.”

“What did you put in that fag?”

“Nothing… Tobacco?” She was staring at the ceiling, her head wrenched upward. “Probably the fucking sherry.”

Harry quickly reached out his arms to catch her before she fell backwards, grinning up at him. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Note: Trelawney’s brew was definitely not a good idea to touch.

“Let’s get you to bed,” Harry whispered as they neared the Fat Lady, ignoring Daphne’s protest of ‘I’m not tired!’.

Thankfully, the Fat Lady was sleeping so he could cover Daphne up with the invisibility cloak properly, without having it catch fire from her cigarette.

He started off with a quiet “Hello?” but it wasn’t loud enough to wake her. Biting the inside of his lip, he tried again. “Erm, excuse me,” he said louder than he meant to, which jolted the portrait awake. He hoped his voice didn’t carry too far along the corridors.

“You do know that it’s half three in the morning, boy.”

“See, there was this emergency…” he blinked up at her, trying to think of something more concrete, “…headache. Had to go to the hospital wing. Sorry about that.”

Her probing eyes surveyed him up and down. “You do look a bit peaky – Password?”

“Dilligrout.”

He let out a sigh of relief when she opened for him and he ushered Daphne through, supporting her slightly with his arm. The portrait hole slammed shut behind him. “Emergency headache? Remind me not to ask you for excuses.”

“All I could think of!” Harry whispered loudly, watching Daphne partially remove her cloak and look around the common room.

“Are my eyes burning or is it just a bit too red in here?”

“It’s the Gryffindor Common Room, Daph.”

“Ah, true. Nice… wallpapering.”

“Em – thanks? We should really get you to bed,” Harry said through a yawn.
She stared over at him dazedly, the dark sheet that was the make-shift invisibility cloak hanging off one of her shoulders. “Do you want to go out somewhere?”

Go out?

“We have class in the morning,” Harry stating plainly, appraising her carefully with his eyebrows raised.

“What fun is that? I feel like going somewhere.”

“I don’t think you’re in the right state to decide.” She was swaying on her feet for Merlin’s sake!

Daphne shrugged, blinking blearily. Her wild hair cast shadows over her ashen face. “S’not as bad as you think.”

Feeling a yawn nipping at the back of his throat, Harry pushed it back, inhaling sharply. “Aren’t you tired?” She really did look it.

“I already said I’m not. You can go to sleep if you want; I just need to get out of the castle for a bit.”

“Just come to bed with me,” Harry nearly pleaded. He didn’t want anything to happen to her if she went out without him and he’d probably pass out asleep halfway to wherever she wanted to go if he went with.

Daphne ignored his plea.

“Have you ever walked around London at night?” Harry stared at her blankly. Did Trelawney’s sherry have some sort of impulsiveness potion added to it?

“Er. Can’t say I’ve ever been.” Did she really want to go to London? Now? At this time? Was anything open at nearly four in the morning?

Not to mention the raving psychopath that was out to get him – if he left school, who knows what would happen. He was sorely reminded of last year’s Thestral ride to the Ministry of Magic.

“Let’s go then – it’ll be good.”

Harry sighed inwardly and moved forward to take her hand in his, pulling her along toward the stairs that led to his dormitory. “Look, how about we get a little nap in before we go anywhere. A catnap will do us some good after searching through all that crap.” He tried to be persuasive but it wasn’t his forte at all.

“That’s no fun though.”

“It will be – I promise.” He hoped he could find some of Neville’s sleeping drought to give her. She looked like she needed a proper rest. The dark circles around her eyes didn’t look too healthy.

Daphne squeezed his hand tightly a few times while puffing on her cigarette, which was nearly burnt down to the filter. “Hm… if I agree, will you skive off class tomorrow with me?”

“Sure,” Harry muttered through a quick sigh, hoping she wouldn’t remember that promise in the
morning. Was she just really drunk or did Trelawney’s sherry cause half of her brain cells to die?

Either way, if she was still like that in the morning, he’d have to get Hermione to fix her. If he didn’t hand in that Transfiguration assignment – which he was already three days late on due to losing the first copy to a particularly explosive round of Exploding Snap – McGonagall was going to castrate him.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
There were voices… but he thought he put a two-way impenetrable silencing spell around his bed last night? Either way, it was entirely too early to wake up. Harry rolled over, reaching for Daphne – who he had expected to be right next to him – and effectively smacked his head against something hard and bumpy.

“Oi, mate, watch it.”

His eyes snapped open to see a shock of red hair next to him. “Ron? What’re y’doing ‘ere?”

“He had a bit of a pissfit.”

“I did not!”

“Whatever. We couldn’t wake you – you sleep like the dead, you know. So, Slughorn’s party?”

The smell of cigarette smoke woke him up a bit more, which meant Daphne was still there and he wasn’t hallucinating – or dreaming.

“You’re going with Harry, aren’t you?”

To Slughorn’s party? Yes, at least that’s what he thought. Harry rolled over onto his back and sat up, taking in the scene. Ron was on one side of him, lying on his stomach. He must have bumped his head on Ron’s bony back. Daphne sat at the head of the bed, a fag dangling from her fingertips.

“Yeah, aren’t you going with me?”

Daphne shrugged. “I want to throw the hounds off our trail. It would just be as acquaintances anyway – Granger hasn’t invited you, has she?”

Ron glared.
Harry sighed and then yawned. She had a point. On his second yawn in a row, he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He really didn’t get enough rest. How was Daphne all raring to go already? She was dressed properly, hair done, and everything. She even put on her usual slap of make-up.

“No, she hasn’t,” Ron muttered grumpily.

“Sorted then. So come with me, have some fun – a few drinks. Slughorn serves Firewhiskey.”

“Who am I going to go with then?” Harry asked, peeking through the curtains and noting that it was 6:30. No wonder he was knackered.

“I dunno. Anyone?”

_ Crack! _

Dobby stumbled slightly as he Apparated onto Harry’s legs, carrying a tray that was twice the size of his head. “Got your coffees, Miss. Grassy!” The tea cosies stacked atop his head leaned back and forth as he caught his balance.

“Thanks, Dobby,” Daphne replied, taking the tray full of coffee cups from house elf and setting it on the only space left on the bed.

“Anything for Harry Potter’s Grassy. Is you needing Dobby for anything else?” Dobby asked, bowing low toward Harry.

“Erm, no, Dobby. Thanks,” Harry said, taken aback by the elf on his thighs.

With one last bow, Dobby disapparated with a crack and Harry stared over at Daphne, who was settling into her coffee. She paused from blowing on the surface of the dark liquid.

“Want one?”

She got up, got dressed, and got Dobby to bring coffee? Merlin, she was efficient in the morning. Harry reached toward her with a nod and accepted a cup. Ron was a bit more reluctant. “What did you have him do to it?”

“For fuck’s sake, Weasley, it’s just coffee.”

Carefully taking the cup, Ron sniffed it.

“And anyway, I haven’t had enough time to put the poison in.”

Ron froze, staring at her.

Laughing, Daphne took a long drag off her cigarette. “Jesus, you need to lighten up.”

“What are you doing up so early anyway?” Harry asked. Usually he had to get out Seamus’ blow horn to get Ron out of bed.

“Well, I had to use the loo but Greengrass took over the bathroom and forgot to lock the door – bint
“You scared me – not my fault that your bathroom is absolutely tiny. It washes off.” Ron was appeased, but obviously didn’t hear her mutter, “with Morgana’s magical make-up remover,” under her breath.

Harry grinned amusedly and took a well-needed sip of coffee, hoping that a cupful would give him enough energy to make it through the day. He didn’t like coffee that much, but it was rather necessary considering he only had about two hours of sleep.

“I had to silence him when he started shouting.”

“You’re not supposed to be in here!” Ron exclaimed, throwing a hand up in the air. The coffee cup in his other hand jiggled, dripping a spot of dark liquid down the side of the pristine white cup.

“Well I am. Live with it.”

“I should have went straight to McGonagall.”

“I would have stopped you.” Daphne paused, tipping back her cup of coffee. “And you’re avoiding the question.”

“What question?”

“Slughorn’s Christmas party?”

Harry shook his head with a small sigh. Did she really not have a filter for anything? He wouldn’t be surprised if the first thing she said to Ron was, ‘Want to go to Slughorn’s Christmas party with me?’ After she attacked him with mascara, that is.

Absolutely nutter.

“Fine,” Ron said sullenly before taking his first sip of coffee. With a grimace, he continued, “But only for the Firewhiskey.”

“Brill. I knew you’d come around.”

Harry knew he should have been jealous but, strangely, he wasn’t. He knew that Ron wasn’t interested in Daphne – especially after how he reacted toward any news surrounding Hermione’s love life. In addition, Daphne had a good reason for asking Ron. She and Ron going together would certainly throw the “hounds” off their trail. It was pretty nice of her to choose him as well. Ron was extremely envious of everyone that got into the Slug Club – even after Harry explained how bloody boring it was.

After Daphne finished her first cigarette, she fished her silver case from the pocket of her skirt and held it out to him. He took one without a second thought while he sipped his coffee. As he lit it with his wand, he noticed Ron watching him in his peripheral vision.

“What?” Harry asked, smoke trickling from his mouth.

“What do those things taste like?”
“Erm…” There wasn’t any way to explain it, really.

Daphne chimed in, “Menthol. Kind of cooling like toothpaste.”

“ Toothpaste?”

“Right, that’s a Muggle thing. It’s like breathing in really smoky mint.”

“Cool,” Ron commented.

Harry sipped his coffee. It was rather bizarre to see Ron being somewhat agreeable toward a Slytherin. If he didn’t know any better, he would suspect that Ron was coerced but Ron didn’t know how to keep a secret from him to save his life. Harry would catch on right away if there was something up. It was when Ron asked to have a cigarette that Harry intervened.

“They’re *addictive*, Ron.”

Merlin, he sounded like Hermione.

Ron shrugged and pulled one from Daphne’s offered case, bending the fag only slightly. “Can’t be too bad. I never seen you smoke before.”

“He’s a social smoker,” Daphne explained and then drained her second cup of coffee in a series of long gulps.

Harry rolled the cigarette between his fingers. “Yeah… Social,” he murmured reluctantly. A fag would be really great to have after those bloody frustrating meetings with Dumbledore. He actually considered taking the habit up full time – it was relaxing, after all.

“Just tap the wand to the tip and inhale – the sparks are enough to light it,” Daphne instructed, handing her wand over to Ron, which surprised the ginger haired Gryffindor.

Ron burst out coughing the moment he lit up, dropping Daphne’s wand to clutch his throat. “Blimey! How can you stand that?”

“I think you inhaled a bit too deep,” Harry answered, fighting the urge to smile and listening to Daphne’s badly held in chortle.

“Right,” Ron muttered, looking at the fag with a dirty expression. He brought the cigarette to his lips again and only let out a little cough this time. “Bloody odd, that.”

Drawing deeply at his fag, Harry looked over at Daphne, who was staring at her watch now. Her forehead creased slightly down the centre.

“I should probably get going before anyone else wakes up,” she said, setting her empty cup of coffee onto the tray.

Harry nodded. “So you don’t remember last night?”

That seemed to pique Ron’s interest. “What happened last night?

Never trust a Slytherin in your room.

She stood up along the side of the bed and grabbed the dark sheet that was her make-shift invisibility cloak, which she was sitting on before. Leaning over the bed, Daphne kissed Harry lightly on the cheek. “I’m still skivving by the way – you owe me.”

Harry groaned. “Don’t go too far.” He could just see her traipsing off to London or wherever, dragging Zabini along with her.

“Nah. I’ll be around. Have a few plans to take care of. Wanna join me, Weasley?”

“I don’t like you that much.”

Daphne snorted. “And I thought we were getting on so swimmingly,” she replied sarcastically.

Glaring at the Slytherin girl, Ron didn’t respond.

Harry watched her disappear underneath her invisibility cloak through the curtain. “See, Ron – she’s not that bad.”

“She threatened to rip my bollocks off with her bare hands if I didn’t ‘behave’!”

So that’s why Ron was so agreeable. “Well… she’s quite feisty when she needs to be…” Harry muttered, draining the last of his coffee and setting the cup on the tray.

“Her cigarettes make me feel funny.”

“That’s the nicotine buzz, Ron.”

“Oh.”

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
A Curious Case

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Duality: A Curious Case

oOo

Harry didn’t see Daphne at lunch that day. He hadn’t seen her in the courtyard smoking when he was walking to the Great Hall either. On the other hand, he did see Ginny and abruptly turned in the other direction to avoid her at all costs. When she tried to talk to him at breakfast about Quidditch, he had enough of staring at her for one day after a few short minutes. It didn’t help that she wore a second hand uniform that was just a tad too small for her size. It just… wasn’t right.

She was Ron’s little tiny itty bitty sister (yes, think of her like that) and he already had some sort of haphazard relationship with Daphne Greengrass that consisted of strange conversations, cigarettes, shagging, and spying on Draco Malfoy. Harry was perfectly content with that type of situation. Ginny was just some bizarre attraction that must have cropped up after watching her chase Quaffles in the – rather sensuous – way she… chased them.

Ahem.

Distracting his mind, he listened to Ron and Hermione bicker about the Potions assignment on Moonwort that he had finished days ago with the help of the Prince. The argument was over the size of Ron’s handwriting mostly. Of course, Ron always wrote as large as humanly possible to fill up enough inches on every essay he wrote, but he took it to a whole new level with that assignment.

As Harry picked at his chicken and vegetables, he scanned the whole Slytherin table looking for Daphne once more, but she still wasn’t among them. Zabini was sitting alone, staring down the sandwich on his plate. The dark Slytherin boy seemed as if he hadn’t blinked since the last time Harry perused the table. He then reached the end, where Theodore Nott sat, pale as a ghost, next to the third years. He really needed some sun. It looked like Snape was going to have competition for the “Slytherin house vampire” contest.

He sighed and focused back on his lunch. No Daphne at all.

Maybe she did go to London. But how? The wards were bloody impossible to get through unless she knew of the secret passageways. Then again, she could have been eating lunch in the kitchen.
Likely, he was worried – even a bit paranoid – for nothing, but he had an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach about her skivving. He noted movement at the Slytherin table out of the corner of his eye and watched Zabini get up, forfeiting the staring contest he was having with his sandwich.

Harry grabbed his bag quickly and muttered that he had to go to the loo. Ron and Hermione didn’t notice much since Hermione was demonstrating the proper size that Ron should write.

Briskly taking off after Zabini out the Great Hall doors, Harry rounded the corner and followed Zabini’s retreating form down toward the dungeons. He had to run to catch up with him.

Zabini slowed his pace. “Judging by your not-so-subtle approach, I take it you want something.”

“Have you seen Daphne lately?”

“With her flitting about, it’s hard to tell, but she’s in London right now, I believe,” Zabini drawled with a sneer.

Harry’s brows furrowed. She said she was going to stay around the school. Blatant lie, obviously. But… going to London would be quite tricky. “How could she possibly get through the wards?”

Zabini glanced over at him. “My question, exactly. I wouldn’t put it past her figuring out how to do it, of course. She’s very persistent. If she’d only put as much effort into her school work…” he trailed off bitterly.

It was almost uncanny. “Merlin, you sound like Hermione.” He nearly regretted muttering that aloud, thinking that Zabini would probably curse him for comparing him to a Muggleborn witch. However, the Slytherin boy only stared at him thoughtfully, with his nostrils flared.

“Hm. Back to the subject of the wards,” Zabini paused. “Considering that you find ways to get out of the castle quite easily, I think you may be able to come up with a solution as to how.”

“Daphne doesn’t know about the secret passageways – I haven’t told her,” Harry replied quickly. “She could have found one though.” And apparated to London after getting out of the wards. He continued, “But, I would like to ask how you two don’t have Ministry owls flocking after you for performing underage magic.”

“Because we’re of age, you nitwit,” Zabini cynically intoned. “However, I wouldn’t be surprised if she found a secret passageway but, as far as I’m aware, she doesn’t know of them. And she shares everything with me, Potter.”

Harry glared, feeling a jolt of jealousy eating at his nerves, while Zabini pulled a pack of fags from his pocket and lit one with his wand. “Why does she even need to go to London?”

“Daph likes to check up on her mother when she can and she’s probably stocking up on cigarettes as well – all the plebeian Muggle things she needs to get done from time to time,” Zabini explained calmly, exhaling a puff of wispy smoke.

He bit his lip, suddenly craving a fag. “Right,” Harry said, sighing. If he had parents, he’d want to see them as much as possible as well. He could understand that... still, it was dangerous outside Hogwarts. And why would she lie to him like that?
They stopped at the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room and Zabini turned to him, eyes narrowed. “I don’t suppose you’re coming in.”

Harry’s lip curled at the thought. “Rather not.” He felt very uneasy in the Slytherin Common Room. Just as Zabini turned to whisper the password to the wall, Harry interrupted. “Could you give me one of those before you go?” he asked, nodding to the cigarette.

Raising an eyebrow, Zabini took out his pack of Davidoff’s and handed one over. “Don’t forget that you still owe me eighteen Galleons,” he drawled.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’ll give it to Daph – she’ll pass it on,” he muttered, sticking the fag into his mouth and lighting it.

Zabini disappeared into the Common Room and Harry pivoted on his feet. Maybe Daphne was right – once you got over how much of a demeaning and insulting arsehole that Zabini could be at times, he wasn’t that bad of a bloke. For a Slytherin.

oOo

“Harry!”

He froze when he heard Hermione’s admonishing tone. Her footsteps thundered up the stairs and he exhaled, smoke trickling out of his mouth.

“Would you put that thing out.” Her hands were on her hips, eyes stern and intimidating – much like McGonagall, actually. He wondered if she took lessons for that.

Harry sighed and took a drag that burned down quite a bit of his fag. “Merlin, Hermione, I’m almost done anyway.”

Hermione shook her head disappointedly. “Nasty habit. Those things will kill you, you know.”

“I’m sure Voldemort will kill me quicker,” he said bitterly. He took another drag.

That made her snap her mouth shut. She almost looked taken aback by it, then she bristled. “Daphne Greengrass is an abominable influence on you,” Hermione told him as they walked toward Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“Actually, Zabini gave me this,” Harry retorted, gesturing to the fag.

He could hear her teeth grinding together and he regretted saying that. “Look, Hermione. I like Daphne. She’s great and very… grounding, you could say,” Harry explained. “And–” he paused, not knowing exactly how to word what he wanted to say. “I’m sorry I haven’t been paying much attention to you lately – it’s been a bit busy. I’ll try harder.”

“It’s fine, Harry.” Hermione’s stance softened. “I’ve just been wound up for the past couple weeks. Ron and I can’t speak without going at each other’s throats and he’s really frustrating. I didn’t mean to take it out on you, though I do disapprove of you smoking. However, I suppose you need to explore a bit… away from us, but you’re really the glue that holds us all together.”
Harry grinned. “That’s not exactly true. We couldn’t function very well without you – we all need each other equally.”

After all their various fallouts over the years, he had definitely learned that much.

He relaxed a bit when Hermione smiled. “Anyways. How’s it going with Daphne?”

*How was it going with Daphne?* That was hard question to answer. It was going fine, yeah, but… judging from last night and this morning-

“I think she may have gone round the twist,” Harry muttered. “She’s kind of all over the place, but at least it’s fine otherwise.”

Other than her lying about London. She really didn’t need to lie. It felt confusing and, strangely, a bit like betrayal.

“Round the twist, how?” Hermione inquired in her trying-to-figure-this-out-like-an-Arithmancy-equation tone.

“A bit erratic – more than usual. Ever since they investigated Malfoy, she’s been teetering on the edge of mad.” Harry paused for a thoughtful moment. “Speaking of which, Malfoy’s been going to the Room of Requirement and we’re very certain he’s up to something in there.”

“Not with the Malfoy stuff again,” Hermione groaned with a sigh. “You really haven’t enough…”

“He has the Dark Mark – Nott’s seen it!” Harry interrupted in a loud whisper.

Hermione’s shoulders sagged. “I know – I know, I can’t find a logical answer to that. Nott could be lying. But maybe he is up to something. Regardless, the only concrete, solid, proof you have is Polyjuice Potion. Which you should have taken to McGonagall like I said.”

“I told you! My word against his. I don’t have any proof that he specifically brewed it.”

They spoke in low hushed tones as they entered the Defence Against the Dark Art’s classroom. Harry spotted Ron sitting next to Seamus and waved as he and Hermione took their seats. “So we just have to wait for the Aurors…”

Harry nodded solemnly. With the amount of corruption going on in the Ministry at the moment, who knew how long that would take.

The door banged open loudly, making everyone in the classroom turn their heads toward the noise, and Snape sauntered into the room, his robes billowing more violently than usual behind him. “Turn to page 473,” he ordered.

Harry fought the urge to set his head on the desk and possibly bang it against the wood a few times as Snape started talking.

It was no wonder Daphne and Zabini smoked like chimneys – Harry was half tempted to join them. School was way too stressful to deal with on top of regular life, let alone with all the action that seemed to come at him like a speeding train.
Listening to Snape’s lecturing alone was enough to drive him to the habit. Harry sneered at his book and, with a silent sigh, he flipped it open to page 473.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“What was Dumbledore thinking when he let him have the Defence Against the Dark Arts position,” Harry fumed as they walked away from the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. He was quite happy to get out of there. He probably would have gotten another detention from Snape if he had stuck up for Neville, who set a desk on fire trying to nonverbally cast a stunner. Hermione, luckily, kicked him in the shin when he opened his mouth to say something.

Snape was making his favourite class – or what used to be his favourite class – the bane of his existence. The great bat lorded over everyone and, when he was in a particularly foul mood like today, barked at them when they made mistakes. Especially Neville.

“Well,” Hermione feebly responded, “he knows his material.”

“Come on, Hermione,”- Ron rolled his eyes –“even if he does know what he’s talking about, he doesn’t bloody well know how to teach it. Dumbledore’s nutters.”

Harry nodded in concurrence and paused when he passed Daphne, sitting in one of the alcoves. He’d barely noticed her out of the corner of his eye.

“How was the lesson?” she asked, staring up at him, her hand was delicately stroking a very content Crookshanks.

Ignoring the questions in his head about Hermione’s cat in her lap, he grumbled, “Complete and utter...” he trailed off not being able to think of an irritating enough word.

“Bollocks?” Daphne supplied.

“Yeah.” He felt Hermione and Ron join him on each side.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione scolded, rushing forward to pick her cat off Daphne’s lap. “Where did you find him? I’ve been looking all over.”
Raising an eyebrow, Daphne stared at her. “I found him under my bed, actually. He and Millicent’s
cat decided to bunk up and have a brood of kittens. There’s afterbirth all over my robes, which they
decided to make a nest out of.”

Harry couldn’t hold back the amusement that spilt all over his face. Hermione, on the other hand,
looked torn between being delighted and horrified, which was Ron’s choice of expression.
“That thing had kittens?” Ron spluttered, pointing at Crookshanks.

Hermione sent a particularly icy glare toward the redheaded Gryffindor. “Crookshanks can’t have
kittens, Ron. He’s a boy.” The cat mewled nastily to back up its owner. “And I’m positively
delighted that he started a family.”

“But that leaves us the problem of informing Millie that your cat defiled hers,” Daphne said with a
smirk. Harry could tell that she was thoroughly entertained. “Not to mention the five little kittens that
are hiding under my bed.”

“Well…” Hermione said in a slightly breathless voice. “We can move them to my dormitory and I
can take care of them.”

“They’re nursing, Granger,” Daphne pointed out, standing up to face Hermione, though she looked
quite intimidating since she was a head taller than the Gryffindor. Harry didn’t even realize the height
difference until they were standing head to head.

Daphne continued, “And, Millie won’t be happy about her cat’s predicament – she loves that bitchy
little thing – but I might be able to keep it a secret from her somehow until you take the little heathens
underneath my bed away.” She paused and examined her nails as Harry looked back and forth
between the two girls. The tension was palpable. “For a price.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not afraid of Millicent Bulstrode.”

“You haven’t met her right hook,” Daphne retorted.

“You’re quite forgetting that I’m a witch,” Hermione said pointedly, wincing as Crookshanks dug
his claws into her arm to seemingly get comfortable.

Daphne laughed. “That really doesn’t matter. When Millie holds a grudge, she’ll get you – and she’s
faster than she looks. Trust me.”

Rolling her eyes, Hermione sighed. “What’s your price then? Just so I can weigh the options.”

“Restricted Section passes. Since you’re a Prefect, you can get the unlimited ones without question.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “Why would you…” he started nearly at the same time Hermione ‘hmmed’
contemplatively.

“I’m researching,” Daphne explained to him with a wave of her hand. “I’ll keep the cats secret until
they’re weened, and everything will be tickety boo.”

“What are you researching?” Hermione inquired with that glint in her eyes that Harry recognized
immediately, though it held a certain amount of suspicion.

Ron grumbled something about ‘Slytherins’, ‘obvious’, and ‘evil gits’ as he gazed down the corridor,
away from the girls’ negotiation.

“Hogwarts,” Daphne stated. Hermione’s eyebrows rose in interest. “I need a couple of really old volumes of *Hogwarts, A History*, which are only available in the Restricted Section.”

Fervently, Hermione shook her head, the middle of her forehead creased. “There aren’t any old volumes of *Hogwarts, A History* in the *Restricted Section*.”

“Yes there are,” Daphne argued. “They’re in the Library-Use-Only part in the back.”

“Why would they be there?” Hermione mused.

Harry’s stomach gave a lurch of hunger and he squinted toward the clock at the end of the corridor, which told him that dinner had already started. No wonder Ron was getting antsy and paying a lot of attention to the clock.

“Why don’t you just go on to dinner?” he whispered to Ron as the Hermione and Daphne’s conversation took a turn onto the numerous volumes of *Hogwarts, A History* and where they were located in the library.

“Yeah,” Ron muttered with a nod. “Aren’t you coming with?”

Harry shook his head. “No, you go on ahead.” He really wanted to ask Daphne how she got through the wards, if she went to London like Zabini had said.

Ron took off without another word toward Gryffindor Tower to drop off his stuff, as fast as his legs could carry him without running.

“But why do you need those *specifically*?” Hermione was starting to get irritated, Harry could tell by the volume of her hair alone. When she was exasperated, it puffed up to incredibly heights.

“But there’s no need to censor anything! *Hogwarts, A History* is incredibly thorough.”

“Well I imagine, Granger, that there may be something they don’t want us to particularly know. I doubt that anyone had checked out the *Restricted Section* for *Hogwarts, A History*. Perfect place to hide something like that because it sounds *absurd*. I only know about it because Blaise told me.”

Hermione let out a long sigh. “Then we’ll just have to get those *Restricted Section* passes, won’t we?” Daphne smirked but it faltered when Hermione continued, “And I’m *definitely* joining you.”

“Whatever, Granger.” The Slytherin girl reached into her pocket and pulled out her silver case and a gold rectangular lighter that Harry hadn’t seen before. Daphne lit up and exhaled slowly. “Think you can get them by tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Hermione said with a curt nod. “I can get them tonight even.”

“Good,” Daphne drawled, “meet me in the library at seven if you can get the passes by then.”

Hermione’s determined gaze met Daphne’s pleased expression. “Oh, I will.”
Daphne nodded politely and looked over at Harry. “Where’d Weasley run off to?”

“Dinner,” Harry said with a shrug. “I wanted to ask you something, before…”

The three started walking toward the Gryffindor Tower to drop off their book bags. Hermione was staring avidly at Harry, petting her cat lightly on his head, while Daphne stared at him expectantly.

“Did you go to London today?”

Daphne nodded. “Yeah… why?”

“You left school grounds?” Hermione interrupted.

“I’m sure you’ve broken a lot of rules over the years too, Granger,” Daphne muttered to the Gryffindor girl.

Harry disregarded the interruption and picked up the former train of their conversation. “How did you get through the wards?”

As they ascended the stairs that led to the seventh floor, Daphne looked around as if gauging the surroundings for any listeners. Harry walked closer to her.

“I don’t think I should say anything with a Prefect in the vicinity.”

Hermione scoffed. “I not inept at keeping secrets, Greengrass.”

“Alright then,” Daphne said quietly. “I used a signature duplicating potion to get through the wards.”

“How would that get you through the wards?” Harry asked, trying to think of how duplicating one’s signature could possibly do that, unless it increased your magical power twofold and allowed you to break the wards or something. But the school would have been alerted if there was a noticeable breech in the wards.

Hermione was staying oddly silent. Wasn’t she supposed to be rattling off useful information right about now?

“I used Dumbledore’s signature.” Daphne stuck her cigarette into her mouth and dug through her pockets, pulling out a small vial of purple twinkling liquid.

“Of course,” Hermione breathed. “The Headmaster can control the wards. And it wouldn’t set the wards off if they thought you were him.”

Harry reached for the bottle and Daphne gave it to him. It felt very warm and tingly in his hand, a bit like very faint static burns. The magic emanating from the bottle licked over his skin and down his arm. “But that’s Dark Magic,” Hermione blurted out, staring at the Slytherin accusingly.

“It’s on the border.” Daphne shrugged.

Dark Magic…

The danger of the potion in his hands hit him like a ton of bricks and the unbearable weight on his
shoulders felt a half ton heavier. He swallowed thickly.

“What if Voldemort got a hold of this?” Harry said just above a whisper, panicked by the thought. “Where did you get it from?”

“I made it. The recipe’s in Magick Moste Evil,” Daphne answered, taking the potion from him. She stowed it back in her pocket. He itched to have it back into his hands to keep it safe. “Kind of a rare book,” she reassured.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of it,” Hermione said. “Though I wouldn’t put it past Voldemort to get his hands on it.”

“But maybe he doesn’t know about it,” Daphne paused for a moment, “it’s not like there’re Death Eaters trying to break down the front door. And, since it only takes a month to brew this potion, they would’ve been here a while ago.”

“But what if he finds out somehow and is brewing it right now, or next month – or the month after,” Harry said in one short breath.

“You have to get Dumbledore’s DNA to make the potion.” Daphne looked at him with her eyebrow sharply raised. “It was astonishingly harder to procure than I thought. He does his own laundry. Getting any trace of saliva from his dinner materials is out of the question. Sneaking up on him to get a piece of his hair was even more difficult – he’s a lot more aware of his surroundings than he seems. Had the gall to tell me it wasn’t wise to run with scissors.” Daphne rolled her eyes.

“In the end, I had to sneak into his private chambers,” she whispered through her teeth.

“Well that’s… comforting,” Hermione commented as they stopped in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady. The portrait glared at first but then seemed to relax back in her chair, asking for the password.

Harry’s heartbeat had calmed considerably. Thank Merlin it was difficult to get Dumbledore’s DNA, but still… it was possible if Daphne could do it. “Dilligrout,” he said to the portrait, who didn’t seem to notice Daphne there with them.

The portrait hole opened and Daphne climbed through after them, not seeming to worry about being in public with two Gryffindors. The Common Room was empty anyway.

Hermione was staring apprehensively at Daphne again and Harry wanted to ask “What?” but held his tongue. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know what it was this time.

They separated in silence. Hermione went up to her dormitory and Harry went up to his, Daphne hot on his heels.

“We’ve come full circle,” Daphne mused as he set his book bag down on his trunk.

Brows furrowed slightly, he asked, “What?”

“Back at your dorm. It’s actually rather nice.” She was staring around the room. “Maybe a little too red for my tastes…”

Harry’s stomach gave an audible gurgle that interrupted her and he smiled sheepishly when she stared at him. “Hungry,” he explained.
“Dinner – right,” Daphne muttered, turning out of the room. Harry stuffed the Marauder’s Map into his pocket. He still liked to keep an eye on Malfoy, even if the Auror’s were going to take him away.

They walked in silence and parted long before they reached the Great Hall. Daphne said it would look suspicious if they entered together. She was already at her spot beside Zabini when they got there. It must have been a Slytherin thing to stare down their food because Daphne was boring holes into her salad.

“Practice again tomorrow, Harry?” Ron interrupted his staring and Harry turned to look at him.

Harry nodded and reached for his goblet of pumpkin juice as Ron led him into a discussion about Quidditch tactics. Thankfully, Ron didn’t go into a pity fest on how pathetic he was playing as of late. Harry really wasn’t up to dealing with that at the moment. His eyes were focused as much as possible on Daphne and he only paid half attention to Ron’s long explanations over chaser formations and how he could best defend the hoops.

There was tension over at the Slytherin table, he could tell. Though, that probably had to do with the blonde-headed git sitting across from Daph, who was rarely spotted during mealtimes. At least he didn’t need the Marauder’s Map at the moment. He could keep a good watchful eye on Malfoy from the Gryffindor table.

Ron turned the subject over to how the Cannons were doing so far in the season, which was as usual (abysmally), while Harry observed Daphne bending the handle of her fork in half with her hand. Her eyes were sneaking inconspicuous glances all round the Slytherin table, which made him certain that something was up.

But her abrupt departure afterward didn’t look too suspicious. Regardless, he itched to follow her.

Harry watched Zabini. If Zabini left after her, he would, but the Slytherin boy didn’t move. Instead, Zabini’s jaw set and he fixed a dangerous glare on Malfoy.

“Mhm. Yeah,” Harry muttered, only half listening for the times when Ron expected him to talk. He shovelled some mashed potatoes into his mouth and swallowed without really tasting it.

Ron kept talking.

Hermione, on the other hand, noticed that Harry wasn’t paying attention. Her eyes narrowed and she glanced over her shoulder. When she gave him one of her, “What in the world are you looking at?” expressions, he shrugged in response. He’d probably need to talk to Zabini again to understand – after dinner.

Without much left to do, Harry settled into his food, keeping close watch out of the corner of his eye on Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini.

oOo

“This is starting to get old,” Zabini muttered to him, after he had pulled Harry into an unused classroom when he was caught following the Slytherin boy.
“You know stuff, I don’t,” Harry replied with a glare, “get used to it.”

“If you weren’t fucking Daphne, I’d curse you right about now.”

As would the average Slytherin, Harry knew that, but he’d rather cut to the chase. “Is there something going on between Daphne and Malfoy?”

“Aside from trying to ‘knock him down a peg or two’…” Zabini drawled with a shrug, pulling out his pack of Davidoff’s and lighting up.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Then what was with the steamy looks you were giving him all throughout dinner?”

“Ah.” Zabini breathed out a puff of smoke. “Why would that be any of your business?”

Closing his eyes to scrounge up a little patience, Harry sighed. “I just have a feeling like there’s something going on and I know nothing about it.”

Merlin, he was turning into a control freak wasn’t he? He always had control over what he was doing when he worked with Ron and Hermione. The Slytherins just wanted to take over for him. The whole loss of control was driving him mad. Maybe he was reading into things that didn’t mean anything. However, the lack of trust certainly didn’t help – he definitely didn’t trust Zabini and Zabini didn’t trust him. He wasn’t even sure he trusted Daphne, considering that she blatantly lied to him this morning. How many other times had she lied?

Zabini was staring at him in an appraising way, his eyes searching. “Perhaps there is something going on that you know nothing about.”

That response definitely didn’t help with his current trust issues.

“That’s why I’m asking you to tell me what it is!”

Zabini gave a short laugh, smoke billowed from his mouth. “Gryffindors. You lot have no sense of subtlety or manipulation.”

Harry didn’t respond. It didn’t even deserve a response. Why did he have to play those games with Zabini when he could just ask for the information?

“If I have to manipulate information out of you,” Harry bitterly replied, “then I can assume that we aren’t on the same side.”

“Now there’s your Slytherin sneaking out to join us,” Zabini said, his smirk firmly in place. It only further grated at Harry’s irritation. “Yet, those ‘steam looks’ – as you so deemed them – had nothing to do with the reason why we have aligned.”

Fair point. Harry tried to scrounge up a reason for why Zabini should tell him something that the Slytherin was obviously guarding.

“I know that there’s something going on with Daphne and Malfoy has to be involved.” Bloody hell, that was a weak response. Why was Zabini so cooperative this morning? Maybe it had something to do with Zabini’s speculation about Daphne’s methods of getting out of the wards… He needed
information from Harry. That had to be why.

“An explanation would involve telling you information I am not permitted to disclose.”

“Why the bloody hell not?”

He was a bit worried about her, though she did provide him with distractions to forget that worry. Dumbledore’s signature potion, sex… information on Malfoy. It all covered up that he had noticed over the course of the week, she decided to go a bit mad. It couldn’t have just been Trelawney’s sherry and only change in events involved Malfoy. She also couldn’t have been sleeping properly in the last week, considering the dark circles under her eyes. The feeling in the pit of his stomach, which was right most of the time, told him it was Malfoy.

Zabini let out a long breath, as if he were annoyed. “It’s up to Daphne. I don’t even know much about it.”

“Just tell me,” Harry calmly enunciated. “I’m… concerned.”

“As you should be.” Zabini paused while Harry’s eyebrows furrowed, not expecting that type of response. “Daph’s a lot to handle and you’re just getting to know her. She’s all these secrets wrapped up in a bundle of mad.”

And to think Harry thought it was so simple in the beginning.

Zabini took a long drag off his cigarette, scrutinizing Harry with his eyes. “Ask her about her left shoulder – it’s injured,” he said cryptically. “From what I understand of piecing together bits of information, it may lead you to some answers.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Harry asked incredulously. She could have slept on it wrong or somehow injured it when she was threatening to rip Ron’s bollocks off with her bare hands this morning. Or maybe she had hurt it when she tried to go through the wards earlier today.

But he didn’t even notice that she had injured her shoulder. His mind moved through every image he had of her over the last few days. There were no signs!

“Draco’s involved, but don’t worry your pretty head too much, Potter. Daphne’s a big girl. She can handle herself.”

Before Harry could respond, Zabini was gone and he rolled his eyes. Gryffindors were so much easier to work with. Slytherins were confusing.

oOo

The map in his pocket pointed him straight to the library; Daphne was sitting at the table furthest to the back, fifteen minutes early for her meeting with Hermione. He spotted Daphne when he went around the Arithmancy section, where she was seated with a few heavy tomes in front of her, smoking up a storm. It was a wonder why Pince wasn’t swooping down on her.

“I don’t think you can smoke in here,” he whispered.

Daphne’s brow unfurrowed when she looked up from the book she was studying. “No, I can’t, but
“You put a spell on her?” Harry asked, looking around for the librarian as if she were going to pop out of the shelves at any moment.

With a shrug of one shoulder – Harry noted that she didn’t even move the left one – she answered lightly, “Mild – nothing that won’t wear off. I needed a quiet place to study and whatever.”

He took a seat across from her and looked down at the books before looking back up at her. “I didn’t even know that this place had Muggle books.”

“These are mine from home,” she explained. “Did you come for the *Hogwarts, a History* debate that’s going to ensue between Granger and I?”

“Um…” Harry hesitated. “-no. I was wondering about dinner.”

Daphne smiled in an amused, yet doubtful, fashion. “Are you asking me on a date?”

Shaking his head, he continued, “You left quite… abruptly.”

“You left quite… abruptly.”

“Right,” she muttered. “It was a bit stifling and I wasn’t very hungry – but I have good news.” She paused. “I caught Vincent Crabbe in front of the Room of Requirement Polyjuiced as a first year. So I took him to McGonagall and he’s probably going to be expelled.”

“So that was what that was for!” Harry said in a loud whisper. All those first years he kept running into… A huge bottle of polyjuice wasn’t plausible if it were simply for Malfoy to use to skip out on detention during Hogsmeade. That made so much more sense: He was using it on Crabbe and Goyle so they could warn him if people were coming near the Room of Requirement.

“There’s another thing,” Daphne said in an odd voice. “Draco was in the Room of Requirement, yet he also appeared at dinner. I think Greg was sitting in his place.”

He should have checked the map. Harry silently cursed himself for not checking.

“I think we could probably catch Greg at it during some meal time during the week, but – I have to say – he’s pretty good at acting like Draco so it’ll be difficult,” Daphne whispered.

Pulling out his map, Harry grinned triumphantly. “It won’t be so difficult with this. Polyjuiced forms and even anamagi show up on it. If Crabbe gets expelled for using Polyjuice, it’ll be easy to get Goyle expelled.”

“And then Draco will have no more minions to guard him. Though Vince did confirm that he was repairing something for the Dark Lord.” Daphne flicked her ashes into a small bowl-shaped ashtray off to the side and took another drag.

“We must have not looked hard enough then.” They combed the entirety of the Room of Requirement and all they got out of it was a dead bird and the location Trelawney’s stash.

A very familiar scoff interrupted them and Harry regretted not bringing up what originally had brought him there. However, talking about and planning the whole Malfoy take-down gave him tunnel vision more often than not.
Harry gritted his teeth. Daphne and her blasted distractions, once again.

“You’re not allowed to smoke in here,” Hermione stated plainly, raising an eyebrow toward the fag dangling from Daphne’s fingertips.

“Fine,” Daphne said with a sigh, stubbing the cigarette out in her ashtray and vanishing the lot. “Happy?”

Hermione glared and took a seat beside them, gazing over at Daphne’s reading material with a faint frown. “Russian?”

“My grandparents are visiting for Christmas hols – I’m rusty,” Daphne explained, closing the books. “Do you have the passes?”

Hermione shoved a roll of parchment forward. “Of course.”

Daphne smiled. “Great, your cat problem is fixed.”

Harry interrupted, wanting to get Daphne alone for a couple minutes. “Hermione, do you think you could go get the books?”

Hermione’s brows furrowed as she looked over at him. “Sure, Harry. I didn’t know you were curious about this.”

Harry smiled sheepishly toward her, not wanting to correct her assumption. Otherwise Hermione would stick around and that probably wouldn’t be the best. The bushy-haired girl took the passes and Daphne stared over at him, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Deciding to cut to the chase, he said, “I talked to Zabini.”

Daphne exhaled a small breath that he could barely hear. “He mentioned… your shoulder.”

Daphne’s eyes met his, solid and expressionless. “My shoulder?”

Harry nodded warily. Her eyebrow rose.

“So it’s a bit sore.”

“And it has something to do with Malfoy, doesn’t it?”

Her jaw set, but she kept staring at him with her rather piercing blue eyes. There was something there, but whatever it was, it perplexed him. He didn’t know whether it was a misunderstanding or if he should be angry, or if he needed to hex something or someone.

“Maybe, maybe not. I don’t see why any of that matters.”

Harry let out a sigh. “It matters because if he hurt you…”

“Hurt me?” Daphne interrupted. “What made you come to that conclusion?”
“Well,” Harry said, testing his patience for a second time in the last bloody hour. Bloody evasive Slytherins. “Your shoulder is injured, Malfoy is apparently a violent git,” – considering the necklace incident – “something happened at dinner, and both Zabini and my gut feelings are pointing to Malfoy.”

“Interesting deduction, Sherlock,” Daphne sardonically intoned. “Anything else to add?”

“No, I think that covered it,” Harry curtly replied. Why couldn’t she just tell him already? What did she have to hide?

Maybe it was completely ridiculous for him to trust Zabini over Daphne, but she did lie to him. He was still quite sore over that, even if he did get distracted by her method of getting out of the wards. There was just something going on with her.

“Right.” Daphne ran a hand through her hair and closed her book. “I don’t know what to tell you, Harry.”

“You just don’t want to tell me.”

“No, I don’t, actually. Why should I?”

“Because I’m concerned.” Irritation was starting to nip and claw at his nerves.

Daphne seemed to be taken aback by that. Her mouth opened as if she were going to say something but then it snapped shut. “It’s not something I talk about. And if it’s okay with you, I’d like to keep it that way.”

The small – almost broken – tone of her voice softened his nerves, as if they were bathed with a calming drought. “It’s just your shoulder,” Harry pointed out.

“And what would you do if I told you that your suspicions are correct?” Daphne asked blankly.

Harry’s brows furrowed. “How did it happen in the first place? Did it happen earlier today? Or while you were spying on him, or what? Are you trying to protect him or something?”

He felt the urge to use the nastiest spell he knew on that bloody ferret clinging to the dregs of anger in his veins. The bloody git hurt her. And she wasn’t denying it!

“Quite the contrary.” Daphne paused. “You wouldn’t understand it if I told you.”

“Told me what?”

“What I got myself into in the first place,” she explained. “I’m pretty capable of handling it.”

“Okay, then,” Harry said, leaning back in his chair. “What did you get yourself into?”

“That’s none of business.” Her tone was blank again and he had a feeling he wouldn’t get anything else out of her.

Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly. “I really don’t understand you, Daph.”

“I don’t expect you to.”
“Well at least it’s better than you lying to me outright, like this morning,” Harry responded bitterly. She said she wouldn’t go too far and yet she went all the way to bloody London. With every terrible thing that was mentioned in the *Prophet* as of late – disappearances, deaths, nine-year-old children bewitched into killing their entire families – he had a right to be, at least, concerned.

“I didn’t lie. Simply didn’t tell you the entire truth.”

“That’s a lie, Daphne,” he said slowly. The familiar betrayal of being lied to seeped in, but it was so insignificant that it wasn’t enough to get angry about. It just stung a little that she couldn’t be completely truthful.

He could hear Hermione’s voice in the *History Section*, just over the far shelves, chatting with Terry Boot.

“My mother’s house was unprotected,” Daphne answered plainly. “I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if anything happened to her.”

Guilt trickled across some of the bitterness, dulling it. If he had Muggle parents, he’d probably be doing the same thing. Unfortunately, he could hear Hermione getting closer and Harry got up before she could rope him into staying for the *Hogwarts: A History* marathon. “You know can tell me anything, Daph.” Harry paused. “But I don’t know if I can trust you if you keep things from me.”

And he didn’t look back again as he walked away, avoiding the *History Section*.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
**Persuasion**

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Duality: Persuasion**

oOo

Ron winced as he moved to grab the platter of eggs at breakfast. He had hurt his left shoulder falling off his broom last night at Quidditch practice and was too stubborn to go to the Hospital Wing as Harry had told him to. He had a feeling that Ron would have gone to Madam Pomfrey if Hermione wasn’t watching, but his pride wouldn’t let him.

“You really should see Madam Pomfrey about that before the game tomorrow,” Harry muttered to his friend, but all he could think of was the impact at which Ron fell to cause the injury and Daphne. It was way too coincidental. Did Malfoy toss Daphne off a broom? It disturbed him, but Daphne seemed perfectly fine. Yet… she didn’t deny that her shoulder was injured.

Maybe she hid it well.

Then again, maybe she wasn’t as injured as Ron. He hoped that was the case.

“It’s fine.” Harry only half paid attention to Ron’s response.

Glancing over at the Slytherin table, Harry sipped his pumpkin juice not expecting to see anything other than Zabini, glaring at yet another plateful of food, and a very saddened and wary Goyle (he didn’t seem to have taken Crabbe’s expulsion well). Harry practically inhaled his mouthful of pumpkin juice when he spotted Daphne next to the Slytherin boy and spluttered, coughing as it went down the wrong bloody tube. Ron clapped him on the back.

“Alright, mate?”

“Yeah, alright,” Harry said, glancing at him before turning his eyes back on Daphne. His throat burned from the pumpkin juice and he pushed his goblet away. He was surprised to see her in the Great Hall. Both Daphne and Malfoy had been missing from mealtimes for days. He was suspicious of that but now less so, since Malfoy still seemed to be missing. It was also no use to check his map for Goyle impersonating Malfoy if Malfoy wasn’t ever there.

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“Yeah, alright,” Harry said, glancing at him before turning his eyes back on Daphne. His throat burned from the pumpkin juice and he pushed his goblet away. He was surprised to see her in the Great Hall. Both Daphne and Malfoy had been missing from mealtimes for days. He was suspicious of that but now less so, since Malfoy still seemed to be missing. It was also no use to check his map for Goyle impersonating Malfoy if Malfoy wasn’t ever there.

Watching Daphne carefully, Harry rubbed his burning throat. She was having a heated discussion with Nott, who was sitting across from her. Surprisingly, Zabini was actually laughing, and Daphne
punched his shoulder without looking at him, silent words spilling out of her mouth like a gushing
downpour. Her eyes were lit up like when she was excited about something, or when she had a
predominantly mad idea (like semi-public, half clothed, sex under the stands during a Quidditch
practice that he was late for). Nott was gesturing wildly with his left hand, as if explaining
something, when Ginny sat down in front of Harry, obstructing his view.

Ginny’s hair looked particularly touchable today.

Harry shook the sudden thought from his head and focused on eating the food that was left on his
plate. Something had to be wrong with him. She was Ron’s sister, not some random girl that… well.
She was Ron’s little sister. It was completely wrong to think of her like that.

All of it just made him crave a smoke.

Turning his attention back to the Slytherin table, watching for Daphne’s departure, he finished
breakfast and waited for her. Sure, he could always walk up to Zabini and ask him if he had any fags
on him, but he was certain that Zabini would ask for his eighteen Galleons beforehand. Harry wasn’t
even sure of how much money he had stowed away in his trunk. He definitely didn’t foresee having
to pay Nott to screw Malfoy and Harry wasn’t even sure if it was fair to charge him. Bloody
Slytherins.

Daphne got up from the table just as he swallowed the last bit of his pumpkin juice with a wince and
he hurried to catch her, hitching his schoolbag up onto his shoulder. He made it around the corner
and had to duck when a jet of yellow sparks flew over his shoulder. Daphne was standing there with
her wand out, poised in a defensive stance.

“Sorry,” she muttered, “didn’t realize it was you.”

Harry stared at her, his jaw slack. “Who did you expect it to be?”

Malfoy, his brain offered.

“Never mind that,” Daphne said with a wave of her hand. “Is there something you wanted?”

A fag for starters. Harry mentally shook that thought away, thinking of something a bit more…
smooth. “I’m sorry for the other night.” He didn’t feel that guilty for it but, maybe if he apologized,
she might as well for blatantly lying to him. And not telling him anything about Malfoy, her shoulder,
or what the bloody hell was going on.

Daphne’s forehead creased slightly at the centre. “You don’t have to do that. You didn’t do anything
wrong.” She paused and ran a hand through her hair before pulling out her silver case. “We have our
differences. It’s only natural.”

Daphne offered him a fag and Harry took it, lighting it up with his wand as if it were second nature
now. Daphne’s eyes kept darting around the corridor as if something were going to pop out of the
niches in the walls.

“I know it’s about Malfoy, Daph,” Harry muttered, taking a drag off his cigarette. It made him feel a
bit calmer about the Malfoy situation. Not much calmer though.

Her expression was guarded when she looked at him. “Could we possibly go somewhere else to talk
about this?” Her eyes went back to watching the corridor for any probable danger that Harry
couldn’t perceive.

She didn’t wait for an answer and took off down the corridor toward the dungeons without him. Harry inhaled deeply at his cigarette and followed. “The common room is likely empty,” Daphne told him, glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes.

“Right,” he muttered. Her actions were starting to make him paranoid; it was as if she were waiting for the castle to be under siege by Death Eaters.

Daphne muttered the password to the darkened wall that was the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. Harry entered behind her, looking around for any stray Slytherins, but he found none. “Before we go into this, if you don’t mind – I’m late to make a firecall,” she said, glancing at her watch.

Harry just threw her a confused look, but she didn’t explain further and tossed a bit of floo powder into the fireplace. Standing in the middle of the room awkwardly, he wasn’t sure if he should stick around and listen or not.

Who the hell would she need to firecall anyway?

A girl’s head popped up in the fireplace before he could make a decision to stay or flee. The girl stared at him and turned her attention to Daphne in front of the fireplace. “You’ve company.”

“It’s alright,” Daphne said with a wave of her hand, blowing a puff of smoke toward the mantle. “I’m coming in.”

She stuck her head in the fireplace, half engulfed by the green flames that muted the entire conversation. That was disappointing. Harry looked around the common room for anyone once again, despite that fact that Slytherins seemed to mind their own business, even if Harry Potter were being dragged into the Slytherin Common Room by Daphne Greengrass. It was bizarre. Gryffindors would have had a conniption if the opposite were to happen. Yet, the last time he was brought in here, he was paid no mind.

Upon declaring the room officially empty, he supposed that most of the students were out and about the castle and at breakfast. Who was Daphne talking to when she knew the Common Room was empty? That was suspicious. The fireplaces allowed firecalls, but didn’t allow floo transport. He wondered why Dumbledore would even allow firecalls, which were great methods of passing information quietly. Maybe they were monitored like the post…

“Alright, well, owl me if you need,” Daphne said as she pulled out of the flames.

“Ugh. Why can’t they just invent proper magical telephones already?”

Daphne laughed as the conversation ended and the girl disappeared from the fireplace. Harry raised his eyebrow questioningly. “Who was that?”

“My cousin, Astoria,” Daphne explained with a shrug, taking a seat on one of the sofas in front of the fireplace. “She wanted me to call her. She doesn’t like owls so much – they frighten her kids.”

Well, at least that made sense, sort of. Harry didn’t push the topic and joined her on the sofa, after vanishing his dead cigarette. Daphne chucked her fag into the fireplace. “So what exactly did you want to ask out in the corridor?”
Not moving for a long while, he worked out in his head how to go about questioning her. Carefully, Harry reached out to touch her left shoulder and Daphne just stared at him. She didn’t wince like Ron did whenever he bumped Ron or brushed past him there. So maybe Malfoy didn’t push her off a broom. That was only a tentative maybe. She said she liked racing brooms around the school.

Daphne shrugged him off like it was nothing, but let out a shaky breath that he could barely discern. Raising an eyebrow, she asked, “I really don’t understand you, Harry.”

“Zabini was right, wasn’t he?” Harry asked in the same guarded tone that she regarded him with.

Daphne gave a small laugh and started unbuttoning her blouse to pull aside the fabric. Her skin was flawless beneath, unlike Ron’s mangled and bruised flesh that practically throbbed purple and blue. “My shoulder is fine. See? Blaise draws conclusions from things he cannot see,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, if not that, then there has to be something going on between you and Malfoy. Zabini said that there was information that he couldn’t share, or something like that,” he countered. “And you didn’t deny that Malfoy did something.”

“He’s done enough.” Daphne yanked the shirt back over her shoulder and buttoned it again. “As with all past relationships, there’s a few ghosts to deal with.”

What was that supposed to mean? He definitely didn’t have any ghosts with Cho. Aside from Cedric… maybe Daphne had a point then. But how could she have been in any sort of situation similar to that?

“What ghosts?” Harry voiced, staring at her perplexedly.

“Regrets. Bad decisions – mostly on my part. I’m a halfblood, Harry. There were a lot of problems in the mix. A lot of things that you just wouldn’t understand about the blood purity bullshit, and bigotry, and pride, and a whole bunch of mental instability. And the fact that I’ve always hated him.”

So Daphne was an expert at having fucked up relationships. Bearing in mind the odd relationship that they were in, he wasn’t so sure if he were far off the mark by calling theirs another fucked up relationship.

“I’ve been dealing with Malfoy for the past six years,” Harry offered. How could she suggest that he didn’t know much about him? The bloody Slytherin was actually a lot like Dudley. Yet, he wasn’t so certain his cousin would pull something like the necklace incident. That was new. Maybe there was just a bit more to Malfoy than he thought, especially considering Daphne’s interpretation of him, which was still half a mystery. Harry wouldn’t put anything past Malfoy at this point. Daphne had confirmed Malfoy ‘was a violent bugger’ once… and that he was ‘annoying’. Her words in his head were jumbled.

She regarded Voldemort’s actions to be like an obsessive ex-boyfriend. Maybe that had something to do with things. Was she really comparing Malfoy to Voldemort? They weren’t even on the same playing field. Voldemort tried to kill him every bloody year.

“I know you have, but people aren’t always what they seem. And, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about it.”
“If he’s hurting you…” Harry started but trailed off when Daphne gave him a sharp look, as if challenging him.

“Don’t you dare think I can’t take care of myself.”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t say that.” He was certain she could. She didn’t exactly excel at Defence Against the Dark Arts, according to her marks, but she was decent in the application from what he had seen in class.

“Either way, we’re going to be late for Potions if we don’t leave now,” Daphne said, pointing to the large ornate clock atop the snake infested mantle.

They didn’t speak as they walked toward Potions and she trailed along behind him, disappearing when he was half way to the classroom. Harry looked round when he realized that he was alone and continued on. She probably didn’t want to be seen walking in with him so she snuck away.

Thankfully, class hadn’t started when he entered but the only empty spot left to sit was in the back, next to Theodore Nott. The Slytherin boy seemed harmless and didn’t look up at Harry as he lingered in front of the work bench. Nott just stuck to organizing his potions kit that looked as if it were going to overflow with ingredients.

Harry took his seat with a sigh and got out his stuff, giving his Moonwart essay to Zabini, who was collecting them for Slughorn. Hermione threw him one of her ‘I’m sorry we didn’t save you a seat’ looks when he glanced over at her and she glared at Ron for some reason that he couldn’t figure out.

Daphne was seated in front of him next to Zabini’s vacant spot, looking the very picture of indifference. He wondered how she got there so quickly. There must have been a secret passageway somewhere that he didn’t know of.

And despite Slughorn’s prattle about the next potion they were going to brew in class, Harry kept looking over at Nott, waiting for the hostility to arise, when an idea suddenly struck him.

Nott seemed to be friends with Zabini and, possibly, Daphne. Daphne rarely spoke of him but they were friendly toward each other, he believed. He felt almost dirty for thinking about using Nott; yet, he wondered if the Slytherin boy would even cooperate. Persuasion wasn’t Harry’s strong suit; however, Slytherins were notorious for their persuasive abilities. All he needed was to find a way to persuade Zabini to tell him everything he wanted and Nott may be the perfect person to go to for that.

And, if Nott was indeed friends with Daphne, he probably wouldn’t be too opposed to offering Harry advice. Maybe. But it wasn’t as if Nott was Malfoy or Bulstrode, who Daphne had said were ‘horrendous pureblooded pricks’.

When Slughorn directed the class to begin on the Douleur Draught, a complicated pain relief potion that was heavily annotated in the Prince’s book, Harry decided to strike up a conversation with Nott. Spotting a gold pipette on the table next to Nott’s supplies, he said the first thing that came to mind, “That’s a very interesting pipette you’ve got there.”

Nott kept working, as if he was going to ignore Harry. It took a few long moments for the dark-haired Slytherin to respond. “What do you want, Potter?”
Not expecting that type of response, Harry hesitated and figured that he might as well get to the point. “May I ask your advice?” he asked quietly.

Nott still didn’t look at him as he added ingredients to the cauldron in front of him and spoke, “I don’t see why you would need my advice. Your grade exceeds my own in this class – augmented by Slughorn or not.”

“It’s not about potions,” Harry whispered, lighting a fire beneath his cauldron.

Turning his head slowly toward Harry, Nott arched an eyebrow. His eyes appraised him slowly, sizing him up. “I’m listening.”

How was he going to elaborate…

Harry cleared his throat and muttered, “Say you wanted to persuade someone to give you information that they didn’t want to give you. How would you go about doing that?”

A smirk crept across Nott’s lips. “Interesting. Potter asking a ‘lowly’ Slytherin for tips,” he drawled and then paused, stirring five times anti-clockwise. “Okay, I’ll bite. If hell freezes over, I shall not be held accountable. Who is it that you wish to persuade?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” Harry said, repeating the phrase that he seemed to hear a lot lately from Slytherins that didn’t want to tell him anything.

“Of course. Although, if you want my advice, it may make the process easier if you told me.”

Harry didn’t say anything as he caught up to Nott with his potion. The Prince said to stir four times clockwise and once anti-clockwise, while adding the salamander spleen.

“I don’t exactly need your advice. I’m just trying to figure out how to deal with this person from every possible angle,” Harry half lied, wondering if it would move Nott along a bit. Even to get advice on persuasion, you had to use a bit of persuasion to get it out of a Slytherin. Harry wanted to roll his eyes.

“Right,” Nott muttered doubtfully. “So if I share my knowledge on this particular subject with you, what’s in it for me?”

Merlin, Slytherins were smarmy little bastards. Never did anything for nothing, did they? Harry sighed. “What do you want? I don’t exactly know the exchange rate on advice.”

“Does Slughorn’s Christmas party sound reasonable enough?”

“You want me to invite you to Slughorn’s Christmas party with all the rumours going around about my secret affair with a Slytherin?” He formed air quotes with his fingers when he said the words ‘secret affair’.

“You’re his prized pupil. You could probably invite as many people as you want, male or female companions withstanding. I can make it worth your while.”

That must have been a ‘yes’.

Harry glared at him. “Fine, but don’t think that it’s a date.” He felt he had to make that clear to the
Slytherin boy considering the whole ‘Nott slept with Malfoy’ situation. Harry definitely wasn’t gay. And even if Harry were to bat for the other team, Nott wouldn’t ever be his type.

Nott raised a speculative eyebrow. “I never said it would be.”

“Good. So the advice, if you will?”

“Well,” Not started, seemingly gathering his thoughts. “I'm not certain if I could give you a good overview within the time constraints of this class. Persuasion is rather easy, but there are more complicated tactics to consider as well if the other methods fail.” He paused and Harry had to nod to urge him to go on.

“I guess if you want the fast-track advice, employ the basic tactic: if the benefits you offer equal the prospect’s needs, then you can proceed,” Nott explained in a very calm monotone. His hands were busy the whole time, fiddling with potions ingredients – chopping, prepping, and de-boning.

“Basically, you’re saying I should bribe them,” Harry concluded, slicing up a bundle of bilommeal grass and wondering what he could bribe Zabini with.

Nott shook his head.

“No bribing necessary. Appeal to them and appeal to their needs. The best way to do it is to get them to want to give you the information. Explain to your prospect how beneficial it would be for them if you knew the information that they have. Unless what you offer… why're you adding bilommeal grass? That’s not what it says in the book.” Nott stared at Harry’s cauldron in disgust.

Harry shrugged, making sure the Prince’s book was hidden from Nott’s view. “Unless what I offer…? ”

Nott ignored his question. “Why did you add bilommeal grass?” Nott repeated, his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Erm—” Harry glanced down at the Prince’s book for a scant second. “It lessens the sensation of ‘pins and needles’ as the potion wears off.”

Harry could physically see Not process that thought. After a moment, he spoke, his eyes unfocused as he stared into Harry’s cauldron. “Arithmancically, that seems to make sense. You added it in after the spleen, correct?”

“Yes…” Harry frowned as he watched the Nott frantically dig through the ingredients in his potions kit and pull out a small bundle of bilommeal grass.

“Ingenious. The spleen is a perfect catalyst, I had never thought of that before,” Nott muttered, his attention completely fixed on the task.

Harry added a few drops of dragon’s blood and waited for Nott’s distraction to end, but he had a feeling that wasn’t going to happen any time soon. Nott was quietly speaking to himself and tearing parchment as he cleared the middle section of the workbench Harry shared with him to hastily jot down an Arithmancy table. That was followed by a series of overly complicated equations. And then a flurry of various things in a language that Harry couldn’t comprehend.

“Aha!” Nott cried elatedly, directing the attention of the entire class toward the back of the room.
“Yes, Mr. Nott?” Slughorn called from the front of the class. “Is there something you would like to share with the class?”

“Ahm, no, Professor, small breakthrough. Nothing to note,” Nott quickly replied, grinding up a handful of cloves in his mortar and pestle with one hand while he added dragon’s blood to his cauldron with the other.

Harry didn’t get another thing out of Nott for the rest of the class. The few words of advice flowed through his head over and over. He was certain it would be easier to get Zabini to tell him than Daphne. The hard part was figuring out benefits that Harry could offer that would possibly meet Zabini’s needs. Yet, knowing Zabini, he would likely catch on. Harry would need to utilize a more complicated tactic to deal with someone as unfortunately clever as Zabini.

Glancing back at Nott, Harry pursed his lips, wondering how to rope the Slytherin boy back into the conversation they were having before Nott went mental. Harry needed to get more out of him. But Nott was still flailing around, much too focused on his potion to be considered healthy. The Slytherin boy stared at the vast array of Arithmancy notes as though they held the cure for cancer. Judging by the length of the parchment, they bloody well might’ve.

As Slughorn moved around the classroom to inspect everyone’s work, Daphne turned toward him and covertly asked, “What exactly did you do to him?”

“Nothing,” Harry replied, whispering out of the corner of his mouth, throwing Slughorn an amiable grin when the professor approached.

“Fantastic job, Harry, my boy!” Slughorn gushed, drawing up a ladle of Harry’s potion and setting it back against the edge of the cauldron. “Do I detect a hint of bilommeal grass in there? Most inventive!” He didn’t even wait for Harry to nod. Harry only smiled graciously and stowed the Prince’s book into his bag as the professor moved on.

“My my, Mr. Nott,” Slughorn gasped in surprise. “What an impeccable batch! And the addition of clove to enhance the anti-inflammatory properties. Imaginative.” The professor glanced fondly over at Harry. “I may have to keep you two in mind for the final project!”

They packed up their work stations quietly and Harry kept trying to catch Nott’s attention. What Nott told him about persuasion definitely wasn’t enough to warrant an invite to Slughorn’s Christmas Party. When Harry finally caught Nott’s eye, Nott slipped a piece of parchment into his hand and walked out the door.

*Meet me in the abandoned classroom in the Hall of Hexes tonight after dinner.*

- T

Well, that solved it. Harry stuffed the note into his bag with a grin. It may have cut into his plans to finish all his homework before the Quidditch game tomorrow, but at least he was getting somewhere with *something*. Everything else was taking way too much time.

The MLE still hadn’t arrived to follow the anonymous tip Zabini sent days ago and it was starting to
grate at his patience. Harry glanced at Zabini out of the corner of his eye suspiciously. Maybe he had more to persuade out of Zabini than he had previously thought.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Harry had to consult the Marauder's Map to find the Hall of Hexes. He had never heard of it during his whole Hogwarts career and it turned out that it was the same corridor where he, Hermione, and Ron had found the room with Fluffy their first year. The voice of Trelawney in the back of his mind told him that it was a bad omen.

But when did he ever start listening to Trelawney?

The abandoned classroom was easy enough to find. Nott's dot remained stationary on the map as he approached the door and entered, stuffing the parchment back into his bag. Standing at the front of the room with a long stick in his hand, chalk in the other, and a billion notes written on the blackboard, Nott looked the very part of an instructor. Nott pushed up the large framed glasses on his nose and gestured for Harry to sit in the only desk available in the middle of the room.

"Let me guess," Harry said, walking over to his 'assigned seat', "you want to be a professor when you 'grow up'."

"Never. I can't stand kids," Nott answered, underlining the multiple categories on the blackboard and not looking at Harry while he spoke.

"Neither can Snape, but that didn't stop him."

Snorting, Nott still didn't look at him as he replied, "I highly doubt that was his first choice of career. For a Slytherin, he doesn't strike me as particularly ambitious. Snape's a prime example of wasted potential and my guess is that he is very aware of that."

Harry's brow furrowed slightly and then he shook his head, brushing off Nott's comment. "Right. Could we just get started?" he asked impatiently.

"I suppose," Nott drawled, pivoting on his feet to look straight at Harry. "As I didn't have the opportunity to give you a proper introduction in class, I'll have to start over – assuming you know
absolutely nothing, which is likely." He moved his incredibly pompous pointer up to the large title 'Body Language'. "Body language is the very key to manipulat-"

"I only need to know how to get information out of someone, Nott, not everything on persuasion," Harry interrupted, raising his eyebrows. He didn't want to sit through this for any longer than necessary and he felt as if there was going to be a lecture.

"Alright then, if you think you can do without… maybe a little test is in order," Nott said with a maniacal grin creeping over his lips. "Just so I can gauge what you need."

Harry dithered. "Erm – okay."

 Conjuring a chair in front of Harry's desk, Nott stalked over and took a seat across from him. "So how's the Quidditch season going for you so far?"

"I don't see what this has to do with anything," Harry said, confused by the unexpected question.

Nott grinned amiably and leaned back in his chair. "Just go along with it. I'm developing a rapport."

Doubting that Nott would be successful at 'developing a rapport' with - of all people - Harry shrugged. "Alright, then. The season's going fine. First game's tomorrow..."

"Yes, Slytherin versus Gryffindor. Are you worried about that at all?"

Nott's question seemed innocent, but Harry was suspicious. He was sure that Nott wasn't on the Slytherin Quidditch team. Yet, what would Nott have to gain from talking to him about Quidditch?

Try not to say anything that he could use, Harry told himself.

"No, not really," Harry replied, not wanting to tell him about Ron's case of getting nervous, worked up, and failing as a result. He wouldn't put it past Nott to sell that information to Malfoy, who would definitely use it against the team.

"I suppose not. You're a good seeker – you could easily win the game in one fell swoop. You're the captain this year, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

Where was Nott really going with this?

"How do you like it?" Nott was pretty good at seeming genuinely interested in the topic, but Harry couldn't believe it for a second. He felt as if he were an experiment being observed by a mad scientist with his own mysterious and devious agenda.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm simply developing a rapport, Potter," Nott responded, raising his eyebrows. "We could talk about something else, if you'd feel more comfortable. Potions, perhaps?"

"Okay…" Harry wasn't exactly comfortable about talking about potions either, but it was better than Quidditch – especially with the game tomorrow.
"How did you come up with the idea of adding bilommeal grass to the Douleur Drought?" Nott seemed much more interested in that than Quidditch; his all-too-watchful bright blue eyes practically sparkled while he spoke.

"A book," Harry answered simply, wondering what he could say to steer him into another topic of potions that he was more contented with. Like… Snape or Slughorn or Wolfsbane or anything other than where he got his information.

Nott's brow rose. "What book?"

Merlin, not that question! Think of book titles… Moste Potente Potions? No, Harry doubted there would be anything on the Douleur Draught in there.

Harry shrugged, not knowing what else to do. "I don't know… Hermione always has tons of books lying about."

"Too bad," Nott mumbled with a frown. "It's a truly brilliant idea. I like to give credit where credit is due."

"Yeah…" Harry breathed, absentmindedly. "How long do we have to keep doing this?"

"Oh, I believe I've all I need. You could move on to trying to extract information from me, if you like," Nott replied in a way that made Harry think that he was amused.

Harry's nerves immediately relaxed. At least Nott wasn't going to ask him any more awkward questions. Now he just had to try and persuade information out of Nott… His nerves weren't relaxed for long as he thought of what he could possibly persuade out of the Slytherin boy.

"We could use a false scenario if that would make it easier on you," Nott proposed when Harry didn't say anything for several moments.

"No,"– Harry shook his head, an idea forming —"We could make this scenario real," he said, knowing exactly what he could extract.

"This shall be interesting," Nott dryly intoned.

Harry tried to collect his thoughts of how to persuade the information out of Nott, but kept coming up a bit blank. He stared at the boy across from him and tried not to sigh. What benefits could he offer to meet Nott's needs in order to get Nott to tell him what he wanted?

"Proceed, Potter. We don't have all night."

At the moment, all his mind could come up with was bribing and, for some reason, his mouth went for it. His mind was still slightly stuck on the potions conversation as well, which gave him a little bit of inspiration – even if he didn't want to give anything involving the Prince's book to Nott. "If I said I could offer you some notes you would find very useful for the final potions exam, what would that be worth to you?"

"That depends. I don't see why I should waste my time." There was a flicker of intrigue in Nott's eyes that contradicted his words, but it was gone as soon as Harry had caught it.

Make him want to tell you the information… Harry thought. He had to sell it. "As you've said before,
my marks are much better than yours in Potions and I can assure you that they're not 'augmented by Slughorn'," he elaborated, feeling a bit awkward under Nott's intense gaze.

Nott's mouth twisted into a smirk. "And what do you get out of this, Potter?"

"I want to know if your father's a Death Eater."

Rolling his eyes, Nott snorted. "Morgana's eye. I'm not going to tell you that for a bit of notes on a potion I could brew in my sleep."

That meant he had to try another angle and – Harry grinned when his mind came up with another plan – Slytherins, after all, weren't above blackmail. "Well, consorting with Death Eaters is illegal, Nott. Have you seen your father recently?" Harry asked, not missing a beat.

"That's none of your concern," Nott said unwaveringly, but Harry didn't let it stop him.

"But it should concern you. Imagine how your life would turn out if someone were to send the Ministry an anonymous tip that Theodore Nott was consorting with a very well-known Death Eater."

That should get him.

"Touché. However, it wouldn't do any good," Nott countered, not lifting his gaze from Harry's face for a second. Nott did it all throughout the 'developing the rapport', and now this, and it was starting to make him feel incredibly uneasy. Nott was one of those people that seemed to be able to look through a person and see their secrets. And he never seemed to blink.

Harry's grin faltered. "Why wouldn't it?"

"My father may or may not be a Death Eater. The Aurors can discern the truth for themselves."

He tried not to let Nott's eye contact get to him. Instead, he stared over Nott's shoulder at the blackboard to settle his thoughts. If Nott's father was a Death Eater, which Harry was certain of, and Nott wasn't afraid to take on the Aurors… that complicated things. Harry's eyebrows furrowed. But the Aurors were questioning people under Veritaserum as of late. If Nott's father was indeed a Death Eater, the only way that Nott could get out of a short sentence in Azkaban was if he…

"You can lie under Veritaserum," Harry deduced, looking back at the Slytherin boy.

"Can I?" Nott questioned in a dry tone. Harry couldn't discern if he was lying. Nott was so very hard to read.

"Either that's the truth or your father isn't a Death Eater."

"I just love how brilliant you are at stating the obvious," Nott sneered. "I'll just call your bluff and you'll never get any information out of me. Will you try for round three or shall I show you how to properly manipulate someone?"

"Round three." If anything, Harry was determined. And he knew something that Nott may not want to have spread round the castle, which was exactly what Harry should have blackmailed him with in the first place. "I know that you slept with Malfoy."

Nott tilted his head slightly. "Do you now?"
"Yes. As I haven't heard about it, I assume you don't want it to get out."

"So which one are you having an affair with? Blaise or Daphne?" Nott asked suddenly, sizing Harry up with his overly perceptive eyes. "Or is it Draco? You two would certainly create some sparks."

Harry tried very hard not to be surprised by Nott's abrupt accusations. "The rumours are rubbish."

"You're lying. Your left eye squints slightly and your voice takes on a different quality when you do that. You were likely bluffing when you said you'd give me those notes on the final and you lied during the rapport – you really are worried about this season, and I'm pretty sure you know exactly where you got the bilommeal grass idea from. It's all in your body language and paralanguage." Nott paused, a small smirk pulling at his lips.

Harry could only swallow thickly as Nott continued, "That aside, I'm guessing that it's Daphne. She'd appeal to you the most, I wager, and you don't strike me as a person who would go for blokes – as appealing as Blaise is to anyone."

Harry still didn't say anything, not knowing how to respond to the Slytherin boy's tirade. Nott was much better at this than he thought. At least now he knew that he went to the right person to teach him about conning information out of someone – or practically reading the truth off their face alone.

Nott's smirk widened. "And I believe we've reached an impasse." Getting up from his conjured chair, Nott said, "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to begin once more."

Harry heaved a sigh, finding his voice. Even though Nott had clearly shown him that he needed more instruction on the topic of persuasion – reading people, more like – Harry couldn't help but ask, "You understand why I need to know, right? Is your father really a Death Eater?"

If Nott didn't answer, it would bother him to no end.

Those terribly perceptive eyes appraised him again. Harry felt the tense silence weighing down on his shoulders like a thick woolen blanket.

"No, he isn't. Think about it, Potter – if my father was a Death Eater, I wouldn't be helping you with anything at any price. I simply allow people to assume that Death Eater Nott is my father so they leave me alone. The intimidation factor is so very useful."

Harry couldn't tell if Nott was being truthful, but Nott didn't look too suspicious – even if Nott was probably talented at looking completely indifferent, and intrigued, and probably a whole bunch of emotions that came from studying body language way too much. Maybe Harry needed that lesson before he could discern if Nott was actually lying or telling the truth. He definitely didn't trust Nott, but it wasn't as if Harry was going to reveal his life story to him.

"So it's true that you're fucking Daphne?" Nott asked.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek in annoyance. Why did everyone call it that? It was a no-strings relationship type of deal. Sure, shagging was involved but that wasn't all there was.

"If you don't tell her that I told you or spread it around…" Harry trailed off with a nod. "Yes, I am."
"Hmm," Nott muttered, moving toward the blackboard. "I suppose I approve. She could do worse."

Rolling his eyes, Harry disregarded Nott's comment and turned his attention to the large blackboard. Nott wrote out a few extra things under the heading of 'body language' and Harry wondered where his sanity went as he stared at the topics. Once Nott got to writing down 'seduction', after he had written what could be considered a small novel in total, Harry lost it. There was no way he was learning how to seduce someone from Theodore Nott, regardless of Nott's experience!

"Just *get on with it!*"

Nott pivoted on his feet with that stupid, overly large, pointer in his hands. "Alright, Potter; *body language*..."

Taking a calming breath, Harry sat back in his seat and prepared himself to listen to a lesson that would probably rival Hermione's tutoring in thoroughness and duration. But if he wanted to work with Slytherins he had to start thinking like one, he supposed.

Merlin, he really could use a fag.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Harry felt the need to apologize to Daphne again after Nott had finished his first lesson. Upon viewing the subject of lying the way a Slytherin would view lying – the way Daphne probably viewed lying – it all made perfect sense. She wasn't lying at all – ever… not exactly.

"The 'perfect liar' is a 'liar' that doesn't lie. The whole truth is left out, yet a bit of the truth is told to appease the prospect."

"But that's still a lie."

"No, Potter, it's the truth minus the unnecessary details." Nott paused and paced the front of the room meticulously. "For example, if you were to ask me, 'When is the last time I've seen my father?' and I told you, 'Recently.' – what would you assume?"

"That you've seen him in the last few days," Harry replied with a shrug.

"And that's what most people would assume. But I could consider 'recently' to mean 'within the last couple of months or years'. 'Recently' is a vague statement that could have a bounty of different meanings to each individual. So with that in mind, do you believe that my previous statement is a lie?"

"No… it's not, I guess."

"And that's how you formulate the 'perfect lie'. A misnomer, of course, but the barest of details or specifics of the truth allows a person to tell a 'lie' without any repressed emotion and without giving any indication that you're deceiving the prospect at all. You can bypass the body language control issue this way. However, the drawback with this method is that you have to be fairly decent at thinking on your feet."

Harry felt so stupid for accusing her. He should have just thought about it. She said that she would be 'around'. She didn't specify what she considered to be 'around'. It could have meant 'around' London, for all he knew.
Yet, it still made him wonder… Why did she have to leave out the whole truth? To appease him? Did she think of him as a ‘prospect’ in that situation? The idea of her thinking of him as a prospect got under his skin a bit, but he let the thought slide as he made his way toward Gryffindor tower before curfew.

Footfalls – and a familiar voice yelling, "Harry!" – bounded up the stairs behind him. "I thought you were going to finish your Charms essay this evening?" Hermione asked, slightly out of breath and looking over him as if she would find a completed Charms assignment tucked under his arm.

"Oh, erm – no. I was just visiting my new tutor," Harry replied. He had thought of using his new ‘skills’ on Hermione to see if he could actually pull off an outright lie to a person who knew him best, but the guilt trickled in early and stopped him. Nott only drilled him for as much time as they had left after the long drawn-out lecture. And he didn't want to lie to Hermione anyway; there was no reason for it.

"Really?" The centre of Hermione's forehead creased. "But you could have asked me for help if you needed it. You didn't have to get a tutor."

Harry grinned at her sheepishly, moving aside the secret passage tapestry for her, so she didn't have awkwardly try to move it with her arms full of books. "I don't think you'd be the best tutor for this particular subject."

Sighing, Hermione replied, "Just because I got an E on my Defense Against the Dark Arts OWLs—"

"It's not Defense Against the Dark Arts either." Harry paused, moving through the tapestry. "It's… persuasion." He could also call it 'manipulation' and 'learning how to be hyper aware if people are lying to you'. Persuasion sounded nicer.

Hermione stared at him as if he had grown a third ear. "A tutor in persuasion? That's what you consider more important than your Charms essay?"

"It's helpful and it builds people skills," Harry defended.

"You mean Daphne skills," Hermione corrected with a knowing grin. "She is, by far, the most difficult and evasive person I've ever tried to talk to."

Zabini's worse, Harry thought. I can't believe I'm thinking of manipulating him. They moved past the Room of Requirement toward the Fat Lady at the end of the long corridor.

"So, who did you get to tutor you for that?"

Might as well go all out.

"Theodore Nott," Harry replied.

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"He doesn't seem threatening. If his father was a Death Eater, I really don't think he be helping me with this, and I think Daphne's friends with him."

"Right, like that makes it okay… being friends with Greengrass, who is rather questionable in my opinion," Hermione scrutinized.
Harry shrugged. "He hasn't tried to kill me so far and I'm not likely to tell him anything important."

"So what is he getting out of this then? Slytherins don't seem to do anything out of the goodness of their hearts after all," Hermione muttered bitterly.

Harry stared over at her, a bit confused by her tone. Daphne's kitten protection detail for Restricted Section passes must have bothered her much more than he previously thought. Despite that, Hermione was enthralled about the Restricted Section volumes of Hogwarts, A History – for her, it was as if Christmas had come early from the way she kept rambling on about it during their study breaks.

"He asked me to take him to Slughorn's Christmas Party," Harry answered finally, a little reluctant to admit it aloud. He didn't want to do it at all.

Hermione snorted, trying to hold back a chuckle. "I wasn't expecting that. I bet you two will have an excellent time together." Her voice was almost a pitch higher than her normal voice.

"Oh har har," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Not as a date."

"Are you sure he's aware of that?"

Harry shrugged. "I made it clear from the beginning that it's not going to be a date."

Shaking her head in an amused fashion, Hermione grinned wryly. "Ron's going to have a field day with that regardless."

Harry definitely wasn't going to tell Ron about it. He also didn't want to tell her that he planned on taking someone else as well – preferably someone female and a lot more appealing than Nott – as that would look quite selfish of him. The only question was who, since Ron stole Daphne.

If he showed up with only Nott in tow, Ron would probably take the mickey out of him for as long as he lived.

"Yeah, but Ron's going with my-" Harry wanted to say 'girlfriend' but backed away from that word, "-originally planned date. Who are you taking?"

Her mouth opened, as if she were going to speak, but then snapped shut as she stared up at the Fat Lady.

"Password?" the Fat Lady drawled, sipping red wine from her crystal goblet.

Hermione held her forefinger up to the portrait. "Could you give us a second?" she asked, but she didn't wait for an answer before nudging Harry into a darkened corner – out of earshot from the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room.

Harry's brows furrowed at the odd way she was behaving. "What is it?"

"I'm having a little dilemma," Hermione started quietly with a sigh. "I sort of – accidentally – said yes to two different people. Ron made me so furious yesterday that I jumped at the first person who asked me and then the same thing happened again today and I rather forgot that I said yes to the first person because I was so angry. And I didn't write it down, like I usually do, and we have the finals coming up and I'm messing up my Arithmancy functions and tables and… and now I have two dates
"Breathe," Harry said slowly, surprised at her lung capacity. "I'm sure it'll be alright. Maybe I can help. Who are the two blokes you said yes to?"

"Cormac McLaggen and Zabini," Hermione whispered breathily.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. Shite. Maybe he couldn't help her. All that would come out of his mouth at the moment was, "You said yes to Zabini?"

McLaggen was pretty obvious about his… affections toward Hermione, and that was putting it lightly. If she wanted to get under Ron's skin the most, McLaggen was perfect. But, Zabini? Harry wondered when the Weasley twins were going to pop out of the walls and simultaneously declare this a cruel joke.

"Yes… he asked me before Arithmancy. I don't know what I was thinking. It was probably something along the lines of 'Ron hates him with a passion – say yes'. So I did. Or maybe that's what I was thinking when I said yes to McLaggen." Hermione ran her hand through her hair a few times. "If I wasn't so scatterbrained lately and if I didn't have fifty percent of my marks for this term riding on that blasted Arithmancy project… I…"

He interrupted her tirade before she could work herself into even worse of a tizzy. "I could probably talk to McLaggen for you," Harry offered, rubbing one of her shoulders to try and get her to calm down. He hadn't seen her like this since the OWLs. He couldn't imagine what the NEWTs would do to her.

"But he doesn't take no for an answer!" Hermione huffed, waving an exasperated hand and nearly dropping her books in the process.

"Yeah, and Zabini's impossible to talk to," Harry said regrettably. *Unless he had something to gain from it,* he added in his head. "I might be able to get Daphne to do it, but Daphne and I are at an odd place right now."

He also didn't feel comfortable asking Daphne for a favour while he was trying to find a way to manipulate Zabini into telling him her secrets via Nott.

Hermione let out a long sigh. "I don't know. It would be better if I handled it myself and declined one of their invitations, but which one? I don't like *either* of them."

"Go with both of them and have them fight to the death?"

That sounded like the best plan to him.

Hermione threw him a stern look, but it wasn't very serious. "Not funny, Harry."

Harry gave her a crooked smile to get her to soften up a bit. "Well," he said, "if you want my honest opinion, go with Zabini. He's… not as terrible as McLaggen."

"But Zabini is more likely to listen if I back out of going with him," Hermione disputed somewhat doubtfully. "I think."

Harry shook his head slowly, imagining that scenario. If Zabini really wanted to go with her, he'd
probably find a way to make her feel as if she really wanted to go with him using various manipulative tactics. "Yeah, I'm not so sure about that." Why did Zabini, the pureblooded git, want to be seen with a Muggleborn at Slughorn's Christmas Party in the first place?

McLaggen only wanted into Hermione's pants, which was reason enough for her to back out of going with him. Zabini's motives were mysterious, which could be dangerous. And that was a good reason to back out of going with him.

"Which one do you like better?" Harry asked.

Shifting her books in her arms, Hermione shrugged. "They're both rather foul..." Harry nodded in concurrence. "I'm an idiot for agreeing to go with either one of them."

"You're not," Harry disagreed, shaking his head. "Maybe a little... frazzled." Maybe a little bit of an idiot, he begrudgingly admitted to himself. But she wasn't an idiot normally. Why did Ron always get on her nerves so often? It's like he did it on purpose.

They settled into a companionable silence for a few moments, where only the faint noise of clinking glasses and laughter was heard from the portraits down the corridor.

"I don't know... I'll try and decide tomorrow – after the game," Hermione said in an almost defeated tone. "We should probably get in before Filch gets to the seventh floor."

Harry reached down to squeeze her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. "Well if they give you too much trouble, I won't be far behind to hex their bits off, okay?"

Hermione grinned, squeezing his hand back and lacing their fingers together. "Thanks, Harry."

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Hedwig was perched on his stomach when he woke up the next morning, looking incredibly irritated about something. Harry squinted up at her, rubbed his eyes, and reached his hand over to grope for his glasses on the bedside table. "What is it, girl?" he asked in a rough sleep-ridden voice.

She turned her beak up at him and held out her leg, which had a package tied to it. Her irritation confused him and it took him a while to realize that he hadn't visited her in over a month. Petting her head carefully, he gave her a guilty grin as he untied the package.

It was odd getting a package delivered by Hedwig. He didn't remember sending any mail. The only time Hedwig delivered anything to him was after he had sent something first. Carefully, Harry opened the small note that was attached to the package, which was wrapped in parchment.

*I picked this up while I was in London and I was going to wait for Christmas, but I figured that you might need it now. It has a magical cache that will need to be refilled every once in a while.*

- Daphne

*P.S. Don't worry about the eighteen Galleons. Blaise is an arse. I took care of it.*

Hedwig nipped at his finger, making him drop the parchment. "Okay, I'll find you an owl treat," Harry said with a sigh, massaging the pain out of his finger. He opened the drawer in his bedside table and grabbed a few mouse shaped treats to set out in front of her. "And I'll visit you more often. I'm sorry, I've just been busy."

Her amber eyes glared at him, but she seemed appeased by the treats, and Harry went back to opening the package. What could he possibly need from Daphne...? He didn't even think to get her a Christmas present. Why would she give *him* one? It wasn't as if they were dating.

What was in the package wasn't much, but Harry recognized what it was immediately. Underneath the parchment was a small burgundy leather case the size of a deck of cards. With a grin, Harry
opened it to find it filled with a nice neat row of cigarettes. Plucking one from the confines, he noticed the empty space fill up immediately - that was handy, he'd wondered why Daphne's case was always full - and lit the fag with his wand.

Hedwig cooed at him, twisting her head sideways as she stared. Harry reached up and stroked her feathers, inhaling deeply at his cigarette. Daphne gave excellent gifts, he thought when the nicotine buzz hit. It was the perfect way to relax before the game.

And if the way that Ron was playing as of late was any indication of how the game was going to go, he'd have to catch the snitch a few minutes in just to make sure Gryffindor won. Something glinted at him from his open bedside drawer and Harry glanced at the tiny bottle of Felix Felicis out of the corner of his eye. *Maybe, with a little ingenuity –* Harry smiled – *the game didn't have to go that way.*

**oOo**

The Gryffindor table was more excitable than usual at breakfast and the chatter could be heard outside the Great Hall. Nearly every Gryffindor cheered as Harry and Ron approached and Harry tried to encourage the good moral by grinning and waving. Ron just grimaced weakly and shook his head. Usually Ron loved the attention, but he looked as if he were going to throw up at any moment.

"Cheer up, Ron!" Lavender exclaimed over the ruckus. "I know you'll be brilliant!" Ron ignored her.1

"Tea?" Harry asked, reformulating the plan he had come up with earlier. "Coffee? Pumpkin juice?"1 "Anything," Ron said miserably, stuffing his mouth full of toast as if it would distract him from the abysmal game that would inevitably happen.1

A few minutes later, Hermione took a seat next to Harry and poured herself a glass of juice. "So," – her eyes darted tentatively over to Ron – "How are you both feeling?"1

"Fine," Harry said, concentrating on handing Ron a glass of pumpkin juice. He had the bottle of Felix Felicis conspicuously tucked underneath his pinky. "There you go, Ron. Drink up."1 Ron had just raised the glass to his lips when Hermione interrupted, throwing a sharp look at Harry, "Don't drink that!"1

Harry smirked and Ron looked up at her, his eyes wide. "Why not?" he asked.1

"You just put something in that drink," Hermione said, staring straight at the bottle of Felix.1 "Did I?" Harry rhetorically asked, keeping his expression and tone in check.1 "I saw you. You tipped something into Ron's drink. You've got the bottle in your hand right now!"1 "I don't know what you're talking about," said Harry, stowing the little bottle hasty in his pocket.1 "Ron, don't drink it!" Hermione said again, still throwing Harry a disproving look every time she
looked back at him.

But Ron picked up the glass, drained it in one gulp, and said, "Stop bossing me around, Hermione."  

She gaped and ground her teeth together, looking affronted. Moving close enough to Harry so only he could hear, she muttered, "You should be expelled for that. I'd never have believed it of you, Harry."  

Smirking, Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice. "Hark who's talking," he whispered back. "Confunded anyone lately?"  

Hermione's jaw snapped shut and she got up from the table, storming away in a flurry of bushy brown hair. Harry watched her go with little regret. It was a bit of a low blow to bring up the McLaggen issue, but Hermione had never really understood what a serious business Quidditch was—especially on the day of the game. He had to make this plan work. They had to win and Ron wasn't going to play well if he didn't believe in himself. Harry glanced over at the red-headed boy, who looked as if he had just been delivered the miracle cure.  

"Nearly time," Harry said, turning his attention to the sky outside the window. "Pretty lucky the weather's this good, yeah?"  

"Yeah," Ron muttered, serving himself another heaping pile of eggs and bacon.  

Ginny sat down next to Ron and dished herself a plate of food that nearly overflowed. Harry tried not to pay her much attention until she suddenly spoke. "Guess what?" she said with a wide grin. "That Slytherin Chaser – Vaisey – took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he's too sore to play. And even better than that, Malfoy's gone off sick too."  

"What?" Harry's brow creased. "He's sick? What's wrong with him?"  

"No idea, but it's great for us," Ginny replied triumphantly. "They're playing Harper instead. He's in my year and he's an idiot."  

Harry smiled back vaguely; yet, as he ate his breakfast, his mind was far from Quidditch. Malfoy claimed he could not play due to being injured before, but every time that happened he made sure the whole match was rescheduled for a time that suited the Slytherins better. Malfoy loved Quidditch more than anything. Why was he now happy to let someone take his place?  

Sure, Harry hadn't seen Malfoy in a while so he wasn't certain if Malfoy was ill or not, but Harry was pretty bloody certain that Malfoy was faking. He had to be up to something else. In the back of his mind, he questioned: What was Malfoy doing in the Room of Requirement that he considered more important than Quidditch? 

On the upside, it was a rather good stroke of luck to further encourage Ron. "Fishy, isn't it?" Harry whispered, using the situation to his advantage. "Malfoy not playing?"  

"Lucky, I call it," said Ron, looking much more animated than he was when they entered the Great Hall. "And Vaisey off too, he's their best goal scorer, I didn't fancy — hey!" he continued, freezing halfway through shoveling a piece of bacon into his mouth and staring at Harry.  

"What?"
Ron swallowed the entire piece of bacon without chewing. "I – you…" he dropped his voice, looking both scared and excited. "My drink – my pumpkin juice – you didn't…?"

Harry raised his eyebrows and said nothing except, "We'll be starting in about forty-five minutes, you better finish your breakfast." ¹

Picking up his goblet of pumpkin juice, Harry felt a very self-satisfied grin pulling at his lips. Already Nott's lessons seemed to be paying off and they hadn't even gotten to the serious manipulation bit yet. It all made him look forward to what was to come, even if Nott wasn't exactly his ideal choice of tutor. Harry just hoped the Quidditch game went as smoothly as his plan.

\[\text{oOo}\]

Despite the ruse of Felix Felicis, Ron got more and more nervous as game time neared. Harry wanted to stick around to encourage the Gryffindor boy, but he found himself being pulled away and shoved into a dark cupboard before he could protest.

He knew exactly who it was from the scent of her alone and it was confirmed when her lips briefly touched his. "Good luck today," Daphne whispered, kissing him again – this time for a longer duration. Harry dazedly responded.

He'd almost forgotten that kissing felt this good.

"I have twenty Galleons riding on Gryffindor so you better win."

"You bet against your own team?" Harry asked in an amused tone.

He could barely see her smirk through the darkness. "Of course. Slytherins never let girls on the team – probably because they don't want to be shown up by us. Those misogynistic bastards deserve to lose."

Harry grinned. "Don't worry. We'll beat them." Especially with most of their half-decent players out of the game… speaking of which- "Do you know what happened to Malfoy?"

Daphne let out a small snort. "I wouldn't be a worthy Slytherin if I didn't know, would I?" she drawled and he could tell that she was smirking from her tone of voice. "He's in the hospital wing with a couple shattered ribs and a punctured lung."

Well that was surprising. "Did he fall off his broom?"

"Blaise got a bit angry at him," Daphne said with a shrug.

A bit angry? Harry gaped. "Zabini did that to Malfoy?"

Waving her hand in a dismissing way, she explained, "Boys will be boys."

"And what happened to Zabini? Was he expelled?"

"Apparently they believe that Draco fell down a flight of stairs," Daphne muttered in a light tone. "I won't correct them."
Harry's brow creased. "Why did he…” he started and then stopped himself. "There's something you're not telling me," he accused.

"The details hardly matter."

"And your vague answer makes it obvious," Harry pointed out.

"Nice catch." Daphne reached behind him and turned the door knob to open it a crack. "The game will be starting soon. You should get going."

Reluctantly, Harry turned to go out. He glanced back at her. "This conversation isn't over."

"Good luck with that," Daphne said with a rather mocking smile, which made Harry wonder if he was – indeed – actually speaking to Daphne Greengrass and not a polyjuiced version of her. But she kissed like Daphne, smelled like Daphne, spoke like Daphne…

Unfortunately, he couldn't stick around. The game started in fifteen minutes and he had to sprint to the locker rooms to get changed in time.

Harry was at a loss. The game went great, yes - there was nothing wrong there - but his friends were at each other's throats. Hermione disappeared to some dark corner of the castle and Ron ran off with Lavender. In retrospect, he could understand their anger toward each other, but he had no idea of how he could fix it.

He wasn't certain he could - or even if his friends would ever get over this fight. It was pretty bad.

Harry stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered around the seventh floor corridor aimlessly. Everyone at the party repeatedly harped at him for a play-by-play, so going back there seemed like a terrible idea. The other players could dole out the stories; he just needed a few minutes away from it all. His eyes roved over the stone walls covered in portraits, then to the wall that led to the door to the Room of Requirement, which had just appeared.

The door opened slowly and Daphne emerged, flicking her wrist repeatedly. Harry's brow creased and he quickly moved to follow her. She didn't seem to notice him. Upon closer inspection, he realized that she was shaking out her hand like he did after writing a particularly long essay.

"I know you're behind me," Daphne said, not turning back to look at him."You're about as stealthy as a hippogriff." She glanced at him over her shoulder with a playful grin and stopped, pulling out her silver case.

"Revision," Daphne replied with a shrug, lighting her cigarette.

"In the Room of Requirement?"

Bluish smoke curled along her cheek. "It's a very good place for revision. Quiet, secluded. No
chance of interruption."

"You smell odd," Harry commented. "Were you working with potions?"

But there were very few Muggle ingredients that they used in potions...

"Why are you so nosy lately?" Daphne asked with a smirk.

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He barely knew how to explain why himself. Something was off and he just wanted to know what was going on... that sounded like a good reason.

"I suppose I can't blame you," Daphne said before he had a chance to speak. She admired the ring that formed in the wispy cloud of cigarette smoke. "You don't trust me one bit - quite strange, that."

"No it's not," Harry disagreed. "You're... a very suspicious person."

Daphne's eyes narrowed in a calculating fashion. "I make it a point to be somewhat suspicious. I like to keep people guessing, but no one ever gets it right," Daphne explained, drawing deeply at her fag. "You know, what I originally gathered of your character is that you have a dangerous habit of thoughtlessly trusting people." She paused. "This version of you is quite interesting."

Brows furrowed, Harry argued, "I don't trust people thoughtlessly."

"Yes you do."

"Oh really?" Harry asked doubtfully, challenging her.

"You seem to trust Dumbledore more than you should. And I think you may trust him more than anyone."

That was true. Dumbledore was on par with Hermione and Ron when it came to trust, but Harry had no reason to be suspicious of Dumbledore. Sure, Dumbledore was pointlessly showing him bits and pieces of Tom Riddle's life without much explanation of why, but there had to be a point to it sooner or later. It wasn't exactly suspicious activity, even if it was a bit frustrating.

"Why shouldn't I trust Dumbledore? He's..." Harry inhaled, trying to think of a word that encompassed Dumbledore but could only come up with, "/Dumbledore/.

"That'll lead to some rude awakenings someday," Daphne muttered, rolling her eyes and drawing deeply at her cigarette.

"What do you mean by that?"

"He's no saint, Harry." Daphne threw him a smirk, shaking her head. "He may not be an enemy, but I believe in knowing my allies just as well as my enemies. It saves you from the possibility of having your back stabbed by them."

Harry snorted doubtfully. "You really think Dumbledore's a backstabber?"

What in the world could have possibly made her think that? Was she privy to information that he hadn't heard or something? She had to be having him on.
Daphne gazed at him thoughtfully. "What do you think?"

"Obviously if I'm asking you, I'm not sure - but I'm leaning toward yes," Harry answered bitterly, feeling a jolt of irritation creeping up his spine. He hated starting a mind game with a Slytherin. They seemed to get off on it while he just flailed around all confused and apprehensive.

Then again, they were Slytherins, what else could you expect from them?

"It's too soon to tell," Daphne stated. "But I hope I've gotten you little bit curious. Curiosity is a good thing."

"Yes, I'm curious about one thing. What is it that you know that I don't know?" Harry asked, his teeth gritting.

"That would be telling." Daphne pinned him a sly gaze and exhaled a breath full of smoke. "Where's the fun in ruining the joy of discovery?"

*What am I trying to discover in the first place? Why Dumbledore is untrustworthy when he's proved that he's more than trustworthy? That seems pointless.* Harry almost voiced the question but Daphne interrupted.

"If I were you, I'd start with the related Apocrypha and then go on to the horse's mouth."

Harry set his jaw. "It's not exactly helpful if I can barely get a proper answer out of you."

Daphne let out a small laugh. "I'm giving you proper answers; you just have to piece them together. This is me making you think for yourself. I'm not Granger- I prefer pointing people in the right direction."

"But if you think I shouldn't trust Dumbledore, wouldn't that necessitate a straight answer?"

"Hardly. I'm teaching you something that you need to learn with this example."

"And what's that?"

"Rarely trust on principle alone, obviously," Daphne said, slowly starting to walk down the corridor. Harry followed, processing her words carefully.

She had a point about trusting on principle, but Dumbledore had proven to be trustworthy time and time again - even if he was a bit blasé in his judgment of revealing critical information; the prophecy was a big mistake. However, Harry doubted that Dumbledore would make that mistake again, since the old headmaster deeply regretted it. And Dumbledore was sharing his own memories from Tom Riddle's life, so he must have been trying to reveal as much information as possible to Harry and was probably doing everything he could to keep Harry in the loop… unlike Daphne.

Harry looked over at her, sorely reminded of their conversation this morning. "So why did Zabini have a go at Malfoy?"

Sighing, Daphne took a long drag off her cigarette and stared at him as if she were debating whether to tell him or not. "You're not going to leave me alone about that are you?"

Harry shook his head.
"Well, it's not that big of a deal. They apparently had a row and Draco overstepped his bounds in Blaise's eyes. He was angry enough to forget that he could use his wand. It happens on occasion."

"Huh," Harry breathed, wondering what would cause Zabini to do that. "What was the row about?"

"Probably Draco's usual bigotry tirade. Blaise gets fed up with them and I can only assume that Draco, the ego maniac that he is, kept on going. The verbal spat ensued and then Blaise likely tackled him and took a few swings at him. Draco isn't that good in a fist fight when his opponent is much stronger than him."

"Oh." Harry shrugged to himself. He was pretty sure she was telling the truth, but he knew she was a good liar and didn't know if he could trust that she was, indeed, telling the truth. He tried to look for cues that she wasn't, but there were none that he could see.

He didn't say anything more while they descended a flight of stairs. But his nose crinkled when that petrol-like smell coming from Daphne's cloak wafted over at him again and he had to ask, "Seriously, what is that smell?"

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "What smell?"

"It's coming from your cloak – I think," Harry said, grabbing at her sleeve and sniffing closer.

She pulled her sleeve from his grip and quickly vanished her dead cigarette. "I thought we were discussing more important matters?"

"But I know it from somewhere. I just don't remember what it is and it's bothering me."

"Well that really narrows down the possibilities," Daphne commented lightly, pulling aside the tapestry that led to the secret passageway down to the second floor. "I work with potions often and there are probably a hundred different ingredients spilled on this thing."

Harry shook his head. "I've only smelled that smell when I was in the Muggle world. It's quite strong, so it's a bit hard to miss."

"I use Muggle ingredients in my potions, unlike most people."

"Really?"

"Yes, my mother's a chemist. Chemicals make things interesting."

They reached the stairs and walked down them in tandem. "Okay," he muttered, dropping the subject. She must have been doing a bit more than revising in the Room of Requirement. Why did she have to be so confusing and evasive anyway? And what would make her not trust Dumbledore? And why would Zabini attack Malfoy for being the usual bigoted git that he was? It all didn't make sense to him.

They walked along in silence for a while until Harry realized that he was in the dungeons and Slytherins were spread around everywhere in the corridors. And here he was, walking openly next to Daphne Greengrass, who didn't seem to be very worried about being seen in public with him at the moment.
A stinging hex zipped past his arm and Harry whirled around toward the assailant with his wand out. The dungeons were not a good place to be after winning a Quidditch match against them only a few hours beforehand. He cursed himself for being so bloody stupid and too lost in thought to notice where they were going.

"Fuck off, Harper. Potter's mine," Daphne said idly, dragging Harry along by the sleeve of his shirt. The seeker substitute sneered at them but didn't send another curse in their direction. Harry kept his wand out just in case.

"I don't think I should be down here," Harry whispered through his teeth.

"I was meaning to ask why you were willingly following me," Daphne muttered back to him. Her wand was out as well, eyes roving along each person they passed as if challenging them to say anything.

"I dunno. I wasn't… I didn't notice."

"Obviously," Daphne hissed.

"You don't seem worried about being seen together," Harry said as they turned into an empty corridor, wondering if she was dragging him to the Slytherin Common Room.

"After the pummelling you dealt us with, I doubt they think that I'm dragging you off to fuck you senseless. They can draw their own botched torture-filled conclusions. I'm known to be rather ruthless."

"Are you dragging me off to fuck me senseless?"

"No."

He then realized that they must have passed the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room because she was leading him down dimly lit corridors that he had never ventured in before. It was very different from other parts of the dungeon. Not one single portrait lined the walls and the wall sconces didn't give off enough light, giving it this creepy dim glow that he only saw in horror films on telly.

"Then where are we going?"

"Secret passageway to the first floor," Daphne said, not looking at him. Harry pulled his sleeve from her grip and walked alongside her.

"I didn't know there was one back here."

Daphne just threw him a grin and they continued along quietly. Their footsteps echoed down the corridors, which seemed to twist and turn endlessly. Harry wondered how much of this was on his map. He thought the Marauders had gotten it all, but he didn't know that Hogwarts went this deep – and he studied that map endlessly throughout the years.

"Since you've been questioning me all night, I only think it's fair that I get one in return," Daphne said suddenly, breaking him out of his reverie.

Raising an expectant eyebrow, Harry waited for her to continue.
"I really don't understand us." The centre of Daphne's forehead creased slightly. "Our relationship is mindless, to be honest. But you act like it's more or less at times. Why do you do that?"

She wanted to talk about that now?

Harry hesitated. "Maybe I want it to be a bit more..." Sometimes he did. And other times, he really didn't; however, it could work if she would cooperate. "But you don't let it progress beyond this."

"True... but this is what I do," Daphne responded, pulling out her silver case. She offered it to Harry and he took one while she lit up. "I don't do serious relationships. Never have."

"Why not?" Harry asked, gazing at her curiously.

She stared at him as if she seriously doubted his sanity, but he could sense a bit of sadness behind it and his brow furrowed. "I suppose that I'm not willing to divulge enough personal information to anyone that would enable a boyfriend-girlfriend type status. Maybe that's it. I'm not exactly certain."

Part of him felt as if there was more to it than that, but the bitter part took over without a second thought. "You seem to tell Zabini enough," Harry said sullenly, inhaling deeply at the fag.

Daphne fixed her gaze on him and gave him a doubtful look. "Blaise draws really good conclusions. I don't know how he does it but he's pretty damn impressive."

*Blaise draws conclusions from things he cannot see...* Harry's brows furrowed. "Does that mean your shoulder really was injured and you lied to me?"

"Jesus, not the shoulder thing again." Daphne rolled her eyes. "I never lie to you, I just-"

"Yeah, I know, you leave a lot of the truth out," Harry interrupted. "It's the difference between a good liar and an excellent one."

"Of course," Daphne muttered with a wave of her hand. She inhaled deeply at her fag. "Seems you've worked it all out, haven't you?"

"I'm not exactly thick."

"And you're consorting with Theo," Daphne continued with a smile.

Harry snapped his mouth shut when he realized that he must have said too much and busied his mouth with his cigarette.

"Don't look at me like that – 'I'm not exactly thick' either." Smoke curled from her lips as she spoke. "I can see the parallels. I know Theo too well."

"That was an unprompted straight answer for once," Harry said with a slight grin.

Rolling her eyes, Daphne snorted. "Just an observation. It doesn't take much more than opening your eyes and ears to notice what's in front of you."

"Yeah..." Harry muttered, trailing off and not looking at her. There probably was a lot that he missed by not doing that – properly anyway.
"So is he giving you pointers on manipulation in exchange for some dastardly deed?"

"Just an invite to Slughorn's Christmas party. Not as a date though." He felt he needed to add that in for some reason.

Daphne shook her head. "Theo's kind of a sociopath, Harry," she said, raising an eyebrow. "Only plays gay when it benefits him but he doesn't enjoy doing it. He's not likely to come on to you, of all people."

Well, that definitely eased his worries a bit. Harry blinked, remembering his conversation with Hermione after the tutoring session. "Speaking of Slughorn's Christmas party, could you talk to Zabini for me?"

"You can't talk to him yourself?"

"It's about Hermione," Harry elaborated. "He asked her to Slughorn's Christmas party and she's not sure if she should go with him. She said yes out of spite. Ron and her aren't getting on."

"Are you certain that's all?" Daphne asked, grinning. "I've heard that she was going with McClaggen as well."

With a sigh, Harry pursed his lips. There wasn't much that he could get past her, was there? "She accidentally said yes to both of them."

"And you want me to speak to him for her because maybe I could sway him," Daphne concluded. "But even if I did, Blaise won't listen."

"Why is he even remotely interested in her? He's… well, you know."

"A bit of a pureblooded prick when it comes to women?" Daphne offered.

Harry nodded. He had heard as much – he only had rumours to go off of. However, if Zabini attacked Malfoy for being an evil bigot… it was all so confusing.

"Outwardly, Blaise is much different than he is when he lets his guard down. He only has the pureblooded preference to appease his mother; it's not his own preference or belief as much as he'd like to think it is. He's attracted to strong women with brains and a nice arse all on his own and Granger has it all. Either way, I think it might be good for him to go for someone who isn't a fascist." Daphne vanished her dead cigarette. "I could speak to McClaggen for you if you like though."

The image of Daphne and McClaggen speaking floated through his mind and he didn't like it one bit. McClaggen was too… big and determined when it came to Hermione. "I'm not sure if that's a good idea," Harry muttered hesitantly.

"If you'd prefer," Daphne said, opening a door to what he thought was an empty classroom or cupboard but it revealed a steep staircase that seemed to lead up to the first floor. She held it open for him and looked at him expectantly.

"Aren't you coming with?" Harry asked.

"Do you need me to make sure there aren't any nasty Slytherins around up there as well?"
Harry shook his head. "No, I can take care of myself." He paused, awkwardly shifting on his feet. "Guess I'll see you around then?"

"Mm. See you, Harry," Daphne said with a nod and he ascended the staircase slowly, only looking back when the door slammed shut behind him.

His conversations with Daphne were definitely getting stranger and stranger.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Important Questions

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: Important Questions

Harry stared at the note for a long time while he fed some bacon to the tawny owl that delivered it. His brows furrowed and he looked over at the Slytherin table, where Nott was seated. The Slytherin boy stared back at him and then raised his eyebrows before going back to his bowl of porridge.

"I'm pretty sure that's an anagram," Hermione muttered from behind the Daily Prophet.

Harry glanced over at her. "Why can't he just write it normally?"

"Because he's Theodore Nott. I saw him working on it earlier in the library." Hermione grinned and took a sip of her pumpkin juice. She seemed to be in a better mood than she was last night. That was probably due to Ron not being around – he was likely still sleeping in since he came back at around half three in the morning after his night with Lavender.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the paper, trying to figure out what other words he could make out of it. After a few grueling and frustrating moments, he gave up with a drawn out sigh. "Isn't there an easier way to do this?"

Taking a small bite of toast, Hermione replied, "Vertere. You have to run the tip of your wand over the words."

Harry glanced around the breakfast table – very few Gryffindors made it to breakfast after Quidditch celebrations – and pulled out his wand. The spell made the letters glow and arrange themselves on the page in front of him. Harry's stomach turned when he realized that it was the same spell that Tom Riddle used to rearrange his name in the Chamber of Secrets years ago and he shook that thought from his mind.

Hall of Hexes tonight at six.
Six would work, if he got his charms essay done before then. Hopefully he'd also have enough time to research a bit on Dumbledore. He felt as if he shouldn't listen to Daphne, but she definitely had gotten him curious. Harry grinned when he thought of a different source that he might be able to use.

He could ask Nott what she was on about tonight, after dinner. *And after* he finished that blasted charms essay.

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"So where's this bloody 'troll ox'?” Harry asked when he walked through the door.

Nott snorted. "They monitor the post. I couldn't very well owl the note in its original state, Potter – I tried to make it easy for you," he said, focusing on the blackboard in front of him. Judging by the title, the theme for the day was going to be 'Important Questions'.

Warily, Harry looked over the topics and sat in his usual desk. As much as he wanted to get on with the tutoring for every-subject-surrounding-manipulation-but-not-exactly-manipulation, he definitely needed to ask Nott about Dumbledore. Every book he picked up in the library only seemed to cover his achievements and a few personal facts, but very little else. If that was what Daphne considered the 'Apocrypha', it wasn't very good to go off of.

"Could I ask you a question before we start this?"

Nott pivoted on his feet, tapping the overly large pointer against his hand. "As a portion of the lesson, or otherwise?"

"Unrelated." Harry paused. "Daphne told me not to trust Dumbledore. Do you know why she would say that?"

With his eyebrow raised, Nott pursed his lips. "That's curious," he mused.

"What is?"

"Why would she…” Not trailed off suddenly, which made Harry wonder what Nott was thinking. "Well… it may have something to do with Aberforth."

"The barman at the Hog's Head," Harry clarified. The centre of his forehead creased as he went over the scene between Aberforth Dumbledore and Daphne a few weeks ago.

"Yes, but it's merely a guess. Daphne is on friendly terms with Aberforth – has been for years. So, considering that he's Professor Dumbledore's brother, he's a potential source of information. We'll be getting to useful sources to exploit later."

"And that's what she meant by related Apocrypha," Harry realized with a sigh, ignoring the prospective subject in manipulation, which didn't sound very savoury in a moral sense.

"She really must like you," Nott commented.
Harry looked up at him. "Generally, you're supposed to like the person you're… intimate with."

However, there currently was a resounding lack of that. He had never had too many problems with his cock before the thing with Daphne, but it was as if losing his virginity had opened the puberty floodgates from hell. He got a hard-on simply from watching her twirl her hair between her fingers in class. Or watching Ginny at…

Harry halted his thought process before it got out of hand and focused on Nott.

"That doesn't mean anything. Physical attraction is paramount in a purely physical relationship. Personalities don't matter regarding sex. If she didn't like you, she definitely wouldn't say anything useful." Nott paused, staring off into space, and then shrugged. "And she'd probably ensure that you're premature death is very inevitable and possibly speed up the process."

That didn't sound like Daphne, from what he knew of her. Daphne was rather nice to him, most of the time. But that conversation he had with her about their relationship and other things, paired with Nott's description, made him wonder what else he was missing. That feeling nagged at him a bit until he decided that Nott had to be wrong about her.

"She wouldn't do that," Harry protested.

Smirking, Nott explained, "You'll understand after you've known her for a while." Tapping the pointer against his hand, he turned his head toward the blackboard. "Shall we get started?"

Sensing that the allotted questioning period was over, Harry sat back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and prepared himself for another couple hours of Nott's lecturing. He almost had more questions swirling round his head than what he came in with.

**oOo**

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Malfoy was still in the infirmary on Monday and he couldn't find Daphne at breakfast. The map said she was in her dorm, so he couldn't very well talk to her about Dumbledore or about what Nott said. It seemed as if she were deliberately trying to avoid him ever since their conversation after the Quidditch game.

Harry debated sitting behind her in Potions class, but thought against it because it would look too suspicious sitting in the Slytherin section unless forced. As he walked past her, she threw him a grin before putting up her usual indifferent façade that she kept in class. Ron plopped down in the seat next to him just before Slughorn started off with his lecture on the final potions project and Harry thumbed through the Prince's book, trying to look for an interesting potion that would take less than two days to brew and would meet Slughorn's requirements.

"Now I want you to work in pairs for this project!" Slughorn ignored the series of groans that came from the class and continued, "Therefore, when I call your names, please join your partner."

Harry dutifully kept searching, knowing that he couldn't search in front of his partner, just in case his partner saw the Prince's notes and inquired about them. It was a bit like cheating, having an annotated book, after all. But it was bloody useful! Muffliato was a fantastic spell as well. The Prince was a genius.

Ron got partnered with the absent Malfoy and didn't look too pleased with it. "I hope the git dies in the hospital wing," Ron muttered sullenly, pulling out his cauldron and setting it down hard on the scrubbed wood table.

Harry sniggered.

"Mr. Potter, you will be working with Mr. Nott," Slughorn said, regarding him with a nod.

Frowning, Harry shut his book. He had a feeling that would happen. Slughorn did say that he would keep them in mind for the final potions project, and all over a handful of bloody bilommeal grass and whatever Nott did to his potion. Looking over at the weedy Slytherin boy, Harry packed up his
"I think we should brew the Consano Elixir," Harry said once he was seated, keeping his heavily annotated textbook closed. The Consano Elixir only had a few notes written in the margins and only took a day to brew. It wasn't that he didn't want to work with Nott; Harry just didn't want to reveal the Prince to Nott. That would probably be quite disastrous.

Nott shook his head. "That's child's play," he said quietly, pulling a book out of his bag that was bound in red leather. "I say that we go big with this."

Harry read over Nott's shoulder as he flipped through the pages of his little red book. "A Scrying Concotion?" Harry's brows furrowed. "Why in the world would you want to make that?"

"Slughorn said we could make anything that uses three different skills that we've been taught this year. Why not make something that uses every skill he's taught us?"

"It's time consuming," Harry pointed out, grabbing the book from Nott and looking over the instructions. "And it'll take three days, not two."

"Then get us an extension," Nott replied with a smirk. "Slughorn wouldn't turn down his golden boy."

"I don't see why we need to do that when we have plenty of options to start off with in the textbook…"

"How is it going, boys? Have you made a decision?" Slughorn's booming voice interrupted and Harry almost jumped, not realizing that the plump professor was standing right behind him.

"We're thinking of doing the Scrying Concoction," Nott said in a very polite tone. Harry narrowed his eyes toward him for a brief moment while the professor walked round to the front of their work station.

"Ingenious idea! I knew you two would make a fine match as partners."

Harry spoke up, "The thing is, Professor, it's going to take three days, as I was trying t-"

"Yes, of course. Then you would need an extension for that," Slughorn interjected and Nott nodded vigorously. Harry wanted to sigh. Didn't Nott have a lot of homework from his other classes to do instead of brewing a ridiculously time-consuming potion? Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was partnered with Daphne and currently glaring at the Slytherin girl. He hoped that he could get her to help him with his homework if he was going to be roped into brewing the bloody scrying potion.

Harry looked back up at the professor while Nott spoke, "If it wouldn't be too much of a bother, Professor Slughorn."

"No, I have no problem giving you one; just let me make a note of it. I'll be looking forward to your results!" With that, Slughorn bustled off to his desk at the front of the room and Harry finally let out a sigh.

"Well, look at it this way, Potter. The potion will only make you more valuable to him and that's exceedingly useful," Nott muttered quietly, pulling out his huge potion's kit that seemed more overloaded than usual. "Slughorn's well connected – an excellent resource."
Harry read into his words, looking between the lines. "That's why you want to make the Scrying Concoction," he whispered. "You want to get closer to Slughorn and use him. That's why you want to go to his Christmas party!"

It all made so much more sense. "So why exactly do you want to get close to Slughorn?" Harry asked in a low voice, leaning close to Nott while he helped him set up the brass scale.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched a smirk pull at Nott's lips. "You're starting to get pretty good at this, Potter," he said with a small breathy laugh. "I'm impressed."

"That wasn't an answer to the question," Harry replied, measuring out and crushing a handful of beetle eyes with his pestle and trying to keep his eyes on Nott while he did so.

"Yes, but I still have a choice whether to answer or not," Nott said, rummaging through his potions kit and pulling out a bundle of spider's webs.

"Why won't you tell me then?" Harry asked calmly, pouring the nearly liquefied beetle eyes into the cauldron while Nott added a gram of spider's webs.

"Because you're Harry Potter and everyone thinks you always do what you think is the right thing. So if I tell you what I want to do, you'll probably go run and tell Dumbledore on me because what I want to do isn't exactly within the rules."

"I don't tell Dumbledore everything," Harry said, rolling his eyes. Did everyone really think that he was some kind of snitch? Was that why Daphne didn't want to tell him what was going on? Because they were breaking the rules? However… she did tell him about getting out of the wards, so that couldn't be it. Nevertheless, he didn't tell on her and he wasn't going to. It was bloody frustrating. Why couldn't he make sense of it all?

After a moment where he was focused entirely on stirring in the spider's webs, Nott commented, "And that is likely to be the truth, but I don't trust you, or anyone, for that matter. Now help me with the argent solution."

Harry stirred while Nott poured a vial of the sliver fluid into the cauldron, trying to keep it from crystalizing as it heated up. "Then why do you say that everyone thinks I'd tell on them to Dumbledore?" Harry asked quietly, keeping an eye on the contents of the cauldron.

"I said 'do the right thing', which doesn't mean that you'd tell Dumbledore, exactly. You simply seek to right all the wrongs and stop all the 'evil'."

"I'm not bloody Spiderman," Harry muttered back as Nott plucked the wings off a pile of lacewing flies.

"What?" Nott stared at him with an incredulous expression.

"Right… that's a Muggle thing."

"Halfbloods," Not muttered, rolling his eyes and going back to plucking the wings off of flies.

Harry let out a tolerating sigh and Nott poured the lacewings into the cauldron while Harry stirred the mixture anti-clockwise. Glancing over at the instructions on what to do next, Harry asked, "So…
"Where did you get the book?" He noticed that it wasn't from the library, because those books often had stamps on them and were usually in worse condition – especially potions books.

"Oh, it's from my private collection. I had a feeling I was going to need it for the final project when I was looking over the syllabus last week."

"You actually read that thing?"

"I like to be prepared."

"It's surprising that you're not at the top of the class," Harry said, gazing at Nott in a calculating manner. "You're probably the only student that reads the syllabus aside from Hermione, and you're actually good at doing this stuff…"

"But you forget; Slughorn and Snape don't like me," Nott muttered, "and they both play favourites. You would know – you've been on both ends of that."

"Yeah." Harry nodded, waving his wand to increase the heat output underneath the cauldron. "I didn't do so well under Snape though, in general. Had no motivation to actually learn." He probably wouldn't have any still if it wasn't for the Prince's book, but Nott didn't have to know that.

"And now you're the star potions pupil." Nott snorted and then paused looking over the instructions again. "Are you free tonight? We should, at least, work out a schedule while this boils. I'll move it to the Hall of Hexes so we can work on it in there."

Harry read a little bit ahead in the instructions and groaned. "I guess it beats having to sleep in the dungeon." That's what some of the other students would have to do if they picked a difficult potion.

"It's not that bad as far as potions go," Nott said impatiently. "I made this one potion once where I had to stir it every half hour or it would settle and eat through the cauldron. Particularly nasty, that was."

Glancing warily over at Nott, Harry asked, "What was it for?"

"An experiment, something or other," Nott answered, shrugging. Harry had a feeling Nott wouldn't tell him even if he probed further for answers so he didn't question it. "I have a break in three hours, so I can stir and add the powdered bicorn horn," Not said, continuing with their previous topic. "Could you meet me after dinner in the Hall of Hexes? We can put in the second dose of argent solution then."

Harry sighed. "Okay. I was planning to revise with Hermione tonight after dinner-"

"You can still do that. We only have to meet for as long as it takes to make sure the argent doesn't solidify. Then come down before it's time for bed and we'll take turns watching it throughout the night. It'll be simple."

"Yeah… simple."

They worked on the potion, only talking occasionally, throughout the remainder of the class and Harry kept berating himself for not asserting himself more. If they had done the Consano Elixir, they'd almost be done with it by now. Bloody Nott. Harry looked over at Daphne and Hermione while Nott packed up his potions kit at the end of class. Daphne didn't look too happy and
Hermione's hair was fluffed up tremendously, making Harry assume that they must have had quite the debate over what to make.

"I'll see you tonight, Potter," Nott said, taking his leave with the hot cauldron levitating in front of him. Harry nodded in return and followed Hermione out the door. Ron stumbled along behind him, keeping his distance from Hermione. The tension between them was palpable in the air.

"So, what potion are you guys making?" Harry asked, looking between his two friends who seemed as if they didn't even want to look at each other. Harry was, once again, stuck in the middle trying to bridge the gap.

"The Consano Elixir," Ron replied bleakly with a shrug of one shoulder. "Looked the easiest."

"Because you always choose the easy option," Hermione scathingly quipped, obviously not just referring to potions. Harry wanted to laugh, because Lavender was… well, easy, but he didn't because he knew it would be cruel to Ron.

Before Ron could retort, Harry spoke up, trying to be nice. "I almost chose that one. Nott looped me into this Scrying Concoction though. Bloody complicated."

Hermione turned her head toward him with a frown. "Greengrass tried to convince me into brewing the Scrying Concoction as well, but I've my Arithmancy Project due on Thursday. Thankfully, we're brewing the Compulsion Philtre instead."

Harry's lips parted and his eyebrows furrowed, but then he kept his expression in check, not certain if he wanted to go into it with Hermione and Ron around. It was too coincidental that Nott and Daphne wanted to brew the same potion, which definitely wasn't a potion in their textbook. What were they up to?

"How's that going?" Harry asked, trying not to seem distracted. He almost sighed in relief when Hermione launched into one of her anti-Greengrass tirades.

Now he just had to figure out how he should approach Nott tonight with his newfound knowledge.

oOo

Harry's usual desk that he sat in during his manipulation lessons was expanded to house the Scrying Concoction and Nott's extensive potion's kit. Checking his watch – he told Hermione he'd meet her in half an hour to study – Harry walked into the room and found the weedy Slythern boy crouched over another potion in the corner. It was sitting on a different, smaller desk.

"One potion for this project isn't enough?" Harry asked, stalking over to where Nott stood.

"Just because I'm giving up two nights to the Scrying Concoction, doesn't mean that my experiments have to be neglected," Nott replied, stirring his 'experiment' that looked rather like pond scum in a cauldron.

"We have to stay here for two nights?" Harry asked, curling his lip at the thought.

Nott gave him a nod. "A scrying potion requires careful handling and observation."
"Yeah, about the potion…" Harry started, taking in a long breath. "What are you and Daphne up to?"

"You're going to have to elaborate on that, Potter," Nott said, adding a vial full of slime to his experiment.

"She tried to get Hermione to do the Scrying Concoction as well. Rather suspicious and too coincidental, if you ask me, especially since that potion isn't in the textbook."

Nott threw him a smirk, making Harry think that he was pulling at the right strands of information. He just hoped he could get to the bottom of it. Nott stirred his potion and quietly muttered, "That still doesn't explain why you would think that Daphne and I are up to something."

"Because you've worked together before, investigating Malfoy," Harry responded.

Tilting his head to the side, Nott glanced up at him. "Fair enough I suppose. You'll have to ask her about this though – I'm not one to go blabbing."

Why did getting any information out of Slytherins have to be so bloody exasperating?

"It's not blabbing if I already basically know that it involves Malfoy!" That was a small lie, but he had a feeling in the pit of his stomach that the potion had to involve Malfoy in some way.

Eyes narrowed, Nott gazed over him in a calculating manner. "Interesting… and Daphne told you this?"

Harry's jaw clenched. "Not exactly."

"Well, if Daphne isn't letting you in on this, I shan't overstep my bounds. That could be dangerous with her." Nott glanced back down at his potion and then up at Harry again.

Nott's words reminded him of his conversation with Daphne. I'm known to be rather ruthless, she said. Nott also mentioned something along the lines during their last tutoring session. Harry bit the inside of his cheek. "Dangerous how?"

"She's creative and not afraid to get her hands dirty," Nott explained, throwing a bundle of sage into the cauldron. "I'll give you a safe example – Terence Higgs, he's a few years older than us. He tormented Daphne for a few years. She somehow got him expelled from school and a small sentence in Azkaban for brewing an illegal coercive potion in his dorm. Snape tried to fight it since Higgs is terrible at potions, but the evidence was apparently too overwhelming. When Higgs was led out of the Common Room by the Auror's, Daphne didn't even bat an eye at it. It's like she knew it was coming."

Nott paused, emptying a vial of brown liquid into his 'experiment'. "I'm not saying that she'd do that to me for overstepping my bounds, but I don't like crossing her at all. It's messy."

Harry's brows furrowed and he stared at Nott blankly, trying to formulate a response. "When was all this?"

"Fourth year. Higg's expulsion was kept quiet because of the Triwizard competition."
"Yeah… I'm really not sure if Daphne would do something like that," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "You have no proof that she did. Isn't that the first rule of making accusations?"

Nott chuckled low in his throat. "Yes, but I don't snitch. Just consider it, Potter. Daphne and Draco? It's a larger, more involved operation than getting rid of Terence Higgs, but it's essentially the same thing, isn't it?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "We're just trying to figure out what he's up to in the Room of Requirement."

"You've also tried getting the Aurors to apprehend him. Daphne's already gotten Crabbe expelled. The only difference with this is that she has a lot of people involved and you're in the loop. There are too many variables, too many people to protect, and too many ways to get caught in this whole thing. So if she doesn't involve you in something, there's probably a reason for it, and that is why I'm not going to tell you what we're going to use the Scrying Concoction for."

Harry let out a long sigh and glared at Nott. "It's not like I'd tell her that you told me or anything."

Throwing him a doubtful look, Nott shook his head and pulled a vial of silver liquid from his pocket. "We should get to work."

"Bloody Slytherins…" Harry grumbled under his breath and followed Nott over to the other cauldron that held their potions project. "I don't understand why any of you lot won't trust me."

"We barely trust each other, Potter, why would we trust you?"

Harry got to stirring while Nott poured the argent solution. "I am known to be quite trustworthy," he replied with a shrug. "You can tell me what the Scrying Concoction's for. I won't tell on you."

"You're going to be really determined with this aren't you?"

"Yes. So are you going to tell me what the Scrying Concoction's for?"

"And you're not going to shut it till I tell you," Nott said in a long breath, raising an eyebrow and putting the stopper back on the vial.

"Nope," Harry said, shaking his head. "You might as well tell me. I've got all night."

"Don't be irritating." Nott glared, grinding up twelve silk worms with his mortar and pestle.

Harry kept stirring. "You're the one that picked the potion that put us into this situation."

"You won't get any regret out of me, so stop trying."

"You could always just tell me what the Scrying Concoction is for and I'll stop."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."
"Tell me."

Nott added the liquefied silk worms to the cauldron and sighed. "It's going to be a long night."

"I can make it even longer," Harry remarked.

"You have to be kidding me."

"Seekers are known for their endurance."

Nott threw him a dirty look to which Harry replied to it with a grin.

"Fine," Nott gritted out. "Do you have any fags on you then?" He sighed again and took a seat on the top of the desk next to the cauldron.

Harry blinked, unsure of what Nott meant, but he was hopeful that it meant that Nott was going to tell him. Reaching into his back pocket, Harry pulled out his red leather case and handed it to Nott. He then stared at the Slytherin boy expectantly, waiting for whatever Nott was going to say after he lit his cigarette. Nott moved at an incredibly slow and almost methodical pace as he did so, not looking at Harry directly.

"It's pretty simple to figure out on your own, really," Nott said, blowing out a long puff of smoke and blinking as it got into his eyes. "Scrying Concoctions have one ability – scrying people. Pour it over a pair of mirrors and you've a way to be in contact with each mirror owner. That's useful and all, but not many people know that you can brew an additional potion that would allow you to block out your end. Do that and you have a covert way to see what the other person is doing. Since the holiday's coming up, what do you think we're going to do with it?"

A wide grin pulled at Harry's lips. "You're going to spy on Malfoy."

"Exactly," Nott said with a nod. "And I didn't even have to properly tell you."

Harry's smile then faded when he realized that there was a giant flaw in that plan. His eyes narrowed toward the Slytherin boy. "Wait… how are you going to get Malfoy to use the mirror or get the mirror in a place where you can spy on him properly?" he asked, thinking that Malfoy could just throw the scrying mirror into his trunk and forget about it.

"Unfortunately, Daphne hasn't informed me how we're going to do that," Nott said with a sigh, taking a long drag off his cigarette. "She just asked me to brew a batch of Scrying Concoction that we could use to keep an eye on Draco. I thought it would be perfect for the final project – ostensibly she did as well."

Harry let out a long breath, a little disappointed by what Nott knew. He thought that it would be this big secret from the way Nott treated it, but it wasn't that big of a deal.

"And if you tell her that I told you about all this-" Not hissed, leaning toward Harry and pointing his cigarette in his direction.

"No need to get so worked up," Harry interrupted, rolling his eyes. "I won't tell her you said anything."

"Good."
"So what else do you know about what Daphne's doing with Malfoy?" Harry asked nonchalantly, wondering if Nott would comply.

"Not gonna happen, Potter. Nice try."

"You've already told me about the plan with the Scrying Concoction, might as well tell me about everything else," Harry persevered, undaunted by Nott's reluctance to cooperate.

Nott paused, seeming to think before he spoke. "No," he said, finally.

"Then could you at least tell me what you get in return for brewing the Scrying Concoction?" Since badgering worked with Nott once, Harry hoped it would again. Nott obviously knew something.

With a short laugh, Nott got up from the desk and flicked the ashes off his fag. "I don't need to be paid for everything. Daph and I do favours for each other like this all the time – as any good friend would."

"You know, it's odd," Harry started and then paused for a brief second, stirring the potion slowly. "You say you're friends, but then you're afraid she'll turn on you if you 'overstep your bounds'. Friends don't do that."

Nott shallowly inhaled from his fag and shrugged. "So maybe I'm being a bit paranoid. It's better to be safe than sorry."

"Daphne really isn't all that frightening. She's just… Daphne," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "She's just as frightening as Hermione, and you probably don't find her-"

"On the contrary, Potter," Nott countered. "Or don't you remember Marietta Edgecombe? She's scarred for life because she snitched on your Dumbledore's Army. It happened out of nowhere and we were in a heavily warded room. Out of you lot, it had to be Granger's brilliance. If she can bypass magical wards like that… I wouldn't want to cross her either."

"Well, it was for a good reason," Harry weakly replied, but then commented, "I didn't know you were on the Inquisitorial Squad."

"Not exactly," Nott said, blowing out a breath full of smoke. "Umbridge needed a minor to do the hard questioning on some of the suspected students and since my father's an Unspeakable that works in the interrogation division… she thought I'd know a thing or two about effectively getting people to confess." He paused, taking one more drag off his half-smoked cigarette before vanishing it. "I do know how, but not properly. My father redacts every bloody document before he lets me read them."

"Radacts? What's that?" Harry asked, curious.

"Magically blocking out every word or sentence or paragraph that isn't supposed to be public knowledge. I haven't figured out how to crack the spell yet, but at least he lets me read something," Nott rambled, waving his wand at the bottom of the cauldron to increase the temperature of the Scrying Concoction.

"But I thought Unspeakables were just a bunch of boffins," Harry said, remembering the odd rooms that he travelled through last year, all of which held various bizarre experiments.
"Sure, they do all the top secret ministry research so there are quite a few of them that are, indeed, boffins," Nott explained, "but a majority of them are emissaries that protect the ministry secrets and gather intelligence on foreign ministries and other organizations."

"So they're kind of like the SIS," Harry guessed, trying to remember his Muggle history classes.

"What's the SIS?" Nott asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Um, Muggle government – spies," Harry said with a nod, finally coming to a proper explanation. He couldn't remember exactly what 'SIS' stood for.

Nott shrugged. "You could call them spies if you wanted. Funny that the Muggle government would need them."

"Every government needs them, I guess." Harry, on the other hand, didn't think that the Ministry of Magic would need them – magic was much different, especially when it came to the government. The Muggle government had the SIS and Interpol and the police. Did the Ministry of Magic have something like Interpol? If they did… "The Aurors really are kind of like the Muggle police," he muttered to himself more than Nott.

"Yeah, Aurors do the lower level work that Unspeakables don't want to touch. Boring job," Nott said, checking the potion that Harry was stirring and grabbing the pewter stir stick from him.

"Doesn't sound too boring. I'd like to be one one day."

"After the fifteenth illegal brew or tea kettle arrest, you'll probably want out."

"That's not all they do – they take down dark wizards and stuff. Look at Mad-Eye, he's lost is leg and his eye doing it."

"It's not all that it seems, Potter. Once the Aurors get the dark wizards in custody, they often hand them over to the higher ups after the entrance interview for interrogation. You won't ever get to see that type of case all the way to the end."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's bureaucracy." Nott then looked down at his watch and asked, "So when are you meeting Granger?"

Harry glanced at the time and groaned. Just as he got Nott to open up a bit – and onto an interesting topic of conversation – he had to go. "I was supposed to meet her about ten minutes ago."

Nott smirked. "I thought so. Guess I'll see you tonight?"

"Yeah." With an absent wave toward Nott, Harry rushed out of the room, hitching his book bag higher up on his shoulder. Talking to Nott outside of his manipulation 'lessons' was much more pleasant than speaking with him during the lessons.

oOo
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Trust

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Duality: Trust

oOo

Harry wasn't expecting Daphne to be in the empty classroom he usually studied in with Hermione, but he was struck with an excellent idea as he ambled into the room and started digging out his books. A cauldron was bubbling at the end of the long table where they sat, which probably held Daphne and Hermione's potion's project. Hermione seemed too immersed in her Charms book to look up at him as he sat down across from them, but Daphne gave him a brief smile and asked, "How's the project going?" She rested the enormous tome she was reading onto the table.

"Shouldn't you know?" Harry asked, pausing from setting up his study material to look her straight in the eye. "After all, you wanted to do the Scrying Concoction as well."

Hermione glanced over her textbook at him with a look that clearly said, 'what are you up to now?' He tried not to spare her a look and focused on Daphne, searching for signs in her body language. He wondered if she would lie to him about this.

"Yeah well, thanks to Granger, I can't utilize that gem of a potion. It was a bloody shoe-in for full marks." Daphne looked out of the corner of her eye toward Hermione, who merely glared in return.

"It's also quite the coincidence," Harry remarked casually, opening his Transfiguration textbook to the chapter that he had left to read before the exams. "I couldn't find that potion in the textbook. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you and Nott are up to something."

Daphne narrowed her eyes toward him. "What exactly did Theo tell you?"

Snorting derisively, Harry tried to act natural. "Nothing. I can never get a straight answer out of him no matter what I ask."

"Right," Daphne breathed, pulling out her silver case and lighting up. She blew out a breath full of smoke. "But the thing is, Theo does give straight answers most of the time. They may be a pack of lies, but he's generally the straightforward type." She raised her eyebrows toward him and smirked.

Her eyes were alight with the prospect of a challenge and Harry wanted to laugh in spite.
"Unlike you," he said. "You just avoid the question entirely."

"I wasn't aware that you asked me a question," Daphne said, taking a drag off her cigarette and running her finger along the edge of the open book sitting in front of her.

Thinking back, Harry let out a minute sigh. She was right. "Then I'll ask it now: What are you and Nott up to?"

"Well, let's review the evidence, shall we?" Daphne asked, raising an eyebrow. "One, there's the coincidence with the Scrying Concoction. I like potions, Theo likes potions. It could be a one off. Or there may be some huge conspiracy there. What would we need a Scrying Concoction for? That's the better question."

"And none of it answers the question I asked. I talked with Nott about this," Harry said, leaning toward her and resting his arms on the table, trying to remain calm. He had to keep a clear head. "He told me to ask you about it, since he 'isn't one to go blabbing'."

Harry wanted to pat himself on the back for that bit of quick thinking. It didn't incriminate Nott at all.

"Oh, come off it, Harry," Daphne rolled her eyes and blew out a breath full of smoke. "You know that I'm still investigating and trying to take down Malfoy, what do you think I would need a bloody Scrying Concoction for? It's blatantly obvious."

Merlin, why did she always have to be so bloody evasive?

"It's also bad enough that Nott thinks you'll get him expelled and arrested if he told me what you two are up to," Harry pointed out, hoping that would push her to answer him.

Daphne laughed. "Oh god, really? He needs to switch to decaf. I'm not that fucking evil."

"That's questionable," Harry muttered, leaning back in his seat and narrowing his eyes.

Tilting her head and gazing at him with a doubtful look in her eyes, Daphne bit her lip. "Alright, fine. I need the Scrying Concoction to spy on Draco during the hols. If that plan doesn't work, I'll find another way, but it's always good to be prepared. Happy?"

Harry smiled, feeling quite triumphant and surprised at the same time. She didn't lie to him! He was fully expecting her to – he was almost hoping for her to lie as well, only because catching her in a lie would be so satisfying. However, getting her to tell him something was a start. Maybe with a little more pressing on different matters, he could get her to tell him other things. "You could have just made it easier and answered from the start," Harry said pointedly.

"In case this all goes to hell and we get caught, I was trying to give you some plausible deniability. That part's gone now."

"Merlin, you two are mental. Is this how all of your conversations go?" Hermione interrupted, looking back and forth between both of them over her Charms book.

Harry knew that Daphne was joking from the way that her lips quirked ever so slightly and he wanted to roll his eyes, feel a bit bitter over the entire situation, and laugh all at the same time – especially at Hermione's expression. Keeping a straight face, he just shrugged and opened his Transfiguration book to the section on human transfiguration.

But, as he read, in the back of his mind he kept thinking of ways of getting more out of Daphne. If only he could get her alone for long enough… There just wasn't much time before the holiday, but he had to know more. It was starting to grate on his nerves and all for plausible deniability? Was that really why she wasn't telling him things? He didn't need any plausible deniability. What he needed was to know what she was up to.

Harry looked up at Daphne for a calculating second and then glanced back down at his book, reading and not processing the words. If anything, he was determined. He'd find a way to get the information out of her – sooner or later.

oOo

He should have known that something was up when Daphne left early from their study session, but he thought nothing of it at the time since she didn't have much for homework left to do. Just as he ascended the staircase to the Hall of Hexes to spend a dreaded night with Nott, he heard voices and whipped out his Marauder's Map to see who it was. The little dots of Daphne and Nott moved ever so slightly around each other and Harry pressed his ear up against the door to hear, surprised that they didn't ward the door. Nott was normally quite careful about that.

"It's a long sentence in Azkaban if we get caught!" Nott's muffled voice exclaimed.

"If we get caught."

"Which we will."

"Stop being so fucking paranoid, you twat. The only way we can pull this off without getting caught is if we work together –properly. I've done most of the work already! I can't back down from this."

"...I suppose it is a good plan, but -" Nott's voice paused and Harry practically smashed his ear up against the wooden door to hear more. "There's too much risk."

"Everything is completely controlled, just how you like it. And I already got Johnson on the hunt for some incredibly useful tools. You wouldn't believe how many favours I'm dishing out for those! I probably won't get to sleep for weeks thanks to that."

Harry heard Nott sigh. "Sometimes, Daph, you can get a bit overconfident with your plans. Nothing is infallible. It doesn't matter how much effort you put in - just because you think everything will go along smoothly and we won't get caught, it doesn't mean that it will!"

"Why do you think I'm running it by you?"

"I've no idea, but I'm starting to get sick of you thinking that you can control everything – including me. I don't want any part in this."

"You're already brewing the Scrying Potion, why stop there?"
"Because this is within my comfort zone. You, on the other hand, are talking about Azkaban inducing crimes!"

"Please, Theo. We can't do this without you. I'll do anything. Just name it." Merlin, she sounded desperate. Harry had never heard her sound like that before and it alarmed him.

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"Anything just sounds like trouble, knowing you."

"I could get you the sortilege manual – in full."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not, Theo. I'm dead serious. Anything you want."

"But the sortilege manual… that's-"

"I can have it to you in three days."

"That's... You're barking mad."

"Hardly. I can do it. Just say you're with me on this."

Harry could tell that Theo was dithering. For a very long moment, no one spoke.

"Okay, I'll help you with your Draco problem – again."

Daphne exhaled a loud puff of breath and Harry heard a bit of rustling and a few mumbled words that he couldn't discern. "I promise we won't get caught."

"Ugh. Don't make promises you can't keep, Daph."

"I fully intend to keep this one."

"Still..."

"So, how's the Scrying Concoction coming along? My batch is only a third as progressed."

"Just crank up the heat a little more when you pour in the argent. Decreases brew time."

"Well, obviously... but will it be as effective?"

"It should be. It's not like we're brewing Wolfsbane."

"I guess."

Harry pulled away from the door, certain that they were done talking about whatever Daphne was planning that involved Malfoy and Nott. He looked at his watch and decided to be safe and wait a couple minutes before walking in on them. If he did it now, it might be a little suspicious. His mind
was whirling with all the possibilities of what they could be planning. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been good if it meant a sentence in Azkaban, but that piece of information didn't narrow anything down.

Leaning against the wall, Harry went over what he already knew. First of all, Daphne was definitely planning to spy on Malfoy using the ScryingConcoction and she was brewing a batch as well. How many mirrors did they need anyway? You could easily enchant a huge mirror with the batch he and Nott were brewing alone. Harry shook his head… he was getting off topic.

Daphne definitely said 'we need you', so it was safe to say that Zabini was involved in the plan. She also needed Nott and it must have been vital… but why would she need Nott and Zabini if she already had done most of the work? Couldn't she just do the rest? Harry's mind whirled, searching for reasons as to why she would need them but he kept coming up blank. It was frustrating.

Nott was good at potions and manipulating people. Zabini excelled in… Actually, Harry knew very little about Zabini so he couldn't assess what she would need him for. Moral support? Daphne… she was decent at a lot of things. But nothing stuck out at him or added up to anything obvious that she could be planning.

With an unsatisfied sigh, Harry stood up and stared at the door, deciding that he waited long enough.

Grasping the handle, he walked through to see that Daphne was sitting on the elongated desk with a half-smoked fag between her fingertips. Nott was stirring the Scrying Concoction, muttering something about the temperature. His hair looked a lot more messy than usual.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked Daphne, figuring that it would look better if he didn't expect her to be there. He really hoped she bought it.

"I had to go over some things with Theo," she answered offhandedly, taking a drag off her cigarette. Setting his bag down, Harry pulled out his red leather case and lit up, joining her. "Like what?" He raised his eyebrows, sitting next to her on the desk.

She let out a small breath and, being this close to her, he could see just how tired she looked. "Just things, Harry," she said quietly, raising an eyebrow.

"She was inquiring about the Scrying Concoction," Nott muttered, not looking up from the cauldron.

"Oh… Interesting," Harry commented, not knowing what else to say. He really wanted to get Daphne alone so he could talk to her properly. It was a bit uncomfortable being there with her and Nott after what he had heard and he tried to quell that feeling.

Daphne leaned closer to him, placing her hand on his knee. "You shouldn't be so concerned, alright? It's under control. I'm fixing everything," she whispered into his ear.

"How are you going to do that?" Harry asked quietly, glancing over at Nott, who seemed oblivious as he weighed ingredients on his brass scales. Harry took a drag off his cigarette, careful not to get any ashes in Daphne's hair.

"Plausible deniability, Harry," she vaguely responded, her lips ghosting over his ear as she spoke. "You're just going to have to trust me."
Harry swallowed thickly, trying not to be distracted by the feeling of her lips on his ear. "If it's about Malfoy, I'm not so sure I can," he muttered, slightly bitter, and it was thankfully sobering.

Daphne pulled away from him with a guarded expression. He so desperately wanted her to tell him openly about what they were doing and he wondered how he could possibly get Nott out of the room or… maybe if he could get her alone somehow.

"If it's alright with you, Theo, I need to go get something. Would you mind coming with me, Harry?" Daphne interrupted, halting his thought process and he thanked his good luck as he curiously followed her out. She must have wanted to get him alone as well… but why?

Maybe for the same reason he wanted to? That was suspicious. Why would she want to now all of a sudden?

He stared at her cautiously with narrowed eyes once they were out of the room, and they walked along the corridor together; Daphne kept looking around for any onlookers as he inhaled deeply at his cigarette. She likely wasn't going to find anyone out because it was after curfew, but she seemed to be overly paranoid. Maybe she needed to switch to decaf as well.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked. They were still on the third floor, not far from the Hall of Hexes, but they kept going. Any empty classroom would do for this, he was certain.

Staying silent, Daphne didn't answer him and just tugged at his sleeve after vanishing her cigarette.

"Come on, Daph. I don't believe that you just want me to accompany you to go 'get something'," Harry whispered to her with a frustrated sigh after they descended the stairs. He yanked his sleeve from her grasp.

"No, I don't. I just thought we could go someplace more private," she said, stopping in front of a random door on the second floor. She pulled harshly at the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge.

"I think you're supposed to push," Harry said, raising an eyebrow, placing his hand over hers and showing her. He wanted to get someplace more private just as much as she did.

"Ah, yes…” Daphne trailed off, entering the dark cupboard where he thought he'd get all the answers, from the way she was acting. He was startled when she suddenly shoved him up against the closed door and kissed him roughly. His cigarette dropped to the floor and his brain unfortunately sent him mixed messages.

He thought she wanted to talk to him about Malfoy and here she was, snogging the living daylights out of him. As he tried to wrap his mind around exactly what she was doing, the sound of her locking and silencing spells set off alarm bells in his head and Harry pushed her away.

"Wait! I don't think we should," he protested, breathing heavily as he extracted her from him and held her at an arm's length.

"Why not?"

Why not? Merlin, she was infuriating! It was obvious why not!

"You can't just tell me bugger all about anything and expect me to…!" Harry let out an exasperated breath. As tempting as it was, it didn't sit right with him. He needed answers more than… this.
Why was she doing this anyway? Was this just to distract him from the conversation that he desperately needed to have with her? Evasive, as always.

"Oh, Jesus, Harry… I thought we discussed this," Daphne said, blatantly annoyed, for which she had no right to be.

With her recent conversation with Nott on his mind, Harry ignored her, deciding to just be blunt about it. "Why do you always avoid telling me everything? Don't you trust me at all?"

She must have let Zabini in on her plan – that's who the 'we' had to be. And she definitely let Nott in on her plan. Why couldn't he know about it? And, now that he thought about it, there was all that other stuff involving her shoulder and Malfoy that she didn't want to talk about, which he tried to respect, but… it hurt that she kept it from him – especially if he could help. There were so many things that she didn't say and he just couldn't get past it all. And then she decided fucking snog him instead of telling him what she should be telling him! He just couldn't stay calm and rational about this for a moment longer. It was too much. He was sick of it.

He was tired of skirting around the issue and he was tired of hearing the words 'plausible deniability' – he needed to know!

"Well that's a hypocritical statement if there ever was one. You haven't told me everything about your life," Daphne said finally, in a frigid tone. "Don't you trust me at all?"

Letting out a sharp tolerating breath, Harry countered, "That's different. There are things I can't tell you!"

"Are you really certain that it's not the same for me?"

"Yes. Unless someone's depending on you to keep things secret so you can be the saviour of the fucking Wizarding World!"

"Christ, Potter. Have you ever stopped to think that you're not the only one involved in that?" He could barely discern Daphne's expression in the dark cupboard, but he could tell that she was rolling her eyes at him from the tone of her voice. "Just because he's after you doesn't mean that we have no bloody importance and that we have to report to you."

"I still don't see why you can't tell me," Harry pressed further.

Daphne snorted. "You really need to get over yourself."

Not expecting her to say that, Harry's brows furrowed and he threw her a questioning look, which she probably couldn't see very well in the light shining through the cracks in the door.

"There are other people involved in this war who are privy to information that they can't tell you," Daphne explained slowly. "Just because you're Harry-fucking-Potter doesn't mean that you need to know everything. You can't fight Voldemort on your own, as much as I know you'd like to."

"So what you're planning has something to do with Voldemort," Harry bitterly deduced. And Malfoy, he added in his head.

"It's a start. And no, I won't tell you."
Bloody Merlin, she was so fucking aggravating, he could scream. Taking a deep breath, he reigned in his anger. Well, if she wouldn't tell him about that, then maybe… "But what about Malfoy and you – that thing that happened…" He couldn't explain it right because he didn't know enough to put together an intelligible sentence. Or maybe he was just so fed up with this that he couldn't think straight. "Your shoulder."

"That's personal," Daphne responded cuttingly. "I don't ask you about Cho, do I?"

"Oh come on - that's different! Cho isn't hurting me – you still haven't denied that, by the way."

"Because I don't like lying to people."

"What you do is nearly as bad." It wasn't lying, but… it still was in a way, regardless of whatever Nott was teaching him!

"But it'll have to suffice, won't it?" Daphne paused and he could hear the snap of her silver case and see her irritated expression as she lit her fag. "There are a lot of things that I don't want to tell you because you'll have a very bad reaction to them. It's better if you don't know – for your sanity and mine."

Harry gritted his teeth. "It's driving me mad not knowing!"

"Better than being carted off to Azkaban for killing someone. I don't have a contingency plan if that happens."

Harry roughly ran his hand through his hair and sighed, trying to calm the anger that was throbbing in his veins once again. "I wouldn't kill anyone. If I can help…"

"You knowing this information will hurt more than help," Daphne interrupted. "I don't think you understand the importance of information and the consequences of acting irrationally."

Harry's jaw tightened painfully. "Oh really?" he said scathingly. "Sirius wasn't a big enough lesson?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Honestly? You still act on instinct too much and sometimes it's completely wrong."

"But it's more often right!"

"But when there are massive potential consequences involved, you need to understand what you'll be sacrificing and decide if it's worth giving up."

Harry's mind went blank for a moment and he busied his hands to get out his leather case to light another cigarette as he thought of what to possibly respond with. He didn't bother looking for the one he dropped on the floor. It was obviously out since he couldn't smell it burning anymore.

"So what will I be giving up by knowing what you're doing with Malfoy?" he asked, plainly, his tone growing bitterer by the second. "How can I possibly understand the consequences if you don't tell me what's going on?"

"Because it's not about you! It's not what you'll be giving up; it's what I will be giving up! You could ruin everything if I tell you about it all. So I'm sorry if I have to leave you in the dark for a little bit,
but it will be worth it in the end," Daphne apologized vehemently. "Just trust me."

Harry exhaled a wispy cloud of smoke and leaned back against the door, feeling quite defeated and having a hard time relenting. His thoughts were racing and he could only think of one thing clearly. "I really need to know, Daph," he said slowly.

"I know you do, but I can’t tell you just yet."

Closing his eyes and letting out a sigh, Harry tried to calm himself. He really wasn't going to get anything out of her in here, was he? Maybe calm rationality was the way to go with this, but she just made him so… angry.

"You'll tell me after it's over?" he asked reluctantly, still not wanting to stop pressing her for information. He was apprehensive that she would ever tell him about anything.

"Yes," Daphne said quietly. "I promise that I'll tell you as soon as I have the situation under control."

She paused and he could hear her swallow thickly as he took a long drag off his cigarette. "Are we done here?" she asked, her voice sounded wary.

There was a very pregnant pause where Harry wanted to say so many things, but he knew that it would start back up into the same conversation that they kept having over and over again. It wouldn't get him anywhere if he said anything.

"Fine," Harry said through lightly clenched teeth and Daphne quickly pushed past him, slamming the door behind her.

The entire conversation left a bad taste in his mouth. And despite her promise and all that she said, Harry still wasn't going to trust her in the least. He just couldn't.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Harry stomped up the stairs to the Hall of Hexes for his last tutoring session with Nott before the Christmas holiday. He had possibly been through two of the worst days of his life. First of all, he had cricks all up his back from sleeping on a badly conjured mattress for the last two nights, and tired from having to get up to tend to that bloody potion every few hours. He wasn't even sleeping well in the first place. Second of all, Harry couldn't get anything out of Nott, even after he told him that he listened in on Nott's conversation with Daphne. Nott's lips were perpetually sealed on the matter and the questioning only seemed to irritate the Slytherin boy. Dealing with an irritated Nott wasn't that fun either.

In addition, Harry had to attend Defense Against the Dark Arts with Snape earlier, who barked at everyone as they took their practical exams and Ron burnt up half of Harry's final essay for Charms with his botched non-verbal shield spell. He had just gotten done rewriting it, trying to salvage what he had of the thing, and it definitely wasn't as good as the first. He also lost his best quill in the fire, but that was the least of his worries.

On top of all that, random girls kept badgering him with offers of sweets and various beverages that Hermione told him not to drink. Apparently they may contain some sort of love potion from Fred and George's joke shop. And it was all because he didn't have a date for Slughorn's Christmas party, which he almost forgot about due to everything else that he had to deal with. Then Daphne kept giving him the cold shoulder during their study sessions with Hermione, not that he minded. He didn't want to talk to her at all. She was only there to tend to their final potion's project, hand over Crookshank's kittens, and, surprisingly, help Hermione with a portion of her Arithmancy project that was on minerals.

He just didn't know how to deal with her anymore.

Harry paused at the door to the blasted room where he had spent the past two nights, not wanting to go in. He idly wondered if Nott was still irritated and he figured that there was nothing he could do about that if he was. Getting on with it, he stepped through the door and shut it behind him.
Nott was standing in front of the blackboard, a cigarette dangling from his lips and smoke curling around his head as he wrote on the board. Harry's brows rose. Something serious must have been going on because Nott only seemed to smoke when he was... extremely stressed. Five cigarettes were neatly laid out on Harry's usual desk, which was back to its normal size. They had turned their potions project into Slughorn – and Daphne – this morning.

"What's up?" Harry asked cautiously, sitting in his 'assigned' seat.

"You really don't want to know, Potter," Nott muttered around his fag. "Between you and Daphne… I'm not certain which one of you I'd kill first if it came to that."

Undeterred by the casual threat, Harry asked, "Are you having issues with what you're planning for Malfoy?"

Nott plucked the cigarette from his mouth and turned his head to shoot Harry a glare. "No," he said, an irritable sneer ghosting over his face. "Daphne's been… difficult. And you haven't made this any easier on her with your prying."

"Well, if you would just tell me…"

Nott took a long drag off his cigarette, appraising him carefully. "I would if I weren't afraid of having my bollocks bottled and shelved for Daph's personal collection."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he briefly glanced at the title of today's lesson – Personality Types. "Do you always do what she tells you?" He remembered that Nott had a problem with her being controlling. Maybe that would push some buttons and get him to admit some of the things that he wanted to know.

Nott turned back to the blackboard and brusquely underlined the title. It seemed as if he wasn't going to answer, but then he grudgingly said with a reluctant tilt of his head, "Yes. I do."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Snorting derisively, Nott pivoted on his feet and walked toward him, sitting in the seat across from Harry. "Well..." he started with a sigh. "It's a bit difficult to pass her up," he replied, his voice full of begrudging respect. "Formidable opponent."

"Yet she's your friend," Harry said more than asked.

Nott blinked, hesitantly answering after a thoughtful drag off his cigarette, "Yeah. She is." He paused, gazing distantly over Harry's left shoulder. "I'm not close to many people, but..." His eyes were unfocused as if he were fondly remembering something. "It's hard not to like her." He inhaled deeply at his cigarette and seemed to shrug off the memory as he stared down at Harry.

It was rare to see Nott so exposed, almost. Harry wished it would continue because he thought he was finally getting somewhere with one of them, but then Nott's eyes grew cold and focused. It was then Harry knew that he lost the blatant honesty. Back to the same old Nott.

Without preamble, Nott started the lesson and Harry wanted to sigh, almost feeling defeated as he lit a fag of his own. Knowing that he wasn't going to get a word in to put them back on the subject they were previously discussing, Harry tried as hard as he could to focus on what Nott was saying about ego-dominant personalities.
Harry glared at Romilda Vane as she happily skipped away from him, wishing that she would just go to the special place in hell that was reserved for her. She was definitely an ego-dominant extrovert if he had to categorize her. Not only did she try to shove some sort of beverage or sweet down his throat every chance she got, she wouldn't leave him alone. He had to accept the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, which were likely spiked with love potion, to get her to go away.

These girls were going mental over him and he knew it was merely due to the fact that he was the apparent 'Chosen One'. Or whatever the Prophet or Witch Weekly were printing about him these days. It only served to irritate him, really. He was almost to the point of declaring that he was gay and telling everyone that he was going to Slughorn's party with Theodore Nott. That would definitely get them off his back.

Stowing the tainted box of Chocolate Cauldrons into his bag, Harry weaved around the groups of girls that were loitering underneath the mistletoe toward the Transfiguration classroom. Ron and Hermione had a huge row over breakfast so he had no idea where they had gone off to. If he could have gotten their attention for long enough to break it up, he would've, but they paid him no mind the entire morning.¹

It all reminded him of fourth year. He was dateless for a party – which was happening tonight and Nott didn't count, unless he was pushed to the point of going mad – while the girl he fancied was going with someone else, and Ron and Hermione weren't getting on. It felt hopeless as all bloody hell and it didn't look as if Christmas was going to be any joy to go through this year with Ron and Hermione fighting like that.

Harry stared over at Daphne when he strode pass her in the corridor. She was standing between Nott and Zabini, watching him, as Zabini bent down to whisper something into her ear. Her smirk and sideways glance along the corridors made his brows furrow, but he continued on to Transfiguration anyway, trying not to give it a second thought. They looked as if they were up to something.

He knew what that expression on Daphne's face meant and it couldn't be any good.

Surprisingly though, Daphne, Zabini, and Nott showed up for class and huddled in the corner, quietly discussing something that Harry probably couldn't be privy of. Ron lumbered in just before class started and sat down next to him in a huff with lipstick smeared down his jaw – from a brief encounter with Lavender under the mistletoe no doubt. Not long after, Hermione entered and resolutely took a seat next to Seamus. She didn't spare a glance in their direction.

All throughout class, Harry gave his best to focus on the task at hand (human Transfiguration) and he tried very hard not to think of all the bizarre problems in his life. Hermione laughed unkindly when Ron had managed to give himself a handlebar moustache and singed off half an eyebrow in one go. And Ron retaliated by doing cruel impressions of Hermione jumping up and down every time Professor McGonagall asked a question. Half the class seemed to get a kick out of that but Harry didn't find it funny at all.¹

He watched, his brow creased with concern, as Hermione raced out of the classroom on the verge of tears just as class ended, leaving half her things behind. Deciding that she needed him more than Ron – he could be an absolute git sometimes – Harry grabbed her forgotten things and followed her.¹

It didn't take long to track her down in the girls' bathroom on the third floor, just as she emerged.
Luna Lovegood was patting her back in a comforting way; the gerbil on Luna's shoulder gave a melancholy chirp. "Oh, Hello, Harry," Luna said, her protruding eyes catching sight of him as he came around the corner. "Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna." Harry paused, holding out Hermione's books. "You left your stuff…"

"Oh yes," Hermione muttered, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide herself from them so she could wipe her eyes on her pencil case. "Thank you, Harry." He could visibly tell that she was trying to hold herself together. "Well, I better get going…"

Just as he was about to offer some – probably botched – words of comfort, she hurried off in a flurry of bushy brown hair.

"She's a bit upset," Luna intoned. "I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She said something about that Ron Weasley."

"Yeah, they had a row."

Luna nodded vaguely. "He says very funny things sometimes, doesn't he?" she said, patting the chattering gerbil on her shoulder. "But he can be a bit unkind. I noticed that last year."

"I suppose," Harry said, exhaling a long breath. Luna always had the uncanny ability of speaking uncomfortable truths. "So, have you had a good term?"

"Oh, it's been alright." The gerbil hopped off her shoulder and started circling her feet, chirping at and playing with her shoelaces. "Ginny's been very nice. She stopped two boys in our Transfiguration class calling me 'Loony' the other day-"

"How would you like to come to Slughorn's party with me tonight?" The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could stop them, but he didn't feel as if it was a terrible idea after the fact.

Luna stared up at him in surprise. "Slughorn's party? With you?"

"Yeah," Harry said with an awkward nod. "We're supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like… I mean…" He couldn't think of the proper way to word his intentions. He didn't want her to think that this was a date – he still had Daphne. "Just as friends, you know. But if you don't want to…"

"Oh, no, I'd love to go with you as friends!" Luna said with a wide smile that he'd never seen on her before. It was actually quite charming. She should smile like that more often. "Nobody's ever asked me to a party as a friend. Is that why you dyed your eyebrow? For the party? Should I do mine too?"

"No," Harry responded, "that was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me." He shifted on his feet. "So I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eight then?"

"AHA!" a voice screamed from overhead and both of them jumped. Peeves was weaving and bouncing through the corridor, grinning maliciously at them. "Potty asked Loony to go to the party! Potty lurves Loony! Potty lurveeeee Looonnnny!"

"Well it's nice to keep these things private," Harry said dryly. With Peeves screeching about it, everyone would know within the hour. Actually… it wasn't such a bad thing. At least it would keep
the love potions at bay and maybe get Romilda Vane to go away.1

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry," Luna said, trying to grab at her gerbil, who was trying to chase after the mischievous ghost making his way down the stairs. "Cricket likes to play with Peeves. I'll see you tonight!"

Harry watched after her, pondering exactly why exactly he had acted on instinct and asked Luna Lovegood to Slughorn's party, when he heard shouting coming from an alcove up ahead. Brows raised, Harry moved toward it to see what all the fuss was about.

"...well-trained dog!"

"For the last bloody time, Draco – I did not send Blaise after you! You're the one that went and opened your big fucking mouth!"

"Ugh – Just admit it, Greengrass! You did! I mean, if you wanted to rough me up, why didn't you just do it yourself?"

Harry peered around the corner to see Malfoy holding Daphne against the wall by the front of her robes. Daphne had a grip on his hair and was pulling his head back, her other hand struggling to dislodge the grip he had on her.

"Well maybe I will!" Daphne gritted out, roughly pushing him back and tripping him with her leg wrapped around his knee. Malfoy landed ungracefully on his arse, taking her down with him. Harry stood still, unsure of what to do. Daphne seemed to be handling herself just fine… She scrambled to sit up straight and she straddled his torso, balling up the front of his jumper with her hand.

Daphne raised her fist, her face set and determined, and Malfoy growled, "Do it, I dare you," glaring at her.

Eyes narrowed, Daphne paused, reluctantly lowering her hand. She pulled him closer to her so that they were almost nose to nose. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she said lowly, her eyes sharp and cold as she slapped him.

Harry's eyes widened.

Wincing, Malfoy didn't answer her; their rough breathing seemed to echo in the alcove. She slapped him again, hard. "Well?" She raised her hand and smacked him even harder, not giving him any time to answer her. Malfoy's cheek was starting to turn red, but he didn't say a thing. He didn't even make a sound. "Does that get you off?"

Was she deliberately trying to get a rise out of him? Harry was quite shocked that Malfoy wasn't retaliating. Usually the Slytherin boy wasn't this silent.

Malfoy's jaw was clenched and he sneered at her. Daphne shook her head, scoffing. "You know what?" She slapped him one last time and it echoed in the alcove. "I'm sick of dealing with you," she said, harshly shoving him back down where his head made a dull thud, connecting with the stone floor. His eyes were squeezed shut as she climbed off him, standing over him for a split second before she walked away.

Shifting on his feet, Harry swallowed thickly when Daphne caught him loitering at the corner of the alcove. She halted in her tracks, staring at him with an unreadable expression, her blue eyes piercing
through him. He wanted to say something but kept coming up blank, not knowing what to think – he
didn't even know if he could properly process what he just saw. After a brief moment, she blinked
and, without a word, brushed past him, not looking back for an instant.

Harry watched her until she rounded the corner, resisting the urge to follow her and ask her what the
bloody hell that was all about, but he figured that it wouldn't go to well considering their track
record. He could faintly hear Malfoy getting up from the floor. "Piece of work, isn't she?" Malfoy
asked disdainfully when he spotted him, brushing himself off.

Harry just stared as Malfoy straightened himself out, wanting to roll his eyes. "Don't be like that,
Potter. I know you're sleeping with her," he acridly intoned.

It was like someone had punched him in the stomach. All the air left his body and Harry inhaled
sharply. How did he find out? "I don't know what you're talking about, Malfoy." He tried as hard as
he could to sound nonchalant, but the breathlessness of his voice gave him away.

Malfoy sauntered forward, standing much too close for comfort. Harry leaned back, staring at him
warily. Up close, Malfoy looked really bloody terrible – as if he had been run over by a lorry. His
eyes seemed as if they were sunken in to his skull and Daphne's handprint marred his cheek and jaw.
His face was covered with pale residual bruises, smattered across his ashy skin and they continued
down his neck and disappeared underneath his collar.

It must have looked much worse when he went into the hospital wing if this was what Madame
Pomfrey considered healed enough to be released. Did Zabini really do that to him? Come to think of
it, Zabini looked pristine as always. How was it that Malfoy looked as if he was approaching the
edge of death and Zabini didn't even appear to be slightly injured?

"She told me all about it. Quite pathetic, really. Her love, her savoir – the great Harry Potter,"
Malfoy taunted, his eyes full of mirth. He smirked. "Though that didn't stop her from fucking me in
the Room of Requirement."

Harry bit his cheek, willing himself to unclench his fists. He was very hesitant to believe Malfoy. He
knew that he should just walk away, but he couldn't help but grit out, "When?"

"Why do you ask?" Malfoy's smirk morphed into a wide smile "Afraid you got my sloppy seconds?"

His blood felt as if it was boiling and he was certain that the flush creeping up his neck would
consume him any moment. Harry rushed forward and pinned Malfoy to the wall with a tight grip on
his jumper. "Tell me when, Malfoy!" Harry said, terse and impatient.

Malfoy sneered. "Couple weeks ago. She was sniffing around in that invisibility cloak of yours." –
his hands wrapped around Harry's wrists, trying to pull him off – "Couldn't resist, I suppose," he
drawled with a self-satisfied quirk of his lips.

"His invisibility cloak? He never let her borrow it. Maybe Malfoy didn't know the difference between
his and Nott's… It must have been the night that she went all dodgy on Trelawney's sherry. She said
she didn't know what Malfoy was doing in there – maybe that was because she was… No, she
wouldn't do that. Would she?"

"You're lying," Harry accused, shaking the Slytherin boy.

"Do I need to say it louder?" Malfoy quipped. "I. Fucked. Your girlfriend."
His body language wasn't giving away any signs that he was lying, but Harry still couldn't believe him. He needed to be rational about this. His mind whirled, torn between killing him and drilling him with questions and then killing him some more. Then he thought of something… "Wait. I thought you said she fucked you?" Harry asked, his brows furrowed.

"We fucked," Malfoy said sharply, pushing Harry off him and smoothing out his jumper. He wasn't looking him in the eyes like he was before. "What do the details matter?"

A small smile played about Harry's lips. Oh yes, he was definitely onto something. In the back of his mind, he went over every lesson that Nott taught him. "Because. I want to know exactly what you did to her."

"Oh I see," Malfoy said slowly. "Didn't know you were into that sort of thing, Potter."

"Don't change the subject," Harry said stiffly, trying not to take the bait and backing off a few steps so he didn't give into his desire to punch Malfoy's pointy little ferret face. He had to remain calm.

"We went at it like nifflers, right on top of your invisibility cloak," Malfoy said, maliciously stalking toward him. "And afterward, she said it was the most sensational fuck she's ever had."

"Details, Malfoy," Harry said through gritted teeth, trying to reign in the anger that was clawing through his veins like a raging fire. He backed up a few more steps, still holding back his urge to tackle the Slytherin boy to the ground.

It really was no wonder why he was covered in bruises.

Malfoy faltered, blinking rapidly, and Harry wanted to smile. He was still going to ask Daphne about it, but… from the way Malfoy was looking at him… This was much more satisfying than punching him. He silently thanked Nott about a thousand times for that lesson on body language. "Yeah, I don't believe you," Harry said, cutting Malfoy off before he could say a word. "Nice try though."

And with that, Harry swept passed the blonde Slytherin, feeling much better than he did before. Malfoy was only trying to goad him into fighting. Now he just had to find Daphne – he hoped he could before lunch was over.

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Luckily, Daphne was just outside the Great Hall, pacing and drawing deeply at a dying fag. She finished it in one breath and lit another in succession, vanishing the first with a smooth swish of her wand. Resigned to the fact that he had to do this, Harry walked up to her, searching his pockets for his leather case. "We need to talk," he said, pulling out his case and looking around the Entrance Hall for any onlookers. He got a few glances from a gangly third year walking out of the Great Hall and he inched away from Daphne uncomfortably.

"Of course you would," Daphne muttered quietly, raising an eyebrow toward him. "This is getting to be a bad habit of yours."

Harry lit his cigarette and grabbed at her sleeve, pulling her down the corridor that led toward the dungeons. He didn't want to have a row in public – especially right in Entrance Hall where anyone could see and hear them. "I would stop but you don't tell me anything now days. I'm bloody sick of
Pulling her sleeve from his grasp, Daphne scoffed. "I told you that I can't," she whispered through her teeth, walking along side of him.

"That's not good enough, Daph," Harry whispered back, pulling her into the first abandoned classroom that he saw and warding the door.

Daphne blew a long breath of smoke in his face and he winced as it stung his eyes, making them water. "Well what do you want me to say?"

He ignored her question.

"I know that you're not going to give me any straight answers, but what was that earlier with Malfoy?" he asked, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. He inhaled deeply at his cigarette, sorely tempted to get her back by blowing smoke into her eyes.

Daphne's brows rose. "What makes you think I won't give you any straight answers on that?"

"Because you have a bad habit of not giving straight answers period," Harry retorted. "I mean, there's your shoulder, the thing with Dumbledore, Malfoy… the Scrying Concoction. It's a bloody pain trying to wrestle answers from you!"

"Fine, you want straight answers? I'll give them to you," Daphne said, wisps of blue smoke trickling out of her mouth as she spoke.

Harry stared at her warily. There had to be a catch.

"But sometimes it's just not that simple," Daphne continued, sighing. "Dumbledore – that's easy enough. Ask Aberforth. Dumbledore's apparently a conniving bastard – always has his own agenda so it wouldn't do to trust him. But everything else…” She shook her head.

With an impatient sigh, Harry muttered, "If you apparently trust me, it doesn't make sense why you won't tell me."

"Because I can't have you interfering with what I have planned! It would ruin everything."

It was the same old story with her every single bloody time. Harry glared at her. "You know, when you investigated Malfoy, you were very open with the information. I don't understand - what changed?"

Pursing her lips, Daphne stared at him for a long calculating moment. Harry could practically see the gears turning in her head from the way she was looking at him and he wondered what she was thinking. If only he paid more attention in Occlumency with Snape – he'd cast 'Legimins' on her in a second if he knew how to do it right. It seemed as if that was the only way he was going to get proper answers from her.

"Well…” Daphne hesitated. "I found out that the Aurors have a mole and Blaise's letter must have been intercepted somehow. I've tried sending other letters, but... no response on that."

"So you decided to come up with some scheme to get him arrested yourself?” Harry guessed, raising
his brows. Where was she going with that? Sure, yes… the Aurors having a mole was an important piece of information but it still didn't explain why she couldn't tell him anything.

Daphne threw him a stern glance. "I shouldn't even be discussing this."

"No, you should. This is good," Harry said, nodding and hoping she would continue. It didn't look like she was going to though.

Taking a drag off her cigarette, Daphne leaned back against one of the desks. "It's not under control yet, Harry."

He desperately wanted to roll his eyes. "Okay, fine then," he said sharply, ignoring the urge to oppose her because that probably wouldn't lead to any cooperation on her part. It was clearly pointless to ask about what she was planning so he changed the topic to the real reason he was there. "What was that with Malfoy earlier?"

"It was nothing," she replied with a shrug, her tone guarded. "Just a row. We have those from time to time."

"Didn't look like 'just a row'," Harry commented, crossing his arms over his chest. "Unless you're saying that you slap him around from time to time as well."

Daphne's eyes narrowed toward him and she snorted contemptuously. "No, I can't say I do."

Harry inhaled deeply at his cigarette, sensing that she had more to say, but she didn't continue. Breaking the tense moment of silence, Harry muttered, "He said you two… had sex. In the Room of Requirement."

"And you believe him?" She raised an eyebrow and flicked the ashes off her fag onto the floor.

"I'm not sure. I was hoping that you'd give me a straight answer," Harry responded, not quite lying. "It is a little suspicious, considering everything."

"I didn't, alright?" she reassured. "Don't worry your pretty little head about that. He was probably just trying to get under your skin. He's good at that."

"Yeah… speaking of which, he knows about us," Harry said, his jaw clenching slightly.

"Mhm. I told him," Daphne said, taking a drag off her cigarette. "I thought it would…"

"You thought it would what?" Harry asked sharply.

"It was stupid really – an oversight. I got angry at him and I wanted to get him even angrier so I… told him," Daphne said, exhaling a long breath. "He won't use it for anything other than blackmail anyway. That's his style."

"Is he blackmailing you?"

"Not yet." She didn't say anything else.

Harry's brows furrowed and he felt a bit confused. Part of him was thankful that he got a few straight answers from her, part of him was overwhelmingly frustrated, and yet another part of him still
couldn't help but ruminate on the question that had been making the back of his brain itch since he saw the confrontation.

Harry dithered, feeling a bit uncomfortable. "Why did you ask if slapping him got him off?" he asked cautiously, cutting through the pungent silence between them.

Blowing out a long puff of smoke, Daphne averted her gaze and shrugged. "He's a violent git, obviously."

Harry pondered exactly how that answered his question. And just as he was going to open his mouth to speak, Daphne interrupted. "I told you that I don't like talking about this," she said, glancing at him and shaking her head. "It's… in the past. Done away with. Nothing good will come of talking about this."

"So that's about your… relationship with him," Harry hesitantly speculated, shifting on his feet. He knew she loathed any mentioning of the subject.

"Maybe," Daphne replied in a nearly breathless voice. She quickly finished up her cigarette and lit another.

Harry's mind was reeling, imagining a plethora of depraved scenarios involving fighting and slapping and the 'said' violent git and Daphne. They must have had some sort of row when her shoulder got injured as well. He wished he could know about it. It made the rage bubble up inside him again when he thought of how her shoulder could have gotten injured considering all of this information.

Yet, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know from the way she was acting – so closed in and jittery, but so open at the same time. He definitely didn't want what he thought might have happened to be confirmed.

"Is that all?" Daphne asked quietly, looking up at him with her brows raised.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded, albeit a tad unwillingly. "Yeah… but you can tell me, y'know," Harry offered. He was still concerned, regardless of everything else. "Anything. If he's… bothering you…"

"I don't need saving, okay, Harry?" Daphne said calmly, tilting her head toward him. "I can handle it pretty well on my own."

Harry bit his cheek, staring at her for a calculating second. He shook his head.

"You're not handling it though. You're just doing with it what you do with everything else." He paused to take a drag off his cigarette. "Avoiding it."

It was quite amazing that she even had the ability to evade her problems. He bitterly wondered how deep her evasion went.

Unexpectedly, Daphne was smirking at him when he looked back at her. "You sound like Blaise," she said.

That definitely didn't make the bitterness fade. "I don't understand how you can tell him but not me."

"I haven't, really," Daphne replied, not looking at him. "He's just… good at getting it out of me."
"So just tell me what you told him," Harry said, once again doubtful that she would.

He heard her swallow and let out a long breath. "It's hard for me," she whispered. "I'm... not ready."

Harry's forehead wrinkled at the centre. "Is it really that bad?"

Daphne nodded and Harry's brows rose.

His head kept replaying the row in his mind, looking for clues. Then he faintly heard the sound of students rushing past the door, making a racket, and he took the last drag off his cigarette. He didn't want to have to leave for class yet – there was still so much he wanted to ask, even if he wasn't going to get any proper answers from her, but he pushed those questions to the back of his mind.

"Well..." he trailed off staring at the door, feeling an overwhelming amount of disappointment building up in his stomach – and, admittedly, a whole lot of pent up rage toward a particular blonde Slytherin. "I guess we should go."

The sounds of students passing by were getting louder.

"I'm sorry," Daphne breathed. "If that means anything to you."

It certainly didn't help, but it was a nice gesture. "It's fine," Harry said absentmindedly, still wondering what it was that Malfoy did to her to cause her to act like this whenever anything surrounding their relationship came up. Malfoy obviously hurt her... but was it in the way that he was envisioning? Or was it something else entirely? It was a little frightening to think of it actually. It made him realize that maybe he cared a bit too much for Daphne, even though she treated him like... this.

He undid the wards on the door. "You'll tell me sometime though, right?" he asked, suppressing the acrimony in his voice and pausing with his hand over the doorknob.

"Eventually," Daphne said with a nod.

He still wasn't sure if he could trust her word.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Luna was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs in the entrance hall, dressed in a spangled gown that was shaped like a Christmas tree. It was a lot less garish than he expected and he was shocked to find that she had even left off the radish earrings and the Butterbeer cap necklace she usually sported. Harry shifted in his old dress robes that he wore to the Yule Ball years ago. He had gotten Dean to tailor them to fit, since he had grown quite a bit over the last two years. Harry never was good at sewing spells.

"Of all the girls you could have asked, you picked Looney Lovegood?" Ron whispered to him when he spotted Harry's date, smoothing down the front of Neville's bulky robes he'd hired. Lavender trailed behind them, glancing around the entrance hall angrily. They had tried to avoid her, but she caught up with them somewhere around the second floor. ¹

"So where is she?" Lavender asked in a huff, staring at Ron accusingly.

Harry's eyebrows rose and he took his chance to sneak away from the inevitable lover's spat that would ensue, only to bump straight into Daphne. She steadied his shoulders. "Hello, Potter," she drawled, her eyes discreetly appraising him.

Surprised, Harry stared at her for a moment, his eyes wide and his heart feeling as if it was in his throat. She looked… Why did she have to look so bloody gorgeous? The wispy silvery-white gown left little to the imagination and he became suddenly aware of the groups of people lined up, watching the scene. Wrenching himself away from her, Harry glared for the benefit of the audience and calmly walked past her, suppressing the contrasting emotions that were welling up inside him.

"Come on, Weasley. Before I curse your girlfriend silent, yeah?" Harry faintly heard Daphne say as he moved over to Luna. All of the girls gathered around the entrance hall seemed to glower at him resentfully as he approached his date. From up close, Harry thought Luna looked quite nice too, but he felt a little guilty that she wasn't necessarily his first choice of date. He threw her a grin to cover up the guilty look that was starting to spread. He really needed to treat his friends that mattered a lot better.
"Hi," he greeted, glancing out of the corner of his eye at a dark-haired girl, who pointed at Luna's dress and giggled loudly. "Shall we get going then?"

"Oh yes," Luna said in a vague cheery tone. "Where is the party?"

"Slughorn's office." Harry led her up the set of marble stairs, away from the jealous harpies in the entrance hall. To his relief, none of them followed. "Did you hear there's supposed to be a vampire coming?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour?"

"I – what?" Harry asked, his brows furrowed. "You mean the Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, he's a vampire," Luna said, matter-of-factly. "Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took over from Cornelius Fudge, but he was forced not to publish by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn't want the truth to get out!"

Harry didn't reply. He was used to Luna repeating her father's insane ramblings enough to know that opposing Luna's point of view was pointless. The party was just around the corner anyway. They could hear the laughter, music, and the sounds of conversation growing louder with each step.

Nott was waiting for them by the door and gave him a curt nod, looking very poised and almost imposing in his dark dress robes. "Potter - Lovegood," he greeted. "How are your gerbils treating you?"

Luna's face lit up at the question and she launched into a gushing answer that Harry only half listened to, but he kept staring at Nott the entire time trying to dissect his expressions to find a motive. Nott actually seemed quite interested in the subject or, at least, he feigned interest very well. Harry didn't know what to think of it. He, at least, never thought that Nott, of all people, would be polite to Luna.

Nott ceased his conversation with Lovegood to greet Daphne and Ron, in a manner. "Daphne – I didn't expect you to ask Weasley." His tone was teasing.

Ron glared from beside Daphne and she smirked. "Be nice, Theo. We wouldn't want me to tell Lovegood your little secret now, would we?" she asked playfully, glancing over at Luna with an amiable smile.

"That wouldn't be very nice of you," Luna said in her usual dreamy tone.

"Not at all," Nott deadpanned.

Harry glanced between all of them, looking just as confused as Ron at the moment. He felt as if he were missing out on a big piece of information that he couldn't discern from the conversation. Unless… Harry glanced at Nott out of the corner of his eyes. Did Nott fancy Luna…? That was the only conclusion he could draw from the situation, bizarre as it was – and highly implausible.

"Shall we enter?" Nott asked, breaking the tension and holding open the door for Ron and Luna, Daphne shortly followed, but Harry put a hand on her shoulder, slowing her down so he could enter alongside her.
"What was that all about?" he asked in a whisper.

"That would be a bit difficult to explain," Daphne said with a strange look in her eyes that Harry didn't recognize until her gaze swept over him slowly. Harry swallowed thickly as she whispered, "You look good."

His heart seemed to want to lodge itself in his throat again. "You do too," he admitted, embarrassed by his inability to control the breathiness of his voice. He wished things were much simpler and that he had asked her to go instead of Luna. And he wished that they weren't constantly arguing, but that was beside the point.

With what seemed to be a sad grin, she tore her gaze away from him and moved forward, grabbing Ron's hand. She pulled him toward the mountains of beverages.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry caught up with Luna and glanced around the room, certain that it had been expanded by magic. The ceiling and walls were draped with emerald, crimson, and gold hangings to make it appear as if they were all inside a vast tent. Despite its size, the room was still crowded and stuffy. A haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were carrying heavy platters of food, carefully avoiding bumping into people.¹

"Harry, m'boy!" Slughorn boomed as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed through the throng of elderly warlocks, where they lost Nott. "Come in, come in, so many people I'd like you to meet!"¹

Gripping Harry's arm tightly, Slughorn led him into the party with a greedy glint in his eyes. Harry grasped Luna's hand and dragged her along with him, not wanting to leave her behind.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires. And, of course, his friend Sanguini."¹

Worple's eyes widened from behind his glasses as he grabbed Harry's hand and shook it enthusiastically. Who Harry presumed was a vampire, Sanguini, nodded at him politely. He looked rather bored with the whole affair and his eyes glanced hungrily over at the gaggle of curious girls.¹

"Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!" Worple said. "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?"¹

"Er," Harry said, raising his eyebrows, "were you?"¹

"Just as modest as Horace described," Worple gushed. "But seriously. I would be delighted to write it myself. People are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn't quite — Sanguini, stay here!"¹

The vampire had been edging toward the group of girls slowly as Worple was distracted by Harry. "Here, have a pasty." Worple took one from a passing elf and stuffed it into Sanguini's hand before turning his attention back to Harry. "My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea—"¹

"I'm definitely not interested," Harry said, shaking his head. His eyes caught a long mane of brown hair as it disappeared between two members of the Weird sisters. "And I've just seen a friend of
He pulled Luna after him into the crowd. "Hermione! Hermione!"

"Harry! There you are, thank goodness. Hi, Luna."

"What happened to you?" Harry asked, his eyes roving over her disheveled form. It looked as though she had just fought her way out of a nasty thicket of Devil's Snare.

"McClaggen tried to get me under the mistletoe and Zabini didn't quite like that. I got caught in a bit of a… well it's no matter now," she vaguely explained with a sigh, trying to straighten out her tangled hair and smooth down the wrinkled bit of her crimson dress. "Come on, let's go this way, we'll be able to see them coming, they're so tall."

"Sort of serves you right for coming with both of them," Harry hissed.

"I didn't know what to do about it! McClaggen wouldn't say no and Zabini…" – she shook her head – "– they served their purpose enough. I just didn't know it was going to be this bad."

The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, taking goblets of mead on the way. Harry stopped short when he realized that Professor Trelawney was standing there alone. Maybe, if he didn't move, she wouldn't see him.

"Hello," Luna said politely.

"Good evening, my dear," Professor Trelawney slurred, blinking rapidly toward the Ravenclaw girl. Harry could smell sherry on her breath. "I haven't seen you in my classes lately."

"No, I've got Firenze this year," Luna said, shaking her head almost wistfully.

"Oh, yes," Professor Trelawney replied, snorting into her bottle as she took a drink. "Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought, would you not, that now I am returned to the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no! We share classes. It's an insult, frankly, an insult. Do you know…."

Harry drew closer to Hermione during Luna and Trelawney's conversation. "Let's get something straight first. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'd stoop that low?"

Throwing her a doubtful look, Harry whispered, "Hermione, if you're willing to take both Zabini and McClag-"

"There's a difference! I've got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, have happened at Keeper tryouts."

"Good," Harry muttered. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match."

Hermione huffed. "Is Quidditch all you boys care about? Oh blast – Zabini." She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated. He barely caught her squeezing through a group of pipe-
smoking wizards before she vanished.1

"Have you seen Granger?" Zabini asked, gracefully sidestepping around the crowd.

"No – sorry," Harry replied, shaking his head.

"Don't fib, Potter, you were just talking to her. Is she alright? McClaggen is one nasty piece of work."

Harry's eyebrows shot up at the concern and he pretended that he didn't just hear that come from Zabini's mouth. It was too puzzling to acknowledge. "I thought you two were fighting over her."

Dusting off his – likely over-priced – burgundy dress robes, Zabini snorted. "I wouldn't call it fighting. I got rid of him. Now, if you would, please point me to where Granger ran off to."

"Er." Harry glanced around and pointed in the general direction where Hermione disappeared. "That way, I think."

"Thank you," Zabini muttered curtly before he went back to his sidestepping business. Harry's eyes trailed after him and landed on Daphne, standing in the corner with an older man dressed in a Muggle business suit, which Harry found strange. They seemed to be quietly chatting – and where was Ron?

Harry leaned down to whisper, "Would you mind if I went over there for a moment, Luna?" into Luna's ear.

Luna nodded, but the words that came out of her mouth formed a reply to Trelawney. Harry took that as a yes, though. Who knew with Luna? He'd be back soon. He didn't want to abandon her, but she seemed to be having a good conversation with Trelawney. He didn't know that such a thing could exist.

Pushing through a very happy and extremely pissed group of Irish wizards, Harry made his way slowly to the corner where Daphne was.

"...on the twenty-second," the business man drawled, sipping from his glass of wine.

"I suppose that'll work for me," Daphne said with a sigh. "Hello, Harry."

"Hi," Harry muttered, shifting on his feet. His resolve seemed to fly out the window into awkwardness at the moment. He felt as if he walked in on an important conversation, from the way the Muggle-attired bloke was looking at him. Harry tried to hold back a suspicious glance toward him.

"Eric, this is Harry Potter. Harry – Eric Johnson. He's Angelina Johnson's grandfather."

Daphne's introduction made things a little less awkward, but he was still rather wary of Eric and he couldn't put his finger on a reason as to why. There was something about him that struck Harry as untrustworthy.

"Nice to meet you sir," Harry said, reaching out to shake hands with him and watching him, trying not to show the wariness he was feeling.
"Please – call me Eric. I've heard quite a bit about you. Mostly surrounding Quidditch – Angie goes on and on about it whenever she visits." His voice was posh and he seemed well spoken, but Harry felt a sleazy undertone to it.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, she's a great chaser."

"That she is. I tried to make all the games, but it's difficult to travel long distance without magic. If only the Ministry could legalize magic carpets…" Eric trailed off looking over at Daphne, who gave him a sharp look. She took a long drag off her cigarette.

Harry's brows furrowed slightly. What would a Muggle be doing at Slughorn's Christmas party? Or maybe he was a Squib, which would make sense. From what he could remember, Angelina Johnson was a Pureblood. Maybe he was friends with Slughorn somehow? Yet… He glanced over at Daphne, who seemed very comfortable with Eric, as though they were well acquainted. Did she invite him?

"Erm, I apologize if I'm prying, sir, but how do you two know each other?" Harry said, gesturing between Daphne and Eric before he sipped his mead.

"Oh, we met ages ago," Eric said in a smooth tone.

"I brew potions for him from time to time, since he's not so great with a cauldron," Daphne explained, her lips quirking a bit as she took another drag off her smoke.

"Yes, among other things," Eric added. "I always like to help those in need of building their CV."

Nodding slowly, Harry had an inkling that they weren't telling the entire truth but let it slide, focusing on the real reason he came over there. "That's great. I just came over here to ask if Daphne had seen Ron."

"I left him by the alcohol. He didn't seem very keen on socializing." Bluish smoke trickled out of her mouth when she spoke and pointed toward the other side of the room, where pyramids of wine flutes and snifters full of alcohol glistened in the light. Faintly, he could see a patch of red hair peeking through the crowd.

"Thanks," Harry said. "It was nice meeting you…Eric."

"Of course. Pleasure's all mine."

As Harry tromped his way through the room, his instinct kept telling him that Eric had something to do with Malfoy and what Daphne was planning. Why else would he be at Slughorn's Christmas party? It was so out of place, but – judging by the crowd – any suspicious activities would go unnoticed amongst the guests unless you were looking for it.

But why would he mention that he wasn't a wizard? That made the whole situation stick out like a sore thumb. And why would Daphne need to get a Squib involved?

Johnson… Daphne must have mentioned him before. He swore that she did, but when?

Thoughts whirled around his head frantically as he found Ron leaning against one of the gold hangings that lined the wall, nursing an empty glass of Firewhiskey. "How's it goin' with Luna?" he asked, his speech slightly slurred.
"Fine," Harry said. "She's talking to Trelawney." Reaching for the empty snifter, Harry took it and set it on one of the silver platters passing by. "I don't think you should drink any more of that, Ron."

"Why shouldn't I?" Ron asked defensively. "Have you seen her cuddling up with Zabini and McClaggen like some common scarlet woman?"

He didn't even have to guess to know who he was talking about.

Harry heaved a sigh. He really didn't want to deal with that right now. "She can 'cuddle up' to whomever she likes. You have Lavender, or have you forgotten?"

But Ron ignored him. "Firs' Krum – now… them."

"Why don't you go find your girlfriend?" Harry asked, cutting Ron off. If he didn't interrupt, he knew there would be a drunken tirade. Ron wasn't the most graceful of people, especially when he was slightly tipsy. Or flat out drunk, like he was now. Ron didn't have a good tolerance for it.

"I don't wanna see either of them. Where's Greengrass?" Ron asked, looking around the room as he stumbled up from his spot against the wall.

"Erm…" Harry steadied his friend.

Harry heard Daphne's voice behind him. "Right here. I leave you alone for a few minutes and you're already completely sloshed?"

Stepping forward to loop her arm through Ron's, Daphne gave a laugh. "You don't hold your Firewhiskey well, do you? Come on. Let's let Harry get on with his date with Lovegood." She gave him a small grin and carted Ron away.

Persistently, Harry followed, catching up to them after he jumped over a house elf. "Hey! Wait a second. What were you doing with that Muggle bloke?"

"Johnson's a Squib," Daphne said offhandedly, rolling her eyes. "Though I can see why he would give you that impression."

Harry stopped dead in his tracks and Daphne raised an eyebrow toward him. Johnson! That was the mysterious Johnson she was talking about with Nott? So he was right! That bloke was involved with the Malfoy plans somehow.

"What is it?" Daphne asked, staring expectantly at him, still grasping onto Ron.

Shaking his head, Harry muttered, "Nothing."

Her eyes narrowed, but then he heard her sigh and her face seemed to relax. "Go back to your date, yeah? Have some fun."

Ron bumped into him, swaying forward drunkenly on his feet, only to be caught by Daphne. His ginger-haired friend dazedly glanced at both of them with a confused frown on his face, hanging off Daphne as they stood near the door to the corridor.

Harry watched them walk out and he let out a breath, pivoting on his feet. He was incredibly torn.
He wanted so much to follow her and Ron out that door and probe for answers. And yet something was keeping him from doing it. He didn't know what it was – maybe it was the idea of trusting her, but… Harry sighed, deciding to wander back over to Luna.

Maybe he had had too much mead. Or maybe he hadn't had enough mead and he took another pint of it, narrowly avoiding Slughorn and Nott. Unfortunately, he bumped into Hermione and Zabini, who looked as if they were actually enjoying themselves on their own. Harry shook his head and resolutely glanced in the other direction, pretending he just didn't witness that happening under the mistletoe. It was too much to deal with.

"Harry Potter!" Professor Trelawney said in grave tone, noticing him for the first time. Luna just smiled widely at him.

"Oh, hello," Harry said, cursing his luck. She didn't spot him before, why would he expect that to happen a second time? Good luck obviously didn't strike the same place twice.

"My dear boy…" she whispered. "The rumors! The stories! 'The Chosen One'! Of course, I have known for a very long time… The omens were never good, Harry. But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance."

"Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject's most important!" a loud voice boomed and Slughorn appeared out of nowhere, carrying a mince pie and a large glass of mead. "But I don't think I've ever known such a natural at Potions," Slughorn gushed, throwing Harry a fond glance. "Instinctive, you know – like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill. Why even Severus-"

To Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and scooped Snape out of the crowd like he was there the whole time.

"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus! I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making. Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he stared at Harry. "Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, it's natural ability!" Slughorn shouted. "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death. Never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you, Severus-"

"Really?" Snape asked quietly, not taking his eyes off Harry for a second. Harry tried not to fidget under his gaze. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to start investigating the source of his newfound brilliance at Potions.

"Remind me what other subjects you're taking, Harry?" Slughorn asked, taking a large bite of his mince pie.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology …"

"All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror," Snape said, sneering faintly.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do."
"And a great one you'll make too!" Slughorn chimed in.

"I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," Luna commented suddenly and everybody looked at her. "The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They're working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease."

Snorting with laughter, Harry inhaled half his drink up his nose and emerged coughing and spluttering mead all down his front. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. The alarmed and contemptuous look on Snape's face alone was priceless.

"Professor Slughorn," a raspy voice called from behind Harry. Turning his head, Harry's brows furrowed at the sight of Draco Malfoy being dragged toward them by Filch's fingers grasping tightly at his ear. Daphne wasn't far behind them, discreetly following them and towing Ron with her. "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filch's grip, glaring daggers at the caretaker. "All right, I wasn't invited," he muttered, his voice full of contempt. "I was trying to gate crash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" Filch replied in a tone that contrasted the greedy look of glee on his face. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the headmaster say that nighttime prowling's out, unless you've got permission, didn't he, eh?"

"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," Slughorn said with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we'll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco."

Harry's stared at the scene in surprise, expecting Malfoy to be happy with getting to stay and escape punishment, but he almost looked just as disappointed as Filch. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Snape's expression tightened into indifference, morphing from having a hint of anger and even… fear? All of it was gone before he could even register it.

Malfoy graciously thanked Slughorn and Filch shuffled away, looking as if someone had just beaten his cat.

"It's nothing, nothing," Slughorn said, waving away Malfoy's thanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all."

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," Malfoy interrupted quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known…" His eyes kept glancing over at Harry and then to somewhere in the crowd.

Slowly, Harry followed Malfoy's line of sight and caught Daphne, standing next to Nott. Nott was socializing with a plump witch with stringy gray hair and Ron was off to the side, staring at the scene. Harry's gaze moved back to Daphne and the predatory glint in her eyes as she looked at Malfoy gave him chills.

He broke away when Malfoy caught him staring and Harry kept his face expressionless, chugging down the rest of his mead. The odd expression on Malfoy's face seemed to scream at Harry that he knew about everything that was going on. But the sound of Snape's voice tore him out of his reverie.
"I'd like a word with you, Draco."¹

"Oh, now, Severus," Slughorn said, hiccupping, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard —"¹

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be," Snape said curtly. "Follow me, Draco."¹

They left with Snape leading the way. Malfoy followed, a resentful expression bubbling up onto his face. Lost for a moment, Harry stood there, indecisive, and then he quickly whispered to Luna, "I'll be back in a bit — er — bathroom."¹

"All right," she said cheerfully – or, at least, he thought he heard her say as he hurried off into the crowd – before resuming the subject of the Rotfang Conspiracy with Professor Trelawney, who was much too interested to be sane. But when was Trelawney even remotely interested in anything normal?¹

Once out of the party, it was easy to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself. The corridor was deserted. What was more difficult was finding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and booming conversations coming from Slughorn's office. Had Snape taken Malfoy to his office in the dungeons? Or maybe he was escorting him back to the Slytherin common room…¹

Harry pressed his ear against door after door as he dashed down the corridor until he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor and heard voices. Finally, he might be able to get some information instead of relying on Daphne all the time. His heart pounded excitedly.¹

"… cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled—"¹

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?"¹

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it."¹

"Who suspects me?" Malfoy said angrily. "For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy no one knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, it won't work — I can stop you!"¹

There was a pause and then Snape quietly commented, "Ah … Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?"¹

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in!"¹

Harry pressed his ear harder against the keyhole, certain that they were referring to Voldemort as him.

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco—"¹

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!"¹

There was another pause. Then Snape said, "You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either
of those things."

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me," Snape said quietly, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear against the keyhole so hard it almost hurt in order to hear them. "I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow—"

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me and I'm doing it, I've got a plan and it's going to work, it's just taking a bit longer than I thought it would."

"What is your plan?"

"It's none of your business."

"If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you—"

"I've got all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes—"

"I would've had Goyle with me if you hadn't put him in detention! And I would have had Crabbe too if you had stopped him from getting expelled!"

"Keep your voice down!" Snape whispered with a dangerous edge to his voice. "I very well could not stop his expulsion even if I had a say in it. It was your fault for allowing the buffoon to go about polyjuiced without supervision. And as for Goyle, if he intends to pass his Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. this time around, he will need to work a little harder than he is doing at pres—"

"What does it matter?" Malfoy asked rhetorically. "Defense Against the Dark Arts — it's all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts—"

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco. Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me! You are being incautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle—"

"They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can—"

"I know what you're up to. You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father's capture and imprisonment has upset you, but—"

Harry barely had a second's warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open. Malfoy strode away down the corridor, past the open door of Slughorn's office, around the corner, and out of sight.
Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom, not daring to breathe. Snape, thankfully, didn't spare him a glance. His expression was unfathomable as he returned to the party while Harry remained on the floor, hid den beneath the cloak, his mind racing. Everything he had heard from Daphne was definitely confirmed in that short amount of time, but there was yet another question on his mind: What the bloody hell was an Unbreakable Vow? And why did Snape make it seem like it was such a big deal?

It took Harry a few minutes to pick himself up off the floor and return to Slughorn's party. When he entered the room, he spotted a noticeably tipsy Ron talking animatedly to some Slytherin seventh year girl, who seemed to be giggling into her wine. Daphne wasn't far behind Ron, looking over the two out of the corner of her eyes with a satisfied smirk as she chatted to Sanguini. Harry idly passed her, tuning into the conversation briefly and not understanding one bit of whatever language they were speaking. Yet another thing that he didn't previously know about Daphne.

Did they really not know each other at all? No, that wasn't true. She knew him pretty damn well. But she wasn't particularly forthcoming about herself and he was all too – stupidly – willing.

Harry sighed, heading over to where he left Luna. She was still standing there with Trelawney, who was half passed out against the wall. Grateful for the lack of Trelawney, Harry grabbed Luna's hand and pulled her away from the dozing Seer.

"Did you have trouble finding the bathroom?" Luna asked, peering up at him and squeezing his hand. "I've noticed that mead attracts wrackspurts much better than soggy bread on a spring morning."

Harry blinked. "No, I didn't have any trouble. Do you know what an Unbreakable Vow is?"

Why he was asking Luna, he had no idea, but she answered him without preamble.

"Oh, it's a mutual agreement between two parties where either party may die if they don't follow through with the agreement. It was rumoured that when Newt Scamander went to Sweden, he made an Unbreakable Vow with the Sveriges Konung not to reveal the location and existence of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Daddy says that-"

Harry's brows furrowed through her conspiratorial ramblings that he only half paid attention to. So Snape… made an agreement with Malfoy's mother to protect Malfoy and if he didn't protect Malfoy, Snape was going to die? That was a bit far, even for Snape. Especially given that the person he was protecting was Malfoy. Then again, Malfoy was Snape's little… pet minion.

But protect Malfoy from what? From Voldemort? No, Malfoy was a Death Eater now so that couldn't have been it… Maybe Snape was protecting Malfoy from Dumbledore. But why in the world would Snape do something like that? Especially if he was truly a member of the Order. And why in the world would Snape offer to help Malfoy as well?

Of course, Dumbledore told him time and time again to trust Snape, but there was no way that he could – especially after all this. Snape's true colours were starting to show. Harry wished that he could march straight up to Dumbledore's office and say, 'Ha! I told you so!'
But then again… There was a niggling voice in the back of his mind that sounded a lot like Hermione: 'Obviously, Harry. Snape was just trying to convince Malfoy to tell him what he was up to!'

After he had seen Nott at work and learned many techniques on how to get information out of a person, he wasn't completely convinced that Snape was a traitor, unfortunately. He really wanted to believe that Snape was, considering the Unbreakable Vow and his offer to help Malfoy with whatever Malfoy was doing. However, offering to help and mentioning an Unbreakable Vow could have just been lies to tip Malfoy over into telling him. That would have been an obvious answer to all his questions if only Snape hadn't sounded so serious about it all…

It was too convincing of a performance for Harry to believe it was all an act. Yet… Nott… well, Nott was really good at lying. Snape was probably just as good, if not better, if he had Voldemort fooled. Or Dumbledore. Whoever Snape was trying to fool.

Harry ran a frustrated hand through his hair, sorting through his thoughts. He didn't know what to think – he needed to speak with Hermione or Ron or, hell, even Nott. Maybe they could help him figure it out – or get it all in order. Then, he realized that Luna was staring up at him with her brow creased.

"Are you feeling okay, Harry?"

"Erm – sorry, Luna," Harry muttered. "Must be the wrackspurts," he added with an idle smirk.

Luna nodded sympathetically. "I have something that may help with that in my dormitory if you like. The party seems to be dwindling."

Plucking a snifter of Firewhiskey off a passing tray, Harry gulped it down – a vague attempt of getting rid of his reeling thoughts. He surveyed the party, eyeing Daphne briefly. She looked quite occupied and he really didn't feel like being there anymore. "Alright," he said with a nod and a breathy cough, setting the empty glass down on a different tray. "Lead the way."

Slughorn's dwindling party was dreadfully boring anyway.

OoO

"I had a lovely time, Harry," Luna dreamily intoned as they walked through the corridors toward the fifth floor. All the mead he drank and that snifter of Firewhiskey were starting to hit him and everything went a bit wobbly. No wonder Ron was so effected after a few shots. Firewhiskey was no joke; his throat still burned from it.

The stairs looked unstable.

"That's good, I'm glad," Harry replied, staring down at her. Luna's eyes seemed more blue than usual. His musings on them cut through his Snape, Malfoy, and Daphne-filled thoughts. There were even little specks of deep azure in them that glowed metallic every time the moonlight hit them just right. He ungracefully tripped up the stairs as he realized that. Luna, thankfully, steadied him before his face hit the ground.

"Oh, I knew I should have brought my spectrespecs with me. I've never seen a worse case of wrackspurt infestation." Luna's fingers were buried in his hair and her protruding eyes searched his
scalp in a way that reminded him of the time when he was primary school and the teacher had to inspect him for head lice. Her fingers tickled as they ghosted over his ears and Harry caught her hands in his, carefully pulling her off.

"I'm fine, Luna. It's really just the Firewhiskey," he reassured her, but she didn't look convinced as they carried on up the stairs. She softly kept a hold on his hand, interlocking their fingers. In his bleary state, it was rather grounding.

"If you're certain," she said with an almost indiscernible shrug. They were just outside the corridor that led to Ravenclaw Tower. "Wrackspurts are known for their ability to deceptively distract – they could be making you think that."

He had to get her off the topic of wrackspurts, even if it was a bit amusing, but it seemed to overly concern her. "You know, I had a good time tonight too, Luna," he said, gripping her hand a bit tighter. He noticed that her fingernails were painted to match her dress, with little twinkling stars sprinkled all over them. "I'm glad I brought you."

He did have to admit, even if she wasn't his originally planned date and she was dressed up like a Christmas tree, he didn't regret asking her one bit.

And it was worth it if it made her smile like that. Her face practically lit up, as if he had just told her where to find a nest of Crumple-Horn Snorkacks. It was infectious. His stomach felt all warm and bubbly, but that was probably from the Firewhiskey or maybe the mead, or maybe he was just a bit more than fond of Luna and not willing to acknowledge that. He didn't understand why people were so mean to her for being a little weird. She was one of the nicest people he had ever met. Definitely nothing like Daphne.

"Thank you. For bringing me." She paused, momentarily glancing at their laced fingers. "And walking me back. Are you sure you're fine? I have something in my dorm that'll clear up the wrackspurts…"

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry said, nodding insistently.

And it could have been the Firewhiskey or maybe the mead, or even the warm bubbly feeling in his stomach, but he couldn't help but lean down and place a chaste kiss on Luna's cheek. Her eyes were even brighter and dreamier than usual when he pulled away. "Happy Christmas, Luna."

"Happy Christmas, Harry."

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OoO

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for reading!
Harry groaned when the light hit him full in the face through the hangings surrounding his four poster bed. The terrible knocking noise cut through the good dream he was having and he mumbled something to Dean to go answer it, but then he realized that it was much too silent in the dorm for anyone to be up. When he pulled back the curtain, his eyebrows rose and he glanced at the clock.

No wonder it was silent, he slept through half of breakfast. Why didn't Ron wake him? Did Ron even come back last night after Slughorn's party? Usually Harry was the one that had to get Ron out of bed, and he didn't remember hearing Ron come back last night.

The knocking at his door persisted and Harry called, "Alright, keep your pants on," as he pulled on the nearest pair of clean looking trousers.

Daphne was outside his door, noticeably hesitant, a cigarette dangling from her fingertips and smoke trickling from her mouth. Harry froze, swallowing thickly. He could actually feel the residual magic surrounding her. It resonated throughout the air, heavy and tingling so fiercely that it lifted the hair off the back of his neck.

"Jesus, I can't do this..." she muttered, turning away from him to head back down the stairs, but Harry reached out, catching her shoulder.

"Wait." He appraised her slowly. Her robe was covered in mud and there were leaves in her hair... His eyes lingered over the – blood? - spattered up the side of her neck.

Harry pulled her inside his dorm, shutting the door behind her. "What happened?"

Daphne drew in a deep breath, her eyes hardening as she glanced around his dormitory. "An oversight," she finally admitted in a preoccupied tone. "And whole bunch of shit that you wouldn't understand."

Harry raised a challenging eyebrow. "Try me."
Staring up at him with her tired eyes, she took a drag off her cigarette. She hummed contemplatively, as if she were considering him, and then she asked, "Mind if I use your shower?"

Harry blinked at the sudden change of topic, his brows furrowed. "Only if you tell me what happened."

"You know I can't do that, Harry," Daphne said with a sigh, pulling off her cloak and pushing past him toward the bathroom, limping slightly. She threw the cloak onto his bed and – with a nearly stifled groan – stripped off her shirt, which looked as if it were soaked with blood. Following her, Harry reached down to pick the shirt up as she stripped off her jeans and pants.

His eyes widened. Yeah, that was definitely blood. It was wet and cold in his hands and he dropped it back to the floor.

He had meant to block the bathroom door, but he wasn't so sure if that was a good idea now. Daphne stood naked in the bathroom, busying herself with the taps. He could faintly see a long cut that ran along her ribs, surrounded by streaks of coagulated blood. Red blotchy bruises were starting to form up her back. She took a drag off her cigarette and stepped into the shower, roughly pulling the curtain across the rail before he could assess any more damage.

"Seriously, Daph. What happened? Are you okay?"

Her arm poked out of the shower, reaching for her wand that was sitting on the back of the toilet. She conjured an ashtray to place her fag in. "I haven't got it under control yet."

Well at least that confirmed that this, indeed, involved Malfoy. What else did he expect? So many possibilities of what could have happened were running through his mind. She must have gone through with whatever plan she had set up because of the mess. And...

Wait. If she didn't have it under control yet, did that mean that she didn't succeed? The question was on the tip of his tongue but he held back, a bit more worried about her than the sodding plan at the moment. Sometimes he wished he didn't care so much. He gulped down his irritation. "Do you need to go to the hospital wing?" he tried to sound calm, but it came out a bit irritable.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"You're not fine! You're-"

Bleeding profusely, from the looks of it.

"Blaise already took care of it," she interrupted sharply. "It's not as bad as it looks – I've definitely had worse."

Harry took a step into the bathroom and ran a hand through his messy bed hair as he took a seat on the edge of the sink. He wasn't sure if he believed her. "And you're sure you can't tell me what happened," he said bitterly.

Harry gritted his teeth.

"Nope." Daphne's arm poked out, reaching for her cigarette.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "So has Malfoy been sufficiently arrested?"
She gave him a meaningful look, peering around the shower curtain, as if to say, 'Are you honestly asking me that?' and Harry assumed that the look meant 'yes', but that wasn't a certainty. There was quite a lot of blood everywhere...

**Did Malfoy attack her?**

Well… if her plan was to get Malfoy arrested by having him attack her, she'd probably be at the Ministry about now, filling out a complaint or a statement, right? Plus, that was a reckless plan. Daphne wouldn't do that.

But then Nott's voice rang through his ears: *If she didn't like you... she'd probably ensure that you're premature death is very inevitable and possibly speed up the process.* If Malfoy was dead, Harry didn't consider it a horrible loss. The inherently good portion of his heart grimaced. It would explain a few things if the plan was to kill Malfoy.

Like the amount of blood and Daphne's current state.

But Daphne wouldn't kill anyone, would she? She didn't seem like she intended to kill Malfoy, what with the Scrying Concoction and whatever crazy Azkaban-inducing plan she had set up for the ferrety Slytherin boy.

"Could I borrow one of your shirts?" Daphne called from the shower.

"Yeah..." Harry murmured, his thoughts racing as he jumped down from the sink to go dig in his trunk for something for her to wear.

It didn't take her long to follow him, dripping water all over the floor, wrapped in a crimson towel. Her limping was much less pronounced. She picked up her jeans and shirt and tossed them into the fireplace with her dead fag. Harry's eyebrows rose and she shrugged, waving her wand and muttering a drying spell. She pointed her wand at her cloak and all the caked-on mud and blood flaked off, disappearing into thin air.

Harry bit his cheek contemplatively. Not all of that blood could have possibly come from her alone...

"Whose blood was that?" he asked carefully.

"A little of everyone's," Daphne casually replied, taking his offered shirt and throwing it on, just as he caught a glimpse of the deep cut along her side that was still very raw. The shirt was too big for her width-wise, but the height was almost perfect, barely covering her arse. Harry's eyes swept over her before he tore his gaze away.

Sure, she looked really good in his clothes – however, **now** was not the time!

There was an incredibly pregnant pause where neither of them looked at each other. Daphne played with the hem of the shirt. "Thanks," she said in a low voice that sounded like she was thanking him for much more than the shirt. "And I'm sorry that I can't tell you anything."

Harry shrugged and looked away from her once more, trying to ignore the painful disdain that was starting to gouge a hole in his chest. The way she was staring at him made him want to shake the truth out of her and trust her all at the same time. It was exasperating – and it hurt more than he cared.
“Harry?”

“What?” he asked in a short breath. Didn't her empty apologies mean that she was leaving soon?

“I will tell you everything when I can. I don't make promises that I can't keep. You can at least trust that, even if you don't trust me with anything else.”

He was so stupid in the beginning, thinking he couldn't be hurt by a no-strings-attached relationship. It was his downfall that he simply cared too much about so many people who crossed his path.

Daphne threw him a small sheepish smile and leaned up to kiss him on the corner of his mouth. "I suppose I should leave you to think about it…” she said, moving away from him.

Quickly, Harry caught her arm and pulled her back around toward him, a sudden burst of anger nipping at the backs of his teeth. He couldn't just let her leave like that – that was giving her way too much power and he was sick of it. He needed to take the control back.

Why didn't she just leave after her empty apologies like usual?

"You know what?” Harry said lowly. "I'm done with this. No more promises. No more… evasion.”

He paused, letting out a terse breath. "You need to tell me."

Daphne twisted her arm from his grasp and he could see her jaw clench. Her eyes narrowed. "You never get it, do you?"

"Frankly? No.” Harry shook his head. "And I don't get all this evasion bullshit either, Daph! What have I ever done to make you not trust me?"

Daphne stared at him, her mouth open as if she was going to say something, but it shut and he could see her mind working behind her eyes. She shook her head.

"Nothing…” she conceded through a frustrated sigh, not looking him straight in the eye. "Absolutely nothing."

"Exactly!” Harry agreed with a brusque nod. "So what's the real reason as to why you won't tell me what's going on? I started this whole thing in the first place! It's only fair that I should know!"

"Jesus… It's not just you! I'm not used to other people meddling in my plans!” Daphne countered, her eyes glaring daggers at him. "It's dangerous. There are so many consequences that I cannot foresee."

Harry didn't let her get any further than that, rage filling that small little hole of hurt in his chest. "I'm not meddling in your plans so there wouldn't be ANY consequences! I only want to bloody help."

"It would help if you'd just trust me!"

"I CAN’T!” Harry bellowed, his fists clenched at his sides. "You're the most untrustworthy person in the world! At this point, I've better chances of Voldemort killing me right now than you ever telling me about Malfoy!”
He wanted nothing more than to throw something at her – or anything – right about now. *Consequences! Damn the consequences.* His nails were digging into his palms, which was a vague attempt at preventing him from grabbing his textbooks off his bed. His arms twitched irritably.

Daphne crossed her arms over her chest, pursing her lips – blissfully silent for once.

Letting out a long breath that barely calmed him, Harry persisted, "Just tell me! Maybe *then* I'll trust you."

"It's not under-"

"Oh god, *don't,*" Harry interrupted sharply. "'Don't say 'You haven't got it under control,'" he mocked. "I've *heard* it before – *and I don't fucking care.* I'm *done* with caring about what you think. And I'm *done* with letting you *walk all over me."

"You're *done?"* Daphne raised an eyebrow. She seemed a bit taken aback by that. Harry wanted to smirk. "What a great luxury that must be! It's a bit *too late for me.*"

"That's not *my* fault," Harry retorted. His veins still itched from the anger bubbling through him.

Daphne backed a few steps away from him, letting out a cruel breathy laugh. "Yeah. Well, since you're all good and *done* with all *this,*" – she threw up her hands in an infuriated gesture – "it's safe to say that we're *done* as well," she said, her eyes flashing.

Harry sucked in a short silent breath.

And in the blink of an eye, the painful hole in his chest ripped back open, gaping larger than before.

It effectively dulled the anger and Daphne – stoic as ever – bent over to pick up her pants just as the door opened. Seamus paused indecisively half way through the frame while Daphne pulled her undergarments over her hips.

Unclenching his fists, Harry shifted on his feet, his eyes roving over both of them. His mind was irritatingly empty at the moment. Shocked.

**We're done.**

It echoed through his mind, over and over.

"Is this a bad time?" Seamus asked, glancing between the two.

'Yes' was just on the tip of his tongue until Daphne grabbed a wrinkled pair of jeans off the floor. "May I borrow these?" she asked in a stiff cordial tone, ignoring Seamus and quirking a brow toward Harry.

"Oi, those are mine!" Seamus exclaimed, moving into the room and shutting the door behind him.

"May I?"

Silence settled between the three and, not waiting for his response, Daphne tugged Seamus' jeans over her legs, buttoning them. They hung rather low on her hips, but they fit just fine. Harry let out a
sigh. He knew that he should say something, but he didn't know what exactly.

Get out, Seamus, so I can argue some more with my... ex-girlfriend? Or maybe, ignoring Seamus: We should talk about this before you leave.

Please stay...

Please leave... Please don't leave.

Why did he care?

"Yeah..." Seamus finally answered her with a nod. "They look better on you than they do me."

"Brilliant. Ta," Daphne muttered, going over to her cloak to pull out her silver case and her lighter. Aside from the unwavering stiffness around her eyes and lips, she made it look like the heated argument between them had never happened. Did he really mean so little to her that she could simply brush it all off like that?

Harry's heart clenched painfully.

"I'll get them back to you before we leave," she said, pausing for a second to light a fresh cigarette. "I take it that Harry told you and all? You don't seem very surprised." Daphne's brows rose expectantly as she looked at Seamus.

The Irish Gryffindor cleared his throat. "Somewhat," he said, looking over at Harry with a quirk of his lips. "Stupid git, in't he? Fittest bird here and he's not showing you off?"

Making a derisive sound in the back of his throat, Harry shook his head. But before he could say that they weren't together anymore – properly, and reluctantly, declaring it – Daphne interjected, "It's just sex, Finnegan. Not that you'd know much about that, hm?" She took several quick steps toward the door while Seamus scoffed. "I'll see you two around, I guess."

She was gone before Harry or Seamus could blink and Harry's brow creased in her wake, his fists clenching at his sides again. What the bloody hell did she mean by that?

She could have just said that it was over between them. But no, she had to go and... insinuate that... Merlin, that woman was so fucking frustrating, he could scream. What was she trying to do to him?

"You guys must get really kinky."

Harry looked over at Seamus, his brows furrowing deeper. "Why do you say that?" he asked, barely keeping his voice in check.

"Did she come here without clothes or were they fucked beyond repair in the process?"

Harry didn't dare glance over at the fireplace where Daphne's clothes currently sat, burning down to ash. Bloody Seamus... He wondered if it would be easier to tell him the truth or just go with Daphne's apparent cover story. Why she wanted to perpetuate that idea was beyond him. Harry ran an irritated hand through his hair.

"I told you. I don't kiss and tell," he muttered after a brief indecisive pause, moving over to his trunk
to pack a bag for Christmas at Ron's before he went down the Great Hall to catch the end of break- 
fast. Even if his stomach was growling, his mind was resolutely elsewhere.

He thought back on the last half hour, going over everything. Harry sighed as he threw a pile of 
clothes, a stack of books on Legilimency and Dumbledore, and the Prince's book into his slightly 
expanded knapsack. He should have asked more questions instead of being so concerned over the 
bloody mess. But that would have been pointless. And he should have, at least, said something after 
she broke it off.

Stupid of him, just standing there like that.

However… now that he thought about it – really thought about it – they didn't have much together in 
the first place, did they? Dread filled his stomach and he swallowed thickly.

They didn't have much at all… No wonder it was so meaningless to her. It all was just sex. And 
Malfoy.

And the fact that he actually bloody cared about her… Still cared.

He really loathed himself for it. She obviously didn't care at all for him in return.

"Come on, mate, one of these days you're gonna have to tell me something."

"It's not going to happen, Seamus," Harry said absentmindedly.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Seamus mumbled, "Well that's rather unfair."

Harry simply rolled his eyes, desperately trying to push back all the pain and anger and swallow his 
feelings. He didn't know what else to do.

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Harry got to breakfast just as many people started clearing out early. Ron looked as if he were about 
to fall asleep on top of his plate with the fork lazily dangling from his mouth and Harry was quite 
surprised to see that he made it to breakfast. Hermione, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found, 
which was weird. One would think that she'd enjoy annoying Ron in his current state, given their 
feud lately. Moving toward the Gryffindor table, Harry loudly took a seat across from Ron and 
slapped his hand down on the table.

"Ugh… you're an evil bastard, you know that?" Ron grumbled, glaring up at him.

"You shouldn't have drunk so much last night," Harry replied, filling his plate up with everything 
that was in front of him. "Have you seen Hermione this morning?"

"She left with Zabini," Ron muttered darkly, covering his eyes with his hands even though the sky 
above the great hall was clouded over and it wasn't that bright.

Harry didn't push the topic. Mulling it over in silence, he ate his eggs. It didn't make sense. Just a few 
days ago, Hermione was complaining about Zabini – now she was willingly spending time with 
him? What was it about Zabini that was so attractive to girls? Harry definitely had to have a word
with her on the train about that, just to make sure she wasn't being coerced into it somehow. Or drugged. Zabini was decent at making potions.

He ignored all the thoughts of Daphne that tumbled in after that.

"Did you have a good time last night?" Harry asked, conversationally, distracting himself. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I dunno. I woke up in the Slytherin Common Room. I dunno how I got there – I've actually no idea whose clothes I'm wearing – but I've a feeling that it had something to do with Felicity Hardbroom."

Snorting with laughter into his eggs, Harry tried not to guffaw too much. Felicity Hardbroom was a Slytherin who was a year above them and, if he went by the rumours… She was basically a 'scarlet woman', for the lack of a more polite term. But now he could see that Ron did look more posh than usual – in an expensive looking white oxford and black trousers – even if he was terribly dishevelled and looked as if he was about to be sick.

"Did she… do anything to you?" Harry asked, after the amusement subsided.

"I don't remember. And whoever gave me that hangover potion is really terrible at brewing them. This fucking headache won't bloody well go away."

"At least you aren't vomiting all over the place," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah. I'm a little nauseous though," Ron muttered, shovelling bacon into his mouth and making an extreme effort to chew it. Only Ron would attempt plough through a mound of bacon and eggs while nauseated.

Shaking his head slightly in disbelief at that, Harry caught Malfoy entering the Great Hall out of the corner of his eye. He almost inhaled half a piece of bacon at the unexpected sight of the current bane of his existence. Not wanting to alert Ron, he kept the conversation going as he inconspicuously kept watch on the Slytherin boy.

"Did Daphne treat you well?" he asked and almost regretted it as his heart clenched. Malfoy always led to thoughts of Daphne, but he blamed the pang on the bits of bacon stuck in his oesophagus.

Clearing his throat, he pushed back his feelings while his mind whirled confusedly over Malfoy's presence. Daphne came to his dorm covered in blood and Malfoy was definitely still alive, looking very much unharmed. What the hell was she doing then? Did her plan really not succeed? However, he didn't know for certain that Malfoy was Malfoy. It could have been Goyle.

He discreetly tried to search his pockets for his map, finding nothing. Then he remembered that he packed it like a complete idiot. Merlin! The one time he actually needed the bloody Marauder's Map, he had to go and forget it!

"Yeah, she's not too bad," Ron replied, after he swallowed an entire fried egg whole. "I can see why you like her. I also think she was trying to..."

Staring at him expectantly, Harry encouraged him to continue, "Trying to...?" He tried not to look over at Malfoy full on, even though he wanted to. And he desperately wanted to go track down Daphne. The confusion, and the issue with not knowing, was going to eat him alive.
But no. He couldn't. *That was over.* He had to do something else about it. Maybe he could seek out Zabini? Nott? No… they'd side with Daphne.

Harry reigned in his thoughts, calming his emotions, and focused on Ron, who seemed to be panicking a little bit.

"I think she was trying to get someone to shag me," Ron muttered in a flustered whisper, his bloodshot eyes glancing around the virtually empty Gryffindor table. "Or something like that. I just remember her saying extremely nice… wicked, really – things about me… and pushing me over to talk with all these girls. And Hardbroom was there. And they laughed at my joke – in a *good* way. I don't remember which joke that was… I wish I did. Ugh, never let me drink that much ever again, Harry… it's horrible. And I think I threw up on Nott, or maybe I was dreaming that part. He didn't hit me."

Harry bit the inside of his lip and then shoved some food into his mouth to keep from grinning too widely and chortling. Yes. Ron was a good distraction. "Quite the night you had then," he responded.

When Harry looked up, he halted, accidentally catching Malfoy's eye and covering up his glance by reaching for whatever plate of food was in his eye line. Ugh, black pudding.

"It was weird, mate. Slytherins aren't supposed to be nice. They're nasty gits!"

"Not all of them are that bad, Ron," Harry replied offhandedly, barely even thinking about it.

Harry wondered if his map would reach him if he summoned it from his room. It was small enough that it could slip through the cracks under the doors, but what about the portrait? Would it get stuck there? And wouldn't someone try to grab it if it were flying past them?

It was too risky, Harry decided.

When Malfoy got up from his seat, Harry found himself making excuses to Ron and left breakfast, following the Slytherin boy. Once out of the Great Hall, Harry hid in a dark alcove and pulled his invisibility cloak from his pocket. The familiar adrenaline rush sparked by instinct surged through is veins. It only took a few seconds to catch up with Malfoy.

Harry walked along behind him as silently as possible, not daring to get too close. He climbed the stairs on the tips of his toes and treaded carefully down the corridors. There was a sort of ominous feeling nagging at the back of his mind, but he didn't pay much attention to it – he was too focused on the task at hand. It was only when he realized that Malfoy was going into a girl's bathroom that Harry paused. Second floor – Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. The place where to do illicit things because no one ever went into that bathroom. Harry grinned in anticipation and barely slipped through the bathroom door before it closed.

"Not bad," Harry heard Malfoy drawl before Harry rounded the corner only to stop dead in his tracks and raise his eyebrows.

There were two identical Malfoys, wearing identical clothing, standing across from each other. The one on the left was tugging at the collar of his robe. "Why couldn't you get Cornfoot to do this? He's much better than I am." That must have been the fake Malfoy.

"It's only for a few hours on the train and you won't have to do anything but sit there and read,"
Malfoy said impatiently, sneering.

"Fine," the fake Malfoy muttered, his shoulders slumping.

"Good," the real Malfoy said, a pleased smirk spreading across his face. He produced a small ring, which seemed to be made entirely of diamonds, from the pocket of his cloak and handed it to the fake Malfoy. "Put this on. It'll get you past Filch's secrecy sensors."

Harry gaped. That was how Malfoy snuck the necklace that cursed Katie Bell into Hogwarts! The ring! He wondered what other stuff Malfoy could have snuck into Hogwarts with that. The possibilities were endless and frightening.

The fake Malfoy slipped the ring onto his index finger and stared up at the real Malfoy. "How are you going to get to King's Cross?"

"I told you. You're not supposed to ask questions, Goyle."

"Oh is it part of your project for-"

"Yes," the real Malfoy interrupted, looking around the bathroom, as if he were searching for eavesdroppers. Little did he know, Harry was practically smirking under his invisibility cloak. "Now go on. I'll see you at Christmas."

"Yeah. Good luck," the fake Malfoy/Goyle said, walking out the bathroom door. Harry mashed himself against the wall to avoid getting anywhere near the Polyjuiced Slytherin boy.

Once Goyle was gone, the real Malfoy inspected his reflection in one of the mirrors and ran his fingers through his overly gelled hair. With a sigh, he turned around and started pacing across the bathroom floor, glancing at his watch occasionally. Harry observed Malfoy cautiously, quelling the moment of impulsiveness where he was almost convinced that it was a good idea to ask Malfoy what happened with Daphne. Malfoy was fifty times more likely to answer him though.

But maybe whatever Daphne was doing this morning didn't involve Malfoy directly. Maybe she spent her morning trying to get the Scrying Concoction set up. And if Malfoy was staying at the Malfoy Manor for Christmas hols, that couldn't have been a pleasant trip from what he had heard about the place. No wonder she was covered in blood.

He thought back to Malfoy's conversation with Snape last night. Malfoy must have had access to Bellatrix Lestrange if she taught him Occlumency – maybe she was hiding out at the Malfoy Manor? And if Daphne had ran into the deranged Death Eater while liberally painting every reflective surface of the Malfoy Manor with the Scrying Concoction… Harry shuddered and he was suddenly just happy that Daphne was still alive if what he was thinking was true.

His stupid clenching heart lodged itself into his throat and he pushed it back down, ignoring it and focusing on his train of thought.

Azkaban-inducing crimes… Breaking and entering the Malfoy Manor was probably one of them, given the state of the Ministry at the moment.

It wasn't long before Malfoy started to make his way out of the bathroom and Harry reacted on impulse, pulling his Invisibility cloak aside and waving his wand at the blonde Slytherin as he passed him.
Caught off guard by the sudden attack, Malfoy tumbled to the floor onto his side, struggling against the invisible ropes wrapped around him.

Letting out a deep breath, Harry folded his invisibility cloak and stuck it in his pocket, trying to think of where to start. What was he going to do now? Malfoy was staring at him, surprise clearly written all over his face, as Harry stalked toward him with his wand pointed toward the blonde Slytherin.

He had to be precise about this. Level headed. What would Nott do? Harry let his mind drift to his lessons, briefly running over them. First, he had to establish his objectives – the goals. He debated whether to ask Malfoy about Daphne or the Room of Requirement first. Having an answer for either would definitely be a desirable outcome.

Now, the approach… Harry's brows furrowed as he stared at the bound Slytherin boy, who looked back at him in confusion.

"Not gonna hex me, Potter?" Malfoy quipped, raising an eyebrow.

Harry crouched down next to him, a small smile playing about his lips. "No, I just need to ask you a few questions."

Malfoy snorted, but Harry paid it no mind.

"What are you doing in the Room of Requirement?"

"Why?" Malfoy's eyes flashed as if he were amused. "Jealous?"

Harry's eyes narrowed, his mind faintly drifting back to his last conversation with Malfoy. "Don't try to lie to me again," Harry said, smirking. "You're an easy read. Now, tell me what you're really doing in the Room of Requirement."

But Malfoy's amused stare didn't waver. "I don't see why I should tell you."

"You're in no situation to oppose me, Malfoy," Harry said, gesturing to Malfoy's current state. "I know you've been going to the Room of Requirement every spare moment you've got. And the fact that you have Goyle covering for you as much as possible was proven just now – on top of that…"

Harry reached forward and lifted Malfoys left sleeve with some difficulty around the invisible ropes. Malfoy struggled ferociously, trying to squirm away, but Harry was determined to roll up the sleeve.

The Dark Mark stood out prominently against his pale skin, menacingly flickering up at him, and Harry couldn't fully keep the surprise off his face. Daphne and Nott definitely weren't lying about the Dark Mark… he had hoped that they were.

But who lies about a Dark Mark?

_Slytherins_, his mind supplied.

"I know that _this_ has something to do with what you're up to in the Room of Requirement," Harry said finally, keeping his voice strong even though his accusation was more of a tentative guess than actual knowledge.
"I'll never tell you anything, Potter," Malfoy retorted, his mouth set in an angry line.

"We could always see what the Aurors have to say about this," Harry countered with a cool calculating glare. "They've been feeding Veritaserum to the interrogatees lately, you know. Sooner or later, you'll spill your secrets. Why not now?"

Malfoy's grey eyes stared up at him, solid and challenging as he wiggled around in his invisible bindings. "If you think that's gonna work, you're fooling yourself."

Harry's smirk widened when he thought of a new direction that he could take. "I always have Aurors accompanying me on the train. They'll be here in about an hour," he said, hoping it was Tonks and Kingsley that would be patrolling the train, just like at the beginning of the year.

Malfoy rolled his eyes, a haughty expression pulling at his features. "I'm still not going to say anything to you. Leave that for these 'Aurors' to decide."

Tilting his head, Harry hesitated, wondering why this wasn't working. It was a solid threat. In fact… it was one he could actually pull off. Why wasn't Malfoy caving in to it? Of course, Harry could always use a different tactic… Or come back to it later… There wasn't a lot of time before they had to leave and Malfoy's emotional state at the moment didn't seem too conducive for giving answers.

"Well, if you aren't going to answer that, then…" Harry paused, wondering how to go about what he had planned next. "What were you doing this morning?"

"Sleeping in," Malfoy answered, still squirming in his ropes. They weren't getting any looser, but Harry still kept his wand trained on him.

Maybe Daphne did go to the Malfoy Manor then… He couldn't discern if the Slytherin boy was lying. Harry's brows furrowed as he gazed over him, assessing. He didn't have a proper baseline for Malfoy's varied expressions – and Malfoy wasn't showing any of the common deceptive cues like he was last time.

"So you didn't see Daphne at all?" Harry pressed, raising an eyebrow. Maybe that would spark something.

Malfoy just furrowed his brows for a moment, and then a smirk tugged at his lips. "You are jealous, aren't you?" he drawled. "What if I did see Greengrass?"

Harry let out a tolerating sigh. That wasn't exactly the type of response that he wanted… Regardless, he pressed on. "Well, did you?"

But Malfoy didn't answer him. Harry noticed how Malfoy's right hand was clutched around his wand, which he must have somehow wiggled out of his pocket, a moment too late. With a short flick, the invisible ropes were gone and Malfoy raised a shield just before Harry's stunner impacted it. Scrambling to his feet, Malfoy shot back with spells Harry barely recognized.

Harry ducked and rolled to the side, springing to his feet and firing back at him as Malfoy's spells collided with the sinks behind him. Sharp shards of porcelain burst through the room, impacting Harry's shoulder, and water spewed everywhere, gushing over the floor. Harry let out a hiss as he felt one of the shards digging into his skin as Malfoy barely skidded around Harry's nonverbal Reducto, which ripped a large chunk in one of the stalls.
Headed for the exit, Malfoy threw a hex at him that shattered the lamp that was just over Harry’s head and he had to raise his hand to cover himself from the glass that rained down. Harry swiftly followed Malfoy out the door, looking around the corridor with his wand raised, but Malfoy was nowhere to be found.

Slippery Slytherin bastard.

Running a frustrated hand through his hair, ignoring the sharp jolt of pain rippling through his shoulder where the piece of sink hit him, Harry cursed. Sparks angrily flew from the tip of his wand and he took off down the corridor. Malfoy would most likely head to the dungeons… but he also could have headed to the Room of Requirement. They were in opposite directions – Harry chose the former, his eyes searching for any sign of him.

How could Malfoy just disappear out of thin air like that? Did he have an invisibility cloak like Nott’s?

A dark voice interrupted his thoughts: *Maybe Nott let Malfoy borrow it.*

No, Malfoy wouldn't have had time to don an invisibility cloak perfectly. Harry would know. Malfoy didn't have enough time to do even half that, so he had to be around there somewhere.

Before long, Harry reached the entrance to the Slytherin Common room and retraced his steps back up to Myrtle’s bathroom, quickly passing by. Malfoy must have headed the other direction. He wouldn't know unless he got the map, which he really should have done in the first place.

On the bright side – now, Harry had plan. And it was probably much better than Daphne's plan – why didn't he think of it in the first place? Sending a letter to the Aurors was unreliable, but sending the Aurors after him in person… that was different. As soon as the train arrived, Harry would tell whoever was on watch duty that there was a Death Eater in the castle and Draco Malfoy would be nicked.

Sure, he didn't get to find out what Malfoy was doing in the Room of Requirement personally, but he'd probably find out from Tonks or Kingsley or one of the Order members sooner or later. It certainly solved all the Malfoy problems that had plagued him for the past couple months – he was done with it. Maybe Malfoy could even share a cell with his dear father in Azkaban.

Harry made his way up to his dormitory and pulled his map from his knapsack, searching for Malfoy and ignoring Dean and Seamus’ banter. He scanned every floor over and over, not finding Malfoy's name at all and he knew that Malfoy didn't have enough time to leave the grounds (he couldn't possibly leave the grounds anyway, thanks to the wards). There was only one place where Malfoy could be and that was exactly where he was going to point the Aurors: The Room of Requirement.

*Now let's just hope he stays in there for a while,* Harry thought, glaring at the map.

"Mate, I think I'm in love with your girlfriend," Seamus said, barging into the compartment he was sharing with a dozing hung-over Ron. Hermione was unfortunately absent and spending entirely too much time with Zabini. Harry was sitting there anxiously, hoping that his tip to Tonks was
successful. She left Kingsley to stay on the train, since the train still had to leave on time, and went after Malfoy after he had told them. He probably wouldn't know the outcome until he got to the Burrow, but he still couldn't help but feel anxious.

He did tell Daphne that he was done with it all and he meant it. It had to end – and it would, on his terms.

Harry was just about to get up and go look for Hermione to tell her the good news – also because the train was going to arrive at King's Cross soon – when Seamus ambled in.

"What?" Harry's brows furrowed, looking over at Ron but Seamus seemed to be addressing him.

Taking a seat next to the half-asleep ginger, Seamus answered with a swoop of his arm, "Greengrass! Or are you two not together? If that's the case-"

Merlin… someone always had to ruin a good moment for him, didn't he? Harry had only just washed his hands of the whole Malfoy thing, causing him to nearly forget this morning when Daphne broke it off with him like their relationship meant nothing at all. Ignoring the tender hole in his chest, Harry interrupted, disregarding Seamus' question, "What did she do?"

Why he kept going along with Daphne's farce was beyond him.

"She made a very public display of returning my jeans." Seamus' smile spread even further across his face. "And she kissed me."

Harry's stomach dropped. Had she seriously moved on that quickly?

"On the cheek, of course," Seamus continued and Harry almost wanted to punch the git, "but that has to mean something."

"No it doesn't." Harry retorted, rolling his eyes and not being able to hide his annoyance. "Basic diversion technique – lead the rumours in a different direction. People tend to believe what they see and make assumptions so she made it look like she spent the night with you when, in reality…"

Harry trailed off cuttingly, both proud and appalled by how much he sounded like Nott. "Well, you were used, mate. Sorry."

And now he was just perpetuating the farce. Great. Though Seamus was getting on his nerves.

Seamus's shoulders slumped and his face morphed from elated to completely crestfallen in less than two seconds flat. "But I thought -"

"She's sort of a Slytherin. Don't take it personally," Harry said distractedly with a shrug that mildly made his shoulder injury twinge as he stood up. "Have you seen Hermione?"

Hermione would definitely take his mind off Daphne – hell, she might even be able to help with the situation. He faintly wondered if he should find Daphne as well… talk to her. But he wasn't even sure if he wanted to talk.

"Last I saw her, she was getting a drink from the trolley."

"Cool, thanks." Harry left the compartment with a quick wave and headed toward the snack trolley, peering into each compartment as he passed. People were bustling around, getting their luggage
together and rushing off to say their parting 'Happy Christmases' to their friends. If only he could actually find his own friend. What had gotten into her? She barely said hello to them before leaving to find Zabini when they departed at Hogsmeade. He hadn't been able to get a word in before she rushed off.

Harry sighed when he entered what was commonly known as the 'Slytherin section' at the back of the train. He noticed fake Malfoy reading and being anti-social in the corner of one of the compartments – if he spotted Kingsley, he might as well tell him about Goyle as well. Harry had checked the Marauder's Map constantly in between Ron's bouts of wakefulness, finding no Draco Malfoy anywhere still. Tonks had disappeared off the map when he checked again a few hours through the train ride, and he hadn't seen either of them reappear.

It could have been a good sign… or it could have been a bad sign. He tried to remain optimistic.

Harry paused as the announcement was made that they'd arrive at Kings Cross in five minutes. He had to find Hermione soon. She never left without saying goodbye, at least – or without spending some time with him, really. And she was going home with her parents as well, so he wouldn't see her for a week; that was if she decided to join them at the Burrow. Since she and Ron were fighting that was only a tentative maybe. What the bloody hell was she doing that was so important?

Just as he passed a dim compartment that had its curtain drawn and headed toward the baggage car, an arm shot out of the compartment door and pulled him in.

"Wha - Daphne?"

Harry twisted against the hold, but the grip was too strong to be Daphne – it tore at his wounded shoulder. His leg was caught in the curtain and it was pitch black inside the compartment – he could barely see more than an inch in front of him, as if someone had thrown up Peruvian instant darkness powder.

Stumbling over the curtain, his heart pounding, Harry whipped out his wand with his free hand. 'Expelliarmus' was halfway out his mouth before his wand was wrenched from his grip and he was thrown up against the side of the train, banging his head against a luggage rack. Pain erupted from the side of his skull, bleeding across his scalp and he blinked dazedly through the black haze that was just barely starting to settle.

Harry cursed, trying to pay no heed to the intense pain throbbing through his eyes, as he blindly swung his fists toward his attacker. His fists connected with something solid but his opponent was quick. The last thing he saw before the world went dark was a streak of bright red light, headed straight for his chest.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
The first thing that registered in his mind was the oppressive heat that hung around him like a thick curtain. It made even the simple task of breathing difficult. His shirt was sticking against his damp skin and he could feel beads of sweat dripping over him everywhere. His head was pounding and he opened his eyes a crack, only to squeeze them shut to keep the sharp throbbing pain in his head from intensifying.

It was too bright.

He could faintly hear people talking... voices. It was as if they were speaking in another room, making the voices sound cloudy and veiled. He couldn't understand a word of what they were saying.

Where was he? The last thing he remembered was... being pulled into that compartment and getting hit by a stunner. His heart rate picked up and he moved his arms, feeling quite thankful that whoever attacked him didn't bind him – but that didn't mean anything.

Braving the bright light, Harry opened his eyes again, blinking rapidly and averting his eyes from the blurry set of lights above him. He lifted his hand to wipe the sweat out of his eyes and groaned at the movement. All his muscles felt stiff - his vision was still a bit hazy, even with his glasses. He was definitely in no shape to run at the moment and he couldn't find his wand.

He precariously rolled off the raggedy old mustard sofa he was laying on and hit the floor, shakily trying to stand up as the excruciating pounding in his head increased. He squeezed his eyes shut at the pain. It felt as if all the veins in his head were going to explode and he rubbed at his temples, trying to get it to stop if only for one moment so he could think clearly.

The skin prickled on the back of his neck when he heard the sound of a door opening and he was vaguely aware that someone was standing behind him. He knew he couldn't move too fast or that would make his head throb even worse so, slowly, he turned around ready to pounce when he came face to face with – Hermione?
"You shouldn't be up. You have a concussion," she scolded, her arms crossed over her bra-clad chest – Harry gaped just a bit – and her lips pressed together in that way that vaguely reminded him of McGonagall. But he couldn't fall for it. In the back of his mind Moody was screaming at him.  

*Constant vigilance!*

Harry roughly shoved her hands away when she reached for him, desperately trying to ignore his aching head. "What do your parents do for a living?" Merlin, how many people knew that? Was that a good enough question to confirm her identity?

"They're dentists," Hermione answered, her hands persistently pressing him down to the sofa. "My father has his own practice. Harry, we're safe. Well… as safe as we can be," she reassured him, taking a sweat next to him on the sofa.

But Harry didn't feel very reassured. Whatever room they were in, it was hotter than the bloody sun and much too bright from the florescent lights that hung from the ceiling. He was surrounded by dingy grey brick, and only if he focused could he see things like the unfamiliar coffee table and the little kitchenette on the other side of the room. The windows were covered in newspaper. No, he definitely couldn't be calm.

Bloody hell, his head fucking hurt. He pressed his palms to his eyes to dull the throbbing.

"Where are we?" he croaked, his heart still playing a fast cadence against the walls of his chest. "Why's it so hot in here? What happened?"

Hermione wrapped her hands around his wrists and pulled them from his eyes. "Erm, a lot of things… happened. Sit still so I can fix your head." She suddenly had her wand in her hand and Harry backed up against the corner of the sofa, preparing himself to bolt.

"It might sting a tad for a couple seconds," she said, tapping her wand on his forehead lightly, muttering a stream of Latin that he didn't have the capacity to comprehend at the moment.

When she said *sting*, she *wasn't* joking. It felt like an electric shock sweeping through his brain and his vision momentarily went black. He clutched at his head, thinking he'd pass out from the sheer agony… He knew he should have bolted - he was going to die-

And as quick as the spell jolted him, it was gone, leaving him with an immense feeling of relief. It was almost as if he was floating and he blinked, his vision readjusting and sharpening from behind his glasses. Merlin, he almost forgot how *good* it felt to not have his head throb constantly. He panted heavily, hot air flooding his lungs as he stared, wide eyed, at Hermione. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"Of course," Hermione said in a short breath, rolling her eyes.

"Then could you *explain* what's going on?" Harry asked, the centre of his forehead creasing. "And where's your shirt?" He glanced down at her chest again, quickly averting his eyes after.

"Nott botched up the Climate Control spell and we've been trying to fix it, but they always start arguing. I can't figure out how to adjust it and it's not an easy spell to break either. Bloody idiots, I swear," Hermione fumed indignantly, running a hand through her bushy hair.
Climate Control spell… They. Idiots? Nott? Harry tried to get his thoughts in order. "Wait. Start over," he said, letting out a long breath. "The last thing I remember is being hit with a stunner."

Hermione bit her lip. "Well, Zabini was acting a bit strange this morning at breakfast. I found it a little suspicious so I tried to keep an eye on him. I knew you said that Daphne was planning something with Malfoy, so I thought it was that and I kept close to him all morning." She paused, shaking her head slightly. "He went to use the loo on the train and I followed him. I thought I lost him, but then I caught him and Nott trying to kidnap you and I tackled them just as they Apparated. And we ended up here."

She gestured to the room with a nonchalant wave of her hand. "Somewhere in Muggle London – I haven't been able to explore much yet," she rambled. "Anyway… Nott, I guess, wanted to involve you in the plans with Malfoy so that's why they took you. Greengrass certainly isn't pleased… they've been arguing over it. That girl is absolutely maddening."

Harry's brows rose high on his forehead and he wiped the sweat dripping from his hair with his hand as he gazed at her. "But there isn't any plan with Malfoy anymore," he said, his mind reeling. There couldn't be any plan. He was done. "I sent Tonks to arrest him."

"Really?" She sounded very skeptical.

Harry nodded. "Just before I got on the train."

Brows furrowed, Hermione shook her head. "But she can't have possibly arrested him… Malfoy's here."

"What?" Harry stared at her incredulously. No… he didn't see Malfoy leave the Room of Requirement the entire train ride and he missed it when Tonks must have led him out.

But… maybe she couldn't find him? How could Malfoy be here? That was the part that wasn't possible. How?

"Yes," Hermione said, getting up from the sofa. She held her hand out to him to help him up. "I'll show you."

His legs felt lethargic and heavy as he moved, but his head was whirling with unrelenting thoughts and questions – his curiosity definitely piqued. Hermione led him out the shabby white door next to the sofa and down a strange corridor that reminded him of Mrs. Figg's root cellar and underground parking garages. The voices he had heard earlier were getting louder and louder, but he still couldn't make out what they were saying.

It was still hot as all bloody hell out in the corridor, even though the walls were made of grey brick and the floor was cement and it was winter – whatever spell Nott used, it was certainly powerful. Sweat poured down his back as he moved, making his t-shirt cling to him uncomfortably. Florescent lights hung from the ceiling and at the end of the corridor there was a set of dark blue industrial double doors with an old rusted exit sign hanging above it. Hermione pulled him through the door to the right of the exit.

"...and the fact that you're still standing here and not trapped on the seventh level of the Department of Mysteries for kidnapping Harry fucking Potter!"

"Theo knows what he's doing."
"That's hardly the point, Blaise."

"Well, who else do we know who's readily available, has a working knowledge of manipulation tactics, and probably knows far more about Death Eater psychology than us?"

It was all… not what Harry expected. Daphne, Nott, and Zabini were standing around a large table in the centre of the room, which was piled high with a mess of books, papers, bottles of Coca-Cola, boxes of takeaways, and various bits and bobs. They were all half naked, slightly injured, glistening with sweat, and screaming at each other with their wands in their hands. On the far wall behind them, there were six different scrying mirrors depicting various angles of Draco Malfoy bound to a chair in an empty room. He was seemingly out cold, with his head lolling over his shoulder – his sweaty blonde hair was plastered to his forehead. He'd probably have one hell of a crick when he woke up.

The wall to the right was covered with a blackboard, which contained a massive semantic word map – the likes of which Harry hadn't seen since primary school – that was completely on the subject of Malfoy. It was daunting to look at. On the opposite side, there was a tiny refrigerato, a pile of trunks and bags (including his and Hermione's), and a desk that was just as cluttered as the table in the centre of the room.

A very bruised and y-front clad Nott snatched Daphne's silver case off the table, briskly lighting a cigarette. "Afternoon, Potter," he greeted in an even tone when he spotted them, glancing over at Daphne with wary eyes. "Sorry 'bout the head, Blaise can get a little overzealous at times."

"He's Harry Potter," Zabini retorted, "I wasn't taking any chances."

"Whatever, it's fine – just tell me what the fuck is going on," Harry said, stalking over to the mirrors on the far wall, passing a very stoic Daphne. She was stripped down to her undergarments and he could see all the bruises and the cut up her side as clearly as ever. Shoving past his feelings, his eyes narrowed at Draco Malfoy, barely believing that the images were real. "Where is he?"

"He's in another room," Hermione answered, nodding her head toward the blackboard-covered wall. "Just down the corridor."

Satisfied with her answer, he addressed the three Slytherins, "And how did you get him here?"

No one spoke for the longest time. Nott and Zabini were staring cautiously at Daphne and she finally threw up her hands in an exasperated manner. "Oh, just go ahead and tell him already."

"Alright. We used a Signature Duplicating potion and a Compulsion Philtre to get him out of the castle this morning. Didn't exactly go as planned – that blasted elf didn't follow the instructions properly," Nott explained rapidly, inhaling deeply at his cigarette. "It took a whi-"

"Hold on – elf? When this morning?" Harry interrupted, his brows furrowed toward the Slytherin boy.

"Daph paid Dobby to apply the potions. We extracted him around five AM, give or take," Nott replied with an absentminded wave of his hand. "Anyway, we-"
"No," Harry cut in again, moving closer to Nott. "That can't be… I saw Malfoy at breakfast-"

"And you followed him, tied him up, and interrogated him?" Daphne asked dryly. Harry looked over at her, his eyes wide. How the hell did she know? She continued, "That was me. Polyjuice. Good wandwork, by the way. I almost dropped my cover."

"I sent Tonks to arrest him," Harry said, appraising her. He now noticed that some of the bruises marring here skin were long and stretched, a shadow of the ropes that once bound her. She had to be telling the truth. You couldn't hide that.

A wry smirk tugged at the corners of Daphne's lips. "Why am I not surprised," she muttered, looking away from him toward the blackboard. "Glad we got the bastard out of the castle when we did then."

"But having the Aurors arrest him was the original plan," Harry sternly pointed out, fixing her with a terse stare.

"Yes, but it's not a very satisfying plan, is it?" Daphne countered, raising an eyebrow toward him. "I doubt that sending Draco to Azkaban would be a permanent solution. The Dark Lord broke them out last year easily enough – I bet he could do it again."

"Not only that – all our work would be for naught," Nott chimed in, flicking the ashes off his fag into an empty takeaway box. "We'd never find out what he was up to unless my father was the one to interrogate him and only if I could somehow get him to give me the files on it. Slim chance of that ever happening."

"So… instead of that, you kidnap Malfoy and interrogate him yourself?" Harry deduced slowly, his brows furrowed, picking up the little details and connecting them. "That's the grand plan that you've been working on for weeks?"

"It's more difficult to kidnap someone at Hogwarts than you'd think," Zabini commented, taking a seat at the table, and sliding a pack of Davidoff's toward himself.

Turning to Daphne, Harry pursed his lips. "Why didn't you just tell me? Especially if you were going to… bring me into it anyway."

"It wasn't my idea to kidnap you – I had no part in it," Daphne said in a curt tone, her eyes narrowing. "Theo is under the impression that you're necessary for a successful interrogation."

"Death Eater psychology," Nott said with a nod, taking a drag off his cigarette. "I was friends with Draco when we were little, Blaise was friends with him when he got to Hogwarts, Daph was involved with him for a little bit, and Potter should cover the Death Eater aspect. All angles – it's important!"

"Well I can't very well stay here and help," Harry said, a little reluctantly. He'd actually love to help… it was tempting. "It's not safe for me to be here. The whole Order is probably looking for me."

Hermione shook her head, snorting derisively. "No, Nott has the covered…" she countered with a wry smile, looking both perturbed and amused. "He somehow got his hands on a time turner."

"I told you – you didn't destroy them all last year," Nott muttered irritably around his fag, smoke curling out his nose.
"Still suspicious." Hermione glared at him. "And you've yet to tell me how you got around the registration."

"Oh bloody hell, Granger, if you really need to know," Nott replied as if he had been through her questioning multiple times before, "I got it from an Unspeakable – they don't need to register them."

"Your father?" Harry discretely guessed and Nott's sly crooked smirk told him 'yes' even though he didn't say anything. Hermione obviously didn't get the message. Harry interrupted before she could launch into a series of probing questions, like she usually did when something seemed amiss.

"Regardless of the whole… time turner thing," Harry said, "I still don't think it's safe for me to be here with Voldemort and his Death Eaters running around out there."

"Jesus, you seriously think he's going to look for you here?" Daphne asked with a breathy laugh. "Very unlikely. The worst things you'll find in these parts are thieves and muggers, and the occasional arms dealer or undertaker."

Harry glared at her blatant disregard for his safety – neither can live while the other survives, after all. "That's not really reassuring."

A small smile ghosted over Daphne's lips. "My wards'll hold up. If the Dark Lord walks by, you could open up the door and wave and he wouldn't even notice. And it'll be even safer at my house - I've a blood ward set there."

"He's not drinking your blood," Hermione suddenly protested. She stared at Daphne as if she had just gutted Crookshanks and made a hat out of him.

"Well, it was either that or set up unstable wards to exempt Muggles. My mother unfortunately has a social life; a blood ward covers that." Daphne raised an eyebrow toward the bushy-haired Gryffindor. "And you have to admit that Harry would be completely safe there."

Hermione glared. "It's very dark magic."

"It's more ancient than dark," Daphne retorted. "And anyway, if this truly is war and Harry is, indeed, the primary target, you seriously don't want to muck about with your light-hearted bullshit. It doesn't need to be more than a drop – and I won't use it for anything other than keeping him safe."

"I somehow doubt that," Hermione said stiffly, vigorously shaking her head. "I don't trust you."

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Isn't the fact that we captured a Death Eater enough proof that you can trust us not to harm him?"

"Oi! Don't I get a say in this?" Harry asked when he got a chance to get a word in, staring at both girls warily. He didn't know much about blood magic. He'd heard things about it that were quite… nasty, but Daphne did have a point, as much as he hated to admit that.

Hermione sharply replied, "No!" at the same time Daphne said, "Of course." They glared at each other.

"You don't know how blood magic works, Harry. She could tether her magic to yours, or she could use it to track you, or she could bind your actions to her."
"One drop is not enough to do those things! He'd need to drink a whole vial for any of that," Daphne said briskly, crossing her arms over her chest. "And tethering magic involves a rather extensive blood exchange, or didn't you read Mordred's Bloud Magicka?"

Hermione huffed.

"I'll do it," Harry found himself saying. Daphne smiled at him and his heart clenched just a little. He pushed past it quickly. There were more important things to focus on – like the fact that he could spend two whole weeks with the Slytherins interrogating Malfoy away from the oppressive Order that barely told him anything because he was 'underage'.

The relief of washing his hands of the whole Malfoy situation was nothing compared to being involved in this process of interrogating him. Excitement was nipping at his heels and he couldn't wait to get started. Christmas had definitely come early this year. He just hoped that the dark cloud that was his and Daphne's relationship didn't loom over them too much.

A half hour later – after everyone had calmed down a little – they sat around the table, munching on fish and chips that they had under a stasis charm to keep fresh. Empty packets of crisps and sweet wrappers littered the table. Hermione had a pile of kittens in her lap and was bottle feeding them while Crookshanks pawed at her knees. Apparently, she and Zabini had gone back to King's Cross to collect their things shortly after she was filled in on the situation. Relaxing back in his chair, Harry sipped at a bottle of Coca-Cola, secretly relishing in the Muggle-ness of it all. He loved the food at Hogwarts, but sometimes he missed the secret pleasures of good old Muggle junk food and fizzy pop that he rarely ever got at the Dursleys.

"So," Harry asked slowly, "have you started with Malfoy yet?"

"I've tried a few times. But at the rate we're going, we'll get a confession out of him sometime in 1998," Nott said miserably. "It's like he's… closed up. Stubborn bastard."

"If you let me at him, I'll get him to open up nice and wide," Daphne said with a feral smile. She took a drag off her cigarette and leaned back in her chair.

"No – too dangerous. You're much too emotionally attached to the subject," Nott countered, firmly shaking his head. "And I really don't want to have to deal with you torturing him."

"I wouldn't torture him, even if it is an appealing idea," Daphne deliberated. "However, I think that your 'love for Daddy' theory is absolute crap."

"No it's not! It's legitimate! Those who feel strong respect for their father figures are generally more likely to confide in those who remind them of their father," Nott explained in an exasperated rush. "It's all up there! Can't you see it?" He gestured to the immense blackboard behind him and Harry confusedly glanced over at it, squinting and closely inspecting the semantic word map for the first time. It was bloody difficult - the board was practically white from how much writing it contained.

The lines that connected the large box in the centre – containing 'Draco Malfoy' – to the smaller box 'Lucius Malfoy' branched off into even smaller boxes that housed the words 'Fear', 'Respect', and 'Ambition'. In turn, those branched off into different clusters of boxes that Harry couldn't read from
this far away. Staring at the 'Lucius Malfoy' box, he replayed Nott and Daphne's words in his head – if Nott was interrogating Malfoy, acting like his father...

"How does that work? You definitely don't remind me of Lucius Malfoy, and Malfoy already knows you pretty well, doesn't he?" Harry asked, his brows furrowed. After all, not only did Nott sleep with Malfoy, Nott also said that they were friends when they were little.

"Draco doesn't know it's me," Nott answered with a wave of his hand. "We're using triple-layer glamours, so the only thing that Draco knows is that I have blonde hair and grey eyes and a similar stature to Lucius Malfoy. Then I just have to emulate his father a bit, which is – shockingly – the most difficult part."

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure that it's not gonna work," Daphne said, a cynical look washing over her face.

Zabini cut in, "I'm with Daph. He loves his mother more, anyway."

"Then, by all means," Nott drawled, "enlighten me. How should we do it?"

"Have you tried playing on his fears?" Hermione asked, looking up from the grey little kitten she was feeding and wiping the sweat from her brow. "Like threatening him with the authorities? Making him think that you're the authorities?"

"No, I've already tried that – didn't work," Harry said absentmindedly, shaking his head. Then he paused and his lips parted as he remembered... "Sorry. Nevermind." He'd nearly forgotten that 'Myrtle's bathroom Malfoy' was really Daphne polyjuiced as Malfoy.

"He's never been afraid of authority," Daphne intoned, bitterness seeping into her voice ever so slightly. "His parents have always been there to get him out of trouble. And if it wasn't his parents, it was Snape or Umbridge."

The mention of Umbridge always made the fading scar on the back of Harry's hand tingle.

"We could use Snape as an angle," Nott suggested with a shrug.

"No..." Harry muttered. "He and Snape are – erm." How could he possibly word this? "I followed them during Slughorn's Christmas party and I listened in on their conversation. I think they're working together or something, only Malfoy won't tell Snape what he's up to because he's afraid that Snape will steal his glory. And Snape made an Unbreakable Vow to Malfoy's mum to protect Malfoy... I still haven't been able to make much sense of it."


"Snape's his godfather," Nott educated, his mouth half full of chips. "It's not all that farfetched."

Harry's brows rose. Now the Unbreakable Vow bit made more sense to him – among other things. Like how Snape immediately treated Malfoy as a favourite as soon as he walked into Hogwarts and that never ceased even to this day. Nevertheless, it was strange that the greasy git could be anyone's godfather.

"I still think you should let me have a go," Daphne said, her voice cutting through the thoughtful
silence that had settled amongst the group. "I pinned him down with Legilimency – that seemed to frighten the hell out of him. If we're going to play on fears why not let me go back in there and do it again?"

"No." That was the only thing that Nott said, throwing her a hard, penetrating stare.

"How do you pin someone down with Legilimency?" Hermione asked, staring at Daphne with one of her 'ravenous for knowledge' looks that Harry knew all too well.

"It's… ah…" Daphne shifted in her seat, inhaling deeply at her dwindling cigarette, her brows furrowed. "You're of age, right?" Hermione nodded. "I'll just show you sometime then. Easier to demonstrate." Hermione's lips quirked and Daphne smirked in return, which was a stark contrast to the constant glaring they were doing at each other not too long ago over the blood ward.

Harry gave up hope at ever understanding women.

"I've got nothing," Zabini said in a miserable tone. "His weaknesses are… hard to exploit in these circumstances. And torturing him is out."

"Well, he's an ego-dominant personality type – those are always the hardest to break, especially if they're working for some sort of cause," Nott said resentfully, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "Usually they have a few weaknesses, yet I could barely begin the approach before he closed up – the rapport was abysmal. Bloody failure."

Harry wasn't completely surprised. If someone like Snape – the dubious master superspy double agent – couldn't get Malfoy to tell him what his plan was, Harry wasn't certain if they could. What could Malfoy be doing for Voldemort that warranted such secrecy?

"Yeah… shall we refer to the board then?" Zabini asked, gesturing to the blackboard and Nott and Daphne murmured in agreement.

The next five minutes, they all stood in silence along the vast semantic word map. Up close, Harry could see all the intricate details and could clearly read the clusters of interconnecting boxes that all stemmed from the large box in the middle labeled 'Draco Malfoy'. He wondered how long it took Nott to draw it up – it covered nearly everything about Malfoy that he knew and many things that he didn't know. He held back a chuckle as he read the box containing 'Complete Brat' in the 'Childhood' cluster, which had 'possible kleptomaniac as child' scrawled below it. That definitely wouldn't help them now.

What could they exploit in order to garner a confession out of the blonde Slytherin…?

Harry's eyes trailed from box to box and from cluster to cluster, looking at the little scribbled notes in the webs connecting the boxes – things like 'cruelty' and 'are you afraid of things you don't understand?' wrapped around boxes labeled 'Power', 'Control', 'Fear' and 'Daphne Greengrass', all interconnected. It gave him an odd… ominous feeling that reminded him of the way Daphne looked at him in that empty classroom just yesterday, so vulnerable. 'It's not something I like to talk about,' she'd said. That seemed like so long ago. Now he was here, obviously somewhere in Muggle London, and Draco Malfoy was strapped to a chair in another room, sleeping through the heat.

'Bizarre' didn't even begin to describe it all.

Though now he could see why fixing the Climate Control spell wasn't at the top of Nott's 'to do list'.
Malfoy was a definite priority and it really didn't matter how irritating it was to feel sweat dripping down his back every time he moved. In fact, he was even starting to get used to it, and Daphne was unfortunately an all too welcome sight, despite being covered in all those… bruises and scrapes and that deep cut up her side.

Sure, she shamelessly threw his heart down the sewer, but he couldn't deny the attraction. And her injuries served to push him further to think of different ways that he could get Malfoy to relent, if only to curse the bloody bastard for doing that to her afterward.

He kept glancing at the box containing the word fear, his mind conjuring images of Voldemort standing over his Death Eaters writhing under the Cruciatus Curse. If Malfoy was working for Voldemort, doing something for him, he probably was more afraid of being at the end of Voldemort's wand then he was at the hands of Nott, Daphne, and Zabini, which was likely why he wasn't talking.

In that sudden moment of clarity, Harry picked up a piece of chalk and drew a line from the box containing the word 'fear' to the box containing the words 'Dark Lord'. "That's what you're missing," he said. "He doesn't fear you lot as much as he fears him."

"Interesting," Nott remarked, tilting his head. "So basically…” He paused and let out a breath, his eyes getting that faraway look in them like they did when he was thinking hard about something. "You're saying we should make him fear us even more than the Dark Lord?"

"Or maybe," Hermione mused, the grey kitten in her arms squirming, "we could threaten to turn him over to Voldemort as a traitor. A similar tactic was used during World War II on Japanese prisoners of war. The Japanese considered being captured a fate worse than death. The prisoners of war were very tight-lipped and often tried to kill themselves any chance they got because they brought nothing but shame and dishonor upon their country by being captured, even worse if they had betrayed their country's secrets. And they had nothing to return to after the war because their families would disown them, so those who captured them offered the prisoners asylum in their own countries if they talked. Apparently, it worked."

"An ultimatum," Zabini muttered, nodding his head appreciatively. "Give us the information and we'll keep you safe or we'll turn you over to the Dark Lord."

"No." Harry shook his head. "Voldemort would torture him for being captured, but he would probably reward him for keeping his silence. Malfoy'd need to tell us whatever he's doing before that plan would work."

"We could plant a false memory," Nott proposed.

"We'd have to know what he was doing first to be able to do that," Harry countered, rubbing the sweat away from his eyes underneath his glasses. "We can't just guess when it comes to Voldemort. He'd know if something was off. He's… smart."

"So we're back to the original idea of making him fear us more than he fears the Dark Lord," Daphne said, letting out a short irritated breath. Then she perked up. "Does this mean that we get to torture him?"

"Ugh, torture doesn't work," Nott scoffed, the centre of his forehead creasing. "It only gets you a bunch of quick lies to make the pain stop."
"Well, how 'bout sleep deprivation?" Daphne asked, biting her lip contemplatively.

"Takes too long," Zabini countered, scrunching up his nose.

Daphne shrugged. "Can't hurt. We've only two weeks. We need every possible advantage."

They all agreed on that, at least.

Absentmindedly rubbing at his scar, Harry's mind whirled to how Voldemort treated his Death Eaters. Torture was used quite often as punishment, it seemed. Was that what they feared? Torture? Death? Why did the Death Eaters follow him anyway if that's where it got them?

Blood purity was one reason, of course. They also probably followed Voldemort because he was a powerful wizard who they believed could get things done. Then there were the demented ones like Bellatrix Lestrange who probably simply followed so she could torture and kill people. And then Lucius Malfoy who seemed to want nothing but power and fortune. Wormtail, who probably did it out of fear, the bloody rat…

But why would Draco Malfoy follow Voldemort? Was it the power? The glory? Was he nothing but a carbon copy of his father – taking his place in the Malfoy line of Death Eaters? Malfoy was also a bit of a coward though. So it was likely that there was fear involved as well – any sane person would fear Voldemort at least a little bit. Yet… how could they possibly replicate that type of fear in less than two weeks? How could they replicate the type of fear that Voldemort had been cultivating across the entire wizarding society for the past thirty years?

Harry relayed his thought process to the others, who simply stared at him when he finished. Nott looked introspective, Hermione was nodding hopelessly, and Daphne and Zabini's expressions were unfathomable the entire time.

"I've no idea…" Harry muttered finally, trailing off with a sigh.

Then, Nott shrugged, a determined look bubbling up onto his face as he grabbed at the neat pile of papers and books on the corner of the table. He plucked out a stack of parchment that was stamped with the word 'CLASSIFIED' across the title. Harry just barely got a glimpse of the words 'Sortilege Manual' and the emblem of the Department of Mysteries before Nott shuffled it to the back of the stack.

"Might as well break out the big stuff then," Nott said, deftly flipping through the mass of parchment. "Daphne, layer Blaise up so he can go wake the subject. We've no time to waste fucking around if we're going to do this properly."

The sinister glint in Nott's eyes made Harry just a little bit worried for what was to come.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Harry felt half dead on his feet as he stepped out of the warehouse into the morning sun. After spending the entire night drilling protocols into his head from the *Sortilege Manual*, the pepper-up potion that Nott gave him was likely the only thing keeping him awake and alert at the moment. He pulled Zabini’s thick jacket around him tighter to shield him from the freezing air. It contrasted so much from sub-tropical temperature of the inside. Thanks to having to polyjuiced into Zabini, he was a good five or six inches taller and felt a bit awkward in the Slytherin boy’s form, but it was an immense relief to get away from Nott and the whole Malfoy situation for a bit. However, it did take a lot of convincing. They treated him as if he was a delicate eggshell and Voldemort was an evil hammer.

"So, Granger, any good at Apparation?" Daphne asked, pulling her wand out of her sleeve and staring at the bushy-haired Gryffindor expectantly.

"I'm not licensed yet," Hermione replied reservedly. "Can't we just-"

Daphne rolled her eyes. "I didn't ask if you were licensed."

"I'm okay at it." Hermione glared, crossing her arms over her chest. "But I think we should use Muggle transportation. We've enough polyjuice."

"We don't have enough time – it's easier to Apparate and it's much faster. We have to go all the way past Downing Street. Do you think you can side-long Harry, or do you trust me enough to take him?"

"I'll take him," Hermione said stubbornly, grabbing at his arm. "We'll see you there."

With a nod, Daphne took a deep breath and spun away with a soft ‘pop’.

Harry's stomach flipped nervously as he stared at Hermione. She didn't seem particularly worried, but he had never seen her Apparate. If she botched it up, he winced at the thought of being splinched. The adrenaline spiking in veins made the pepper-up potion's effect hit him at full force and
his heart pounded in his chest as his ears let out a burst of steam. 

Before he knew it, he was spinning into oblivion, his entire body under pressure, like he was being squeezed through a tight tube. They landed and he stumbled, feeling his stomach roll. "You okay?" he heard Hermione ask and he looked up at her.

"I think so," Harry said, examining his limbs – well, Zabini's limbs for the moment – and making sure they were all there. "Yeah, I'm alright." He paused and took a deep breath to let his stomach and heart calm down a bit. "Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"I may have spent a few nights practicing in the Shrieking Shack," Hermione answered with a determined expression, grabbing his hand and pulling him along with her out of the alleyway. "Greengrass can't be the only seasoned professional at breaking laws around here."

"Yeah… I suppose so," Harry nodded. "Bit mad, isn't it? All of this," he asked, reflecting on the past twenty-four hours. They kidnapped him, they kidnapped Malfoy, and now they were in the middle of instigating a full on psychological interrogation which likely went against laws on both the domestic and international level. Muggle laws as well, he imagined. He still had trouble processing it.

Hermione shrugged as they turned the corner down a street he didn't recognize. "It may be mad, but it makes sense. I can't blame them. With all the corruption going on everywhere, it's hard to know who to trust."

Biting the inside of his lip, Harry nodded reluctantly. He wasn't certain of Malfoy was worth all of the effort they were going through, but a large part of him was desperate to know what the Slytherin boy knew.

"Speaking of which," Hermione began, "do you really trust Daphne?"

His brow furrowed and he shrugged, briefly glancing at the ginger bloke who walked past them. There weren't too many people on the streets this early, but he had to remain alert. "I'm not sure…" he said. "She has her moments, I suppose."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Yeah. But, how much do you really know her?"

Did she honestly need to discuss this now?

Harry let out another long sigh. He and Daphne spoke quite extensively in the past few months, but how much did he know about her? The truth was both frightening and irritating. "Okay, I'll admit that I don't know her that much," he said, pulling his leather case out of his back pocket and plucking a fag from the confines.

"Then you can't trust her."

Lighting up with the lighter he borrowed from Zabini, he inhaled deeply, not really sure what to think. Actions spoke louder than words and Daphne sort of proved that she could be trusted to a certain extent… She was obviously not fighting for Voldemort. Didn't Hermione see that?

"Why do you think I can't trust her?"

"She's dangerous." Hermione pursed her lips. "She plays mind games and manipulates people… and she knows and uses very dangerous magic."
"Is this about the blood thing again?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrows and taking a drag off his cigarette.

"There's that, and Legilimency, the signature duplicating potion, triple-layer glamours – everything in that blasted Magick Moste Evile book of hers. She's not a good person."

"Just because she's not exactly a good person doesn't mean we can't trust her," Harry said, flicking the ashes off his fag and following Hermione across the zebra crossing. "Look at everything she's done. If anything, I think it'd be beneficial to have a few Slytherins like her on our side."

"Still doesn't make her any less dangerous," Hermione pointed out, pausing to read the street sign. "It's this way, come on."

OoO

They reached the storefront of a dusty decrepit shop where they met Daphne, who was standing in the doorway. "Took your bloody time," she mumbled, pushing the door open.

Hermione glared and Harry stubbed out his cigarette as they filed into the place. He gripped his wand underneath his jacket sleeve, just in case. The shop was filled to the brim with used random junk, a wall of used CDs and cassette tapes on offer, and various used electronics. It didn't seem like a particularly nice place, but he never got the impression that Daphne was leading them anywhere nice. Harry trailed after Daphne while Hermione went straight to browsing through the CDs, but he felt her eyes carefully glancing after him the whole way.

The weedy Muggle bloke behind the counter couldn't have been any older than eighteen. He looked up from his book as they approached. "Jesus, what the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"Heard you sell stereo equipment – thought you could help me out," Daphne said with a shrug, leaning against the counter. Harry's brows furrowed for a moment as he glanced between the two of them, but then he sobered into the stoic Zabini expression he practiced in the bathroom mirror before he left. He figured it would be best if he remained silent.

"Sure, what's your price point?" the bloke asked, pushing the blonde hair out of his eyes with his hand.

"Don't play that game with me – you'll give it to me for free," she retorted sharply. "But I'll pay for the scopolamine."

"You're joking." The man's eyebrows shot up and his eyes flicked to Harry for a moment, who kept his face blank. He didn't dare hazard a suspicious glance in Daphne's direction. "You do know what that does, yeah?"

A smirk crept over Daphne's lips. "I'm well aware."

"Alright then." The bloke's eyebrows rose even higher on his head. "How much of it do you want?"

"Half a gram. I'll come back if I need more – or anything else you're selling," Daphne said with a wave of her hand.
"Christ, you trying to take down a walrus?"

"Just some large vermin that I don't care for." Daphne stared at the man expectantly. "Do you have it or not? I can always go somewhere else."

"Yeah yeah, I'll go get that – you pick out a stereo or whatever it was you wanted."

"So I'm just going to take a wild guess that he's a drug dealer," Harry whispered when the man disappeared into the back room. "I thought we were only here to get the stereo for the whole sensory overload plan."

Shrugging, Daphne moved over to look at the stereos and electronics, playing with the dials. "Drug dealer or not, Rob's handy to have. Used to be my neighbour." She paused, glancing at him carefully and lowering her voice even further. "And the scopolamine'll be useful. In certain doses, it's a slightly hallucinogenic substance that could be considered the Muggle equivalent of a truth serum. Since we don't have a month to brew veritaserum and I don't know where I can steal some, this shall have to do."

"Got the music," Hermione interrupted, holding up a pile of CD's. "I hope Malfoy likes Swedish techno, death metal, and the Spice Girls."


"She's buying scopolamine," Harry translated and Hermione's eyes widened.

"That's why you dragged us to this god awful shop? Are you insane?"

Closely examining the speakers of the stereo system Daphne was perusing, she muttered, "Yes, well – as I was explaining to Harry – we don't have much time to procure veritaserum."

"Scopolamine is not at all like veritaserum!" Hermione countered, keeping her voice as low as possible. "Eventually, you may get some truth using it, but you'll get a lot of hallucinations out of it before that ever happens."

Harry's brows furrowed as a wry smile pulled at Daphne's lips and she glanced at Hermione out of the corner of her eye. "I'm counting on that."

"Why?" he asked.

"Never taken hallucinogenic drugs, have you?" Daphne asked rhetorically. Surreptitiously casting a featherweight charm onto the stereo system, she picked up a speaker and shoved it into Harry's arms. "There are good trips and there are bad trips – it all depends on the situation you're in." She carefully started to arrange the cords and wires at the back of the stereo, wrapping them around the large boxy device. "Bad situations equal bad trips and Draco's going to have one of the worst trips of his life. If I get the truth out of him, that's great, but I'm banking on that bad trip to at least scare the hell out of him."

"But you could kill him with it!"

"I'm surprised you even know what scopolamine is, Granger," Daphne said with a snort, bending her leg upwards and reaching into the side of her shoe to pull out a small wad of hundred pound notes.
Hermione sneered. "I'm hardly an idiot."

"Could've fooled me. You're idiotic enough to think that Theo's plan is going to work the way it is," Daphne retorted.

"It's based on protocols from the *Sortilege Manual!* If it works for the Ministry, it should work for us."

"Who says that those protocols actually *work* for the Ministry? They don't exactly publicize their success rate and since the Dark Lord isn't dead yet, I'm going to guess that it's not very-"

"Oi," Harry quietly interjected as he spotted Rob coming out of the back room out of the corner of his eye.

"That'll be three hundred pounds. Did you choose your – well, you're a bit of alright," Rob said, stopping short and eyeing Hermione with lewd interest.

A haughty expression washed over the stern lines of Hermione’s face and she quickly grabbed Harry's free arm. "Sorry, taken." Pursing her lips, she looked over at the Slytherin girl while Harry tried his best to do the intimidating Zabini stare. He had half a mind to hate the idea that she was actually considering a relationship with the wanker and the other half was rather certain that Zabini drugged her somehow. "I hear Daphne's newly single though."

**Bloody hell, Hermione.** He lightly kicked the back of Hermione’s foot in retaliation. He really didn't want to watch a stupid drug dealer go after Daphne. It was too fucking soon.

Surprisingly, Rob's nose scrunched up and he shook his head. "Nah, I don't fancy psychopaths."

"Always the charmer," Daphne commented dryly, passing him the money and slipping the sachet of drugs into her pocket.

"Only psychopaths use that type of stuff on people, sweetheart," Rob pointed out, nodding toward Daphne's pocket.

"Call me thorough," Daphne quipped. "So, if you're done asking me things you *really* shouldn't… we'll just be going. It was nice seeing you, Rob."

As they walked out of the store, carrying the awkwardly bulky stereo system, Harry couldn't help but stare at Daphne suspiciously. He knew her expressions well enough now to know she was keeping something from them. The tightness around her eyes and lips betrayed her, even if she seemed relatively unassuming.

"You're hiding something else, aren't you?" he asked while they waited for the crossing signal to turn green.
Daphne raised an eyebrow toward him. "What gave you that idea?"

A smirk pulling at his lips, Harry replied, "Your evasiveness just now."

She let out a small breathy laugh. "You think that my evasiveness actually means something?"

"Not exactly." Harry shook his head and he could feel Hermione's eyes on him. "It's what you don't say that means something."

"Well, would it help if I told you that I'm always hiding something?" Daphne asked conversationally as the signal turned green and they started across the road.

"No. But it would be a great help if you told me what you are hiding."

With a discreet glance in the direction of Hermione, Daphne's lips curled into a wry grin. "Not yet," she muttered to him as they headed down a dim alleyway, which was likely the Apparation point they were going to be using.

"I'm starting to get tired of your personal agenda, Greengrass," Hermione interjected, crossing her arms over her chest. "Either tell us or shut it."

"If anything, I'm getting tired of people digging into my 'personal agenda', Granger."

They stopped by a pair of trashcans and Harry set the speaker down to massage where it dug into his arm. Even though it was extremely light, the corners still pressed into his arm from the way he had to carry it.

"This plan with Malfoy is never going to work if we don't work together," Hermione scoffed, shaking her head.

Daphne grinned, shrinking the stereo system down to pocket size with her wand. "You know, you were right about that up until the point where you said 'if'," she countered, carefully scooping the system up into her hand.

"What makes you so sure that the plan's going to fail?" Harry asked curiously, just as Hermione opened her mouth, a frustrated expression marring her features.

"Because it's not enough," Daphne explained, straightforward. "Doesn't matter how much you deprive him of sleep or deprive him of his senses or overload his senses or condition him… it won't get him scared enough to break in two weeks. He's a desperate entitled bastard."

Harry's brows furrowed and he bit the inside of his cheek. "You should've told Nott that."

Pursing her lips, Daphne shook her head. "No. Theo's stubborn and arrogant. He won't consider any elevation in tactics until he sees eminent failure – and he's in no mood to listen to me. He thinks I want to torture him, remember?"

"Or kill him," Hermione said, openly staring at the pocket where Daphne had stashed the sachet of scopolamine.

"Nah, killing him would be too quick," Daphne said in an oddly casual tone. She pulled Hermione's
arm out of its crossed position and shoved the stereo system into her hand. "Now… I've another errand to run, so you two go ahead. I'll be along shortly."

"Let me go with you," Harry blurted out before he ever began to think it all the way through.

Daphne shook her head. "Don't be stupid. Your polyjuice will wear off before we can get back."

"I have more on me," he persisted, patting the vial held in the fur-lined pocket of Zabini's ridiculously expensive coat. He had an odd curious instinct that he should go with her and, if there was one thing that he always followed, it was his instincts.

Hermione grabbed at his arm. "Even then, Harry, it's not safe," she said, adding, "not with her – you don't know where she's going," under her breath.

Daphne's cold sardonic laugh signified that she heard that and she gazed at Harry in a way that made him think that she did not want him to come with her.

Pulling away from Hermione's claw-like grip, Harry moved toward Daphne. "Sorry, Hermione. I'm going."

"Great," Daphne said with a tight smile.

That was definitely a warning, but she wasn't running away from him.

Harry's eyes challenged her. "Great," he responded, with his own grin. Grasping tightly onto her arm, he readied himself for the unpleasant feeling of being squeezed half to death while Daphne narrowed her eyes at him. He had just finally registered Hermione's protests as Daphne reluctantly spun off and Apparated them away.

Harry doubled over when they landed and he heard an ominous scraping click of metal on metal just as he caught his breath. Years of growing up in the Muggle world, furtively peeking glances at the telly, taught him exactly what that sound was and he looked up to find himself staring up the dark barrel of a revolver. His reflexes kicked into action and his wand was out in an instant, a curse just barely on the tip of his tongue.

Now he knew why Daphne wasn't too keen on him joining her.

"Jesus, Johnson, put that away," Daphne scoffed from beside him as she pulled Harry up to his feet. He barely noticed that he was half sprawled out on the tiled floor.

Johnson lowered his weapon, nodding toward Harry. "What are you doing with the Zabini kid?"

Clutching onto Harry's hand, Daphne explained, "He's helping me with Malfoy. No need to worry."

Harry tried to keep his expression neutral and as Zabini-like as possible to keep up with the facade. His wand was tucked up his sleeve, just in case. He knew that there was something off about Johnson when he met him at Slughorn's party and it felt slightly satisfying that he was right about that, but it was also slightly nerve-wracking. Daphne Apparated them straight into Johnson's
enormous, stainless steel and granite covered kitchen. The cabinet under the kitchen sink was open and Harry could see a gun holster bolted to the cabinet door, which was probably where the revolver came from. What kind of person kept a gun in their kitchen?

"If you're certain," Johnson drawled dubiously, setting the revolver down on the granite-topped island in the middle of the kitchen. He picked up his cup of coffee and leaned back against the island, surveying them with his dark eyes. "I was hoping you'd use the normal entrance this time."

"There were unforeseeable complications," Daphne said with a sigh. Then, she nodded toward Johnson's cup. "You have any more of that?"

"Help yourself."

Taking a proffered cup of coffee from Daphne, Harry busied himself with it, trying to furtively sneak questioning glances at her when he safely could. She seemed as if she had been to this place many times before based on how she knew her way around the kitchen.

"Everything you asked for is in the loading room, if you want to take inventory. Did you bring what I needed?" Johnson asked, raising an eyebrow toward Daphne. Harry stared at the exchange between them, concealing his interest. Zabini was incredibly talented at looking bored no matter the occasion and Harry was certain that he was failing, but it didn't keep him from trying.

Setting her cup of coffee onto the island, Daphne dug into her pockets, pulling out the sachet of scopolamine and a sparkling crystal half the size of her fist that shimmered and glowed in the light filtering in from the windows. "Half the scopolamine's mine," she said. "I didn't have time to divide it up before I got here."

"Now I understand why you wanted that many drips," Johnson commented.

With a nod, Daphne took a quick sip of her coffee. "He's also not drinking anything we give him, so I'm killing two birds with one stone. How much do you think he can have? He's probably about eighty kilos, give or take."

"It's always best to start small with it – I wouldn't add more than a tiny amount to the bag since you don't know his tolerance." Johnson picked up the bag of cream coloured powder, examining it carefully before setting it back down. "Wizards are often a bit strange when it comes to this stuff."

Daphne's brows rose. "How so?"

"It produces more hallucinations. I've since given up on it for magic-folk – you don't get as much control with them like you do with the Muggles," Johnson replied, as though he was discussing the weather as opposed to forcibly drugging people.

"I'll keep that in mind," Daphne muttered, pulling out her silver case and lighting up.

"What else are you going to do with him?" Johnson asked, moving across the kitchen to refill his cup of coffee.

"Personally? Nothing," Daphne said with a shrug, blowing out a puff of smoke. "Theo's always difficult to manage and I've been considered a torture risk."

"I can't imagine where he got that idea." Johnson's tone was steeped in sarcasm.
"Yeah, there's no joking about with Theo. But there are ways around him to include my involvement." She glanced over at Harry for a moment and his brows furrowed.

"Excellent. If you happen to get the location of the Malfoy's summer home, don't forget to share," Johnson replied with a wink, picking up the sachet of scopolamine and the gleaming stone with his free hand. "I'll go divide this up for you."

"Thanks," Daphne said offhandedly as Johnson disappeared through the door to the left of Harry. She busied herself with finding an ashtray in one of the many cupboards for a moment before turning toward him. "Sorry about him. He's a tad paranoid."

"That's putting it lightly." Harry pulled out his leather case and lit a fag with his borrowed lighter. "Why does he keep a gun under his sink?"

"He's a squib and he deals with dangerous people on a regular basis so he keeps a gun in every room." Daphne set the ashtray between them. "I can't say I blame him."

Harry inhaled deeply at his cigarette. "Right. So what's your plan to go around Nott that involves me?" he asked, changing the subject the more important matter at hand. He was pretty certain that was what she was hinting at a moment ago.

Daphne's brows rose and she hesitated, finishing off her second cup of coffee. "That's complicated. You really want to do this now?"

"Yes, if it involves me I want to know – complicated or not."

Daphne shrugged a shoulder. "Fair enough," she said, glancing at the clock on the far wall.

Harry's brows furrowed.

"Since Theo has shut me out of interrogating, I'm going to need you to interrogate and access Malfoy for me. Do you think you would be able to do that?"

Of all things, he wasn't really expecting that. Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I just started learning about this stuff less than a month ago. Nott wouldn't let me in there."

"I'm pretty sure he would let you in if you could knock some fear into Malfoy using your 'inside' Dark Lord knowledge."

"But I can't." Harry shook his head. "Voldemort doesn't… do much aside from torture and kill people and threaten to kill people. How could I realistically use those tactics to interrogate Malfoy? Nott wouldn't agree to them."

"You won't use those tactics though. It's just a way into the room with him. Then, once you're in the room, you use my tactics," Daphne explained with a grin.

Harry pursed his lips. "You mean drug him and… then what?"

"Well you don't have to worry about drugging him. Theo will go along with hooking Draco up to the IV drip because he's not drinking anything we give him. We can't allow him to be too dehydrated. The drugs will be in there. I just need you to break him a little so we can get the right
effect when we introduce the drugs. Make him hopeless and afraid. The sleep deprivation and sensory manipulation should help with that. Then I think you'll be able to syphon the truth from him after we play around with his mind a bit, I believe… but that type of fear should get anyone to break.”

"What makes you think I can do all that?" Harry asked skeptically.

"You've a lot of potential. You just need the right plan of attack, I think – from what I've seen, anyway," Daphne replied, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray.

Harry hesitated, part of him was excited and eager to agree but the other part was slightly terrified. "You're not going to give me a choice, are you?"

Considering her history and that bloody stubborn expression on her face…

"No – that's doubtful," Daphne said, scrunching up her nose and shaking her head. "Do you need more convincing?"

Harry shrugged, biting the inside of his lip. "I think I might be able to do it."

Daphne's brow rose. "You think?"

"Yeah," Harry muttered, nodding. "I think I can."

"Then, first thing's first," Daphne started as she moved toward him and twisted the handle of the door behind him, nearly pressing herself against him to open it, "you need to improve your lying ability."

Rolling his eyes, Harry retorted, "It's not that bad."

"Sure – but it's not very good either," Daphne said, skirting around him to go through the doorway. "Come on, help me carry the drips and I'll point out your weak spots."

Harry let out a drawn out sigh and followed her through the door. Between dealing with her and Nott, he had a feeling that it was going to be a bloody long two weeks.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
The Overture

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Thank you so much for reading! Also, I must thank my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help! I hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize, I do not own. This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: The Overture

oOo

"You could be scary if you wanted to. I can see it. You're almost there."

"That wasn't scary enough?"

Daphne shook her head. "No. Maybe I'm a bit desensitized. But I doubt that's even on par with the Dark Lord."

Harry wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. They had been working at this for hours. Zabini and Hermione were at Daphne's house, sleeping in proper beds (the lucky bastards), while he, Daphne, and Nott were taking the night shift of watching Malfoy get pelted by the automated sensory overload/sensory deprivation/keep-him-awake-at-all-costs system. Nott was supposed to go in to dole out questions every once in a while, but he was half sprawled out over the desk in the command room asleep.

"How about this…" Daphne said, the centre of her forehead scrunched up in thought. "What do you find frightening about Voldemort in particular?"

Harry's brows furrowed. The last time he actually saw Voldemort was in the atrium at the Ministry over six months ago… trying to take over his mind. "He's not that frightening, really."

Daphne stared at him cynically. "You're joking," she deadpanned.

"Well, it's what he can do that's more frightening than him himself. He wouldn't hesitate to torture and kill your entire family and friends if it would get him what he wanted."

"So basically you're saying that he's a selfish, psychotic bully?" Daphne raised a skeptical brow toward him. "There has to be more. He couldn't have amassed such a following and such a reputation off of that alone."
"I supposed he's decently charismatic… intelligent, and most of the people who follow him are mental pureblooded bastards. And he *is* incredibly dangerous."

Daphne's eyes widened and she frowned. "That's it?"

Harry shrugged.

"No… I can't believe that's all there is to him. I mean, he's *supposed* to be the *ultimate* Slytherin – the *heir* of Slytherin! If he was the ultimate Slytherin, I could see why so many people would fear him, but-" Daphne shook her head, letting out a sigh. "A plain old sociopath is just so common."

"He *is* powerful *and* a genius at magic. It seems as if only Dumbledore surpasses him, but I don't know the extent," Harry said with another shrug, going over that duel in his mind.

"That much is apparent – I *know* that already." Daphne reached for her silver case sitting on the edge of the sofa and lit up, holding the case out to offer him one. "But being powerful and good at magic will only get you so far."

"He was consciously using magic well before he came to Hogwarts," Harry suggested, plucking a fag from the confines of Daphne's silver case as Crookshanks' kittens ran around his feet and took off into the kitchenette.

"So? *Granger* was a prodigy too and I bloody well don't fear her," Daphne argued, brushing her hair away from her forehead. "There must be something else – something *more*."

Unfortunately, she had a point. What was it about Voldemort that was one of the most important keys to his success?

"He makes really good threats?" Now he was just reaching, even if it was true. Harry sighed. "I don't know what more to say. It's difficult to profile Voldemort properly."

Pursing her lips, Daphne hummed thoughtfully. "Okay, next topic then. What do you find scary if Voldemort doesn't do it for you?"

"Dementors," Harry admitted.

"Logical," Daphne commented dryly, taking a drag off her cigarette. "Unhelpful to our situation, but logical."

His lips quirked up in a small smile and his brows furrowed slightly as he stared at her. "What's your fear?"

"Too many things," she replied cryptically, blowing out a puff of smoke.

"Like?"

"Control – or the lack thereof." Daphne averted her gaze and leaned back against the pillows on the sofa, sighing. "Helplessness as well - I can't stand that."

"Yeah, but that stuff doesn't seem to be working all that great with Malfoy yet," Harry muttered around his cigarette before lighting it.
Daphne rolled her eyes. "That's the thing about pureblooded Slytherins. They're regularly controlled by stupid customs and their parent's approval and all that political bullshit. What we're putting him through he can relatively deal with - given a short timespan anyway. I'm not sure how he'll deal with sleep deprivation though."

"Do you know his biggest fears?"

"Well..." Daphne paused, the centre of her forehead creasing in thought. "He has a healthy fear of werewolves and losing his mother. And Granger. I think Granger makes him feel a bit hopeless." Daphne shrugged. "I know he loathes me, but I'm not certain if that has much fear involved or if it's just pure hatred. Oh, and he can't stand when he can't control other people. That's why he targets you a lot."

The gears started turning in his mind as he sat there and thought about it. If he wanted to get to Malfoy – really get to him – he had to play dirty. Maybe even past the point of where Nott would comfortably allow, but possibly right before he reached Voldemort's level.

Fears – Voldemort...

"That actually might be a good approach..." Harry said quietly, more to himself than to Daphne.

"What would?" Daphne asked, a curious gleam in her eyes.

A wide smile spread across Harry's face. "I've an idea."

Taking what he swore was his fiftieth shot of pepper-up potion in the last two days, Harry watched Nott quick-fire a series of questions at Malfoy in the mirrors, listening through the baby monitor they had set up to keep everyone keyed into what was going on in the interrogation room. He had yet to convince Nott to let him into the room with Malfoy, but he was going to wait until Nott came out. Nott looked pretty damn frustrated at the moment; as frustrated as Nott could look, anyway. His face was relatively unreadable, but he was staring at Malfoy so fiercely that it was as if flames were going to shoot from his eyes and burn Malfoy to a crisp.

And Malfoy was defiant as ever – they had gotten him to talk at least, but only in attempt to bribe them and complain about his lack of legal representation. Malfoy could apparently have them swimming in gold if they released him. Right now, Malfoy was a bit delirious from dehydration and lack of sleep, but still going on about it. Still tight lipped about any useful information.

Zabini occasionally looked up from the book he was reading to make comments on the interrogation. He was persistent in trying to fix the Climate Control spell. Harry had no idea where Daphne had gone, but she was likely making preparations for the plan and, from what he could hear in the corridor, it sounded as if Hermione just got back from gathering lunch.

"Has he said anything else yet?" she asked as she strode through the doorway, loaded down with bags full of groceries.

"No. He's still being a stubborn bastard," Zabini answered, setting his book and his wand aside to
help Hermione unpack the food and lay it out.

Hermione sighed. "He should be worn out by now… Maybe Greengrass was right."

Harry's brows furrowed and he turned to look at her, raising a perplexed eyebrow. Did she really just say that or was he hearing things?

"It's been three days and nothing," she elaborated, pursing her lips in that way he knew she was pained to say what she was about to say. "The plan isn't going to work as it is. You'd think that we'd make a little bit of progress by now if what we were doing was working, but he's obviously not afraid of us."

"It's probably Theo's delivery that's the problem," Zabini offered, dishing up a large bowl of curry and rice while Hermione set about making a pot of tea with her wand. "Granted, he's decent at what he does, but he has the tendency to be cold with people – impersonal. Too polite."

Harry nodded, getting up to grab a bowl full of curry for himself. He was starving. "Maybe I should take a shot at him," Harry suggested casually. "My relationship with Malfoy is far from impersonal and polite."

"You, Potter?" Zabini snorted. "Funny."

"I'm serious," Harry asserted between bites. Hermione spared him a suspicious glance. "I know a few things that you lot don't. I might be able to work some of those things into an approach that could get him to speak, get him scared. Possibly mimic Voldemort a little. If anyone here could do that, it's me."

"And, pray tell, how does the Dark Lord act exactly?" Zabini asked with a disbelieving expression shadowing his features.

Smirking, Harry replied, "He's the ultimate Slytherin."

Thank you, Daphne.

"So you think that you can act like the ultimate Slytherin?" Zabini gave a mocking laugh. "Merlin, I'd pay to see that."

Hermione narrowed her eyes toward the Slytherin boy in disapproval, but Harry wasn't deterred by his condescension. "The hat almost put me into Slytherin, you know," he retorted. "And I am a parselmouth, which, from what I can remember from second year, is a very Slytherin trait."

"Touché," Zabini said. "However, you weren't raised Slytherin. You've never lived it a day in your life."

"And you've never been possessed by Voldemort before," Harry countered fiercely. "I have."

Zabini's eyebrows rose and a small grin tugged at his lips. He stared at Harry for a short while, as if assessing whether Harry was telling the truth. "Alright then," Zabini said with a nod of respect before going back to his meal. "We'll see how you do."

Harry regarded Zabini cautiously. That was almost too easy.
"Wait. How exactly are you going to imitate Voldemort?" Hermione asked confusedly. "He's far more powerful – and I'm sorry to say Harry – but he's more intelligent and, not to mention, psychotic. You're not like him at all. Plus, Voldemort tortures people. He kills people. That's extremely hard to mimic given our parameters."

"Yes, but if Malfoy is a Death Eater, then he must know a few of Voldemort's mannerisms at least. I don't have to kill or torture anyone to copy those." Technically he was telling the truth, he did have a plan to use a few of Voldemort's mannerisms that he knew of.

"A subconscious approach," Zabini remarked, vaguely considering the idea. "Extremely Slytherin."

Daphne's voice sounded through the room as she entered. "What's extremely Slytherin?"

"Theo's plan isn't working very well – again – so Potter came up with an alternative. It has potential," Zabini evenly replied, going back to eating his curry.

"Told you it wasn't enough," Daphne said, grabbing a Coca-Cola from the mini refrigerator before taking a seat. "What's the new plan?"

As they explained it to her and ate, Harry couldn't help but think how much he both despised and envied how easily Daphne slipped into an unassuming role. How easily she could lie with not even a twitch of a muscle to give her away. He wasn't that good. Maybe he was when he was acting on pure instinct and adrenaline, but he doubted he would ever be that good without it spawning from that. Yet, he had shown a large improvement in the past few days.

Daphne was a surprisingly sufficient and easygoing teacher. She also had a clear and simple approach to lying. It wasn't about being unreadable, like Nott. Overall, lying was about acting casual; lying was about not being afraid, not caring, and not stressing over lying – being just as comfortable with the lie as you were with the truth. It was so logical that it should have been common sense. Harry's downfall was being completely comfortable with it and caring too much, but lying was a lot like keeping secrets and he was already good at that. He just needed to transfer and apply that knowledge.

When it came to Malfoy, Harry doubted that he'd go through a moral struggle in order to lie, deceive, and manipulate him.

oOo

Nott burst into the control room a little while later, his jaw clenched to such a degree that Harry could practically hear his teeth grinding in frustration. "We need to get him hooked up to those Muggle drip things soon. He's getting too delirious," he said in a rational commanding tone – far more rational than he appeared as he stripped off his shirt, trousers, and triple-layer glamour in a furious whirl of limbs.

"Delirium can result from the sleep deprivation as well, you know," Daphne replied, lighting up a fag and blowing out a puff of smoke. "But I'll prep them after I'm done with this."

Nott collapsed in the seat across the table from Harry, running his hand through his hair and blinking rapidly. "Yeah. Perhaps. That could be it..." he muttered briskly.
"I think you need a break, mate," Zabini said, eyeing the weedy Slytherin boy warily. "Let me or Potter take over for you for a little while. He came up with a decent idea while you were in there."

It was somewhat unsettling for Zabini to mention that right off the bat – Harry actually wasn't certain what Zabini was playing at by agreeing to his whole Voldemort act. Zabini would be the reasonable one to put into the room next, not Harry. Zabini was great at manipulating people and Harry doubted that he had fully convinced Zabini that he could do it better. There had to be some other motive at play.

Trying not to let that bother him, Harry relayed the plan to Nott, whose curiosity seemed peaked by it and he cautiously relented after a lot of convincing. Harry had to hold in a sigh of relief. The earlier that he could get in there, the more hope he had that Daphne's whole plan would actually work – and that his approach would get something out of him. They needed to get in there soon or else Malfoy's opinions about them might solidify to an irreversible point. Nott didn't exactly make a frightening impression. His demeanor in the interrogation room would've likely worked on plenty of other people, but Malfoy just wasn't very affected by it. Merlin knows why.

While a glamoured Zabini went to feed Malfoy a plate of food that he probably wouldn't eat much of, Harry and Hermione followed Daphne when she went to prep the IV drips. As they walked toward the room with the sofa and kitchenette, Harry could almost see the barrage of questions that Hermione wanted to ask behind her expression. Daphne had just barely gotten out the needles and the small transparent tubes before she pounced.

"How much scopolamine are you going to give him?" Hermione asked, staring at the bag full of clear fluid that was hanging on a rolling metal rack. It surprised Harry that she took this long to mention the scopolamine since they had gotten it.

_Five points to Gryffindor for your restraint, Miss Granger_, Harry idly thought. Merlin, he really needed to spend less time around the Slytherins.

"None yet. This is just to hydrate him," Daphne replied, hooking the tubes and a long glass bulb up to the bag. "He's not in the right state to induce hallucinations. Harry will get him to that point and, if necessary, we'll add in a tiny amount of scopolamine in increments until we get the desired response." She said it as if she didn't even question his abilities – like she had so much confidence in him and the plan.

"You really think you can do that, Harry?" Hermione asked, turning toward him, her eyes full of concern.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time I've tried to get information out of Malfoy," he said, thinking back to second year, where they used polyjuice to question Malfoy about the heir of Slytherin. Then that time in the corridor a few days ago, after Daphne had stormed away, now that he thought of it. Malfoy wasn't an adept liar, it seemed. Harry filed that information away for later use.

Nodding, Hermione's eyes unfocused as she looked away, deep in thought. Daphne hung the thin tubes from the hook on the IV drip rack and pulled out her wand. "Alright. Let's get a glamour on you so we can get in there and do this." She paused, her eyes roving over his face. "Do you have any preferences for how you want to look?"

A dark idea crossed his mind and Harry smirked, wondering if it was such a good idea. But, when imitating Voldemort ever so slightly… why not? "Yeah, I'll need a mirror though."
"Let's move to the bathroom."

Hermione's suspicious look was back as she followed them into the cramped loo. Since Daphne was the only one who kind of knew how to put in an IV and Hermione only had a vague idea, Daphne got to go into the room with him. Nott wasn't very happy about it, but it was necessary. With a few short sweeps of her wand, Daphne emerged from the glamour charm as a redhead with a round face, a slightly crooked nose, and hazel eyes. It looked painless and a regular glamour was painless, but he had no idea how triple-layer glamours worked. They appeared to be more like human transfiguration than a glamour with how flawless they appeared and human transfiguration was *painful*.

Harry braced himself as he explained what he wanted and Daphne went to work on his glamoured high cheekbones, sweeping her wand across his skin. "A little more gaunt," Harry directed. "And dark eyes – maybe dark blue. Almost black. Finer hair, with some wave to it… thinner eyebrows - more arched." He examined his reflection in the mirror after she finished with the alterations. "Make my lips a little bit fuller, I think. Can you make me paler as well?"

"Obviously," Daphne deadpanned, pressing her lips together. "Blaise isn't a milky-skinned towhead naturally."

She got back to working on his face and swished her wand over his body to make his skin turn a striking porcelain colour before he went back to the mirror to inspect himself closely. The resemblance was eerie but, still, something was still off about it. There was something about the eyes… Harry bit his lip, wracking his memory. "More eyelashes." That was what he needed.

"Who are you trying to look like?" Daphne asked, flicking her wand at his eyes and making his lashes fuller. Another quick charm changed his voice, deepening it slightly to make it unrecognizable. It wouldn't do to have Malfoy recognizing their voices.

"Tom Riddle," Hermione answered for him

Harry sharply turned toward her while Daphne stared at him as if he had just declared his undying love for Goyle.

"How do you know what Tom Riddle looks like?" he questioned, his brows furrowed. The triple layer glamour itched every time he moved his face and he moved to scratch it.

"He was in the Slug Club. Slughorn has a picture of him in his office," Hermione explained with a shrug, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"There's no possible way that the Dark Lord looks *this* good," Daphne said, shaking her head. "He's an inhuman snake monster from what I've heard – or is that just a rumour?"

"He looked like this before he transformed into that," Harry responded, feeling at his face in the mirror. Triple layer glamours were so strange. It all looked very real, but it wasn't. When he touched his face, he could tell his cheekbones weren't that high from the feeling of them beneath his hand. And his lips weren't that full underneath his fingertips but they appeared to be full in the mirror. Plus, it was itchy; it felt as if he hadn't shaved in a couple days and the stubble was bothering him, except that feeling was all over his head.

"That's… interesting," Daphne muttered, her glamoured eyes grazing over his form. "Very extreme."

"Yes, well-" Harry gestured toward the door, ",-shall we?" He really didn't want to go into detail or
ponder why Voldemort went from Tom Riddle's handsome appearance to what he had become. He wasn't particularly certain of that himself.

"Right. Granger, why don't you transfigure something for Harry to wear while I go get the supplies," Daphne said quickly before making her exit, flicking her glamoured red hair over her shoulder and scratching at her scalp in annoyance.

They met up in the corridor, outside of the room where Malfoy was kept. Harry dreaded putting on clothes in this heat, but Hermione attached a cooling charm to the fabric of his cloak, which made it feel slightly more tolerable. It would have been better without the cloak.

"How are you feeling?" Daphne asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. Her magically changed voice reminded him of an argumentative Luna.

"Itchy mostly – and a little nervous," he said, his stomach feeling light and shaky with anticipation. "It's not as if I do this every day."

"Just stop feeling and remember what we practiced. We have to do this. You can and will succeed," Daphne replied indomitably, resting her hand on the door handle and giving it a twist, not giving Harry much time to settle his nerves.

A determined look masked Harry's muted anxiety and he nodded just as she opened the door. A blonde-haired, green-eyed glamoured Zabini was still trying to feed Malfoy water, but Malfoy was resolute on his refusal to drink anything they gave him.

"No scruples," Harry resolutely thought as his adrenaline started to kick in.

"That'll be all for now," Harry intoned softly, shooing Zabini away. Daphne wheeled the IV drip into the corner behind Malfoy and Zabini strode out the door after giving him a respectful nod.

Malfoy, on the other hand, looked absolutely contemptuous, his chin wet from the mouthful of water he spat out. "Who the hell are you?" His silver-grey eyes shot toward Daphne and back to Harry.

Directing an amused smirk toward the Slytherin boy, Harry paced around his chair a few times, observing him carefully and ignoring his question. As the tension grew, Harry waited until he could sense that Malfoy wanted to say something before leaning over Malfoy's shoulder and resting his hand on the back of his chair. Malfoy stiffened, angling his torso away from Harry as much as he could.

"You're Draco Malfoy, correct?"

Malfoy didn't answer, fixing him with a petulant glare.

Harry tisked in the back of his throat, straightening up. "That's entirely too bad." He pulled a small stack of parchment and a quill from his cloak and made a show of looking over it, marking a few things with a quill. "Uncooperative subjects don't do well where we're transferring you," he said in a quiet voice.

He handed the parchment to Daphne and she shoved it into her cloak pocket. "You see-" his hold tightened on the quill as he leaned over Malfoy's shoulder again and drew the feather up the side of Malfoy's face "-we don't cater to your kind. In fact, I'd have no qualms with tossing you to the werewolves, but there's something that we want."
Harry had to hold back a satisfied grin when he saw Malfoy visibly swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. Finally, a desired response. "Now, it's up to you," he continued, his tone still perilously soft. "We could do this the hard way, or we could do this the easy way. Which would you prefer?"

"Who are you?" Malfoy demanded again, his voice raspy and dry. "Aurors? Unspeakables?"

Harry chuckled low in the back of his throat, a fierce wolfish grin marring his features. "We're far worse than that."

"That didn't answer the question," the blonde Slytherin replied sternly.

"Ah, but you're severely mistaken. In here, information is a privilege and if you want more, you're going to have to earn it by answering my questions," Harry said evenly, in a calm no-nonsense manner.

"I told the other bloke that I'm not speaking without legal representation."

In one quick motion, Harry clutched at Malfoy's sweaty hair and yanked his head back, exposing his throat. He pressed the sharp silver tip of the quill to the side of his neck.

"You honestly think that any sort of legal representation could save you in here?" Harry scoffed, an amused smirk pulling at his glamoured lips. "Speaking with us is your only way out - unless you really want to do it the hard way."

Malfoy swallowed again, his eyes wide.

Barely wasting a moment, Harry dug the quill harder into Malfoy's skin, just enough to make an indent. "You see, this is your carotid artery. If severed, you bleed out in two minutes – three at the most. It would be all too easy to end your life, of course; but, if I stop the blood flow and inject you with blood replenisher before you bleed out, I could repeat that process over and over. You'd be quite helpless, only privy to the feeling of being brought back and forth from the brink of death and, sooner or later, your mind'll wear down with your body – more than enough for me to break it." He paused, digging the quill in just a little more as he silently thanked Daphne for pounding that threat into his mind.

Malfoy's jaw was shaking and his uneven breaths that echoed throughout the room.

"But we mustn't get ahead of ourselves. You could always go with the easy way," Harry said far more amicably, letting Malfoy's head drop and pulling his quill away from him. But he still kept a tight grasp on his damp blonde tresses and forcefully turned the Slytherin boy's head toward him so he could look him in the eye. "It's all very simple – you could have a nice chat with me, be cooperative, and it's highly possible that we'll give you something you want in return. That—or we bleed you dry of everything. Your choice."

Letting go of his head, Harry stalked around Malfoy and stood in front of him, towering over his blonde head. When Malfoy didn't give any indication that he was going to make a choice – in fact, he looked more deflated than anything – Harry said, "We'll give you a while to think about it."

Glancing over at Daphne for a moment and then back to Malfoy, a depraved grin tugged at the corners of his lips. "And," Harry added in a false saccharine tone, "since we loathe to see our
transfers dehydrated, we will be hooking you up to a device that will prevent that. It's for your own good, you see." His grin widened ever so slightly to show the edges of his teeth. "It wouldn't do to have you bleed out too early."

Taking the cue, Daphne rushed in, quickly immobilizing Malfoy's arm and carefully poking at his veins with the needle. Malfoy struggled against his restraints and shouted protests, making the chair groan and creak while he did so, but Daphne got the needle in and the fluid flowing. She secured the IV and the drip with a spell before backing away, maintaining a cold unreadable expression.

"What is this? What are you giving me?" Malfoy exclaimed, glancing at the hanging IV drip with wide eyes. "Veritaserum? Coercion potion? What is it? It's the same stuff that's in the water, isn't it!" He urgently tried to move his immobilized arm in vain. Daphne's spells held strong.  

"We'll leave you to figure that out yourself," Harry steadily replied, eyeing him with intent. "Now sleep tight. It'll be a while before you'll get any more."

With that, Harry followed Daphne out, slamming the door shut behind him.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
The Egression

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: As always, thank you for reading and a massive thanks to my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: The Egression

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The thing about sleeping in a transfigured bed is that it was never like a proper bed. The transfigured bed always seemed to maintain a few properties of the original item it existed as. Therefore, it faintly felt as if you had actually slept on said item after you woke up. While a sofa or a flat object was the best thing to transfigure into a bed, it didn't work as well if the sofa was as old as McGonagall and had a few springs loose. So, when Harry woke up from his nap, his back was killing him before he even opened his eyes. Sooner or later, he was going to have to sleep at Daphne's house in a proper bed – but they just hadn't had the time to make it there before collapsing into a heavy sleep. It was sheer luck that Daphne could get her wand out quickly enough to transfigure the sofa.

Harry had barely gotten more sleep than Malfoy – the actual sleep deprivée – since he had arrived. Deceiving and manipulating nearly everyone around him was exhausting work. He had no idea how Daphne could do it practically every day of her life. Granted, he did have to work in a lot of practice sessions with her in addition to the manipulation and deceit, which further contributed to the exhaustion.

Forcing himself to sit up, he stretched his aching back and spotted Daphne over by the kitchenette, pouring herself a bowl of corn flakes. She must have just recently gotten up; her hair was an absolute mess. When the kettle whistled, she went over to it and made herself a cup of tea that was probably half pepper-up potion judging by how liberally she was pouring it in.

Her knickers and bra were black today, which contrasted nicely with her skin. Harry's eyes trailed over her naked back, down her bare legs and he averted his gaze, wondering when he'd start getting used to her being like that. Bloody botched Climate Control spell. He could only be grateful that this morning he didn't wake up embarrassingly pressed against her backside like he did yesterday. He was half thankful that she didn't mention it, but part of him was frustrated that he didn't know here he stood with her in that regard. They didn't have time to discuss anything involving their relationship with the Malfoy interrogation looming over their heads. It didn't help that he also had no idea how to bring it up.
Harry glanced back over at her, focusing in at the marks marring her pallid skin. The bruises from his incarcerous spell were starting to fade, but the injury she had gotten across her ribs from Malfoy still looked extremely painful. Anger bubbled up inside him every time he looked at it, but that only dulled his arousal a tiny bit.

"What spell did he use on you?" he asked, trying to get his mind off the things he wanted to do with Daphne in her current state – perhaps bent over the kitchenette or draped across the sofa. Merlin, he needed to stop. He had been so good at ignoring that little voice in his head for the past few days, why did it have to start seeking revenge now?

Daphne turned around, her eyebrows raised. "Who? What spell?"

"Malfoy. The cut on your ribs."

"Oh." Daphne glanced at it, shrugging. "I think it's called the Thrafsmata curse. Apparently it slices into you and starts breaking every bone in your body. Luckily Blaise knew how to stop it quickly enough." She trailed her fingers over the deep reddened gash. "Well… maybe not for him. His back is still pretty raked over from that hex Draco threw at him while he was trying to fix me."

Yeah, Zabini's back looked particularly nasty. Harry nodded, directing his mind to that and focusing on the anger he felt toward Malfoy to dull his arousal to a far more manageable point.

Daphne flicked her wand, sending the kettle, the giant bottle of pepper-up potion, and a cup over to the coffee table in front of him. Her bowl of cereal and cup of tea followed and she sat across from him on the mustard coloured sofa, dipping her spoon into the bowl of cornflakes. Harry stretched one more time before pouring himself a cup of tea with a healthy shot of pepper-up potion.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Harry asked, his anger toward Malfoy filling him with inspiration to break him. He took a sip of tea and steam started to pour from his ears as he felt energy flood his veins.

"Since I'm sure Granger, Blaise, and Theo can take over Draco's transfer to the other room, we should get some more practice in – settle a direction and all that."

At the moment, he honestly wanted nothing more than to get into that room and curse the living daylights out of the blonde ferret, but he couldn't do that. He had to be smart and subtle – the ultimate Slytherin.

Sighing, Harry ran his hand through his messy hair and reached for his red leather case and lighter sitting on the edge of the coffee table. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, taking a cigarette out of the case and lighting it in quick succession.

Daphne drained her cup of tea in one go and moved to pour herself another cup, her brow furrowed in thought. "Well, since you did so brilliantly last night, I'm confident we could go with a cold approach and work from there."

Harry shook his head. "Half of the stuff I said in there came from you."

"Kind of, but the ruthlessness was all you, Harry." She gazed at him sharply from over her bowl of cornflakes. "It's the attitude I'm looking for more than the actual words and threats at this point."
"Why?" Harry asked around his fag, staring at her hesitantly.

"Because that's your weak spot we need to get past," Daphne replied. "With the right attitude, the right words will come."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, not sure if he was prepared for another few straight hours of agony. "Maybe. I'm not exactly good without direction," he muttered doubtfully, rubbing the last of the irritating sleep out of his eyes.

"Oh please," Daphne retorted, rolling her eyes. "Give you some adrenaline and you're a fucking natural."

"Good luck inducing that at the moment," Harry said through a yawn. He eyed the bottle pepper-up potion and grabbed it to take an extra swig from it.

Daphne stared at him blankly, undaunted, and Harry nearly winced at that look. "I might be able to come up with something," she said lightly. "But we should start some practice soon anyway – can't leave him resting for too long."

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After a hurried breakfast of cornflakes, Harry sat in his usual spot on the previously transfigured bed. Daphne turned it back into a sofa for the time being. "Let's first reestablish our objectives," Daphne said, pacing in front of the coffee table with a cigarette dangling from her fingertips. "What information do you need to collect from Malfoy?"

Harry let out a long breath. "We need to figure out what he was doing in the Room of Requirement, who the necklace was meant for and what the necklace's purpose was, what his purpose is as a Death Eater, any inside information he knows about Voldemort and his Death Eaters – plans, tactics, names, etcetera…" His brows furrowed as he tried to think of anything else.

"Alright, that's good enough for now," Daphne interrupted, flicking her ashes into a conjured ashtray on the coffee table. "Now, what approach do you think will be the best at gathering that information considering your developed rapport?"

"You were right being ruthless – using that attitude. He'll respond the best to it based on his reaction to my introduction, but…" Harry didn't even know where to begin with that type of approach. He was decently ruthless during the introduction, sure, but that was different. This time, they needed information. Before, they just needed a positive response.

"Why not get physical," Daphne suggested, staring at him in a contemplative and cold manner.

Harry stared up at her doubtfully and shook his head. "I'm not going to assault him."

"No, not exactly assault. I mean…" Daphne sighed, taking a seat on the sofa across from him, leaning forward. "He's not going to willingly talk just because he's scared of you and the situation. You need to subconsciously threaten him and physically assert yourself even more than before. You might have to force it out of him."

Harry pursed his lips and stared off over her shoulder, his eyes unfocused as he thought of a way he
could do that.

"The trouble is pulling it off without actually hurting him too much," Daphne pointed out in a faraway tone, taking a drag off her cigarette.

That was exactly what he was thinking. The centre of Harry's forehead creased. "Short of putting a knife to his throat…"

A soft smile pulled at Daphne's lips. "You could do that. And… you could use the occasional choke hold when he doesn't answer you."

Harry stared at her questioningly.

"Like this." She moved forward, placing her hand lightly at his throat. "You need to put pressure on these veins," she explained, tapping her fingers and thumb against the sides of his neck. "And these pressure points. He'll be able to breathe a little, but it'll get very uncomfortable very quickly – he doesn't like to be choked at all."

"Who does?" Harry said rhetorically.

"Well some people find it exhilarating," she answered anyway, her eyes meeting his. She stroked her fingers over his exposed throat and a vulnerable flush started creeping up his neck. "Takes a person with a special death wish to have that kind of kink," she remarked, cigarette smoke curling up from her mouth.

Harry cleared his throat. "Right… so, I could use a choke hold at one point. What else shall I put into my arsenal aside from vicious threats and choking him?"

Daphne's eyes narrowed calculatingly and she tilted her head to the side. "How much pain can you take?"

"Erm-" Harry's brows furrowed and he shrugged. "I dunno. Why?"

"I could use a numbing spell, but…" Daphne trailed off, flicking the ashes off her fag and inhaling deeply at it as she stared at the coffee table, her eyes unseeing. "He might have a positive reaction if you act unhinged, maybe draw a bit of your own blood – something like that."

Harry regarded her warily. "How do you want me to do that?"

Daphne didn't answer for a long while and he started to think of his own scenarios where he could use that tactic. It didn't seem promising – if anything, it just sounded painful, ineffective, and unnecessarily gruesome.

"Tying in with the 'holding a knife to his throat' idea – if you ever come close to slitting his throat, it might be a good idea to back off at the last second," Daphne explained, her tone distant. "Then, possibly in a fit of barely contained rage, make it look like you don't realize that you're holding the blade of the knife in your hand. Draw some blood – enough to drip on the floor at least – as you 'calm' yourself down." Her lips pulled into a slow smirk as she mimed the action with her hands. "That might get him worried. Because if you can do that to yourself, what are you willing to do to him?"
"I don't think I'll need that one," Harry replied tentatively. "I mean, it's... decent, but I doubt he'll draw me into coming close to slitting his throat at any point – you saw how he reacted during the introduction. He's scared."

"He'll grow complacent enough sooner or later," Daphne said with a wave of her hand. "It might be a useful way of taking back the power so I wouldn't discount it. Think of it as a more extreme version of the choke hold."

Shrugging a shoulder, Harry muttered, "Alright."

"Let's give them a go – see how you do," Daphne said, readying her wand and stubbing out her dead cigarette in the ashtray.

Harry exhaled a long breath as she transfigured the sofa she was sitting on into a chair that mirrored the one Malfoy was bound to in the interrogation room. A conjured knife landed on the coffee table with a few twirling flicks of her wand and a mouthed incantation.

She was extremely different to work with than Nott; far more hands-on. She didn't hold back anything and she wasn't afraid at all to play the interrogatee. Then again, Daphne drew out his manipulative side and pushed him to manipulate. Nott had simply taught him the basic subjects involved in manipulation.

Harry walked around the table and stood in front of her, his arms crossed over his chest in more of a self-conscious action than anything. He let all the emotion drain from him with a deep breath, as he had so many times before, trying to imagine her as a certain blonde Slytherin he needed to get information from. He needed to feel empty, able to run off his darker emotions without empathy.

"Come on, Potter, we don't have all day," Daphne drawled, mimicking Malfoy's intonation and accent. It really was no wonder why he thought her polyjuiced as Malfoy was the real thing. She had a disturbing knack for it.

He thought he'd start small to get himself into the mood.

"Getting comfortable, are we?" Harry taunted, circling her chair. Malfoy would be in the new interrogation room when they did this.

Daphne sneered. "What do you think?"

"You only have yourself to blame for that," Harry replied pointedly, sweeping his eyes over her. "But we have much more important matters to tend to." He paced in front of her, clasping his hands at his back as he thought of the direction he wanted to take the questioning.

"It couldn't be more obvious that you're working for the Dark Lord; that little mark on your arm speaks volumes. But it strikes me as odd," Harry stopped in front of Daphne, invading her personal space. "Sixteen-year-old Death Eaters are incredibly uncommon, from my experience – the Dark Lord prefers those of a much higher calibre." He towered over her, leaning closer. "So what exactly did he see in you? What could possibly make you so important to him that he would mark you?"

Daphne snorted, rolling her eyes at him and playing the silent-Malfoy-defiance card.

You need to subconsciously threaten him and physically assert yourself even more than before.
Might as well jump straight into it then.

Without giving her any warning, Harry's hand shot out and he grabbed her throat where she taught him to, pressing down a little to test it. He could feel Daphne swallow thickly underneath his palm. "Wrong answer. Try using words next time," he said forcefully, staring into her eyes with all of the intensity he could muster.

"A little higher," Daphne directed, jumping out of character. He moved his hand up. "Good – now press down like you mean it. I'm not that easy to break and Draco won't be either."

Harry dithered, biting the inside of his lip. She could always stop him if it got to be too much, so he slowly did what she said, watching her carefully. He could nearly feel the blood rushing in her veins as he pressed down, her pulse beating against his hand – all of those fragile bones in her neck.

When Daphne's face started to flush, he pulled away and she stared at him approvingly. "That's how you should do it," she murmured breathlessly. "Continue."

Where was he? Oh, right, Malfoy's importance. "Well? What makes you so important to the Dark Lord that he'd mark you?"

"What makes you so important that I answer your questions?" Daphne countered petulantly.

"If you have any sense of self-preservation, I suggest you do." Harry reached his arm backwards, picking the conjured knife off the coffee table. He stood, idly playing with it in his hands. If this tactic was going to be used at any point, it would be useful to give it a try. He vaguely wondered how Daphne was going to play this one out.

Daphne tilted her chin up haughtily. "My father-"

Harry sharply cut her off. "Your father is in Azkaban. A place where you could very well be, so don't think for one moment that 'your father' affects me in any way. I know people who could make Lucius Malfoy squirm in fear at the twitch of their little finger."

A venomous smirk crept over Harry's lips as he stalked around her. He leaned against the back of her chair, his lips close enough to her ear that he was certain she could feel his breath there. "I could give you to them," he said, as if nothing would please him more. He lightly trailed the tip of the knife over her collarbone, barely making an indent in her skin. Just letting the blade trail over the surface as an imminent threat. It wouldn't do to make her forget that he could press down. "They'll pull secrets from every inch of your flesh until you have nothing left to tell."

Daphne let out an almost imperceptible shuddering breath and he felt a rush of satisfaction course through him, spurring him on.

"So I'll repeat myself one last time, and you better make it count," Harry continued, dragging the tip of the knife up the side of her neck. She stayed very still as he traced a vein, pushing the blade against her just a bit harder. "What makes a sixteen-year-old boy like you so important to the Dark Lord?"

A contemptuous expression crossed over Daphne's face. "I've evaded telling you lot anything; it's obvious why he would want me," she declared in a way that made him think of how Malfy spat out the word, 'Mudblood.'
Harry reached up and tugged at her hair, pulling her head back and pressing the sharp edge of the blade against her throat. "Not a very fast learner, are you, Malfoy," he said lowly, his jaw tightening as he pulled her head back even further. Daphne winced and his lips twitched into a malicious smirk. "Do you need me to give you a reminder of what we discussed last time? I have plenty of blood replenisher on me. We could be here all night."

Daphne smiled up at him. "I'll be amazed if you don't get your answer after that," she said, signaling the end of the brief session. Her hand curled around the blade at her neck, pulling it away as Harry let go of his grip on her hair.

Straightening up and dropping the knife, he felt a bit drained in his triumph. He was almost to the point of looking forward to using the whole tactic. Of acting unhinged; holding the blade in his hand and pressing down until it dripped blood. He walked toward the coffee table and grasped at Daphne's silver case, lighting up a fag.

"What if I actually need to use the whole thing?" he asked and her brows furrowed briefly.

"Oh I'm sure you could accomplish it successfully without direction," Daphne answered, resting back in the wooden chair, her arms on the armrests. "You keep getting better at this every time we do it." Her eyes trailed over him as a slow smile tugged at her lips. "Ruthlessness works for you."

Harry froze. He knew that particular glint in her eye – as if she wanted to consume him. A deep seated thrill crawled up his spine that he partially couldn't admit to himself that he felt.

Taking a long drag off his cigarette, he forced a small grin. "Thanks, I think," he replied, shifting on his feet as he grabbed the bottle of pepper-up.

"No need to thank me – that was all you." Daphne stood, taking the bottle from him after he took a sip to stop the drained feeling he was starting to get. "Draco won't know what hit him after you're through with him." She poured herself another tea/pepper-up concoction and glanced over the rim of her cup at him with that same consuming glint. "You could chew him up and spit the pieces all over his holier-than-thou mother after a few more sessions."

The inherently good portion of Harry's heart grimaced; he probably did have the potential to do that. It was getting easier and easier to slip into that role. His gaze traced over the red marks on Daphne's neck where he had gripped her and he hoped they didn't bruise. That would only make it worse.

"I think you should call him Draco though," Daphne said, breaking him out of his reverie.

Harry blinked, watching her cast a few cushioning charms to the wooden chair. "Why?"

"It's more personal than calling him 'Malfoy'." Daphne shrugged. "Might give you an edge to get even further under his skin."

Harry's nose scrunched up in distaste and Daphne gave a laugh. "Out of everything, that's what bothers you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harry couldn't help the short bitter laugh that came out of him and he inhaled deeply at his fag, pondering. "I'll give it a try."

"Excellent." Daphne's eyes shone mischievously and she sat back down into the wooden chair. "Shall we work on your threats and questions as well this time? Get your inspiration flowing?"
Stubbing out his barely smoked cigarette, Harry met her gaze, preparing himself for anything.

Daphne had quickly cast a triple-layer glamour over the marks on her neck before they walked into the control room. Harry threw her a questioning look and she just shrugged in response, stalking forward.

The control room was much more organized than the last time he saw it, which was likely Nott and Hermione’s doing. They were in the middle of sorting out the small refrigerator in the corner while Zabini kept tapping at the walls with his wand, trying various incantations that seemed to be directed toward fixing the Climate Control spell. Crookshanks and his kittens were piled up on a cloak next to Hermione, sleeping.

Nott looked up at them when they entered and scrabbled to his feet, brushing off the ridiculously tight pair of blue boxers he was wearing. "I thought you two were going to sleep more. It's only been five hours."

"Draco is far more important than sleep right now, Theo," Daphne replied, plucking a bottle of cola from the fridge and taking a seat at the table in the centre of the room.

Speak for yourself. That explained why he needed so much pepper-up.

Harry let out a sigh, glancing toward the mirrors on the wall, which depicted a very awake Malfoy in the middle of getting pelted with sensory overload spells. Malfoy’s eyes were shut tight to block out the bright flashing lights and he seemed to be trying to block out the sound in one of his ears by pressing his head up against his shoulder. The new room that Malfoy was moved into was painted a bright irritating yellow colour, had a clock hanging on the wall – spelled to speed up and slow down at random intervals – and contained a very useful table that sat off to the side, opposite to the IV drip. It was the perfect place to set all of the tools of intimidation that Harry needed.

"Which approach are you going to use for his questioning?" Nott asked him cordially, clasping his fingers behind his back.

Harry shrugged, searching his brain to figure out exactly what to call it. "Straightforward and ruthless."

"Sounds good," Nott commented with a nod. "When we moved him, I noticed that his Occlumency shields were starting to weaken – perhaps due to lack of sleep. If you can't get him to talk, we could always keep him from sleeping until his shields break."

"I thought we were going to stay within the law on that one," Hermione interrupted from her position on the floor. The kitten in her lap kept clawing at the lace on her bra and she impatiently set it with the rest of the sleeping bunch.

"I don't see the point – even with the Ministry's limits, it isn't classified as torture," Nott answered with a wave of his hand.

"At least the-" Daphne started but was cut off by Zabini.
"Could you chatterboxes stop talking for a minute? I've almost cracked this bloody spell."

"Muffliato," Harry heard Hermione murmur, waving Nott's wand to extend the spell around them and exclude Zabini.

Nott's eyebrows rose toward the bushy-haired Gryffindor. "Impressive." He stole a glance toward Harry. "I'd keep her around if I were you."

"Are you kidding?" Harry smiled, glancing at Hermione fondly. "I wouldn't give her up for anything."

"Yes, we all know Granger's a genius," Daphne muttered impatiently. "Can we get in there to pester Draco? We need to change his drip soon. It's getting low."

"Oh, right," Nott said, his head perking up, "that reminds me --" He walked over to the table and moved aside a few piles of books to grasp at what was laying between them. "I had to go get a few ingredients for the blood replenishing potion in Kockturn Alley and I picked you up one of these." In his hand was a long pale wand with a wrapped leather handle and a bit of gilding at the hilt. "Granger had some trouble removing the original core, but I think she got it all. It should be a good stand-in, in case you need to play 'wizard' in the room."

Harry hesitantly gripped the wand, feeling no warmth under his fingers or tingling energy that signified a resonance with his magic. "Alright. What if I actually need to do a spell though?"

"I linked it to mine," Hermione cut in, standing up from the floor and straightening her jeans, which were rolled up to her knees. She plucked her wand off the table and twirled it in the air, shooting sparks. The wand in Harry's hand mirrored the sparks and he nearly dropped it in shock.

With a satisfied smile, Hermione explained, "I used the diamonds from Blaise's ring and marked them with some concatenation runes to link them, then I inserted one into the core of that wand and attached the other to the tip of mine with a simple sticking charm. Comes off easily enough so we can link the wand someone else's if I'm not around." She held her wand up, showing the tiny gleaming stone at the top. "When you're in there, just do the wand movements to signify what you want me to cast and I should be able to understand what you need to cast."

"Strange how you're brilliant enough to do that and yet you can't fix the Climate Control spell that Blaise is killing himself over," Daphne jested, plucking a fag from Zabini's pack of Davidoff Slims and lighting it with her wand.

Hermione shrugged a shoulder, a small smile playing about her lips. "The heat isn't so bad now that I'm used to it. Plus, it's fun watching him try to solve it."

They all glanced over at the dark Slytherin boy who was currently magicking arithmancy equations along the spare bits of wall around the massive black board and down the wall around the door in an obsessive frenzy. Out of everyone, he and Malfoy seemed the most effected by the heat, even without so many clothes on.

In Harry's peripheral vision, he saw the sensory overload spell let up on Malfoy and sighed, moving over to the luggage to get some trousers and a shirt. Five and a half hours was long enough to keep Malfoy waiting. That and he had just spent the better part of the last hour warming up for it. He didn't want to cool down.
"I probably should go in there and question him soon," Harry muttered, pulling a pair of trousers over his boxers. He took off his glasses before putting on his shirt. "Could you do that vision spell again, Hermione?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Here, use my wand," he heard Daphne say seconds before his vision cleared and they surrounded him, arranging his clothes, changing his voice, and casting triple-layer glamours.

Looking every bit like Tom Riddle, Harry stalked down the corridor toward the new interrogation room with Nott, who had to unlock it for him. This room was nearer to the room with the kitchenette and seemed a lot smaller than the original interrogation room from what he could see through the mirror.

Pausing in front of the door, Nott pressed himself against the wall at the side of the door so he wasn't seen and performed the spell.

Harry barely had time to think.

The door slammed shut behind him with a resounding boom and he stood in front of Draco Malfoy, the adrenaline of deceit starting to hit him in full force. From up close, Harry could see the bags under Slytherin boy's eyes and faded bruises still speckling his skin. There was a deep reddish purple bruise starting to form around the IV needle in his arm. His eyes were bloodshot, sandy-coloured stubble had started to form across his jaw, and his hair was a sweaty mess. The light grey t-shirt he was wearing was similarly soaked in sweat and had a dark stain of dried blood on it.

It was quite possibly the worst state that he had ever seen Malfoy in.

Surreptitiously, Harry glanced at the clock on the wall to note the time in this room. "Good evening, Draco," he greeted in a polite but commanding tone, moving forward to the table that was off to the side. He let the last dregs of emotion drain from him so he could get started properly.

Malfoy didn't say anything in return and Harry tisked in the back of his throat. "No greeting today? That's a pity," he said calmly, pulling a selection of knives out of the expanded pocket in his trousers and laying them across the table. "You do remember what I said about uncooperative subjects, yes?"

Next to the knives, he arranged twelve syringes full of hastily brewed blood replenishing potion into a straight row.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Malfoy stiffen, panic briefly flashing across his face. Oh, he definitely remembered.

"Good," Harry commented in a pernicious drawl. "Then I suggest you find your voice."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm here to collect information from you by any means necessary," Harry replied plainly, his expression impassive. "The way in which I collect that information –" he eyed the equipment sitting on the table, "– largely depends upon you."

"I have gold. Plenty of it! If you get me out of –"
"I thought I made myself clear about that the last time we spoke," Harry interrupted, selecting a knife from the table and examining its sharpness. He glanced over at the Slytherin boy, his eyebrow raised.

Malfoy's lips pressed into a thin line and his eyes widened. "That was a joke though, right? You really wouldn't –"

"Does this look like I'm joking?" Harry gestured to the table with the hand that held the knife. "I've enough blood replenisher here to bleed you out all night." He paused, his lips twitching into a smirk. "If you wish to avoid that, you're not off to a promising start."

Visibly swallowing, Malfoy averted his gaze, his jaw clenched. "What do you want from me?"

"Why are you working for the Dark Lord?" Harry asked softly, absentmindedly stroking the knife with his fingers.

"I was forced into it," Malfoy replied, not quite meeting his gaze.

Mostly certain that Malfoy was lying, Harry asked, "By whom?"

"My father."

"Your father is in Azkaban. He has been since June when you were in school and you were marked after that," Harry said, advancing closer toward Malfoy and using his free hand to lift his pointy chin to stare him straight into his eyes. "Now how about you tell me the truth this time? Why are you working for the Dark Lord?"

Malfoy's eyes drifted off, looking away even if he couldn't turn his head. Beads of sweat dripped down from his temples and along his forehead.

"Tick tock, Draco," Harry murmured, letting go of Malfoy's chin to move around to the back of his chair. He carefully avoided the IV drip. "The longer you take to answer with the truth, the longer I'm going to let you bleed out before I inject you with the blood replenisher."

Harry threaded his fingers through Malfoy's hair and sharply tugged his head back.

"Fuck! Okay! I'll tell you!" Malfoy exclaimed, panting and struggling against his hold. Harry held firm, wrapping Malfoy's hair tighter around his fingers. "I wasn't exactly lying when I said I was forced into it! I wasn't planning on taking the mark this summer, but my father failed at whatever the Dark Lord made him do and he was going to take it out on my mother if I didn't do anything. He was going to kill her."

Finally some progress. Harry loosened his dangerously tight grip on Malfoy's hair but still kept hold of it. "Do you know why the Dark Lord wanted to mark you?"

Malfoy swallowed thickly. "No."

Harry's grip tightened again and he brought the knife to the Slytherin boy's throat. Malfoy's eyes widened. "That's a lie, Draco. Tell me why the Dark Lord wanted to mark you."

"I'll tell you if you get that knife away from me."

Harry chuckled lowly, a smirk pulling at his lips. "That's not how this works. Tell me the real reason
why he wanted to mark you and then we'll see."

Hesitating, Malfoy took a few panting breaths. The skin on his throat was straining against the blade. "He wanted to control me – he wanted me to do something for him."

"What did he want you to do for him?"

"Get the knife away first."

"I said 'we'll see'."

"Please."

"You're avoiding the question." Harry pressed the knife a bit firmer against Malfoy's skin but not enough to break it or make him bleed. "What did the Dark Lord want you to do for him?"

"I can't tell you!" Malfoy whimpered. "He'll kill us! I can't…"

"He can't kill you if you're already dead, which you're on your way to being if you continue avoiding the question," Harry countered, his cold eyes boring into Malfoy's like broken glass. "I can assure you that we'll pull every secret from your flesh until you have no more to tell and feed you to the wolves. Do you really want that to happen?"

His eyes watering from the strain on his neck and the taught strands of hair between Harry's fingers, Malfoy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "He wants me to fix a vanishing cabinet."

Harry's brow furrowed slightly. He couldn't tell whether Malfoy was telling the truth or not. "Why does he want you to do that?"

Keeping his expression blank, Harry wracked his brains trying to remember what the hell a vanishing cabinet was. What the hell would Voldemort do with a vanishing cabinet anyway?

"There's a vanishing cabinet at Borgin and Burkes one at Hogwarts. They're sisters. The Dark Lord wants me to fix the broken one at Hogwarts so I can let the Death Eaters into the castle."

Harry's heart dropped and he pulled the knife away from Malfoy's throat, fighting to keep his face from showing what he felt. Biting his cheek, he let the emotion drain away from him before he spoke. "Is the vanishing cabinet in the Room of Requirement?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "How did you know?"

That was a definite yes. As soon as he got back to school, he was going to destroy the bloody thing.

"I've informants everywhere, Draco," Harry answered unblinking. "How far along are you in fixing it?"

Malfoy regarded him warily, his jaw stiffening. "Why are you asking me these questions? I think I'm entitled to know that much."

Merlin, Daphne was right about him. He did have a problem with being controlled – even after threatening him plenty of times!
Harshly pulling Malfoy's head back even further, Harry brought the knife to Malfoy's neck again. "You've hardly earned any entitlements. Now answer the question."

That seemed to sober Malfoy up a bit. His silvery grey eyes widened as the blade touched his neck.

"The full moon is next week," Harry elucidated in a menacing tone. "We could always go with that option if you'd prefer."

Malfoy shook his head, his lips trembling slightly. "No, I haven't fixed it yet – it'll send inanimate things through. Living things never make it."

Satisfied that he didn't seem to be lying, Harry let up on his grip of Malfoy's hair, placing his head at a more comfortable angle. He kept the knife at his throat because it seemed to make him a lot more cooperative. "Good. Now, once you let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, what's the plan then? Take over the castle? Capture Harry Potter, perhaps?"

"I don't know." Malfoy's eyes became slightly unfocused, which seemed to indicate that he was telling a lie. Not a bad tell to have – if Harry didn't notice the pattern, he would've thought that Malfoy might have told the truth. Maybe it was a side effect of Occlumency.

Harry's eyebrow rose. "I thought we went over this before, Draco." He pressed down on the blade just enough to make a shallow cut, but not enough to draw blood just yet. He could feel Malfoy tremble beneath his fingers. "I don't like it when people lie to me and I'm beginning to get very impatient. What did the Dark Lord have planned once you let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts?"

"I can't…"

A terse expression tightened the features on Harry's glamoured face. "Do you want me to cut deeper?" he asked, his voice sounding like a smooth growl – low and calm.

"I'm supposed to kill someone," Malfoy said, wincing as the words came out of his mouth.

"Who?"

"The Dark Lord'll kill me if I tell you."

Blood started to well up under the blade at Malfoy's throat. "You'll eventually end up telling me anyway if you make me extract it from you. People easily bleed their secrets." Harry paused, faintly tilting his head and sizing Malfoy up with his hungry eyes. "You'll probably be ready to die in time for the full moon."

A drop of blood trailed down the side of Malfoy's neck.

"Please don't…"

The hopeless grimace that passed over Malfoy's strained face, full of exhausted sadness and loathing, almost made Harry want to lighten up. But there were more important things he had to focus on. This was war. This was bigger than him and everyone involved. He couldn't be a bleeding heart.

Harry briefly glanced over at the syringes full of blood replenishing potions, realizing that he would actually drag it on to that point if he needed to. Yet, from the look on Malfoy's face, doing that might get him the opposite result he was looking for. What Malfoy needed the most right now was hope.
The human need to survive was overwhelming and desperate when tested. He was facing death on both sides.

"Who are you supposed to kill, Draco?" Harry questioned firmly and then tempered his voice to a more gentle tone. "Unlike the Dark Lord, I won't kill you unless you don't tell me. Answering me is the only way out."

The muscle underneath Malfoy's left eye twitched as he averted his eyes, drawing in a quaking breath. His dry lips cracked as he softly spoke in a depleted voice, "He wants me to kill Dumbledore."

It was said so faintly that he barely heard it, but there was no mistaking it. Harry couldn't help the pleased smirk that bubbled up onto his face. If Malfoy wasn't lying, this was big. And, of all the people who tried to get information from him...

Harry's heart swelled with triumph.

*Severus Snape, eat your fucking heart out.*

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
After the brief feeling of triumph subsided, Harry squashed it enough so he could think rationally and his eyes narrowed toward the blonde Slytherin. “He wants you to kill Dumbledore?” he repeated suspiciously.

“You?”

Malfoy’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed thickly and he nodded carefully to keep the knife from going any deeper. “Yes.”

“I’m willing to believe that the Dark Lord wanted you to fix the vanishing cabinet in order to let the other Death Eaters in to the castle, but to direct a freshly made sixteen-year-old Death Eater to kill Albus Dumbledore…” Harry shook his head. “That’s hard to believe. If Dumbledore is indeed the target, who was truly directed to kill him?”

“I’m not lying!” Malfoy cried, his body jerking violently against his restraints. Another drop of blood flowed down the side of his neck. “He wants me to kill him.”

Harry tilted his head, raising an eyebrow. “Why you?”

“To make up for my father’s mistake.”

“Okay, say I believe you,” Harry said with a cruel smile. “Why then does he want you to let the other Death Eaters into the castle? Why wouldn’t he direct one of them to kill Albus Dumbledore?”

Malfoy groaned, squeezing his eyes tight shut. “I don’t know,” he said through gritted teeth. “He has leverage on me? I’m dead if I don’t do it and my mother will die too. Not to mention what he’ll do to my father…”

“He has leverage on all of the Death Eaters, Draco – not just you.” Harry lifted the blade and placed it in a fresher section of flesh on his throat, pressing down. Malfoy’s eyes widened and his lips
started to tremble. “Why not have someone like Bellatrix Lestrange kill Dumbledore as soon as you let her into the castle?”

“I told you – I don’t know!”

“Then what is the purpose of letting the other Death Eaters into the castle?”

Malfoy winced when the blade pressed even deeper into his skin. “We’re to seize the castle after Dumbledore falls.”

“How?”

“I can’t – why do you need to know all this?” The centre of Malfoy’s forehead creased as he looked up at him. “What’s it to you?”

“You’re in no position to ask questions, Draco,” Harry replied in a dangerously soft tone, sliding the knife ever so slightly to tear into the top layer of skin on Malfoy’s neck. A smirk twisted his lips. “You know, there’s this curious thing about flesh,” he continued, his eyes transfixed on the blade. “It’s so… yielding.”

“DON’T please,” Malfoy whimpered, straining his neck further as he tried to back away from the knife. “I’ll tell you. Please just… don’t.”

He didn’t even have to draw blood.

“I’m not exactly clear on the final plans yet,” Malfoy said quickly, his eyes shifting from Harry’s glamoured face to the arm that held the knife at his throat. “I was going to be briefed on the finalizations on Christmas Eve. But… after I kill Dumbledore, my Aunt Bellatrix is supposed to capture McGonagall and kill Flitwick because their quarters are closer together in the castle. The Carrows are supposed to kidnap Trelawney, Burbage, and Vector. Rowle and Snape are supposed to secure the students to the quarters and kill anyone who comes out.”

Licking his dry cracked lips, Malfoy carried on, “Erm… someone is supposed to kill Hooch and Sprout – I don’t remember who. But Slughorn, Filch, Pomfrey, and Sinistra are supposed to be spared unless they show resistance. And Gibbon and I are to capture Hagrid on the way out of the castle – giants are hard to take alive, but he might be leverage to use against Harry Potter.” Malfoy frowned. “Greg is supposed to help with that, he’s going to be marked on Christmas Eve with Stephen.”

Harry’s grip got increasingly tight on the handle of the knife as he took all of the information in, trying to keep his emotions and expression neutral. He wasn’t sure that he was prepared enough for this. He hoped that everyone in the control room was taking that down. That was too elaborate to be a lie, if it was a lie, but Malfoy showed no signs of lying whatsoever… Merlin.

He could really use a cigarette right about now.

However, there was one thing that helped relieve his roiling emotions - the vanishing cabinet, ostensibly, wasn’t fixed yet. So the situation could be prevented still. He would need absolute proof before the feeling of worry niggling at his stomach would go away. Taking an imperceptible deep breath through his nose, Harry stared at Malfoy sharply.

“Are those the only students who have been or will be marked?”
Malføy blinked, averting his eyes away from Harry’s abrasive gaze. “Vince was going to be marked too, but he got expelled – he’s as good as nothing to the Dark Lord now.”

Voldemort was getting very gutsy if he was starting to mark students… Harry pursed his lips. “How did you get past the secrecy sensors with that mark on your arm?”

Tiredly, Malføy looked up at him. “How do you know about those?”

“Common knowledge–” Harry tightened his hold of the blade against Malføy’s neck. “–answer the question.”

“There’s a potion,” Malføy practically groaned out, squeezing his eyes shut. “I don’t know anything else about it.”

Harry’s jaw clenched and he replied in a clipped tone, “What did I say about lying, Draco? We could always–”

“Fucking hell – fine.” Malføy’s eyes snapped open and he let out a gush of breath. “My father invented a masking potion that would conceal the Dark Mark if you rub it onto it. Or if you drink it. That makes it last longer.” Malføy swallowed, moistening his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. “Can I have some water? I’m really thirsty.”

“After we’re through here,” Harry replied calmly. “What more do you want from me!” Malføy shouted, struggling against his bindings. The sound echoed off the walls. “You stick me into this stifling room – you drug me! There are lobsters crawling all over the walls – you lot keep badgering me every time I nod off! I keep hearing this bloody music that won’t… fucking stop! Please… I need some sleep. Please just let me get some sleep.” He sniffed, tears welling up in his eyes. “I’m so tired. I don’t know how much longer I can do this. I can’t…” he trailed off into quiet sobs, tears streaking down the sides of his face, disappearing into his sweaty hair.

Lobsters? Harry discreetly glanced at the walls. As far as he knew, they weren’t drugging him… Must have been the sleep deprivation.

Sighing, Harry looked down at the Slytherin boy, loosening his hold that he had on his hair. “If we let you sleep and get you a drink, do you promise that you will be more cooperative?”

“Can I have a bed?” Malføy asked in a wobbly voice, his grey eyes bright as he glanced up at him.

“That might be able to be arranged,” Harry drawled. “However, failure to cooperate will see an end to that. You only get one chance. If I get you these things – a few luxuries – do you promise that you will be more cooperative with me?”

Malføy nodded, his tears abating.

Harry’s grip tightened on the boy’s hair, pressing the knife closer and nearly drawing blood. “I can’t hear you,” he growled.

“Yes. I will,” Malføy replied quickly. “I promise.”
Glancing at him doubtfully, Harry let go of the boy and straightened up. “We’ll see about that.” He moved to collect the knives and syringes of potions on the table, wiping the blood off the knife he held to Malfoy’s throat with the edge of his t-shirt.

Malfoy rolled his neck to presumably get the crick out of it from having it strained backwards for so long. “What are you going to do to me after you’re done with me?” The fearful broken tone of his voice made Harry’s heart twinge with guilt, but he squashed it immediately.

Harry towered over Malfoy as he stood in front of him. “If you give us everything we want and your information is confirmed as truth, we will let you live,” Harry said evenly.

“I’m dead if you let me go – he’ll kill me… and my mother.”

Harry’s eyebrow rose and he shook his head, a cruel smile tugging at his lips. “I doubt that we’ll just let you go like that.” He actually had no idea what Nott, Zabini, and Daphne had planned to do with him after they finished.

One step at a time.

If possible, Malfoy’s face paled even further. “If I asked you to, would you kill my mother quickly before he gets to her?” He paused, licking at his dry lips again. “I could tell you where you can do it.”

“And be led into a trap?” Harry sharply countered. “I think not.”

Malfoy looked away into the corner of the room, tears brimming in his eyes once more.

Harry took a deep calming breath. “I’ll send someone in soon with your requests,” he said, preparing to exit the door. However, he paused, turning to look back at the Slytherin boy.

“But if you betray me, Draco… the consequences of your actions will hurt you far worse than he will hurt your mother.”

oOo

“Is there any way we can fact check what he said in there?” Harry voiced as soon as he walked through the door and sat at the desk in the control room, still in his stuffy clothes and itchy glamour.

They were staring at him wide-eyed, save for Daphne, who had a look on her face like she could barely contain her excitement.

“Well…” Nott started, clearing his throat and setting aside the piece of chalk he had in his hand. His glasses were falling down his nose, a cigarette was perched between his fingertips, and the blackboard behind him contained all of the information that Harry had gleaned from Malfoy in the interrogation room. Gone was the semantic word map. “We could question Katie Bell on the necklace incident after we get back from hols. Unless one of you wants to send her an owl and ask if she was supposed to deliver it to Dumbledore.”

“That might be a good idea…” Harry muttered, emptying his pockets, stripping off his shirt, and unbuttoning his trousers.
“I’ll do that after I change Malfoy’s drip,” Hermione said, looking up from the small mirror she was using to apply a triple-layer glamour. Half of her face was distorted into the face of someone else.

Nodding, Harry leaned down to take off his shoes. “Good.”

Zabini leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you remember a vanishing cabinet when you checked the Room of Requirement?”

“Erm – there was that one cabinet with the dead bird in it,” Daphne answered unsurely just as Harry was about to say the same thing. “But I can get Graham to ask the Room of Requirement for Draco Malfoy’s vanishing cabinet specifically to confirm. I’m sure he’d be discreet about it. He owes me for getting Harper off his back.”

Nott glanced over at Daphne. “Too bad you didn’t bring your owl. Would have been nice to keep the correspondence off the books at the post office.”

Shrugging, Daphne replied, “I couldn’t find him in the Owlery last week so he’s probably at Astoria’s house or maybe my grandfather’s. I’ll have to call them.” Daphne paused, turning toward Hermione, who was putting the last touches on her glamour. “Where did you put my mum’s mobile when you tidied? It was sitting on the fridge before.”

“In that drawer over there.” Absentmindedly pointing to the desk drawer by Harry’s foot, Hermione waved her wand toward her throat and hummed as she adjusted her voice. “I hope you don’t mind,” she said, after finishing her voice charm. “I used it to call my parents to check up on them.”

“Oh yeah, no problem,” Daphne said with a wave of her hand, moving Harry’s foot as she pillaged the desk for the phone. “We always have minutes on it since mum never uses it.”

“Okay, good,” Harry said, standing up to pull off his trousers. “You call your cousin and write that bloke to check on the Room of Requirement, Hermione’ll change Malfoy’s drip and then write Katie… We need to get him a bed and some water as well…” Harry looked over at the mirrors to see Malfoy’s shoulders shaking as he sobbed quietly. He could barely hear it through the baby monitor.

“I’m the best at transfiguring them, so I’ll do it,” Zabini offered. “Daph, can you get a glamour on me so I can help Hermione in there?”

Harry’s eyebrow rose toward the dark Slytherin. First Hermione calls him ‘Blaise’ and now he calls her ‘Hermione’? What was next? Pulling a Ron and Lavender all over the bloody place? Then again, that didn’t seem like their style, even if something-he’d-rather-forget did happen under the mistletoe at Slughorn’s Christmas party.

Grabbing Daphne’s silver case, her gold lighter, and standing next to Nott in front of the blackboard, Harry lit up, inhaling a calming breath full of smoke. “How can we possibly confirm the rest?” he asked more to himself than anyone else. His eyes trailed over the collected information, which couldn’t be absolutely confirmed as the truth until they had some sort of proof. It was a pivotal rule of interrogation, even if Harry was dead certain that Malfoy wasn’t completely lying.

Hard to lie with a knife to your neck and fear in your veins, especially when you had so much desperation to live. Malfoy was no martyr. He’d sing like a canary before he’d give his life up for something.
“I’ve some healing salve in my cloak,” he heard Daphne say behind him. “The cuts seem superficial so it shouldn’t take much.”

“Oh, good, thanks,” Hermione replied. “I’m not good at healing charms yet. They’re sub-par at best.”

Letting out a laugh, Daphne said, “Mine too. Thus the healing salve.”

They continued to talk quietly and Harry tuned them out.

Nott flicked his ashes into the ashtray sitting on the chalk rack that was attached to the blackboard. “I was thinking… Greg’s house might be easy to break into. I’ve been to it many times before – their security is relatively standard,” he said, glancing out of the corner of his eye toward him.

Harry’s brows furrowed and he looked back at the weedy Slytherin boy. “You’re not suggesting…”

“We got Draco out of Hogwarts,” Nott said in an implicative voice, a smirk unfurling over his lips. “Greg might not be an easy break, but I know a few of his weaknesses.”

Harry bit the inside of his cheek and took another drag off his cigarette. It would take time – a lot of time – if they were going go that route. And even if they did get a hold of Goyle, Malfoy was just starting to crack – how long would Goyle take?

They only had seven more days.

“How long does your time turner go back to?”

“…Good question,” Nott said, somewhat reluctant. “Fourteen to eighteen days is the comfortable range. Highly possible. Past that, I don’t know. It’s redacted information, but apparently some bloke went back a very long time with a day turner like the one I’ve got – at least, that’s what the information that I could get implied.”

“If we decide to go with your plan, we’ll likely have to stay the full eighteen,” Harry said, his nerves a bit on edge at the thought. That was the limit. It was risky.

All of it was risky.

“If we can’t get everything out of him, there’s always Astoria and Johnson. They’re to be taking care of Draco once we go back. And, from what I’ve heard of Johnson, he’s not that bad at getting information from people – for a Squib. I’ve plenty from my trust fund that I could give them if Goyle will be an issue.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, an expression that made his glamour always itch, even though he was rather used to wearing it by now. “You’d honestly leave Malfoy and Goyle in the hands of a Muggle and a Squib?”

“If Daphne thinks they’re capable, and I’m sure they are – yes. Johnson’s the one that got us this place,” Nott said, gesturing to the room within the small converted warehouse that they were standing in. “It’s secure, even by Muggle standards – without the extensive wards we’ve set on it. He seems like the type of person I’d like to meet. Careful. Paranoid, even.”

“You mean you’ve never met him?” Harry asked in surprise.
Nott’s brows shot up, his eyes regarding him uncertainly. “You have?”

“Twice.” A wry smile bubbled up onto Harry’s face as he flicked the ashes off his fag. “One time, he held me at gunpoint.”

“See? The more I hear of him, the more I like him,” Nott drawled, turning back to the blackboard. He inhaled deeply at his fag until it burned down to the filter. “I should get started on planning. Draw up a map of Greg’s house – compile a list of supplies. We’ll have to capture him after Christmas Eve so we can get the finalizations of the Hogwarts siege Draco was talking about. Unless that was all a pack of lies, but we’ll figure that out after we bring in Greg…”

“I’m not so sure about this…” Harry muttered hesitantly.

“Have you any better ideas?”

Harry shook his head. Nott’s plan was good – possibly the best, unless they were to kidnap an actual seasoned Death Eater who might know a hell of a lot more than Goyle – but it was still so very risky.

“Don’t worry so much, Potter. Between the three of us and you and Granger, we’ll work something out. It’ll be quicker and easier to fill in the gaps and see all the angles with all of us looking at it.”

oOo

They had begrudgingly agreed that Goyle was the best source of information that they could realistically get a hold of with the least risk.

With a hydrated Malfoy strapped down to a bed transfigured from a piece of parchment and the necessary letters written, they all gathered round the table. The sight-correction charm was starting to wear off so Harry had to put his glasses back on to see properly. Daphne sat to the left of him, dialing her cousin and getting no answer yet again. “She must have had a training exercise today,” she muttered with a yawn, setting the phone down and sliding the bottle of pepper-up potion toward herself.

Sticking his cigarette in his mouth, Harry looked over the blueprint-esque drawing of the Goyle estate, which was only half completed. The house didn’t seem to be that large but the grounds were massive from the looks of it. Nott and Zabini were trying to make it as accurate as possible while Hermione rifled through a giant book on wards to help her reverse engineer some of the protections that were placed on the Goyle estate.

It was likely that he wasn’t going to be able to be involved in the kidnapping. He was quite useless without magic in that situation, but it was still extremely interesting to watch them plan – to help them, on occasion. Nott was meticulous as ever and Zabini and Daphne intermittently argued over ideas that each of them were throwing out. Some of the wards around the Goyle estate could be broken without detection, but others… not as much.

They could enter the premises undetected, that much was certain, but getting out of there with Goyle quickly would be extremely difficult. Apparating in and out would be impossible. The anti-apparation wards extended beyond the grounds by a few thousand meters. Wards against brooms where hard to go around and making them recognize your magical signature in order to enter and
exit on a broom would compromise your identity.

That left the option of doing it on foot; however, with the amount of land the Goyle’s had, it wouldn’t be a swift exit at all. They’d have to go around fields of venomous tentacula. Apparently that’s how the Goyle family made their fortune; the majority of venomous tentacula plants and products sold on the market came from them.

Harry’s eyes snapped up from the page when Daphne scraped back her chair and stood with a stretch. “I can’t take this room anymore. I’m going to go get some dinner – any preferences?”

“Can I come with?” Harry asked. It had been days since he last got out of the warehouse.

“Sure,” she said, moving over to the pile of trunks and bags. “I’ll fix up your glamour.”

“Would pasta and a bottle of Montrachet be too much to ask for?” Harry heard Zabini ask as he got up to pull on the trousers he wore in the interrogation room. “I’m dying for some real food.”

“Ooh, pasta does sound good,” Hermione concurred, looking up from her book. “And an arugula salad with antipasto.”

Daphne paused from transfiguring her cloak into a trench coat, raising her eyebrow toward the two. “Do you guys just want to go to a fucking Italian restaurant? I doubt I can find one that does takeaways.”

Hermione and Zabini shared a look. “Can we do that?”

“By all means, go ahead,” Nott chipped in, not looking up from the floor plan of the Goyle estate. “Just bring me back something that doesn’t have onions in it.”

“We’ll have to stop at Berry Brothers & Rudd for the Montrachet,” Zabini said, getting up from his chair to rifle through his trunk for clothes. “They simply don’t serve that stuff anywhere.”

“Do you know of a place that lets you bring your own bottle?” Hermione asked, joining the crowd around the trunks. Harry quickly belted his trousers and buttoned up his shirt and got out of the way, taking his shoes with him.

“That’s no matter, love. We’ll just confound the waiter.”

Hermione whapped him on the arm with her jumper. “And break The International Statute of Secrecy!” she admonished, causing Zabini to let out a deep laugh.

“I’ll be discreet about it,” he assured her with a smirk.

Naturally, that earned him another whack to the shoulder and Harry rubbed a hand over his still-glamoured face, which always made it itch even worse. When he looked up at Daphne, she was shoving a pair of heels onto her bare feet and zipping up her skirt.

Fully dressed, with his glamour touched up and the eyesight charm restored, they all set off toward the alleyway they used as an Apparation point. Walking out the door to the warehouse was like exiting a furnace and hopping into a freezer. Harry pulled his coat around himself tighter to shield himself from the frigid wind as they spun off to wherever Zabini had to get his stupid – as per usual, overpriced – wine.
Hermione blessed him with a warming charm as they made their way toward the restaurant and he gave her a thankful nod, catching his reflection in the shop window behind her with a brief startled pause. Hermione’s brow furrowed at him and she looked over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s just bloody insane how real these glamours look,” Harry muttered, shaking his head.

Letting out a short breathy bitter laugh, Hermione’s lips quirked. “Yeah. Makes me wonder how Greengrass got so good at them.” She stared at him from the corner of her eye, speaking in a low tone of voice. “It’s not like her Charms grades are anything to boast about and it’s really hard to get it to appear like that. I mean, her repellant charms are laid down perfectly in seam with the sculpting work – even Nott has trouble with it and he almost beat me last year with that extra credit project he did.”

Harry’s brows furrowed as she continued her tirade, “Plus, you’ve seen her try to do the washing-up charms – even Neville’s better at those – so she had to get good at triple-layer glamours through repeated use of them.”

“Oh maybe she just practiced them for this purpose – interrogating Malfoy,” Harry rationalized, though it was a little suspicious. He watched Daphne’s back as they walked. She and Zabini seemed to be taking bets on when and if Nott was going to have a nervous breakdown by the time they got back to Hogwarts.

“I doubt that,” Hermione said after a pause, her lips pursed. “To get a triple-layer glamour right, you have to study anatomy and physiology as well as shaping, sculpting, and defense charms. That’s why they call it a triple-layer glamour. It’s three layers of spells laid atop each other and woven together, which makes it hard to detect and rid of without the counter-charm – especially if it’s done well. She’s not that good to master it all in a month. If it was Nott, maybe. But her?” She snorted quietly.

Harry shrugged. “Why don’t we ask her about it instead of theorizing?”

Scoffing, Hermione whispered, “You’re even starting to sound like her now.”

The centre of his forehead creased. “No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. Is she brainwashing you? You two spend a lot of time together for people who’ve just recently gone through a breakup.”

“Erm… not that I know of. And you know it’s for the interrogation. She’s helping me. By the way, speaking of relationships, what are you doing with Zabini?” he asked through his teeth, diverting her attention away from the whole Daphne-breakup thing. He’d rather not touch the subject with a thirty-nine and a half foot pole if he could help it.

He could audibly hear Hermione’s mouth shut before he inhaled, regaining her composure. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You and him are a lot closer lately. He called you by your name, for Merlin’s sake! And he let you assault him without being a ponce about it,” Harry explained, eyeing the Slytherin boy in question.

“Well, it’s not like I’m going to wait around for Ron to get a clue.” She let out a breath. “Blaise is… nice, once you get to know him. Charming even. Courteous. He kind of reminds me of my
grandfather.”

Harry raised an eyebrow toward her. “No offense, but is your grandfather a manipulative git?”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed in his direction. “I wasn’t referring to that. Blaise will be nice to you if you’re nice in return. Polite, even.”

“Hard to be polite when every other word he says is either backhanded or insulting.”

“Okay. Fair point. I know he can be… difficult to handle at times,” Hermione admitted, shrugging a shoulder. “But maybe I’m into that sort of thing, now that I think of it.”

“Still don’t see why Zabini is so appealing to you,” Harry said with a shake of his head.

“Well I don’t see why Greengrass is so appealing to you, so we’re even,” Hermione countered, her lips quirking.

They shared a look and he shrugged. “I don’t think I could explain it properly myself.” Harry paused, biting the inside of his cheek. “She’s just… exciting.”

“Dangerous,” Hermione corrected.

A small smile spread across Harry’s lips. “That might be why she’s so exciting.”

Daphne and Zabini stopped underneath a deep maroon awning and were staring back at them as they caught up. “You could have told me it was formal dress,” Hermione whispered to Zabini while the hostess seated them in a private booth that the Slytherin wanker requested specifically.

“You look just fine, love,” Zabini muttered, causing Harry to narrow his eyes toward him.

Pulling the crystal ashtray toward herself, Daphne lit her fag, offering him one. Hermione gave him a dirty look from over her menu, like she did nearly every time he lit a cigarette in front of her. But an even dirtier look was sent in Zabini’s direction as he surreptitiously transfigured matches into wine glasses.

Blowing out a long breath of smoke, Daphne grabbed at the glass of wine that Zabini was pouring and took a swig. “Alright, so – food. Is there anything on this menu that’s in English?”

“I suggest the fish,” Zabini chipped in. “It pairs excellently with the wine.”

Daphne glanced over at him sharply before going back to the menu. “You know I don’t eat meat.”

Zabini’s brow furrowed. “Even fish?”

“Even fish. I’ll just get a salad of some sort,” Daphne replied, flicking her ashes into the ashtray.

“My aunt’s a vegetarian too,” Hermione said distractedly, her eyes flicking down the menu. “She always brings the strangest things to Christmas dinner and tries to convert everyone.”

“The term vegetarian is a bit too political for my liking.” Daphne shrugged, shoving the menu away from her. “I just don’t eat meat, that’s all.”
Hermione looked up at her, brows raised. “Why are you a vegetarian then?”

“After you swallow about a pint of blood, you’ll never want to eat anything that tastes even remotely like it ever again,” she said blankly. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he watched Daphne’s face flicker ever so slightly, reading the lines at the corner of her mouth and eyes carefully. Otherwise, her expression didn’t waver.

_Truth._ He’d spent enough time ‘interrogating’ her to know her lying ticks by now.

Harry’s brows rose. “How did you end up swallowing a pint of blood?”

“Draco had some weird ritual kinks.”

_Mostly-true. Just as Harry’s mouth opened to ask another question, Zabini cut in, “Must you? I’d rather not have my appetite ruined before we even get a chance to order.”_

Daphne rolled her eyes and picked up the dessert list.

“ Weird time to start telling the truth,” Harry said out of the corner of his mouth.

“The interrogation is nearly done,” Daphne responded in the same manner. “I promised I would start letting you in on things when it was over. It’s almost over.” She then turned toward Zabini and said, “We should order Theo some of this chocolate cake.”

“Does that mean you can tell me how you got so good at triple-layer glamours?” Harry pressed, setting his menu down and flicking his eyes over to Hermione for a brief moment. He could hear Zabini at the other side of the table muttering to himself, obviously displeased.

A smirk tugged at the corners of Daphne’s lips. “I’m just more interested in it than other spells of the same calibre. I tend to pay more attention if I’m interested in it. That’s why I’m good at Apparation and certain transfigurations – certain _other_ spells and making potions. Why are _you_ so great at Defense Against the Dark Arts? And Potions all of a-”

“That withstanding, it’s not in our curriculum,” Hermione interrupted. “It would take heavy auxiliary research to find out how to do it.”

“I stumbled across it last year when researching human transfiguration for an assignment. McGonagall was handing out Restricted Section passes like her god-awful ginger newts because of Umbridge’s extra library restrictions.” Daphne took a drag off her cigarette. “Shame not to take advantage. I know you did. Those modified protean charms aren’t particularly vanilla arts, are they?”

“I do what I have to do when the occasion calls for it.”

“Exactly. I do as well.” Daphne’s smirk widened. “So, since we’re doing this now, how did you learn how to Apparate? Can’t just be beginner’s luck.”

“Snuck out of the castle to do it. You?”

“I went on a trip to Russia the summer before fifth year and got licensed. Apparation age is fourteen there.”

Hermione shook her head, the centre of her forehead creasing. “No, I considered doing that as well –
you have to be a Russian citizen.”

“I used my mother’s Soviet Union passport, changed the information on it while I was at school, and pretended not to know much English for a few weeks. They’re not very attentive to old Muggle documents.”

“How did you learn?” Harry asked, staring across the table at Zabini.

“I’ve a dual citizenship,” Zabini answered in a bored tone not even looking up at him. “Apparation age is sixteen in Italy.”

“And yet your favourite wine is French?” Hermione lightly quipped.

A grin formed on the Slytherin boy’s lips. “You know your wine,” he remarked, glancing over at her with that... look in his eyes that was unsettling.

Harry felt the sudden urge to either vomit or kick Zabini under the table – or both. Instead, Daphne nudged his leg with her knee, catching his attention. “There’s no use stopping it if it’s going to happen,” she said under her breath.

Inhaling deeply at his fag, he let the smoke settle and flicked the ashes off into the tray. Daphne stole his lighter laying on the table and lit up another cigarette just as the waiter appeared with the breadbasket and even more wine. Zabini must have confounded the staff somehow. Not even the water boy noticed the extra glasses and bottle of Montrachet on the table.

“You know, I was just thinking,” Hermione said, amid the appetizers. “If we can’t get into the Goyle estate using magic, why don’t we go in the Muggle way?”

“We’ve already been over legging it.” Zabini set down his fork and wiped the nonexistant sauce off his lips with a white linen napkin. “Not easy to lug dead weight over a few kilometres without a spell or two.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I mean motorbikes or cars even. A car would be more practical, but it’s hard to get our hands on one – I know where we can rent motorbikes and I’m sure I could find a spell to muffle the noise as to not arouse suspicion.”

Harry’s mind briefly entertained the thought of stealing Uncle Vernon’s car but then dismissed it. Surrey was a long drive from the Goyle estate. It would take too long.

“I know where we can get a car,” Daphne offered. “If I can get a hold of my cousin, I know she’ll let me borrow the princess. It’s rubbish, but it runs well.”

“Will the back gates even fit a car?” Harry wondered aloud, picturing the schematic that Nott was still perfecting back at the warehouse.

Shrugging, Hermione leaned back in her seat, chewing at her lip. “The entrances at old estates are designed to fit a horse and carriage – the size of that is somewhat comparable.”

“What about tracks?” Zabini questioned. “A masking spell would be detected.”

“We don’t need one – we could just transfigure the imprints from tire tracks to footprints.” Daphne plucked her wine glass off the table, her brows furrowed. She turned to Hermione. “Do you think
you could find a way to muffle a car engine?"

“I don’t know off hand. I’ll have to visit Flourish and Blotts to pick up a book, but I’m sure I could do it.”

A wide smirk spread across Zabini’s face. “Genius as always. Now if only you could come up with a way to fix that bloody Climate Control spell that Theo butchered.”

The two shared a look and Daphne mimed gagging, causing Harry to grin. Then something hit him. “Hold on – who’s going to drive?”

Daphne’s lips twitched into a small grin. “I’ll do it, of course.”

“Don’t tell me – you also got your driving license in Russia?” Hermione jested.

“No. *That I don’t* have, but it can’t be any different from a golf cart and I’ve driven those plenty of times.” She lowered her voice, glancing over at Harry. “My mother dated this guy who would drag us to the country club for 18 bloody holes. The only thing I liked about that place was the stupid little golf carts.”

“I’d rather that *I* drive,” Hermione said sharply, as if there were no questioning it.

“Granger, you’ll have your hands full with unwarding spells and covering our tracks. I know it’s in your controlling nature to do *everything* but please let me do this one *little* task,” Daphne paused, fishing a cigarette from her silver case. “I promise I’ll practice and do it perfectly to your liking.”

Hermione glared as Daphne lit her fag. “You don’t have such a good track record with promises, Greengrass.”

“I haven’t put any stipulations on this one though,” Daphne retorted.

“Merlin,” Harry cut in, “just let her drive. She grew up in the Muggle world just as much as you did.”

Hermione’s face suddenly lit up, as if she had just found the solution to a hard arithmancy problem. “Good point, Harry. *You* should drive. I’d be much more comfortable.”

Daphne let out a breathy laugh. “I think you’ve had far too much wine. Harry’s not…”

“He’s driven Ron’s Ford Anglia to school in second year,” Hermione pointed out. “That makes him the one with the most experience.”

Harry hesitated. “That was a *magical* flying car.”

“You still drove it and we’ll need all the help we can get to bring down Goyle so Greengrass might come in handy in there.”

Daphne actually looked as if she was considering it. So did Zabini. It all made his stomach twist nervously. Then again, he did have the most experience, but he couldn’t use magic at all…

“I can’t use magic,” he muttered.
“Driving doesn’t require it,” Hermione said in a softer tone. “I know you can do it.”

“I’ll make sure you’re safe,” Daphne added, staring at him unblinkingly.

Hermione’s lips pursed. “We’ll both make sure.”

Shrugging, Harry downed a few swigs of his wine, wincing at the taste. “Okay, sure – why not?” He felt suddenly very reckless.

A wide smile broke out across Hermione’s face and she squeezed his knee under the table. “Brilliant. Now all we have to do is get that car.”

 oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“Sorry, Daph. I hit a grouse with it a couple weeks ago. There’s a giant hole in the radiator and it blew my engine – feathers everywhere. My mechanic couldn’t bloody believe it until I showed him,” Harry heard Astoria say through the loud phone speaker cradled between Daphne’s ear and shoulder. They had gone outside the restaurant to get some fresh air, mobile reception, and to get away from the sickening scene that a tipsy Hermione and Zabini were making while they waited for dessert.

Daphne was standing near enough to him that he could hear the entire phone call and she paused to take a giant swig from the bottle of Ferme Blanc she brought out with her. “Well there goes that plan,” she said with a sigh, inhaling deeply from the fag in her other hand.

“Have you asked Johnson?” Astoria asked. He noticed that she had this slight European accent that he couldn’t place.

Leaning against the wall, Harry cupped his hand around his cigarette as he lit it to block the wind. The cool breeze felt good against the alcohol-induced flush underneath his glamour.

“No. Johnson’s in Vladivostok for the rest of the week,” Daphne said through a long breath full of smoke. “He stays off the grid when he’s in Russia.”

“Bummer. I’d borrow you my car but I need it for work. Sorry I can’t help.”

Daphne looked over at him, frowning. “That’s alright. We’ll just have to figure out something else.”

“Good luck with that – oh, are you coming to Christmas dinner on Friday?”

Rolling her eyes, Daphne took another swig from her bottle of wine and passed it to Harry, who
clutched at it before it could hit the ground. “No,” she replied simply.

“Come on, it’ll be great! You can bring your friends.”

“I’d rather not make them have to deal with our fucked up family unit, Astoria. I’ll see you tomorrow when you bring my owl, yeah?”

“Fine. Have fun with your little kidnapping.”

“Bye.” Daphne clicked the phone off and let out a drawn out sigh. “Well that’s that idea gone to shit. Have any bright ideas of where we can get a car?”

Harry shrugged and tried Daphne’s wine of choice, feeling even bolder than he was earlier in the night - before all the wine and cappuccinos and cigarettes. It gave him a euphoric uninhibited edge to his thoughts.

Smirking languidly, he said, “Maybe.”

It was only midnight – the night was still young.

oOo

They stood in front of the driveway of house number 4 on the street and Harry half expected his aunt’s horse-like face to peek through the curtains of the master bedroom at any second. Daphne had Apparated them near Mrs. Figg’s a couple blocks over and they walked the rest of the way. There were a few measures of alcohol in the bottle of wine that she held at her side and he took it from her, renewing the euphoric level of his buzz. He knew that Daphne was possibly very pissed from the dazed look in her eyes – more than he was anyway – and she still managed not to splinch them when they landed.

Assessing the situation, he carefully stared at the house. There was another car in the driveway at number 4, so Marge was definitely visiting for the Christmas holiday. Damn. They had to be extremely quiet, lest they wake Ripper and everyone else in the bloody house.

“How do _somnus_ spells work on dogs?” Harry asked, glancing out of the corner of his eye at Daphne, who had taken her wand out and looked entirely too eager to break the law.

He passed her the bottle of Ferme Blanc and she shoved it into the magically extended pocket of her trench coat.

“Works on Millicent’s cat.” Daphne’s lips pursed and she glanced over at him. “So what’s your plan? Knock out a dog – break in…”?

“Follow me,” Harry instructed, walking around to the side of the house to the faux rock that held the key that opened the back door. He had to make this look very Muggle – or possibly as if one of Dudley’s stupid friends had done it. “As soon as you hear or see a dog,” he said quietly, shoving the key into the door handle, “_somnus_ it.”

Waving her hand absentmindedly, Daphne whispered, “Yeah yeah, this isn’t my first break-in.”

As silently as possible, Harry opened the door and snuck inside. He felt a nonverbal spell hit his
shoes as soon as he set his foot down onto the tiled kitchen floor, completely muffling the sound of his footsteps.

Not her first break-in, indeed.

He could hear Ripper snoring in the lounge and directed Daphne toward it to make sure the bastard dog stayed asleep while he made his way into the foyer to search Uncle Vernon’s coat. In the dark, it was a bit hard telling the difference between his and Marge’s coats. Burrowing into the puffy polyester tent that was the coat rack, Harry ended up with two sets of keys and, for a brief second, he considered wasting time debating over whose keys were whose when he heard a clinking noise coming from the kitchen.

And the sound of the fridge opening.

What in Merlin’s name was Daphne doing?

Side-stepping noiselessly toward the kitchen door, he peeked through it to see Dudley digging through the fridge and grabbing a pot of fruit-at-the-bottom yoghurt with a spoon dangling from his mouth. Where did he come from? Surely he would have noticed if Dudley had come down the stairs.

Then he realized that he couldn’t hear Ripper snoring anymore.

Fuck.

In the light of the fridge, he watched as Daphne strode into the kitchen all fucking nonchalant and – even through the slight haze of alcohol – his seeker reflexes kicked in. Harry leapt straight onto Dudley, his forearm stifling his cousin’s protesting scream. The struggle nearly took them both down to the floor and the spell that Daphne reflexively fired off just barely whizzed past his shoulder, making a dull thud as it struck the cupboard behind him.

Confundus, from the sound of it – good, at least it wasn’t something dangerous.

“Shut up! It’s ME, you great dolt - do you want to wake up everyone in the house?” Harry furiously muttered into Dudley’s ear. Both sets of keys were still in his fists and cutting into his palms as he tried to keep a hold of his squirming cousin.

Fucking hell, he was strong.

A jet of purple light soared straight into Dudley’s chest and his eyes widened. “I don’t know who the fuck – what did you do to my voice?” Dudley furiously exclaimed, though it was muted several decibels.

“Simple volume adjustment. If you want to keep your voice box intact, I suggest you stop struggling,” Daphne threatened, her wand trained on the boy’s throat. Dudley froze immediately. “In case you forgot,” she continued, glancing over at Harry, “you’re still glamoured.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He didn’t forget.

But Dudley’s eyes got even wider. “WHAT DOES THAT MEAN-”

Dropping a set of keys onto the floor, Harry put his hand over Dudley’s mouth. “Listen,” he said gruffly. His voice was still the same; the voice charm wore off ages ago and Daphne didn’t bother to
redo it. “It’s just me - Harry.” His cousin’s eyes narrowed and Harry sighed exasperatedly. “You
know - I lived in the cupboard under the stairs for ten years, went off to Hogwarts, saved you from
the fucking Dementors - who else do you know who has magic?”

“Oh... Why do y–what are you doing here? I thought you weren’t allowed home on holidays. And
who in the bloody hell is she?” He was likely speaking in a normal volume, but it sounded like a
barely audible whisper thanks to whatever spell Daphne had put on him.

Merlin, what were they going to do with him?

He looked at Daphne for help and she shrugged, practically reading his thoughts as they spilled out
onto his expression. Leaning against the countertop, she reached into her pocket and fished out her
silver case, lighting her fag with a quick flick of her wand.

“Just call me Harry’s girlfriend, yeah?” Daphne muttered, blowing out a long breath full of smoke.
He could tell that she was still rather pissed from the way she held herself. “Now, we’re not sure
what to do with you. We could rid of your memory that we were ever here and you’ll wake up with
a nasty headache and be none the wiser. However, I think that – if you’re good – you’ll never
breathe a word of anything that transpired here. If you do say something though, I’ll make sure to
magic your bollocks off and keep them in a jar to use as a paperweight. Got it?”

Dudley glanced up at him warily out of the corner of his eye. “You’d let her do that to me?”

“If you say anything about this, I’ll let her do worse to you. She knows where you live. She knows
where you go to school. And I will tell her where you hang out with your stupid little friends so you
won’t be able to get away from her,” Harry threatened without preamble. Merlin, it felt so good. “If
anyone asks about tonight – you didn’t hear anything and you didn’t see anything.”

Dudley nodded slowly, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. “I didn’t hear anything or see anything.”

“Good,” Harry said sternly, letting his cousin free from his grip and picking up the set of keys he
dropped. “She’ll be performing a ward on you that’ll alert us if you speak of anything about this.
We’ll know if you do.”

With a wave of her wand and a brief flash of light, Daphne muttered some spell that made Harry
think she was actually casting a ward that would do what he said, but that threat was all for show.
Dudley wasn’t going to talk – any threat with magic would solidify that. She really didn’t have to
ward him.

Better to be safe, he supposed.

Harry silently shut the back door behind him and he heard Daphne end the volume control spell on
Dudley’s voice with a quick ‘finite’ through the kitchen window as they passed it. Following him to
Uncle Vernon’s BMW, she got into the passenger seat and stopped him just before he put the key
into the ignition. “Just turn the key a little bit, but don’t turn it on – slide it into neutral. We can push
the car out of the driveway and down the road without alerting anyone,” she whispered, flicking the
ashes off her fag out the open car door. “Then we can start it.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “Have you done this before?”

“Of course.” Daphne smirked. “I used to help Astoria sneak out of the house all the time.”
Once they were half way down Privet Drive, Harry started the car and took off, shutting his door and putting his seatbelt on one-handed. He breathed a sigh of relief that Uncle Vernon pressed Grunnings for an automatic due to some sort of golf-related ‘stress injury’. He didn’t know how the hell he’d deal with a manual gear shift, given his lack of driving experience.

Once they were settled and headed toward the motorway, Daphne passed him a lit cigarette, which he accepted. “So,” he said slowly, taking a long drag. “Girlfriend, huh?”

“Why not,” Daphne stated casually,shrugging and blowing smoke out the car window.

*Why not?* That was a good question.

“Well, I still haven’t forgiven you.”

“We’re in Muggle world with a captured Draco Malfoy and we just coerced your cousin and committed Grand Theft Auto together. You’re unlicensed – we’re pissed. Oh, and-” she dug into her pocket, pulling out the Ferme Blanc that still had a bit of warm wine left in it, “here’s an open bottle of alcohol in a moving vehicle.” She downed the rest of it. “You should *definitely* forgive me.”

Harry let out a breathy laugh. “Breaking laws with you doesn’t make up for everything you’ve left me out of.”

“Everything I’ve left you out of was just more law-breaking,” Daphne replied, setting the bottle of wine in the centre counsel.

“Sure, there’s that. Then there’s the information about Malfoy and you, and…” Harry shook his head and flicked the ashes off his fag out the window. “Many things, really. I mean… I want to. I’d love to be in an actual relationship with you-”

“But?” Daphne asked expectantly, continuing his sentence.

“I know very little about you.” He inhaled a breath full of smoke, letting it settle in his lungs. “Yet, somehow, you know so much about me.”

“I’m not all that interesting, Harry,” Daphne said and he watched her smirk from the corner of his eye. “Just your typical Slytherin doing typical Slytherin-y things.”

“I somehow doubt that kidnapping a fellow Slytherin to help a Gryffindor constitutes as ‘typical Slytherin-y things’, ” Harry muttered, shaking his head. He took a drag from his cigarette and flicked the ashes out the window. “Tell me something about you that I don’t know.”

“Like what?”

“Anything.”

“I like breaking laws with you and mussing you up a bit,” Daphne said. “It’s fun.”

“Yeah, it is,” he had to admit. “But I was looking for something more personal.”

“Well… if you’re so hard pressed on getting to know my deepest darkest secrets. What is it that you want to know?” she drawled, leaning back in her seat and tugging at her seatbelt.
His mind blanked and he carefully focused on merging onto the motorway while he tried to think of what he wanted to ask. There were so many questions swirling in his mind – too many – and to think that he may not get another chance at this. Perhaps the next time she decides to down a quarter bottle of Montrachet and most of the Ferme Blanc?

Could this be considered taking advantage of her in her inebriated state?

She wasn’t that pissed if she could apparate them from London to Surrey without splinching them and that was a while ago so it had to be wearing off, right?

Fuck it.

Steeling his nerves, he said, “Okay. What exactly went on between you and Malfoy before I came into the picture?”

“Oh, that. We fucked,” she said boldly. “There’s not much else to it except mental illness and bigotry.”

“Right,” Harry muttered doubtfully. “Would it kill you to be a bit more open?”

“It’s not like I ask about your relationship with Cho Chang,” Daphne retorted, taking a drag off her cigarette. “Or any other girls you’ve been with.”

“There’s only been you and Cho – and you and Malfoy obviously had a lot more going on than Cho and I ever did. What with the blood ritual kink or whatever that was.”

“Some things are very hard truths, Harry,” she said, sucking down her fag and blowing her smoke out the window.

His expression softened and he glanced over at her. “I can handle it.”

“Promise not to murder Malfoy?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I promise not to murder Malfoy.”

“Alright.” He heard Daphne let out a long breath, a thin cloud of smoke trailing out her lips. “I coerced Draco into bed because I was an idiot.” Daphne sighed again, continuing in controlled and nearly detached tone, “We’ve always hated each other, but – you know – attraction is stupid. And he’s always hated that I was able to get one up on him and take advantage of him so he made it his sick twisted goal to try and conquer me because that’s my place. How dare a half-blood best a pureblood over and over, especially one who grew up in the Muggle world. I’m practically a mudblood,” she said, her accent mimicking Malfoy’s perfectly for a brief moment. “End of story.”

“Yeah… that’s – mental,” Harry said, glancing over at her. “What did he do to you?”

“Oh, everything in the book. Typical domination and control tactics – with and without magic. He even tried out sex magic and forced me to drink a pint of his blood.” She paused, burning down the rest of her cigarette. “But the spell doesn’t stick if you vomit it all back up. Small mercy that he’s an arrogant twat.”

Harry’s jaw clenched and he gripped the steering wheel. “I’ll kill him.”
To his surprise, Daphne laughed. “You promised – don’t be such a Gryffindor. What we’re doing to him now is much better than killing him anyway.”

Harry let out short, angry breath through his flared nostrils. “We should try every trick in the book on him. Maybe even force him to drink a pint of blood and see how he likes it.”

At least he wouldn’t feel too bad about accidentally cutting too deep into Malfoy’s throat now.

“That’s not the worst he’s done,” Daphne said, rolling her eyes. “And, quite frankly, I’m not willing to tell you any more if you’re going to react like a hotheaded bastard. You can’t kill Draco Malfoy, even if you want to. That’s not smart. You just have to bide your time, like I have, and strike at the opportune moment – as I have. And now he’s helpless, alone, afraid, and miserable. It’s fantastic.”

Harry didn’t want to think of what more the sick bastard could have done to her that was worse than forcing her into a blood ritual. But… he had to ask. “What did he do to you in the Room of Requirement when you followed him?”

“Oh, that was nothing. He just attacked me – thought I was you because I had Theo’s cloak. So we fought and he tried being all git-like till I kneed him in the bollocks and broke three of his ribs.”

“Wow.” Harry’s brows rose as he exhaled a breath full of smoke. “That’s how you hurt your shoulder?”

“Well, he is stronger than me so it took a little maneuvering,” Daphne said with a shrug, pulling out her silver case and lighting up again. “Ended up injuring my shoulder in the process. Not a big deal.”

Harry didn’t know what else to say about it. It was all very… strange.

“Look,” Daphne said suddenly, breaking through his reverie. “Draco and I had a really fucked up relationship – very abusive. You can kind of leave it at that because, while I’m with you, I’d rather not think about all the bad stuff that’s in the past. We’re onto revenge now. And it’s going well – it’s beneficial for both of us.”

It made so much more sense why she was so cooperative. It wasn’t altruistic in the least. They were gleaning information for Harry’s cause in a way which satisfied Daphne’s thirst for revenge at the same time.

Well, if there was one thing he was clear about, he had to admit that she definitely knew how to capitalize on a situation. Draco Malfoy giving Katie Bell that necklace was the perfect catalyst, but to think that that had led to all of this…

Slytherins were fucking mental. And he could barely wrap his mind around just how mental they actually were.

oOo

“This is the car you were picking up? I thought Daphne said it was an Austin Princess,” Hermione questioned, staring perplexedly through the newspaper covered window at the BMW that was parked in front of the warehouse. It was within the boundaries of the ward, which made it invisible to anyone that wasn’t allowed to enter them.
“Err-” Harry shifted on his feet and set both sets of keys that he stole on the table in the middle of the control room. “Actually, Daphne’s cousin said that the Princess died, so we stole Uncle Vernon’s car.”

“Harry!” Hermione admonished, whacking him over the back with her stack of papers on warding and Merlin knows what.

“Ow!” Harry winced, rubbing his shoulder. “Jesus, Hermione.”

“You know he’s going to report that car as stolen as soon as he finds out its gone! And we can’t have the police looking out for it when we’re kidnapping Goyle! Honestly!” She threw her hands up exasperatedly.

“It’s fine! Don’t worry – Daphne has it covered. She went to find the same model to switch the license plates with. It’ll work out. We’ll have it back to Uncle Vernon after the job’s done.”

He wasn’t all that concerned. It seemed simple enough and it wasn’t that big of an issue to ‘borrow’ Uncle Vernon’s car for a bit. Granted, he accidentally forgot to leave Marge’s keys behind, which was an honest mistake. He was far more concerned with getting out of Surrey unnoticed at the time.

But deep down inside, he sincerely thought that the Dursleys deserved this.

Daphne probably didn’t take the somnus spell off the dog as well.

What a shame.

oOo

It wasn’t until Daphne came bustling through the door, chatting loudly with who he assumed to be Astoria in the corridor, that Harry realized it was morning and he had been up for over twenty-four hours. He had just finished his brief – slightly angered – chat with Malfoy about every Death Eater the Slytherin boy knew of and was currently copying the list that Nott recorded on the giant blackboard. He’d have to consult Mr. Weasley, and hopefully Tonks, about some of the names he didn’t recognize whenever they were going to go back to their normal lives. Hopefully one of them was the MLE mole. If not… maybe Goyle would know some more names once they got a hold of him.

Doubtful, but maybe.

A large tawny owl flew past his head, perching on top of a pile of books, and Daphne followed with her cousin in tow. Astoria wasn’t at all what he expected from the little information he knew of her. He thought that she would be a lot older, considering that she had twin toddlers at home, but she wasn’t too much older than them. Maybe twenty-five at the most. And she was intimidatingly pretty. Statuesque with dark eyes and bleach-blonde hair, which suddenly made him think of the memory of Ron trying to ask out Fleur Delacour in fourth year.

“When you said dress for tropical, I thought you were kidding,” Astoria said, taking off her jacket. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, offered one to Daphne, and lit up before throwing the jacket over the back of the chair where Daphne usually sat. She was clad in tight jeans and an equally tight t-shirt.
Yeah, if Ron were here, he’d definitely have a go at flirting with her.

“We had a problem with the climate control spell and haven’t been able to undo it,” Daphne explained, turning her attention to the room. “I suppose we should get started. This is Hermione Granger, our bookworm and spell expert; Harry Potter, our interrogator; Theo Nott, our tactician and interrogation expert – and, well, you know Blaise,” Daphne introduced, gesturing to everyone casually. “I’m just going to give her a quick tour of the place so she knows what she’s working with.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Astoria said vaguely, eyeing the scrying mirrors on the wall with interest. There was a murmured typical response from all of them and Harry sat his list down on the table.

Nott stood from his seat to grab a drink from the mini fridge. “So what kind of experience do you have in interrogation?” he questioned, eyeing her carefully over the rim of his reading glasses.

Daphne rolled her eyes and Astoria’s brow arched. “A little. It depends on what you mean by experience,” she drawled, her lips quirking.

“Really,” Nott responded in the same drawling manner, twisting open the cap on his bottle of coke. “I thought Daphne said you worked with explosives for a living.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed toward Nott. What was he playing at?

“I do.”

“Where do you get interrogation experience from that?”

“I was captured by a terrorist group and interrogated when I was stationed in Bosnia. That’s where I met my ex-fiancé – the interrogator,” Astoria answered blankly. “May God rest his soul in hell.” She took a drag off her cigarette and flicked her ashes into the ashtray on the table.

“Alright then,” Daphne said, forcing a wide grin and interrupting Nott before he could ask any more questions, “the tour!”

Nott glared at her but she ignored him. “This is the control room, where we do most of our work. The whole place outside of Draco’s room is spelled properly and the baby monitor is one-way so you don’t have to worry about him overhearing anything. You could scream bloody murder and he’d be none the wiser.”

“Are you sure? Your walls seem pretty thin…” Astoria commented as Daphne ushered her out the door. Whatever Daphne’s answer was, it was muffled.

“Don’t be fooled by her pretty face, Theo,” Zabini said after they left. “She’ll fuck you up. Where do you think Daph gets it from?”

“Oh, she fucked you up, did she?” Nott retorted, taking his seat across from Harry.

Zabini’s lips formed a straight, unamused, line. “No.”

“I think she did,” Nott whispered loudly to Harry before taking a sip of his drink. “He wouldn’t be so bitter about it if she didn’t.”
Harry bit the inside of his cheek to keep from snorting in amusement at the contemptuous look on Zabini’s face.

“What did you do to her? Turn on your Zabini charm and try to wet her knickers?” Nott continued bantering. He must’ve gotten into the leftover wine.

“It was a much better approach than yours,” Zabini snarked.

“You two,” Hermione scolded before they could continue any further, shaking her head. “She’s right in the next room – the least you could do is be respectful to our guest.”

“How was I being disrespectful?” Zabini asked, turning toward her with his eyebrows raised.

Giving him a stern look that clearly told him he was very mistaken, Hermione went back to the book on automotive spells in her lap, moving Crookshank’s paw in order to turn the page.

OoO

The preparations were complete. Everyone had downed their shots of pepper up potion and gone over the plans of the Goyle estate until they had it etched into the backs of their minds. They had just sent Zabini to the estate to check on the area and make sure it was okay for them to go through with the whole ordeal.

All of this build up and waiting around was making Harry increasingly nervous. Even Daphne seemed more nervous than usual, but she didn’t show it outwardly. He could tell from the way she burned through the fags alone. Hermione, on the other hand, had a different way of dealing with her nerves – by triple-checking everything. She made him drive Uncle Vernon’s BMW around the warehouse a few times to make sure the motor was sufficiently silent. Then, when he was done, she applied about fifty more silencing spells to various parts of the car. He was certain that the bloody thing wouldn’t make a damn sound even if you deliberately tried to make it make noise.

“I don’t think we need to silence the keys, Hermione,” Harry said seriously, staring at her with his eyebrows raised as she poked her wand around the ignition.

Doing it anyway, she shrugged. “You never know.” She crawled out of the driver’s side and went over her list under her breath as she paced around the car. He could just barely hear her. “… everyone’s boots are done, clothes are silenced, the car’s done, back seat’s enlarged, everyone’s glamoured… Astoria’s watching Malfoy, the warding spells-”

Daphne was sitting on the bonnet of the car, burning down another cigarette. “Oh, come off it, Granger. Everything is ready; we just have to wait for Blaise to get back.”

As if on cue, Zabini came walking out of the warehouse with Nott declaring, “We’re set to go!”

They all piled into the slightly expanded and altered BMW – equipped with new license plates – and shut their doors, which made absolutely no noise. Not even the leather seats made noise as they slid across them. Harry turned the keys in the ignition and, due to the lack of sound, he had a hard time determining if the car was actually on before he shifted it into drive and took off.

“Is it okay if I turn on the radio, or did Granger silence that as well?” Daphne quipped, testing the
knobs in the centre of the dashboard and rolling down her car window to get rid of her cigarette smoke.

OoO

“Could you pull up along-side the wards here?” Hermione asked as they approached the Goyle estate. Daphne quickly turned the radio off and Hermione rolled down her window, which also happened to make absolutely no sound what-so-ever.

Through her open window, Hermione flicked her wand, tugging back a thin, nearly-invisible membrane that started to glow as it moved closer to the tip of her wand. Watching her work with it was strange. It was almost as if she was playing with it – studying it; she kept squishing it between her wand and her hand, kneading it and twirling it with the tip, until – suddenly – a hole opened up in the ward, big enough for the car to fit through.

“First line of defense breached,” Harry heard Nott say softly from the back seat, almost as if he was checking off a list.

“We still have the internal wards to get through,” Zabini muttered in response as Harry drove closer toward the gate. These wards were much different than the ones that Hermione punched through. For one, they were visible and, two, they looked rather menacing. The magic they contained crackled with energy, surrounding the entire perimeter of the Goyle estate. It reminded Harry of a tesla coil, firing off electricity.

For these wards, both Zabini and Hermione silently vacated the car and approached the gate. It was so quiet, only the sound of their breathing penetrated the air.

Surprisingly, Hermione didn’t think of silencing that as well.

“Oh, they’re good,” Daphne whispered, vanishing her fag with a wave of her wand and not taking her eyes off of the two as they started cutting a chunk from the wards over the back gate.

According to Hermione, getting through wards was a lot like performing surgery. You could cut bits off of it and the wards stayed intact while allowing them to get through (the Muggle way, anyway – anti-Apparation and anti-broom wards were apparently impossible), but you had to know what parts of the wards to cut. Cut the wrong bit and the wards would break or sound the alarm, alerting everyone, and all hell would break loose.

As soon as Zabini and Hermione got back into the BMW, Harry held his breath and pressed down on the gas pedal. The wrought iron gate looked tall and imposing as they drove through it and Harry’s heart rate sped up. All he could see around him were vast fields of venomous tantacula, which occasionally snapped at the car as they passed by.

“Just keep driving straight. You can’t possibly miss the house,” Nott directed, calm as bloody ever.

Meanwhile, the butterflies in Harry’s stomach were doing some sort of rain dance.

The grass under the wheels of the car crunched under its weight and, out of his peripheral vision, he saw Daphne hang herself out the window – likely to transfigure the wheel tracks as they drove along, just like they planned.
The Goyle estate was a short drive to get to, but Nott was right about not being able to miss it. The blasted thing was absolutely gargantuan. The enormous Roman-style columns in front gave way to more Gothic architecture, with gargoyles curving around every corner and hiding in every niche of the dark stone archways and pointed windows. There were only a few lights on in the house, sparsely spread out – possibly making it easier for them to find Goyle.

As he parked in front of the estate, Harry stayed put inside the heavily warded and silent car while the four of them got on the move. They worked like a well-oiled machine, spreading out and entering the house swiftly. The first light on the ground floor of the estate went out and Harry could see wand light bouncing off the curtains in the window.

It was like that for every light, one by one; they went off like clockwork. Anxiously tapping his silenced foot, Harry watched and waited, wanting to move or do something – anything. They were in there for a long time and he swore he saw spells shoot across the windows every so often.

Then, what sounded like a pack of dogs started barking and that was almost enough to make Harry exit the car and want to investigate. His fingers paused on the door handle and he stopped himself just as he heard a yelp.

And then silence.

Pulling out his red case, he lit a cigarette with Daphne’s gold lighter, inhaling deeply

He kept reminding himself that they had to cover their tracks and remove every trace they could without setting off the wards. That was probably what was taking so long.

Yeah… that had to be it.

After all, they only had to stun Goyle and get out of there. They knew the layout of the house very well so they would know where Goyle was likely to be.

But, maybe Goyle wasn’t an easy target? What about his parents? Did he have any siblings? He obviously had dogs… that, they didn’t know about beforehand.

His cigarette burned down to the filter and he lit another, not daring to blink as he watched the house. There were only a few more flashes of red and yellow light in the windows – that was good. Nothing green… yet. Definitely a good sign.

He was nearly halfway through his second fag when the four of them came bursting through the front entrance, a large body suspended in the air above Nott, Zabini, and Hermione while Daphne limped behind them. She had her wand trained downward and was shooting spells at the ground.

Springing into action, Harry bustled around inside the car, opening all of the doors with his fag dangling from his lips

“Drive,” Daphne ordered through gritted teeth as soon as the last door was shut and she maneuvered herself back out the window to continue transfiguring their tracks.

There was blood running down her trouser leg, soaking through the fabric, but Harry stomped on the gas pedal and took off down the dirt road that led to their exit.
Everyone in the car was panting, out of breath. He could vaguely hear Goyle snoring, so they obviously got him down with a somnus spell of some sort. Daphne’s blood was starting to spread to the seat, dripping onto the pristine beige leather.

When they got to the gate, Zabini exited the car to reopen the wards that must have closed after they drove through. He made a new parting that was barely enough to fit the car into and it took a bit of maneuvering but, once they were out, they were basically free.

Zabini ran after them and Harry stopped long enough for him to hop back into the BMW. He had just gotten the door shut as they made it through the outer perimeter, which Hermione closed with a wave of her wand behind her.

Taking a drag off his cigarette, Harry coughed and stubbed it out quickly, wincing at the taste of burnt filter. “So… how did it go?” he asked carefully, glancing at the backseat through the rearview mirror. Goyle was bound and nestled between Zabini and Nott, fast asleep.

“How did it go?” Nott spoke. “Until Daphne ran into the dogs – that woke Goyle’s father up and… which of you took him out? I didn’t see.”

“I did,” Zabini answered gruffly. “Slicing hex to the neck – I didn’t bother to check if he was still breathing.”

Daphne snorted. “He wasn’t when I passed him.”

“Nice one,” Nott commented.

“Yeah…” Harry heard Hermione mutter. “He got me with a spell, though. I’ll have to look it up when we get back. Good job you were there, Blaise; he popped out of nowhere. I didn’t expect…”

“You’ll be fine. Whatever he hit you with wasn’t Dark,” Zabini assured. “I checked while you were breaching Goyle’s door.”

“Well it’s a good job you bastards left me to deal with the bloody dogs,” Daphne sardonically intoned around her freshly-lit cigarette. “I had to stun all fucking seven of them.” She pulled up her trouser leg with an inaudible hiss.

“The important thing,” Nott rejoined, “is that we got Goyle out of there. If he knows anything about the plan to seize Hogwarts for the Dark Lord, it’ll make all of this worth it.”

Out of Harry’s peripheral vision, he watched Daphne make a face at the large gaping bite in her leg.

“Tell that to my bloody thigh. I think I might need stitches.”

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Author’s Note: As always, thank you for reading! And a massive thanks to my betas, Ruaidhri and RAfan2421, for all of their lovely help!

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize, I do not own. This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended. In addition to that, Daphne’s grandfather’s background was inspired by Ken Alibek’s ‘Biohazard’, which I don’t own as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Duality: Criterion

OoO

“You’re going to have to get the temperature in this place fixed before you leave. I can’t work under these conditions,” Astoria said, pausing from stitching up Daphne’s thigh to fan herself with the Sortilege Manual and getting blood all over them.

Nott went into a fit of barely-contained rage over that, snatching the papers away from her. “These are important documents!”

The blonde simply stared at him blankly before stripping her grey t-shirt off – down to her undergarments, like the rest of them – and throwing it aside. She went back to stitching the large bite in Daphne’s thigh, causing the Slytherin girl to let out a hiss of pain every time the needle went through her skin.

“Hold still,” she commanded.

“This would be a lot easier if I had a pain-relieving potion,” Daphne replied through gritted teeth.

Shrugging, Astoria continued stitching. “It’s not that bad. You’re lucky those dogs didn’t tear a chunk off of you.”

Daphne gave her a contemptuous look and Astoria poured some more alcohol on the rag Hermione had conjured, wiping the blood that bubbled up from the wound. With a breathy groan, Daphne’s head lolled back against her chair.

“Oh, stop being a big baby,” Astoria admonished and Harry was very glad that he wasn’t in Daphne’s position. Her cousin was… brutal.

“I’m not,” Daphne countered. “It hurts.”
The two Greengrass women stared at each other fiercely and Harry swore that Astoria dug the needle in a bit deeply on purpose for the next stitch, causing Daphne to grip the table but resolutely not make another noise.

Harry’s head snapped up when a red-haired glamoured Zabini barged through the door, carrying a few scrying mirrors, with Hermione trailing along behind him, stripping off her own triple-layer glamour and folding the sweater that she must have removed. She scratched at her messy curls vigourously once the glamour evaporated off of her.

She had taken to wearing Zabini’s silk boxers with her bra, instead of her jeans, over the past two days and Harry wasn’t sure what to think about it. Sure, it was probably more comfortable than wearing jeans in the heat of the warehouse, but why Zabini’s boxers? Harry would have lent her a pair if she asked.

“He’s all set up for interrogation if you want to take a whack at him, Potter,” Zabini said, spelling the mirrors onto the wall over the fridge with a sticking charm.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. They wanted him to interrogate Goyle as well?

“You or Theo should do it,” Daphne spoke for him, lighting up a cigarette and wincing. Astoria was nearly done with the stitches. “Harry’s busy with Draco.”

“Ooh, we could play Good Unspeakable-Bad Unspeakable,” Zabini intoned with a smirk, and Nott shrugged, removing his reading glasses and checking to make sure he had removed all of the blood that Daphne’s cousin had gotten on the Sortilege Manual.

“Why don’t you just talk to him?” Astoria suggested, tying off the last stitch and wiping her hands off on the bloodied alcohol-soaked rag. “He’s a kid in a scary situation – he’ll probably give you the information you want easily enough.”

“We’ll obviously have to in order to develop a rapport first,” Nott drawled. “And he’s not just a kid – he’s a Death Eater working for the Dark Lord.”

“Still a kid,” the blonde pointed out.

Daphne scoffed, flicking the ashes of her fag off into the ashtray. “Don’t be so bloody ageist, Astoria. ‘Kids’ have just as much potential to be as deceiving, manipulative, and dangerous as adults.”

“You expect that from Goyle? Honestly?” Hermione asked with a snort.

Nott’s lips pursed thoughtfully. “He’s not the sharpest quill in the case, but you never know. People surprise you when they’re being interrogated.”

“We already have enough information on the siege. We only need to confirm it or see if it has changed,” Harry chimed in, grabbing a can of cola from the mini fridge to press against his heated neck – it took a while to get used to the tropical temperatures in the warehouse after being away from it for any short period of time. He watched Goyle in the scrying mirrors; the Slytherin boy was wide awake and staring rather panic-stricken at his surroundings. “And if you can get anymore names of known Death Eaters that would be helpful.”

Zabini nodded, considering his words. “We’ll see what we can do. Hermione, can you throw one of
Although Harry hated to admit it, he was knackered. The lack of sleep was starting to get to him, placing him in a perpetually exhausted state and the pepper-up potion was only serving to make his heart pound and his head a bit light. That was all good and fine for keeping him awake, but it didn’t do much for his tired brain.

He was seated in a chair across from Draco Malfoy, who sat upright in his transfigured bed; his one arm was chained to the headboard and the other arm was perpetually connected to the IV drip via magic since he remained resolute about not drinking until desperate.

“What else did the Dark Lord do when he visited your house this past summer?”

Malfoy’s head rested back against the concrete wall behind him. “I don’t know,” he groaned. “I think I told you everything.”

“You think. As soon as you’re certain, we’ll move on to a different subject,” Harry said with authority, ignoring his itchy nose underneath his Tom Riddle glamour. “Or would you prefer legilimency?”

Malfoy shook his head with a frown. “He spoke with Snape a lot.”

“Yes, we’ve been over this. What did he speak with Severus Snape about?”

“I told you! I have no idea!” He ran a hand over his sweaty brow. “They were in a locked and warded room.”

“You wouldn’t be a proper Slytherin if you didn’t know a little about what they were discussing,” Harry stated evenly.

Malfoy glared balefully. “There’s no possible way I could hear anything through the Dark Lord’s wards.”

“So that leaves you with word of mouth,” Harry pointed out. “Were there any rumours amongst his Death Eaters? Any that may indicate the Dark Lord’s plans for the war?”

Malfoy’s face scrunched up and his gaze averted to the floor. “Snape never discusses anything with us.”

“You’re lying, Draco,” Harry said in a way that made it sound like a threat. “He’s your godfather. He must have said something to you or your mother at least.”

Brows furrowed, Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “He was more concerned over trying to get in on my mission for the Dark Lord – trying to steal my glory!”

Harry smirked. “And if you had any ounce of intelligence, you would have traded information with him,” he said, thinking of what Daphne or Nott would have done in Malfoy’s shoes.
“Well maybe I’m not as smart as you think I am,” Malfoy’s tone was resentful and he pushed back the stray hair that had gotten into his face. It was a bit strange to see him without the usual gel slicking back his blonde tresses. They didn’t provide him with styling products after they let him shower and clean himself up in the tiny warehouse bathroom.

“Maybe,” Harry finally replied. “However, you’re still a Slytherin. Slytherins have a habit of getting their hands on any information that could prove useful.”

“Were you a Slytherin?” Malfoy countered.

“Yes, I was,” Harry lied easily.

“You’re despicable,” he muttered with a demure scoff. “Betraying your own kind.”

In the blink of an eye, Harry’s hand snapped forward, grabbing hold of Malfoy’s throat as he stood over the boy. “Our kind may be attracted to the Dark Arts, but that does not mean that all of us must join the Dark Lord.” He paused, pressing down where Daphne had instructed to when she walked him through this process, nearly cutting off Malfoy’s air supply. “You’re the despicable one, Draco; following a madman to your inevitable death for the chance at a sliver of glory.”

Malfoy heaved a gasp as Harry let go and the strangled redness that had formed in his cheeks started to fade. “It’s not like I had a choice!” he exclaimed, his voice rough and gravelly as though he wanted to cry but couldn’t.

Harry shook his head in disgust. “You did. And I bet you didn’t even put up a fight.”

The look on Malfoy’s face indicated that Harry had struck a nerve and he knew he wasn’t going to get much more information out of him for this session. He was tired of it anyway. What he needed most right now was a cooling charm, a giant glass of water, and some sleep.

Harry left the room without looking back at the blonde Slytherin, who was miserably curling in on himself against the wall with his arms around his knees. It caused the chain to scrape against the metallic headboard as Malfoy tugged at it, which Harry heard faintly before the door slammed shut. The detainment wards automatically clicked into place behind him.

Letting out an exhausted sigh, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the buzzing surface of the wards. Their magical energy caused his hair to tingle and stand on end.

“Are you having problems with your detainee?” he heard Astoria say and he opened her eyes to see her coming out of the kitchenette room with one of Crookshank’s kittens in her arms. The tiny cat batted at her shaggy shoulder-length hair playfully.

Harry shrugged. “I know when he’s going to go into useless-mode. There’s no helping him out of it.”

“From what I’ve seen, you’re very good with him.” She set the cat down on the floor when it clawed her neck, leaving a tiny scratch, and the kitten decided to attack her foot. “You could probably talk him through it with a bit of time.”

Shaking his head, Harry ran his fingers through his hair and stepped off of the door. “I’m too exhausted to try. Why don’t you go in there and talk him through it? Didn’t Daphne brief you on his
“She did, but I’m not the best interrogator. Don’t have the patience for whiny little brats like him.”

Astoria let out a breathy laugh. “I can’t believe that she even dated that one.”

Harry’s jaw clenched, memories of every single conversation about Malfoy that he had with Daphne flying through his head. “I don’t think you could call what they did ‘dating’,” he said stiffly, walking toward the control room.

Did Astoria even know about Daphne and Malfoy?

“I’m only being nice; if it were up to me, I’d put a bullet in each one of his legs and make him stand while I pulled them out with a pair of forceps,” she replied, her European lilt creeping into her words.

She definitely had a clue then.

Harry’s nose scrunched up in distaste, mostly due to the fact that he knew he wouldn’t stop her if she ever tried to do that to Malfoy. It was completely against his morals – and he wanted to be the better person, even if it was tempting to take an eye for an eye: punish him by forcing him into a blood ritual, assert injurious dominance and control and abuse him mercilessly. But of all the people who should have wanted to do that, it was Daphne, and she made it clear that she preferred a less torturous revenge. Something about it being more effective and satisfying – to keep him alive and afraid.

“So are you two together?” Astoria suddenly asked, which made Harry halt in his tracks in front of the door to the control room.

He looked back at her and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Ah,” she said, a knowing smirk bubbling up onto her lips. “Well, I’m sure she’ll come around eventually.”

“It’s more me than her,” Harry retorted, pushing the door open and wiping the smirk off of Astoria’s face.

Crookshank’s kitten got through the door before him and immediately ran to Hermione’s feet.

Daphne was standing by the chalkboard, taking notes on the interrogations with one hand – Nott and Zabini were still in the room with Goyle – and rubbing more dittany onto her wound with the other. Her stitches were gone; it was only temporary to stop the bleeding until the shops in Diagon Alley opened so she could go out and stock up on healing supplies.

Hermione immediately graced him with a cooling charm as he walked through the door and sat down. “I wish I could just be of age already so I could do my own damn cooling charms,” Harry muttered, yawning and pulling the fake wand out of his pocket. He never needed it with Malfoy, but he carried it anyway. Hermione liked to play on the safe side and nagged him if he forgot it.

Another wave of Hermione’s wand made the itchy glamour melt off of his face and he threw her a thankful grin, which she returned.

“I’ll take over for you,” he heard Astoria say behind him. “You and Harry should go home and get some rest. You both look dead on your feet.”
“I’ll come with,” Hermione said, closing her book, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daphne glance at her sharply.

“Still don’t trust me, Granger?”

Hermione’s lips pursed. “Not much, but better than before. You’re still going to have to give him a drop of your blood so he can get in and I want to make sure he makes it there safely. I also need a nap.”

“Yeah, fine,” Daphne conceded. “Whatever makes you happy.”

He’d almost forgotten about the blood ward that Daphne had on her house even though the two argued over it numerous times over the past week. What he understood was that the blood ward was put in place to bar entry from magical people, save for the few with Daphne’s blood in their system. Apparently the ward still allowed Muggles to enter and Daphne’s mum could have her friends and colleagues visit without experiencing any issues.

It seemed safe enough but, because of Hermione’s distrust, it took days before she relented enough to take a drop of Daphne’s blood so she could sleep in a proper bed. Comfort won out in the end and, begrudgingly, Harry had to admit that Zabini had a small part in it as well. He and Daphne hadn’t had the chance though, being so busy with Malfoy and often just passing out on the – occasionally transfigured – sofa in the kitchenette room.

Needle in hand, Daphne stood over him and pricked her finger, casually offering it to him. He had a feeling it wouldn’t be the last time he’d have to taste someone’s blood to get past a blood ward. It was a useful tool and with the war brewing…

Harry licked the droplet of blood clinging to Daphne’s index finger.

oOo

He could physically feel the blood ward surrounding Daphne’s house as soon as they Apparated across it. It was a heavy sort of energy that weighed him down and made the tips of his fingers quiver. A lot of power went into it; he could practically taste it as he stumbled when they landed. The air was thankfully a lot warmer than the outdoor Apparation point they used at the warehouse, but a hell of a lot colder than he was used to and he felt cold even in his jacket.

After straightening himself out, Harry’s brows rose as he surveyed the inside of Daphne’s house – it was nothing at all like he thought it would be. From his observations, he assumed most Slytherins were rich bastards and the way that Daphne threw money around, he thought it was the same for her. However, the house she lived in was quaint… to say the least – the whole place had a sense of decay about it, actually – from the peeling wallpaper to the stained linoleum and carpet on the floor. It was also slightly crooked from the building settling and the interior hadn’t been updated much since the 60’s. Gaudy patterns, faded garish colours, and paisley littered every surface.

“Is your mother home?” Hermione said, peering through a doorway that led to the kitchen. “Oh, she’s probably at work… I was hoping to ask her if I could borrow a few of her books.”
Daphne let out a short sardonic laugh. “Of course you’ve met my mother, Granger. That’s so you.”

“Blaise introduced me,” Hermione retorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Because Blaise thinks with his cock,” Daphne said with a smirk, tugging at Harry’s arm to pull him toward the stairs. “Come on, bedroom’s this way.”

Hermione trailed along behind them up the stairs. “Blaise may have his faults, but you can’t say that he’s being exceedingly courteous to me only because his goal is to sleep with me – which he hasn’t, for your information.”

“Maybe not ‘goal’, but I’m pretty sure that at least half of what he does is because he wants to sleep with you. It’s his Modus Operandi.”

The entire subject of their conversation made Harry want to both bleach his brain and hex Zabini’s balls off at the same time.

Scoffing, Hermione stared shrewdly at Daphne’s back. “Like half of what you do is because you want to sleep with Harry?”

Harry’s brows furrowed and he glanced between the two girls who had stopped to argue on the landing of the stairs.

“That’s not entirely true,” Daphne contradicted, her voice matter-of-fact. She tugged off her cloak and threw it over her arm. “Most of what I do is self-motivated and spawns from self-interests. If it helps Harry and makes him want to sleep with me, that’s a benefit, but it’s far from the actual goal.”

“Oi, I’m right bloody here, you know,” Harry interrupted before this could go any further. Hermione’s hair was starting to puff up like it always did when she got angry. “Merlin, do you two do anything but argue?”

Well, he could admit that they did, on a rare occasion. Usually Daphne and Hermione put aside their differences when it came to certain academics – like teaching each other spells, pinning each other down with legilimency, and going over wards. However, their arguing was insane sometimes, and over the most pointless things too: Earl Grey vs. chai tea, where to put the numerous cat beds and litter boxes, are those bin bags biodegradable? ‘No, that spell makes the tea taste funny, Granger! Use this one.’ And Harry had spent most of his time at the warehouse with Daphne alone or with Draco alone.

Put the two in a room together for a second and one says an opinion, all of a sudden it was like the harpies had descended to rain hell down on all of them.

“But arguing with her is fun,” Daphne said, her eyebrow peaked.

“Speak for yourself,” Hermione muttered, glaring at the Slytherin girl.

“I was.”

“Obviously…”

“Don’t sound so condescending; you like a good debate – practically thrive on it.”
“I would, given a proper opponent.”

“Are you insulting my arguments, Granger? They’re completely legitimate.”

“Ha! Legitimate. I didn’t know that was what they were calling ‘biased’ nowadays.”

“Pot to bloody kettle, my dear Gryffindor.”

“Enough!” Harry shouted with a huff of a sigh, throwing his hands up exasperatedly. They were arguing about arguing! “I’m too knackered to deal with you two right now. I just need a bed and maybe a pillow. Which door leads to one?” He gestured down the corridor which led to another set of stairs at the end of the hall. There were three painted wood doors; two on one side and one on the other.

He was directed to Daphne’s room, the first door on the left, and Daphne trailed inside the room behind him; Hermione muttered, “I’m going to go sleep in the guest room,” as she passed.

What struck him about Daphne’s room as he glanced about it was how much it fit her. There was a distinct lack of furniture, consisting of a small bed with a quilt, a wardrobe, and a bookshelf, which had a stereo system, an ashtray, and a rotary phone on top of it. Otherwise, the walls were completely bare and there wasn’t even a rug covering the hard wood floor. It was very utilitarian, as if she only had things she used – no frivolities. His eyes wandered from Daphne to the open door of the wardrobe, which had a tattered red USSR flag bunched up and hung on the inside of it, and his brow quirked.

Maybe there was one frivolity.

“You do know that the Soviet Union fell a few years ago,” Harry stated dryly, as she started stripping off her outer clothes and shoved them into the wardrobe. A nice, comforting warming charm spread throughout the room with a wave of her wand.

Daphne gave a laugh and followed his gaze. “Yeah, I do. This was a present from my grandfather,” she explained. “He likes to constantly remind me of where our family came from – the sacrifices they’ve had to make during the Cold War and all that nationalist nonsense.”

Harry folded up his shirt and set it next to hers in the nearly-empty wardrobe. “What kind of sacrifices?” He thought back to what he knew about the Cold War and learned during primary school, but it wasn’t much. He could barely remember any of it.

Shrugging, Daphne moved past him to take a seat on her bed, lighting up a half-smoked cigarette and opening the bottle of healing potion to rub onto her wound. “Well… basically, my grandfather defected and snuck his family out of the country. He was a scientist at Biopreparat, a facility that produced biological weapons – nasty stuff like smallpox and Marburg.”

She set the vial of healing potion on the shelf next to her bed. “He thought it was disgusting what they were doing and that his government thought that it was more important to feed lab monkeys who were destined to die from these weapons better than its own people. At one point, some people were encouraged to drink cooking oil so they didn’t starve to death and that’s just…” She shook her head, letting out a long breath full of smoke.

Stripped down to his boxers, Harry tiredly took a seat next to her and laid back against the pillows. He listened as she continued, looking up at him with a smirk, “So he snuck his family out of the
country and traded all of the information he knew about the Soviet Union’s biological weapons program for a better life here. And the British were very good to him; they gave him a home, a job, a new identity – Greengrass. I’m kind of glad for that. Disregarding patronymics, I’d be Daphne Megrez Grebenshchikova if they didn’t.”

Harry snorted. “That’s a mouthful.”

“Try spelling it,” Daphne wryly replied, stubbing out her cigarette, lying next to him, and burrowing herself into the blankets.

“So that’s why you know… Russian?” Harry asked after a bout of silence, thinking back to those vocabulary books she had with her a few weeks ago and watching her talk to Sanguini.

“Rusty non-fluent Russian,” he heard Daphne mumble from under the quilt. She peeked up at him through the folds. “My grandmother taught me and Astoria. She used to smack us with her wooden spoon when we mis-conjugated. I’ll never be able to look at wooden spoons the same again.”

“Harsh.” Harry joined her under the quilt, relaxing into the softness of the mattress. It was so comfortable and warm that he was afraid if he closed his eyes for too long he’d fall asleep.

“It worked though,” she muttered, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. He rested his arm over her waist. “Tired?”

Just the word ‘tired’ was making him yawn. “Knackered.”

“Sleep.” He could feel her breath against his skin as she spoke. “I can tell you all about my fucked up family tomorrow if you want.”

“I’d like that.”

Closing his eyes, he wasn’t sure if he said that aloud or not before sleep overtook him. But sleep was like blinking, he was so exhausted. In one second it was mid-afternoon and in the next, it was morning – the sun cascading through the windows as dawn broke.

Harry’s eyes snapped open when he heard a loud noise and he groped for his glasses – Daphne must have taken them off of him when they fell asleep. He found them next to the stereo and nearly called out, ‘Daphne?’ as he was putting them on, but the words died in his throat.

Standing next to her wardrobe, Daphne pulled a pair of deep blue knickers off the shelf and slid them up her legs; Harry couldn’t help himself from trailing his eyes along their path and over every inch of bare skin that he could see. She brushed her fingers through her hair and piled it on top of her head with a clip, revealing even more skin.

Even with the faint bruises and injuries fading to scars, she looked exquisite.

Week’s worth of built up fantasies flashed behind his eyelids every time he blinked and he nearly touched himself to relieve the tension as he stared at the curve of her breasts, remembering how they fit so nicely in his hands. How they bounced – and how her legs felt, wrapped tightly around him as he…

Daphne reached up and grabbed her bra off the hook on the inside of her wardrobe and Harry swallowed thickly, squashing away the reluctance that usually welled up at this point.
“Leave it off,” he said, feeling bold, his voice rough from sleep.

Raising her eyebrows, Daphne turned toward him, but then her lips curled into a playful grin as she held the bra up between her fingers with a questioning nod toward the offending garment. He could read the blatant question in her eyes: ‘You mean this?’

Harry sat up, his feet dangling over the side of Daphne’s bed as he threw off the stifling blanket and gave her a nod. The cool air in the room hit him, sobering him just a bit. She had tossed the bra aside with a shrug, an amused expression on her face as she stalked toward him.

His stomach did an exhilarated flip and he licked his lips. “Take those off as well,” he directed, wondering if she would since she was so compliant about the bra. His eyes glanced down at her knickers, staring unabashedly at her cloth covered quim.

“Give me one good reason and I’ll let you take them off for me,” she drawled lightly, stopping just in front of him, her legs brushing his knees. He was eyelevel with her ribs and wanted nothing more than to lick a trail along her skin, from the waistband of her knickers to the pulse at her neck; to kiss every single bruise and scrape, and suck over the freckles on her chest.

If there was one thing he couldn’t deny, it was that he couldn’t help himself when it came to her – he couldn’t possibly stay away from her, no matter how hard he tried to push back his errant thoughts. She was manipulative, immoral, evasive… dangerous even. He knew that. He wasn’t sure what it was that attracted him to her, but he knew it was an attraction that went much deeper than physical. Maybe he couldn’t admit to himself that – even though she was all those things – he secretly enjoyed it all.

And maybe he was mental for enjoying it.

Either way, he still wasn’t sure what he wanted. Definitely not a relationship. But… this. This was how everything started. No emotions involved. That was exactly what he needed. They weren’t close enough for anything else. Not yet.

*Give me one good reason…*

‘*We’re done,*’ he distinctly remembered her saying in his dorm.

“We’re not done, but this doesn’t mean anything,” he articulated slowly, looking up at her with intent and pushing his fingers underneath the band of her knickers to tug them down her legs.

Swiftly pulling her down onto his lap to kiss her fiercely, he thought he may have caught her by surprise. Her knickers were caught around her ankles, stretching as she straddled him, and he could feel her smirk against his kiss. His glasses pressed painfully against the bridge of his nose as he scraped his teeth over her lower lip and possessively sucked it into his mouth, a low growl building in the back of his throat.

His hands trailed over her skin as she threaded her fingers through his hair and tugged, sucking at his tongue and making his toes curl. He was all sensation, uncaring about their mixed morning breath as he groped her arse and ground himself up against her. Even through the fabric of his boxers, it felt glorious. His nerve endings were pulled taut, begging him for more.

Daphne scraped her nails down his chest, stroking him roughly through his boxers as she moaned
into his mouth. Not wanting to end this too soon, Harry caught her wrists in his hands and pressed her over onto the bed, settling himself between her legs. Her chest swelled as she panted unequally, smiling up at him, her lips swollen and red.

Gaining a bit more control over himself, he bent his head down to devour her neck, licking and sucking at all the spots that he knew made her moan. He felt her toes hook into the waistband of his boxers, trying to slide them down, and he chuckled against the skin of her throat.

“Eager?” he whispered breathily into her ear, nipping at her earlobe.

“Not the only one.”

“Mhm.” Harry rubbed himself against her.

“Bloody hell. If you don’t fuck me right now, I’m going to hex your bollocks off.”

He smiled against her skin and softly bit at her pulse, causing her to let out a sharp shuddering breath. “You wouldn’t do that,” he said, letting go of her wrists and pulling back to look at her. He licked his lips. “You like them too much.”

“Bastard,” she muttered teasingly, practically ripping his boxers off as she shoved them down his legs.

“Gorgeous,” he returned in the same tone, sucking along her jaw to her mouth. She dug her heels into his arse, rubbing up against him with a moan.

He pulled away again, moving down a bit to grab at her thighs, avoiding her partially-healed injury. He pushed them apart, wide and open. “Patience,” he murmured and she glared at him, her eyes shining hungrily. It made his spine tingle thrillingly and he involuntarily shuddered.

“She should have never taught you how to control your emoti– oh god,” she gasped, arching.

Harry latched his mouth over her nipple and sucked hard, palming her other breast with his hand. He hummed contentedly against her skin as he felt her nails sharply scrape up his back, making his cock twitch and impossibly harden even further.

Two can play that game, he thought. His hand trailed over the inside of her uninjured thigh, slowly making its way up. He teased over her slit before he pushed a finger in and curled it, rubbing against that spot inside her that always made her clench around him greedily.

Licking at the freckles between her breasts, he watched her throw her head back and moan. Merlin, she was maddening. Pushing back his urgent need to get inside her, he licked a wet trail down her stomach, sucking just below her navel, which made her dig her fingers into his messy tangled hair. He wanted to make her scream and desperately wanted to try something new that he’d been curious about ever since Dean mentioned it not long after he met Daphne.

With things getting in the way at Hogwarts whenever he and Daphne met, there was never enough time for too much foreplay. He paused over her, his lips centimeters from her clit as he looked up at her half-lidded expression. Letting out a breath, he languidly licked the flat of his tongue over her, circling the tip of his tongue against her clit in the way that she liked when he rubbed her with his fingers. He added another finger inside her and rubbed at that spot at the same pace, making her tighten even more around them and writhe and moan so loud it was almost a scream.
If she wasn’t painfully grasping at his hair, he swore he would have come all over the sheets by now. Messily, he sucked at her clit, pressing his fingers harder, rubbing mercilessly and moaning against her when she growled. She was soaking wet, nearly dripping down his fingers. Harry smiled against her cunt, kissing her pulsing clit one last time before pulling his fingers out and spreading her come over his cock, making sure she was watching.

He kissed the flushed skin over her neck, wrapping her long legs around him and sheathing himself inside her; his eyes rolled to the back of his head as he slowly stretched her. Fuck, she was still pulsing.

He wasn’t going to last long at all.

Naked Snape flitted into his mind, but it didn’t do much when he was buried this deep and she was practically milking his cock as she clenched over and over, meeting his hard thrusts – raking her nails over his shoulders. She pulled his head down, nipping at that spot below his ear in a way that made his toes curl. He groaned roughly, increasing his pace as she marked him. He reached down to furiously rub her oversensitive flesh.

As if she could tell he was close, Daphne breathed jaggedly against his ear, gruffly whispering, “Don’t you dare come.” She trailed the tip of her tongue over the shell of his ear. “I’ll suck it off your cock after if you get me off first.”

_Fucking hell._

Growling through his teeth, he pounded into her harder – fucking her into the mattress – causing his glasses to go askew. He bit his lip, nearly drawing blood. Squeezing his eyes shut, he felt them water as he frantically held back. She was going to be the death of him. The bedframe banged against the wall, quaking underneath them, and he felt her bite into his shoulder, forcing his orgasm from him as she tightened around his cock so hard he could barely move. He gripped her, thinking he was going to pass out any second now. The edges of his vision went black for a moment and he felt all of the muscles in his body seize at the sensation. As she sucked ruthlessly, it felt both painful and almost as if he was going to come all over again at the same time. All of the air left his lungs as he moaned loudly, feeling the tip of his cock touch the back of her throat. She doubled her efforts, sucking even harder, and his glasses fell off his face, dangling from his ear as he jerked uncontrollably.

It hurt so bad but it felt so fucking good. Staring down at her blurry form, his mouth was caught in a breathless sob of too much feeling – too many feelings. He grasped at the bed sheets, nearly tearing them. Just as he thought he was going to go mad, air flooded his lungs and she pulled away from him, his cock slipping out of her mouth slowly.

He shoved his glasses back on with shaking hands and watched her licked her lips, an overly-pleased grin pulling at them. Her dilated blue eyes trailed over his skin until she met his gaze.

Letting out a light satisfied sigh, she leaned over his torso toward the bedside table and grabbed her silver case and lighter.

They lit their cigarettes, not saying a word. Daphne still straddled his thighs and he leaned back
against the bunched up pillows behind him, not taking his eyes away from her. The silence between them felt charged. He wanted to remember this moment for the rest of his life, burn it into his brain so he never forgot a second of it. He could still taste her on his lips and he ran the tip of his tongue along the seam of them before taking a drag off his cigarette.

“What are you thinking?” Harry asked, breaking the silence. Smoke curled from his mouth as he spoke.

Blinking at the question, Daphne’s grin widened. “You’ve got a bit of come on your glasses.”

“Oh.” Harry took them off, looking around for his boxers to wipe them on, but Daphne already had out her wand and did a quick *evanesce*. “Thanks.”

“I was thinking we should get back to the warehouse, actually,” Daphne said, staring at her stereo, which was similar to the one they were now using on Goyle for sensory overload. “I want to see how the *We Know All* joint questioning approach is going – see how they’re doing.”

Daphne climbed off of him and padded over to the wardrobe, plucking her knickers off the floor with her toes as she went. They got dressed silently and headed out the door, only to run into Hermione waiting for them outside.

“Do you two even know how to perform a silencing charm?” she asked, raising an eyebrow and crossing her arms over her chest. A flush crept up Harry’s neck.

“Do you make it a habit of loitering outside of places where people are fucking?” Daphne countered, mirroring the Gryffindor girl’s stance.

Hermione spluttered. “No! I was being courteous and waiting for you to be done. You’re rather lucky as well. Your mother left for work not five minutes before you started making that racket.”

*That would have been mortifying.*

“Eh. It’s not like she would care all that much,” Daphne said with a shrug. “Did you get the books you were after?”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded to her armful of Muggle texts. “She had a whacking load of chemistry and physics, though her collection on psychology was a bit weak compared to my parents’.”

“Obviously. She’s an industrial chemist, not a dentist,” Daphne muttered, holding out her hand to both of them, which they took.

They spun off, being twisted and squeezed endlessly through a long tube, headed toward the stifling hot warehouse.

OoO

“There’s a rumour that the Dark Lord is preparing to take the Ministry soon,” Goyle’s voice drifted gruffly from the one-way baby monitor.
It had taken them days to get to this point of openness. Nott and Zabini may have been persistent in their interrogation, but it was Nott’s ‘nice’ approach and – surprisingly – Astoria who had finally gotten to the boy in the end. Goyle’s resistance was weak at best and he was readily seduced by pleasantries and comforts and all of the baked goods that Astoria brought from home on her visits to the warehouse after work.

She may not have been a good interrogator, but she knew her way around using incentives to get what she wanted. She utilized positive reinforcement techniques – much like the ones she used on her twins – rewarding Goyle when he told them what they wanted and denying him the reward when he refused.

“Would you like another slice of cake, Gregory?” Astoria asked. Being a Muggle and one of the people who were to take care of Goyle and Malfoy after they all left for their proper holidays, she remained unglamoured.

Cutting through the rich dark chocolate pastry sitting between her and Nott, she set it onto a plate with a plastic fork.

“Yes, thank you, Miss Demirović,” Goyle said politely, staring hungrily at the dessert as it was slid to him across the table, to which the Slytherin boy was chained.

Since the name ‘Astoria Greengrass’ was an obvious giveaway as to who had a hand in capturing the two Slytherin Death Eaters, it was Daphne’s idea for Astoria to take the surname of her dead fiancé in the interrogation room. Astoria wasn’t exactly pleased with it - she apparently duped her late ex-fiancé into the engagement and, eventually, she got close enough to him to get her hands on a lighter, a pack of cigarettes, and a bottle of vodka. During her escape from the compound she was kept at in Bosnia, she tied him to a chair and murdered him in the fire she started to facilitate said escape. So, to say that she was *fond* of the name ‘Demirović’ was an overstatement.

“And how is the Dark Lord planning to take the Ministry?” Nott asked, resting his elbows on the table and leaning closer to Goyle. He was glamoured as a long-haired blonde bloke with pale blue eyes and a slightly ridiculous 70’s-style mustache.

“I don’t know,” Goyle mumbled through a mouthful of cake. “I mean, I’ve heard he has spies – you know, like *moles* – everywhere. And Yaxley told my dad that we’ve the Aurors in our pocket ever since they got rid of that Bones woman. That’s as good a start as any – take away the Aurors. Right?” He paused, looking over at Astoria. “Can I have another glass of milk with this?”

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“Of course. I’ll go get that for you,” she said, getting up from her seat.

In the control room, Harry was watching the interrogation out of the corner of his eye, listening intently as he wrote down the information on the blackboard under the heading of ‘Goyle’. His list of intel was starting to reach the length of Malfoy’s list. They had the updated information on the siege, which hadn’t changed much. They learned that Voldemort was very displeased with Malfoy being missing – he thought that the boy ran away and was in hiding. Narcissa was also going mental with worry searching for him; she was currently travelling around, checking the property of every acquaintance and friend in Europe, which the Dark Lord ‘graciously’ allowed. Voldemort wanted to punish Malfoy for fleeing and defying his orders so finding the blonde Slytherin suited *him* just fine.

Nevertheless, in Malfoy’s stead, Voldemort put Stephen Cornfoot – a pureblooded Ravenclaw in Harry’s year – up to the task of fixing the vanishing cabinet. Goyle and Cornfoot were marked and inducted into the Death Eaters circle on the same night. Unfortunately, there was no talk of who was
going to kill Dumbledore; that was left out of Goyle’s siege plans and Dumbledore wasn’t even mentioned. When asked about Dumbledore, Goyle simply shrugged and said, ‘I don’t know. Stephen wants to let the other Death Eaters in when he’s away. Should be easy; Dumbledore’s been gone an awful lot this year.’

But it was strange because Malfoy had maintained that he was instructed to kill Dumbledore specifically – wouldn’t Voldemort find someone else suitable for the task? Why not Cornfoot? From listening to Goyle, Harry was beginning to consider it as a complete lie – it was preposterous that Voldemort would entrust someone so young to kill the great and powerful Albus Dumbledore. Harry thought that Voldemort would want to do it himself; yet, the blonde Slytherin was irrepressibly insistent about it. That insistence made Harry hold back on deciding if it was true or not. After all, it was very possible that Voldemort didn’t trust Goyle or Cornfoot with information about murdering Dumbledore.

In secret, the Dark Lord could have pulled one of the other Death Eaters involved in the siege aside and instructed them to do it.

“Are you suggesting that Scrimgeour’s replacement for Amelia Bones as the Head of the Auror Department is a mole?” Harry heard Nott ask and he paused, chalk-in-hand, listening more intently.

“Dunno.” Goyle shrugged, licking the chocolate ganache frosting off of his plastic fork. “Yaxley’s the one handling the Aurors.”

“As you’ve implied,” Nott responded patiently. “Have you seen Gawain Robards at any of the Death Eater gatherings you’ve been to?”

“Robards?” Goyle shook his head, his brows furrowing. “No – never heard of him.”

Harry wrote down, ‘Ask Malfoy about Gawain Robards,’ in another section of the blackboard, under the heading of ‘Information to Gather’.

“Do you know of any other moles that the Dark Lord has placed in the Auror office?”

“I already told you about Yaxley,” Goyle said, spooning more cake into his mouth.

Nott persevered, “Anyone else?”

“Some bloke named Thicknesse maybe? But I don’t know much about him. Yaxley’s mates with him – they work at the Auror office together.”

Writing down the information on the blackboard, Harry grabbed his biro and added ‘Thicknesse’ to his list of ‘possible MLE moles’ to ask Remus, Tonks, and Mr. Weasley about during his normal Christmas hols.

“Is there anyone else who Yaxley associates with from the Auror office?”

“Well, there’s Octavius Gibbon and Yaxley’s partner, Jerimiah Plottker, but Plottker’s a mudblood – doubt he’d be a mole.”

Harry agreed, but wrote down the information anyway. Gibbon was already mentioned as a person who was to take part in the Hogwarts siege, so it was no surprise when he was mentioned as a mole.
Astoria came back into Goyle’s interrogation room with a glass of milk and a plateful of blueberry cobbler just as Harry heard Daphne and Hermione enter the warehouse corridor from outside. Those two had spent the last couple hours taking Astoria’s twin boys – Alex and Anatoli – to the pet store for more supplies and to help pick out collars for all of the bloody cats. There were probably six of them, not including Crookshanks. The kittens seemed to be everywhere outside of the interrogation rooms, causing trouble, clawing at the sofa in the room with the kitchenette – upon which Zabini was sleeping – and running around people’s feet as they walked. Crookshanks did his best to corral them, but it was a weak effort. Sometimes Harry swore that the half-kneazel was encouraging his kittens to be rambunctious little troublemakers.

“Have you heard any other rumours of the Dark Lord’s move on the Ministry?” Nott asked after Goyle gulped down a quarter of the milk and went back to his cake.

“Not really,” Goyle said, wiping his mouth off with the back of his wrist and smearing chocolate everywhere. “I think they want to take Hogwarts first before they move onto taking the Ministry. There’s more talk of that since the vanishing cabinet’s almost fixed.”

“What made you think that they won’t take the Ministry first?” Nott inquired slowly. “You did say that they have the Aurors in their pocket – why would they wait?”

“Dunno.” Goyle shrugged, scraping off the last bits of chocolate cake on his plate and eyeing the plate of cobbler that Astoria had sitting next to her. “I wouldn’t wait if I were them, but the Dark Lord wants Hogwarts.”

“Yes, but why does he want Hogwarts?” Astoria jumped into the interrogation, impatiently running her fingers through her hair.

“Maybe he wants it as his new headquarters. He kept threatening Draco’s dad about the peacocks during the meeting. Maybe he doesn’t like peacocks.”

Harry snorted. Merlin, Goyle could be ridiculously thick. Peacocks? Honestly? Voldemort would just kill them all if he didn’t like them.

But… wait, wasn’t Lucius Malfoy supposed to be in Azkaban? He hadn’t heard anything about an Azkaban breakout in the Daily Prophet – not that he trusted the bloody paper to print anything useful. ‘Stan Shunpike, Death Eater’. Yeah, right. It was a bloody injustice what Scrimgeour was doing. Perhaps he wanted to keep the breakout quiet. Either way, Harry was going to ask Mr. Weasley about it.

Nott seemed to have the same train of thought as Harry, asking, “So Lucius Malfoy broke out of Azkaban?”

“Yeah – they all did, I think,” Goyle replied, sliding aside his empty plate. “After the Dark Lord took the Dementors with him, they were being guarded by little runts - dad said he crushed this Auror bloke’s skull in and stole his wand. Probably a mudblood.”

“Right,” Nott commented dryly, which flew straight over Goyle’s head. “Do you know where the Dark Lord is keeping the Dementors?”

“No,” Goyle shook his head. “Snape might, though.”

After adding a note of that onto his parchment of intel he was bringing with him on his normal
holidays, Harry quickly scrawled it onto the blackboard – accidentally in biro first, not paying attention. “Fuck,” he breathed, licking his finger and wiping it off the board. He wrote it out in chalk this time, skipping over the wet bit of blackboard.

“Would you like some blueberry cobbler to finish off your milk?” Astoria inquired, pressing the dessert closer to him.

“Oh, yeah. Your cobbler’s almost as good as my mum’s,” Goyle muttered, digging into the crumbly crust with his plastic fork.

Harry had never thought he’d meet someone with a bigger stomach than Ron, or even Dudley, but Goyle literally took the bloody cake – the whole cake. Yesterday, Hermione started worrying that they were going to rot the teeth out of his head during the interrogation, after Goyle had consumed an entire treacle tart, the giant angel food cake with macerated strawberries and whipped cream, and most of the chocolate cream pie. In one sitting. Goyle was a bottomless pit when it came to sweets. Even Muggle sweets, when Astoria brought them in this morning – unwrapped in a mound on a plate. It made Hermione cringe watching him devour it all.

Daphne, Nott, and Zabini were less shocked by Goyle’s appetite, of course, being in the same house. They had to sit at the same table during meals for the past six years. To them, this was normal.

Faintly, Harry heard Daphne speaking outside the door to the control room, “Now, we’re going to go outside and do the spinny thing to take you to your Auntie’s, okay?” There were muffled cheers from Astoria’s twins and an excited pattering of footsteps as they exited the warehouse.

Hermione walked through the control room door, carrying two collars to place on the kittens that were rolling around in the middle of the floor with a balled up piece of parchment. “How’s it going with Goyle?” she asked.

“Pretty good. I think he’s gotten through most of what we can use, though. He knew more than I expected,” Harry said, turning toward her.

In Goyle’s interrogation room, Nott and Astoria were trying to pry more from Goyle, but his answers were turning a bit useless. Harry kept an ear out for anything new while he spoke. “How was it with the twins?”

“They’re adorable – Greengrass has them thinking we’re magicians. And naturally, they want kittens. I’d say yes, but I don’t know how Astoria would feel about it. They are part kneazel.”

“Kneazels aren’t dangerous,” Harry muttered, writing down another name that Goyle mentioned – an Unspeakable named Rigoberto Dolen: possible Department of Mysteries mole. He was friends with Goyle’s mother.

“Generally, no, but they can be aggressive.”

“Not when bred with cats,” Harry responded a bit distractedly, thinking back to Care of Magical Creatures when Hagrid brought in purebred kneazels and one of them almost bit his finger off.

“Still…” Hermione stood behind him, reading over his shoulder. “Goyle said they’re going to take over the Ministry?” she asked in alarm. “Did he mention when?”

“No. Keeps saying they’re going to do it after they siege Hogwarts.”
“Oh.” Her lips parted and she got a faraway look in her eyes as she stared at the blackboard. It was as if her mind was absorbing all of the new data collected and Harry could physically see her analyzing it in her mind. “That’s not good…”

“How so?” he questioned, his brows furrowed.

“Erm – Voldemort has the Aurors – that’s probably true. They’ve been arresting strange people lately, according to the Prophet. But, anyway, that’s not the Ministry’s only defense. They have Unspeakables and other employees who are fully capable of defending.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, nodding. That’s why he wasn’t so worried about the Ministry falling any time soon. They’d need more than the Aurors in their pocket. “What’s your point?”

Looking up at him, Hermione’s brows creased in the centre as she worried at her lower lip. “Well… a lot of these people have kids who go to Hogwarts – most of them, I’d wager. It would be… advantageous to take Hogwarts first.”

Harry’s stomach dropped and all of the air poured from his lungs as he realized what she was saying. “He wants hostages,” he muttered breathlessly.

“That’s what it looks like.”

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
They all were seated around the control room. An extra chair was conjured to accommodate Astoria, who was sitting off to the side of the table and eating the only bit of cake left after they were through with Goyle. Harry grabbed his red case, plucked out a cigarette, and lit it with Daphne’s gold lighter. He was going to need it for this discussion.

“How Graham gotten back to you on the Vanishing Cabinet?” Nott asked, pushing his glasses up his nose and looking over at Daphne.

“Mhm.” Daphne was still stripping off her jeans and shoes; she had just gotten back from returning Uncle Vernon’s newly-unsilenced car, which was triple-checked to make sure it was just as it was when they got it. “He got the room to show it was in there. Shouldn’t be any trouble getting to it if we need.”

“I think we should destroy it before any of this can happen,” Hermione muttered, running her fingers through her bushy hair, which was radiating magical energy ever since they came to the realization as to why Voldemort wanted Hogwarts.

Harry partially agreed with her suggestion, but it was all more complicated now. As soon as Malfoy revealed it, Harry wanted to destroy it more than anything; however, after having a week to think about it and having more insight on the situation, he wasn’t so certain.

“You know, we could capture a lot of Death Eaters – members of his inner circle – if we don’t destroy it,” Harry replied, exhaling a breath full of smoke. “We have ample information about the plan. I think that, if we round up the Order and the DA once Cornfoot gets it fixed, we could take them all out. If we destroyed it, we wouldn’t be able to do that.”

“Decent plan – I’m in for a Death Eater takedown,” Daphne said, leaning back in her chair and draping her arm over it. “I mean, if we destroy it, we also wouldn’t know what else the Dark Lord
has up his sleeve. When the Vanishing Cabinet doesn’t work for him, he’ll obviously still try to siege Hogwarts – use a signature duplication potion, secret passages, blow open the front gates; God knows what. It would make everything we’ve done here pointless.”

“It may sound like a good plan and all, but think of what you’re suggesting,” Hermione countered, turning fiercely toward the Slytherin girl. “We’d be knowingly allowing Death Eaters to enter the castle – allowing dangerous people to enter a school full of children. There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t, Granger,” Daphne muttered ruefully with a discreet roll of her eyes. “We’re pretty much fucked in the ‘choice department’.”

“And we’ll be prepared for the Death Eaters since we know what’s happening,” Harry added. “Like Daph said, Voldemort will end up doing something else if this doesn’t work for him and we won’t be prepared for that. This is a better option.”

Straightening out her bra strap, Hermione bit her lip. “I still don’t like it.”

“So what’s the immediate plan then?” Nott asked, staring at Harry with an excited glint in his eyes. “Keep a close watch on Cornfoot and track his progress?”

“Seems like the best option,” Harry said, shrugging a shoulder, feeling a bit drained at the thought. The Marauders Map would marginally help. It was too bad that the Room of Requirement didn’t show up on the bloody thing.

“I know a friend of a friend who might be able to assist us with that,” Daphne pitched in, shrugging and glancing toward Zabini. “You’re still on talking-terms with Montague, right?”

“Oh, I’m the friend, I take it?” Zabini asked, his lips curving into a smirk. “I haven’t talked to Sylvia since November, but we parted ways amicably.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed toward the dark Slytherin boy; Harry knew that look all too well – the Lavender Brown stare of death. He’d never pegged Hermione to be such a jealous person before, but she definitely was.

Daphne’s brow rose. “Do you think she’ll be cooperative?”

“Probably. If not, she’s easily bribed.”

“That’s good. I’ll soften her up with something from Gabriel Enchant. What’s her cloak size?” she asked, grabbing a pen from the centre of the table and writing something down on a piece of parchment.

“What are you two going on about?” Nott interrupted, fiddling with the edge of the Sortilege Manual in his lap. He guarded that bloody document with his life.

“Montague’s a Ravenclaw,” Daphne explained with a wave of her hand. “She’s best friends with Dahlia Runcorn – Cornfoot’s girlfriend. She could be useful.”

Nott stared at her as if she had just spouted four heads. “I could have sworn that Cornfoot was into blokes – he always does the ‘once over’ to Blaise in Charms.”

“I did not need to know that,” Zabini muttered. Then he said quickly, glancing over at Daphne’s
parchment note, “Er - I think she’s a size six.”

Hermione’s teeth audibly gnashed together and Harry pursed his lips to keep himself from laughing.

“Thanks. And I really don’t think Cornfoot’s gay, Theo – I’ve heard that he and Dahlia were caught snogging in the Astronomy tower a few weeks ago and Padma Patil is pretty good at delivering accurate rumours.” Daphne snorted, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Wish I could say the same about her sister.”

“Okay, so,” Harry cut in. “New plan – we keep close watch on Cornfoot in every way we can think of and track his progress on the cabinet. Yes?”

“What are you going to do about the Ministry moles?” Astoria asked, setting her empty plate on the table.

“I’m going to talk to a few people I know who work in the Ministry who I trust.” Harry bit the inside of his cheek, thinking. “They might be able to help if I point out who the moles are – keep close watch and maybe implicate them?”

“Er – how exactly are you going to explain to them how you got that information?” Hermione inquired, her brows furrowing uncertainly.

Taking a drag off his cigarette, Harry shrugged again. “I haven’t figured that part out yet. Any bright ideas?”

“You could use me,” Daphne offered, reaching across the table toward Astoria’s pack of Davidoffs. “I’m a Slytherin – a trusted one that you’re ‘dating’ and I offered you some information that I overheard.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s dodgy. You’re not very trustable.”

The two glared at each other from across the table.

“How about you say that you’ve made some new allies in other houses who are good at getting their hands on information and leave it at that?” Nott suggested. “Not only is it true, but it’s vague enough that it doesn’t incriminate us and what we’re doing.”

“That’s not bad actually,” Zabini commented, moving over to the mini refrigerator to fetch a drink.

Harry vaguely nodded, mulling it over in his mind – imagining the conversation between him and Mr. Weasley and possibly Tonks and Remus. He had a feeling it was going to be extremely difficult convincing them of what they’d gathered from Malfoy and Goyle. It was too early to tell them about the siege, but the moles… Nott’s excuse was the best he could think of to justify the information.

“I could back up your accusations if you need me to – once I get to the Burrow. I’ll only be at my parents only for a couple of days,” Hermione offered. Harry nodded toward her thankfully.

“Alright. Sorted,” Daphne muttered, flicking her wand to light her cigarette and looking around the room. “I can’t believe we’re leaving this place tomorrow. Feels like we’ve been here forever.”

“That’s because we haven’t gotten much sleep in the past two weeks,” Hermione sardonically intoned and they all shared small smiles and short huffs of laughter.
It was a strange way to bond – spending two weeks in a stifling hot warehouse in Muggle London, interrogating two teenaged Death Eaters – but Harry felt that it was a silver lining to the war, in some way; that a common enemy could bring together an unlikely group of Slytherins and Gryffindors. And a Muggle.

It gave him a small glimpse of hope for the future and made him feel a lot less alone in his struggles, as if the weight of the Wizarding world was just a bit more bearable.

OoO

During his last night with Daphne, he lost count how many times they fucked. He wasn’t the most knowledgeable about sex, but he was pretty sure that they had tried every conceivably reasonable position imaginable. Not only in Daphne’s bed, but also in her bathroom, against her bedroom door – not forgetting the silencing charms this time – on the floor, and then there was a bed-floor combination… the shower.

Bloody hell, he was raw.

The Apparation from Daphne’s house to the Apparation point outside of the warehouse jostled him, causing his boxers to painfully chafe against him. Even Daphne was occasionally wincing from the aftereffects of last night.

“So if we were staying at your house for this entire time,” he asked as they tightened their coats around themselves on the short walk toward the warehouse door, “where are you going to be when we go back?”

Daphne glanced over at him. “You caught that did you?”

“The first rule of time travel is you must not be seen,” Harry replied, remembering the time he and Hermione saved Sirius with her time-turner.

“That’s why I’m going to stay with Johnson. He has a few jobs for me to do that require magic and I owe him a lot for helping with this whole thing,” she explained. “I also have a list of where everyone has been in the past two weeks so I can avoid us. Oh, and I have to repay Croaker for giving me the Sortilege Manual as well…” she trailed off with a disgruntled sigh.

“Croaker?” Harry’s brows furrowed. That name sounded familiar… “Wasn’t he that Unspeakable bloke that worked with Bode? The one who got attacked last year?”

“Yeah. Croaker retired after Bode died and went underground. Johnson does jobs for him occasionally.”

“So will he be in Vladivostok too?” Harry asked, remembering that Daphne said something to Astoria about Johnson being in Vladivostok during the past week.

“I really need to watch my words around you now that you’re paying more attention,” she said, reaching over to mess up his hair.

He shrugged her off, smirking. “So I’m not supposed to know about that?”
“Not really.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “What is it that you do for Johnson exactly?” He didn’t really like Johnson all that much so the suspicion was highly warranted.

“Are you interrogating me about my work, Potter?” she asked playfully.

“I don’t see why I can’t know.”

“He’s a Squib, I’m not. Put two and two together,” Daphne answered vaguely as they entered the much more comfortably heated warehouse. “Looks like Granger fixed the Climate Control spell finally.”

He sensed that the conversation about what she did for Johnson was one to be had at a later date.

When he opened the door to the control room, he almost ran headlong into Astoria and she stepped aside, letting him through. “Sorry – I was hoping you were Johnson.”

Right. Both of the Greengrass cousins were involved with Johnson somehow. He itched to roll his eyes.

“That’s alright. Why are you here?” Harry stripped off his coat, his brows furrowed. “I thought you had to work today.”

Astoria worked as an ammunition technician, specializing in disabling and disposing of explosive ordnance and various munitions for the Ministry of Defense. Harry thought it was an interesting job – quite dangerous too at times, apparently.

His instincts told him that it was probably useful for Johnson.

“I took the day off,” she replied with a shrug. “Eric doesn’t know the detainees so I figured I’d fully debrief him on the situation. Formulate some plans with him.”

To Harry’s right, Daphne entered the control room digging around in her pockets and she pulled out a small sachet full of off-white powder. “Here,” she offered, handing the sachet to Astoria. “It’s scopolamine. If you have any trouble making them go double agent, hallucinations could give you an advantage. Johnson’s good with dosages, so trust him.”

That was news to him.

“Double agent?” Harry interrupted. “Seriously?”

Daphne shrugged. “What else are we going to do with them? They’ve likely given us all of the information that they have. If we, at least, get them to turn, they’ll be able to benefit us in some way. And we could let them out – give them some hope. They’re not going to want to stay bound in Granger’s special magic-binding shackles forever. Astoria has a little experience with this.”

“Right,” he muttered, pursing his lips. “Your fiancé.”

“Ex-fiancé,” Astoria corrected sharply, setting the scopolamine on the table in the middle of the control room. “I’ve a feeling that the brat will be easier than Goyle.”
“Doubtful. Goyle is incredibly self-serving. Blackmail him, bribe him, and shoot him somewhere non-vital if he starts rambling on about how inferior Muggles are to magical people,” Daphne explained, moving over to the mini fridge to get out a bottle of cola. “He’s the easy one.”

“No. That’s doubtful,” Astoria argued. “Your plan may work, but how will he explain his time spent here once he goes back?”

“You’ll train him in deception. I can get someone to give him Occlumency lessons. Then, after he’s free to go, he can explain to the Death Eaters that he was on the run from the Order of the Phoenix.”

Astoria’s brow rose. “And what about his father? You said he was dead. If we don’t tell him and the opposition does, that can make Goyle turn back on us faster than any bribe or blackmail we lay on him. Your plan is shit.”

Daphne let out a long breath. “Alright then. Discuss it with Johnson. What do you have planned for Draco?”

“Demirović was just like him. I’m sure if I apply the correct amount of pressure, he’ll crumble like iron oxide,” Astoria said, regarding Daphne tersely.

“You’re going to do the same thing?” Pulling her silver case out of her pocket, Daphne lit up.

“No. Not exactly,” she replied, staring over Harry’s shoulder at the mirrors, which depicted Goyle and Malfoy in separate interrogation rooms. “But I’ll need to get in his favour. I read his file and… I’ll need a bit of help for my tactic to work. Do you know any Death Eaters who can get ahold of his mother?”

Harry glanced at Daphne carefully as she looked at him. “Yes, I do. He’s not exactly a Death Eater though.” The reluctance in her voice was palpable and Harry’s brows rose.

“Who?” he questioned.

“Michael Bonneville,” Daphne revealed after a brief moment of hesitation. “He works for Gringotts and manages illicit monetary transactions off the record for the Malfoy, Avery, and Lestrange accounts. Probably a few others too.”

“Excellent,” Astoria said at the same time Harry asked, “How do you know him?”

Daphne threw him a sharp glance. “Johnson put me in touch with him for a job or two. Please don’t implicate him to the Order, Harry. If I remain as one of his contacts and get closer to him, then I can figure out where the money is coming from and where the money is going. That can be exceedingly useful in the future of this war.”

Harry sighed, biting the inside of his cheek. “Fine.”

“Are you close enough to him to ask him to get you a meeting with Draco’s mum?” Astoria asked, grabbing Daphne’s silver case and lighter.

“Yeah.” Daphne’s eyes got a faraway look to them. “I think I’ve an idea on how to do that. You know how Goyle said that Narcissa is going around Europe to look for Draco?”
Both Harry and Astoria nodded.

“She’ll probably need to meet with him for some quick Galleons and I’m going back in time. If I contact Bonneville as soon as I go back, I may be able to intercept her before she leaves the country.”

“Good,” Astoria muttered. “Do that.”

“You’ll owe me for this.”

“You already owe me for turning the brat.”

“That confident in this, are you?” Daphne let out a short uncertain laugh. “I’ll put her in one of Johnson’s safe houses and lay down a false trail of her travel throughout Europe.” She glanced at the clock on the wall and pulled out her wand. Using a small mirror that was laying on the table, she got to work on a glamour.

“Wait. What are you going to do?” Harry asked, his brows furrowing.

“Well, I need to go in there and ask Draco about the properties that his family has. Without that, I’m running blind.” Daphne’s hair shortened and turned blonde with a few sweeps of her wand. She emerged from behind the mirror looking identical to Astoria. “The Dark Lord will be expecting Narcissa to visit them so I’ll have to impersonate her after I get her safe.”

Harry stared at her incredulously. “Are you mad? Haven’t you captured enough people in the past month?”

“She’s not the first Malfoy I’ve captured and impersonated and I doubt that she’ll be the last.” Daphne turned her wand on Harry and he felt the itchy sensation of a glamour slip over his face. The eyesight charm and voice changing charm came next and he didn’t even need to guess who he looked like.

“I can just ask him, you know,” Astoria said, blowing out a short puff of smoke. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine. We need to do this quickly and Harry can get him to talk if he won’t reveal anything.” Daphne pointed her wand at her throat and performed a voice changing charm to match Astoria’s. “Come on, Harry.”

They walked out of the room and Harry’s eyes narrowed toward her. “What jobs did you do for Michael Bonneville?” he asked, taking the chance and ignoring his incredulity over their sudden plan to kidnap Malfoy’s mum.

Daphne transfigured her cloak into a Muggle-style trench coat and vanished her dead cigarette, letting out a slightly frustrated sigh. “It was a money matter. Bonneville made a few exchanges of cash for diamonds. I believe it was for the Lestranges, but it could have been for the Malfoys.”

Harry’s brows rose. “I thought you only did ‘magic jobs’ for the Squib. Diamonds don’t sound very magical.”

“They’re more magical than you think,” Daphne spoke quietly as they passed the door to the kitchenette, where Nott, Zabini, and Hermione seemed to be eating breakfast. “I mean, if you’re a
wizard, diamonds are easier to conceal and smuggle from country to country in comparison to money, especially Galleons. They’re every black market’s best friend.”

“Where did you-”

“Oi! Where are you two off to?” Nott called from inside the kitchenette room, interrupting him.

“We’re just going to speak to the brat. We’ll be out before you have to leave,” Daphne answered, putting a tiny European lilt to some of her words to mirror Astoria’s slight accent.

Sometimes he wondered just how deeply deception and manipulation wove through Daphne’s veins.

“You are, by far, the most suspicious person I’ve ever met in my entire life,” Harry whispered briskly, pulling her toward Malfoy’s interrogation room. “We’re going to have to rectify that one of these days.”

“I know – we will. Let’s just get in there and do this; we don’t have much time,” she said quickly, opening the door and slamming it shut behind them.

Malfoy was still sleeping in his transfigured cot, his chained arm dangling over the side of the bed. He woke up with a jolt when the door slammed.

“What do you want now?” he mumbled, yawning, his voice rough from sleep.

“We need to know the location of all the properties your family owns in Europe,” Daphne said, cutting straight to the point.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed as he sat up, leaning back against the wall and pulling at his chained arm. “Why?”

“I’m going to rescue your mother. She’s been looking for you at those properties so our time to act is now.”

The tired smile that spilt across Malfoy’s face told Harry that they weren’t going to have to strong-arm him for this information.

OoO

“I wish I could go with you,” Harry said after they exited Malfoy’s interrogation room and Daphne stripped off their glamours. Malfoy sang like a fucking canary in there. “You can’t do this alone and we still have so much to discuss.”

She turned toward him, a small grin pulling at her lips. “Who said I was going to do this alone?”

“I’m glad you’re not, but that doesn’t distract me from the fact that we have massive communication issues,” Harry dryly replied.

They stopped short when Johnson walked out of the control room, straightening out his dark grey suit jacket. That was their cue to leave the warehouse – as soon as he arrived. Harry let out a nearly
imperceptible sigh.

He wasn’t ready to leave yet.

“Excellent work getting the location of the Malfoy summer home, my dear,” Johnson drawled in his smooth tenor voice.

It was hard to believe that he was Angelina Johnson’s grandfather. They seemed so different. Did she even know about him at all?

“It wasn’t for you, Eric,” Daphne answered. “It’s for a job. The fact that you overheard it was luck on your part.”

“I’ll keep away from it for a few weeks then,” Johnson replied, his eyes glancing around the corridor of the warehouse. “Have my facilities treated you well?”

“They have. Am I clear on my payment?” Daphne asked cryptically.

“In full. It went well.”

“No details – time travel.”

“Of course. Now, if I may ask – what is Mr. Potter doing here?” Johnson questioned, glancing over at Harry with a smirk.

“No, you may not ask,” Daphne said lightly, grabbing Harry’s hand and moving to walk around the sleazy Squib. “As far as you’re concerned, you haven’t seen Harry Potter since Slughorn’s Christmas party.”

Johnson drawled in return, “My lips are sealed.”

“Contact me if you need anything,” Daphne called back to him.

“You’re really going to have to let me in one of these days,” Harry whispered as they entered the control room, only to be met by Zabini, Hermione, and Nott’s faces staring back at them. Their pile of luggage was rounded up in the middle of the room. The kittens, sans two for Astoria’s twins, were with Crookshanks in his pet carrier.

“Now’s not exactly the time,” Daphne muttered to him and then raised her voice to a normal volume, “Are we ready to go?”

“Yes, grab your luggage,” Nott instructed. “We’ll Apparate to a back alley near King’s Cross and – if my calculations are correct – once we go back in time, that’ll give us five minutes until we have to Apparate onto the Hogwarts Express. It’ll be close.” He glanced down at his watch. “We’ll have to move quickly.”

Harry took his rucksack and trunk, hauling it behind him with the side handle. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Zabini helping Hermione with the pet carrier and offering to carry her bags, which should have put points in his favour, but it only made Harry want to punch him a little bit.

Daphne took him with her when they reached their Apparation point and he caught himself on his trunk as they landed. His heart was pounding in his chest and his feelings were all mixed up.
Nott pulled the time turner out from under his shirt and un-looped the chain, extending it until it was long enough to fit all of their heads comfortably. “Alright. Hop in and grab your luggage. Anything you’re not carrying won’t be coming back,” he said, holding the chain out for Hermione and Zabini to get in.

Harry and Daphne joined and they all tightened their grips on their trunks, rucksacks, and bags.

Part of him was excited to go back and stay at Ron’s for Christmas and tell the Order of all of the things he learned. But it felt slightly alien to him now that it was actually going to happen. It was strange that he was going to have to lie— withholding information— to so many people that he trusted.

And it amazed him how comfortable he was in that warehouse and how uncomfortable he was going back. He was comfortable with interrogating Malfoy and kidnapping Goyle – making active decisions in the war. It came to him so easily…

The Time Turner spun and he knew he was going to have to live somewhat of a double life from now on.

But if that was what was needed for the war, then so be it. What was one more secret to keep on top of his growing pile of other secrets? He didn’t regret a single thing that he did over the past two weeks. He just hoped he would have a more active role going forward.

Two weeks from now, he wasn’t going to tolerate any backseat bullshit from Daphne anymore. That was certain.

OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
They’d pulled it off.

Harry almost couldn’t believe it. With a giant intake of breath, he stepped off the train with his luggage and Hermione at his side, feeling massively disoriented. A slightly-less hung over Ron met him on the platform with Kingsley and Tonks, who had just apparated to Kings Cross from Hogsmeade after trying to find Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts.

He wondered how Hermione dealt with this time travel business during her third year. Then again, she only went back an hour or three at the most. Trying to reconstruct exactly what was happening two weeks ago was a little trickier.

Ron and Kingsley were chatting about the recent Quidditch match between the Falcons and Harpies while Hermione went to go find her parents. Ginny skipped by them and Harry averted his eyes away from her bouncing form, focusing on Tonks when she spoke.

“I tried my best. I couldn’t find him – slippery little bugger,” she muttered, pulling him aside as they approached the Weasley family, who were standing near the entrance to Platform 9 ¾.

“Damn,” Harry said quietly, hoping he sounded dismayed enough. “I swear I saw him go in there. There’s been talk that he’s working on something big in the Room of Requirement – for Voldemort – and Crabbe got expelled for using Polyjuice potion. I think Malfoy’s been using Crabbe and Goyle as look-outs since they’ve been polyjuicing into first years and stationing themselves outside of the room.”

Tonks’ bright orange brows rose. “Sounds serious. How do you know all this?”

“I’ve been following him, and Hermione and I have made a few friends in different houses who are sympathetic to the Order’s cause. They’ve been helping us gather information about the other side,”
Harry whispered, leaning close to her. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a minimally duplicated version of his list of suspected Ministry moles. Surreptitiously, he slid it into Tonks’ pocket.

“Here. That’s a list of Ministry moles that we’ve compiled. Don’t look at it until we get off the platform,” he said carefully, making sure they weren’t overheard. “I believe that it’s reliable – it’s a good start, at least. And I think we should call for an Order meeting soon, when Hermione gets to the Burrow. There’s a lot we have to go over.”

Tonks threw him a sly grin. “Y’know, you might make a fine Auror one day, Harry.” She patted her pocket. “I’ll definitely check this out.”

“Thanks, Tonks.” Harry grinned in response and hurried ahead to catch up with Hermione, Ron, and Kingsley, breathing an imperceptible sigh of relief.

She took the bait. Now he only had to lie just as smoothly to the rest of them when the time came. He nearly snorted doubtfully at the thought; it wasn’t going to be easy.

OoO

“So how was last night with Looney?” Ron asked as they briefly unpacked their clothes and presents for other people that they ordered through the post or bought at Hogsmeade.

Oh, yeah. Slughorn’s party was last night for Ron.

Harry paused from lifting a t-shirt out of his trunk, revealing Aunt Marge’s keys underneath them, and he wanted to laugh hopelessly at the situation. Biting the inside of his cheek, he shoved the keys deeper into his trunk as he debated over what to tell Ron. They didn’t even think about him the whole time at the warehouse – it was simply, ‘How are we going to fool the Order?’

Merlin.

“Erm – it was fine. We ran into Trelawney and that was unpleasant as always. You know how she gets once she’s into the sherry.” Harry paused, noticing a bulky envelope addressed to him in the corner of his trunk that he didn’t remember packing. It looked like Daphne’s writing.

Clearing his throat, he continued, “But I followed Malfoy after Snape dragged him out of the party for gatecrashing and listened in on the conversation. Apparently Snape’s made an Unbreakable Vow to protect Malfoy and Malfoy’s definitely fixing something for Voldemort in the Room of Requirement. I think Snape was offering to help him.”

Ron’s eyes widened. “Bloody hell. What do you think they’re up to? Are they working together or something?”

“I’m not sure – Snape couldn’t get anything out of Malfoy so I don’t know if they’re working together. I don’t think so,” Harry lied with a shrug, trying to think fast. “And, erm – you know how I’ve been disappearing for the past couple weeks after dinner? And Hermione has been studying alone and stuff?”

In reality, that was just him taking manipulation lessons from Nott and Hermione often studied alone,
but it suited him well for a decent lie.

“Yeah.” The redhead nodded, hanging up one of his infamous Weasley jumpers in his wardrobe.

“Well… we’ve been consulting people and building a network of informants and spies, you could say. It’s like the DA, but more separate and it’s only for gathering information. Except that one of our informants got Crabbe expelled for using polyjuice, which was helpful. But they haven’t gotten much information on Malfoy just yet – we’re all working on it. And we’ve been making a list of suspected Ministry moles as well. We’ve ears in every house now.”

Ron stared at him blankly from across the room and Harry felt guilt pull at his chest as he went on, “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you. We started it when you and I were fighting about Daphne and I wanted to tell you but… I just never found the right time. And Hermione and you haven’t been getting on, which is probably why she hasn’t told you.”

“S’alright. I get it. I was being a git,” Ron muttered sullenly, shrugging his shoulders. “I haven’t exactly been that truthful with you lately either.”

Dropping Hermione’s present – two books recommended to him by Daphne about secrecy and mind spells, which he had to order from a rather shady catalogue – into the gift pile, Harry stared at Ron questioningly.

“I, uh…” Ron started reluctantly, paying entirely too much attention to the contents of his rucksack, “slipped you some of Fred and George’s love potion a couple weeks ago.”

“What?” Harry hissed, his brows furrowing. “For who? Why the bloody hell would you do that?”

His hand roughly grasped Ron’s shoulder and he forced Ron to look up at him.

The redheaded Gryffindor shrugged him off, looking like a skittishly outraged rabbit. “You were messing about with Daphne Greengrass!” He shrugged again, averting his eyes and backing away. “I was… jealous or something. Y’know – and my sister has been in love with you for ages and I really don’t like her with Dean, so I thought that if I… made you look at her differently, you might… change your mind,” he explained awkwardly, sighing before he continued at similarly stilted pace, “her mind. About Dean. Because Dean’s a fucking git with girls – all those bloody stories he shares with Seamus…”

The guilt over lying to Ron evaporated away from Harry so quickly it was surprising that there wasn’t a cloud of steam left behind.

“You drugged me. Brilliant,” he muttered snarkily through gritted teeth. It was, however, nice to know why Ginny was suddenly very interesting to him every time he saw her since that fight between her and Ron about snogging. He thought it was just hormones; after all, she was rather pretty. Ron must’ve put the love potion into his water while he was busy with his Quidditch captain duties during practice.

No wonder Ron was apologizing for being a right idiot after that practice. He must’ve thought that it all was going to end soon…

“Is there an antidote to this fucking potion?”

“Er – yeah,” Ron replied carefully, sidestepping slowly to his rucksack. “I was going to put it in Mum’s biscuits. You know the ones you like? But um. I’m sorry, mate.” He pulled a deep red vial of
potion out of his bag that had the Weasley twin’s signature WWW emblem printed on it. “I didn’t think you were that affected by it since you... erm-”

“Since I, what?” Harry snatched the vial out of Ron’s hand and downed it in one gulp, wincing at the super sweet taste of it. “I definitely was affected. It’s just common courtesy not to cheat on your... ‘girlfriend’ with your best friend’s sister, who also happens to be dating another one of your friends!” he seethed, angrily narrowing his eyes toward the redhead. “You’re thick to think that would ever happen.”

“Merlin - I said I was sorry!” Ron exclaimed quietly, throwing his hands up.

Harry glared at him, stalking over to the window and pulling out his red leather case as he opened it. He desperately needed a fag.

“I’m not sure if I believe you,” he said stubbornly, glancing over at Ron, who was still standing by his rucksack. He used Daphne’s gold lighter, which he’d borrowed, to light up, blowing a long breath of smoke out the window.

“Better not let mum catch you doing that. She’d have kittens.”

“Then you better not tell her that I’m doing it. She’d probably have kittens if I told her that you slipped me a love potion spiked with Ginny,” Harry countered, sitting on the window ledge and keeping his cigarette hand positioned outside of the window.

Ron’s jaw hardened. “Well, it isn’t as if you haven’t been lying to me for weeks as well! What with this secret group you and Hermione have together. Maybe you two belong with each other.”

“I’m sleeping with Daphne, Ron. I’m not interested in Hermione. We’re just gathering information from people – I thought that I’d be nice and let you in is all,” Harry responded, secretly pleased by the look of guilt that crossed over Ron’s face.

Ron sullenly crossed the room. “Yeah, well, I’m gonna go see what Fred and George are up to. Have fun burning your lungs out with that thing,” he mumbled, opening his door and angrily shutting behind him.

Harry rolled his eyes, rather thankful for the thing that was ‘burning his lungs out’ at the moment. It eased every bit of stress he was feeling and if it wasn’t for it, he probably would have thrown something by now. Leaning back against the window frame, he sighed, exhaling a short puff of smoke.

His eyes then trailed over to his trunk that held the envelope from Daphne and he reached for it, grasping it between his fingers and pulling it toward him, shifting his gaze to the door before opening it.

Good. Ron definitely wasn’t coming back.

A short note slid out of the envelope with a giant square metal case that was the size of his fist.

_Feel free to keep watch._

_-D_
Harry quickly opened it, revealing two scrying mirrors on each side of the case – one empty and one depicting Draco Malfoy, bound and tied to a chair with a Lucius Malfoy-esque Nott standing over him. Scrying mirrors didn’t offer any sound without the help of a second potion, but he knew that this happened two weeks ago (in his timeframe anyway). It was while he was unconscious after Nott and Zabini kidnapped him. Nott apparently questioned Malfoy a lot while Harry was out cold. His guess was that the sister of the scrying mirror on the other side didn’t exist yet and that it was meant for Goyle, which was probably why it didn’t depict anything.

Did Daphne give all of them scrying mirror cases? Or was this just a special present for him?

Whichever it was, it was too dangerous to have out in the open for too long. Sticking his cigarette between his lips, he buried the metal case deep inside his trunk underneath some old Transfiguration homework and leaned back against the window.

He wished Hermione would get to the Burrow sooner. If Daphne had any sense, she would have given Hermione one of these mirror cases as well. He also needed to discuss the issue of Ron with her – the sooner they decided on what to do with him, the better. He didn’t like lying to him, but he wasn’t sure if Ron could reliably keep his mouth shut after being left out, love potion blackmail withstanding.

Harry could only imagine how bitter Ron would be if they told him and bitterness was a very strong emotion to deal with. Ron wouldn’t take it lightly if they decided to tell him.

OoO

“‘arry! Eet ez so wonderful to see you!” Fleur exclaimed on her way up the stairs, with Ginny in tow, helping Fleur carry her luggage. Harry felt himself bombarded with hugs and kisses from the French woman as she stopped on the landing and he looked over at Ginny for help, knowing he wouldn’t get any. The Weasley girl could barely contain her mirthful grin.

Without the effect of the love potion, the attraction had disappeared and he was at the point where he was before, which was a relief. Ginny was Ron’s little sister, and nearly like his own little sister. In retrospect, it was amazing how powerful Fred and George’s love potions were. He almost couldn’t believe that they were legal…

“Sorry,” Harry muttered to Fleur, blinking out of his reverie. “You surprised me. It’s nice to see you too. How’ve you been?”

“Fantastic as always! Bill and I ‘ave been planning a marvelous wedding for zis summer – I was ‘oping you could come. Of course, we are not sure on where eet will be, but eet will be lovely to ‘ave you there!”

This summer?

Harry’s brows rose. “Erm – sure, I’ll try my best. Sounds great,” he replied with a nod, glancing over at Ginny again, who rolled her eyes.

“Excellent! I’ll put you on ze invitation list!” Fleur’s smile grew and she pecked him on the cheek as she passed, going toward Ginny’s room, where she was probably staying. Poor Ginny.
Harry tossed the redheaded girl an empathetic look on his way down the stairs and headed to the kitchen for some breakfast. He left Ron sleeping upstairs after not talking to him all night. Harry had turned in early after dinner and it was some of the best sleep that he had gotten over the past two weeks, even though he woke up at 4 AM due to the extremely irregular sleep schedule that he had been keeping at the warehouse. He spent most of the morning trying to analyze the Ron situation and coming up with possible outcomes. Most of them were not promising, so he desperately needed to talk it over with Hermione.

Two minds were better than one when it came to stuff like this.

Mrs. Weasley had breakfast laid out on the table already, under a stasis charm, and he took a seat next to Mr. Weasley. He could hear Bill and Fred and George talking animatedly in the lounge over one of Fred and George’s new inventions for their shop.

“It’s terrible what they’re doing to Stan Shunpike,” Mr. Weasley muttered from behind the Daily Prophet. “To all of the people they’re arresting lately. Don’t tell anyone I’ve told you this, Harry, but they’ve no evidence for at least three of the people arrested – and yet they’re sending them to Azkaban regardless. The Ministry would rather condemn them than look foolish in the public eye. And even Dumbledore can’t get them to change their minds. It’s ridiculous.” He paused, adding again, “And very top secret, of course.”

“Yes, I know. I can keep a secret. But it’s really because of the moles in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement anyway,” Harry replied quietly, leaning closer to him and grabbing a piece of toast while he poured himself a cup of tea.

“Mm. I imagine so as well,” Mr. Weasley said, glancing over at him with somber eyes. “The problem is that we know that they’re there, it’s simply difficult to pinpoint who is working for whom, and how to tie them to who they’re working for. The atmosphere around the Ministry is very hush-hush and everyone is being exceedingly careful.”

“But there has to be a way to implicate them somehow.” Spreading jam over his toast, Harry sighed. “No one is so careful as to not leave a trail tying them back to something nefarious somewhere. Has Tonks showed you the list I’ve gathered?”

“She has – it’s very bold.” Mr. Weasley shook his head doubtfully. “I’ve worked closely with some of these people for years; they can’t be moles.”

“They might be though,” Harry whispered, “that’s the thing. Moles are supposed to be unsuspecting – unassuming. Maybe they’re under the Imperious or… they aren’t who you thought they were. The most surprising people can be absolutely devious and I’m very sure that most of that list is accurate. The group I’ve formed at Hogwarts is good at getting their hands on information – and they’ve risked their necks trying to get it. I wouldn’t have given it to Tonks if I wasn’t certain about it.”

Mr. Weasley’s mouth flattened to a thin line. “We’ll have to see. I’ve called an Order meeting for this weekend, after Remus arrives. We’ll discuss it more then,” he muttered quickly before Mrs. Weasley bustled through the door with Bill, Fred, and George in tow, proclaiming that they absolutely needed breakfast.

Harry felt infinitely more satisfied as he ate. It sounded as if he was actually going to get to attend this Order meeting and Hermione was going to be around by then too, which made him breathe an internal sigh of relief. He desperately needed her to back him up because he wasn’t sure if he was enough to convince them, judging by the way Mr. Weasley reacted.
“That’s a really odd habit to have if you’re a wizard, you know,” Ginny commented quietly as she came around the shed.

He’d just had another row with Ron up in Ron’s room and he went outside to the back of Mr. Weasley’s shed for a fag while the rest of the family was distracted by their separate holiday or wedding planning duties, which was a godsend. Obviously he wasn’t sneaky enough to slip by Ginny though. He’d thought she was too busy making paper chain decorations in the lounge.

“Is it?” he rhetorically replied, flicking ashes off onto the lightly snow-dusted ground.

“Extremely distinctive,” Ginny said, her lips quirking. “In fact, the only people at Hogwarts who do that sort of thing are Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass. And that seventh year Muggleborn, but I forget his name…”

“Maybe I picked it up over the summer at the Dursleys,” Harry lied casually. He only had three cigarettes in the past four days at the Burrow – usually after a terse moment with Ron. The youngest Weasley boy didn’t seem to want to speak to him and spent an inordinate amount of time with Fred and George. That suited him just fine, until they eventually started talking, which eventually lead to an argument and then a fag.

“I know Blaise Zabini, Harry.” Ginny leaned against the shed next to him. “And those look like the same cigarettes he smokes half the time – apparently the same as Greengrass – so cut the bullshit. Is Ron not talking to you because he found out you’re dating Greengrass?”

Harry’s brow arched. “How do you know Blaise Zabini?”

“I fooled around with him a little last year. He’s a narcissistic, arrogant twat, but he’s fit and he liked my bat bogey hexes,” Ginny answered, shrugging.

Was there a girl in the world who didn’t find Zabini appealing? Harry wanted to roll his eyes.

“So you’re going out with Greengrass? It would explain a lot. Especially the rumours.”

He let out a long sigh, weighing the consequences. He knew that Ginny was trustworthy enough. “Maybe I am.”

“Huh. Good to know,” she said lightly, her mouth twisting in contemplation. “I mean, you definitely could do worse than her. Romilda Vane has been frothing at the mouth for weeks.”

“Yeah… Lots of love potion chocolates.” Sensing an opportunity, Harry asked, “So, what do you know about Daphne?”

“Oh, not much.” Ginny tucked her hair behind her ear and shrugged a shoulder. “She keeps to herself and Zabini only mentioned that it’s a horrible idea to get on her bad side – but that’s any girl, really. Witches are brutal if you piss them off. Boys don’t seem to get that.”

He doubted that Ginny would ever kidnap and psychologically interrogate someone if they pissed
her off, but he figured he’d take her word for it. After all, Hermione permanently scarred someone for betraying Dumbledore’s Army.

“Yeah, I get it,” Harry responded. “You lot really know how to pack a punch.”

“And a nasty bat bogey hex,” Ginny added with a sinister grin. “Better beware. I can’t imagine what Greengrass’ specialty is – she’s a Slytherin.”

Deceit and manipulation.

Harry snorted out a laugh at the thought. “It’s definitely not magical.”

“Really?” Ginny’s body language shifted and she stared at him intently. “What is it?”

“That would be telling,” he muttered with a smirk.

“Spoil sport,” she replied, smiling wryly and batting him on the shoulder. Then she sobered, looking him up and down. “You’ve changed a lot, I’ve noticed. Especially over the past few weeks. You’ve been a lot quieter, if that’s possible.”

“We all have to change sometime. And I’ve… The war’s getting closer.” He exhaled a breath full of smoke. “It’s not exactly a comforting thought.”

“Well I’m always here to help if you need me to be. The whole DA is – you could start up proper meetings again. I’ve stayed in touch with them and some of us have even been practicing. The Creevey brothers finally got their full patronuses to form just last month. They’re gerbils.”

Harry smiled fondly, picturing the Creevey brothers practicing in his head. “That’s great. But… I don’t know. I’ve been a bit busy with things – Order type of stuff. It’d be nice, but I don’t know how often I’d be able to attend DA meetings.”

“Just think about it. We have your back. You’re not alone in this fight – we hate that snakeface just as much as you do.”

“I know,” Harry said with a nod, stubbing his cigarette out on the ground and stowing the filter in a spare bit of paper to discreetly throw away. “Keep your coin on you. We might need to use it in the future.”

“Always. Constant vigilance.”

They started walking back to the Burrow and, as he turned the corner onto the path, he spotted Hermione bounding down the steps of the Burrow toward them, her bushy hair bouncing in her wake.

Finally, she was here.

“Merlin, I thought the past few days would never end,” Hermione muttered once they got inside and she pulled him up the stairs to help her carry her things while Fleur distracted Ginny about invitation choices and wedding locations. Crookshanks’ kittens were running around everyone’s feet.

“I’m glad you’re here too,” Harry said under his breath. “I’ve no idea what to do with Ron and I haven’t decided if we should tell him about the whole thing. We’ve been arguing a bit. I told him our
fabricated story and he told me he slipped me a love potion when he was angry about me being with Daphne, which caused the whole… arguing.”

Hermione scoffed. “Honestly? I can’t believe he’d do that to you. Who was it targeted at? Did he have an antidote?”

“Ginny. Yes – I drank the antidote right after he told me.”

“He’s probably the only big brother in the world who would want his sister to date his best friend,” she sardonically intoned, opening the door to Ginny’s room, which had three camp beds laid out in the cramped space. “Bloody prat.”

Harry let out a breathy laugh. “I’m over it, really, but he’s definitely not over us lying to him about our… group that we’ve came up with and left him out of. It makes me want to hold the love potion thing over his head every time he brings it up. I’d tell him what really happened, but I don’t see anything good coming from it.”

Hermione hummed thoughtfully, pursing her lips. “Ron can keep a secret, but you know how he hates being left out of things. I’ve no idea how he’d react if we told him all of it.”

“He’d be bitter about it like he usually is with stuff like this.” Harry sighed, sinking down onto one of the camp beds. “But we’re his friends and, even if he can be difficult, it’s hard to lie to him so much…”

“It’s not like the story we made up is that far from the truth,” Hermione reasoned, sitting next to him. Glancing over at her, Harry felt himself deflate a little. “So you suggest that we should lie.”

“Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure.” He ran his fingers through his hair, his mind whirling to the possibilities he’d thought up over the last few days. “We definitely can’t tell him while we’re around anyone in the Order. Maybe when we’re at Hogwarts we can tell him so he doesn’t ruin everything. He’ll be far enough away from everyone and would have to send an owl, which I doubt he’d do. It’s too much effort for him and he likes instant gratification.”

“I agree. We should lie until it’s safe enough to not,” Hermione said, nodding once, and then her expression darkened. “Even if he’s a git who fed you a love potion. He deserves a whack upside the head for being so thick.”

Harry’s lips curved into a crooked smile. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“For what?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Being here. Sticking with me and dealing with Nott and Zabini and Daphne. I couldn’t have asked for a better best friend.”

Hermione’s arm wrapped around him and she half-hugged him tightly. “I could say the same to you.”

“I doubt that. I seem to drag you into everything,” he replied, pulling away from her.
“Are you kidding?” Hermione’s grin widened. “You make my life more interesting. What would I do otherwise? Sit at home and knit? I’d be bored out of my mind.” Then, her eyes widened slightly and she reached for one of her bags. “That reminds me – Muffliato – did you get one of these?”

She pulled up a very familiar-looking metal case after waving her wand around them and Harry nodded. “Yeah, Daph gave me one too. It’s at the bottom of my trunk.”

“Did you notice the enchantment on it?” Hermione asked, flipping it over and running her wand over it, revealing a glowing line of Arithmancy across the edge of it. “It has an alert sequence – Blaise’s work. I’m guessing that it’s tied to the wards on the doors to the interrogation rooms. It’ll go off if they try to escape.”

“Like that does me any good,” Harry replied sarcastically. “It’s not as if I can do magic outside of Hogwarts yet.”

“I know, but it makes sense. With all of us having one of these, at least one of us might be able to get there in time to intervene and stop them from escaping if it happens. It’s actually not a bad idea.”

“It’ll also give us front row seats to watching Astoria and Johnson try to turn Malfoy and Goyle into double agents,” Harry dryly remarked, flipping it open.

“So that’s what they’re doing.” Hermione paused, staring down at it. “I knew there had to be something else.”

“Yeah… and Daphne’s going to capture Malfoy’s mum to help out with the whole scheme. It’s mental.”

Hermione’s brows rose and, through the barrier of the Muffliato spell, he heard Mrs. Weasley call up that it was time for dinner, cutting their conversation short. Harry let out a frustrated sigh. It was bloody difficult to get enough time to speak to anyone uninterrupted these days.

OoO

Christmas at the Weasleys was a long drawn-out affair that seemed to last for days, and it wasn’t even Christmas yet. Mrs. Weasley made an inordinate amount of food for everyone; decorations were splattered everywhere, culminating at the epicentre in the lounge, where a giant Christmas tree stood.

The sound of Ron chewing pastries got on Harry’s nerves and he retreated to a small corner of the house with the Half Blood Prince and the metal mirror case, which he would occasionally peek glances at when no one was looking.

Watching himself as Tom Riddle interrogate Malfoy was like staring into another life. The foreign expressions on his glamoured face and the downright ruthlessness with which he handled Malfoy made him feel as if he were looking at another person doing those things. But it was him and it wasn’t even that difficult for him either.

While the slight moral dilemma surfaced, he buried himself into his Potions text and the Half Blood Prince’s words, distracting himself. He hid the metal case in his pocket while he did so, only pulling it out to check what day it was for his other self and occasionally watch.
Instead of learning interrogation techniques, he did his holiday homework. Instead of interrogating Malfoy, he helped Ron peel sprouts for dinner and snuck away to discuss everything with Hermione – including the plans over what exactly to tell, and withhold from, the Order in the upcoming meeting.

Ron was finally being less git-like, at least. They could talk without arguing and he was extremely interested in the conversation between Malfoy and Snape, which was just the bloody tip of the iceberg compared to what Harry actually knew. Not that he could tell Ron that just yet.

On Christmas Eve, instead of planning the kidnapping of Goyle and stealing Uncle Vernon’s car, he sat at the dining room table while people trickled through the fireplace and stood round the room, waiting for the Order meeting to start. It had gotten delayed because Remus was stuck somewhere and couldn’t arrive till now. Hermione was anxiously tapping her fingers on the table, which made Harry feel slightly anxious by proxy. The buzzing atmosphere in the room wasn’t helping any as well.

“I heard that Lucius Malfoy’s boy’s done a runner,” someone whispered behind him and Harry turned his head, catching a glimpse of Mundungus Fletcher speaking to Mad-Eye Moody.

“Has he, now?” Moody’s gruff voice sounded, his magical eye spinning and searching the room.

“Where’ve you heard that?”

“It’s all ’round Knockturn,” Mundungus proclaimed. “The Malfoy woman put a notice out to all the shopkeepers to keep a lookout for ‘im and I’ve an in with Borgin. He buys me best stuff.”

Harry’s pulse picked up and he was thankful that he left the scrying mirror case up in his trunk, buried. He hoped that Hermione had done the same with hers – who knew what Moody’s eye could see. That mirror case was a danger to his plans. If any of the Order members were going to stay the night, he’d have to be extremely careful with it.

“No wonder I couldn’t find him or get him to come out of that blasted room,” Tonks said, joining the conversation. “He probably wasn’t even in there. Merlin, I feel so stupid…”

“No need to feel bad about it, Tonks – at least you tried,” Hermione said quietly toward the group, biting her lip in contemplation. “He could have used the distraction of the students getting on the Hogwarts Express to run off. Perhaps he polyjuiced himself – we’ve some evidence that he’s been using it because of Crabbe’s expulsion.”

“Makes sense,” Tonks said. Then she turned to Harry. “Didn’t you say that he was working on something for You-Know-Who in that room?”

“Yes. We’ve reason to believe that he was,” Harry lied, letting his nerves settle with a false dismayed sigh. “But if he’s run away… We’ll have to figure it out when we get back to Hogwarts – try to get in there. Maybe get someone to spy on Goyle – Goyle might know something about it or maybe even take over for him.”

“The Goyle kid?” Moody questioned doubtfully. “You-Know-Who wouldn’t trust anyone in that family with anything important. They’re all five feathers short of a whole Hippogriff.”

Tonk’s brows furrowed. “If he was working on something serious though, don’t you think that Malfoy’d take it with him?”
The image of Draco Malfoy hauling around a giant Vanishing Cabinet on his back made Harry’s stomach clench as he held back an amused snort.

Keeping his face neutral, Harry shrugged, absently shaking his head. “I dunno. He might have done.”

“Then we’ll keep on the lookout for him. Track his movements if we get word of his whereabouts,” Mad-Eye Moody decided. “Might be beneficial to put out a small reward for his capture to encourage cooperation.”

Their conversation was cut short by the doors to the dining room shutting and locking, after Ron stepped in with Remus Lupin. Harry could tell from the smudgy flush on Ron’s cheeks that he had to put up a fight with Mrs. Weasley in order to attend the meeting – she couldn’t keep him and Hermione from attending.

They’d had a small row with Mrs. Weasley about it earlier, but he and Hermione stood their ground. Their list was important to the Order and they were old enough to decide what to do with their lives. She also wasn’t their mother, which hit a sore spot when Ginny stepped in and pointed it out to her.

He wondered how Ron convinced her to let him attend.

Ron took a seat next to them and nodded in support, while Remus started the meeting, going over the various movements of Death Eaters that they’ve tracked. It wasn’t anything Harry hadn’t figured out from the things he’d overheard Mr. Weasley talking about to Fred, George, and Bill. The Death Eaters seemed to be lying low for the most part in the last two weeks, with only a few isolated attacks here and there. No recent Muggle terrorism – mostly just suspected kidnappings of various witches and wizards: a potion’s master who worked for Bobbin’s Apothecary, a person who worked at the Ministry’s library, and an old historian who wrote about the Goblin Rebellions for a living.

It was strange. Harry couldn’t figure out anything that connected these people. Why would Voldemort want them?

“Has anyone seen the news this morning?” Bill held up the Daily Prophet, folded to an article entitled, ‘FLOREAN FORTESCUE: CAPTURED OR WORKING FOR THEM?’

“Codswallop,” Mr. Weasley interjected. “It has to be someone posing as Florean.”

“Are you talking about the bloke who owned the ice cream shop?” Harry asked, his brows furrowing. He glanced over at Hermione, who looked surprised.

“He was a friend of the Order of the Phoenix. An outlier – like Aberforth. He kept watch on certain people and gave us information,” Tonks explained. Harry didn’t even know that Aberforth Dumbledore did that, but it made sense – the Hog’s Head was a great place to stick someone to gather information. “Death Eaters found out about it and cut that information off at the knees this past summer. We haven’t heard from him since.”

“But this article indicates that he might be working for them, which is a problem, because all of the information that he’s given us over the past two years could have been faulty if he’s really working for them,” Bill said, throwing the Prophet down on the table.

“The only evidence they have is based on a very coincidental ancient magical ritual near the last
Death Eater sighting,” Remus reasoned, letting out a sigh as he stared at the article. “Florean may have been a notable practitioner of the craft, but he isn’t the only one out there who practices ancient magic. You can’t think that he’d betray us.”

“Constant vigilance, Remus,” Mad-Eye spoke up. “This may not be enough evidence for betrayal, but if anyone receives any further transmissions from Florean, it should be handled with strict caution.”

“We don’t even know if he’s still alive!” Tonks said heatedly. “Let us receive evidence of that first before we go passing judgments about a possible dead man.”

“Fair enough,” Bill interjected. “We’ll wait for word from Florean before we make a decision. But what about his past information?”

“Are we doing anything with that at the moment?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“The whereabouts of Bellatrix Lestrange was useful – she got away, o’course – but we haven’t had much luck on the Nott and Avery hideout,” Moody said, taking a drink from his hipflask. “Seems they’ve made it unplottable. Everything else we’ve gotten from him hasn’t panned out all that well.”

“At least it’s something though,” Tonks muttered. “And, if you haven’t noticed, Alastor, we haven’t been having much luck with anything lately. The Auror office is against us.”

“Enemies in the ranks, yes,” Mad-Eye gruffly responded, his eye spinning round to Harry. “That list was your doing, wasn’t it, Potter?”

Harry nodded. “Hermione and I compiled it, actually.” He glanced over at his bushy haired cohort and continued, “We’ve placed informants and spies into every house at Hogwarts and you’d be surprised by how much kids talk. Sometimes they don’t even realize what they’re letting slip in front of people.”

“Every house, eh?” George questioned. “Even Slytherin? How’d you pull that off?”

“Blackmail and bribing, mostly,” Harry lied, thinking quickly to things he had learned over the past month. “The hook and pull scheme. Hook them with blackmail or a bribe. Then, the deeper that they are as an informant, the more they’re pulled and the harder it is for them to get out of it. They’d be seen as a serious traitor to the other side if they ever wanted to switch. It’s how you lot cultivate assets, isn’t it?”

Tonk frowned, staring at him from across the table. “Well, officially, asset cultivation is mostly Unspeakable work – and high level Aurors.” The centre of her forehead creased. “It’s not exactly public knowledge.”

“It may not be public knowledge, but it’s not that hard to figure out those tactics if you know what books to look at and what footnotes to follow,” Hermione explained, lying through her teeth with such an ease that Harry had to hide the impressed look that nearly spilled out onto his face. “I’ve done a lot of research on this. It’s been very useful.”

“It’s not that hard if you happen to be dating a Slytherin as well,” Ron butted in offhandedly.

Mrs. Weasley should have put up a better fight.
“Ickle Ronnie dating a Slytherin girl?” Fred dramatically covered his heart. “But the Weasley brother pact!” Fainting theatrically, he landed in George’s lap. “It’s broken, Gred!”

Trying to reign in his emotions, Harry clenched his fist under the table as he surveyed the varied expressions on the faces of nearly everyone in the room. Ron babbled out denial, his ears turning bright red in embarrassment, and Harry sighed.

“It’s not Ron,” he said evenly, cutting Ron off and causing everyone to glance at him warily. “I’ve formed a… relationship with Daphne Greengrass. She’s been a great source for blackmail on people. And she’s a halfblood. Grew up in the Muggle world, so she’s on our side.”

Merlin, why didn’t anything ever go smoothly for him?

“It’s not important who Harry goes out with anyway,” Hermione said before anyone could comment, redirecting their focus. “He hasn’t told her anything he shouldn’t and the important thing is that list. We’ve gotten plenty of those names from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff; Slytherin isn’t the only house from where it’s spawned.”

“We were hoping that you’d be able to put the list to use and maybe find a way to incriminate any of them,” Harry explained.

“It’s a long list,” Tonks said, leaning back in her chair with an exhausted sigh. “It makes sense that many people would be moles, from the way things are going at the Ministry in certain departments, but the people that are on that list are… surprising.”

“Like Gibbon,” Mr. Weasley muttered, shaking his head. “He just can’t be. Molly and I’ve been over to his house for tea on numerous occasions – there’s nothing suspicious about him.”

The corners of Harry’s lips tightened as he held himself back. He desperately wanted to cry out that Gibbon was one of the Death Eaters who was instructed by Voldemort to siege Hogwarts and kill one of the teachers, but he couldn’t. He had to be patient.

“Just look into it,” Harry urged. “Maybe some of these people are very careful, but they’re bound to mess up. And maybe they’re unmarked or hiding their mark if they have one – I’ve heard that there might be a potion for it. Draco Malfoy has been rumoured to have the Dark Mark and he got by the secrecy sensors at school.” He paused, letting out a breath. “Regardless, even if they are unmarked, there has to be some way to prove that the people on that list are moles. It wasn’t easy information to come by.”

“Good lead, Potter. I know about that potion,” Moody said, nodding. “It was used sparingly during the First War. The Ministry has a monitoring list for anyone who purchases the key ingredients, but it hasn’t alerted me – the moles might be stopping it. I’ll go down to the records office and retrieve it personally to check for tampering. Dung, think you can ask around your little peddling friends for help on this?”

“Dunno. If yeh give me a list of ingredients, I migh’ be able to.” Mundungus shrugged. “It’ll cost, o’course.”

Mad-Eye’s gaze darkened, which caused Mundungus to pale a little. “Budget’s tight – better be convincing.”

“Righ’. Will do, Mad-Eye.”
“We need to get someone in the Department of Mysteries,” Tonks said, looking over the list she had pulled out when they started talking about it. “Three of the people on here work there and none of us can get in without former clearance.”

“Are you open to recruiting someone?” Hermione asked and Harry glanced over at her, suspicious of where she was going with this.

If she was going where he thought she was…

“I s’pose,” Tonks replied, tilting her head reluctantly. “The spooks aren’t the most sociable lot and Bode was our last outlier.”

Hermione bit the corner of her lip. “You might want to look into recruiting Tavion Nott.”

The room erupted in scoffs and noises of protest.

“You can’t be serious,” Tonks articulated, staring at her in horror. “His elder son’s a Death Eater. He wouldn’t help us in a million years.”

“Just because his elder son is a Death Eater does not mean that he wouldn’t help you,” Hermione argued. “We all have black sheep in our family.”

“Tavion Nott used to be best friends with Lucius Malfoy, girl,” Mad-Eye Moody proclaimed. “We’d be setting ourselves up for a knife in our back if we asked him.”

“Oh, you always think someone’s going to stick a knife in your back,” Tonks commented wryly.

Mad-Eye turned toward her. “And I’ve yet to be proved wrong!”

“How about Croaker?” Harry suggested, wondering if he was a part of the Order at all, considering Bode was.

“Yeah. Good luck finding him,” Bill said in a miserable tone, crossing his arms over his chest. “He quit his job and completely disappeared after Bode was murdered.”

Harry made a mental note to ask Daphne how she contacted Croaker for the Sortilege Manual.

“It’s fine – I’ll spend some time around there – poke at the spook nest and see what flies out,” Tonks volunteered, not looking pleased. “I’ve a few people to get out of the seventh level anyway.”

“What are we going to do with the rest of this list?” Remus asked, holding it up and gazing around the room.

“We pick our targets and stay close,” Moody instructed indomitably. “If anyone makes a mistake, we need to be the first to see it happen.”

The meeting ended shortly after and Harry felt himself deflate as he walked out of the room with Ron and Hermione in tow. Ron seemed to be torn between looking at them accusingly and being wary for some reason that Harry couldn’t figure out.

“That could have gone better,” Hermione said once they were up in Ron’s room, alone and under a
muffliato spell.

Taking a seat at the window, Harry stared over at Ron. “Yeah, I thought we were done for when you mentioned I was with Daphne.” He pulled out his red leather case, opened the window, and lit up. He was in desperate need for a cigarette after all that. “Thanks for saving me in there, Hermione.”

She threw him both a grin and a disapproving glance toward his fag.

“Well I didn’t know that you wanted to keep that a secret from the Order,” Ron said with an animated shrug, his expression slightly cowed. “I mean, I figured that Greengrass helped you with that list, didn’t she?”

*Understatement of the year.*

Harry couldn’t hold back the breathy laugh that escaped him. “Yeah, she definitely helped.”

“I figured as much,” Ron said, taking a seat on his bed and staring at them both. “You know, you two need to stop keeping things from me. If you don’t want me to say something, or if you don’t want me to mention something, then tell me.” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “I’ve noticed you sneaking around and all of those private conversations. What is it that you talk about that I can’t know?”

He and Hermione hadn’t been having *that* many private conversations, had they? Maybe two or four; after all, they had to keep their story straight about what they were going to reveal to the Order.

“What do you mean, Ron?” Hermione asked, regarding the redheaded Gryffindor warily.

Harry felt a bubble of worry build up in his stomach as he took a drag off his cigarette.

“I can tell that you’ve been keeping stuff from me. You’re not that good at hiding it,” Ron said, his eyes roving between them. “I know you too much to not see it. So what is it?”

Sinking down onto Harry’s camp bed, Hermione let out a withered sigh. “If we tell you, do you promise that you won’t speak a word of it? Not one peep to the Order or anyone else?”

“Yes,” Ron insisted with a nod. “You can trust me. Merlin, s’not like I’m your enemy or anything.”

“But you’ve developed a really bad habit of saying things you shouldn’t – and at the worst possible times,” Harry remonstrated, not certain about letting him in on the big secret already. “You can’t do that with this if we tell you. It would endanger all of us.”

Ron shook his head, holding up his hands as if in surrender. “I won’t. I promise. Really. I didn’t say anything about Snape’s Unbreakable Vow in there, did I? Because you didn’t seem willing to mention *that*.”

“For good reason,” Harry spoke around his cigarette.

“And I want to *know* that reason!” Ron exclaimed and then he lowered his voice, “I just want my best friends back.”

“If we tell you,” Hermione interjected sternly, pointing at him with her McGonagall finger of
severity. “Not only can you not breathe a word, but also – no more being an absolute git and forcing love potion on anyone ever again. You want to be friends? That street goes both ways.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It was stupid,” Ron said with a sheepish duck of his head. “I won’t ever do it again.”

“Good.” Hermione nodded stiffly. “Then we’ll tell you once we get back to Hogwarts.”

Ron’s brows furrowed. “Why then? Why can’t you tell me now?”

Harry vaguely wondered if Daphne felt like this the entire time he was prying her for information about what she was planning. Because it was bloody nerve wracking and Ron was his best mate, who he could trust with his life. No wonder she was tetchy about it.

“It’s only five days, Ron,” Hermione patiently intoned. “What we have to tell you requires the upmost discretion and we need to make sure we’re away from prying ears. The Room of Requirement should suffice.”

Seeming pleased with Hermione’s excuse, Ron gave a nod, settling back into his bed, and Harry let out a nearly inaudible sigh of relief. He shared a glance with Hermione and he could tell that she was thinking exactly what he was thinking: They had six days to figure out precisely what they were going to let him in on.

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“Thank you for the books,” Hermione said to him as she sat next to him at Christmas brunch, pulling the teapot toward herself. Everyone was chattering and happily showing off their Christmas presents around the table.

Hermione lowered her voice, leaning toward him, “Did Blaise tell you to get them for me? I know they have to be… specially requested.”

“Erm, no. Daphne mentioned you’d probably like them while we were revising,” Harry whispered. Any form of the word ‘revision’ was code for ‘at the warehouse’. “I was having a hard time figuring out what to get you and I had parchment and quills on standby, but I get you stuff like that almost every year.”

“Thanks,” she said again.

“No problem. Thanks for the kilo of treacle toffee,” Harry responded. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were deliberately trying to rot the teeth out of my head.”

They shared a small laugh, which turned into even more laughter as one of Fred and George’s new inventions was unleashed on Bill and Mr. Weasley – a shaped marzipan type of candy that they aptly named Quacky Quaffles. Harry wondered if they had gotten the idea from watching children’s telly. The two Weasley men sounded almost exactly like a pair of aggravated Donald Ducks, especially when they broke into laughter over each other’s voices.

“You know you’ve got a maggot in your hair, mate,” Bill quacked when he noticed it, plucking it out of Harry’s messy locks. Fleur made a disgusted face at it and Bill tossed it at George, who made it explode into sparkling duck-shaped confetti that landed all over the place.
“It was a gift from Kreacher,” Harry explained, rubbing his cheeks, which were starting to hurt from smiling too much, too widely.

Ginny’s head perked up as she stared over Harry’s shoulder out the window. “Oi, is that Percy?” she chirped out, her voice high and chattery like a chipmunk, which made everyone turn toward the window and look out. But Ginny seemed more concerned over her voice, accusingly squeaking, “Hey! What’d you twats give me – I didn’t even touch anything!”

Mrs. Weasley was far too distracted by the sudden appearance of her estranged son walking toward the Burrow to even scold her for her language.

“We put some Chipmunk Chicory into your tea,” Fred explained quickly, moving toward the window, his eyes widening as Percy and an older bloke that Harry recognized to be Rufus Scrimgeour drew closer up the snow-covered path.

“Arthur! It is him!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, her hand pressed over her heart as she got up from her chair and moved closer for a better look. “And it looks like he’s with the Minister!”

She bustled around, waving her wand and tidying up the confetti and some of the random Christmas mess that was spread about the table to make it look more presentable.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Percy stood there awkwardly with Scrimgeour at his side. “Merry Christmas, mother,” he said finally, after a moment of silence where everyone was staring at him.

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears, throwing herself toward him for a hug. “Oh, Percy!” she gushed, dabbing at her eyes with her new shawl from Bill. “I can’t believe you’re here!”

The Minister of Magic stood in the doorway, leaning against his cane and overlooking the scene with a faint smile. “You must forgive this intrusion,” he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked toward him. “Percy and I were in the area – working, you know – he couldn’t resist dropping in and seeing you all.”

Harry’s brows rose at Scrimgeour’s words; Percy looked as if that was the last thing he wanted to do. His entire body was as stiff as a board and he kept avoiding everyone’s reproachful stares by half-hiding himself behind his mum.

“Oh, yes – please, come in and join us!” Mrs. Weasley invited, straightening her sparkly new hat, given to her by Fred and George. “Have some tea, or a little–”

“No, no, my dear Molly,” Scrimgeour declined, raising an idle hand. “I don’t want to intrude; wouldn’t be here at all if Percy hadn’t wanted to see you all so badly…”

“Oh, Perce!” Mrs. Weasley said happily, reaching up to kiss him. “Come sit down, you must’ve had a long journey in this snow. Are you sure you don’t want any tea to warm you up, Minister?”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “No, I assure you, I don’t want to impose. I’ll just have a stroll while you catch up with Percy. If anybody would care to show me your charming garden…” His dark eyes trailed along everyone sitting at the Weasley’s kitchen table, finally landing on Harry. “Ah, that young man’s finished, why doesn’t he take a stroll with me?”
The atmosphere around the table changed in an instant. Everybody went from staring at Percy, to Scrimgeour, and then to Harry. Ginny let out a derisive chipmunk-esque snort, glaring at her brother, but before she could say anything brash, Harry spoke up.

“If you wanted to discuss something with me alone, Minister, you could just ask, you know. I don’t bite,” he said with a crooked grin, trying to be pleasant and pushing away from the table.

Scrimgeour couldn’t have made his pretense of this visit more obvious. From the looks of things, the entire table could see it. Hermione and Ron both started to get up from their places to follow and he stopped them with a gesture of his hand. “It’s alright,” Harry said quietly. “This probably won’t take that long.”

“Yes, of course not!” Scrimgeour said enthusiastically, stepping aside to let Harry pass through the door. “We’ll just take a stroll around the garden – have a chat – and Percy and I’ll be off in no time at all. Carry on, everyone.”

Pulling his thick jumper around him tighter, Harry walked across the yard toward the Weasleys’ increasingly snow-covered garden with Scrimgeour limping at his side. On their way, Harry took even breaths, clearing his emotions and slipping closer to his interrogation role. He couldn’t imagine what Scrimgeour had to discuss with him, but he knew that Scrimgeour was the Head of the Auror office before he became Minister, which made it a good idea to put up his guard.

Especially if it had to do with the war. He had to think clearly, precisely, and analytically if that was the case.

“Charming,” Scrimgeour complimented, stopping at the garden fence and looking out over the landscape. “Very charming. I can see why you spend your holidays here.”

Harry said nothing, knowing full well that Scrimgeour was staring at him from the corner of his eye. Probably evaluating him. He let his shoulders relax and tried to appear to be at ease.

“You know, I’ve wanted to meet you for a very long time,” Scrimgeour said, after his surreptitious assessment.

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been very protective of you.” Scrimgeour fiddled with his wire rimmed glasses, dusting the tiny flakes of snow off of them. “Which is natural, of course, after what you’ve been through… Especially after what happened at the Ministry.”

He was waiting for Harry to say something, which was natural when it came to developing a rapport, but Harry remained silent, treating it like a Sortilege Manual case. He needed to figure out why Scrimgeour wanted to talk to him and Scrimgeour seemed extremely eager. According to the Sortilege Manual, when approached by a seemingly eager, friendly, and talkative prospect, silence could be a great revealer.

Scrimgeour continued after he sensed that Harry wasn’t going to reply, “I’ve been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has – most understandably, as I say – prevented this.”

Staring at him blankly, Harry let his eyes shift over the uncertain wrinkles lining Scrimgeour’s
otherwise good-natured expression.

“But the rumors that have flown around,” Scrimgeour prattled on amicably, waving his arm in a sweeping motion. “Well, of course, we both know how these stories get distorted – all these whispers of a prophecy – of you being ‘the Chosen One’.” He paused, leaning a bit closer. “I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?”

“Perhaps,” Harry answered neutrally.

“So he has, has he?” Scrimgeour muttered rhetorically, putting on a camera-ready smile that could have passed for friendly. “And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?”

“I think that’s between me and him, isn’t it, Minister?” Harry asked, placing a small bit of innocence into his voice and raising his brows. Scrimgeour was definitely here to get some information on Dumbledore – likely him as well.

“Oh, of course,” the Minister stated with a dismissive wave of his hand. “If it’s a question of confidences, I wouldn’t want you to divulge. And, in any case, does it really matter whether you are ‘the Chosen One’ or not?”

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, deliberating and trying to figure out where this was going – what the Minister was trying to find out exactly. But Harry needed more intel.

“I’m not sure,” he lightly replied. “Does it?”

“Well, of course, to you it will matter enormously,” Scrimgeour said, his eyes gazing at him affably but Harry noticed that there was a hint of greed in there somewhere. “But to the Wizarding community at large… it’s all perception, isn’t it? It’s what people believe that’s important.”

All perception… What people believe that’s important…

Ugh. There it was.

Merlin, this was an image-saving, information gathering visit, wasn’t it? Harry held back from rolling his eyes.

“And people believe that you are ‘the Chosen One,’ you see,” the Minister proclaimed after Harry didn’t say anything. “They think you quite the hero – which, of course, you are, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Four? Five times?”

He had to admit that Scrimgeour wasn’t bad at trying to develop a rapport, but that was no surprise considering who he was.

Scrimgeour continued on after a pause, “The point is, you are a symbol of hope for many. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named… it gives people a lift. And I can’t help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it a duty to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost.”

“Right. You want me to stand by the Ministry,” Harry said slowly, as if considering it, purely for Scrimgeour’s benefit. He’d never go along with it – there were too many consequences of standing by the Ministry. Too many ways to be shoved into the role of a puppet, which he loathed. “And what does that entail?”
He vaguely wondered how Scrimgeour was going to spin this whole thing to persuade him. What benefits would he offer to meet the prospect’s needs?

“Oh, well, it’s nothing at all tedious,” Scrimgeour assured. “If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance – that would give the right impression. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily.”

Harry’s scar tingled on the back of his hand at the mention of Umbridge and he let out a tiny breath to calm himself. It was a bad persuasion approach, especially if Scrimgeour knew anything about what happened at Hogwarts last year, which he likely did. Harry almost couldn’t believe that the Ministry rehired that tyrannical toad woman after that.

“I get it,” Harry interrupted, trying to keep his expression neutral. “You want to give the impression that I’m working for the Ministry in order to improve your image in the public eye.”

Scrimgeour’s hand rose and he shook his head. “You misunderstand. I’m here to ask you this because it would give everyone a lift to think you were more involved,” he stated diplomatically. “The Chosen One, you know… It’s all about giving people hope – the feeling that exciting and good things are happening.”

“That’s the biggest lie I’ve heard from you yet, Minister,” Harry said evenly, remaining as pleasant as he could muster. “I understand perfectly that your main goal is improving your image to the public because it’s suffering, and you only want to recruit me for this task because the public believes that I may be the ‘Chosen One’. You shouldn’t be afraid to admit that. It is the truth, after all.”

“Well,” Scrimgeour said, a slight frown pulling at his lips, “…yes, that may be partly why we’d like–”

“And that’s why I don’t think a partnership between us would work,” Harry asserted plainly, which made Scrimgeour stiffen as he cut him off. “You come here on false pretenses, peddling a pack of lies to try and manipulate me into filling your personal agenda. But I’m not that easy to fool. And, to be completely honest, I don’t like a lot of the things that the Ministry’s doing. Like locking up Stan Shunpike, for instance.” He then added, offhandedly, “You also have one hell of a mole problem.”

The Minister did not speak for a long moment, his eyes hardening and jaw clenching. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” he said, his tone carrying an angered edge that he couldn’t hide. “These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You’re still young–”

“The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot is a lot older than me, and he doesn’t think Stan should be in Azkaban either,” Harry countered. “I told you: I understand completely, Minister. You’re forcing him to be a scapegoat to cover up the mole issue – just like you want to make me a Ministry poster boy to cover up your unwillingness to act.”

The silence that drifted between them was so thick you could choke on it, but Harry stood his ground, waiting for Scrimgeour to break it first.

“I see,” he bitterly intoned. “You would prefer — like our dear Chief Warlock — to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?”
“Can’t blame me for not wanting to be used,” Harry remarked, which caused Scrimgeour’s face to take on a slightly outraged flush.

“Some would say it’s your duty to be used by the Ministry!”

“Yeah, and others might say it’s your duty to check that people really are Death Eaters before you allow them to be chucked into prison,” Harry bitingly replied. “You’re doing the same thing Crouch did during the First War. Why can’t you people ever get it right? Fudge pretended that everything was all hunky dory while people got murdered right under his nose, and now you’re allowing the wrong people to be chucked into jail and going along with it to cover up your mistakes while trying to pretend you’ve got ‘the Chosen One’ working for you to make you look good.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes narrowed. “So you’re not ‘the Chosen One’?”

Harry let out a short bitter laugh, unable to hold it back. “I thought you said it didn’t matter either way?”

“No, it doesn’t. I shouldn’t have said that,” Scrimgeour muttered quickly, shaking his head. “It was tactless—”

“Yeah,” Harry responded, “and one of the only honest things you’ve said to me thus far. You might want to try more of the truth sometime, Minister.”

He lifted his right hand, pointing out the scars that were indirectly given to him by the Ministry last year: I must not tell lies.

“Dolores Umbridge seems to sorely believe in it,” he muttered, his voice dripping in irony. “Yet, I was the only one telling the truth last year and I don’t remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to convince everyone that Voldemort was back. The head of the Auror office has a lot of clout in that area but, unlike you, I’m never going to sit back and play puppet because I know the truth.”

Scrimgeour stood silently, gazing at him fiercely. For a minute, he seemed to be at a loss for words and Harry paid close attention to his body language, noticing every shift.

It was only slightly surprising when Scrimgeour changed the subject, all pretenses flying out the window.

“What is Dumbledore up to?” the Minister questioned, his head tilting microscopically as he looked at him. “Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?”

“I’ve no idea,” he said, a bit impressed by the gall that Scrimgeour had to continue with this.

“And you wouldn’t tell me if you knew,” Scrimgeour deduced, “would you?”

Harry’s brow arched. “What do you think?”

“Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can’t find out by other means.”

“You can try,” Harry said, his lips twisting into a bitter smirk. “However, you’d just be repeating even more mistakes of the past. Fudge thought of interfering at Hogwarts and meddling in Dumbledore’s affairs too. And, you might have noticed that he’s not Minister anymore, but
Dumbledore’s still headmaster; so I’d leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you.”

They’d reached a standstill, staring at other impassively, secretly sizing each other up and trying to get a clear read.

“Well, it is certainly evident that he’s done a very good job on you,” Scrimgeour commented, his eyes cold and glittering. “Dumbledore’s man through and through, aren’t you, Potter?”

“I’m not much of anyone’s man,” Harry corrected, holding back his discomfort at being called that because he wasn’t even sure if he was himself. “As I said, I don’t like to be used.”

Pivoting on his feet, he strode back toward the house, not letting his demeanor fall away until he was out of the Minister’s sight.

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Direct and Paraphrased Quotes/Reference:


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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Clandestinity

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: As always, thank you for reading! And a massive thanks to my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Duality: Clandestinity

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The feeling of his wand back in his hand, performing even the randomest of magic, made Harry extremely happy to be back at Hogwarts. In his timeline, it had been a little over a month since he had set foot in the castle, which was bizarre to think about. Once they were past the secrecy sensors, Ron was already nipping at his and Hermione’s heels to get them to visit the Room of Requirement – even saying that they should skip lunch, which made Harry and Hermione pause in alarm on their way up the stairs in the Entrance Hall.

Ron was really bloody serious about wanting to be in the loop if he was turning down lunch.

“Er – just let me go get the Gryffindor password from McGonagall and I’ll join you two there,” Hermione said with only the slightest hesitation, turning and leading her bags and pet carrier up the stairs with her wand.

Harry let out a sigh and gestured with a sharp jerk of his head for Ron to follow him. “Come on then,” he muttered, not looking forward to this bit.

Outside of the Room of Requirement, he paced with Ron slowly – three times – until the door appeared and allowed them to enter. The room was cozy, similar to the Gryffindor common room, with the massive table full of pastries and sandwiches behind the sofa being the only difference. Harry glanced over at Ron with an amused grin as the redheaded Gryffindor moved forward and tried to grab a chocolate pastry, but his hand kept going straight through the food as if it was a ghost.

“I don’t think that’s real, mate.”

“What’s the point of going through the trouble of giving me food that isn’t real? I’m starving!” Ron addressed the room, reaching down and opening his rucksack to pull out a tin of Mrs. Weasley’s shortbread. “Thank Merlin I’ve another tin of mum’s biscuits.”
Shaking his head, Harry set his bags down and took a seat in one of the armchairs in front of the fire while Ron took the sofa, stuffing shortbread into his mouth. They’d barely had a chance to say anything before Hermione joined them, entering the room and sitting across from Harry in the other armchair.

“So,” Ron began, wiping crumbs off of his mouth with the sleeve of his jumper, “you wanna tell me what’s been going on with you two? With your group and stuff?”

“There is no group,” Harry stated calmly, causing a confounded expression to bubble up on Ron’s face.

“What?”

Hermione shifted nervously in her seat. “That was a lie that we told the Order to convince them about the list. But really, we got that list via… other means.”

“How then?” Ron’s brows furrowed low on his head. “What’d you do?”

“We kidnapped and interrogated Malfoy and Goyle,” Harry said after a pause, reaching in his pocket to pull out his red leather case. “Well, really – Daphne, Nott, and Zabini kidnapped Malfoy and we all sort of kidnapped Goyle together—”

“Hang on,” Ron interrupted with a gesture of his hand, his gaze questioning. “When did you…? How did you…? And—”

“We used a time turner,” Hermione said, cutting him off.

She went on, explaining the original plan that Daphne, Nott, and Zabini had with Malfoy and how they kidnapped Harry and she found out about it. Then, about how they interrogated Malfoy for information and how they needed Goyle for confirmation so they kidnapped and interrogated him. She revealed most of the information they’d gleaned from the two Slytherins, including the Vanishing Cabinet and the Hogwarts siege, which they had agreed upon telling him.

Ron’s eyes got increasingly wide during the whole story, his mouth opening at various times to interrupt, but Hermione kept going, putting it all out there. Harry stayed silent, smoking a fag and listening, playing with the metal scrying mirror case in his lap. His nerves were set on edge.

“No bloody way,” Ron breathed after it was all over, his entire body unmoving – possibly from the shock. The tin of biscuits next to him lied completely forgotten.

Sighing, Harry flipped open the metal case in his lap, which depicted both Malfoy and Goyle in their interrogation rooms. Malfoy was reading a book and Goyle was passed out on his bed, asleep. He threw it to Ron, who fumbled with it and stared at it, his eyes even wider than before.


Hermione rolled her eyes. “We said we’d tell you everything. That’s everything.”

“Let me get this straight,” Ron replied, staring between both of them. “You-Know-Who’s planning to siege Hogwarts for hostages in order to take over Ministry…? With a Vanishing Cabinet. Which is in this room – well, another room in this room. Right now.”
“Yes,” Harry said with a nod.

The centre of Ron’s forehead creased. “And you’re not going to destroy it?”

“As much as I’d like to, that wouldn’t be the most… tactical approach,” Hermione confirmed, shrugging begrudgingly.

“Why not?”

“Voldemort would find another way to siege Hogwarts somehow – this way we know how he’s going to get in and we can stop it that way,” Harry explained, taking the last drag of his cigarette. “We’re going to keep an eye on Cornfoot to track his progress. When the cabinet’s fixed, we’ll be waiting for them.”

“Why didn’t you tell the Order about this?” Ron asked. “I mean… I’m sure they’d help.”

“Snape’s a part of the Order,” Harry said briskly, “and I don’t trust Snape. We’ll alert the Order when there isn’t enough time for him to go running off to Voldemort to tell him we’ve foiled his plans. Because Merlin knows who Snape is working for.”

He heard Hermione let out one of her patient sighs, knowing that she slightly disagreed with him, but she didn’t protest the plan. Obviously everything Malfoy’d said in the interrogation room about the summer conversations between Snape and Voldemort was starting to get through to her. And Goyle about the Dementors, among other things – like the suspicious Unbreakable Vow.

Ron nodded his head in concurrence, staring at the fire with a much less confused look on his face. He seemed to be taking it all in – and accepting it surprisingly well.

“The Order probably wouldn’t go along with our plan either,” Harry elaborated further, as an afterthought.

“I dunno.” Ron shrugged a shoulder. “They might, mate. But yeah… I agree about Snape. It’s a good plan…” His brows then furrowed and he looked up at them. “So you really spent two weeks in a Muggle warehouse thing with Greengrass and that lot? And Malfoy. And Goyle.”

Harry’s brows rose at the question. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “We did. It wasn’t as bad as you’re probably thinking.”

Ron stared at him unconvinced.

“Merlin, Ron,” Hermione scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “You need to get over this petty house rivalry. Is it so hard to believe that there are Slytherins that are on our side?”

“Come on, Hermione.” Ron’s lips flattened into a thin line. “Nott? His father’s a Death Eater! And Zabini is…”

“If you were paying any attention at the Order meeting, you would have heard that Nott’s older brother is the Death Eater in that family – not his father and definitely not Nott!” Hermione argued sharply. “And Blaise has always been quite neutral, despite his–”

A heated flush crawled up Ron’s neck. “Blaise, is it?”
Harry pressed his hand to his forehead, letting out a silent groan as the row hit with an explosive force.

Why did she have to slip and call him ‘Blaise’ _now_, of all times? She’d been pretty good at calling him Zabini throughout the whole explanation. He tried to drown out the screaming and not listen to it, much like he did when she and Daph got into rows at the warehouse, but it was hard. It was echoing off the walls.

When he glanced back up at them, they were on their feet, circling each other – their eyes narrowed to slits. Ron bellowed about the ‘mistletoe incident’ at Slughorn’s Christmas party and Hermione had out her accusatory pointer finger, tapping Ron on the chest with it and cornering him as she articulated, “I can snog _whomever_ I _want_, Ronald Weasley! _As many times as I want_!”

That just made it worse.

They looked as if they wanted to strangle each other, which made Harry feel slightly worried as they drew even closer to each other. Swiftly, he rose from his chair, situating himself between the two just as Hermione got out her wand. Harry stood in her line of sight, blocking her aim if she decided to take the shot.

They were arguing over his shoulders and around his torso.

“COULD YOU JUST STOP AND BLOODY WELL TALK ABOUT THIS LIKE CIVIL FUCKING ADULTS FOR ONCE?!” Harry shouted over their screaming, grabbing the front of Ron’s shirt and the end of Hermione’s wand.

They both glared at him, momentarily silenced, and he shoved Ron down onto the couch, gesturing Hermione to take a seat in her chair with his other hand. She harshly tugged her wand out of his grip and stubbornly stood by her chair, crossing her arms over her chest.

That was probably the best he was going to get out of her.

“Okay,” Harry said, regaining his composure and still standing between them as a human shield. “I don’t know what it is with you two, but it has to stop.” He held up his hands when they went to interrupt him.

“Look – we’re all telling the truth right now,” he continued. “So… _out_ with it. Do you two want to snog each other or something? Because you _both_ have acted like jealous… _people_—” He wanted to say a far more insulting word. “—for _months_. And I’m _seriously_ getting tired of it.”

There was a stiff minute of silence, where no one moved a muscle, and air in the room felt charged until Hermione suddenly spoke.

“No – I’d rather not ‘snog him’, as you so eloquently put it,” she answered haughtily. “Maybe a few weeks ago I would have said differently, but I’m past the point of dealing with this.”

“A few _weeks_ ago?” Ron intoned, his voice acrid and bitter as he looked up at her. He then sunk back on the sofa, his expression darkening. “Right. A few weeks ago for you was Slughorn’s party. _With Zabini_.

“_It was before that, actually, and I wasn’t going to wait around forever_ for you to get a bloody _clue_,
Ron,“ Hermione replied, her lips pursed to a severe degree. “I fancied you. But… I just can’t.” She shook her head. “I’m sick of it and it’s hopeless.”

“But I…” Ron started and then stopped, his expression morphing slowly – softening slightly. “Maybe I do too.”

Hermione’s brow rose. “You ‘what’ too?”

“…Fancy you,” Ron admitted hesitantly, looking jumpier than a pygmy puff.

*Well… this is better than the shouting, at least,* Harry thought as he side-stepped away to retake his seat in the armchair by the fire.

Hermione huffed, shaking her head. “It’s too late.”

“But…”

“No, Ron,” she sharply cut him off. “I really do like Blaise.”

Ron stared at her in horror, sitting up straighter. “He only wants one thing, Hermione! Blaise Zabini is–”

“Not you too,” Hermione interrupted, rolling her eyes. “You don’t understand. None of you do!”

Harry gazed at her questioningly, a bit on edge from the sudden shouting. He was ready to intervene at any moment, watching the conversation carefully. They weren’t attacking each other… yet.

Hermione’s wand was still pointed in a direction other than Ron, which was relieving, but that could change at any moment. And she really knew how to use that thing so it was good to be on guard.

“Then help me understand!” Ron said, leaning forward, angry and attentive. “Because I fancy you and you fancy me – your next response shouldn’t be ‘Oh, well, I like Zabini’,” he mocked, causing Hermione to glare at him.

“I told him I fancied you, you know,” she said in a vicious voice, but it faded quickly. “He was… very empathetic. He helped me a lot, actually.”

“Helped you right out of your skirt, I reckon,” Ron scathingly retorted.

“No!” Hermione said firmly. “He’s… You know how his mother’s had her fair share of relationships and he’s definitely had a fair share of…”– she sighed –“well, you know?”

Ron rolled his eyes, looking disgusted. “I don’t even want to know,” he grumbled.

But Hermione persisted, “I wouldn’t exactly call him an expert in this subject, but he understands at least. And he helped me realize what type of relationship that you and I would have if it ever happened. Would it be good? Yeah, probably for the first few months… But we just don’t work, Ron – we row and have so many differences. And it likely wouldn’t ever stop. It’s even possible that we wouldn’t be close friends after the relationship eventually ended and I don’t want to lose you as a friend.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. If Zabini was using a manipulation tactic on Hermione, *that* was an
extremely good one… He wondered what the dark Slytherin boy was playing at.

“But my mum and dad argue all the time and they have a great relationship!” Ron protested, still with that sickened expression on his face.

Hermione sighed again, a frown marring her lips as she gazed at Ron patiently. “I don’t want that type of relationship. It makes me sad thinking that that would be our future – my future – if we ever decided to give it a go.”

“But we don’t know that!” Ron burst out, gripping the edge of the sofa cushion. “We haven’t even tried anything and – already – you’re passing off on it because bloody Zabini put that idea in your head!”

Hermione’s jaw stiffened. “I’m not stupid, Ron. All he did was ask me where I saw it going – if I were to be involved with you, marry you even – which I hadn’t thought of before. I didn’t think ahead of the fact that I just fancied you because I was too busy rowing with you, being angry at you, or trying to make you get a bloody clue.” She paused. “It wasn’t him that put that idea into my head – it was my own conclusion. And I don’t fancy you anymore. I can’t have that life.”

Harry’s face relaxed slightly at her elaboration, as did Ron’s – actually, Ron went from being red with anger to looking completely dejected as a result of Hermione’s further explanation. He couldn’t even muster a reply, which made Harry glance over at him with a touch of sympathy, even though Hermione had a decent point about their possible relationship.

Harry reckoned that he’d have to have a serious chat with Zabini alone sometime, because everything Hermione had said was suspicious behavior on Zabini’s part. And if Hermione was considering a relationship with the arrogant wanker, Harry needed to make sure there wasn’t any foul play. He was her friend, after all – he had to look out for her. Just as Hermione looked out for him.

He had no idea how he’d help Ron though, which made him feel slightly awkward since he had brought on the whole conversation.

Rejection wasn’t an easy thing to swallow.

Then again, neither were love potions.

OoO

Harry had a problem. A really really big problem. And it was only a week into classes! However, it was a problem he expected – just not so soon!

“Hermione…” he muttered as he entered the empty classroom where he knew she liked to study before dinner. “What can you teach me about Occlumency in… less than four hours?”

She lifted her head up from her book, a confused expression marring her face and she marked her place with a spare bit of parchment. Her eyes then trailed to the scroll in Harry’s hand and the confusion fell away in an instant, replaced with concern.

“You have to meet with Professor Dumbledore.”
“Yes.” Harry took a seat across from her, pulling up a chair. “And I’ve always had this… inkling that he’s been – well… reading my mind? It’s like I don’t have to even say anything and he says things as if I were thinking out loud.”

“I know… Static Legilimency,” Hermione said with a resigned nod. “Professor Snape does it, I’ve noticed. It wouldn’t be implausible if Professor Dumbledore’s mastered it – it’s an intelligent thing to do if you’re in a position of power.”

“Right, so if I go in there and he asks about the mole list, how do I keep from him the real reason why I have that list if he’s reading my mind?” Harry said in a rush, feeling slightly panicked.

He trusted Dumbledore and all, but he didn’t trust what Dumbledore would do with that information and – by extension – the Order, which could mess with their plans. “I’m terrible at Occlumency. And didn’t you and Daphne do a load of practice with that stuff when we were revising?”

“We were trying to figure out how to block being pinned down with Legilimency – it’s not…”

“Sounds a lot harder than Occlumency,” Harry commented with a tilt of his head.

“I’m not sure.” Hermione shrugged, the centre of her forehead creasing. “I mean, yes, I know how Occlumency works and I know how to do it, but I’ve not had the same amount of practice you’ve had with Professor Snape. No one’s broken into that area of my mind; I don’t know if I could effectively evade them with what I know.”

His nerves were tingling worse than ever and his voice took on an anxious edge as he spoke, “Well, then, tell me what you know. It can’t hurt.” He paused and let out a sigh. “Maybe we could… practice a little? I don’t want to go in there unprepared.”

Hermione sighed and she shook her head. “I can’t do Static Legilimency, Harry.”

“Can’t be that different from normal Legilimency.”

“Legilimency is deeper and Static Legilimency picks up surface thoughts – they’re performed differently…” Hermione’s lips parted and she got up from her chair. “I’m going to go get Blaise – he knows Legilimency much better than I do. He might be able to try it.”

“Wait – hold on!” Harry stopped her before she could move out the door. “I’m not laying all of my thoughts and memories out to Zabini.”

“What else can we do then?” Hermione rhetorically questioned. “I’ve never performed actual Legilimency, let alone Static Legilimency – Blaise has. He’d be better at this than me. I’ll teach you what I know about Occlumency – Blaise might have a few ways to approach it too – and then we can… practice.”

He didn’t have much choice over this, did he? He was running blind – even Hermione was running blind, which was unusual.

With an unenthusiastic sigh, Harry gritted out, “Fine. But I don’t trust him. If he sees anything I don’t want him to see, he’ll have to agree to being Obliviated.”

Hermione’s lips pursed. “No – no Obliviation. Go get some vials. If he agrees to it, he can pull the
memories from his mind instead. It’s safer – more controlled.”

“But how will we know if he’s pulling the right memory?” Harry hissed, his entire body filled with mistrust over this whole idea.

“I’ll teach you how to put them into your head so you can check,” Hermione replied with a nod, as if the whole thing was decided and sounded completely sane to her.

She left the room in a flurry of bushy brown hair before he could say anything else and Harry pulled out his red leather case, frustratingly lighting a fag as he went off to search his potions kit for his box of vials.

This was one hell of a half-baked plan.

OoO

He came back to the room with a large box of unbreakable glass vials in his hands, filled to the brim thanks to Neville. Neville had hundreds of vials, which he used on a regular basis to collect plant extracts, so he didn’t mind sparing a few dozen to help Harry with his ‘extra-credit Potions project’. It was a small fib, but he’d probably need as many vials as he could get if the Occlumency lesson from Snape was any indication of how this was going to go.

In the room, Zabini was leaning against the table with his wand out, looking bored and aloof in a way that only Zabini could pull off. Hermione was sitting next to him on the table, in mid-ramble about the things she’d learned about blocking Legilimency attacks and Harry took out his wand to quickly ward the door just in case. He didn’t want anyone stumbling upon them practicing this.

“The techniques used to manipulate Static Legilimency are the same as usual Occlumency techniques,” Zabini replied to Hermione, glancing over at Harry. “What type of techniques did you previously learn?”

Harry shrugged. “Clear your mind?”

Zabini’s brow arched. “The Vacuous Technique? That’s…” He shook his head, his lips pulling into an amused smirk. “Was it effective at all?”

A perplexed expression crossed over Harry’s face and Hermione explained, “It’s a very advanced technique. Is that all you… learned?”

Harry nodded.

“No wonder you need my help,” Zabini dryly intoned. “Only an imbecile would start off teaching you that method right away.”

Slightly entertained by Zabini inadvertently calling Snape an imbecile, Harry set the box of vials on the table. “What other techniques are there then?” he questioned, staring over at them.

“Morgana’s eye, Potter, are you seriously telling me you’ve never opened a book on the subject?”

“There’s the Replacement Technique, the Distraction Technique, the Mundane Technique, and the
Mirror Technique,” Hermione listed, ignoring Zabini’s derisive remark but still throwing him a disapproving glance. “All of them have different ways of approaching the issue. It’s generally about projecting different thoughts to replace others or conjuring up deceptive images. Since you said the techniques for manipulating various types of Legilimency are similar, I think the latter will be the best approach, right Blaise?”

Zabini shrugged. “If he can muster enough imagination to effectively accomplish it, perhaps.”

Harry glared at the dark Slytherin determinedly. “I’m sure I can. Now, what do I have to do?”

“You have to…” Hermione started, obviously gathering her thoughts, “*imagine* things. For example, when you go to lie, you have to imagine aspects of the lie and project them to the forefront of your mind. If Dumbledore asks you about the list — for instance — you could bring forth an image of asking various people for help, or asking them to gather information for you. You have to visually construct the lie.”

“Yes, that would work,” Zabini said with a miniscule tilt of his head. “*However, for completeness,* it’s better to take a past memory and replace aspects about it to fit your lie. Imagined, constructed, and badly altered memories all have a fogginess to them, which makes them easy to detect. The Headmaster might be able to sense that something’s off if there’s too much fog.”

“Okay,” Harry muttered, positioning himself in the centre of the room, away from any objects he could hurt himself with while under Legilimency, “I’ll try that then. We should get started – we’ve only about three hours left.”

Zabini gazed at him with a cynical expression. “If you brace yourself like that in front of Professor Dumbledore, he’s going to know something’s off without Static Legilimency.”

Letting out a sigh, Harry tried to relax a little. “I’ve had terrible experiences with Legilimency, Zabini. Just give me a second…”

He took in a deep breath, clearing his emotions and preparing to visually lie, bringing up and changing memories of speaking to Nott to blackmailing him; changing memories and conversations with members of the DA, with Luna, and with Susan Bones and even Daphne.

Rolling his shoulders to stretch out the tension, Harry nodded. “Okay. Ready.”

Zabini stood, approaching him with his wand at his side. “Now, I can’t perform Static Legilimency. That’s wandless and takes *years* to master. I’m simply going to do a light Legilimency sweep – it’s a bit stronger than Static Legilimency, but light enough that we’ll still be able to hold a conversation while under the effects.” He paused. “It might be advantageous to… have me ask you questions you’ll have to answer with a lie in order to simulate the situation.”

“Go head.” Harry took another deep emotion-quelling breath and nodded in acquiescence before Zabini raised his wand.

“*Legilmens,*” Zabini whispered, maintaining eye contact. “How was your Christmas holiday?”

Harry’s brows furrowed and he gazed at the dark Slytherin confusedly, not able to feel any difference inside or outside of his mind. Did Zabini get the spell wrong? It wasn’t like any type of Legilimency that he’d ever experienced.
Shouldn’t he be hunched over on the floor right about now?

“I didn’t get it wrong – I know what I’m doing, Potter,” Zabini impatiently responded to Harry’s thoughts. “Now answer the question: How was your Christmas holiday?”

“Er, good – I had fun,” Harry replied, his mental images sticking to the memories at the Burrow; peeling sprouts with Ron and eating at the enormous dining table in the Weasley’s kitchen. The Weasley’s kitchen thought then strayed to meeting Rufus Scrimgeour and he tried to stop it, but the image of speaking with him in the Weasley’s garden still peeked through.

“I see. How did your private chat with the Minister of Magic go?” Zabini asked, a mocking grin tugging at his lips.

“I probably don’t need to lie about that with Dumbledore,” Harry said, shrugging. “There wasn’t anything… incriminating about it.”

More images poured forth that he tried to hide and failed.

“Not bad, Potter.” Zabini’s grin widened further. “Subtly telling the Minister of Magic where to stick his wand – I’m impressed.”

Harry’s teeth gritted in irritation. “You’re supposed to be helping me lie to Professor Dumbledore – not assessing my memories, Zabini.”

“Sorry,” Zabini said, but he didn’t look sorry in the least. “It’s not like I can help it when you’re being an open book.”

“Just get on with the questioning.”

“This little group of yours – the ones who got the list. Who are they?” Zabini then probed, cocking his head to the side.

Harry brought up the memories he’d altered and tried projecting them to the forefront of his mind. “I’d rather not say. They wish to remain anonymous – I believe it’s safer for everyone that way.”

“Good – though that one of Susan Bones is suspicious. When was that?” Zabini’s eyebrow rose. “Last year? Her hair’s different. And there’s a bit of fog in the one with Theo, but it’s not too terrible for your first try.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment?

Harry’s brows rose. “I’ll try again,” he said, quickly altering the thoughts and placing the conversations in different memories, projecting them forward.

Zabini’s nose scrunched up in consideration. “Better. It’ll do. How about Draco? Do you know where he is? And Goyle?”

Harry blinked, trying to imagine Malfoy gatecrashing Slughorn’s Christmas party, but he knew that a memory of Draco Malfoy tied to a chair in his interrogation room slipped by for just a second.

“I’ve no idea where he is. Haven’t seen him since Slughorn’s party.”
“Finite,” Zabini muttered with a sigh, waving his wand. “I think it might be a useful exercise to write a list of everything you don’t want the Headmaster to know and construct memories against them. Because you can’t go into this ill-equipped. You’re good at hiding your emotions but you’re not good enough to construct quick fabrications on the spot. You’re not compulsive enough to do that.”

That was actually an extremely helpful idea… The centre of Harry’s forehead creased. “Why are you so willing to help me?”

“Potentially, I could be implicated just as much as you if something in your mind got to Dumbledore,” Zabini clarified. He then glanced over at the bushy-haired Gryffindor seated on the table with a smirk. “Hermione can also be very convincing.”

“…How?” Harry asked, his eyes flicking toward both of them.

“I threatened to hex him quite… creatively if he didn’t help you right away,” Hermione answered with a self-conscious shrug.

Zabini’s smirk widened. “Can’t argue with that, can I, love?” he said fondly.

Ugh. Trust Zabini to be attracted to threats of being hexed.

Harry rolled his eyes as he ambled over to the table and grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill to start his list.

“How did you learn about all this stuff anyway?” he asked, staring at the parchment and writing things down: Malfoy, Goyle, and the warehouse to name just a few.

The dark Slytherin snorted derisively. “How do you think?” he said, leaning against the table. “It’s not as if my mother isn’t an alleged homicidal widow.”

“Oh. Right…” Harry trailed off with a wary stare toward Zabini.

“So she really did kill all of her husbands?” Hermione questioned with a scoff and a stern hand on her hip.

Zabini let out a breathy laugh. “As I said – alleged. There’s no proof – don’t look so appalled.”

“Just because there’s no proof doesn’t mean that she didn’t!” Hermione argued.

“Yes, but there’s no official proof that she did either.”

“You wouldn’t need to learn mind arts if you weren’t covering anything up for her.”

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not.” Zabini shrugged. “What she does with her husbands is her business.”

Hermione gaped. “But she’s killing people.”

“Allegedly,” Zabini insisted. “And if she were to kill anyone, it would be for a good reason.”

“Like what? Monetary gain?” she disapprovingly remarked.

Zabini laughed, low and deep, a wide smile splitting across his face. “Most of our money came from
my father, who died – of natural causes, mind you – well over a decade ago.”

“That doesn’t tell me that she wouldn’t do it for monetary gain,” Hermione pointed out.

“No, it doesn’t,” he evenly replied.

Before Hermione could say anything else, Harry interrupted the heated discussion, looking up from his list, “Okay. I’m done. Is there anything you want to add?”

He slid it over to them, glad for the silence that fell over the room.

Hermione’s glare toward Zabini withered and she picked up the piece of parchment, her eyes scanning it briefly. “Seems to cover everything. Shall we add your mother’s dubious habits to this?” she asked haughtily, passing the list to Zabini.

“I don’t see why. It’s all alleged, as I’ve said,” Zabini retorted, smirking. He then turned toward Harry. “You don’t want to keep your relationship with Daphne from him?”

“I was… forced to tell the Order about it, so he’ll know,” Harry explained, biting his cheek in irritation at the memory of Ron outing that secret.

“How unfortunate,” Zabini drawled absentmindedly, setting the list back down onto the table and fingering his wand. “Are you ready to give it another try?”

Letting out a long sigh, Harry reluctantly nodded. “Just let me reconstruct a few memories first…”

**OoO**

He finished the last few drags off of his cigarette in front of the statue guarding the Headmaster’s office, vanishing it with a wave of his wand. Mentally and emotionally, he was prepared for this, but he would be lying if he said he wasn’t at least a little bit nervous. He had no idea what to expect other than Pensieve-viewed memories about Tom Riddle’s life. Hopefully Dumbledore was just building to the more useful stuff for later – taking his time. That had to be it.

Whispering the password to the giant eagle statue, Harry climbed the stairs to Dumbledore’s office, taking even breaths through his nose to clear the remaining dregs of emotion that clung to him. The memories he had reconstructed came to him much easier now, thanks to Zabini drilling him for the last two hours.

He was ready.

“Ah, Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore greeted from behind his desk, gesturing to one of the wing-backed chairs in front of him. “Please, sit down. Would you like a Lemon Drop?”

Harry crossed the room, past the sleeping portraits of former Headmasters, and took a seat, declining Dumbledore’s offer of a Lemon Drop.

Dumbledore popped one of the sweets into his mouth, staring at him thoughtfully and leaning back in his chair. “How have you been?”
“Just fine, sir,” Harry replied, getting comfortable in the wing backed chair and trying to look relaxed.

Dumbledore smiled genially. “I’m glad that you are. I’d heard that the Minister of Magic visited you at Christmas.”

“Yes,” Harry said with a nod, staring at Fawkes, who was perching on the end of the desk. Avoiding eye contact supposedly helped with deterring Static Legilimency. “It wasn’t too unpleasant. He was… more manipulative than I expected though.”

Dumbledore’s bushy white brows rose. “Is that so?”

“He used Percy Weasley to get me to talk to him and then tried to bribe me into improving the Ministry’s image.” Harry glanced over at Dumbledore for a moment, conjuring up those memories. “He also tried to gather information on you. Wanted to know where you were going off to during your absences.”

“Yes, he has been very nosy in the past months,” Dumbledore replied with a small smile. “He tried to have me followed, which was rather amusing. Unfortunately for him, he sent Dawlish. I regret that I’ve had to jinx him more times than I’d ever care to. Naturally, Dawlish says it’s all part of the job, but nevertheless…” he trailed off with a slightly pained sigh.

“So he still doesn’t know where you’re going,” Harry deduced, quickly hiding his built up curiosity over the subject and projecting the image of Scrimgeour asking about it all.

“No, not as of yet,” Dumbledore said, peering over his half-moon spectacles. “I have also heard that you and your friends offered your hands at the last meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.”

Was that Dumbledore’s way of distracting him from the topic of his absences?

Harry nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on the box of Lemon Drops on the desk, preparing his mind before he looked back up at the Headmaster. “It started out as a way of gathering information on Malfoy and what he was doing in the Room of Requirement. Getting our hands on names of Ministry moles was just a happy accident – we thought the Order could use it.”

“It was very kind of you to share that with us. However, I would like to know, Harry… What came of the information gathered on Draco Malfoy?” Dumbledore questioned, gazing at him with his overly perceptive twinkling eyes.

“We never could figure it out,” Harry said with a shrug, projecting memories of Mundungus Fletcher speaking of Malfoy at the Order meeting. “Not that it matters anymore since he’s run off. With Goyle as well.”

The disappearance of Goyle and Malfoy caused a number of wild rumours to fly about the castle over the past week – everyone was talking about it.

As an afterthought, Harry continued, “Maybe whatever he was working on in that room, he took with him.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore intoned, his malformed hand stroking idly at the end of his long beard as he turned to stare out the giant window in his office. “I’m unsure if you’ve been told this, but Narcissa Malfoy has gone missing as well – around the same time as Mr. Goyle. The Daily Prophet, as you
would expect, has kept this matter very private.”

Harry’s brows rose and he schooled his expression into one of surprise. “Really? D’you think they’ve gone into hiding? Maybe they took Goyle along?”

He hadn’t been able to talk to Daphne since arriving back at school, what with classes starting and the piles of homework that the professors handed out. She also seemed inordinately busy – disappearing during meal times and study periods. But if Narcissa Malfoy had been missing since Goyle had been gone, it was safe to guess that Daphne was successful.

Dumbledore shook his head, glancing back at Harry, who had to quickly hide his thoughts under Malfoy at Slughorn’s Christmas party and the conversation between Moody and Mundungus Fletcher.

“Alas, I can only speculate, for there has been no word of their whereabouts or movements for weeks.” Dumbledore paused, placing his hands – one blackened and one merely wrinkled with age – on the edge of the desk. “And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. We have much to cover this evening,” he said, rising from his chair.¹

As the Headmaster strode over to the Pensieve, Harry let out an inconspicuous sigh of relief, but kept his facade.

He almost couldn’t believe that he was accomplishing lying to Dumbledore. But the hours of preparation that he’d put into the lies didn’t prepare him for the effects – how he felt now as what he was doing sank in, following the eccentric Headmaster over to the Pensieve. He tried to squash it and not let it show on his face, but inside he felt it all, gazing into the basin and away from Dumbledore’s twinkling stare.

Part of him felt guilty about lying, which he’d expected – he trusted Dumbledore after all and the eccentric Headmaster had given him very few reasons not to trust him over the years.

Yet, the other part of him was… starkly opposite. It didn’t feel guilty in the least.

If anything… that part of him seemed… pleased.

OoO

All direct and paraphrased quotes taken from/Reference:


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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Steganography and Duplicity

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: As always, thank you for reading! And a massive thanks to my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: Steganography and Duplicity

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“Horcruxes? Tom Riddle was asking Slughorn about horcruxes?” Hermione questioned, rolling the word around on her tongue. “Horcruxes… I don’t think I’ve heard of that term… horcruxes…”

Harry’s brow arched. “Did you not hear the bit about how I have to manipulate the real memory out of Slughorn?” he asked, even though he was appreciative of her intellectual inquisitiveness.

Dumbledore didn’t offer any information on horcruxes, so it was no surprise that Hermione didn’t know about them. It was possible that the Headmaster didn’t know about horcruxes either, which could have been why he needed the memory, but that was highly unlikely. The more likely scenario was that Dumbledore was keeping that information to himself, like he usually did. Harry was beginning to see the point of Daphne’s regurgitated words from Aberforth Dumbledore: ‘He always has his own personal agenda.’

Regardless, horcruxes must have been extremely obscure magic – and dark magic at that since Slughorn was trying to cover up the fact that he knew about them. Likely illegal and very likely immoral. Slughorn was all about his image.

“I heard that, yes, but—” Hermione paused, sighing, “—shouldn’t we try to figure out what horcruxes are before getting that memory from him? It might help you with getting that information if you knew what they were…”

“Maybe,” Harry replied, reaching into his pocket for his red leather case and going through Sortilege Manual protocols in his head. Nott and Daphne’s lessons trickled in along with it. “Unfortunately, it’s not like I can bring him in for somerevision, if you get what I mean.”

Plucking a fag from the confines of his cigarette case, he lit it with Daphne’s gold lighter, inhaling deep.
“Yes, that wouldn’t be the most intelligent plan,” Hermione agreed, her mind obviously elsewhere. “Horcruxes…” she muttered under her breath, shaking her head. “I need to go to the library. Perhaps you should ask Nott for some help?”

Harry stared up at Hermione as she stood from the alcove they were sitting in. “I don’t know if Nott would be helpful with this since Slughorn doesn’t like him that much – and I’m not even sure if I want to tell Nott – I mean, maybe. I know I can use asset cultivation tactics on Slughorn, but…” He shrugged. “It would take some time. And I dunno how effective it would be.”

“Might be a good idea to start attending more Slug Club meetings and stop scheduling your Quidditch practices for when they occur then,” Hermione suggested, shifting her bag over her shoulder. “I’ll see you in Potions later.”

Harry nodded, exhaling a breath full of smoke as Hermione disappeared down the corridor. A few moments after, he got up, stretching his legs and walking off to go find Daphne. This was the first study period where he wasn’t buried under piles of new coursework – or in need of emergency Occlumency lessons – and he would be damned if he wasn’t going to talk to her. Besides, he needed to return the lighter she’d borrowed him.

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Using the Marauder’s Map, he located her in the Slytherin Common Room and stalked down the stairs toward the dungeons, pulling out his invisibility cloak. His idea was that he’d wait until someone came by and whispered the password to the entrance, but he’d only passed one person on his way down there, which didn’t give him much hope on that plan. Regrettably, most of the students were in classes at this time so he had to think up a different – bolder – plan.

From under the cloak, Harry lifted his hand and knocked on the darkened wall, waiting for an answer. He pounded a bit harder a minute later, increasing the knocking until he heard scuffling on the other side.

“Keep your bloody trousers on!” the girl yelled from inside. The bricks in the folded aside and a sneering seventh year appeared in the opening, looking around the corridor. “Peeves, if this is another joke, I’m gonna get the Bloody Baron, you stupid poltergeist! Oi! Where in ruddy hell are you?!”

Flattening himself aside the wall, Harry surreptitiously entered the Slytherin Common Room, not daring to breathe as he passed the irritated seventh year girl. The entrance wall closed behind him and he quickly side-stepped, nearly knocking into a column, in order to avoid having the girl run into him.

“Peeves again?” he heard Daphne idly comment from the sofa in the middle of the common room. A cigarette was dangling from her fingertips as she stared at the enormous tome in her lap while taking notes with her other hand.

“If he does that one more time…” the witch who had answered the knock grumbled, stalking over to one of the study tables near the enchanted windows.

The Slytherin Common Room was mostly filled with sixth and seventh years, some he recognized
and some that he didn’t. A younger-looking fourth year boy was there, lounging on one of the armchairs with a bandaged leg propped up on a cushion.

“I’ve heard that there are entrapment spells that you can use on poltergeists,” the boy said, joining the conversation. “My mum works in the Department of Magical Creatures. That’s what they use to transport them in cases of malicious hauntings.”

While a small group of Slytherins plotted getting their revenge on Peeves, Harry snuck up behind Daphne and poked her in the shoulder, which made her shift and look around, slowly maneuvering her wand.

“Daphne,” he whispered, moving close enough so only she could hear him.

She turned her head toward his voice. “Harry?” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth. “What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d return your lighter,” he quietly replied, “and we need to talk.”

Shoving her wand back up her sleeve, she inconspicuously asked, “About what?”

“Well… everything, basically. I heard about Narcissa.”

Letting out a sigh, Daphne closed her book on a piece of parchment that seemed to be covered in numbers, not notes, which Harry had only glanced at for a second. “Go to the sixth year boys’ dormitory. I’ll be along in a second.”

He nodded, even though she couldn’t see him, and took off up the stairs to the left. Since the staircase didn’t collapse under him, he knew he remembered it right, and he got to searching which door to go through. It seemed as if the dormitories were laid out similarly to the Gryffindor ones, which was a relief.

Twisting the handle on the doorknob, he entered the sixth year boys’ dormitory, only to pause and stare bafflingly at the contents of the room.

“What the hell…?”

There were… squirrels.

*Everywhere.*

There had to be at least a dozen of them.

And not just normal squirrels – no – these squirrels had to have been enchanted somehow. They were flying about the room, chattering and stashing things in the wall niches and whipping their propeller-esque tails about. A few of them clung to the ceiling, along the top of the bed canopies, and skittered along the walls.

If this didn’t solidify that Slytherins were barmy, he didn’t know what did.

He felt the door open wider behind him and Daphne plowed into his back, causing him to sprawl face-first onto the floor with Daphne on top of him. “Ow,” he hissed, shifting the invisibility cloak off and moving away from her.
“Sorry. I didn’t expect you to be standing right in front of the bloody door,” Daphne said, wincing and rubbing at her shoulder.

“What’s with the squirrels?” he whispered, not really knowing why they were whispering since they seemed to be very alone up in the dormitory area.

Daphne pushed the door shut with her foot and sat back against it, warding it with a quick spell.

“Theo likes… experiments,” she explained, glancing up at the little creatures flying about. “I think this one’s for a potion he’s trying to invent to enable flight, but who knows with him… The potion that he fed to a bunch of gerbils a couple months ago was some sort of intelligence-enhancing potion, but it just made the gerbils schizophrenic. Flight could be a side effect of whatever he’s trying to do.”

Gerbils? Harry’s brows furrowed. “Are those the same gerbils that–”

Almost every first year in Gryffindor had one and the irritating creatures tripped people up in the common room when the first years got them out and played with them all at once.

Daphne smirked. “Likely. I gave the schizo things away a couple months ago. They got on Theo’s nerves.”

“Right…” Harry took a seat next to her, folding his invisibility cloak and sticking it in his pocket when a squirrel tried to pluck it away from him. He shooed the creature away with the back of his hand. “You lot are mental.”

“Nah, that’s just Theo.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “Gets detention for it every year; as if that’ll stop him.” She sighed, pulling out her cigarette case while she dug further into her pockets. Her hand emerged holding a tarnished lighter with a golden eagle crest and an oval malachite background on the front, which Harry speculatively stared at.

“So what did you want to talk about?” she asked, lighting up and causing him to glance back at her.

“Er – right – how was your holiday?” Harry questioned, taking a cigarette when she offered him her case. “We haven’t had much of a chance to talk in the last week. I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Shrugging a shoulder, Daphne blew out a short breath full of smoke. “It was fine. Got a lot of things done. You’re probably wondering about Narcissa, yeah?”

Harry nodded, using Daphne’s gold lighter to light his fag. “Yeah. How’d that go?”

“Couldn’t have been more perfect. I told her that her son was kidnapped by the Order of the Phoenix and was being housed in a very safe place — and that she’ll get to see him in a couple weeks when we can safely transport her to where we’re keeping him.” Daphne’s lips quirked. “I had to show proof of life but, after that, she was more than accommodating to come with us. It’s possible that the Compulsion Philtre I sprayed at her when she wasn’t looking helped it along, but she’ll stay put.”

“You’re absolutely sure about that?” Harry asked prudently. “I mean, if Narcissa runs off to Voldemort with information about the Order having Draco Malfoy, everything could be... completely ruined.”

Daphne gazed at him sharply. “I’m certain. I was with her for two days; we got on decently and I
had her very convinced. She seemed... happy to be away from her husband and the Dark Lord – happy enough to go along with pretending to be a Muggle for the time being if that meant she got to see her son and stay safe. My guess is that she wasn’t in the best situation.”

She paused, taking a drag off her cigarette. “And, as a backup, I infused all the tea in the flat with more Compulsion Philtre so she’ll stay regardless. You don’t have to worry about her. She was fine with or without it.”

“I don’t know…” Harry hesitantly responded, still slightly wary and fiddling with Daphne’s gold lighter in his hand. Flicking the ashes off his fag, he took in a long calming breath full of smoke that settled his entire being. It always helped with the nerves and worries.

“It’ll be fine Harry,” Daphne assured. “I promise.” She then paused, her eyes trailing over him. “So, I heard from Blaise that you had him teach you Occlumency yesterday.”

“Well, I had to lie to Dumbledore about our... activities. Zabini was the only option at the time.” Harry shrugged, feeling a bit uncomfortable about the topic – why did lying to Dumbledore feel like an accomplishment?

Maybe because it was an accomplishment, the pleased portion of his mind told him. He doesn’t suspect a thing.

“What else did you do on your holiday?” he asked quickly, changing the subject and pushing the topic of lying to Dumbledore away from his mind.

Daphne tugged at a messy lock of his hair, a small smile playing about her lips. “You just can’t resist knowing, can you?”

“Nope. And I’m not going to take ‘no’ for an answer,” he said, mirroring her smile and lightly batting her hand off.

“I already told you what I was going to do. Johnson had a thing for us in Vladivostok and I repaid Croaker. That’s not ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But it’s not very descriptive.”

Daphne’s smile widened for a moment and then faded into seriousness as she exhaled a wispy puff of smoke, shaking her head. “I can’t be very descriptive, Harry. Some things are not only mine to tell.”

She pursed her lips, shrewdly regarding him. “Johnson and Croaker wouldn’t appreciate it if I went around blabbing about those things. And, while I know you wouldn’t tell anyone… I’m just trying to be a trustworthy person to them. I’m sorry.”

A touch of guilt for all of his prying over the weeks tugged at his chest and Harry nodded in understanding. He knew the way it felt withholding things from Ron and how Ron’s prying had got to him at the Burrow… he knew wasn’t making anything easier for her. She did seem to tell him the important things, at least.

“Yeah, I get that. I’m sorry too – for being nosy… I just can’t help it.” He pushed away the guilt, his lips twisting into a crooked smile. “I’m not used to being this close to a person who has so many secrets that I can’t know.”
“It’s alright,” Daphne replied, bluish smoke trickling out of her lips. “I’ve definitely dealt with worse. Blaise sent one of his house elves to spy on me last year when I wouldn’t tell him, which was a nightmare. Thank Merlin the little bugger had a Butterbeer addiction or else I might not have caught him…”

If there was anyone who understood what it was like to be followed by a pesky house elf, it was him. Amid that thought, his eyes widened.

“That might not be a bad idea actually,” Harry breathed, an idea ripping through his mind like a bolt of lightning.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to send Dobby after me,” Daphne drawled with a sardonic glare.

“No – not you.” A smile split across Harry’s face. “Cornfoot! Dobby’d make a decent spy, I’d reckon. And I’m pretty sure he’d do it too.”

Daphne’s lips parted and she stared at him with a slightly horrified expression. “Jesus, why didn’t I think of that before?” She nodded absentmindedly. “Dobby would be perfect. House elves can make themselves completely invisible. That’s far more than what Sylvia Montague can do – she has been rather helpful though.”

“Really?” Harry leaned toward her interestedly. “How so?”

“She searched Cornfoot’s possessions for us – found a few items that he’s likely using. There’s the usual Polyjuice, so I’m guessing he’s using similar tactics that Draco used with Vince and Greg. I told her to leave it. But, also, he has a whacking load of books on Thaumaturgy, which is quite brilliant, but he is a Ravenclaw.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “Thaumaturgy?”

“It’s a branch of magic that covers illusions and hallucinogenic bewitching,” Daphne explained with a backward wave of her hand. “If he uses Thaumaturgic wards around the Room of Requirement, he wouldn’t need his friends to Polyjuice into first years and drop toad spawn to warn him. The ward would produce a distracting illusion for anyone that would come close. And, if he got caught doing something unsavoury, I imagine that Thaumaturgy could be useful for that as well. He could bewitch someone into thinking they didn’t catch him doing anything – the victim of a Thamaturgic spell usually has a hard time distinguishing between imagined events and reality to the point where reality seems more farfetched than the imagined event.”

“But if he knows that, then why does he need the Polyjuice?” Harry questioned, spotting holes in her logic.

“I dunno. Maybe he hasn’t mastered Thaumaturgy yet?” Daphne shrugged, taking a drag off her cigarette. “It’s very difficult magic. And the Polyjuice could be for something else… such as sending people in his place during mealtimes. Thaumaturgy wouldn’t help with that.”

It made sense – he’d have to go back to checking his map at meal times.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek contemplatively and exhaled a breath full of smoke. “Has Montague mentioned who might be… helping him with this? Who he’d get to cover for him?”
“There are a few suspects,” Daphne responded. “Dahlia Runcorn is the obvious one; I also think that
the Carrow twins may be helping him – they’ve been behaving suspiciously over the past week. I’ve
searched the Carrow’s dorm, but I didn’t find anything. Runcorn is in Hufflepuff so… I can’t get in
there. I’m still working on a plan for that.”

Harry nodded and then paused, flipping open Daphne’s gold lighter and closing it. “I can though,”
he said, gesturing to the edge of his invisibility cloak hanging out of his pocket. “Got in here easily
enough. And I might be able to get Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott to help.”

Daphne’s brows rose. “Excellent. Do you need any bribing money or blackmail?”

“No,” Harry said with an amused snort, shaking his head. “Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were
members of the D.A. They’ll help me, I’m sure of it.”

“Good,” she responded, breathing an almost imperceptible sigh of relief. “Those two wouldn’t be
easy to get blackmail on. They have ridiculously clean slates.”


Daphne gave an innocent shrug. “It’s good to have blackmail material, even on your ‘sort-of’
friends.”

“Not all of us are Slytherins, Daph,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “We trust each other a bit more.”

“That could lead to a knife in your back someday, y’know,” she casually muttered around her
cigarette, reminding him of the Order meeting at the Burrow.

A huff of a laugh passed through Harry’s lips. “You sound exactly like Mad-Eye Moody.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Daphne commented, her cheek scrunched up in consideration. “I think?”

“Maybe,” Harry said, shrugging. “Er – speaking of Mad-Eye though, I need to know how to get
ahold of Croaker.”

The centre of Daphne’s forehead creased and she flicked the ashes off her fag. “Why?”

“Three of the moles on our list work in the Department of Mysteries and I believe he might be able to
help…” he answered. “The Order doesn’t have anyone in there and, since you got ahold of him for
the Sortilege Manual, I thought you might–”

“Yeah, I know how to contact him. He probably wouldn’t mind the great Harry Potter knowing,”
Daphne cut in before he could finish his sentence, a grin crossing over her face. She then lowered
her voice, despite the wards on the door, “You have to owl a numerological coded note – using the
lateral shift sequence and the flexion method for concealing – then you’ll have to send it to Johnson,
Johnson will send it to Croaker’s liaison, and they’ll take care of it.”

“The… what? Hold on.” Harry’s brows furrowed and he glanced around the room. “Do you have a
piece of parchment so I can write that down? Hermione… will be better at that than me.”

With a flick of her wand, Daphne vanished her mostly-smoked cigarette and crawled forward,
reaching into the trunk at the end of the closest four-poster bed. “I could write the note for you. I’ve
gotten pretty decent at it…” she muttered, pulling out parchment, ink, and a quill, which a greedy
squirrel tried to grab from her. She sent a Stinging Hex toward the little flying menace. “Bastarding things.”

Dithering a tiny bit, Harry replied, “I’m still not sure what I’d say to him – Hermione can most likely do it. She’s at the top of her class in Arithmancy.”

“I s’pose...” Daphne quickly wrote out the process of contacting Croaker and handed it to him. “Burn that once you’re done with it.”

“Maybe you’re more paranoid than Moody.”

“Croaker’s worse,” Daphne stated very seriously. “He’d flay everyone alive if the method of contacting him got into the wrong hands. Not that there’s anything incriminating on that... but it’s better to be safe.”

“Okay, I’ll burn it – don’t worry,” Harry ensured, folding the piece of parchment and stuffing it deep into his cloak pocket. He then noticed the lighter he was inattentively fiddling with in his hand and he slid it over to her. “Oh, and here’s this back. Thanks for letting me borrow it.”

A smirk tugged at Daphne’s lips and she shook her head, sliding it back to him with her foot. “Keep it. It suits you more than me,” she said, grasping the tarnished silver lighter that he was staring at earlier. “I kind of like this one better.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied, pocketing the gold lighter. He nodded toward the silver one. “Where’d you get that anyway? It looks... old.”

“I won it in a bet in Vladivostok,” Daphne said with a shrug.

Vanishing his cigarette with a wave of his wand, Harry gazed at her curiously. “What sort of bet?”

“A classic trick,” she intoned, vaguely smug. “Want me to teach you it?

“It’s not anything dangerous, is it?” Harry apprehensively asked, raising his brows.

Daphne shook her head. “No. Not at all. It’s deceptively simple – Accio Hat.”

One of Zabini’s dark rabbit fur hats flew out from underneath his bed and landed in Daphne’s lap. She set it on the floor between them and shoved her newly acquired lighter underneath it, looking back up at him. “Hats are optimal for this, but you can use other things – teacups, bowls, anything you can hide something under.”

“Alright.” Harry nodded, waiting for the next move to the trick. “Now what?”

“I bet you that I can get that lighter out from under there,” Daphne said, smirking, “without touching the hat.”

His eyes narrowed toward her. “You’re a witch. Of course you can.”

“No,” Daphne self-assuredly retorted, making a show of setting her wand aside, “I won’t be needing this.”

Raising a skeptical brow, Harry watched her vigilantly; she’d have to do something wandless if she
wanted to get that lighter, but wandless magic was impossible for most people to do, which made him doubtful that she could do it. Circling her hands in the air above the hat, Daphne closed her eyes and swayed, like she was performing some sort of voodoo. Harry’s expression grew more skeptical by the second.

When she opened her eyes, she nodded at him. “There we are.”

Harry’s lips pursed and he scrutinized her hands. “Where’s the lighter then?”

“I said I could get it out from under there without touching the hat. I didn’t say where it would end up after,” she replied with a shrug.

Rolling his eyes, Harry lifted up the hat to check and see if it was still there and Daphne’s arm flew forward, snatching the lighter up.

“Didn’t have to touch the hat, did I?” she said triumphantly when he glanced up at her.

A short breathy laugh passed through Harry’s nose and he shook his head. “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“My grandfather taught me that trick when I was little – I fell for it too,” Daphne said with a smile, tossing the hat onto one of the beds and sending a barrage of stinging hexes toward a group of squirrels when they tried to grab it.

“Your grandfather sounds like an… interesting person,” Harry commented, his stomach warming as he stared at her. Daphne always seemed the least guarded when she spoke of her grandfather, even if she was only mentioning him. The way she smiled…

“He’s my favourite person,” she corrected, toying with the flintlock-esque top of her lighter, igniting it and snuffing it out. “He’s the reason I wanted this in the first place. He has one just like it – won’t tell me where he got it, of course, but—” her smile softened, “–maybe he will now, since I’ve got one too. You know, the ‘you tell me yours if I tell you mine’ type of deal.”

“Ah,” Harry said with a knowing nod, “that’s where you get your Slytherin deviousness from.”

Daphne’s lips quirked. “Not just him. Most of my family would fit into this house better than some of the stupid Purebloods who are sitting out in the common room right now – and they’re Muggles. The only thing they lack is magic.”

“That’s got to be a popular opinion around here,” Harry sardonically intoned.

“You’d be surprised,” she casually replied. “Muggle Studies is the favourite class of many a Slytherin.”

“Really?” he asked, clearly feigning disbelief.

“Oh, yes. Why, just the other day I was showing Millicent how a toaster worked. She found it fascinating.”

“You should mention television to her,” Harry suggested.

Daphne nodded. “Pretty sure she’d cross over after that – full blood traitor status.”
“Yeah, and I’m having an affair with McGonagall,” he said in the same insouciant and sarcastic tone she used the entire time.

“She’s dishy; I wouldn’t blame you,” Daphne said, her eyes gleaming wickedly. “Does she let you call her Minnie between the sheets?”

“Ugh, okay, that’s too far,” Harry replied with a wince, letting out a snort of laughter that had been building ever since she mentioned Millicent Bulstrode and a toaster.

Daphne’s smirk turned into a softer grin and she moved closer to him, the sides of their legs and hips pressing against each other. “It’s your own fault. You mentioned the affair in the first place.”

“I should have said Trelawney,” Harry grumbled a bit, which caused Daphne to let out a huff of laughter.

“The madder the witch, the wilder the itch – is that true?”

“Alright,” Harry said with a short breathy laugh. “Not Trelawney then.”

Threading her fingers through his hair in a way that was almost affectionate, Daphne muttered, “You’re far more fun when you’re not trying to press me for information.”

“Well, I am an interrogator, you know,” Harry mischievously retorted.

“I’m aware of that,” she said quietly, kissing him on the corner of the mouth.

Just as he leant down to kiss her more properly, the door behind them rattled and muffled shouting filtered in through the ward, “Theo, you complete bastard, let me in!”

With a sigh, Daphne picked up her wand and lighter and moved away from the door while Harry slid to the side. “Finite. Apari,” she muttered and the door burst open, revealing a rather entertained Blaise Zabini on the other side as his dark eyes skimmed over both of them.

“Commandeering my dorm for a shag with Potter now, Daph?” Zabini sarcastically remarked. “That’s classy.”

He took a hesitant step into the room with his wand drawn and zapped at least five flying squirrels that flew at his head upon entering and shutting the door. He was a whirl of limbs and hexes as he fought off the second round of squirrels that came in for backup. Harry didn’t make a single move to help him – it was too amusing watching Zabini duel against a bunch of flying rodents.

“You didn’t change your hair potion, did you?” Daphne dryly replied, watching the squirrels flee the area quickly, looking defeated. “You know they’re attracted to the scent.”

“I haven’t found another one I like,” Zabini said, glowering as he stalked over to his trunk. “What are you two doing in here anyway?”

Daphne got to her feet and held her hand out to Harry to help him up, which he took. “Tracey’s in my dormitory with Malcolm; s’not like we could go there,” she said. “I thought you and Theo would be busy tailing Runcorn and her friend.”
“We were – but we’ve Potions in ten minutes and I don’t fancy being late,” Zabini said, grabbing his school bag from his trunk and slinging it over his shoulder.

“Fuck,” Harry breathed, quickly tugging his invisibility cloak out of his pocket. He’d completely lost track of how long he’d been there.

“I’ll get you out of the common room,” Daphne muttered, opening the door as he threw the cloak over his head. She pulled him close and quickly whispered to him on the way down the stairs, “Do you think you could meet me in Hesperivs Hall tonight around curfew?”

“Er – sure. I’ll try,” Harry whispered back, glancing down at his watch distractedly. He’d have to sprint all the way up to Gryffindor Tower for his potions kit and bag if he was going to make it on time.

But, then again, being late could play to his advantage…

OoO

“Did you tell her about the horcruxes?” Hermione asked when he mentioned most of his conversation with Daphne to her in her ‘empty study classroom’ after a disappointing Potions class.

Harry was over five minutes late to it – deliberately – and it didn’t play to his advantage. He was hoping for a detention with the plump Professor in order to get closer to him but, unluckily, Slughorn let him off easy with barely a reprimand.

He had to come up with a different – better – plan for next time.

“No, I only told her that I lied to Dumbledore when she asked about Zabini’s Occlumency lesson yesterday,” Harry replied, taking the folded instructions of how to get ahold of Croaker out of his pocket. “Er – d’you think you can figure out how to code a note using… whatever this is? They’re instructions for contacting Croaker. Daph gave them to me.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she snatched the parchment up, looking over it with fervor. “Wow… that’s… does she know how to do this?”

“She contacted Croaker for the Sortilege Manual, so…” Harry trailed off with a nod. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, the flexion method is extremely advanced – post N.E.W.T. level. And with a shift sequenced numerological code underneath that, with all the folding of numbers, it’s incredibly complex – I’ve never seen it used this way,” she rambled, gesturing wildly with her hands. “I mean, writing it is one thing – once you get done coding the note, all the parchment will have on it is a few numbers that hold it all – so opening it up is even harder. If we write to Croaker and he sends us a reply, it might take weeks for me to decode it properly if this is what he’s using.”

“Wouldn’t it take weeks for him to decode it then?” Harry asked, arching a brow.

Hermione shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me if Unspeakables are trained in this. It’s a genius coding process; the flexion method is a nightmare to ‘unfold’ – the formulas and sequences are usually woven into trammel wards. It makes the wards fold up to trap intruders inside them like a net and it’s
“Which you are,” Harry encouraged. “Top of the class and everything. And you’re already studying for the N.E.W.T.s.” Which he found mental, but it was the least he could expect from Hermione – her E on the Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. spurred her to start studying six months earlier for the N.E.W.T.s than she did for the O.W.L.s, giving her a year and a half head start before the sane people in their year started studying.

“I know you like to think that I know everything, but it’s not true,” Hermione retorted, pulling a fresh sheet of parchment from her pile. “I’ll be able to write the note though, at least – for now. What shall we say?”

Shrugging, Harry moved to sit next to her. “Erm – how about… ‘Dear Mr. Croaker, we’re very sorry to bother you, but we really need your help if you can spare it.’?”

Hermione wrote out the words on the parchment, nodding. “The Order of the Phoenix – a secret group formed to fight You-Know-Who – is looking into His moles in the Department of Mysteries, but we are having a hard time getting into the department for more information on them.’ Would that work?”

“Should we mention the Order to him?” Harry hesitantly asked.

“Bode was an outlier and you said that Daphne told you they were partners. He possibly knows about the Order and he could be on our side...” Hermione trailed off with an indecisive expression.

“Well, if he isn’t, then we’re giving information to the other side that we know about the Department of Mystery moles.”

“But, if he is, he’ll help us.” Hermione paused, chewing thoughtfully at her lip. “He probably is – Greengrass wouldn’t tell you how to contact him if he wasn’t.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose high on his head. “You’re actually trusting Daphne now?”

“Not… exactly,” Hermione said cautiously. “But she doesn’t seem to want to harm you and she is very proudly against prejudice – secretly – but that’s to be expected, given her position. Did you tell her why you wanted to contact Croaker?”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “I did.”

His answer caused a relieved grin to press across Hermione’s face. “Then I doubt she’d want to risk that information getting into the wrong hands, if anything. So, I say we tell him.”

“Okay,” Harry replied, watching her write what she proposed earlier. He then added, “Any help you could offer on this matter would be greatly appreciated.’ Keep it short and simple.”

“That’s good,” she muttered, writing that line down – she looked up at him after, pausing for a moment. “‘Sincerely, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter.’?”

“Why do you get to go first?” Harry asked. “He probably thinks I’m the ‘Chosen One’ – it might persuade him further.”

“But I’m writing it and coding it so I get to go first,” Hermione countered, quickly composing the
“Fine,” Harry conceded, curiously watching her work. After drawing out a number table beneath the short letter, she grabbed at a different piece of parchment and wrote down lines upon lines of numbers as she stared at the original written letter.

“I’m using this lateral shifted sequence,” Hermione explained when she noticed him staring at her, pointing to the table below their original note, “to translate the letters and words into numbers.”

“Looks… not too hard.”

Eating his words, he completely got lost when she started on another fresh sheet of parchment, writing down a plethora of formulas, sequences of numbers, and symbols that he didn’t recognize. It sorely reminded him of maths.

With a wave of her wand, the formulas, symbols, and number sequences lifted into the air – wispy and glowing like golden smoke – and floated over the parchment that held the coded letter.

“Now for the hard part,” Hermione whispered, focusing and sending each symbol, formula, and number sequence into the letter – one at a time – with a flick of her wand. The wispy writing disappeared into the parchment, shortening the coded letter as every different element was sent into it.

When she was done, she held it out to him with a triumphant sparkle in her eyes. “There we have it. Hedwig will probably be happy to be busy with something after you’ve ignored her for most of the year.”

Harry’s brows furrowed as he looked down at the parchment, which had a three single digit numbers written across the centre. “Nine-Four-Three?”

“The flexion method folds the coded note and makes it smaller, but it’s all still in there – hidden throughout the Arithmancy.” Hermione flicked her wand at the parchment and he was bombarded by wispy gold numbers and sequences flying in front of his face before she put them back into the parchment. “See? Trying to get the code out of that mess is tremendously difficult.”

“No kidding,” Harry muttered, taking the parchment from her and folding it up. “I’ll just get this to Hedwig then.”

“I’ll go with you,” Hermione replied, packing up her bag. “I have to stop by the library and check out Fibonacci’s *Objectives and Procedures in Diminution*.”

Before she packed the instructions on how to contact Croaker, Harry snatched it up. “Daphne suggested that we… burn this.”

Shrugging, Hermione passed him the original note that they penned to Croaker. “Might as well burn this too then.”

She didn’t even question it, like he expected she would, and he vaguely wondered if this was Zabini’s influence at work. He still needed to talk to the dark Slytherin boy – optimally alone. Perhaps, while he was at the Owlery, he’d send a different letter with Pig…
His invisibility cloak was put to use for a second time that day as Harry made his way up the stairs around the Clock Tower and toward Hesperivs Hall. As it was a Friday night, he spotted a number of amorous couples secreted away in alcoves and behind statues and tapestries on his trek. The invisibility cloak would be a bloody useful tool for a Prefect – and a horrifying one for the snoggers out after curfew.

Daphne was waiting for him just outside the door to an old abandoned classroom and she pulled him inside it as he revealed himself in front of her.

“Good you came,” she whispered excitedly.

Inside the room, Nott was sitting on one of the desks near a large bag full of broomsticks and he suddenly figured out what he was there for.

“Are we going to… race?” Harry asked immediately, his whole body perking up at the idea. He’d wanted to join her in it ever since she mentioned it months ago in the Quidditch locker room.

“Yes,” Daphne answered, “but we’re also cultivating some assets and we need to fix your appearance.”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “What’s wrong with what I look like now?” He was wearing his usual casual clothes – some of which were cast offs from Dudley, but Dudley’s old shirts were comfortable.

“You’re Harry Potter, I’m Theo Nott – she’s Daphne Greengrass,” Nott said, gesturing with his hands. “We can’t be seen together doing this.”

“I’m only going to throw a triple layer glamour on you and fix your clothes. And glasses,” Daphne explained, waving her wand over him and plucking the glasses off his face. “I already told the Carrows that I was inviting someone who used to go to Hogwarts but is visiting to interview for an apprentice position under Slughorn. We’ll call you Mr. Voynich.”

His vision cleared with a flick of Daphne’s wand and he blinked. “Erm… Potions apprentice, Voynich – got that. We’re cultivating the Carrow twins by racing with them?”

“Mhm.” A small smirk tugged at Daphne’s lips and she slid his glasses into the pocket of his cloak, waving her wand to change his voice. “I mentioned the idea to them a few days ago and they were interested; I thought it would be a great opportunity.”

Harry shifted on his feet. “But don’t I need to go get my broom?”

“We only use Cleansweep Golds for racing – it evens out the odds and lets us focus on skill rather than equipment,” Nott drawled, gesturing to the load of brooms next to him. “If you have a Cleansweep Gold, be my guest.”

Ambling across the room, Harry grasped one of the broomsticks in his hand, inspecting it – it reminded him of a heavily gilded version of his Nimbus 2000, which made him feel a bit nostalgic. “Not bad. Seems well balanced,” he commented, glancing up at Nott and catching his glamourised reflection in the window behind the Slytherin boy.
Tom Riddle’s face blinked back at him and he sent a slightly dirty look toward Daphne.

“Why do I look like Tom Riddle?” he accusingly asked.

“It’s handsome and we’re dealing with fifteen-year-old girls,” Daphne said, shrugging. “It would be beneficial to our cause if you could charm them and… make nice.”

“While looking like Voldemort,” Harry dryly intoned.

“Well, he apparently doesn’t look like that anymore – why not use it since he isn’t?” Daphne rhetorically questioned. “Waste of a decent face, if you ask me.”

“And if I get caught by Dumbledore or Slughorn, what do I say? They know what he looked like,” Harry argued.

“If you get caught – which I hope you’re a good enough flyer to not – say, ‘Velamen Detraho Celementum Finite.’ It’ll get rid of the glamour,” she answered smartly.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to protest further as there was a knock on the door and Daphne went to answer it, ushering in the Carrow twins along with a dark-haired Hufflepuff Harry didn’t recognize.

“I’m so glad you could come – and you’ve brought Dahlia! It’s nice to finally meet you! The more the merrier – we rarely get a full group for this,” Daphne said pleasantly. “Some people just don’t have the nerve.”

“Then you’ve been asking the wrong people,” Runcorn remarked. “A little detention never hurt anyone.”

“Only if they catch you,” Daphne slyly replied, glancing at Harry and pausing. “But I believe introductions are in order first.” She gestured toward everyone in the room as she acquainted them, “Mr. Voynich, this is Flora and Hestia Carrow and Dahlia Runcorn. And this is Theo Nott, who most of you already know.”

Harry offered his hand and greeted the girls, trying to hide his irritation at his appearance and be friendly.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, feeling vaguely like a piece of meat being paraded in front of them. They looked… possibly as if they were salivating. Runcorn, however, seemed far more interested in Nott, which was sort of a relief.

“Pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Voynich,” Flora practically purred, her deep grey eyes salaciously roving over him.

“I heard that you were interviewing for an apprenticeship,” Hestia said after shaking his hand. Harry nodded, thinking fast. “Yes, I’m very hopeful. Professor Slughorn is a brilliant Potions Master – he’s why I applied.”

“Would you be available for tutoring when you get the apprenticeship?” Flora asked, tilting her head in a flirtatious manner. “Daphne said you were a dab hand at potions and I’ve been struggling to find a good tutor, you see…”
He itched to roll his eyes. Daphne was sadly correct about his glamoured appearance – the shallowness of it all was somewhat disturbing.

“Well, if I get the apprenticeship, I might be able to tutor – we’ll have to see. It’s up to Professor Slughorn,” Harry lied smoothly, keeping a genial expression on his face. “What is it that you’re struggling with in the subject?”

He’d hoped that the question would catch Flora in her lie, but it only made her sister join in on the ‘tutor ruse’ – coming to Flora’s aid with questions of her own. The conversation continued on with the twins jumping for his attention. They asked him question after random question about potions, which he never thought he would have known the answer to before the Half Blood Prince came into his life. He could have kicked himself for asking what she was struggling with, but it seemed to play in his favour, at least.

The entire time the twins prattled on, he kept half an ear on Nott and Daphne’s conversation with Runcorn; they seemed to be chatting about how broom racing around the school had started and why they used *Cleansweep Golds*. Runcorn was apparently a huge Quidditch fan and knew a lot about brooms.

“So sorry to interrupt your conversation,” Daphne said as she situated herself next to Harry, “but I believe we should start our race soon. Filch has his external rounds and the Prefects have a shift change in three minutes, which make for optimal conditions.”

It didn’t surprise him that they had this worked out down to the minute – Nott and Daphne were the type of people who always thought three steps ahead of others.

Nott handed out the brooms and motioned for them to follow him out the door. “The race for tonight starts at the top of the Clock Tower, on the floor above us. From there, it’s down the tower, across the quad, round the greenhouses, up through the Grand Staircase – through the seventh floor corridors – and we end at the top of the Astronomy Tower. No exceptions – no secret passage ways – no hexing, jinxing, charming, or magical trickery,” he instructed in a straightforward manner.

“Winner gets this set of scrying mirrors – which enable private communication between two users,” Daphne said, pulling a pair of ornate silver hand-held mirrors out of her pocket. “Theo generously donated them as a prize for this race. They’re truly one of a kind.”

Harry had a feeling that those scrying mirrors were tampered with and caught on to the plan Nott and Daphne had concocted. They likely wanted to let one of the girls win so they could spy on them through the mirrors. Merlin, it was good.

As they all ran up the stairs and got in line for the race, Harry discreetly pulled Daphne aside and muttered under his breath, “So which one do you want to let win?”

“Runcorn – stroke of luck that the Carrows brought her,” Daphne replied, barely moving her lips as she spoke. “Stick with the twins and try to distract them if you get the opportunity.”

“Oi! No exchanging strategies over there!” Nott called and Harry intentionally made his smile turn a bit guilty, shifting to stand between the Carrow twins.

It was great being back into the fold, working with Nott and Daphne again. There was just something about subterfuge that gave him a rush – almost as good as flying, which he was also about
to do.

*Merlin* – flying *and* subterfuge! He could kiss Daphne right here and now for it.

Nott started the countdown from ten and Harry positioned himself on his broom, readying for the takeoff. His heart was pounding and he went over the race-path in his head, loosely figuring out how to distract the Carrow twins. After all, he was no novice with a broom and had a lot of skill up his sleeve.

“GO!” Nott bellowed and they took to the sky.

Harry immediately dived off the end of the tower in a Wronski Feint, headed straight for the ground and internally ‘whooping’ with pleasure. In his tailwind, he felt someone right behind him and he pulled up, almost smashing into Daphne as she cut him off, streaking straight across the quad. The Carrow twins and Runcorn were hot on her heels.

Crouching low and spiraling toward them, he caught up, doing a quick loop-de-loop around the twins and smiling at them along the way, the wind whipping through his itchy glamoured hair. He stuck near the two of them at the Greenhouses, circling the area and heading toward the gaping door to the interior of the castle, which Daphne and Nott must have left open before the race.

Runcorn was the first one through, followed by Daphne and the twins – he saw them all up ahead. Nott was trailing behind him at the rear, looking more as if he were taking a calm leisurely stroll than racing around Hogwarts on a broom. At the bend in the corridor up ahead, he saw Runcorn slow to peek around the corner and she went for it as the others caught up, doing the same. The entrance leading to the Grand Staircase was at the other end, its doors wide open like a pair of welcoming arms.

Far up ahead, he watched Runcorn shoot through it over a moving staircase, followed by Daphne. Harry caught up the Carrow twins, who were purposely swerving and hogging the corridor. Turning himself onto his side, grasping the *Cleansweep* one-handed, and flattening sideways atop his broom, he zipped past them, skimming the internal wall with his back. The Carrow twins stared at him with shocked faces as he winked and flitted up the first of many staircases, his robes fluidly rippling around him. His heart was soaring in his chest, free and tingling with happiness.

This was just as fun as Quidditch – maybe even more. The possibility of being discovered by Prefects or teachers gave the activity an intoxicating edge.

He spun up on Daphne, twirling around her and laughing as she quietly scoffed, “*Show off,*” to him as he passed. It only served to goad her into drafting in his tailwind and knocking him out of balance as she cut close, flying alongside him with a smirk on her face. The back of her robes whipped at his cheek and she zoomed up ahead, looking back on him with a promise of a challenge in her eyes.

He’d take that challenge any day.

Harry ducked low, maneuvering himself around the staircases and over a railing to catch up right beside her as they paused, staring around the corner at the corridor which led to the Astronomy Tower. Runcorn only *just* made it around the next corner ahead as two Prefects came out from behind a secret passage tapestry, conversing loudly to each other. He and Daphne hung back and the Carrow twins nearly ran into them on their way up.

“If we all fly fast enough and high enough, they won’t see us,” Daphne whispered, hovering higher
and gesturing for them to follow.

Quietly, they all moved backwards for room to pick up speed and, like a volley of arrows, whooshed forward, their heads nearly touching the high ceilings of the hall. Harry’s heart lodged itself in his throat the entire time and he held his breath, willing his broom to go as quickly as possible. They could be caught at any moment. His head grazed the ceiling, ripping out a tuft of his hair.

In a blurred streak of colour and motion, they jetted over the gossiping Prefects and around the corner, continuing on with the race. The Carrow twins were back at taking over the corridor, flying all around and trying to block his and Daphne’s path. They used a smarter tactic than before, moving randomly – but there was a pattern to everything.

Harry’s keen eyes spotted an opening and he took it, curling himself around the *Cleansweep Gold*. He left the girls in his dust with a flourishing twist through the open door of the Astronomy Tower. The spiraling staircase of the tower made him slow down slightly when he almost ran into a wall, kicking off of it with his feet.

Two rounds up the stairs, he happily finished, taking a spin around the tower and landing on the walkway, two feet firmly planted and a wide smile on his face.

Runcorn clapped softly, grinning just as wide as he was. “Nice flying,” she said. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d ask if you played professional Quidditch. You seem like you’d be a natural seeker.”

“I’ve only dabbled in the sport,” Harry replied with a modest shrug. “But you won – fair and square. I’d say that says more about your flying than mine.”

Runcorn took a mocking bow. “Why, thank you. Maybe if you weren’t trying to pull off all your tricks, you could have beat me.”

*Or, if Daphne and Nott didn’t want you to win, I could have*, Harry thought.

“Who knows,” he ambiguously responded, feeling two sets of feet land behind him on the wooden walkway around the Astronomy Tower. Daphne was circling the area and dismounted in front of him with ease.

“That was wicked!” Flora exclaimed, rushing over to the group. “It was exhilarating, going past those Prefects!”

“That’ll be another thing we’ll have to see about, Miss Carrow – *if* I get it,” Harry replied, still unable to contain his smile as he watched the three girls animatedly recount the race with each other.

They were all really nice girls, from what he could gather of them in this short time; he distantly wondered why in the world they’d want to get mixed up with Cornfoot and all that. It was a shame, really. But… he knew that prejudice ran deep and some people believed in following the footsteps of the rest of their family. Perhaps that was it: They were following the Runcorn mole and the set of Carrow Death Eaters… Bad influence had its way of making good people do terrible things.

It didn’t take long before Nott joined them, still composed as ever, despite the windswept hair and pink cheeks from the flight.
“Who won?” the weedy Slytherin boy asked, straightening out his cloak and shouldering his broom, breaking Harry out of his reverie.

“I did!” Runcorn announced, stepping forward.

Daphne took the pair of scrying mirrors from her pocket and presented them to her. “You definitely earned these – that was some rather good maneuvering down there. I’d love it if you’d join us next time,” she said, then she glanced at the Carrow twins. “All of you. I’ll see if I can dig up an even better prize.”

“Oh, please. I doubt you could top my prize gathering,” Nott retorted arrogantly, his lips curling into a smirk. “My father has all sorts of interesting devices he leaves laying around… he rarely notices if a few go missing.”

The avaricious look on Runcorn’s face was more than palpable as she glanced over at Nott. It was a good strategy, name-dropping his presumed-to-be Death Eater father… That must have been why she was so interested in him after they were all introduced.

“Oh, I’ve a great idea! D’you think you could brew some liquid luck, Mr. Voynich? I heard Slughorn gave that out as a prize at the beginning of the year,” Hestia cut in, staring over at him.

Nott and Daphne feigned looks of curiosity and Runcorn’s greedy little eyes turned to him.

Shrugging, Harry replied, “It’s a very advanced potion. Even a person at my level has difficulties brewing it.”

“But you must be great if Slughorn’s considering taking you as an apprentice,” Flora said, noticeably trying to flatter him and coquettishly fiddling with her reddish-brown hair.

Her sister was far more subtle as she tried to persuade him, pointing out, “He has very high standards – I doubt he’d take on just anyone.”

“Could you try it?” Runcorn asked, holding the scrying mirrors to her chest. “I’ve always wanted to see what liquid luck was like.”

He wasn’t sure about the Carrow twins, but Harry definitely suspected that Runcorn wanted that potion so she could give it to Cornfoot – the way she was looking at him, and Nott, made her intentions rather obvious. She barely could withhold her interest. Of course, he’d never allow her the chance of getting her hands on a vial of the potion, but there wasn’t any harm in making her think differently…

With a crooked smile, Harry replied in a tone he hoped to be charming – the way Tom Riddle used it so perfectly, “Well, there’s no harm in trying, is there?”

The three girls cheered and, behind their backs, he saw Daphne give him a nod of approval, appraising him in a way that made sparks twist through his stomach.

It was only a matter of time – Runcorn and the Carrow twins were on their way to becoming potentially valuable assets.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Author’s Note: As always, thank you for reading! And a massive thanks to my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: Parapraxis

OoO

It was Saturday noon, the Great Hall was teeming with students eating lunch, but Harry was waiting in the Hall of Hexes. As his watch ticked over five minutes past, he started to wonder if using Ron's tiny owl, Pigwidgeon, was such a good idea. A school owl would have done well, but Ron didn't give Pig much attention – Harry couldn't help but take pity on the poor thing. It looked so eager to deliver Harry's letter that it was in a tizzy over it, flapping about and annoying all of the other owls to no end.

When Zabini rounded the corner, coming from the Grand Staircase, Harry's worry settled.

"I'm in no mood to do you any favours after sending me that infuriating little owl, Potter," Zabini said, a contemptuous look on his face as he stalked toward him. "So, make it short, what is it that you want?"

Great, maybe he should have sent a school owl instead.

"I don't really want anything particularly…" Harry started, letting out a breath. "I needed to talk to you more out of concern."

"Daphne's just fine – you need to stop worrying about her or she'll probably end up maiming you one of these days. And if she doesn't, I will for badgering me about it," Zabini threatened.

"It's not about Daphne. It's Hermione."

Zabini's brow arched. "Is there something wrong?" The tone of his voice changed instantaneously, from drawling contempt to immediate unease.

"Not really," Harry said a bit anxiously, staring up at the tall Slytherin. "It's… Well, I don't mean this to be – in any way – insulting, but your relationship with Hermione is a little confusing."

Zabini's expression shifted and the Slytherin boy stared at him blankly, not making any motion to
Harry continued, "It's just that you're not known to be very friendly toward Muggleborns and have a rather prejudiced reputation… Not that I think you're prejudiced, exactly – that could be for show, I know how that is with you lot – but I'm confused as to why you're contradicting your reputation by pursuing a relationship with her."

Letting out a patient sigh, Zabini pivoted on his feet. "Walk with me, Potter," he said with a wave of his hand, gesturing for Harry to follow.

Taking a hesitant step after Zabini, Harry cautiously strolled alongside him, stealing suspicious glances up at the dark Slytherin and fingering his wand up his sleeve in case this got ugly.

"I know the relationship I'm… 'pursuing' with Hermione is probably a shock to you, and – to be completely honest – it's an even more shocking development to me," Zabini stated calmly, in a cold and vaguely aloof tone.

"I don't know if Daphne told you this," he said after a brief pause, "but we had an amusing agreement involving Slughorn's Christmas party. She proposed that she would ask Weasley to the event if I asked Hermione. I accepted, because seeing Daph manage lightweight dunderhead Weasley would at least provide me with some entertainment for that night."

They slowly made their way up the stairs and Harry gazed at Zabini with his brows furrowed, remaining quiet as the Slytherin boy went on, "Nevertheless, I didn't foresee her accepting my invitation. And, I certainly didn't expect her to keep approaching me afterward, but it wasn't as if I could ignore her since I asked. She was… very nervous and angry all the time and we often ended up speaking of various things until she was calm. She has this interesting way of venting frustrations..." he trailed off, letting out a breath, his eyes unfocused as if trapped in a memory. "It was surprising – getting to know her."

"Not that… that isn't a great story and all," Harry said slowly, "but I don't see your point. Why her? And why you?"

"I'll put this in simple terms for your thick head, Potter," Zabini drawled, rolling his eyes. "We have shared interests, academic and otherwise. She's steadfast, intelligent, inventive, attractive, and ambitious – I'm very much the same. Our personalities meld well together, even if she has far too many morals. Normally, I'd drop someone for that; however, she ticks so many of my boxes that it would be stupid of me. No one in the world has ever come close to my ideals, but she practically is my ideal."

They stopped at the sixth floor, loitering on the landing of the stairs and silently staring at each other.

"So you're not coercing her in any way at all?" Harry finally said, unsure of how he felt about everything Zabini told him. "And you have no problem with her being Muggleborn, yes?"

Those were two important questions that had yet to be clarified.

Zabini snorted. "You're more prejudiced than I am if you're asking that," he retorted, causing Harry to glare at him doubtfully.

Rolling his eyes once more, Zabini sighed. "To ease your worries, if only because you're her friend: No, I am not coercing her in any fashion, neither do I have a problem with her being Muggleborn – not much of one anyway. Yes, it spoils my reputation and, yes, it will cause my mother to have a coronary. But, as I said, she's too ideal to let go over simple details. My mother
Harry's brows rose as he took in Zabini's tone of speech, his body language, his… everything. This wasn't a joke like with Millicent Bulstrode and the toaster – Zabini was sincere. He actually, genuinely, fancied Hermione. Not a drop of his body language indicated that he was lying. In fact, the way he spoke of her… it was almost as if…

Merlin, it was weird.

Blinking away some of his astonishment, Harry nodded once. "Oo-kay..." he drew out the word. "You never gave any indication…"

"In this world?" Zabini questioned derisively. "You have to be tactful to survive well, Potter."

"That's why I said before that it was probably all an act. But I had to make sure," Harry explained quickly. "Hermione's my best friend and I care about her."

"Glad we could have this understanding then," Zabini said, offering him his hand and smirking. "Truce?"

"Er – aren't we past the 'truce' point?" Harry replied, staring at Zabini's proffered hand.

"Barely," Zabini responded. "It means that you'll tolerate me and I'll tolerate you, if only for Daphne and Hermione's sake."

With only the slightest hesitation, Harry reached out and firmly grasped Zabini's hand. "Truce then."

After a pause, where they separated, Zabini had an expression on his face as if whatever he was about to say he was going to regret, looking at Harry in consideration.

"Now that that's done," he dryly intoned, cocking his head toward the stairs leading to the seventh floor, "do you want to come spy on Cornfoot with me?"

Harry's eyes widened. "Obviously. What's the plan?"

"Disillusionment Charm, get into the room of many things, and find a spot to watch him." Zabini patted his school bag at his hip as they climbed the stairs. "I brought lunch – there's probably enough for both of us. Grundel, my house elf, always over-packs."

"D'you know if he's in there already? We're likely not going to get in if he is," Harry said, reaching into the pocket of his cloak and pulling out his Marauder's Map, which Zabini stared at with a strange, vaguely bored expression on his face.

"Don't tell me that that's a map of the school that shows everyone's location," he deadpanned.

Right, he'd never actually mentioned the Marauder's Map to Zabini before, had he?

"Okay, I won't tell you," Harry remarked, spotting Cornfoot's name in the Great Hall. "You're sure he's going to come to the Room of Requirement today?"

"After lunch. The scrying mirrors planted on Runcorn gave me the tip. Daft girl brought one to him right after the race." Zabini paused in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching ballet to trolls and he took out his wand. "Can you perform a decent Disillusionment Charm or do I have to do it for you?"
Harry tossed him a petulant glare, slipping his wand from his pocket and making a show of executing the charm perfectly – tapping his head and shivering from the sensation of it. It didn't matter if they had a truce; Zabini's words were always going to have an occasional insulting flair to them, he imagined. It was just how Zabini spoke.

The phrase 'conceited tosser' came to mind as they entered the Room of Requirement and Harry found a good vantage point on top of a solid pile of stacked sofas. It wasn't far from the Vanishing Cabinet and just high enough to see everything, even if Cornfoot walked around to the back of the cabinet. Casting a Stabilization Charm to make sure the pile was doubly safe, he climbed atop the highest sofa and signaled Zabini by flapping a tattered cushion in the air. "Oi – over here!" he called.

Scaling the pile, Zabini nearly climbed on top of him, not that Harry could really see anything other than Zabini's school bag, which was the only thing that Zabini left un-disillusioned. His large invisible hand grasped Harry's thigh before pulling away as if it had been burnt.

"Sorry, Potter," Zabini idly apologized, more out of propriety than anything else, as he settled the bag between them on the sofa.

"It's fine," Harry muttered, waving his wand around them and casting a quick Muffliato.

Whispering a Notice-Me-Not Charm, Zabini started pulling out the food and they ate in odd – slightly uncomfortable – silence, staring down at the Vanishing Cabinet.

"Do you know what's wrong with it?" Harry conversationally asked after a long while, fidgeting in his seat and setting his half-eaten container lid full of pasta salad aside. "Like… what it would take to fix it?"

Zabini made a non-committal humming noise and a cloth napkin floated up into the air, dabbing at Zabini's invisible lips. "I haven't gotten much time to inspect it so I haven't been able to do it fully. There's definitely something wrong with the magical limbo between the two cabinets – it's deteriorated."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. "D'you think Cornfoot can do it?"

"Not certain. I know Draco probably could've – given enough time. Despite his many faults, he wasn't bad with a wand; but, I don't know Cornfoot as well. Your guess is as good as mine."

Zabini passed him a bottle of Butterbeer as silence fell over them once more, with only the sounds of chewing and the light glugging of beverages between them. Just as Zabini packed up their empty lunch containers, the door to the room opened and Cornfoot strode through with Runcorn trailing behind him. In contrast to the tall, well-built athletic Hufflepuff girl, Cornfoot was a short and scrawny little bloke, with messy shoulder-length sandy hair and dark eyes.

"Did you set the ward?" Harry heard Runcorn ask as they rounded a stack of desks. She was holding a large writhing cloth bag in her hand and her wand in the other.

"I'm not stupid, Dahlia. We'll know if anyone comes sniffing 'round," Cornfoot replied in his gruff nasally voice, staring up at the Vanishing Cabinet and opening its doors. "Got the toads I asked you for?"

Runcorn passed Cornfoot the bag. "Frogs – all I could get. Why do you need them?"

"Testing – I'm not risking my life by going through that thing while we're fixing it," Cornfoot said, flicking a Summoning Charm at the room and causing a giant glass tank to fly toward them. Another flick of his wand shallowly filled the tank with water and he released the frogs into it, setting the tank
aside on an ancient desk near the cabinet. "We need live subjects for this. Frogs'll do."

Runcorn's seemingly-perpetual acquisitive eyes were glancing between the Ravenclaw boy and the Vanishing Cabinet. "So, what's faulty? It looks in good condition – my aunt's is just like this one."

Harry listened carefully as Cornfoot confirmed Zabini's speculation about what was wrong with the cabinet, but there was another detail – apparently the deteriorated magical limbo had caused an unstable vortex of magic to open up, which they also had to eliminate or close off. Being the Ravenclaw that he was, Cornfoot got a giant pile of books out of his bag and sat with his girlfriend, rifling through the tomes on the floor while they discussed the needs of the cabinet.

Shifting more on his seat, Harry moved to the side, leaning against the edge of the sofa to get as comfortable as he could on the busted old couch. Reconnaissance was really bloody boring – and it wasn't like he could leave without getting caught. He almost felt bad for sending Dobby, who he had contacted this morning, to do such a mind-numbing job. In fact, Dobby was probably in the room with them somewhere, but he wasn't likely to detect the elf. Dobby could move about completely silent and invisible with the aid of his special magic.

After the first few hours, Harry considered taking a nap until his bladder started nagging him. The most entertaining thing that happened all afternoon was when Cornfoot shot the wrong spell at the Vanishing Cabinet and was hurtled backwards into a mirror, shattering glass all over the place. The spells that followed seemed to be accepted a lot better and the two proceeded with far more caution, occasionally arguing with one another. Over and over, they endlessly consulted the books strewn about the floor; the two kept going back and forth – shooting spells and referring to the books.

It was like watching a tennis match in absurdly slow motion, with Cornfoot and Runcorn playing the tennis balls.

By the time the two had packed up, dragging their feet abysmally out the door after failing to send three frogs through the cabinet alive, Harry desperately needed a piss and a fag. And more food. It was past dinner time.

"Well that was disappointing," Zabini intoned, speaking for the first time in hours and materializing on his side of the sofa once Cornfoot and Runcorn were safely gone. "However, I'm certain we've a while before the Death Eaters come. They were pulling at strings at best."

Harry tapped his wand over his own head, stretching his newly visible limbs. His body felt cramped all over and his arse had fallen asleep ages ago. "Yeah..." he trailed off, rolling his stiff shoulders and flexing his buttocks to wake them up. "It'll probably be safe enough to let Dobby take over for us. I don't fancy doing this again."

"Spying not your thing, Potter?" Zabini drawled, a smirk tugging at his lips as he started to climb down the pile of sofas.

Shaking his head, Harry retorted, "Not this type. How can you possibly sit still for that long? I couldn't even hear you moving over there."

"Patience."

Harry's nose scrunched up at the comment and he followed Zabini down, quickly as he could with his arse starting to wake up – his bottom tingled painfully. "I prefer action, I think."

"Of course," Zabini said with a snort. "That's why you're a Gryffindor and I'm a Slytherin."

"Hard to be patient when your bladder's about to bloody burst," Harry groused in response, jumping
off the last sofa and making a beeline for the door. "Thanks for this though – it was… *erm* – enlightening."

"Yes," the dark Slytherin boy replied, holding open the door for him, "we now know that Harry Potter's got a bladder the size of a walnut. Surprise, surprise – alert the *Evening Prophet.*"

"Oh, sod off, Zabini. We've been in here for nearly seven bloody hours!"

Zabini just laughed.

**OoO**

Astoria Greengrass had an interesting way of working, Harry'd noticed over the past week or so of watching the scrying mirror case from time to time. He rarely caught her in the room with Malfoy or Goyle, but he knew she spoke with both of them. Their conversations were always seemingly sociable with laughter and smiles and Harry expected much of the same today. However, watching Draco Malfoy go all teary-eyed and seeking comfort in the older Muggle woman's arms as he cried was... an interesting progression. Behind Malfoy's bowed back, his blonde head tucked against Astoria's shoulder, Harry watched Daphne's cousin roll her eyes and gently stroke her fingers through Malfoy's hair.

If Malfoy knew he was being comforted by a *Muggle*, Harry wondered how it would go.

"Where were you all day? I've been looking all over!" Hermione whispered loudly as she sat next to him in the corner of the Gryffindor common room. He was curled up with his heavily annotated Potions textbook hiding the scrying mirror case.

Quickly, he shut the book and the case, leaning over to mutter, "I was with Zabini, spying on 'you-know-who' and 'you-know-who's' girlfriend doing 'you-know-what' in the 'you-know-where'."

"Oh." Hermione tilted her head significantly toward the stairs to the boys' dormitories and Harry nodded, following her.

They passed the students loitering around the Apparation Lesson sign-up sheet and Ron on the sofa with Lavender, doing an impression of two beached fish flapping about with their lips glued together. Harry could only sigh at the sight of them – knowing that it there would be no luck in trying to pry them apart. After Hermione had made it clear on Ron's chances with her, Ron seemed to start going out of his way to snog Lavender at every free moment he had. It didn't leave Harry much time to talk with his best friend, who often stumbled in late at night, his lips swollen and neck filled with so many love bites that his skin resembled that of a cheetah's.

After making sure his dormitory was empty, Hermione shut the door behind him and sat heavily on his bed. "Any news?" she asked, which prompted Harry to tell her nearly everything about this afternoon, barring his and Zabini's talk over the Slytherin boy's relationship with her.

He knew Hermione wouldn't take it well if she knew he went snooping into that.

She was silent as he finished his brief recap of the boring afternoon and he finished with asking, "How about you? Did you find anything on horcruxes in the library yet?"

A dark look passed over Hermione's face and her eyes narrowed as she glared at the wall. "No, not yet," she said, her lips pursed. "I haven't gotten to it all, but I've been through *most* of the Restricted Section *and* the normal part of the library. There isn't much left and they're not mentioned anywhere. I'll get to the rest tomorrow, but if I can't find *something* in the
restricted *Divination* books, I'm going to have to ask Nott or Blaise for help. They both have private libraries at home. Of course, there are also the rare and dubious book catalogues that I could order from… but that could get very expensive very quickly and I have no idea if it would turn up any results."

"You think we should trust this information with them?" Harry hesitantly asked, fidgeting with the scrying mirror case in his hand.

"It might help," Hermione replied, shrugging. "Nott comes from a large Pureblood family that has connections with other families who are Death Eaters. And Blaise, while neutral, has an extensive knowledge of the Dark Arts. Even Greengrass does – and she actually *uses* it." Hermione's upper lip curled into a modest sneer before she went on, "They might have heard of horcruxes or perhaps could point me to a book that would give me an idea of what in Merlin's name they are."

"I'll ask Daphne then," Harry decided. "It's not as if we have to tell them why we need to know what horcruxes are."

The centre of Hermione's forehead creased. "What if they ask?"

"Tell them that it's not in your place to tell – and that this topic involves the lives and trust of many people who you wouldn't want to betray," Harry answered, regurgitating and slightly altering Daphne's reasoning for not telling him about what she did during her holiday.

Hermione let out a sigh and nodded reluctantly. "Okay. I'll look more tomorrow and then ask Blaise or Nott – whoever I see first."

They had made their decision. Drastic as it was, they needed all the help they could get and Harry reluctantly agreed with Hermione's assessment of the situation. Knowing what horcruxes were could give him an edge on getting that memory from Slughorn.

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After a night of not-so-fitful sleep thanks to Ron and Lavender giggling in Ron's bed under terribly casted silencing charms, Harry found himself back in front of the entrance of the Slytherin common room, loitering behind a small group of first years under his invisibility cloak. A boy with dark hair and snooty features whispered the password – 'Devil's Snare' – which allowed Harry to enter behind them. From there, he quietly made his way across the common room, sneaking by various bunches of students, including the Quidditch team – Zabini was amongst them since he apparently filled in as a chaser on occasion. Their talk, however, wasn't strategy so Harry didn't stick around them for long, despite being tempted to.

Swiftly slipping by a mousey seventh year boy, Harry tip-toed up the stairs to the heavily warded door of the Slytherin sixth year boy's dormitory. He glanced around before knocking – he knew Daphne and Nott were in there due to the Marauder's Map; they were probably plotting, knowing them and judging by the extensive spells on the door. The wards lowered in front of him, layer by layer, and Daphne opened the door as Harry shoved back the hood of his invisibility cloak, pushing into the room before anyone could see him in the corridor.

The door slammed shut behind him and he could feel the wards being spelled back on it by Daphne as she greeted him with a slightly surprised, "Hello, Harry."

Inside the room, Nott was sitting behind a large cauldron on the floor, his flying rodents all gathered round him like he was their bloody king. There was another cauldron in the corner, away from everything flammable, emitting sparks. Harry didn't want to go anywhere near it from the sizzling
sound it was making – it sounded dangerous.

"Morning, Potter. To what do we owe the pleasure?" Nott idly asked, looking up at him. His blank stare in Harry's direction was mirrored by the horde of squirrels surrounding him, who all moved in tandem with their 'master'.

It was… unnerving. What exactly did he do to those squirrels?

He wanted to question it, but he had come there for more important – pressing – matters, unfortunately.

"I need to ask you about something," Harry said, shifting out of the invisibility cloak and folding it over his arm. "And it's very important that this remain secret – just between us and Hermione and Ron… and probably Zabini."

"Ask away then," Daphne prompted, taking a seat on a trunk next to the sparking cauldron in the corner, glancing into it for a moment before gazing back up at him.

Harry sat heavily on one of the four-poster beds facing them. "Have either of you ever heard of… horcruxes?"

Nott's eyebrows rose and Daphne's lips pursed in thought before she dug into the expanded pockets of her robe. Harry spared her a quizzical glance.

"Why would you want to know about those?" Nott questioned.

"I can't tell you why," Harry said, shaking his head, "I just need to know what they are. It's important. Do you know?"

"Got it." Daphne's hand emerged from her pocket with an old ragged book and she flipped through it quickly. "Here it is: 'Of the Horcrux,'" she read, "'wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction.'" ¹

"Well that's very helpful," Harry muttered cynically. "What book is that?"

Daphne shrugged. "Magick Moste Evile. It's in the introduction – never seen that word mentioned anywhere else."

"Did you get that from the library?" Harry asked, his eyes roving over the book in her lap for any markings that would indicate it was from there.

"No, this was my father's book," she said with an ironic smirk tugging at her lips. "My 'inheritance', you could say."

"It's doubtful that you'll find out what a horcrux is from a book," Nott interrupted and Harry's gaze moved to him. "Soul magic is controlled by the Ministry and studied by the Department of Mysteries."

"So a horcrux is soul magic," Harry deduced, his brows furrowing.

"I think so…" Nott trailed off, scratching at the side of his neck. "I've read a redacted file of my father's on it before. But reading a redacted file is a lot like reading a story with all of the best bits removed so you only get the general idea, but nothing precise. He was the head interrogator on a case of this wizard some years ago who made a horcrux – two murders occurred as a result of its making and its… implementation. Apparently horcruxes kill people, but they're also devices that
house souls or use souls in order to work, I believe."

"So this… wizard sucked out the soul of someone using Dark Magic, which probably killed them, used it to make a horcrux, and then… used the horcrux to kill another person?" Daphne clarified warily, shutting *Magick Moste Evile* and stowing it back into her expanded pocket.

"Yeah, I think that's what happened," Nott said, placing a lid onto his cauldron and leaning back against his bedside table. "I'm not sure how it works or anything. That bit was redacted."

"If it's Department of Mysteries-related, Croaker would be the best person to ask, but you probably don't want to let Croaker in on this," Daphne said, her gaze moving to Harry. "Do you?"

Harry let out a sigh, considering the harm of it.

It all just didn't make any sense. Why would Voldemort want to suck souls out of people, make horcruxes, and then kill people with the horcruxes? *Avada Kedavra* seemed a lot quicker and Voldemort definitely wasn't afraid of using it.

There had to be something more to horcruxes than just killing people... something more that could've been on that redacted file that Nott was missing. If Croaker could get that redacted file…

"Maybe – if you don't mention it's *me* you're asking this for," he answered with a reluctant tilt of his head.

"Oh, that's easy. I could tell him that I came across horcruxes in a book–" She patted her magically expanded pocket containing *Magick Moste Evile*. "–and that I'm curious as to what they are. I'm sure he'll give me an idea if he knows anything. He was a boffin before he went into the field."

"How do you even know Croaker so well?" Harry asked, his brain burning with curiosity over everything involving Daphne's private life that she kept from him.

"I told you – Johnson. He introduced me, and Croaker and I just… get on," Daphne explained with a wave of her hand, slipping off the trunk and rifling through it. "So do you want me to ask him or…?"

"Yes. Fine – ask him," Harry said, wondering if Hermione's investigation into horcruxes in the library was yielding any better results than he was getting at the moment. That was doubtful.

Soul magic. The only upside was that he now had an idea of what Hermione could double check or order books on.

Daphne pulled two pieces of parchment and a quill out of the trunk she was rifling through and immediately got to writing numbers on one of the pages. She didn't even consult a numbers table as she worked, which told him that she had probably contacted Croaker so many bloody times that she likely had the lateral shifted numerological sequence they used committed to memory.

"Is that all you needed to know?" Nott asked, idly petting the head of one of the squirrels surrounding him.

Harry considered asking Nott if he'd help him get that memory from Slughorn, but decided against it, finally settling on nodding his head. "Yeah," he said, fiddling with the cloak in his lap.

After a short bout of silence, where he watched Nott dote upon his flying rodents while Daphne swiftly spelled Arithmancy into the coded piece of parchment, she announced that she was done. Harry's eyes moved to her and she folded the note, shoving it into a box of Honeyduke's chocolates,
which she had pulled from her pocket.

"Want to come to the Owlery with me?" she asked. "I sort of need to talk to you about Weasley."

Harry's brows rose and he stood up. "Erm – sure, what about him?"

"I'll tell you after we get out of the common room," Daphne said, moving toward the door and waiting for him to put his invisibility cloak back on.

She re-warded the door on their way out and was briefly stopped on their jaunt through the common room by a fifth year pulling her aside and telling her that Rowstock was the one who cursed Gloria. Pressing himself against a column as someone walked by them, Harry looked onto the scene.

Daphne nodded at the fifth year, quickly responding, "Okay, we'll take care of it. Thanks," before pausing near the wall entrance, which made Harry tap her shoulder to alert her that he was there.

As the bricks shifted back into place behind them, Harry moved closer to her and whispered, "What was that all about?"

"Just Muggleborn issues," Daphne muttered back, glancing around the corridors for eavesdroppers and finding none. "The bigoted Pureblooded Slytherins target them – us – sometimes. And Gloria is this sweet little first year who's still new to the house hierarchy – she got sent to the hospital wing on Friday."

Harry stared at her in disbelief from under his cloak. The sheer idea of it was horrifying. "There are Muggleborns in Slytherin?"

Daphne's lips pursed and she nodded. "Only five – it's not that common, but they slip by the Sorting Hat from time to time. And then there are a couple halfbloods like me who grew up in the Muggle world as well – basically Muggleborns ourselves. We all look out for each other when someone goes in for the attack; they have to be reminded of just how Slytherin us 'dirty bloods' can be. We have to… earn our place in the house. It's not given to us freely."

"So that's how you're known to be ruthless," Harry commented, following her up the stairs and in the direction of the exit that led to the Owlery.

"Not exactly," Daphne stiffly replied, pulling the hood of her cloak up to shield herself from the snow falling outside. "But anyway – I wanted to discuss Weasley."

Harry blinked. "Oh yeah, what about him?"

"He's been having 'girl trouble' and seems to think that I'm his new psychologist on the matter," she said, rolling her eyes. "Why is he talking to you about it?"

"Slughorn's Christmas party, I suspect." Letting out a sigh, Daphne pulled her silver case and lighter from her pocket and lit a cigarette. "Want one?"

Harry nodded, reaching out of his cloak to pluck a fag from the case and pushing back the hood of his invisibility cloak while she continued, "I gave him some pointers involving girls that night, to be nice. And my advice of 'date around' that I gave him doesn't seem to be sticking with him. He can't get it through his thick skull that 'dating around' does not mean 'keep fucking Lavender Brown' – who he wants to break up with, by the way. Maybe you can take over the advice giving stuff with him; he doesn't listen to me very well and he's really too obvious about approaching me sometimes.
I've had to tell people that someone gave him a love potion that won't bleed out."

**Bleed out?**

Harry's brow arched.

"Okay, I'll talk to him – he's been spending an awful lot of time with Lavender so it's hard to shake him off her," he said, taking a drag off his cigarette as he climbed the Owlery stairs behind her.

Then, he realized that the scene they made would probably look bizarre to any outsider – the floating smoking face and hand of Harry Potter following Daphne Greengrass. Thankfully the Owlery was empty.

With a short wave of her wand, Daphne spelled the box of chocolates shut and attached it to her large tawny owl, Mavis, who eagerly took off with the package. "You usually sit next to him in Potions – Slughorn probably won't oppose a little chatting between you two. You're his favourite."

"Well, if he gives me detention for it, all the better," Harry muttered without thinking and he bit the inside of his cheek after he realized exactly what he had just said.

Daphne's brows rose. "You actually want detention with Sluggy? Why?"

"It's nothing," Harry said shaking his head. "I don't mind detentions with him so much."

"Right," Daphne drawled. "You know that I know all of your lying tells, love."

"Well, I can't say much about this either," Harry replied, "so you're just going to have to trust me like I have to trust you in spite of all of the mysterious things you do with Johnson and Croaker that you don't tell me about."


Harry shifted uncertainly on his feet. "That was… easy."

"I'm not one to pry unless it's important," she said with a shrug. "You don't make it far with Johnson or Croaker if you do. You just accept it as it is and move on."

"So there's definitely no hope for me knowing what you do for them," Harry concluded, flicking ashes off his fag over the edge of the railing on the Owlery.

"I wouldn't say that there's no hope."

"Really." His eyes narrowed skeptically.

Daphne sighed, leaning against one of the wooden roof supports for a long moment, scrutinizing him. Then, gradually, a small smile pulled at her lips.

"Did I ever tell you how I met Johnson?"

Harry shook his head, slightly caught off guard by the topic change.

"It was at the Hog's Head – beginning of fifth year. Not many students like to go there because of all the dodgy people who hang around and it's off the path, so it's great for solitude and a decent drink."

"It also reeks of goats," Harry added as another reason why people didn't like to go there, "but go on."
Daphne gave a short laugh. "Yeah – goats… Anyway, I was studying for a potions exam and got into a small debate with Aberforth – something involving fluxweed and dragon's blood. Johnson joined in somewhere along the way and that's how I met him." She flicked the ashes off her cigarette and took a drag, shrugging. "Four Firewhiskeys in, he hired me for a potion's job. It paid well, so I accepted. And he obviously can't do it on his own – he may be better off than most squibs but he's still magically disadvantaged."

"What kind of potions did he ask you to make?"

Daphne's smile turned wry. "Now that's the part that's not only mine to tell."

"Of course," Harry said, rolling his eyes and still burning with inquisitiveness over it all. Letting the subject drop and pushing away his desire to know with a hearty inhalation at his fag, he asked, "Any more news on the Cornfoot front then?"

"No, but I have a few ideas on the asset cultivation front…"

Harry's interest flipped inside him, the burning inquisitiveness momentarily redirected. He'd always had a secret fondness for conspiring. Daphne definitely didn't disappoint.

OoO

"I think Slughorn's gotten wise to what you were doing to avoid his meetings," Hermione said as she caught up to him in the corridors during one of their shared study breaks, passing him a velvet ribbon-adorned scroll.

In the past, the mere sight of the infamous scroll would have sent Harry careening to the Quidditch Pitch sign-up schedule. But now, his heart was about to burst with glee.

"It's tonight," she told him before he could slip the aubergine-coloured ribbon off the parchment with his eager fingers. "Doesn't give you enough time to write-in a Quidditch practice, does it?"

"It's not like that matters now – I'm definitely going," Harry replied, reading over the note, which told him the usual time and place of the Slug Club meeting, all done in ornate calligraphy.

"You're not going to approach him about… 'it' yet, are you?" The centre of Hermione's forehead wrinkled slightly. "Because we still don't know exactly what you-know-what's are other than what Nott's mentioned and that book… Can't believe I didn't read the introduction while we were revising. I had full access to it when we were there; it would have saved me ages in the library."

It was Hermione's favourite tragic story as of late – that the library had failed her and the only book that mentioned horcruxes – in passing – was one she had already read while they were staying at the warehouse, which was why she overlooked it in her library search. Harry simply nodded in absentminded sympathy, knowing that he'd only irritate her if he told her off about being a broken record.

"I'm only going to try and get closer to him tonight – I'm not about to approach him about it until we know more and he's extremely comfortable," Harry reassured her, pausing and leaning toward her to whisper, "Have you gotten anywhere with that letter Croaker sent us?"

Two days back, Croaker's reply to their first missive had come to them in the grip of an eagle owl. Hermione had spent hours on it afterward, even neglecting her homework in favour of trying to
crack the code out of the Arithmancy.

"It's slow progress…" Hermione muttered, glancing at him; her shoulders hunched a bit self-consciously.

"I still think you should ask Daphne for help," Harry said, as he had numerous times before.

And, Hermione replied as she had numerous times before, "If she can do it, I can do it."

Harry turned his head away from her to discreetly roll his eyes. "Alright, but when the moles take over the Department of Mysteries, don't blame me if I tell you I told you so."

Hermione glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "We've time."

"We don't know that for certain."

Her glare withered microscopically, but she pursed her lips, nodding determinedly. "I'll get it decoded."

Based on her tone, he knew there was no point in arguing with her. Harry was half tempted to steal Croaker's note out from under her nose and bring it to Daph, but he was certain that Hermione would probably send a horde of birds and Merlin-only-knew-what after him if he did that. He'd learned a lot about the bushy-haired Gryffindor girl's wrath from watching her and Ron row for years – and he knew better.

"You should just focus on getting that memory," Hermione haughtily added.

"Yeah, yeah – I've been making nice with him in class, haven't I?"

"By cheating."

Not this again… Harry thought, wishing he could bang his head against the wall until he could forget whatever it was bezoars were used for. The stunt he pulled in class yesterday, counteracting his poison with a bezoar instead of the complicated law that Slughorn was talking about, had magnified and renewed Hermione's hate for the Half Blood Prince.

"You may not like that book, but it's come in useful for this – and many other things; you even use Muffliato now – you can't deny that," Harry retorted, causing Hermione to deflate a little as they paused in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, whispering the password to her and entering the common room.

Hermione lowered her voice, "Don't insult my intelligence, Harry. Muffliato is… different than cheating in class. We know things that can't be overheard and it's more flexible than silencing barriers. I'm not so foolish as to deny a helpful spell when it's required, even if I disapprove of its origins."

"Well, if I wasn't 'cheating' with that book, I doubt I'd be Slughorn's favourite and I really doubt I'd be able to get 'it' from him then," Harry hissed quietly, his eyes glancing around the common room for anyone who could be listening.

Hermione's hair puffed up in response to his argument but then it settled as she stared at him with a begrudging expression. "I don't like it though."

"Can't you just be happy that I'm actually interested in a school subject other than Defense Against the Dark Arts for once?"
"If I'd known you'd be so readily seduced by an annotated textbook, I'd have let you read from mine after I was through with them for our assignments," she bitterly replied as they sat back on the plush sofa in front of the fire.

"Yeah, but I doubt that you change things that the books say or instruct and write your own invented spells in the margins."

The corners of Hermione's lips tightened. "Well you're never going to find out with that attitude."

"It's not like I'd know if you did." Harry sighed, running an exasperated hand through his hair and knowing exactly why she was nitpicking at him and being unnecessarily difficult.

Her insecurities were running a bit wild, thanks to Croaker's letter, the horcrux stuff, and him usurping her top spot by 'cheating' in Potions. Didn't help that he wasn't being very tactful, but he shouldn't have to be; she was his best friend, not an asset.

Hermione's face softened slightly as she looked at him and she ran her fingers along the edge of her book bag. "Would you mind if I used your dormitory to work on the note? I don't want to be interrupted by Parvati and Lavender."

"Yeah, I'll come up with you – I've an essay for McGonagall to get done anyway."

"You still haven't finished that?"

Harry tossed her a crooked smile. "Not all of us can be you."

OoO

It was a bit of fast work trying to get his hands on a tin of crystallized pineapple once the idea hit him during lunch, but the utilization of Ginny had led her to contact the DA and, fortunately, Stewart Ackerley had a tin of it on hand. Not long before the Slug Club meeting, Harry made the exchange with the Ravenclaw third year outside of the Great Hall, paying him two Galleons even though the boy was more than glad to help and said it wasn't necessary, but Harry insisted.

As he walked toward Slughorn's office, he considered everything that he knew about the man and the personality traits which he could exploit during the meeting and in the future. Slughorn was exceptionally covetous and prized those who were useful and sycophantic – that was as far as he had observed.

The problem was that Harry had no idea how he could possibly be of any use to Slughorn as anything other than an association to boast about. Perhaps if he became something more… or provided more use. But how?

Harry paused in front of the door to Slughorn's office, coming up with nothing and checking his watch to make sure he was definitely early so he could discreetly deliver the sweets. To his surprise, Daphne was already there, sitting at the table around which the professor held his Slug Club dinner parties with a glass of elf-made wine resting between her fingers. They were discussing something quietly and Harry thought he overheard one of them say something about a potion ingredient that went for twenty Galleons an ounce on the market.

"Oho, Harry!" Slughorn called out when he spotted him. "Come join us, my boy! Please do help yourself to the wine – had this lovely bottle given to me from the ever-generous Madame Cavell; never forgets an old colleague, that one!"

Harry was immediately seated at the table to the right of Slughorn with a wine glass being pressed
into his grip in one smooth motion. "Thank you, sir," he said, digging into his pocket with his free hand and pulling out the tin of crystalized pineapple. "I'm very sorry I haven't been able to make it to all of the meetings in the last couple months – being Quidditch captain and all. I got these for you, as an apology. I know they're your favourite."

Slughorn's eyes widened and he happily snatched up the tin, a wide grin on his face. "You spoil me! How did you know they were my favourite?"

"Just a guess. You always have a tin of them in class," Harry replied with a genial smile, repeating the lie he had thought up earlier on the subject – he really knew of it from the tampered memory of Tom Riddle asking about horcruxes. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Daphne was watching him carefully.

"Of course – of course! You're like your mother in that way. Very perceptive!" Slughorn then turned his attention to Daphne. "Speaking of which, I believe you've met Daphne Greengrass before, haven't you? Takes right after her father, much like you your mother. Natural at potions, though I would say a little unconventional…"

"Well, my mum's a chemist, Professor, and I was raised by her," Daphne said, setting her wineglass down on the table and leaning back in her seat. "Chemistry isn't much different from Potions. There are many types of useful Muggle technologies that wizards aren't privy to."

"Yes… petrol, was it? You discussed that in your last assignment on Moonwort," Slughorn said with a nod, idly stroking his chin. "I'd have never thought to use Moonwort – and flobberworm bone dust – in that manner. Very destructive, but from a purely academic standpoint – a novel discovery."

"What's the 'novel discovery'?" Harry asked. His eyebrows rose as he glanced between the two of them and sipped at the sweet wine that Slughorn had handed him. He was hoping Slughorn would go on a bit more about Daphne's father since she didn't seem very forthcoming about the topic, but she unfortunately diverted the conversation. She was good at that.

"If you steep Moonwort in petrol and brew it gradually in a gold cauldron with flobberworm bone dust, you get an explosive mixture that – when ignited – is almost as powerful as trinitrotoluene, the magical equivalent to which would be an extremely powerfully executed blasting spell," Daphne explained, trailing her fingers along the rim of her wineglass.

Harry's lips twisted into a smirk and he wondered if Astoria had any influence on that particular experiment.

"Amazing what Muggles are capable of without magic, isn't it?" Slughorn said, popping open the tin of crystallized pineapple and plucking out one of the sweets. "Wizards don't use potions for those means, naturally, but it is interesting to know that there is an alternative. A blasting spell without magic…"

"Don't you think that there could be a potion-equivalent for almost every spell?" Daphne asked, raising an eyebrow toward the plump professor. "The possibilities are endless with what you can do with them, even if you are a bit limited with the method of deployment."

"See what I mean by unconventional?" Slughorn said good-humouredly, nudging Harry in the shoulder with his elbow. "You'll go far with that open mind of yours, Daphne. Oh, and I believe it's time!"
The Professor's attention turned to the door to his office, which had just opened, revealing various members of the Slug Club. "Please, come in, everyone – have a seat! The starters shall be arriving any minute!"

Hermione took the empty chair right next to Harry with Zabini sitting on her other side. McLaggen, trying to get as close to Professor Slughorn as possible, rushed to the chair next to Daphne on Slughorn's left. The rest of the Slug Club trickled in slowly amongst the wide-ranging conversation that Slughorn struck up. Melinda Bobbin, the Carrow twins, Ginny, and a few other people that Harry wasn't well acquainted with filled the rest of the large table.

Since Harry and Ginny were the newcomers to the already familiarized group, some of the conversations were a bit confusing – they seemed to pick up right where they left off at the last meeting – but Slughorn made an effort to include them, especially Harry. It was actually kind of amazing to watch Slughorn work. He quite literally directed the conversation around the table, much like a conductor would an orchestra, somehow involving every single person in the room. It became extremely apparent as to why the man had so many connections – he had a way of appealing to everyone and manipulating the conversation just to his liking while appealing to the prospects at hand.

It was brilliant, if a little disturbing and incredibly devious, considering that Slughorn would probably exploit nearly everyone sitting around the table in the future in order to continue with his well-connected and comfortable lifestyle. Slughorn was every bit a greedy, cunning, and ambitious Slytherin.

Harry shifted in his seat amid the entrée that appeared on everyone's plates, which was announced by Slughorn to be some sort of Ukrainian dish he became fond of during his travels throughout Europe studying potions in his youth. A soliloquy about Slughorn's studies followed, during which Harry realized that Hermione and Zabini were playing footsie under the table; though, from the waist-up, they appeared completely normal. She even had one of her shoes off and was sneaking her sock covered toe up one of his trouser legs.

In spite of the fact that Harry had somewhat accepted their relationship and agreed to a truce with Zabini, it was still a bit alarming to see it unfold.

But that alarm was short lived and slowly morphed into panic as one of the Carrow twins – Flora – interrupted Slughorn's story about his apprenticeship under a man named Master Greggor to ask, "Is it true that you might be taking on an apprentice this term?"

Slughorn's eyes widened and his lips parted in a long pause as he stared at the Slytherin girl. "Well… that may be so, Miss Carrow," he articulated slowly, his eyes shifting around the room.

Harry's heart was beating so hard, he could feel it in his throat and he forced himself to swallow his mouthful of soup, setting his spoon aside. He didn't think they'd actually… ask Slughorn about it.

From across the table, he shared a look with Daphne. She seemed more curious than panicked, which made his blood settle a little, but it didn't do much. She could have been putting on an act. What was her contingency for this? He knew she had to have one – she had bloody contingency plans for ruddy well everything.

"How did you come across such a rumour?" Slughorn inquired uneasily, his face still frozen in a wide-eyed expression.

"I may have met Mr. Voynich on his way out of the castle," Flora lied, a little smirk curving across
her lips. Harry was tempted to reach for his wand and cast a quick 'Langlock' on her, but it would have looked very suspicious all around, especially since she was an asset. And they were in the middle of a crowded table.

"Yes, of course..." Slughorn nodded absentmindedly, muttering, "Mr. Voynich – Tom. Very bright. Rather not sure if I shall take him on…"

Daphne's gaze narrowed a fraction and Harry's stomach felt like it was slowly filling with lead weights as he snuck glances between her and the plump professor.

Tom.

He definitely said Tom.

What in the bloody hell did Daphne do to him? Harry was pretty certain she did do something from the small changes in her expression as the whole thing went on.

"Why not, Professor?" Flora asked, tilting her head curiously.

Harry tried not the glare at the girl and kept his face straight. Inside his mind he was screaming at her to SHUT UP!

Slughorn cleared his throat, speaking louder and more confident than before, though still somewhat anxiously, "The position is for me to determine privately, Miss Carrow. And it would be appreciated if we could keep this between us, yes? Wouldn't want the Headmaster knowing that I'm looking into an assistant – he isn't quite aware of it yet."

Everyone around the table nodded and the Professor let out an almost imperceptible breath, bringing his glass of wine to his lips for a drink, which seemed to calm him.

"Now, I believe I was in the middle of telling you all about Master Greggor!" Slughorn declared, jumping right back into his monologue about his own apprenticeship and taking most of the room's attention off of the interruption, but it was easy to see in his body language that he was still unsettled by the mention of Mr. Voynich.

Harry was left feeling as if he had taken a massive dose of pepper-up potion that went straight through his system very quickly and he took deep, even breaths through his nose to clear out his emotions. It was only a matter of time before Slughorn struck up a conversation involving him and he didn't want to appear nervous.

First chance he got, he was going to grab Daphne and ask her what the bloody hell she did to him.

OoO

"Yeah, it wasn't supposed to happen like that…" Daphne said with a sigh as she leaned against the wall in the secluded and warded alcove he had pulled her into after the meeting.

"How was it supposed to happen?" Harry hissed, not bothering to be particularly quiet. The Muffliato he'd casted would hold.

"He was supposed to be able to easily distinguish Mr. Voynich from Tom Riddle – I tried to make sure of that – but Thaumaturgy can be a bit unpredictable." Daphne paused, her lips twitching. "I've not gotten the hang of it yet – I thought I had. I never put in the idea that Mr. Voynich's name was Tom, so something must be flowing in from his past."
Harry pulled his red leather case from his pocket and lit a cigarette with his wand, taking a much-needed calming drag.

"Can you fix it?" he asked. "Because we can't have him going around thinking that Mr. Voynich is Tom Riddle if I'm going to use that disguise to cultivate people."

Among other things.

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Obviously we can't have that, but it'll take some tinkering to fix it. Hallucinogenic bewitching is incredibly complicated magic."

Glancing at her sharply, Harry blew out a breath full of smoke. "But you can."

"Yes. I'll have to put some more practice in first – figure out precisely what went wrong so I can fix it properly. At least I got him to confirm the existence of Mr. Voynich, so it wasn't a complete failure."

"Not to the Carrows, but to Slughorn it is!" Harry retorted. "He looked bloody horrified when that was brought up."

"Fear can keep things isolated pretty well – it's a great motivator," Daphne countered, shrugging. "And even if he goes to Dumbledore with it, I doubt that Dumbledore would know what to make of it all."

Harry let out a gust of a sigh. "Or maybe he'll catch on to whatever we're doing immediately and everything will be ruined."

"You're being paranoid," she said blankly, her brow arching. "The most that Dumbledore could possibly see from Slughorn's mind is a young man who looks like Tom Riddle interviewing for an apprentice job – the Thaumaturgy I wove in there looked very good when I did a sweep. I probably just didn't have the bewitching part solid so there wasn't enough separation for Slughorn… I think. I'm not sure."

"Just fix it," Harry implored. "Soon, if you can."

Daphne's brows rose and she moved next to him, reaching up to rub one of his shoulders and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and feeling himself deflate ever-so-slightly at her casual touch. "I will. Calm down. It's not the end of the world and panicking over mistakes and regrets is not a productive way to move forward. You know this – or didn't I teach you well enough back at the warehouse?"

He could hear the smirk in her voice and he let out another sigh. "You did. It's just that I need to get something from Slughorn and I can't have him like this if I'm going to succeed."

"Well, it might not be a bad idea to have me plant a suggestion to give you that something while I'm playing around in there," Daphne offered, her hand slipping from his shoulder. "Since I'm going to have to do it anyway."

Harry glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Do you think that would work?"

"I dunno," Daphne said uncertainly, biting the corner of her lip. "Depends on what you have to get from him."

Flicking the ashes off his fag, he tilted his head back against the cool stone wall behind him. "I was told that methods such as Legilimency and bewitching wouldn't work… or else it would have
already been tried."

The centre of Daphne's forehead creased. "What is it that you need to get from him?"

"A memory," Harry said and he didn't know why he was saying it, but his nerves were frazzled from the meeting and it was late and he probably could use her help too. "It involves Tom Riddle, that's why he can't be this way. It could hinder things."

That was an evasive enough truth.

"Hm," Daphne hummed, looking away from him, her eyes unfocused in thought.

They stood in silence against the wall while Harry's fag dwindled between his fingertips and he considered the possibilities of how Thaumaturgy could help him.

It wasn't Legilimency or Veritaserum or strictly bewitching…

"If Slughorn is so horrified of him, why not use that?" she asked suddenly, nearly startling him because it was so quiet around them for a few minutes.

Harry's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Daphne shrugged. "Fear is a great motivator," she repeated. "Maybe you can scare it out of him somehow."

Scare it out of him…

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, pondering ways and debating how... His neglected cigarette burnt down until he had to vanish it.

He couldn't bewitch it out of Slughorn. He couldn't use Veritaserum, and definitely not Legilimency. But scaring it out of him… it had the potential to give him exactly what he needed – what he was missing before. Slughorn needed a way to use him other than simply something to boast about.

Harry's eyes lit up as he stepped off the wall.

"You know, that just might be crazy enough to work..." he said, pacing around and coming up with a plan – all of the possibilities – in his head.

It would take time, but probably less time than his current plan. And effort. And he'd still have to continue on with his cultivation maneuvers.

However…

A slow smirk unfurled over his lips as he looked at her. "I've an idea. But I'll need you to teach me a few things..."

OoO

Reference:


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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
"So this is how you usually practice… stuff?" Harry asked, warily glancing at the small group of potion-enhanced flying squirrels that Daphne brought up to the Room of Requirement, pilfered from Nott.

Daphne tilted her head thoughtfully, pulling the last of the squirrels out of the expanded pocket of her robe. "Depends on what it is. Thaumaturgy requires living subjects – squirrels work well; you can get them to do almost anything, but it requires human practice to gain proper finesse with it – you'll see." She paused, slipping her wand from her sleeve. "Unless you'd rather start with the triple-layer glamours? Those you can do on yourself."

Shaking his head, Harry drew his wand. "Thaumaturgy first. It's the most pressing."

"Alright, Thaumaturgic suggestions. They're the 'easiest' of the lot. The wand motion is a simple flick and the incantation is nonverbal – Retinentia."

"Retinentia, got it," he said with a nod, repeating the word in his head over and over.

"This incantation allows the mental tendrils of a person's mind to connect with your magic – that's what makes this all very tricky. You can get the connection with the incantation – that part's easy – but it's working with the tendrils that's the difficult part. There's no specific incantation for adding suggestions – you have to concentrate on your magic and suggest something. Are you with me so far?"

"I think so?" Harry asked, his brows raised. "Pull at tendrils and add suggestions."

"Concentrate on your magic and then add suggestions," Daphne amended, waving her wand and summoning one of the squirrels that was flying about the empty room they'd requested for practice in. "It'll be easier to explain that part after you try it. Have you done any N.E.W.T.'s level magic before?"
"Does the Patronus Charm count?" He took the squirrel from her, which stayed surprisingly placid in his grip. Nott and Daphne must have made them more docile with their Thaumaturgy practice.

Zabini was probably pleased by that – he was far too attached to his special hair potion.

Daphne shrugged. "I've never successfully casted a Patronus. I mean, I know you have to concentrate on a happy memory and then do it – this is more... concentrating on the magic and then suggesting. Go on, give it whirl; at least make a connection so you can get a feel for it."

Staring down at the squirrel and holding it still, Harry pointed and flicked his wand at it, focusing on the incantation. In a flash, it felt as if a rush of tingling warmth had shot out of him, tugging at something from the squirrel – a silvery band of light, floating in his mind, connecting with the small mammal – and he nearly dropped his wand in astonishment at the rush of it all, the warmth and silvery band of light disappearing behind his eyes.

Harry's brows furrowed. "Er – was that supposed to happen?"

Staring at him expectantly, Daphne's lips curved into a bemused smile. "I can't really tell. Thaumaturgy is a mind to magic connection – it's not visible to anyone but the caster. If it was, I'd physically show you how to do it."

"Well... there was this silver thing and this rush and this warm sensation..."

Her brow arched and she rolled her wand between her fingers and palm. "Have you not felt your magic before?"

Harry shrugged, shifting on his feet and letting the squirrel free when it started to struggle in his grip. "Not really, I guess. Was that what that warm sensation was? Like gripping your wand?"

"Yeah. I would have thought that, since you're friends with Granger and all, you would have done some..." she trailed off, shaking her head. "It's no matter. That sensation is what you need to focus on once you get ahold of a mental tendril – that's the 'silver thing': a tendril. Then, you use your magic to transfer a suggestion."

Staring down at his wand, his lips parted. "...How?"

"Intuitively – using your magic. You have to get a feel for magically weaving your own thoughts around mental tendrils. Takes a lot of magical concentration... I'll show you, kind of–"

Plucking a squirrel from the air by the scruff of its neck, Daphne pointed her wand at it, her eyes unblinking as she focused solely on the squirrel. As she let it go, the squirrel started hopping around the floor like a hyper rabbit. "I suggested to it that it should jump up and down ten times," she explained. "You just focus on the magic inside you and strongly intend to weave a thought or idea around the tendril."

"So it's a bit like accidental magic?" Harry asked and then quickly elaborated, "My aunt gave me a terrible haircut once and my hair grew back to the way it was overnight because I hated it so badly."

Daphne gave a laugh. "I suppose. It might be easier for you if you feel strongly for what you're doing. You have to have a clear suggestion while focusing on your magic to make that suggestion stick to the mental tendril."

"Okay, got it," Harry muttered, sweeping his wand and summoning the nearest flying squirrel.

Now that he knew what was going to happen, it was a bit easier to hang onto the connection and
focus. It felt very strange to him – the warm, tingly feeling inside him that was his magic, welling up and attaching itself to a foreign piece of the squirrel's mind. Trying to focus on that feeling, he attempted to do what Daphne did to her squirrel. However, when he set it down on the floor, it simply skittered over to join the squirrel that Daphne had doing a jig, not jumping even once.

"I probably didn't concentrate enough…" he muttered, biting the inside of his cheek.

"What did you try to do?" she asked, looking up at him from where she was crouched on the floor.

Dropping to his knees beside her, he picked the errant squirrel back up. "Make it jump, like you did."

"You're not going to get it the first time you try it – I didn't," Daphne said comfortingl. "Even on squirrels, it's hard. Wait till you get to humans – took me a whole week before I could get Theo to do a backflip over his bed without him protesting, or tell Blaise that he loved him after a few suggestions."

Picturing that in his head, a short disbelieving laugh escaped him and he stared over at her, stroking the squirrel's head to calm it. "You can do all that with Thaumaturgy?"

"With practice," Daphne said with a nod. "It just takes time. It's complex magic because the human mind is complex and Thaumaturgy is a process of magically weaving illusions into the mind, whether they're images or words or feelings that a person can believe is reality, or as their own thoughts and feelings. And, with the wards, you create a magical cage around the area that does the hallucinogenic bewitching and suggesting for you. Muggle-Repelling wards actually derive from Thaumaturgic wards – they impart suggestions to Muggles. Then there's the Notice-Me-Not Charm, the Babbling Curse, and even Cheering Charms or other charms that affect people's moods – all derived from Thaumaturgy. They're just... advancements of an old branch of magic that inspired it. But older types of magic tend to allow for more possibilities because they're the old way of doing everything that we now have simpler spells for, which do the work for us."

"Interesting..." Harry vaguely responded, staring down that the squirrel in his hand. "So I could make the squirrel really happy by suggesting that it be happy to one of the mental tendrils?"

"Not exactly," Daphne replied, her cheek scrunching up. "You have to impart the feeling of happiness if you want to make it feel something. Concentrate on your magic, hold the tendril, give yourself the feeling of happiness, and then focus on attaching that feeling to the tendril."

Harry's lip curled, imagining the difficulty of all that. "I can see why Cheering Charms were invented now."

"You'll get it with practice," she said confidently. "Why don't you try again?"

Flicking his wand toward the squirrel and casting the nonverbal spell, he concentrated on the suggestion of jumping, pulling away from the tendril after imparting it and releasing the squirrel.

The bastard just sat there, staring up at him with its beady little eyes.

This was going to take a while.

OoO

Ginny and Neville, as it turned out, were practically the new leaders of the D.A. While official meetings weren't held anymore, they apparently treated it as a sort of tutoring and counseling service amongst the inter-house group of friends, remaining surprisingly close to each other. Ginny was the most enthusiastic about it all – and the most enthusiastic to help every time Harry approached her for
"Do you have a few minutes?" the Weasley girl asked quietly, tugging him away from Ron and Hermione on his way out of the breakfast in the Great Hall on Saturday.

"Uh – sure, what is it?" He tossed his two friends an apologetic look, following Ginny down the corridor.

Ginny lowered her voice, "You said you needed a private meeting with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott?"

"Yeah. Order business..."

"I reckoned that was it – Susan and Hannah are very well-connected. We use this abandoned classroom on the fifth floor, so – for the future – if you need to contact one of the D.A. members, it's a good place to meet. We use it for studying and such."

"The D.A. has a new headquarters?" Harry asked, trying to keep up with Ginny's manic pace up the stairs.

"Mhm. It's great – Ernie Macmillan kitted it out with a bunch of old furniture he found in a storage room in one of his Prefect rounds. And we've got the old board up and Luna hung around all of these garlands to keep the Wrackspurts at bay, which apparently helps with focusing. I don't know if that's true, but it makes the room smell nice. Better than the Gurdyroot she was so intent on before – one of Neville's omnivorous plants kept eating it and it smelled terrible. It had to go."

"I was wondering where that thing went – it ate Seamus' Puffskein at the beginning of the year," he said, stalking after her down a fifth floor corridor he'd only been through a few times in the past. "So, Susan and Hannah are meeting me there?"

"Yes. It's perfect, no one but the D.A. knows about it. Also, Anthony, Justin, and Padma worked on the privacy warding and Sir Cadogan agreed to hang around in the landscape portrait outside of the room as a guard. He's shit at it, but he's good at keeping Filch away. They can't stand each other."

They reached a nondescript classroom door and she turned to address the landscape portrait hanging across the corridor. "Hello, Sir Cadogan!"

"Greetings, young Ginevra!" Sir Cadogan replied, galloping around on his steed and stirring up the nesting grouse that were painted into the portrait. "Nothing new to report, I'm afraid – the bootless beef-witted codpiece and his cat have been suspiciously silent!"

"I'm sure you'll handle him just fine – keep up the good work," Ginny told him, reaching behind her to open the door and let Harry into the room.

"Aye, m'lady!" he heard Sir Cadogan exclaim from the corridor just before the door slammed shut behind them.

The D.A.'s new headquarters gave him a wave of nostalgia from the moment he entered, looking around. They'd tried to make it somewhat resemble the Room of Requirement when D.A. had practiced there, with various *Daily Prophet* and *Quibbler* articles and pictures hung up on a board on one side of the room. The other side held the familiar practice dummies, which were arranged like soldiers along the walls. There were differences though. Garlands that smelled like wildflowers dangled from the ceiling, draping over the walls, and various plants filled the windowsills. The rest of the room was occupied with tattered furniture that still looked comfy, giving it a homey –
It was as if the D.A. had never disassembled; it continued to persist, even without him – and that warmed his heart a little.

Harry's eyes trailed to the faded yellow sofa next to the fireplace, where Susan and Hannah were waiting for him, holding cups of tea and corralling the errant enchanted tea service in front of them. Flouncing across the room, Ginny dropped into one of the burgundy armchairs and – trying to think of something to say – Harry joined her after a moment of hesitation, taking a seat.

"I'm sorry I haven't really been around for the D.A.," he apologized, feeling as if it was desperately needed, especially considering… well, everything currently surrounding him. "I didn't realize…"

"It's fine, Harry," Susan replied, giving him an cheery smile and stilling the magical bouncing sugar bowl with a vicious strike of her wand. "We all figured you were busy and we're doing well enough on our own – Ginny and Neville have been taking the reins."

"I've heard," Harry said with a nod. "I'm glad."

"Want some tea?" Susan offered, gesturing to the enchanted service in front of her. "This was my auntie's set. They're bloody useless at recognizing a guest – aren't you, you little nits?"

The teapot seemed to cower under her glare and Harry politely declined. "I'm good, thanks."

"What was it that you needed to meet with us for?" Hannah asked, setting her writhing teacup aside and tapping it with her wand to make it stay put.

Letting out a breath, Harry started his approach, "Have either of you heard of the Order of the Phoenix?" he asked, staring mostly at Susan. He knew that her aunt – likely the previous owner of the tea service – was involved with them before she was killed last summer. Kingsley had mentioned working with her a few times.

"You mean Dumbledore's secret group?" Hannah questioned, her eyes lighting up. "Quite the scandal, that – it's all over the Evening Prophet – Andy Smudgley has been doing these 'investigative' pieces–"

"Investigative – pfft," Susan huffed into her tea. "It's sensationalistic trash."

Hannah shrugged. "It's fascinating though… You have to admit."

Harry's brows furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Andy Smudgley's stupid conspiracy in the Evening Prophet," Susan answered, gazing at him with vague skepticism. "You haven't read his series?"

"No…" he warily intoned. "What's the conspiracy?"

"That Dumbledore has a secret army called the 'Order of the Phoenix', which he uses for political and personal gain," Susan explained, rolling her eyes. "Basically, Smudgley's been trying to convince people that it's Dumbledore who's stirring up – and instigating – a lot of the Death Eater attacks, using the Order of the Phoenix, to discredit and undermine the Ministry as an institution. And he heavily postulates that Dumbledore secretly wants to run the government like an ironfisted dictator, which he assumes will occur if an all-out war breaks out – a war that Dumbledore is apparently encouraging so he can gain full political power." She snorted contemptuously, her hand reaching out to snatch up her footed saucer, which started to run off toward the edge of the table. "It's
pure propaganda that has bloody Scrimgeour written all over it."

"Yeah, but at least people think it's just a conspiracy." Ginny jumped into the conversation. "Unlike Dauber and Pash's anti-Muggle articles in the main paper."

**Anti-Muggle articles?**

Harry stared between the three girls, feeling tremendously out of the loop. He clearly needed to start reading the *Prophet* again instead of just glancing at the cover in disgust and throwing it in the corner of his dorm. His face was plastered on the front of almost every issue as of late and the ones that didn't have his face plastered all over usually mentioned him at some point. Scrimgeour was trying very hard to make it look like he was working with the Ministry, regardless of their Christmas meeting.

And Hermione, who usually had enough patience to read the *Prophet* in total and weeded through the news for him, was still going through the back issues she'd missed while she was focused on her library horcrux hunt.

*Merlin*, look away from the bloody paper and all hell breaks loose.

"What anti-Muggle articles?" he asked, glancing over at the redheaded Gryffindor.

"You know how the *Daily Prophet* started that section on Wizard-Muggle relations last November?"

Harry nodded. From what he had read of it, it was a half-arsed attempt at best and far too easy to get annoyed and angry at.

"Well, they wrote *some* good things, articles about how the Muggle Prime Minister and the Minister of Magic were working together to provide Muggles with support after Death Eater attacks and such. It *used to be* rather pro-Muggle, but it's slowly deteriorated into… *ugh.*" Ginny's nose scrunched up as if she'd just stepped in dragon dung.

"There was this article a few weeks ago that started out like we were collaborating with the Muggles. They'd found this mass grave from the Burning Times and the Ministry of Magic was informed, and the Ministries worked together on returning the remains to their families – good and all. But the article *mostly* focused on the torture that magical people used to suffer during the Burning Times – especially the women and children. They spun it like Muggles were *total* monsters and *still are* – but they don't do anything to us anymore!"

He may have heard Hermione mention that one…

"And *now,*" Ginny continued, gesticulating wildly, "they've been all: There's been an outbreak of a mysterious illness in Sihr – it must be the Muggles' fault! Seven wizards shot in Denmark – Muggle weapons are dangerous, here're some tips on how to avoid Muggle weapons violence and defend yourself from the Muggles because they're *surely* out to get us! It's nothing *good* anymore – mostly *bad*. And people bloody well *believe* it!"

"Because bad news sells," Susan dryly intoned, her mouth flattening into a thin line. "Especially if it's irrationally biased and inspires strong emotions – that's how politics works. My great uncle works in The Department of Magi-Muggle Cooperation; he *loathes* that section. He told me that those *incidents* that they're making such a fuss out of happen *all the bloody time*. What they *don't mention* is that witches and wizards accidentally kill Muggles *just as often* as Muggles accidentally kill witches and wizards – especially if there's a war going on somewhere. But that section wouldn't gain as much popularity if they tried to write like *actual* journalists."
"They're probably not actual journalists, I reckon. Likely Death Eaters who got a shiny new job at the *Daily Prophet,*" Ginny said boldly.

"Maybe." Susan shrugged again, setting her cup of tea down onto its saucer and tapping it with her wand. "But it's the Ministry who's still approving it – they have people who review articles before they're allowed to be published. The blame is all on their backs."

"Does that have something to do with you coming to us?" Hannah asked, angling herself toward Harry and raising her brows. "Because I *might* be able to help. My cousin works for *Witch Weekly* and he probably knows someone who can stop the Order of the Phoenix series from being published. Not so sure about the anti-Muggle articles; the *Evening Prophet* is handled differently than the *Daily Prophet.* Less serious – they've less readers."

"Er – no… I mean, you can do that if you want, but that's not why I wanted to meet with you," Harry muttered, caught off guard and his mind still roiling from the news about the *Prophet.* Biting the inside of his cheek, he tried to get back on track to his approach.

"I only mentioned the Order of the Phoenix because I work with them – and they're *really* fighting *against* Voldemort; it's *not* for Dumbledore – he started the Order to combat Voldemort… none of that stuff in the *Prophet* that you mentioned is true."

"We know, Harry. Anyone with half a brain would be able to see that it's a ruddy pile of kindling," Susan heatedly insisted.

"Hopefully the rest of the population sees it that way." His lips quirked into a sardonic crooked smile and Ginny scoffed cynically, murmuring, 'Not bloody likely,' which he internally agreed with.

With a small sigh, he moved back onto the reason why he needed them, bending the truth, "*Anyhow*… there's evidence that Voldemort's using students at Hogwarts to do things for him. We're still not certain on what he's having them do – Malfoy and Goyle were possibly involved before they went missing. But I believe that one of these students is in Hufflepuff and I was wondering if you could help me get into the common room so I can search their dorm for clues or anything else I can get on them."

"A *Hufflepuff* working for You-Know-Who?" Hannah leaned forward in her seat. "Who is it?"

"I don't think it would be the best idea if I said," Harry replied and then added, "*Until I'm sure* they're working for Voldemort, that is. The goal is to incriminate with proof – not accuse."

Susan's eyes narrowed. "It's Zacharias Smith, isn't it?"

Harry snorted with laughter, shaking his head. "No – not him." Though he could see why she would come to that conclusion.

"Too bad," Susan muttered, slumping back against the sofa. "I've wanted a good reason to hex the little git for a while now."

"We'll help you get in, Harry," Hannah said, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear and smiling genially. "You know it's by the kitchens, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I've been down that way before."

"I'm free for it tonight if you want – how about you?" Hannah glanced toward Susan.

"Er – we'd have to do it when I know this person isn't going to interrupt the search, so…" Harry
trailed off before Susan could give an answer. "I've a way to make sure they won't be there," he
evasively explained to their questioning glances.

"Do you know how to do the Memo Charm?" Susan asked, her eyes focused on the tea service.
Exhaling a long exasperated sigh, she waved her wand at the sugar bowl, which had started
bouncing again – even worse than before – flinging sugar everywhere.

"No." Harry shook his head, sweeping away the thin layer of sugar that had gotten onto his lap.
"Like the interdepartmental memos at the Ministry?"

"Exactly those. You could contact us that way, when you know the person's going to be out; one of
us should be around to help you," Susan said, giving the badly behaved bowl a strict tap of her
wand, sedating it. "It's not that difficult. I've been teaching it to the D.A. so we can stay in touch with
each other without alerting everyone using the coins. If you Disillusion them, they're perfect for
sending a confidential message. Whack you right on the forehead – hard to miss."

"Alright," Harry replied, slipping his wand from his back pocket and coming up with an idea that
would assuage some of his guilt over neglecting the D.A. "How about a trade? You teach me the
Memo Charm, and I'll teach you the basics of a triple-layer glamour that you can pass onto the D.A.
Takes a while to master, but it's a useful skill."

"Sounds good to me." Susan shifted forward to the edge of her seat, glancing over at the redheaded
Gryffindor. "Got any parchment handy, Ginny?"

OoO

Quidditch practice that week was hellish, snowy, and emotionally grueling. Ron and Ginny
squabbled most of the time over Ron's piss poor performance (and everything else they could pick at
each other for) in front of the hoops, leaving them wide open for the other Chasers to toss Quaffle
after Quaffle right on through. The only players who got any real practice the entire time were the
Beaters, who made a game out of getting the Bludgers as close to the two rowing ginger's heads
without actually hitting them. Harry only let it go on because it was the one thing that would
momentarily break up the fighting – all of Harry's words fell on deaf ears, even when he disarmed
them, played the Quidditch captain card, and threatened to boot them off the team.

Bloody maddening.

Nearing the end of practice, when it got so cold out that it was hard to keep a warming charm going
without casting them every five minutes, he started to wonder if arguing was what Ron and Ginny
did to stay warm. They didn't seem nearly as effected by the weather as the other players, who Harry
allowed to turn in early after suggesting that they get some pepper-up potion from Madame Pomfrey.

"I dunno what's gotten up her bonnet," Ron grumbled, tugging off his sweaty undershirt in the
Quidditch locker room and tossing it into the dirty clothes trolley, which was already full from
everyone else on the team having been through there. Ron had hung back around the pitch to help
Harry wrangle in the balls. "I say one thing about Dean's throws and she acts like I'd gutted her
Pygmy Puff."

"You said Dean threw like a girl," Harry elucidated, but Ron merely shrugged.

"Just a little honest criticism."

"Ginny's a girl," Harry further pointed out, unlatching his arm guards and shoving them into his
locker. "I'm surprised Demelza didn't say anything."
Ron rolled his eyes, shucking off his soaking wet breeches and pants. "Women," he muttered, sauntering off starkers toward the shower stalls with his leather Keeper helmet still on his head.

The sound of squeaky knobs turning and water spraying over the tiled floor followed in his wake and Harry finished removing his freezing Quidditch robes, casting a warming charm over himself before he summoned a towel for his walk to the showers. He'd lived in a dormitory full of boys and shared a locker room with the Gryffindor Quidditch team for six years, but he would never be able to match the immodesty of anyone in the Weasley family – even Ginny.

"Speaking of women," Harry said, turning on the shower taps and throwing his towel over the top of the stall. "How's your progress on breaking up with Lavender?"

"Ugh," Ron groaned from next stall over. "Don't mention her, mate. She's impossible – all she wants to do is snog me till my lips feel like they're going to fall off and it's hard to get a word in when we do talk. S'like she knows or something. And it's really hard to break up with someone when they've got their hand down your pants."

*Clever tactic,* Harry humourously thought, busying himself with scrubbing his soapy fingers through his tangled mess of hair.

"Greengrass keeps saying I ought to tell her outright, but–"

"I thought I told you to stop bothering her about that?" he cut in, staring at the stall partition toward Ron's voice.

"Yeah well, she's the only girl who ever gives me any girl advice."

Harry's brow arched. "You haven't *asked* any other girls for girl advice."

"Well, I don't know any other girls that well. And Greengrass is… not bad. Though I think she's been setting Felicity Hardbroom on me and that's just made Lav worse. I dunno what to do, Harry. They're mental – all of them. Cept perhaps Greengrass and maybe Hermione, but if she's with Zabini…" Ron trailed off, cursing insults under his breath, which were half-muted by the shower spray.

"They really fancy each other, Ron. It's bizarre, but there's nothing much you can do about that," Harry said, possibly for the hundredth time since he'd told the Weasley boy about his chat with Zabini. Ron was just as suspicious about the Slytherin's intentions as he was – *actually,* Ron was still suspicious. He'd probably *always* be suspicious.

"I know…" Ron miserably intoned. "I saw them yesterday after the Prefect meeting sneaking into that alcove on the fourth floor – you know the one? Clever clogs warded it. Disillusionment or something – *completely* disappeared."

"Probably an Insularity ward," Harry muttered, remembering one of the ward debates at the warehouse between Daphne, Zabini, and Hermione. Brilliant idea to use one of those for snogging in an open alcove – he'd have to look into that.

"Whatever that is." The sound of Ron's leather Keeper helmet being tossed away and dully hitting the floor with a 'smack' followed. "So – uh – how's it with Greengrass?"

"What d'you mean?" he asked cautiously, his eyes narrowing.

Ron rarely asked about his relationship with Daphne. It was refreshingly opposite of Seamus, who wouldn't shut it about Daphne or Hermione, who Seamus was convinced was Harry's "bossy bit" on
the side’ from all of the time that they spent together up in Harry's dorm with Croaker's letter and the
dubious catalogue-ordered books on Soul Magic.

"Well, you asked me about Lav – isn't this where we talk bollocks about our girlfriends or
something? Y'know, like Fred and George and Charlie."

"Daphne's not my girlfriend, really," Harry uncomfortably intoned, letting the stream of the shower
flow over him and warm him to the bone. He thought he'd never get warm after that bloody practice.

"I know – whatever you two are doing," Ron paused and the squeaky sound of a potion dispenser
was heard. "Lucky bastard. Lav's got me wearing that stupid necklace under my clothes and throws
one hell of a fit when I forget it."

Harry snorted, chuckling softly.

"And you just get to sneak away for whatever you do with Greengrass and not have to deal with all
the other stuff."

"We don't just... We do plenty of 'other stuff' – like I've told you. She's teaching me things."

"I bet she is."

Shaking his head, Harry soaped himself up, letting the muscle relaxation potion lather and soothe his
Quidditch-specific aches. "It's not what you think."

"'S'probably kinkier than what I think – Slytherin 'n all. Charlie dated one once, that's why Fred and
George and I made a pact. She liked to do a lot of kinky things with him – s'probably why he liked
her. Bit like a dragon. Scary."

"Er..." Harry bit his lip. "No. She's... maybe but... no. We're not – it's not kinky."

"So nothing kinky at all? Really?"

"We've tied each other up once or twice, but that's not that... That's normal, isn't it? And controlled
Slicing Hexes. I mean..."

"Slicing Hexes? Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"Yeah, that's the point, isn't it? It's not... dangerous if it's controlled, but it could be. Bit more
exciting than a Severing Charm."

They'd used both in the past, but the feeling of those yellow sparks, flying along the fabric across his
shirt – slicing into it and tearing it off – not doing a lick of damage, was extremely satisfying in a
way. It could've done a lot of damage though. It definitely could've...

He never realized how much he was into that sort of thing until she sprung it on him, all smirking
and whispering, 'Trust me?' with her wand pressed against his chest after an arduous session of
Thaumaturgy.

Great. He was getting hard just thinking about Daphne and her controlled Slicing Hexes.

"It's just to get rid of clothes and stuff..." Harry muttered, clearing his throat and trying to will his
half-mast erection to go down by picturing McGonagall naked. Then Snape – Snape usually did the
trick.

"Like I said," Ron replied, after a pause. "...Kinkier than I thought."
"It's tame most of the time..." Harry justified, not wanting to feel self-conscious.

It was just a bit of impatient magic that he happened to like the feel of.

"Still a lucky bastard, even if she's going at you with those," Ron grumbled. "Lav likes to tickle me while we... you know. It's bloody weird – I don't know how to tell her to stop though."

"Erm – how about tell her, 'don't do that'?" Harry said, finishing up while the sound of squeaky taps turning off came from Ron's stall. "Or just... pin her hands or something."

"Pin her?" Ron was right outside of the door to Harry's stall. "Isn't that a bit rude?"

Turning off the taps and wrapping a towel around himself, Harry opened the stall door. He wiped the steam from his glasses with his thumbs. "Isn't 'tickling you when you don't want it' a bit rude?"

"I guess?" A flush was creeping up Ron's face and he nervously rubbed at the back of his love-bite marred neck with his hand, holding his towel around his waist with the other. "Does Greengrass tickle--"

"No. She doesn't," Harry answered awkwardly, moving toward his Quidditch locker and drying off as he grabbed his pants.

"So just... pin her," Ron said, more to himself than anything.

Harry nodded, shoving his legs into his trousers. "Or tell her you don't like it -- that's a better option."

"Rather just break up with her, honestly," Ron griped, toweling off and banging open his locker. "Do you and--"

Pulling just jumper over his head, Harry interrupted, "Are you going to base everything off of what Daph and I do?"

"Well, you are a bit more... experienced -- just curious."

"I'm not though -- not any more than you are."

"A little bit," Ron responded, his dry shirt sticking to him as he tugged over his half-wet torso. "What with Cho and now Greengrass. And all the kinky Slytherin stuff you do with her."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not more experienced though. And it's not kinky. It's just different, that's all."

"Exactly. That's why I'm asking."

"If you'd stop being a coward and break up with Lavender, you wouldn't need to ask -- you could follow Daph's advice and go find out differences for yourself since you're so interested."

"I'm not a coward!" Ron retorted, his brows furrowing. "Lav's just impossible and I don't know how to do it. They really need to teach a class on that -- be more useful than bloody Divination and Astronomy."

Harry scrubbed his hand over his face, sighing. "Do you want me to break up with her for you?"

"D'you think that'd work?" Ron stalked over to the mirrors on the wall with his wand in his hand and started spelling glamours over the smattering of marks on his neck.
"Since you don't have the bollocks to do it yourself…" Harry trailed off, bending over to tug his trainers on.

Ron's reflection glowered at him in the mirror. "I do – it's just that she's–"

"'Impossible'," Harry finished for him. "Yeah, I know – and no, you don't."

"I do," Ron asserted. "I just don't know what to say."

"I think we should see other people', 'I don't want to see you anymore', 'maybe I'm not "your sweetheart"…"" Harry replied, his lips curving into an amused grin. "I could give you a list."

Ron's glower deepened as he inspected his glamour work, which made his neck appear whiter than the rest of his skin. "It's not that easy."

"It is, mate." Waving his wand, Harry performed a quick Hot Air Charm on his hair, running his fingers through it to straighten it out to no avail. "If you really wanted to end it, you wouldn't be making so many excuses. You'd just do it."

"Huh." Ron thoughtfully chewed at his lips. "So… uh – pin her?"

Harry shrugged on his robe, pocketing his wand and wrapping his thick Gryffindor scarf around his neck to protect himself from the frigid weather. "…If she seems comfortable with that."

"S'worth a try. Anything to stop the tickling."

Harry's brows rose. "You're never gonna break up with her, are you?"

Ron answered with a deflated shrug and conflicted look on his face.

OoO

"Do you think you can check to see how far along they are in fixing the Vanishing Cabinet?" Harry inquired after Dobby delivered a long detailed speech about what Cornfoot and Runcorn were up to in the Room of the Requirement, where they were currently. Their names had completely disappeared off of the Marauder's Map less than an hour ago.

He figured that, while he was waiting in the Hogwarts kitchens for Hannah or Susan to arrive to let him into the Hufflepuff common room, he'd get an update from the house elf on his reconnaissance mission.

"Dobby knows a way!" Dobby said, nodding enthusiastically, causing the pile of tea cozies on his head to teeter back and forth. "Is Harry Potter sir wanting me to check the cabinets now?"

"Erm – no, Dobby," Harry replied, setting down his mug of hot chocolate and raising a hand to stop him from Apparating away immediately. "They're up there at the moment. Maybe after they're done?"

The portrait hole burst open and Hannah Abbott came bounding through as Dobby stayed silent, forbidden to discuss the mission in front of anyone but Harry; Dobby's answering nod and expression told Harry that he'd do what he'd suggested and get back to him after and Dobby took his leave, Disapparating with a crack!

"What do you think?" Hannah asked, spinning in front of him as she strode over to where Harry sat. "I've been practicing the triple-layer glamours." She fiddled with the end of her glamourised brunette
"Nice. Looks good," Harry complimented, evaluating – it seemed almost as flawless as Daphne and Hermione could get them. Hannah must have been talented at Charms to get the glamour to work in only a few days.

"Thanks! I've always wanted to try out darker hair, but I didn't want to mess with permanent dying charms and I'm terrible at human Transfiguration – and triple-layer glamours are even better than cosmetic spells for covering spots! It's amazing," Hannah rambled, scratching at her chin. "Itches like the dickens though."

"You got skin down already?" Harry asked, his eyes flicking toward her chin, looking for the seams of the glamour and finding none. He reiterated his earlier thought – she was incredibly talented at charms.

"Skin and hair. Features don't want to stick for me." She turned to the house elves that started approaching her. "Oh, no, I don't need anything – don't worry about me! I'm just here to meet with Harry."

"Well, you're on the right track," Harry encouraged, picking the conversation back up and watching the dejected elves slowly return to their usual duties. "Took me ages just to get skin and hair and I'm still dreadful at features – it works a little better if you perform the spells backwards because the defense charms stick it all in place, but it's... not as good as doing it properly."

"I'll try that," Hannah said, looking him up and down. "Are you going to use one to get into the common room? Glamour yourself as a Hufflepuff?"

"I'm not that good at them yet – you can obviously tell I'm wearing a glamour when I do them. I'm going to use a Disillusionment Charm instead," Harry replied, standing up and demonstratively tapping his head with his wand, letting the charm take over him. He then tugged his invisible invisibility cloak out of his pocket and threw it on for even more concealment. "I'll go in like this, silence my shoes, and sneak into the dorms."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Woah, that's amazing – I can't even see you!"

"That's the idea," he quipped, rather certain that his invisibility cloak was the reason why he was so well-concealed. "Shall we?"

"Oh, yes – the entrance is just down the corridor, in the wine casks." Hannah pivoted on her feet, exiting the kitchens; she kept looking around for him like he'd suddenly appear out of thin air and he tapped her shoulder to let her know he was following. "Goodness, this is hard with you being invisible."

"Just try to look natural – I'll stay close," Harry quietly ensured her, tapping her shoulder every ten steps and again when they stopped in front of a giant stack of massive wine barrels.

"Is it alright if I wait for you back in the kitchens?" she muttered to him, whispering the password – 'Pigeon Pie' – and causing the end of one of the casts to open, revealing a staircase that led downward. "Then you can tell me if you find anything. I've been dying to know who it is."

"Yeah, that's alright, I'll meet you there," he replied in a hushed tone, knowing that if he found anything he'd probably have to lie to her about it, but she didn't need to know that.

Descending the staircase, Harry silenced his footsteps as he entered warm and inviting circular room that was the Hufflepuff common room. It felt slightly as if he had stepped inside an enormous,
brightly lit and oddly coloured, onion bulb. Yellow and black décor permeated every surface, interspersed with the green plant life growing in the pots hanging from the windows. Study tables lined the walls and plush, curved furniture encircled a giant spherical – also bulb-like – fireplace, which was recessed in the centre of the room. Students relaxed against poufy cushions on the hearth, studying and chatting to each other as Harry passed through, silently side-stepping around them.

He was starting to get pretty decent at sneaking through common rooms from his practice down in the dungeons, visiting Daphne. Part of him was wondering if he should sneak through Ravenclaw Tower for the complete Hogwarts common room-sneaking experience.

A first year Hufflepuff girl disappeared up a staircase that must have led to the girl's dormitories and Harry waved his wand, immobilizing the stairs. He wasn't certain if it was needed – but he didn't want to alert anyone of his invisible presence by turning the stairs into a slide. Taking a tentative step onto the staircase, he let out a breath when it didn't flatten under him and continued on his way up, searching for the fifth year girl's dormitory.

Pressing his ear to the door, he double-checked that it was as empty as the Marauder's map had indicated fifteen minutes ago before turning the handle, glancing around. His stomach was doing anxious flips and he swiftly entered the room, parting his cloak and getting started. While he was midway through trying to locate Runcorn's stuff by opening the trunks and looking at names on homework, he put a Tripping Jinx on the door as an afterthought. If he searched carefully enough, it would allow him enough time to get everything in order without making anyone too suspicious if they ran into it.

A Tripping Jinx on a doorway was a common prank.

With his luck, Runcorn's trunk was the last one he reached and he hurriedly got to searching, memorizing where she had everything so he could put it all back. The trunk was disappointingly chock-full of the usual fifth year supply of books and course notes and very little else. One of the scrying mirrors that she had won during the broom race was in there, hidden in a jewelry case under a romance novel, and the only other anomaly he found was Cornfoot's copy of Advanced Potion Making, which had been wrapped up in her Hufflepuff scarf.

Sighing, Harry rearranged the trunk back into its former state, closing it and moving on to search the wardrobe and bedside table. It was when he stooped down to search the bottom drawer on the wardrobe that he noticed something peculiar out of the corner of his eye. Underneath Runcorn's bed was a cauldron, bubbling away next to where she kept her broomstick and potions kit. Placing a Heat-Protection Charm on his hands, he pulled it out from underneath the bed and lifted the lid, scrutinizing the contents and unable to figure out exactly what it was on sight. It wasn't anything he'd made before. Wishing he'd brought a phial with him, he eyed Runcorn's potions kit, deciding – against his better judgment – to knick one from her.

She had enough of them; she wouldn't notice if one went missing, would she?

His heart nervously rising to his throat, Harry swiftly ladled a small amount of potion into the glass phial, replacing the lid on the cauldron and sliding it back under the bed. Stuffing the phial into the pocket of his robe, he did a quick search of the bed and bedposts, checking for concealment spells and finding nothing awry. Backing away from the area, he gave the room a once-over – everything looked as it was when he found it – and he nodded to himself, nearly stumbling into the Tripping Jinx he'd set on the door, which he removed on his way out.

As he had expected, he wasn't able to call the search a brilliant success – nothing like the treasure trove that was Cornfoot's dorm. He basically told Hannah he didn't find much when he met back up with her in the kitchen, still not informing her whose dorm he searched. Fortunately, she took it well,
only a little let down by it, which made him breathe an internal sigh of relief.

Sooner or later, he'd probably have to tell her – and the D.A. – but, for now, he had to keep his cards close. The numerous plans that they all had set in place relied on rather specifically executed steps. While there was a minimal amount of flexibility on certain things, if they let too much information get out, they wouldn't be able to predict what could go wrong.

If a worst case scenario were to occur – if the Vanishing Cabinet were to be destroyed or if Cornfoot and Runcorn were taken out of commission – there were a number of terrible possibilities that could be made possible as a result. It was better to remain discreet and have the important information stay in the confidence of those who were in on the plan – even if it was a bit stressful to keep it that way.

Lying, deceiving, and continually keeping track of all of the different stories he had told people in his head was a bit like dancing on a ledge while someone fired Cruciatus Curses at him. He had to make sure he didn't slip for even a moment, especially when the time came to whip out the lies and carry on with the various farces they'd created.

No wonder Daphne smokes so much, Harry thought, plucking a fag from his red leather case and lighting it on his way back to Gryffindor Tower. The mysterious phial of potion in his pocket was just begging for a good prod from Hermione.

OoO

When Cornfoot and Runcorn weren't using the Room of Requirement, it vaguely resembled a mad house during his and Daphne's practice sessions.

Flying squirrels circled the Gryffindor common room-esque space like vultures, grouping with the paper-plane memos that whizzed around the light fixtures in the ceiling. Various books that they'd needed for practice and issues of the Evening Prophet were strewn about, bereft of all the Andy Smudgley articles, which burned vengefully in a cauldron in the corner. Daphne's face was badly morphed into the face of Hermione – thanks to Harry's botched triple-layer glamour – while she did cartwheels across the floor under his Thaumaturgic suggestion, breaking into insane fits of laughter.

However, he wasn't certain if the laughter was from the emotions he placed in her mind or if she was just laughing because he'd finally gotten her to do cartwheels.

Staggering to a stop in front of him, Daphne giggled like he'd never heard her before and he smiled widely as she said, catching her breath, "I think you've got it now. That one hit me perfectly – didn't even feel it. The euphoria was a nice touch."

"Yeah?" he asked, not being able to resist reaching for her and loosely pulling her into his arms. "Think I could take on Slughorn yet?"

Daphne waved her wand over her face, getting rid of the badly done triple-layer glamour. Her free hand was sneaking up the back of his shirt, teasing at his skin. "I think that if you do that a few more times – consistently –" She paused, a smirk curving her lips. "– we'll be able to do step one on Monday."

His smile widened further as his heart soared in his chest and he leaned down to kiss her softly. "Brilliant," he muttered happily against her, backing her toward the only sofa in the room that wasn't covered in books and newspaper. "Have I mentioned that you're a brilliant teacher?"

"Must be my methods," Daphne wryly replied, her teeth grazing over his lower lip and angling her body against his.
"Mm – must be," Harry murmured, laying her down onto the cushions, her legs wrapping around him. His lips skimming over her neck, placing kisses along her collarbone and tasting the saltiness of her skin. "I've a better idea than cartwheels and euphoria."

"Oh, really?" she prompted, kicking off her shoes, which thumped onto the floor. "And what would that be?"

"Do you think anyone's ever tried inciting arousal with Thaumaturgy before?"

Daphne let out a huff of laughter, tugging his head back by his hair and grinning up at him. "I like where your mind is at."

Nipping at his earlobe, she pressed her lips against his skin, whispering, "Go on then, Mr. Potter." He felt a controlled Slicing Hex, sparking from the tip of her wand and skimming across the front of his shirt, ripping it open and making him shiver. "Ten points to Gryffindor if you can get it on the first try."

"Yeah, you're a bloody brilliant teacher."

OoO

"Are you ready for this?" Daphne asked, her hand resting on the doorknob.

Harry shrugged, trying to quell the jittery wasps that kept zipping through his stomach. He felt far more confident up until they reached Slughorn's office. Merely standing in front of the place made the plan that he'd concocted seem that much more real. Previously, it was all in his head like a faint illusion of what he had to do, but now…

"Just like we practiced, right?"

Daphne's lips pulled into a smirk. "You'll do well, I'm sure of it. Don't worry so much."

Her telling him not to worry only seemed to make it worse.

The door opened easily and they stepped inside the large office. Cautiously warding the door behind them, he anxiously trailed after her through the room, taking deep breaths through his nose to clear his emotions. Behind one of the partition screens, Slughorn was poking at his fire with his wand, his giant velvet-covered bum in the air, and he gawkily whirled around when they entered, his eyes wide.

"Oho! Daphne – Harry, m'boy! You startled me!" he exclaimed, pressing his hands against portly stomach. "What can I help you with at this late hour?"

"We've something to ask you, Professor," Daphne casually intoned, moving toward one of the sofas in front of the fireplace and taking a seat. "Perhaps you can settle a little debate between us?"

"Of course – of course!" Slughorn finished mucking about with his fire with one last poke at it and he sat heavily in the ornate armchair across from her. "I'd be glad to. What is this debate of yours about?" He twisted toward Harry to gesture for him to take a seat.

Pulling the phial he'd lifted from Runcorn's cauldron out of his pocket, he sat next to Daphne and held it out to Slughorn. "We were wondering if you could tell us what this potion is. One of my dorm mates is brewing it and none of the revealing spells'll work on it."

Hermione couldn't even figure out exactly what it was, taking a whole hour in his dormitory running
tests. There were too many potential potion outcomes.

"If it isn't a complete potion, most revealing methods won't work on it. Requires a more experienced hand – or nose," Slughorn said, seizing the phial from him and uncorking it to take a whiff. "Ah, precisely! You say that one of the students in your dorm is brewing this?"

Harry nodded dutifully. "Yes, sir. Daphne thinks it's a sleeping aid because of the heavy use of lavender, but I personally think it's a nighttime drought for the common cold – since there's angelica root in it. You can tell by the colouring..."

"You aren't wrong about the ingredients! Both excellent guesses – however, the potion is neither of those. This is Felix Felicis, in fact – not even a month into its brew cycle. Rather impeccably done thus far, if I say so myself."

Slughorn re-corked the phial and tossed it back to him, searching the pockets of his smoking jacket while he spoke, "If it were further along, you might have been able to connect it to the recipe if you used a spell to analyze the components. Silverweed would have been a dead giveaway, but that isn't added until the third month of brewing." He paused, the centre of his forehead creasing as he squinted toward his desk beyond the partition, gripping his wand. "Ah, I must've left my tin of pineapple over there..."

As he raised his wand to summon the tin of sweets, Daphne pounced, drawing her wand from her sleeve and pointing it straight at him.

"Somnus," she muttered, causing Slughorn to slump in his chair, his head lolling to the side and letting out a great long snore. The wand in his hand clattered to the floor and Harry let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding from the moment Daphne took action. Already, she was crossing the rug and standing over the plump professor, her wand flicking as she mouthed incantations to alter the Thaumaturgy previously placed into his mind.

Harry got to his feet, staring unblinkingly. Planning everything out was a lot different than practical execution, and seeing Slughorn peacefully sleeping while Daphne messed around with his head was a bit like... uncomfortable shock.

"Alright," Daphne said, straightening up and nodding. "Fixed the hallucinogenic bewitching." She gazed over at him, her eyes searching his face. "It's your go, love."

Rolling the tension out of his shoulders, he reasoned with himself that the plan he'd concocted was good and would get him what he needed – it was only just a matter of time and careful implementation. Sadly, it couldn't be done without this, but it would be different after this part was over. He'd never have to mess with the mind of a sleeping man again.

Raising his wand and focusing, Harry stepped forward – a simple flick and one of Slughorn's mental tendrils was pulled toward his magic. With concentration on the goal in mind, feelings of guilt and regret thickly wove around the tendril and Harry backed away, ending the spell and letting his nerves deflate inside him.

Daphne's expression was vaguely soothing when he looked over at her and he nodded toward Slughorn, indicating that it was her go again.

He watched as she steadily raised her wand, aiming towards Slughorn's temple. Her face didn't betray any sort of nerves or hesitation over what they were doing; she was calmer than a gentle
breeze and he couldn't help but admire her for that, even as she performed the necessary spell, "Obliviate."

OoO

"YES! I got it!" Hermione cried, springing up in her seat on Harry's bed, the parchment in front of her flying into her hands. Harry's quill went skidding off of his essay at the disturbance, tracking a long line of ink across the page and splattering it all over the Evening Prophet, which had been opened to the latest story on the 'Order of the Phoenix conspiracy'. Cursing, he mopped up the mess with his wand, looking up at her.

"What does it say?" he anxiously asked.

"Dearest Miss Granger and Mr. Potter," Hermione read, "I apologize that I am unable to personally help the Order of the Phoenix in the Department of Mysteries myself. However, it may be of some use to your cause to ask around the sixth level if they enjoy sausages. Those who are agreeable or answer in the affirmative to this question will be of use to you and might be willing to help you within the department. Please give my regards to Albus. Hope all is well, S. Croaker."

"Sausages?" Harry incredulously asked, his eyes narrowed toward the parchment.

"Maybe it's some sort of Unspeakable code for 'Order of the Phoenix'?' Hermione suggested with a shrug. "I don't know."

Harry's eyebrow arched. "'Sausages' for 'the Order'? That makes about as much sense as what Smudgley's writing."

"I'll send a letter to Tonks," Hermione muttered, pulling a fresh roll of parchment from her book bag. "She might be able to figure it out. Or, at least, she'll be able to put it to use since she's working on getting someone in the Department of Mysteries."

"Yeah…" Harry grabbed Croaker's letter from her and read it over again. "It's not like I'm going to be able to give my regards to Dumbledore for him."

"He probably thinks it was Dumbledore who told you how to contact him," Hermione deduced, scribbling out a letter to Tonks and chewing at the end of her quill after every other sentence. "Unless he knows about you and Greengrass, but since Greengrass wasn't mentioned…"

"I wonder if he's gotten back to her on the horcruxes yet," Harry mused, shoving his Charms essay aside and reaching into his bag to pull out the Marauder's Map to look for her.

Hermione signed her name on the bottom of the parchment with a flourish. "You've been meeting her every other day since the last Slug Club meeting; she'd tell you, wouldn't she? What have you two been up to, anyway? I've been meaning to ask, but I didn't want to pry into your relationship."

"Erm – it's not really… that. It's more to do with Cornfoot. Slughorn too." Harry shrugged, his eyes roving over the dungeons, searching for 'Daphne Greengrass'.

"You told her about the memory?"

"Not fully…" Harry paused, spotting Daphne's name in the Ravenclaw common room. She was with Dahlia Runcorn and Sylvia Montague, making nice just as they'd had planned. The Runcorn friendship between them was really coming along, so much so that Daphne was able to completely ruin the Felix Felicis that Runcorn was brewing by hitting it with a spell that raised the temperature
on it.

Liquid luck took meticulous temperature monitoring; Runcorn would have to start over.

"So what are you doing that involves Slughorn's memory?" Hermione asked, glancing up at him curiously.

"She's been teaching me Thaumaturgy and stuff… and we've been practicing a few other things," he explained, setting the Marauder's Map on top of his half-completed Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. "It's… a bit complicated."

Hermione stared at him sharply. "So complicated that you need to resort to Dark magic?"

Harry's brows rose. "Thaumaturgy isn't Dark, is it?"

"It's hallucinogenic bewitching – of course it's Dark!" She stared at him warily. "What are you going to do to him that requires that?"

"Er… scare the memory out of him? It's only to make me more… useful to him," he reluctantly admitted. "You know, putting suggestions into his head…"

It didn't seem that Dark to him, but perhaps it was a little bit… He and Daphne were somewhat messing with Slughorn's mind with what they were doing. He'd only considered it marginally immoral, which it definitely was.

The centre of Hermione's forehead creased. "Suggestions of what?"

Letting out a sigh, Harry leaned back against his headboard. He'd have to tell her all of it if she was going to make sense of anything. He dithered, knowing she wouldn't be fond of it, but he didn't like keeping things from her.

It was bad enough that he had to lie to everyone else – he didn't want to lie to his best friends.

"Alright. You know how Slughorn has this new possible apprentice that was mentioned at the last Slug Club meeting – Mr. Voynich?" he asked and Hermione nodded. "Well, Mr. Voynich doesn't exist. Remember I went broom racing with Daphne and we worked on getting closer to the Carrow twins and Runcorn a while ago?"

"Yeah, but…"

Harry persisted, "I was Mr. Voynich. Daphne triple-layer glamoured me into Tom Riddle and then put a Thaumaturgic spell on Slughorn to convince him that he interviewed Mr. Voynich for an apprentice position in case the Carrows or Runcorn asked him about me. However, her bewitching failed and Slughorn couldn't distinguish between Mr. Voynich and Tom Riddle very well, which is why he reacted so weirdly during the meeting."

Hermione's lips parted. "Okay… What does this have to do with the getting that memory other than severely inconveniencing everything?"

"Actually, it doesn't inconvenience anything," Harry contradicted, his lips twisting into a faint grin. "It's really handy that she bungled that spell because we can use that angle. She altered the Thaumaturgy she originally placed in his mind to make Slughorn think that the Voynich interview was all a nightmare. Then, Daphne altered Slughorn's memory of Flora asking about Mr. Voynich during the meeting. Of course, we had to oblivate the real reason why we went to Slughorn's office when we did all of this but… nevertheless…"
Hermione's face grew more horrified with each passing second and Harry shook his head, refocusing on the original plan at hand.

"I've been putting Thaumaturgic suggestions in his head that his conscience is the reason why he keeps having these nightmares about Tom Riddle interviewing as Mr. Voynich. And, I've laid the foundations for guilt and regret over giving Dumbledore the tampered memory. Then, gradually, I'm going to put more suggestions in there that he should give the real memory me, because I'm the 'Chosen One' and very close to him; a person he can trust. Giving the memory to me will then clear his conscience so he can stop having the nightmares. Meanwhile, Daphne's going to make him think he's had more nightmares until he gives me the real memory because she's a bit better at Thaumaturgy than me right now. It has a possibility of working really well and it provides me with a valuable use to him: To help him clear his conscience about that memory."

"That's mental, Harry!" Hermione admonished, her eyes widening. "You're terrorizing a professor!"

"I know it's wrong." Harry shrugged sheepishly. "But Dumbledore said that that memory was very important and it must hold some sort of terrible knowledge if Slughorn's hiding it from him. Maybe the ends will justify the means! We already know that horcruxes kill people and, if Voldemort's making horcruxes, it would probably be important to know what that's all about with Slughorn and everything, don't you think? It might involve him somehow."

"And what happens if the Carrows or Runcorn ask him about Mr. Voynich again?" Hermione retorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "That certainly throws a spanner into your plans, doesn't it?"

"Daphne already put a Thaumaturgic suggestion in Runcorn's head that it wouldn't be beneficial to ask Slughorn about Mr. Voynich because she isn't supposed to know about him – for the Carrows, she changed it a bit since they've already asked; they won't ask him again. I honestly think she should have done that in the first place since suggestions are easier than full-on bewitching… but–" Harry tilted his head in a nonchalant shrug. "– we wouldn't be where we are right now if she did."

"I can't believe you're doing this – he probably would have given you the memory if you just buttered him up and asked nicely."

"Doubtful," Harry retorted. "Dumbledore's known him for over fifty years and he probably 'buttered him up and asked nicely' and look at what he got. I've only known him for a few months! And it's obvious that Slughorn only does things for people who would be of use to him… But my use is only something that he can boast about – some use that is. It's definitely not enough to confide his deep dark Voldemort-related secrets with. I need him to feel like he's clearing his conscience and I'm doing him a favour. Thaumaturgy will do well for that, even if it isn't the most ethical way to go about it."

Hermione's lips pursed and she focused on folding up her letter to Tonks, sticking it into an envelope. "Fine… but I don't approve of it one bit. Greengrass has been a terrible influence on you."

"Don't blame Daphne for this. It was my idea – not hers," Harry defensively replied. "She's teaching you some seriously Dark magic."

"Which I asked her to teach me," he pointed out. "I didn't know it was Dark. It's simply… useful for what we need to do."

It was also weird to think that Dark magic inspired the Cheering Charm.

"Erm – Thaumaturgy doesn't work that way," Harry said, surprised that he knew something that Hermione didn't. "Occlumency can't block Thaumaturgy very well and you don't need any eye contact."

"No wonder it's considered so Dark then! There's no way to protect yourself from it!"

Harry let out a patient sigh. "There's a spell you can use to reverse it; it's just not blockable… And it's not as if I'm doing it for the wrong reasons, Hermione. There just aren't many other options that would get me foreseeable results any time soon."

"As you've said," Hermione replied with a huff of a sigh as Dean and Seamus loudly entered the room, tossing around their shoes. "But that doesn't mean I have to like it – or approve of it. I can see wh–"

"Oi, it's the lovebirds!" he heard Seamus proclaim before popping his head into the curtains around his bed. "You two 'doing your coursework' again?"

Snorting derisively, Harry asked, "That what they're calling it now?"

"With Hermione Granger, yeah, I imagine, mate," Seamus said as he glanced over at the Gryffindor girl, winking rather salaciously. "Hello, 'Mione."

"Seamus," Hermione greeted tersely, her disapproving McGonagall stare-of-death fixed on him. Seamus leaned closer to Harry. "Does she look like that even when you –"

"If you want to keep that bottle of Firewhiskey I saw under your bed, you'd better not finish that sentence," Hermione sternly interjected. "And, for the last time, there is absolutely nothing going on between us!"

"Yeah, he's always going to be like this," Harry dryly intoned, answering the silent question that was written all over Hermione's face.

OoO

Ever since the first step of Harry's plan had been executed, Potions class became a daunting juggling act. On one hand, he was balancing asset cultivation with Slughorn and, on the other hand, he was carefully messing with the man's mind, with Daphne aiding him.

She was lucky she always took a seat at the front, giving her perfect access to weave as much Thaumaturgy as she wanted into Slughorn's mind. Harry's usual seat in the middle of the room wasn't close enough to perform the spell, so he had to come up with various ruses to get near Slughorn – aside from his usual classroom walkabouts.

Stirring his cauldron and double-checking the Prince's book for instructions, Harry surreptitiously glanced around the room before making his way to the storeroom behind Slughorn's desk for ingredients that he would have had if he hadn't intentionally left them behind in his dormitory. His wand was inconspicuously slipped from his sleeve as he reached the edge of Slughorn's desk. The plump professor was sitting there, grading papers and obliviously chewing his way through a packet
of sweets.

Harry's heartbeat quickened and he felt like a child reaching for a contraband biscuit in the tin hidden on the top of a fridge, out of his reach.

With a short flick of his wand and a nonverbal spell, Harry continued to pass behind Slughorn's back, pulling at one of the professor's mental tendrils. He could feel it with his magic and the Thaumaturgic suggestions and feelings of guilt that he imparted clung to the tendril, snapping back into Slughorn's mind. Pocketing his wand, he moved to find the ingredients he needed, watching the professor out of the corner of his eye.

Slughorn's gaze didn't even lift from the essay he was reading for a single moment and relief flooded through Harry's veins. Trying to avoid detection was always the most unnerving part of the whole scheme – luckily, only Hermione seemed to notice what he was doing, based on the look she shot him as he walked past her.

On his way back to his desk, he felt a note slide into his hand by magic – he'd recognize one of Daphne's Placement Spells anywhere – and he opened it after tossing a small measure of the feverfew he'd gathered into his cauldron.

Got a response. Meet me in the Hall of Hexes after dinner.

Harry's stomach did an acrobatic twirl, his breath catching in his throat as his eyes skimmed over the words again and again. He'd been waiting for this for what seemed like ages. And, given all of the disapproval he'd received from Hermione for using Thaumaturgy as of late, he was in need of a little more justification for what he was doing. At least, he hoped that knowing more about horcruxes would give him that.

Yet… considering how long it had taken Croaker to get back to them, Harry wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad sign. It was difficult to remain too optimistic.

OoO

"Y'know, I thought that I was supposed to be the reckless Gryffindor in this relationship," Harry innocently stated, a delighted grin bubbling up onto his face.

"Oh, shut it, Potter," Daphne drawled amusedly, handing him an unbreakable vial of familiar purple twinkling liquid.

They stood on the edge of the Quidditch Pitch, just before the wards protecting the school. The Signature Duplicating Potion was rubbed onto their chests and wands, and a triple-layer glamour was thrown onto him before they passed right through the wards as if going through a thin layer of fine mist.

It was just as reckless of him as it was of her, sneaking out.

He didn't even get the chance to tell Hermione where he was going when he ran off to meet Daphne in the Hall of Hexes. But, he didn't expect to be making his way to the Calendula Café in Hogsmeade to meet an ex- Unspeakable for a chat about horcruxes. Apparently, the subject was so taboo, Croaker wouldn't even talk about them in a heavily coded note since that led to an implicative paper-trail. It didn't matter if it could be burned or if it was difficult to decode. A meeting at the Calendula Café on short notice had to suffice.

Daphne used Disillusionment Charms and footstep-silencing spells to get them past the Auror guards on the path to Hogsmeade. The place was crawling with them.
This is reckless, he repeated in his head as they snuck by the red-robed pairs of witches and wizards, but he was thrilled regardless.

It reminded him of his rule-breaking third year-self, stealing away to Hogsmeade without a signed permission slip, only he and Daphne were on a completely different path.

Once they got off of the high street, Daphne cancelled the Disillusionment Charms and footstepsilencing spells, quietly leading him down a road behind Zonko’s to a small café that was tucked away in the residential area of the village. The pale blue exterior of the two story building was welcoming, even in the dark, and the interior was quaint and cosy with cushioned chairs and tables dotted around the place.

It was far better than Madame Puddifoot’s, with only locals lightly dispersed about the hospitable café.

"Come on, he's probably up here," Daphne whispered, still grasping onto his hand.

He followed her to the lofted upper level and they stopped in front of a private table where sat a thin, stoat-like man with greying hair, swathed in navy-coloured tweed and delicately sipping at a steaming mug of coffee.

"Who's your friend?" Croaker asked after greeting Daphne with a nod and a smirk that made his face seem even more stoat-like.

"Someone who can keep a secret," Daphne idly stated, sitting down next to Croaker and pulling out a cushioned chair for Harry, which he took.

Croaker’s dark eyes narrowed a miniscule amount, calculatingly raking over Harry’s form in a way that made him feel as if he was about to be covered in lard, thrown into a pan, and roasted for dinner. He fingered his wand in his pocket despite the fact that Daphne said they could trust Croaker with their lives.

"Hm… Impressive triple-layer glamour. It's not too hard to figure out who you are though," Croaker finally said, causing Harry’s nerves to seize as he shifted in his seat.

"But I'm…"

"I'd recognize that scar on your forehead anywhere, covered in a glamour or not."

Daphne snorted, conjuring two empty mugs and pulling the pot of coffee on the table toward herself. "Holding out on your spook skills again, are you?"

Croaker’s stoaty smirk widened. "Better to be underestimated than overestimated, I always say." He paused, flicking his wrist and causing his wand to appear in his gloved hand. "But first, some privacy—"

A powerful wave of magic flooded around them and Harry felt his ears pop from the force of it. The invisible wards fell over their small occupied space, caressing his skin like a tickle of silk, which contrasted heavily from its power.

"You're just showing off now," Daphne playfully chided with a good-natured smile, pouring a second cup of coffee and sliding it toward Harry.

Croaker tilted his head in a demure shrug. "We shan't be overheard, given the nature of the topic." He then cleared his throat, taking another sip of coffee before he began, "Now, you require
Both Harry and Daphne nodded, staring at him with rapt attention. Daphne's hands were pulling her silver case from her pocket all the while.

"They're very interesting devices," Croaker intoned, not missing a beat as he conjured Daphne a crystal ashtray when she lit a fag; Harry took one as well, lighting it with his gold lighter. "A horcrux allows one to become somewhat immortal, I suppose you could say, but that is – to a certain degree – a half-truth."

Immortal.

Nott didn't mention anything about immortality.

Harry's heart sunk into the pit of his belly as he exhaled a breath full of smoke. "What do you mean by that, sir?" he asked. "How does that work?"

Croaker's eyes moved to him, putting Harry under his scrutinizing Unspeakable gaze. "They're formed by splitting the soul. Therefore, immortality only lasts as long as two lifetimes. It isn't complete and eternal immortality; thus, a half-truth. In addition, the bit of soul that you split off and put into the horcrux will not pick up your life where you left it after you die. Sometimes a person with a horcrux – who hasn't been very careful with it – will have another version of themselves walking around and living a completely different life than their own. And they're occasionally none the wiser about it."

"Okay, I feel like I'm missing an important bit of information here," Daphne interjected, blowing a wispy puff of smoke toward the ceiling. "Assume we know absolutely nothing about horcruxes because I've only seen the word mentioned in Magick Moste Evile and the author wasn't too keen on explaining anything."

"Oh, yes, forgive me – I'm used to discussing this matter with more informed subjects," Croaker apologized, starting over. "A horcrux is essentially a home for a chunk of soul that can eventually turn into the wizard or witch whose soul the chunk originated from. It's formed via the use of the Killing Curse, which, as you may know, does damage to the human soul – the curse aids in the splitting process. I believe there might be a potion to further aid horcrux-making, but I'm a little rusty on the method..." He held up his finger and dug into his inner cloak pocket, tossing a book on the table. "The general process is in there if you want a full guide on how to do it. Nasty stuff, to be honest."

Harry stared at the book, Secrets of the Darkest Art by Owle Bullock, cocking his head to the side to read the title straight on.

"Where was I..." Croaker blinked rapidly and then nodded. "Ah yes – the chunk that flakes off as a result of the horcrux-making will remain the same age that the person was when the original soul was severed. And, once formed, a horcrux will be able to do its job, which means that you have to be very careful with it after you make it. Horcruxes are designed to kill and drain the life from humans who have contact with them. The soul is on a constant search for life-giving energy, which is what enables the soul-chunk to regain its former body. It's a bit like a phoenix being reborn from its homicidal ashes, which is probably why it's continually considered a method for immortality, despite the limited extra lifespan gained from a horcrux..."

Throughout Croaker's lecture, Harry froze as a few things that the ex-Unspeakable said hit far too close to something he'd encountered in the past.
"Is it possible for a horcrux to possess a person?" he asked, busying his hands with his cigarette and mug of coffee and trying to seem casual.

Croaker nodded once. "Easily – if you form a strong enough bond with a horcrux and feed it enough of your energy, there are points where you're likely to become more horcrux than person. They're rather parasitic."

All the dots in Harry's head connected. Tom Riddle's diary must have been Voldemort's horcrux, which tried to kill Ginny in order to gain form.

But he destroyed it... so why was Dumbledore after the horcrux memory in Slughorn's head? Harry's brows furrowed and he looked into his recollections for more clues, drawing deeply at his fag.

To his left, Daphne was lazily flipping through *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. "Gruesome..." she muttered vaguely toward the book before looking up at Croaker. "Is there any actual way to gain real immortality?"

"There's the obvious vampirism – that's eternal. The trade-off is that you lose your magic in the process and have to dine on human blood for the rest of your life to sustain you, which deters most people," Croaker answered in a humoured drawl, settling further into his seat and curling his gloved fingers around his coffee mug.

"Huh," Daphne uttered, her lips parted in thought. "But what about the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Destroyed, unfortunately – before the Unspeakables could get their hands on it. And Flamel burned all of his notes on the process of making it before he died, the bastard." Letting out a rueful breath, Croaker took a sip of coffee. "Many Unspeakables would give their wand arm for that information."

Meanwhile, Harry couldn't think of any reason why Dumbledore would want Slughorn's horcrux memory since Voldemort's horcrux was already destroyed.

Perhaps the memory held a new key piece of information?

But what...?

Was he wasting all of his time with the Thaumaturgic intervention he was staging? Was it possible that Dumbledore himself didn't know what a horcrux was?

Harry dismissed the latter question once more, knowing it was extremely improbable. Dumbledore seemed to know almost everything.

Or maybe he just wanted proof that Tom Riddle's diary was a horcrux...

"Then it makes sense why horcruxes are considered apt for immortality," Daphne said, closing *Secrets of the Darkest Art* and picking up her coffee. "Since there isn't any other way to retain your magic and increase your lifespan."

"Indeed; however, I dislike that description of it. Immortality is and should be eternal in order for it to qualify," Croaker replied, his cheek scrunching up in irritation. "I blame Harpo the Foul for describing it as such, but he basically invented the process."

"Hmm..." Daphne hummed around her cigarette in contemplation. "Yeah, but what if you made more than one horcrux to make your lifespan more... eternal? Or is that not possible?"
Croaker tilted his head introspectively. "I don't think anyone's done that before. And, who – in their right mind – would want to be the first to see if they can split their soul more than once without something going wrong?" He cynically laughed as if the notion was ridiculous, cutting it off with sip of his coffee. "It would need testing before I'd chance that."

Harry's stomach joined his heart, sinking to the pit of his belly.

He knew who would want to be the first…

"But, if it was possible," Croaker continued, "I still wouldn't consider it eternal immortality even then – you'd have to continually make horcruxes and if you lived through that, considering the studies done on failed Dementor kisses, I doubt you'd have much soul left in you to exist after two thousand years at the most. But that goes into the unknown."

"Two thousand years is a significant increase in your lifespan," Harry pointed out, adding in his head, 'For someone who's afraid of death, especially.'

Imagining two thousand years of Voldemort was difficult to wrap his head around. How many horcruxes would that take?

"Well, does the soul split in complete halves…?" Daphne questioned, her forehead creased in the centre. "Or is it more imprecise? Because that would make a huge difference."

Croaker shrugged. "Even the Department of Mysteries doesn't understand much about actual soul-splitting due to the rarity of horcruxes. I would hazard a guess and say that it's imprecise, just based on the St. Mungo's–Department of Mysteries collaborative analyses on soul damage as a result of the Killing Curse, which was done on Azkaban prisoners after the last war. And, when Dementors leave bits of soul behind, they're always jagged cast offs. Messy eaters, that lot."

"Makes it all the more possible to have more than one then," Daphne concluded, flicking ashes off of her fag and sitting back in her seat.

"Still wouldn't advise more than one if that's what you're planning to do, Ducky," Croaker responded, the corners of his lips quirking. "Or is this information for the Boy Who Lived?"

Harry uncomfortably met Croaker's amicable gaze.

"Well, if Harry wanted to split his soul, would you blame him? He has one of the most powerful wizards in the world after him," Daphne retorted. "Might come in handy."

"Yes, I can see the appeal to have an extra life in that case," Croaker said, nodding graciously. "However, don't get caught – the Department of Mysteries has wanted to study you for ages ever since you survived the Killing Curse. If you made a horcrux, they'd be even more interested, which is saying something. Not to mention the Azkaban sentence that it carries, leaving you completely at their mercy."

"It's only a consideration, sir," Harry replied, going along with the convenient excuse Daphne presented. To her it probably wasn't an excuse – she might've thought it was true since he hadn't told her that Voldemort was the reason for his interest in horcruxes. "It would be nice if we could keep this conversation just between us though. I don't want it getting out that I'm looking into this."

"No worries there," Croaker guaranteed. "It's not as if I'd be comfortable telling anyone that I informed two teenagers how to make a horcrux. I'd be in Azkaban if anyone important got wind, considering that it's banned knowledge."
Harry's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Then why'd you tell us? If it can get you into trouble…"

"You don't become an Unspeakable unless you enjoy breaking the rules, Mr. Potter," Croaker answered, his eyes sparkling mischievously. "Those who do the field work are basically glorified criminals with government paychecks and heads full of secret knowledge." ¹

"My kind of job," Daphne commented from behind her coffee mug.

Croaker glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. "Yes, we all know that you aspire to be a cliff jumper."

Harry stared at Croaker questioningly and the ex-Unspeakable explained, "Sixth level. Cliff jumpers are the spooks with very little sense of self-preservation. Run straight into danger and usually you find them hiding in enemy territory."

Harry's brows rose. Daphne wanted to be that type of Unspeakable? That was news to him, even if it sort of made sense.

"You did it for thirty years and you're still alive. No need for the discouraging tone," Daphne remarked, laying her hand over *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. "Mind if we keep this?"

"You sent payment for it, didn't you?" Croaker rhetorically questioned, his stoat-like smirk twisting at his lips.

Daphne's expression shifted into one of surprise and Harry stared between the two of them. "This book cost that much?" Her lips parted. "But that was for you."

"Banned knowledge has a steep price point." Croaker paused, finishing his coffee. "And you've more than compensated with your information on the Malfoy's summer home."

"What is it about that bloody summer home that everyone wants?" Harry asked, unable to contain his interest after it had been mentioned so many times.

"It's rumoured that Nicholas Malfoy hid the hand of Midas there after he stole it from the Goblins in the 14th century," Daphne clarified, rolling her eyes. "I'm guessing it's true?"

Croaker's smirk widened but he didn't confirm or deny it.

Daphne let out a breathy laugh. "You and Johnson are incorrigible."

"More ambitious than incorrigible, I'd say," Croaker returned.

"Wait. The hand of Midas actually… exists?" Harry's brows rose. "It's real?"

"And everything it touches turns to gold," the ex-Unspeakable happily confirmed with a nod.

"Including live human bodies," Daphne wryly added.

Croaker waved that fact aside with a backwards sweep of his gloved hands. "Powerful magic always has a trade-off, you know that."

"If you and Johnson end up as gold statues, I'll sell you," Daphne casually threatened, her words contradicting the amused smirk on her face.

"Just as long as I fetch a decent price," Croaker quipped, matching her smirk.
Daphne snorted, shaking her head. "Incorrigible."

"Ambitious," Croaker corrected, checking his watch and sighing at the time. "And I apologize, but I must cut this delightful conversation short. I've another appointment rather soon."

"No problem, sir," Harry said. "Thanks for helping us."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Potter," Croaker replied, standing up from his chair and reaching his hand across the table, which Harry politely shook. "I hope all goes well with the information I presented. And with the Department of Mysteries."

"Thanks," he repeated as Croaker waved his wand, undoing the powerful wards around him.

Croaker tipped his head toward Daphne. "Ducky," he said with a droll stoat-like grin.

Daphne returned his nod. "Sausage," she replied, smiling, and Croaker spun on spot, Apparating away with a soft 'pop'.

Harry's brows furrowed, reminded of the letter Hermione decoded. "Sausage?"

"Mm – he's 'the toad in the hole'. Used to run prison comrade schemes in Azkaban to gain information by making 'friends'," Daphne offhandedly explained, stubbing out her cigarette, shoving *Secrets of the Darkest Art* into her robe, and pulling out her vial of twinkling Signature Duplicating Potion. "Better put more of this on before we go back… No idea how long this stuff lasts."

OoO


OoO

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Declivity

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: As always, thank you for reading! And a massive thanks to my beta RAfan2421 for all of his lovely help!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Duality: Declivity

OoO

"Merlin's pants," Hermione breathed, flipping through Secrets of the Darkest Art, her wide eyes devouring the images and words on the pages. "This is… Well, the title is certainly fitting."

"Bloody hell, is that a picture of the… er –" Ron was staring bewilderedly over Hermione's shoulder down at the book, swallowing thickly. "What is it doing to him?"

"Soul extraction," she murmured and Harry knew what they were looking at. His stomach turned, remembering that image, drawn and animated with excessive detail. It was burned into his mind, the way the victim's pale corpse was twisted at the murder's side as the potions that aided the extraction process took effect, making the killer's body crack and invert, spewing the delicate soul shard – along with a number of other things.

The whole process was agonizingly repulsive and made his skin crawl just thinking about it.

He had no idea how Croaker could talk about something like that so lightly – and Daphne. She had looked through the book in more detail after they had left the Calendula Café, and she barely had much of a response to it before she passed it off to him.

How she could remain undisturbed after reading about it and seeing those images baffled him.

"You really think that Voldemort – oh, fine, Ron, You-Know-Who – made more than one of these?" Hermione asked him, Ron shuddering at her side. Her face was ashen and her jaw slack as Harry glanced up at her.

"Just a theory. He's definitely made one – the diary. But… he doesn't strike me as the sort to just stop at one, I imagine," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders to ease the tension that had settled into his posture. "If he wants to be immortal, somewhat immortal anyway, without giving up his magic – it's the only way."
"But Croaker told you no one's done that before," Ron pointed out.

"No one sane," Hermione replied, flipping back in the book. "If you look past all of the – ahm – well, the vile and evil things. It's dangerous for a person to make just one – it mentions the danger of inverting your body like that right here." She pointed to a small section in the book. "Making more than one could probably kill you or cripple you or… The side effects of this kind of magic are incredibly serious."

Busying his hands with his red leather case, Harry plucked out a cigarette, lighting it and moving over toward the window by his bed to crack it open. "Like what?"

He hadn't been able to stomach the book long enough to get to that bit.

Hermione shook her head. "I haven't gotten through the whole thing yet. But it might explain Voldemort's current appearance. There's a section on recovery… That's just for one horcrux though. That might not be enough if you've made multiple horcruxes. You can't continually crack your body apart and invert it like that before something's going to break down – I assume, anyway. Magic can't fix everything…" She bit her lip, shaking her head again. "It's amazing he's still alive if he's done more than one or two – maybe three."

"But it's possible to," Harry said, blowing out a calming breath of smoke toward the window. "Or isn't it? Because he's definitely still alive."

"Well, overlooking the danger, it probably is possible," Hermione confirmed, her teeth worrying her lip. "And Volde – You-Know-Who could have used a snake for a reparative spell or potion or something… I've read about Dark healing rituals while looking for horcruxes in the Restricted Section. They might be powerful enough to keep him alive after inverting and splitting and..." she trailed off with a grimace, shutting the book in her lap.

They fell into a short silence, only the sound of the crackling of Harry's cigarette floating between them until Ron cleared his throat.

"So – er – what do these things look like?" the redhead asked. "Y'know. The horcruxes."

"They can be anything – an empty tube of lipstick; a carriage clock – it just has to have room to house the piece of soul, which doesn't take much space at all," she said, letting out a sigh. "And, if he's made enough for two thousand years' worth of horcruxes like Croaker mentioned, that's… a lot of horcruxes."

"…How many?" Harry inquired, his eyes widening a fraction.

"The average life of a wizard is about a hundred-and-twenty-five to a hundred-and-seventy-five years. That would make it eleven horcruxes – perhaps more or, hopefully, less. I doubt he'd be able to make that many and still be alive though."

But he didn't hear that last part. His brain seemed to pause on the numbers; they echoed through his mind.

_Eleven._

"Fuck…" Harry breathed, leaning his head back against the cool window. "This is going to be a fucking nightmare. They could be pieces of bloody trash and unless Slughorn's memory turns out to be a show and tell of 'here are my ruddy horcruxes', I don't know how…" Scrubbing his hand over his face, he brought his cigarette back up to his lips, exhaling bluish smoke in an aggravated huff of breath.
"Well, there's one thing you can do in the meantime that'll help," Hermione said, her brows creasing in concern and Harry threw her a questioning glance.

"The Chamber of Secrets," she elaborated. "Basilisk venom is one of the few things that will destroy a horcrux and, if the carcass is still there, the venom will be viable. Even when improperly stored, it lasts for years."

"But that's only useful if we find a horcrux," Harry retorted. "Which could be basically anything."

"It's something though!" Hermione asserted. "It'll be good to be prepared, at least. It's useless to go looking for a horcrux first and finding it and having no way to destroy it, especially if the way of destroying it is right under your feet! Why not have it handy?"

Harry flicked the ashes from his fag out the window. "Alright, fine, I'll go down there."

"We will this weekend," Hermione said with a nod. "After our Apparation lesson."

Harry's brows furrowed. "You're coming with?"

"We both are, mate – I wanna come too," Ron piped in, his expression determined.

"Great," Harry muttered tightly, taking a calming drag off his cigarette.

He'd hoped he'd never have to see that Chamber ever again – fat bloody chance at that. He should have known.

OoO

Ever since his enlightening conversation with Susan, Ginny, and Hannah in the D.A.'s new headquarters, Harry started to dread Tuesday and Thursday evenings when Andy Smudgley released his articles. With it came the storm of owls, which rained down upon dinner in the Great Hall. The number of subscriptions to the Evening Prophet had skyrocketed, spreading amongst the Hogwarts students at the same rate as the popularity of the Order of the Phoenix conspiracy.

But what was even more horrifying than the popularity was that people were starting to become more curious than skeptical, with some of them occasionally shooting glances up at the empty chair where Dumbledore usually sat for dinner. The Headmaster had been gone for weeks now and that only added to the inquisitive buzz that sparked in the Great Hall.

Intentionally late and dragging his feet across the floor, Harry plunked down onto the bench next to Hermione and glared at the front page of the newspaper lying across his empty plate, already waiting for him. Not looking forward to this, he braced himself as if he were ripping off a plaster and read Smudgley's latest headline.

OPERATIVE OF THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX SPEAKS: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

In response to the Evening Prophet's exposition on the misdeeds of the elusive Order of the Phoenix, a male operative of Dumbledore's secret coalition contacted our humble office. Careworn and tired of the dishonesty, this operative – who has wished to remain anonymous to the public – went into detail on the group's culpability in the transgressions uncovered by this reporter's team, offering to grant an interview for the exposé. Determined to bring our faithful readers the truth, it was only with the confirmation of this operative's legitimacy – proven by cross-referencing his claims with several Ministerial documents and files from our own investigations (see page 9) – that this reporter met with the operative privately at an undisclosed location and progressed with the most enlightening interview on the matter to date... Cont., page 4.
"Oh, bloody fucking hell," Harry groaned under his breath and his hands tore open the newspaper to page four, his eyes quickly skimming the article, the words blurring before him. Sections of it jumped out at him, catching his attention and forcing him to read slower, anger burning hot in his chest.

--Hardened by his years of service in the Order of the Phoenix, the operative calmly describes his experience of being party to the bewitching of nine-year-old Kenneth Brocklehurst on October 10th at the hands of Dumbledore's secret coalition. For those who are unaware of the tragedy, the young boy—compelled by the Order of the Phoenix and not Death Eaters, as previously believed—proceeded, that evening, to execute his entire family via rudimentary Muggle means...

"Well, that's shock value, innit?" remarks the operative. "The Brocklehursts were under Ministry protection and we were to show that weren't enough to save them. No one suspects a little boy...

…The operative's account of the Order of the Phoenix's involvement in the Brockdale Bridge disaster, resulting in the death of countless Muggles, is even further solidified in truth by the Auror Office's report on the same incident. In concurrence with the operative's experience, the report states that traces of Polyjuice Potion were found at the scene of the catastrophe, the very potion used by the operatives of Dumbledore's secret coalition during the incident...

"On the whole, we were instructed to 'motivate fear'..." the operative explains. "I went along with it, of course, but what else can you do? Powerful wizard like Dumbledore'd do something about dissention—he often did..."–

There were pages and pages of the interview filled with never ending lies, with the 'operative' confirming every single one of Smudgley's previously written articles on the fake 'exploits' of the Order—and more. The anger in Harry’s chest slowly rose, heating his cheeks and making his jaw clench.

"It's Fletcher," he seethed quietly. "It has to be! He sold out to that..." He let out a breath. "That... bastardling little..."

He should've strangled him last year when he had the chance.

"You don't know that, Harry," Hermione reasoned under her breath, leaning close to him and grasping at the pitcher of pumpkin juice. "Smudgley could be making this whole interview thing up like he has with everything else he's written."

"'...modest middle-aged man, working as a self-employed entrepreneur by trade...'" Harry scathingly read Smudgley's description of the 'anonymous operative', raising his brows toward her. "That's just a 'nice' way of saying 'petty thief who fobs off stolen goods in Knockturn and Diagon Alley'."

He snorted in disgust, his lip curling up at the article as he shoved the newspaper aside, not able to look at it for a moment longer. Everyone around him was discussing it; he could hear their furtive whispers. Accusing glares were passed up to the empty Headmaster's chair.

"Poor Mandy, I can't imagine how she feels..." he heard someone say from the Ravenclaw table just behind him.

A whisper from down the Gryffindor table came in, loud and clear, "My sister was on the team of Obliviators for that incident—I always knew there was something dodgy about it when she told me."

Smudgley was pressing too many of the right buttons.

"The scary thing about conspiracies is that they often have some truth to them," he heard a
Ravenclaw boy heatedly argue with Michael Corner and the temperature seemed to rise in the room, stifling him.

Balling up the paper in his fist, Harry stood up from the table and stalked toward the exit, brushing past Ron and Lavender and not sparing anyone in the Great Hall a glance. Getting out of those doors was the only singular goal in his mind and he breathed a sigh of relief as the Great Hall doors slammed shut behind him. The curious buzz of frenzied conversation was muffled and unintelligible, making it easier for him to calm himself and not do anything stupid on impulse, like set fire to everyone's copy of the *Evening Prophet*.

That wouldn't have been a good idea.

Instead, pulling out his wand, he did just *that* to his own copy, feeling the angered pressure in his chest start to abate as the newsprint crackled to ash at the end of his nonverbal *Incendio*.

"*Evenesco,*" he muttered, making the blackened flakes of paper disappear and he released a breath, setting off toward the Hogwarts kitchens for a much quieter dinner and pulling out his red leather case.

The whole bloody conspiracy was starting to get completely out of hand. Something had to be done about it, but he wasn't certain what that 'something' was.

**oOo**

"I don't know why Dumbledore isn't doing anything," Harry muttered, unable to focus on the homework spread over floor in his dormitory, which Hermione and Ron were working on. That bloody interview had been stewing in the back of his mind and, after going the entire day listening to the mad gossip of the student population, he couldn't keep it in any longer.

Ron glanced up from the glass full of water that he was trying to nonverbally transfigure into air. "About… Smudgley?" he clarified, his brows raised. "Yeah, s'bit dodgy. But maybe he's trying to deal with it when he goes off to wherever he goes."

Shaking his head, Harry stood up and stretched, reaching in his back pocket for his red leather case as he stalked toward the window by his bed. "I don't think so. If the Ministry and the news are as tied as Susan said, then Scrimgeour wouldn't keep having him followed."

"They would do if he's gathering evidence," Hermione supplied, barely looking up from the giant tome in her lap. "With enough proof, Dumbledore could make a good case against the *Evening Prophet* for libel and even more charges could be put on Smudgley – fraud, conspiracy, defamation… A case like that would be difficult for the press to ignore and, since he's the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, legal action is the logical choice."

Harry paused from lighting his cigarette, Hermione's words acting like a momentary calming balm applied to the ends of his nerves. Yet… there was something not quite *right* about that possibility.

"But the Order doesn't keep records of anything, so what could he gather? Witnesses?" He inhaled a deep breath full of smoke and cracked open the window, his brows furrowing. "The Order isn't supposed to be public knowledge. And if he wants to keep what they do a secret from the Death Eaters or if he wants to keep who's involved in the Order a secret…"

"He's *Dumbledore*, Harry," Hermione cut in, throwing him a shrewd expression. "He'll find a way to manage without exposing the Order – or he's waiting for Smudgley to stick his foot in his mouth. It's not like everyone believes those articles. It's going to take more than *that* to rally people against
him. Fudge tried and failed at doing the same thing last year."

"I wouldn't say that he failed completely last year," Harry retorted. "Or don't you remember Umbridge?"

"The fact still remains that people will stand behind Dumbledore in spite of controversy."

"Only because Voldemort showed up at the Ministry and proved them wrong!"

"But that's not everyone and, honestly, the Prophet doesn't have as much credibility anymore," Hermione pointed out, letting out a breath. "Not to mention that Smudgley's 'proof' behind the Order conspiracy is extremely circumstantial."

"Sirius went to Azkaban on less than circumstan—" Harry hissed, stopping abruptly as there was a loud knock at the door. Ron honestly needed to break up with Lavender. Every time that the three of them were together, she always found a way to interrupt them. It was as if she had bloody radar for them.

Harry didn't even bother to put his cigarette out as he answered the knock, surprised to find Romilda Vane standing on the other side of the door. The fag was dangling from his mouth and he was certain that he had an ugly look on his face.

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything..." she said sheepishly, clutching two scrolls against her chest. "I meant to deliver these last week, but they sorta got jumbled up with my notes for the O.W.L.'s."

It was an obvious lie and he was half tempted to point that out to her, but he swallowed down his unpleasant mood with a deep breath.

"Right," Harry muttered as polite as he could, taking the scrolls from her. "Thanks, Romilda."

"You're welcome! I'm always glad to help out Professor Slughorn. And..." she paused, throwing him a flirtatious grin, "if you need anything else..."

"Ah, no... no need," he awkwardly replied, desperately wanting her to sod off and moving to close the door. "I'll see you around."

"Bet you ten Galleons that has a love potion or spell on it," Ron proposed the moment that Harry rudely shut the door and turned back to the room.

Harry sent him a sardonic look to which Ron defended, "What? S'easy money."

"No, really?" Harry said more than asked, plucking his wand out of his back pocket and throwing the scroll addressed to Hermione over to her. "Specialis Re..."

The scroll in his hands turned a bright red, revealing a golden string of equations across the seal, which dissipated slowly and he quickly tossed it to Hermione. "Do you think you can break the spell on that? It looks like Arithmancy."

Hermione sighed. "I don't think it's worth the bother since it likely says the same thing as mine does. Slughorn's having a birthday party this Friday and he's inviting the entire Slug Club to it. Didn't you say he mentioned something like this to you?"

"Well, he did ask me if I was coming to his little 'leapling' gathering last week. I just thought he meant that as another Slug Club meeting."
"Leapling?" Hermione chewed at the end of her note-taking quill. "No. Leaplings are those who are born on February twenty-ninth. Leap year – 'leaplings'."

"I didn't know that."

"We'll have to get him a present," Hermione said with a sigh, tucking the scroll away into her bag.

"In three days?" Harry's brows rose. "What in the world could we come up with in that time?"

"I don't know. It'll have to be mail-order and quick though."

Letting out a breath full of smoke, Harry leaned against the cold glass of his window. On the upside, Slughorn's birthday party would give him an additional opportunity to get even closer to the plump professor. And it also would serve as a decent distraction from Smudgley's articles since there wasn't really anything he could do about them.

Or, actually, maybe there was something he could do…

He vaguely wondered what Ginny or Luna were up to and quickly got to work on sending memos. Slughorn wasn't the only one with a 'club' full of well-connected people.

oOo

"We have an issue," Daphne said, pressing an ostentatiously wrapped gift box into Harry's arms, shortly after entering their usual meeting room in the Hall of Hexes. The box contained an expensive velvet smoking jacket that she pulled out of some dark corner of her resources for him in less than half a day.

Daphne was even quicker than the DA, which was rather astonishing.

Harry's forehead creased in concern as he watched her fish out her silver case and light up, waiting for an explanation to the beginning of her tirade, but Daphne didn't seem to be all that forthcoming at the moment.

"What's the issue?" he prompted, setting the gift box aside and accepting a proffered cigarette.

"Cornfoot's on to me," she said quietly, even though Harry had sufficiently warded the room as he waited for her earlier.

His stomach sank briefly, but he pushed the feeling aside. "And what makes you think that?"

"He's not stupid – in fact, I think that he's smarter than Draco could ever be. The way that he conducts himself when he's around us--" 'us' meaning her, Dahlia Runcorn, and the Carrows-- "his actions are calculated. I can tell. He's trying to play an unassuming role just as much as I am. But I'm not exactly sure of his entire game plan."

"I still don't see what makes you think that he's on to you exactly – he might be 'playing the unassuming role' because he doesn't want to make you suspicious of him," Harry optimistically suggested.

"It's more than that. He pulled me aside yesterday after I left the Ravenclaw common room and asked if we could spend some time alone together, without the others around. He left it rather open to suggestion – kind of impressive – but I truly think he asked me that because he's onto me." Daphne paused, blowing out a long breath of smoke. "I'm still not sure how I'm going to approach it."
Harry's insides froze. "What'd you say to it?"

"I obviously agreed," she replied with a casual shrug. He had no idea how she could remain so calm. "It's too good of an opportunity to pass up."

"I suppose," he rationalized, letting out a sigh. "Could be dangerous as well. You could have just told him you're involved with someone and took it that way."

"And put myself under Dahlia, Flora, and Hes' microscope? Not to mention Sylvia… I'd rather deal with Cornfoot. Though I suppose I could have used Theo… but, no – if I can use this as a way to get even closer to Cornfoot, it'll be worth the risk."

Inside Harry's mind, all of the horrible possibilities – the worst case scenarios – were flowing through at a mile a minute. He tried his best to tamp them down and push them aside so he could think more clearly, but he could only come up with one conclusion.

"I'll come with you," he said. "When are you meeting him?"

Daphne's brow arched. "If you come along with me, I'll have to throw you to hell if he discovers you. It's not that hard to detect someone under an invisibility cloak."

"I've gotten a lot better at sneaking around in that thing. I'll silence my clothes and shoes – put myself under Disillusionment."

"Still doesn't protect you from *Homenum Revelio* and I wouldn't put it past Cornfoot to use it."

"Then 'throw me to hell' if he does," Harry consented, determined. "It could only earn points in your favour."

Considering him carefully, Daphne took a drag off of her cigarette. "Alright," she said finally. "We're meeting tomorrow in front of the statue of Swarfin the Shrewd at five."

*While everyone else was going to be at dinner...* It made alarm bells go off inside Harry's head, but he let out a calming breath full of smoke, nodding.

"I'll be there."

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Sitting around and watching Cornfoot try to fix a broken Vanishing Cabinet couldn't have been further from the type of spying that Harry preferred. Sometimes he wondered if he had a subconscious death wish. The type of spying he enjoyed made his heart feel like it was ten fast-paced staccato beats away from a myocardial infarction; the way the adrenaline rushed through his veins in those moments made him feel more alive than he'd ever felt at any other time.

*This* was spying. It was less intense than optimal, but intense enough to keep him on his toes.

He had to admit that Cornfoot was a careful bloke. He kept a watchful eye on the corridors around him while he waited for Daphne in front of Swarfin the Shrewd, his eyes brushing by Harry – hidden under his cloak – like he wasn't even there. That gave him hope that his disguise was sufficient.

The minutes ticked by until Daphne arrived right on time and not a second later.

They made amicable chit chat about classes as they walked off, with Harry following them at a safe
distance – just enough to hear everything, but far enough away that he could dodge a spell if Cornfoot found him out. The boy in question seemed to be leading Daphne toward the Clock Tower, which was an extremely unusual place for dates if they were seen together by someone involved in the rumour mill, making it a good choice for a secret rendezvous. It would most likely be assumed that they're study partners at the most.

Tamping down any jealous feelings that started bubbling up – if this indeed was a secret rendezvous – Harry wondered if Cornfoot and Runcorn were actually an item or if that was just a farce. That, perhaps, Cornfoot was using her. Apparently Runcorn's father had a lot of connections in the Ministry and was very possibly a Death Eater, according to Daphne. Dating a child of a fellow Death Eater would probably make Cornfoot seem more loyal amongst the Death Eaters. And, if Cornfoot was as calculative as Daphne seemed to think, Harry was willing to bet that dating Dahlia Runcorn was a calculated move – probably on both of their parts.

After all, they didn't seem that close when he and Zabini had spied on them in the Room of Requirement. Outside of that room, they appeared to be much closer, which was something he hadn't really realized until now.

"We can speak more freely up here," Cornfoot said as they reached the topmost level of the drafty Clock Tower. Harry was glad that he didn't forget his robe – the air coming in from the swinging pendulum of the clock was on the uncomfortable side of cold.

"What makes you think I haven't been speaking freely in the first place?" Daphne questioned, leaning against the railing. Harry passed her to settle into a dark corner of the room, out of the way but close enough to listen.

Cornfoot's lips pulled into an arrogant smirk and he took a seat on one of the low horizontal beams lining the room for structural support. "Your 'nice and polite' act is good, but it doesn't fool me. I know a lot more about you than you think."

Daphne gave a snort. "Relying on rumours? That always goes well."

"Why not? You do it. It turns out that we're not that different from each other."

"Did you save that line especially for me, or is that what you tell most people you ask to meet in secret?"

"Mm," Cornfoot agreed, "but my sources are probably correct."

"You're smart enough to know that I wouldn't answer that; why even ask?"

The Ravenclaw boy gave a laugh. "What a shame," Daphne vaguely intoned, plucking a cigarette from her silver case and quickly lighting it. "It's a double edged sword, you know."

"Mm," Cornfoot agreed, "but my sources are probably correct."

The atmosphere changed in that second and tension rolled thickly through the room like an ominous fog. Harry fingered his wand that was hiding up his sleeve just in case. There was no predicting what could happen. The miniscule changes in the lines of Daphne's face gave him the impression that she wasn't the least bit pleased.
"If you want to drop all pretenses, Stephen – this isn't the way to go about it," she finally said, pushing herself off of the railing at the top of the stairs and pacing closer to Cornfoot, practically towering over the short-statured boy. "I mean, it might work in some cases. The 'We Know All' approach is what the Unspeakables call it, but your use of it is extremely flimsy."

Harry's brows rose. He didn't even consider that Cornfoot was using a tactic; she picked that out ridiculously quick.

"And your insults aren't going to get me to admit anything. Is that another Unspeakable 'approach’?"

'Ego Down', Harry's mind supplied. Daphne was right – Cornfoot wasn't an idiot in the least.

A faint smirk tugged at her lips. "If you're not admitting, I'm not admitting."

"Yes, I've heard that you like trades," Cornfoot drawled. "Much like you enjoy bribery and blackmail – and blood. That's just the 'B's'."

"Right. Because you seem to know so much about me."

Her sarcasm wasn't lost on Cornfoot and he gave a laugh. "Could say the exact same thing to you."

"Okay then," Daphne said, blowing out a breath of smoke. "If we're so much alike as you presume, give me an example."

"You can't find one for yourself? Maybe I'm overestimating you."

"You sure do like to beat around that bush."

"I think we should work together," he said without any further preamble.

That seemed to give Daphne pause. "What makes you think I'd be interested?"

"You've a proclivity for collecting secrets," Cornfoot proposed, all business and deception. "It's a decent trade. You work with me, I'll tell you secrets."

Daphne let out a derisive huff of laughter through her nose. "Baiting. That's a very nice try."

"I reckoned you'd say something like that," Cornfoot responded dryly. "So I'll give you a little batch of secrets up front and you can consider my offer."

"Go on."

Harry watched Cornfoot closely, carefully observing every ounce of his body language as he spoke.

"You were the one who got Crabbe expelled, which isn't a secret to you, but I also know that you don't want it spread 'round."

"Does this mean that you also know my motive?" Daphne taunted, completely undisturbed by the blackmail. "Since you know me so well and all."

"Possibly."

"Take a guess then."

"That would lead to another secret and I'm not willing to part with that until you agree," Cornfoot said, almost as if he was chiding her.
"Such a tease."

Cornfoot's dark eyes ghosted over her and his lips tugged into that irritatingly arrogant smirk of his.
"I've yet to see any indication of what Draco mentioned to me about you, so that makes two of us."

"I didn't know you two were friends."

"Don't play thick. It's insulting."

"If you're looking for a psychopath for hire, you're looking in the wrong place."

'Psychopath for hire?' Harry's brows furrowed as he glanced over at Daphne.

"I know better than to take Draco's word at face value," Cornfoot recovered. "And I'm ninety percent certain that I'm looking in the right place."

"That's a high percentage." Daphne's head tilted and her eyes narrowed toward Cornfoot. "Do you view me as a friend or an enemy?"

"Either would be beneficial. Perhaps more – though I've doubts about those rumours."

"I don't think Dahlia would be too happy with you."

"She doesn't need to know. You're good at lowering suspicion about those sorts of things."

"You just told me who one of your sources is," Daphne pointed out, disapproval marring her expression.

"Intentionally," Cornfoot said slowly, the word rolling off his tongue.

Harry's brows furrowed even lower as he listened to them, his mind trying to connect what they were talking about to any piece of information that he knew and coming up far too short. Their conversation sorely reminded him of being back in the warehouse again, listening to Nott and Daphne have a chat that was mostly in their heads with very few spoken words exchanged.

A mental chess match – 'mental' in more ways than one.

"I'm not sure whether to be impressed or disgusted by that."

"When I'm interested in something or – in this case – someone, I give it my all, which is probably one of our most astute similarities."

"I'm hardly as narcissistic," Daphne countered. "Unlike you, I have no urge to fuck myself."

"I doubt that I could stand up to the physical prowess of Blaise Zabini anyway."

"Self-deprecation doesn't suit you, Cornfoot. You don't mean it."

"Caught me," Cornfoot replied with a shrug, as if he couldn't care less. "So, do we have a deal?"

Daphne didn't answer at first, seeming to take her time to really think it over, but Harry knew that she had already made her decision and was possibly lying though her teeth. But he couldn't do anything about it but sit there in the corner and watch, his heart sinking in anticipation.

"What will you do if I say 'no'?" she asked, amusement shining in her eyes.
"You won't."

Daphne shrugged. "Grant me a hypothetical."

"I'm sure you can come up with one on your own that would be sufficient enough," Cornfoot stated confidently.

"Just because you strongly believe that something will happen doesn't mean it will pop into existence."

"Yeah, and playing with your food won't make it lay down and die, no matter how much you want it to."

"Nice." Daphne took a drag off her cigarette, blowing her smoke up toward the drafty ceiling. "I've a few conditions," she said, not looking at Cornfoot and preferring to stare distantly toward the grounds of Hogwarts below.

Cornfoot crossed his arms over his chest. "Which are?"

"I'm allowed to deny any request. I don't torture without reason – no murder, no maiming. Setting up plots to expel people will cost you extra. And I won't risk any sort of incrimination if you're ever caught. That's your arse. As far as you're concerned, I'm an outside contractor and my name stays out of it at all times."

"Doesn't sound like a very beneficial deal for me."

Daphne glanced over at him from the corner of her eyes, her lips curving into a smile. "You wanted to bait me until I was just as incriminated as you are. I know." She paused, taking a small drag off of her cigarette. "The downside of being so apparently 'similar' to me is that you'll act as I'd expect you to – which is nearly exactly what I'd do. So, if you want my help, those are my terms. You'd do the same if you were in my position. Actually, this is the same deal you had with Draco, isn't it? Only he wasn't very discreet – I trust you will be if we're truly anything alike."

Cornfoot's expression barely shifted throughout Daphne's reply, but Harry got the distinct feeling that there was a sudden chord of respect between the two of them. Like they were comrades on the opposite sides of a line, dipping their toes onto it and pulling away without ever crossing.

"Alright, I accept your deal," Cornfoot said with a nod. "What does it cost for a favour?"

"Depends on the favour," Daphne considered, turning toward him.

"I need a way to smuggle things past the secrecy sensors."

Daphne's brows rose. "In person or through the mail?"

"In person," Cornfoot replied, but Harry could tell that he was filing away the fact that Daphne knew how to sneak things through the mail.

As if she was expecting it, Daphne immediately ratted off her price, "Fifty Galleons."

"That's ridiculous."

"I'm not cheap. If you want something that works, you'll have to pay for it."

"How many secrets would bump the cost down to twenty?" Cornfoot haggled cautiously.
"Depends on if I get to ask the questions or if you get to select the information given," Daphne answered.

"Three questions," Cornfoot said curtly. "You get to ask."

"I could have it to you tomorrow for five questions. Three is a bit stingy."

"Four questions and I'll give you forty-eight hours," Cornfoot stubbornly negotiated.

"Ah, but you're mistaken. You need something from me and I'm the only one who can feasibly deliver without a trip to Knockturn – and even then you'll have to get out of the wards, ask around, and risk running into an undercover Auror – so I have the power here. Not you. Five – plus twenty Galleons – and you'll get it tomorrow – safe and sound and very little risk involved," Daphne argued plainly, all hardened edges in a way that made even Harry feel slightly intimidated by her.

It reminded him of what she was like when she was with Johnson, from the small glimpse that Harry had gotten of that. It made her seem older – more experienced and untouchable, as if he could fire an Unforgiveable at her at the moment and it would just bounce right off.

Cornfoot's jaw clenched a fraction, stepping up to her intimidation. "Four and I won't spread it around that you were the one who got Crabbe expelled."

"Five and I won't tell Dahlia, Sylvia, and the Carrow twins that we snogged in the Clock Tower and you could barely control yourself. Maybe I'll even muster up a giggle about it."

"Dahlia wouldn't believe that."

"But Sylvia, Flora, and Hesper would. I wonder how long it would take for it to reach her dear daddy that you were cheating on his perfect pureblooded daughter with a halfblood like me."

Cornfoot snorted contemptuously. "We're more alike than I previously thought."

"Sure," Daphne said, impossibly calm. "But I know where you stand – you don't even have the slightest inkling about me."

Thick tensioned silence fell over them once again, seeming even more malevolent and ominous than before. Cornfoot let out an exasperated huff of air.

"Okay," he conceded, his jaw visibly clenched tight. "Five questions – twenty Galleons. You'll have it to me tomorrow."

"I'll owl you in the morning with a time and place for the exchange. Daphne flicked the ashes off of her cigarette, heading toward the stairs, only to halt in her step and glance back over at Cornfoot. "Unless there's something else?"

"Plenty. Though nothing to do with you at the moment. You can go."

A too-polite smile cut across Daphne's face and Harry wondered why she was just standing there and not leaving. With the atmosphere as charged as it was, he'd want to leave as quickly as he feasibly could before any wands could be drawn – especially since Cornfoot was apparently no slouch in the brains department. But she seemed to have other plans.

"Did you know that there's a specific area on the chest vulnerable to trauma and can cause commotio cordis if 'touched' just right?"
Cornfoot glanced up at her from underneath his fringe. "That threat would mean something to me if I knew what 'commotio cordis' was."

"Unfortunate. I'd show you," Daphne replied in a flippant tone, moving toward the stairs, "but where would the fun be in that?" She paused on the first step, not bothering to look at Cornfoot as she spoke, trailing off meaningfully, "If you dismiss me again though…"

"You may be able to act it, but you're never going to be like us," Cornfoot scornfully retorted, causing Daphne to smirk as she whirled back around to stare him straight on.

"And why do you say that?"

"Playing Muggle music during a Slytherin party, and getting detention for causing a riot over it? That's not usual amongst our kind."

Daphne let out a huff of laughter. "You have no idea of my kind. And you certainly have no idea of what I can do to you if you were to cross me, so let's leave it at that, shall we? It's not worth the pursuit."

Glaring at Daphne's back as she retreated down the stairs and making no move to follow her, Cornfoot retorted quietly, "Maybe Draco was right about you."

If she heard him, she didn't give any indication.

Harry didn't linger long after, getting up from his spot in the corner and feeling vaguely strung out from all of the mental whiplash. His bones were practically aching for a fag and he itched to sit Daphne down and ask her to explain everything.

But, knowing her, that would be an exercise in futility and he wasn't feeling masochistic enough to attempt it at the moment.

He just had to grit his teeth and bear it as usual. Fortunately, he was getting better at that.

oOo

Daphne was at Slughorn's party with Ron.

Again.

It nearly felt like a dream when Harry had heard about it just an hour earlier. In one small instance, Ron was going on about how Lavender had broken up with him – tears building up in his eyes – and in the next instance, he was all gung-ho about going to Slughorn's birthday party with Daphne Greengrass. His entire world had gone completely mental and he had never felt so disconnected from everything.

He shoved his gift into the giant pile of elaborately wrapped gift boxes in the corner of the room and spotted Daphne and Ron talking to the Carrow twins and Cornfoot, who was a guest of Hestia's. Daphne was drinking out of a flask she had pulled from the inner pocket of her robes and passed it over to Ron, who winced as he took a sip.

Harry could vaguely hear their conversation from where he was standing.

"Apparently Hardbroom slipped him a love potion as a prank, so I'm just going with it really," Daphne said with an amused smirk tugging at her lips.
Ron, next to her, was surprisingly smooth as he emerged from her flask. "Eh, don't sell yourself too short."

He handed off the flask to her and Cornfoot expressed interest in it, to which Daphne replied, "Unless you want a dose of Compulsion Philtre that I'm immune to. I'd stay away. Slughorn's serving much harder stuff over there. Firewhiskey's not my taste."

Internally, Harry hoped she wasn't being serious; yet, Ron's calm demeanor wasn't helping much with that. He could have been under the effects of the Compulsion Philtre or maybe Daphne had filled him in on everything before the party. It didn't seem as if Ron was completely clueless, after all.

And Ron could occasionally pull of a surprising amount of manipulation…

Cornfoot's lips curved into a smile. "What exactly is 'your taste'?"

"Dark and handsome with green eyes and glasses." Daphne's eyes briefly glimpsed at Harry and her grin widened. He quickly averted his eyes from their conversation, burying himself in his pint of mead. There was no doubt in his mind that the entire group was staring at him now.

He sorely hoped that Daphne had planned that to covertly inform the group that he was 'listening in' and that she wasn't slipping up.

"Come on, Weasley – I don't think I've introduced you to Sanguini before. Don't mention his teeth. He's frightfully sensitive about the subject."

Glancing up underneath his eyelashes, he caught Ron and Daphne's retreat. The smooth skin of her enticing back was exposed by the obscenely low draped crimson gown she wore to the party. He was left with Cornfoot staring up at him, almost glaringly, from behind the shadow of Flora and Hestia Carrow as Harry looked after her but he moved on, trying to appear as if he hadn't overheard anything.

Thankfully, Harry was saved by the spectacle that Zabini and Hermione were making in the centre of the room. They were dancing to what would probably be considered 'inappropriate Muggle music', which was probably Ginny's doing – judging by the vaguely disguised pleased look on her face – and making a show of it. He couldn't help but be heartened by the display and all of the people gathering around to cheer them on.

Mid-song, Daphne took the hand of Slughorn, as if summoning him from the crowd beyond Sanguini, and led him next to the couple. Slughorn seemed to be intent upon a box-step waltz, but Daphne added undulations to it that made the all-too-proper dance seem far more modern. It was pure Muggle style that made him smile, even if it internally sent a flutter of despair.

She was risking things by doing this. He knew that and it was that slightly rebellious drive within her that drew him to her. Her whole display sent mixed messages – she was both a Slytherin and Gryffindor in that way. How she could act just as 'high and mighty' and posh as the purebloods and yet get down to the 'Muggle earth' at the same time was probably calculated. From the looks of it, Cornfoot didn't know what to think and neither would Harry if he didn't actually know her.

Yet, at the same time, it felt shameful to stand on the sidelines as a halfblood and not be able to embody the term as well as she could. Even though he was 'Harry Potter' and was as engrained into the wizarding world as a wand was, he still wasn't integrated himself.

He was still an outsider in this crowd, deep down.

If he was going to win the war, he was going to have to rectify that soon. He was counting on Luna
to get back to him on that memo he sent about Smudgley's articles and, hopefully, within that
meeting, he could make something that could start to turn the tide to his side.

In the meantime, Slugnorn looked ripe for a dose of Thaumaturgic suggestion. It would be a shame
to waste the opportunity…

oOo

Apparation, as it turned out, was a lot bloody harder than Hermione, Daphne, and Zabini made it
look during their Christmas holiday together.

Harry couldn't even bloody splinch himself into the stupid little hoops set out for them in the Great
Hall by Wilkie Twycross. And even though Hermione was there for the lessons and Harry knew that
she knew how to Apparate, she put on a very good show of failing like the rest of them. It probably
would have looked suspicious if she had showed up and was able to Apparate on the first try.
Daphne and Zabini weren't there, of course – they were waiting to take the test in April to get their
British licenses. Nott was there, however, but Harry wasn't certain if Nott could Apparate since he
had never Apparated while they were at the warehouse. If the Slytherin boy knew how, he also
made a good show of trying like Hermione.

Susan seemed to be the only first-timer that could truly manage and the result was too macabre for
him to ruminate upon.

"I swear I felt something tingling in my fingers," Ron muttered as they spoke of the lesson, entering
the girls' bathroom on the second floor.

"Apparation is a central feeling, Ron. If you feel it in your limbs, you're going to splinch," Hermione
replied quickly, handing Harry his Firebolt after he pocketed his invisibility cloak and warded the
lavatory door.

Ron's brows furrowed. "How would you know that?"

"How do you think I got around half the time during Christmas hols?" Harry rhetorically questioned,
stalking over to the very sink that held the Chamber of Secrets.

It wasn't as if he was ready for this, but he couldn't delay it too much longer – the war was enclosing
upon him, closer and closer every day.

"Hold on – you know how to apparate?" Ron exclaimed, his mouth gaping.

Hermione shrugged. "It wouldn't look good if I already knew, would it?"

"Shh – I need to focus," Harry hushed, squinting toward the snakes and trying to muster up the right
language to get the thing to open. He swayed from side to side, causing the glowing jeweled eyes to
look more alive.

"Open," he hissed, looking side to side at his fellow Gryffindors for confirmation more than the sink.

The sink, however, was faster. It clunked to life and spread open slowly, revealing the familiar pipe
that he'd gone down less than five years ago. It built a sense of deja-vu inside of him that made the
hair on the back of his neck stand on end, but he could only ready his broom, take a glance at his
friends on both sides of him, and recklessly charge down the shaft without their consent or warning.
He remembered the Chamber of Secrets as if it were yesterday. He remembered the descent, the
antechambers, and the Chamber itself like the back of his hand. There wasn't any way he could
forget it.
After he opened the inner Chamber beyond the crushed rock, the three stalked forward toward the large decomposing carcass of the Basilisk he'd only slayed just a few years ago. For years of decaying, it looked nearly new, but it didn't smell that way. The reek of the rotting carcass was apparent from the moment they set foot into the massive space. As they grew closer, they shielded their faces with their robes in order to block out the scent of rot that seemed to permeate everywhere.

"So, we need to start from the back and then work our way forward for the most... productive collection, according to what I've read," Hermione instructed, hoisting herself up the side of the decaying corpse of the Basilisk like it was a simple pile of rocks and already plucking at the back of the massive snake's mouth.

Harry and Ron looked at each other uneasily before following to help her. He found that it was easier to maneuver around the Basilisk using his broom, rather than pulling off Hermione's deft acrobatics. Slowly, they carefully chipped the teeth out of place with their wands and stored them into charmed lambskin sacks that Hermione said would be the best at retaining the properties of Basilisk fangs and venom. Yet, the sack seemed to grow warmer and warmer at his hip, even then, and he gasped as he stared down at his trousers.

"Bloody hell, that's hot – ow!" Harry hissed through his teeth. Upon realizing it wasn't the lambskin sack that was burning through his trousers, he pulled the smoldering scrying mirror case from his pocket and let it clatter to the stone-covered ground of the Chamber, trying to blow cold air onto his fingers from the resulting burn.

"Merlin. That's Blaise's alert sequence!" Hermione said in panic, her eyes widening as she stared down at the now-glowing case. The light it emitted seemed to pulsate from red to white hot, only growing with intensity.

Harry's heart plummeted and his slightly burnt fingers became the farthest thing from his mind. "But the magical restraint bracelets you made... They can't break out – you tested it! They can't possibly escape without help or–"

Letting out a breath as she tried to cool down the scrying mirror case with her wand, Hermione reasoned, "It's either that, or someone's trying to get in to the warehouse. But, if that's the case…"

Staring up at the corpse of the partially de-fanged basilisk, Harry cursed.

oOo

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
"Trust a Slytherin to shove a Protean Charm as strong as the blasted Dark Mark into an alert sequence," Hermione muttered in frustration, frantically working at removing the spells from the perpetually burning scrying mirror case.

Sometimes Hermione's intelligence overcomplicated things.

Harry huffed out a long sigh from where he was standing over her, trying to get the urgent annoyance and panic lacing his nerves under control. It wasn't as if they had all the time in the world to waste on fiddling with damn case! Impatiently, he insinuated himself next to the bushy-haired Gryffindor, quickly placing a Heat Protection Charm on his hands.

"Here, let me," Harry interrupted as he grabbed and clicked open the scorching mirror case triumphantly, only to stare blankly at the contents.

The restless fluttering in his stomach ground to a momentary halt.

Hermione's brows rose and Ron peeked over his shoulder, clutching his lambskin bag full of basilisk fangs. "So they haven't escaped?" Ron confoundedly asked.

The images in the mirror were very much as usual – too usual. Draco Malfoy was seated on his bed, peacefully reading, and Goyle was lounging back in an old beat-up armchair in his room, stuffing his face full of sweets and watching the telly that Astoria recently brought him. They should have been gone – even if someone had broken the wards to help Malfoy and Goyle escape, they probably had enough time to capture them. Unless…

"They could still be there. But scrying mirrors can be tampered with as well – there're spells for it," Harry said a bit distractedly, setting the case back onto the ground and straightening up. In spite of the Heat Protection Charm, the case still felt warm enough that it stung his already-burnt fingers.

Plans whirled through his mind. He considered sending a memo to Daphne, but it would probably
take too long to meet up with her and, if Malfoy and Goyle hadn't escaped yet, every second counted. He already had the tools necessary to get out of Hogwarts. An unbreakable vial of Signature Duplicating Potion – given to him for emergencies – sat in his pocket and he wasn't so bad at casting a triple-layer glamour anymore. He also had his cloak with him, as always, but Disillusionment was also going to be necessary...

"Maybe whoever broke the alert sequence got caught in the trammel ward. They go off if you try to cut through them," Hermione proposed and Harry glanced over at her.

"Then Goyle and Malfoy would be trapped in it too. Can you Side-Along Apparate both of us?" he asked curiously, picking his broom up from the cold stone floor of the chamber.

"I can." Hermione shifted onto her feet. "Maybe they haven't cut through it yet… they're difficult to get through."

"S'not like we can do much, Harry," Ron protested sullenly. "We're underage – the Ministry'll have us nicked if we cast anything."

Fuck, he didn't think about that.

Biting the inside of his lip, Harry tilted his head in consideration. "Well, then they'll have us nicked. I'm not letting Malfoy and Goyle get away – Merlin only knows what'd happen if Voldemort gets his hands on them." He paused, mounting his broom. "And, anyway, we're running out of time. Hermione, how fast can you throw on a triple-layer glamour?"

"Decently," she answered, picking up her own broom and meeting his gaze determinedly. "What are you thinking?"

"I say we go in invisible and glamoured – silenced." Similar to how he got through the Hufflepuff common room and to the Calendula Café. "Hopefully we'll be able to figure out a plan of attack before we're spotted and have to fight."

Thus, delaying the possibility of alerting the Ministry, he thought, adrenaline mounting in his veins.

He exhaled a long breath, trying to focus. "But there won't even be a fight if we don't hurry."

Hermione nodded as Ron mounted his broom, throwing his lambskin sack over his shoulder. He had no idea where they were going to stash those for the time being.

"Alright, I'll send a memo to the others to tell them to meet us at the warehouse while you put on a glamour and start work on Ron."

"Sounds good," Harry agreed to her addition to his plan as they sped off toward the exit of the Chamber of Secrets.

oOo

Being late afternoon on a Saturday, it was more difficult to sneak out of the castle than Harry anticipated – having to dodge students and teachers. The last time he exited from the wards with Daphne, they went out from behind the Quidditch pitch, but that wasn't a possibility this time due to the Hufflepuff Quidditch team's practice. There were too many people in the surrounding area.

Silently, the freshly-glamoured trio rushed through the thick drifts of snow, under Disillusionment Charms and the invisibility cloak, which helped them stay close. The cloak only covered them to their calves, yet was sufficient enough to do its job. Hermione had suggested that they go through the
wards across the lake, where they were unlikely to meet any Aurors or students; the downside was that it was much farther than the pitch and the snow banks on the edge of the lake were slightly difficult to navigate in tandem.

"Ugh, I hate these bloody glamours. Itches worse than when Fred and George put itching powder in my pyjamas," Ron muttered under his breath, once they were a safe distance away from the crowds of students out on the grounds, having snowball fights. His fidgeting nearly tripped them up under the cloak.

"Would you stop that? Picking at it only aggravates it – you'll get used to it after a while," Hermione whispered at the sound of Ron vigorously scratching from Harry's other side.

"Fine," Ron sighed. "So how does this signature potion work anyway? Do we have to say a spell at the wards to get them to let us through and make it think we're Dumbledore or something?"

"No, it – er… masks your signature with whatever signature is duplicated in the potion," Harry replied, picking up the pace as they crossed over a particularly large bank of snow. "Since the wards recognize the magical signature of the Headmaster automatically, we can just walk right through them. Daph and I didn't have any trouble with it."

"Wow, s'that easy?"

"Mhm," Harry murmured, stepping over the rough rocks at the edge of the lake.

"Hang on!" Ron burst out after a few moments of their silent hurrying. "If it's *that* easy, why hasn't You-Know-Who tried making this stuff? He wouldn't need to bother with Cornfoot then."

"The potion requires Dumbledore's DNA," Hermione explained. "Greengrass went through a lot of trouble to acquire it."

"DNA's like blood and hair, right?"

Distinctly, Harry remembered Daphne mentioning a crusty sock being involved and he suppressed a shudder at the reminder of what might've been currently spread all over his chest and wand.

"Yes… blood and hair," Hermione hesitantly answered. From her tone, Harry could tell she was thinking exactly what he was thinking.

"But, if *Greengrass* can get it, I reckon Snape can. It would probably be *easier* for him…"

"Which is all the more reason to keep Malfoy and Goyle from escaping," Harry asserted, trying to quicken their pace once they reached a flat stretch of snow-covered ground.

Even though his stomach was tied in an anxious knot, reaching the edge of the wards felt like a relief and they stood in front of the barrier, pausing shortly to catch their breath. Hermione gripped at Harry's wrist and, in turn, Harry grabbed Ron's hand as they passed through the wards, Ron trailing behind slightly. The tingling, misty veil of magic closed at their backs and Hermione readjusted her position under the cloak, probably to reach out for Ron's free hand for better Apparation contact. Being under Disillusionment Charms made it extremely difficult to keep track of what everyone was doing and Harry's practice with the charms had gotten them to the point where they were almost as good as his invisibility cloak, which complicated maneuvers like this.

"Okay. Hold on tight," Hermione said, her hand moving to grip onto Harry's, squeezing reassuringly. "And take a deep breath. London's a long Apparation trip from here."
"S'gotta be quicker than thestrals. Not that I could see those either at the time," Ron muttered just before the sensation of being squeezed through a long tube overtook them and they spun off toward the warehouse.

**oOo**

Harry's heart crawled higher and higher in his chest the moment they landed in the familiar alleyway Apparation point he hadn't seen for two months. He was dreadfully thankful that Hermione had the foresight to cast a *Muffliato* as soon as they touched the ground. Ron's violent retching from his first Side-Along Apparation would have definitely given them away.

Peeking around the corner of a building and across the street, he saw that the wards around the warehouse seemed to be intact – or, at least, a portion of them. If they were completely broken, the warehouse would have been visible instead of appearing as a disused car park. Unfortunately, that also meant that they had to cross through the wards in order to see what was going on. He didn't like the idea of getting that close.

In his gut, he knew that something didn't feel right.

The only advantages they had were invisibility and the element of surprise. And invisibility was only a *slight* advantage if anyone breaking into the warehouse decided to cast a revelatory spell.

Behind him, Hermione was tending to Ron, hurriedly helping him recover with a few spells from her wand – anti-vertigo being one he recognized. "Could've warned me that was gonna happen," Ron groaned, keeping his voice quiet in spite of the *Muffliato* surrounding them.

"Not everyone has the same reaction," Hermione whispered. In her next breath, Harry could tell by the tone of her voice that she was addressing him, "Do you think we should wait for the others?"

Harry turned toward her, readjusting the grip on his wand and his invisibility cloak, under which Ron and Hermione stood an arm's distance away. It was the only way he could keep track of where they were.

"No," he replied softly, glancing back toward the warehouse. "They might be here already. If they aren't, we don't really have much time to lose – whoever broke in could be gone with Malfoy and Goyle already."

He heard Hermione let out a huff of a sigh. "Okay. How about you and Ron take the cloak? If anyone sees me under Disillusionment, I can at least defend myself without alerting the Ministry."

He didn't like the thought of that, but she had a fair point. Ministerial discovery was more preferable than being discovered by Voldemort, but not by much.

"Alright – budge over." Harry took a step toward them, lifting up the hem of the invisible cloak and trading places with Hermione. The cloak was *just* large enough to fit him and Ron, but it was still a tight squeeze.

"I'll take the left," Hermione whispered before taking off out of the alleyway, not giving Harry a chance to reply, the *Muffliato* dissipating with her departure. He could only make out the most miniscule shimmer of her invisible form in the setting sunlight as he and Ron carefully strode in the opposite direction.

"Where are we going, exactly?" Ron said under his breath – so quiet that Harry could barely hear him.
"Car park. The wards make the warehouse invisible outside them," Harry explained, his voice nearly inaudible, practically pressing his lips against Ron's shaggy hair so he could hear him. "Just follow me."

Taking hold of Ron's sleeve with his free-hand and preparing himself for anything, Harry gripped his wand tighter. To his left, he could feel Ron shifting along with him. Slowly, they made their way through the wards, sticking to the perimeter. The bad feeling in his gut only sunk lower once greeted with the sight of the warehouse, standing seemingly untouched and exactly as he remembered it. Even the newspaper covering and peeling from the dark windows hadn't changed.

The dead silence that hung about the place tingled at the back of Harry's neck.

He was used to having things sprung on him – sudden attacks and fights for his life. He wasn't used to walking in, expectant, and finding that everything appeared normal and quiet. That almost made it worse because he had no way to anticipate anything and a haunting sense of déjà vu overwhelmed him. It was as if he was back at the Department of Mysteries again, being lured, and that feeling had his heart on the verge of clamouring out of his throat.

Letting out a calming silent breath through his nose, he urged Ron to move with him toward the windows and peered through a gap in the newspaper, trying to see if he could spot anything or anyone inside. The weight of the hefty silencing charm that was cast on the building pushed down on his shoulders as he stood on the boarder of it, pressing his face to the glass. Everything was too dark to see clearly, but he hoped to catch a glimpse of wandlight or… anything. He noiselessly moved from window to window, looking into the gaps, desperately searching; Ron's clipped – noticeably anxious – breathing next to him only served to make his heart beat faster.

He'd almost made it to the back of the building when he caught a shimmer of magic out of the corner of his eye and nearly jumped, pointing his wand toward it, before he realized it was just Hermione.

"I haven't been able to see anything in there, how about you?" she said quietly as she approached.

To his left, Ron sprang away from the window, knocking into Harry and causing them to stumble. "Bloody Merlin – warn us a little before you appear out of nowhere!" Ron hissed under his nervous breath.

"Sorry."

"It looks empty," Harry whispered. From this close, he could just barely make out the faint outline of her body if he squinted. "Can't you do a revealing spell to see if anyone's inside? Homenum Revelio or… something?"

"I have to go in to do that – I don't know any that search from the outside of a structure. I already used it to find you; you're the only people that showed up out here."

That was a little relieving, though the prospect of going inside made up for the relief.

"Maybe we should try the back door?" He knew that the warehouse had one.

A narrow passage at the end of the converted warehouse corridor – where they had spent their Christmas holiday – led to a door, which opened up into the unconverted portion of the warehouse. He'd only been to that area once and found it to be an uninteresting large empty space, but it had a set of industrial doors that accessed the outside.

"You mean the front door – we went through the back door the entire time we stayed here," Hermione corrected, her shimmer sidestepping around them and leading the way.
"Whatever," Harry murmured, tugging at Ron's sleeve. "Come on."

With a softly spoken silencing spell and an unlocking charm, Hermione opened the 'front' door, holding it for them and carefully closing it so even the weight of it scraping across the concrete floor made as little sound as possible. The sizable space echoed even the slightest of noises and he was afraid to breathe too loudly.

"Homenum Revelio," he heard Hermione whisper from behind him, and he waited, furrowing his eyebrows at the undetectable spell. Though, logically, when one needed to cast such a spell, it probably wasn't in the most hospitable of environments, like now. Undetectability was welcome.

"Anything?" Harry asked quietly over his shoulder, keeping his wand at the ready.

"Just Malfoy and Goyle from the looks of it," she muttered in an exhaled breath. "I don't understand. Alert sequences don't go off on their own and we got here quick enough… you'd think there be… someone."

Harry shifted on his feet, the centre of his forehead creasing. "Is there a way to block revelatory spells?"

"Possibly."

"So we'll search manually then."

"Great," Ron sighed, stalking forward with him under the cloak, toward the door at the opposite corner of the dim empty room. Newspaper-clad windows didn't let in much light and the grey brick did a terrible job at reflecting it. The eerie silence of his surroundings and everything except their breaths was unnerving. Harry grabbed at Ron's sleeve again to signal him to stop, waiting for Hermione to perform more unlocking charms and silencing spells.

**BOOM!**

Just as she'd twisted the silenced handle, a thunderous explosion rang out from the other side of the door – so large that it made the building tremble. A series of ear-splitting metallic crashes followed – 'clang!' 'ting!' 'clang!' – growing closer and louder and shaking the dusty concrete beneath their feet before it stopped.

Harry's heart imbedded itself at the base of his throat as he tightened his grip on his wand and Hermione threw open the door, rushing forward. In his haste, he'd lost Ron under the cloak dashing after her and he nearly bumped into her when his eyes adjusted to the darkness and spotted the wreckage.

Blocking their path at the end of the thin corridor were the metal double doors from the back of the building. They lay haphazardly, one of them half propped up against the wall and wedged in their way. The sizable masses of steel were warped, crumpled, and jagged at the edges, blown inward by what was unquestionably a tremendously powerful blasting spell.

In the hole left behind by the missing doors, stood two men – their individually lithe and hulking forms shadowed against the waning light outside. Steadying himself against the internal corner of the building, Harry swung his legs through the gap between the battered doors and the wall one at a time. Hermione must've already leapt through because she let loose a swift series of stunners and spells from up ahead, causing the men at the threshold to dodge to the side out of the way.

A mist of light shot past Harry's head and he lifted his wand, a spell on the tip of his tongue when
one of them exclaimed, just loud enough for him to hear, "Jesus Christ, they're invisible!"

The spell – halfway uttered – died in his throat, his steps faltering.

And then he glanced back at the doors… blasted inward.

Why would anyone who was escaping or fleeing the warehouse blast in? To cover their tracks? It wasn't as if it was difficult to navigate over them.

A third person stood in the doorway as one of them brought up a large flickering shield of magic to block Hermione's wave of stunners. Before they could retaliate, Harry shouted, "WAIT! Daphne?"

But it wasn't soon enough. Swiftly, he dropped to the ground, out of the way of the spells that were blindly thrown in his direction. They impacted with the metal doors at the other end of the corridor, causing them to clatter and he vaguely recognized 'Finite' among them.

"Stop! Hold on!" one of the blokes exclaimed after the barrage, warily stepping forward into the dark corridor. "…Harry?"

"Yeah?" he said hesitantly, scrabbling up from the floor, still poised to attack but cautious nonetheless. He was suddenly thankful that they forgot the voice changing charms in their urgency to get out of Hogwarts.

"Well fuck," the lithe bloke he believed was Daphne breathed, his shoulders sagging. "We didn't think you'd get here so quickly."

"It could be a trick," the bulky bloke suspiciously muttered in a low voice, shrewdly glaring into what was likely just a dark corridor from his perspective.

"Doubtful – Theo's spell showed three people inside other than Draco and Greg and it's not as if we weren't expecting them," the lithe bloke replied, lighting his wand clearly illuminating their glamoured faces. How Daphne had glamoured herself into slightly taller, dark-haired male, he had no idea. Granted, she could have used human transfiguration, but that was a little extreme – even for her level of paranoia. Human transfiguration like that was excruciatingly painful to go through for a temporary disguise.

She pulled a very familiar silver case out of her pocket and held it up to the light, moving forward a few more steps and peering around. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours?"

Harry's lips pulled into a relieved grin. "I think it's safe enough to take off the Disillusionment now, Hermione. Ron?"

"Back here," Ron called from farther down the corridor. The sound of the battered metal doors jostling followed.

"Are you certain there's no one else here?" he heard Hermione ask in the darkness to his left.

"I used one of my father's revealing spells upon arrival," the thin bloke, who was likely Nott, said. "He claims that it's infallible."

"The ruckus you lot caused would have made anyone come running, you'd think," Ron commented, his voice growing closer behind Harry.

"As evidenced by you three," the large bloke – obviously Zabini – sardonically quipped. "We're lucky Daph's spell-happy. The door was supposed to be used as a weapon."
"I'm not 'spell-happy'! They were fast approaching the targeted area when I checked. I gave it a few more seconds and blasted the door in. I'm glad I didn't give it more time."

"You could have killed us," Hermione admonished as light flooded through the corridor at the end of Zabini's wand. She materialized a moment later, having stripped off her Disillusionment.

Daphne's glamoured/transfigured lips twisted into a smirk. "Yes, well – since there hasn't been any Ministry owls flocking down to peck at us yet – it's safe to say that I'm not the only 'spell-happy' witch in this corridor."

Removing Harry and Ron's Disillusionment Charms with two sharp waves of her wand, Hermione retorted, "I would have been less 'spell-happy' if you didn't show up under excessive transfigurations–"

"They're not transfigurations," Daphne interrupted. "It's Polyjuice, a voice changing charm, and a glamour. Very simple."

_Not a bad idea for a quick, drastic disguise…_ He was going to have to brew some Polyjuice Potion when he got back to Hogwarts.

"And, anyway," she continued, "it doesn't matter – the wards are more pressing. _And_ Draco and Greg. Since they're still in there, they probably aren't Draco and Greg anymore."

Nott flicked on the lights of the control room and everyone followed him through the door as Hermione spoke, "We got here around fifteen minutes after the mirror went off. I highly doubt that's enough time to switch Malfoy and Goyle for imposters."

"A lot can be done in fifteen minutes. The wards showed fresh traces of signature effacement when Blaise did a quick sweep, which means that someone _had_ to have been here," Nott reasoned, his gaze moving from Hermione to the wall of scrying mirrors, where he performed a few quick spells on them to check for tampering.

The mirrors still depicted various angles of Malfoy and Goyle, reading and watching television – oblivious to what had been going on around them from their blissfully silenced rooms. Although, Malfoy _was_ sneaking wary glances toward the door between pages. Harry wasn't certain if that was due to the blasting spell that had shaken the building or if he was warily glancing at the door for another reason.

"What's signature effacement?" Ron whispered to him, leaning close, the invisibility cloak draped over his arm.

"Erasing a magical signature from a spell that was performed," Harry whispered back. "So it can't be tracked. We've used it before. _While kidnapping Goyle._"

Meanwhile, Hermione was in the middle of pointing out, "That doesn't necessarily mean that they've succeeded breaking _in_. They could have tried and failed and effaced their signature afterward. Additionally, the trammel ward would have been tripped if they got in."

"It _was_ tripped," Zabini said pointedly, the corners of his lips pulling into a tight expression. "I wove the alert sequence around your trammel. We wouldn't have had the alert if it hadn't been."

Hermione's thin glamoured lips parted and Harry's eyes widened, his stomach twisting uneasily. If the trammel ward went off, there would have been a golden net of magic on the ground, pinning down everyone inside it and trapping them. The fact that the trammel ward appeared to not have been tripped and, yet, _had_ to have been tripped was… disconcerting.
It wasn't a good sign.

A determined expression bubbled up on Hermione's face and she stalked toward the door. "We're going to have to do more than just a 'quick sweep' then," she indomitably declared, quickly grabbing Zabini and dragging him along behind her by the front of his robes.

In their absence, Daphne lit a cigarette, passing her silver case to Harry without a word and he silently fished one out. It was a comforting gesture and the smoke settled thickly in his lungs, easing the edge of tension in his nerves.

"So," Daphne said, smoke curling along her cheek as she glanced over at Nott, "where do you want to start?"

Seemingly satisfied that the scrying mirrors weren't tampered with, Nott tilted his head shruggingly. "We could collect blood for the Blood Matching spells while they work on the wards outside," he said and then motioned his hand toward Daphne's silver case. "May I?"

"Blood Matching spells?" Ron cut in, his face twisted in bewilderment. "Aren't those used for paternity tests? Where'd you get Lucius Malfoy's blood? And Goyle—"

"Blood Matching spells may be used with anyone who's related, not just for paternity. The closer the relation, the better the match, and the easier it is to prove identity," Nott clarified, flipping open Daphne's case and plucking a fag from the confines. "Since I'm the closest relation here to Greg, I'll use my blood for his and we can use Daph's for Draco's."

Harry's eyes flicked over to Daphne, the centre of his forehead creasing. "How are you related to Malfoy?"

"It's… complicated," Daphne evasively replied, blowing out a long breath full of smoke.

Harry snorted, itching to roll his eyes, the slight irritation only adding to his unease about the entire situation. "You just don't want to mention anything involving your father."

Whenever the subject was brought up, she always found a way to squirm out of it and, considering that the only family she spoke of was her Muggle family, who were most certainly not related to Malfoy…

"Naturally. I hate my father."

"Why…?"

"A laundry list of reasons." Daphne flicked her short dark hair off her forehead irritably and sternly regarded him. "He abandoned my mother when she told him she was pregnant, which made me think I was unwanted for most of my life. And the only thing he left behind was one of the darkest books ever published, which led my mother to believe that Hogwarts was going to teach me 'black witchcraft' and I had to fight her to go. It wasn't until I got here that I found out he died not long after I was born and was a bloody Death Eater. No surprise as to why he abandoned my mum. Pregnant Muggle – halfblood kid – family fucking shame and all that, especially with his pedigree."

She let out a huff. "And every time Slughorn mentions the bastard and how I get my talent from him, I just want to—" Her hands curved in front of her and mimed wringing someone's neck.

Harry's brows rose, his half-smoked fag burning down uselessly between his fingers.

"But that still doesn't explain how you're related to Malfoy," Ron said, a confused expression
wringling his nose.

Daphne rolled her eyes, sighing and peering out a gap in the newspaper-covered window, where Hermione and Zabini were passing by, waving their wands at the wards above. "We're… second cousins, I think. And, before you judge, I wasn't aware of that before I got involved with him."

"Ha! Involved. My grandfather married his second cousin," Nott remarked in a humoured drawl, tossing another spell at the scrying mirrors, which yielded no result. "You've got nothing on most purebloods – it's traditional to go shopping for a spouse at a family reunion."

Second cousins…

Taking a contemplative drag off of his cigarette, Harry's eyes narrowed in thought and the Black family tapestry flitted through his mind. Unless she was related to Lucius Malfoy… it seemed to fit, and he felt his stomach drop. Death Eater, one of Slughorn's collections, pureblooded family, killed not long after trying to leave the Death Eaters the same year Daphne was born… Maybe getting cold feet wasn't the only reason why he left them… Maybe it wasn't the reason at all…

He was vaguely aware of Ron launching into a story about how five of his cousins married five of his other cousins after a family reunion when he was ten and he glanced over at Daphne. An amused smirk tugged at the corner of her lips in response to Ron's prattle; the expression looked so familiarly her, even on her Polyjuiced and glamoured face.

"…they're all a bit barmy, really," Ron finished, shaking his head.

Nott stubbed out his partially-smoked cigarette in the ashtray on the table. "Old-fashioned more than barmy, in polite terms." His eyes moved to the scrying mirrors on the walls. "I suppose I'll fix up my glamour and coax some blood from Greg. Potter will most likely do better at getting blood out of Draco, but you might want to help him in case that isn't Draco in there."

Daphne nodded, her eye's meeting Harry's. "Sure. I'll play 'bodyguard' for Mr. Voynich."

"You can tag along with me if you want, Weasley," Nott said, heading toward the door. "Greg is harmless when you bribe him with sweets, which I'm certain we can find in the other room. If he doesn't take the sweets, then we'll know he's not Greg, but we should remain on guard regardless."

Stunned, Ron stared after Nott before trailing behind him, setting aside the invisibility cloak on the table. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind that."

Left alone with Daphne, Harry bit the inside of his lip, dithering. "Er – I'll need a voice changing charm."

Daphne slid her wand out of her sleeve and flicked it in the direction of his throat. "Say something?"

"…Is Regulus Black your father?" Harry hesitantly asked, the voice coming out of his mouth an octave lower than his own – the same voice he always used in his Tom Riddle disguise.

There were a few seconds where Harry shifted on his feet, staring at Daphne uncertainly as her expression froze.

And then, a sense of familiar, yet melancholy, warmth spread through him when he realized that he'd hit his mark. Harry's lips quirked. "He is, isn't he?"

She stared distantly toward the wall behind him, a weary sigh escaping her. "Promise not to hold it against me?"
Harry's brows furrowed. "Why would I? Sirius was my godfather." And, just like that, all of the previous warmth he had felt faded quickly. "...I would've liked to've known."

Sirius probably would have as well, if he was still...

"Oh, God. I didn't even think of that."

"Well," Harry recovered, "if it means anything to you -- he told me that Regulus was killed because he defected from the Death Eaters." He'd gotten the impression that she didn't know that.

"I doubt anything I'll ever hear about him will make up for years of resenting him, but thanks," she said in an ambiguous tone, vanishing their mostly-smoked cigarettes and slipping her wand back up her sleeve. "You're not going to start bombarding me with questions now, are you?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Harry awkwardly replied, "Not sure what I'd ask."

"That's a first," Daphne wryly commented. Digging into her pockets, she handed him a corked phial and a small silver knife that was normally used for chopping up potion ingredients.

"We'll need five drops, but if you can't get more than three out of him, I can work with that," she said, all back to business, as she led him out into the corridor. He could hear the muffled sounds of Ron and Nott in the room with the kitchenette, digging through the refrigerator, and he clutched at the 'tools' in his hands a bit numbly, hardly knowing what to think.

Daphne's fingers paused on the handle of the door that led to Malfoy's interrogation room, the front of which still buzzed with containment wards that appeared to be fully intact. "Are you ready?" she asked, gazing at him expectantly.

Letting out a deep calming breath, he straightened his posture and pushed everything in his mind aside, giving her a nod. If there was one thing he could definitely do, it was get something from Malfoy.

The blonde Slytherin's head popped up over the book he was reading as Harry moved through the door, inconspicuously glancing at the clock on the wall, which was still randomized. Much of the room had changed since his own time at the warehouse. It looked more like a bedroom than a stark interrogation room and the chain that attached Malfoy to his bed by the magical restraint bracelet was longer – long enough for him to walk freely around his room.

Long enough to pose a potential threat as well.

"Good morning, Draco," Harry stated smoothly, indifferently.

"You," Malfoy spat with a faint sneer. "What are you doing here?"

Harry's eyebrow arched. "Glad to see that your manners have improved since we last spoke."

Malfoy glare wavered from him to Daphne, who stood silently off to the side. He then noticed the knife in Harry's hand, fear briefly glinting in his eyes. "Forgive me," he tersely replied in a tone that contradicted his petulant sneer. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We require a small amount of your blood," Harry drawled, cutting to the chase. "It's nothing sinister, I assure you."

Malfoy watched him suspiciously, shifting in his seat. "...What for?"
Throwing caution to the wind, he decided to use a half-truth as a test. Thus far, Malfoy appeared to be Malfoy, but he wasn't completely certain of that.

"A Blood Matching spell," he explained. "There's someone who has come into our hands who claims to be who they appear to be, and you're the closest relation."

"Who?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"My father?"

Harry's expression hardened. "It's very tiresome to have to repeat myself, Draco," he remarked, an edge creeping into his words as he deliberately adjusted his grip on the silver knife for show.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he seemed to think it over, setting aside his book and crossing his arms over his chest, protectively. But it also could have been a sign of deception; Harry hadn't forgotten his lessons in body language.

"Okay," Malfoy consented with a haughty tilt of his head. "I'll let you have it – if you tell me your name. Your real name. And I'll know if you're lying."

A feral smirk curved at Harry's lips, meeting Malfoy's gaze straight on and bringing images of interrogating him to the forefront of his mind. The magical restraint bracelet probably covered every sort of Legilimency, but it never hurt to be a bit paranoid. He stalked toward the Slytherin boy, insinuating himself into his personal space and harshly placing his foot on the bit of chain that rested on the floor. The action jostled Malfoy's crossed arms.

"Thomas Voynich. Nice to officially make your acquaintance," he coldly introduced himself, sounding more like a lazy threat. He wasn't going to let Malfoy's all-too astute and defiant stare get to him. "Now, roll up your sleeve."

It was on those words that he felt his mind being pulled without warning – sucked into a vortex. It wasn't Occlumency. No – quite the opposite. And it definitely wasn't directed at him. Through the motion, he started to worry he was doing accidental magic, as colours and sounds whirred past his vision out of control, roiling in a chaotic maelstrom of thoughts that were not his own. He caught glimpses of Astoria, of Narcissa; their faces and blonde hair almost blurred into one. A glimpse of Hogwarts and Crabbe and Goyle and Nott flew by. Green and silver linens and ties and robes emblazoned with snakes.

But, then, there was a moment of clarity.

A stopping point.

"You are to kill Albus Dumbledore."

The sibilant hiss of Voldemort's order reverberated through his mind, forceful enough to cause a twinge of phantom pain to shoot through his scar at the mere sound of it.

Then there was the image of an arm, unfamiliar, but older and too much unlike Malfoy's, clasped onto the arm of Malfoy's mother, magic swirling around the linked limbs.

"I will," a voice drawled, reminding Harry of bezoars and wolfsbane and acerbic insults. The magic churning around their wrists sparked, a flame shooting across the swirled link.
"And will you," a woman's voice intoned, "to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

"I will."

A second spark shot through the magic, twining and tangling and forming a fine, glowing chain.

"And, should it prove necessary... if it seems Draco will fail..." the woman whispered, "will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

"I will."

Severus Snape's voice was clear in that moment – as clear as if Harry had heard it with his own ears. Suddenly, the thoughts swirled in reverse and he was tumbling. His mind felt as if it were being drawn back into his brain, like a bizarre mental turkey baster of recollections. The next thing Harry knew, he was blinking down at the blonde-haired Slytherin he had yet to draw the necessary blood from, exactly in the same position from where it had all started.

"Well?" Malfoy said impatiently, holding out his arm, his sleeve pushed up to his elbow. "Are you going to take it, or are you just going to stand there?"

His expression was nettlesome and completely devoid of any indication that he knew what Harry had just seen, ostensibly from his mind. Not wanting to give anything away, Harry schooled his own expression, pushing the disorienting confusion aside. Busying his hands and pulling the cork from the phial, he made a tiny incision at the side of Malfoy's wrist with the silver blade.

He couldn't help but peek out of the corner of his eye at his former rival, wondering if all of it was on purpose or not. The thing that bothered him nearly as much as the thoughts he was presented was... how? Backwards Legilimency didn't seem possible from all that he'd read and heard about it and Hermione's magical restraint bracelets completely tamped down Malfoy's power. He was as good as a Muggle in his current state.

It didn't make any sense.

If it was deliberate – as it seemed – was Malfoy secretly trying to tell him about Snape's Unbreakable Vow? About his task to kill Dumbledore? ...That Snape had no choice but to take on that task for him now due to the Vow? Why would Malfoy even do that or want to tell him about it? Wouldn't he want to protect his godfather?

Harry hadn't given him any indication that he was on Snape or Voldemort's side. Actually, he hadn't given him any indication he was on Dumbledore's side either.

Accidentally collecting a little more than five drops of blood, Harry backed away, corking the vial. "That should be enough." He paused, observing Malfoy carefully. "Is there anything you need? That I could get for you?"

Although he made the questions seem innocent, he hoped that it might prompt Malfoy to give him a clue as to why... But the blonde simply shrugged, shoving the sleeve of his plain cotton shirt back down and smearing blood over his wrist.

As Harry turned to move toward the door, Malfoy quickly asked, "Is Ms Demirović here? I'd like to see her, if she is."

"She's not, no."

"Ah... Alright." Malfoy sounded disappointed by his answer. Was that supposed to be a clue?
"Thank you for your cooperation," Harry politely intoned, exiting the room when Malfoy gave him no response.

If Daphne had noticed anything off about the exchange, she didn't give him any indication either.

"He acts like he's Draco," she said once they were in the corridor, wariness clouding her glamoured features, "but there are methods to impersonate a person with near faultlessness. An Imperious Curse and Legilimency would be the obvious choice, unless that's an Unspeakable in there – then we're really f*cked."

He followed her into the control room in preoccupied silence, setting Malfoy's blood onto the table next to his invisibility cloak, which he stowed into his pocket. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched her roll up her sleeve and drain a few drops of her own blood into a different phial as he stared at the scrying mirrors on the wall. Ron and Nott – now glamoured as the mustachioed, blonde-haired bloke who originally interrogated Goyle with Astoria – were still in Goyle's room, looking as if they were having an amicable chat that was probably shocking the hell out of Ron. Malfoy was back to reading in his room, his fingers fiddling with the edges of the page he was on.

"He used magic," Harry admitted, just as Daphne waved her wand at a third empty phial, causing it to glow blue in her hands.

"What? Draco? I didn't see him…" With a guarded glance toward him, she carefully poured a small equal measure of blood from each phial into the glowing receptacle. She swirled the blood around in the phial, mixing it, corking it and setting it aside as the glow pulsed. "What kind of magic…?"

"Legilimency," he said, cutting her off when she opened her mouth to retort, "Only it wasn't Legilimency. It was like I was using Legilimency on him. But I wasn't, I swear. I had no control of it and don't you have… control when you do Legilimency?"

Daphne's brows rose. "To an extent, yes. Draco is a skilled Occlumens though. If you performed accidental Legilime–"

"I didn't!" Harry protested. "I know it wasn't me! It had to've been him! The only thing I did was Occlumency."

"What are you two arguing about?" Nott asked, entering the room with a full phial of Goyle's blood in his hands and Ron behind him.

"Harry thinks Draco performed Legilimency or…" Daphne trailed off, staring at him uncertainly.

"It wasn't…" Harry sighed, trying to think of a way how to properly explain what happened. "I was in his mind. It was like he pulled me in there."

"But I should've seen if he was doing something like that."

"It was just after he traded for my name and said he'd know I was lying, so I Occluded my mind – just in case, you know – and told him and he pulled me in."

Daphne ran her fingers through her hair, glaring at the scrying mirrors. "He shouldn't be able to do that – unless that's not–"

"Which Occlumency technique did you use?" Nott asked.

"Replacement Technique."
''And he 'pulled you into his mind'…” Nott mused, his lips pinched in thought as he leaned against the table. "How close were you to him? Sitting next to him? Standing?"

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "Er – a few inches, maybe? Standing. I don't see what–"

Nott held his hand up, his eyes unfocused.

"Most forms of Occlumency... project magic, but it's imperceptible magic," he quickly explained. "Even the Trace can't pick it up. However, there are some wizards and witches who can detect it – usually Master Occlumens and Legilimens who have a predisposed magical affinity for Mind Arts. It's an extremely rare talent – as is Reverse Legilimency, which is what you describe, and – as far as I know – these two things generally go hand in hand."

"But the magical restraint bracelet--" Daphne started, only to be interrupted by Nott once more:

"That's why I asked how close he was. That projection of magic likely got within the limits of Draco's magical restraint bracelet. I don't think Granger considered anything other than external magic when she made it. He can't exert his magic on anyone or anything else, but he could most certainly perform Occlumency and Reverse Legilimency, which, from the examples I've read, can be initiated by pulling at Occlumency's projected magic. Potter's had to have been in range."

"Or the bracelet's compromised," Daphne retorted. She rounded on Harry, glancing worriedly over at the scrying mirrors every few seconds. "What did you see when you were in his mind?"

"Snape's Unbreakable Vow and Malfoy's task to kill Dumbledore, mostly. Astoria and his mum were in there as well. And Hogwarts. Crabbe and Goyle and the Slytherin common room, dormitories…"

"That sounds exactly like something someone would show you if they're trying to convince you they're the real Draco Malfoy."

That was a good point… maybe that was why Draco, or not-Draco, performed Reverse Legilimency on him. It was extremely convincing, after all.

Nott cleared his throat and they both turned to him as he held up Daphne's vial of mixed blood, only it wasn't glowing anymore. The blood inside had turned a medium-light royal blue colour. "Unless you have any other second cousins who are wizards, that's irrefutably Draco Malfoy in there."

"But how could Malfoy be a Master Occlumens – or… Legilimens?" Ron incredulously questioned. "Since when?"

"He had lessons in it last summer from Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry replied, though he was hardly able to believe Malfoy's mastery of the craft any more than Ron. No wonder they couldn't get into Malfoy's severely sleep deprived mind during the interrogation… "It was to help him keep his task secret from Dumbledore and Snape."

And why in the world would the real Malfoy show him memories of his task to kill Dumbledore and Snape's Unbreakable Vow? Was it because Harry wasn't convinced that Malfoy was told to kill Dumbledore during his interrogation?

Yet, the Unbreakable Vow memory wouldn't have been necessary if that was the case. Harry couldn't find a single reason for showing him that.

"So, thus far," Nott said, setting his own phial of mixed blood aside under what was presumably the Blood Matching spell, "we have signature effacement on the wards, Draco is certainly Draco, even
though he's exhibiting odd behavior with Reverse Legilimency, and Greg is showing signs of Obliviation."

Nott moved to the empty blackboard on the wall and started listing. "Did you check the wards on Draco's door?"

"I'll go do that," Daphne said, her pace restless as she walked out the door.


"Goyle always looks like that." Ron's glamouréd brows furrowed. "How can you tell he's been Obliviated?"

"The watering eyes kind of gave it away."

"Oh," Ron muttered. "I just thought he was watching something sad on the picture box. They were in an infirmary or hospital or whatever Muggles call it."

"Malfoy didn't show any of those signs, no," Harry answered Nott, curiously squinting toward Goyle's telly in one of the scrying mirrors. It was playing one of Uncle Vernon's favourite shows to yell at about overpaid doctors and the NHS.

In the next scrying mirror, Malfoy was perusing the contents of the stasis cabinet in the corner of his room – which looked far bigger on the inside – pulling out a butterbeer. The blond Slytherin sat heavily on his bed, lounging back against the wall as he twisted the cap and stared directly at the door, taking sips from the bottle. His expression was distant and had a strange determination about it that Harry couldn't discern a reason for; it was just as mysterious as the reason for those memories.

Before he could rethink it, his feet carried him out and down the corridor and he nearly bumped into Daphne, who was half-kneeling in front of Malfoy's door and inspecting the wards. Underneath her wand, a golden metallic glow revealed layer upon layer of multiple lines of Arithmancy.

"Mind if I…?" Harry said, pointed to the door.

The inspection spell cut off and she looked up at him, moving to the side in an awkward shuffle. "Want me to come with?"

"Ah – no. I'll be fine. It's only Malfoy," he replied, throwing the door open and slamming it shut behind him.

The blonde Slytherin was still in the same position he'd last saw him, but now there was a sly smirk forming at his lips.

"Back to Obliviate me properly now that there aren't any witnesses?" he drawled, his eyes narrowing.

Harry blinked, trying to keep his expression neutral. "Why would I Obliviate you?"

"Because I remember," Malfoy said, his smirk morphing into a smug smile. "You were here earlier, accessed those memories – probably more than those – and then you must've Obliviated me or something, though you couldn't do it fully – I must've tried to Occlude it or else I wouldn't remember you rooting through those memories. It's still enough for me to know that you were here though." He paused, his gaze sharpening with a sense of daring. "And I'm prepared this time if you try to Obliviate me again."
It felt like a punch to the stomach.

"You can… Occlude Obliviation," Harry repeated slowly.

Occlumens were able to lie under Veritaserum – something he never thought previously possible – so it was highly unlikely that Malfoy was lying… Which meant that someone had definitely broken into the warehouse and was around long enough to perform Legilimency on Malfoy – maybe Goyle too – before Obliviating them.

"Did I stutter?" Malfoy sneered and he set his bottle of butterbeer onto the pile of books on his bedside table. "I'll even give you a free shot, if you like. I could use the practice."

"It wasn't me," Harry stated evenly, watching every minute move that Malfoy made for signs of deception. Malfoy might have simply been goading him so he could get ahold of Harry's wand… not that it would work with the magical restraint bracelet still around his wrist.

"I haven't seen you in two months and, all of a sudden, you show up and ask me for blood not even an hour after I've had my mind raped and Obliviated?" He snorted. "I don't believe in coincidences, Voynich."

Malfoy was always cocky when he thought he had the upper hand. Harry glared, debating on telling him the whole truth and dithering on whether or not it would sufficiently knock him down a peg or two.

"Did you ever stop to think that I came back because this happened to you?"

"What about the blood then?" Malfoy's tone was doubtful.

"I never lied about what the blood was for." As a subtle show of trust, Harry moved closer. He was in range if Malfoy decided to lash out at him. "Only," he said, "the Blood Matching spell wasn't for someone else. It was for you. We had to make certain you weren't an imposter."

Remaining silent, Malfoy's eyes narrowed once more, though his expression was more speculative than suspicious.

"We had a break in," Harry continued calmly – more calm than he felt – keeping his Voynich demeanor intact. "The question of how, why, and who have yet to be answered. Any information you can give me about the person – or people – who dug through your mind and Obliviated you would be beneficial to your… continual safety."

"My 'continual safety'?" Malfoy asked, his brows furrowing warily as he leaned away from him. "What? Are you going to torture me again? I already told you all I know. No need to get out your knives."

He didn't realize how much his last statement sounded like a threat; he was mostly referring to keeping Malfoy safe from Voldemort…

Well, whatever worked.

Malfoy stared up at him, questioning, "So you really didn't do it?"

"No," Harry said, meeting Malfoy's unconvinced gaze. "You know I don't require Legilimency to extract secrets."

"It's faster."
"Not with an Occlumens like you," Harry retorted, his mind prickling. Unless Malfoy was completely caught off guard, the person who went through Malfoy's mind would have had to be ridiculously skilled at Legilimency to get in there. Voldemort was a logical choice, but he'd never leave Malfoy and Goyle alive if he broke in. Bellatrix wouldn't either... And, other than Snape, he had no idea of other Death Eaters who were very skilled at Legilimency.

But Snape was also Malfoy's godfather... He'd leave Malfoy alive. And Snape had motive to get information from Malfoy as well, but – if it was him – why wouldn't he take Malfoy with him? Why the Obliviation?

...'And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?'...1

If he were to take the knife in his pocket and stab Malfoy right now, would Snape die if he was one of the people who broke in? Because he would've failed to protect Malfoy by leaving him behind?

It was tempting to test that theory, but Harry wasn't keen on it. He needed more evidence on the intruders, and preferred if the evidence – proof, really – didn't involve someone dying, even if it was Snape.

The question still remained of how the intruders – Snape among them or not – found out about the warehouse and tracked it down. It was given every level of protection short of a blood ward or a Fidelius Charm, which they were likely going to have to perform now that the warehouse was threatened.

"Are you certain you don't remember anything else?" Harry probed further. "What they looked like? Their voice? Male or female?"

Malfoy shook his head and then paused mid-shake, his eyes widening toward the open book sitting at the edge of his bed. "I think I was – must've been – compelled to read. But I've no memory of it... just the strong impulse to do it. I still feel it a little."

Harry's stomach twisted in nervous disappointment. "That's it?"

"I was Obliviated. You're lucky I remember as much as I do!" Malfoy snapped, staring at Harry as if he was as thick as mince, but then his expression sobered to something more thoughtful. "Or, maybe, you're just trying to test me to see if I remember if it was you who did it. You said you were a Slytherin. That's exactly what a Slytherin would do."

Malfoy and his bloody interrogation games.

Harry didn't bother holding back his derisive snort of laughter. A wolfish smile pulled at his features, one that always seemed to intimidate Malfoy, even though he tried to hide it. "And what would you think of me if I told you I lied about being a Slytherin?"

Malfoy's lips pursed. "Did you go to Durmstrang then?"

Knowing that he wasn't going to get anything more out of him except doubt and defiance – judging by where the conversation was going – Harry turned on his heel and left the room without answering, shutting the door in Malfoy's glaring, questioning face. If Astoria showed up, she could probably get more out of Malfoy if he had more to give. But, if he did, he'd barter with it instead of being accusatory.

At least he found out a few more things that Nott could add to the list on the board.
"Extensive signature effacement, **massive** gaps in the recognition wards, Obliviation and Legilimency used on the prisoners, no signs of tracking spells or devices, and no bloody traces of **anything? Who** talked?"

Harry's eyes widened as Croaker's unfathomable gaze swept across him and around to the other teenagers scattered about the control room. When Daphne mentioned that Croaker was paranoid and could be brutal when that paranoia was tested, she wasn't exaggerating. He felt as if the ex- Unspeakable was going to drag them all into an interrogation room one-by-one the moment he entered the warehouse with Astoria at his side, vicious magic radiating off of him in waves.

"There is absolutely no other way that someone could have found this place otherwise," Croaker stated tersely, composed but fierce. His navy tweed cloak swished along his legs as he paced slowly.

"We were debating over Narcissa," Daphne said, her polyjuice and glamour completely gone and back to her regular self. Other than Astoria, she was the only one who didn't seem nervous under Croaker's harsh scrutiny.

Even the normally unflappable Zabini appeared slightly – well – flapped.

"It wasn't Narcissa," Astoria countered, adjusting her shoulder holster under her coat. "She doesn't know where the warehouse is. Draco is brought to visit her under sensory deprivation – charms? – to the flat in Hammersmith—"

"And, she would have to use magic in order to follow us when we bring the Malfoy boy back here," Croaker briskly interrupted. "Considering that the Death Eaters aren't knocking down her front door, she hasn't used magic since she agreed to play Muggle."

Daphne's brows furrowed. "You've confirmed that they've put the Trace back on her then?"

"On **Narcissa Malfoy?** They can't do that!" Ron argued. "Once the Trace is gone it's gone!"

"The Department of Mysteries spreads misinformation for a reason, Mr. Weasley. And I've been informed that they have reinstated her Trace," Croaker answered Daphne, sparing Ron a glance that sufficiently cowed the redheaded Gryffindor. "I imagine the Malfoy kid will have his previously-removed Trace back on him as well very soon. It's more difficult to reconnect one which has been illegally broken, such as his." He turned toward Astoria. "Do you believe you can keep him on a leash about this Reverse Legilimency business?"

"Of course," Astoria said confidently. "Narcissa will help if he won't listen."

"Good," Croaker muttered, turning his eyes back on the room. "Now, have any of you mentioned anything to anyone about the whereabouts of Draco Malfoy or Gregory Goyle?"

There was a resounding round of "no's" and shaken heads.

"If wasn't any of us, sir," Harry said solidly, stepping up to Croaker's intimidating stance. "And it's pointless to go looking for blame when there's evidence that points to who could've broken in."

"But how would Professor Snape find out about the warehouse, Harry?" Hermione asked, just as she had earlier when he relayed his suspicions.

"Maybe he used Static Legilimency on one of us. We all take his class," Harry proposed, finally able to answer that question after giving it some thought. "There probably aren't many people who can get into Malfoy's mind. Snape's probably one of the few."
"There aren't many people who can break a trammel ward, catch it, and repair it before it traps
either," Zabini pointed out. "It's nearly impossible."

"So is getting a recognition ward to recognize your signature without leaving it behind," Hermione
added. "Not to mention doing all of this in under fifteen minutes."

Croaker remained quiet, seemingly taking in their speculation.

"This whole thing's a mess," Daphne mumbled around her cigarette as she lit it, passing her silver
case to Harry, who gratefully accepted one. His nerves were a bit frayed and Croaker being there
certainly wasn't helping with that.

Harry breathed out a slow stream of smoke. "Since there isn't much else we can do here, I say we put
up a Fidelius Charm – like we planned – and look into… people who might've broken in."

Snape was at the top of his list. It wasn't completely implausible. Snape had the means and the
motive and, frighteningly, Voldemort's ear as well.

"Great and all, Potter, but who's going to volunteer to take the Dark Mark?" Zabini dryly replied.
"It's the only way to infiltrate the Death Eaters."

Daphne's lips parted and a wide grin spread across her face, which contrasted heavily from her
previous crestfallen expression. "No it isn't! I can use Cornfoot! He'd know if the Death Eaters were
passed any information about Draco or if there was a leak about what he's doing at Hogwarts. He's
in contact with them – said so himself when he traded secrets."

"This is Malfoy's replacement you've been cultivating?" Croaker asked.

"Yeah," Daphne said with a nod, "and if he's still going on with his mission, we can assume that the
Dark Lord hasn't heard about his… information leak."

"But who, other than Death Eaters, would break in and go through Draco's mind – and probably
Greg's as well?" Nott retorted, crossing his arms over his chest. "This wasn't something that someone
just did on a whim. This seems like a planned attack to me. A planned operation."

Croaker's eyes narrowed toward the weedy Slytherin. "You're Tavion's kid, aren't you?"

Nott nodded. "He's always spoken very highly of you."

"Spare me. He speaks highly of everyone," Croaker drawled, checking his watch. "Shall we draw
straws for Secret Keeper before the Dark Lord shows up on our doorstep and kills us all?"

oOo

"Not a bad choice. Rather unassuming."

Harry's expression turned doubtful as he stared at the shortest straw of the conjured bunch between
his fingers. "Is it really?"

"Your image to the public is as a savoir – the Chosen One – the one who fights Death Eaters. It's not
your Modus Operandi to kidnap them. Additionally, you've been at school this entire time. You're
not an obvious suspect." Croaker paused. "Now, how about we go outside while the rest of you get
everyone outside the wards? I suggest sensory deprivation charms on the prisoners. And, perhaps,
some… glamours. You three sorely require it."
With that, Croaker disappeared back through the door, leaving Harry staring in his wake. As he got up to follow him, Daphne and the two Slytherin boys were already busy spelling triple-layer glamours on each other. Hermione headed off to place sensory deprivation charms on Goyle and Malfoy with Astoria in tow.

Catching up with Croaker at the edge of the wards, where the Unspeakable was running a few diagnostic spells, Harry chanced a sideways glance over at him once he appeared to be done. "So, how does this work, exactly?"

A stoat-like smirk tugged at Croaker's lips. "We wait until they clear the premises. Fidelius charms are more finicky to perform than they are difficult – requires a certain degree of magical finesse. You're the only one allowed on the property when I perform the spell, otherwise it won't take."

"Interesting…" Harry trailed off with a nod, barely knowing anything about wardcraft in the first place or he'd probably have a bounty of other questions. As it stood, he had plenty of questions to ask Croaker, he just wasn't certain on how to go about it.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. "May I ask you something, sir?" he said with a cautious tilt of his head.

Croaker's brow arched and he tugged his leather gloves further up his sleeves, fitting them more snugly on his hands. "As long as you don't make a habit of calling me 'sir', knock yourself out."

"Sorry," Harry apologized, shifting slightly on his feet. "But, er, why is it that you're helping us with this? In general. I mean, you're an Unspeakable – you could do basically anything you want and yet you take time out to help me and Daph and all of us."

"It's simple, Mr. Potter. Basic human nature – we do what we can for what we believe and we protect and do anything for the people and things we love," Croaker drawled, mischievously meeting Harry's gaze. "However, if you wouldn't mind, I'd enjoy it if you got to the most burning questions in your head. There's no need for subterfuge. We're allies."

Harry let out an anxious breathy laugh through his nose. "I'm not trying to manipulate you."

"Yes, you've tact – I appreciate that. Your Occlumency skills, on the other hand, require work. So, what's on your mind?"

"You tell me," Harry remarked, feeling vaguely uneasy about Croaker reading his thoughts.

"I'm an 'Unspeakable', as you say – it's a hazard of association and a force of habit in my line of work," Croaker said as Harry pulled out his red leather case. Before he could get out his lighter, Croaker lit his cigarette for him with a mere flick of his fingers, causing Harry's eyebrows to furrow.

"Thanks." He tacked wandless magic onto the list of things that Croaker knew how to do.

"No problem. I'm also not one to speak of personal matters involving my associates and my friends, so any discussion of Regulus Black is off the table. I don't know much about that, either way," Croaker continued without skipping a beat. "As for the Trace… that's an entirely different matter."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly as he dissected Croaker's words. He never considered asking about Regulus Black... Maybe Static Legilimency wasn't as reliable as Harry previously thought.

Taking a drag off his cigarette, Harry explained, "You mentioned that the Trace could be turned on for anyone. But, I want to know if it can be turned off for someone like me – not just Malfoy."
Croaker's stoat-like smirk stretched even farther across his face as the man glanced at him from the corners of his eyes. "That's very possible."

A small smile curved Harry's lips and his insides swelled with hope. "How would I go about doing that?"

"You're good friends with Horace Slughorn, aren't you?"

Harry nodded, a bit uncertainly.

"If you could get me a private meeting with him – in person – I could arrange to wipe you from the Trace's notice."

Harry's eyebrow arched. "What do you want with Slughorn?"

"Nothing that would get you into trouble," Croaker said with a reassuring gesture. "I merely require his opinion on something. He's well-travelled and has acquired an impressive amount of magical knowledge in his years. He may be more amenable to the meeting if you mentioned the hand of Midas."

It seemed innocent enough. Yet…

"Why can't you just contact him yourself for a meeting?"

A small laugh bubbled up from Croaker's throat, sounding nearly like a scoff. "The last time I saw Horace Slughorn, we… weren't on the best terms. I'd appreciate it if you could help me with this matter."

Sighing, Harry flicked the ashes off his fag, briefly considering it. It wasn't as if Croaker was giving him a deadline, which was nice. Nevertheless, knowing someone with the hand of Midas would probably further advance his position with Slughorn, even if it involved Croaker. Slughorn was greedy and Obliviation was a possibility if it went pear shaped.

"So, if I can get you a meeting with him, I'll contact you with a date and time?"

"That's slow, plebian business. Take this," Croaker said, reaching into his pocket and passing him a small blue crystal that was no larger than the fingernail on his pinky. "Ten minutes before the meeting, crush that. I shan't be late for it."

"Yeah… brilliant," Harry muttered, staring at the crystal and weighing it in his palm, "but what about Hogwarts' wards?"

Croaker's dug into the internal pocket of his tweed robes and flashed him a small vial of purple twinkling liquid that Harry knew was Signature Duplicating Potion. "I'll manage," he said, stowing the vial away with his quick fingers. "Don't mention to Ducky that I stole this. She's like me; doesn't play well with others. Makes for a great Unspeakable – not so great a partner, which I'm certain you've encountered."

Harry's brain flooded with an epiphany at those words. "I've another question."

"By all means, ask it then."

"It's more like I need your advice. Daphne has recently gotten inside Cornfoot's group after weeks of asset cultivation and I want to do something about it as well, but I'm not sure how, since I'm… me. And my normal disguise for the project is as a tentative apprentice for Professor Slughorn, who is...
still in the interviewing process, which limits my involvement with Cornfoot. How should I go about getting closer?"

Croaker's brows rose. "What house is he in?"

"Ravenclaw," Harry dutifully answered. "But, from what I've seen of him, he'd probably fit in Slytherin as well."

Croaker hummed in thought. "If I were you, I'd go for a non-obvious approach. It's not too difficult to don a disguise and pretend to be someone else. Being yourself is the most difficult. As Mr. Cornfoot is a Death Eater, he's probably very interested in you. Try to genuinely make friends with him by 'chance'. When I was at school, the best way to make friends with a Ravenclaw was to catch them in the library when it was full and find an excuse to study with them."

When the library was full… Yeah, that could definitely work. Harry's lips curved into a small smile. "So it's basically like dangling myself as bait to him but, really, I'm trying to get information from him instead. Like… opposite interrogation?"

If he did that and acted completely innocent, not only would it solidify his own stance, but also Daphne's investigation… It had the potential to lower suspicions all 'round. Genius.

"Exactly," Croaker said, staring at him with approval. "In my experience, it's an incredibly effective means of gaining information without arousing mistrust. My expertise at that technique is part of what gave me my former job."

Behind them, Astoria led the group exiting from the warehouse, her wrist attached to the other end of Draco Malfoy's restraint bracelet. Zabini was attached to Goyle, and Hermione and Daphne seemed to be having a muttered conversation with Ron at the back. Nott was the last to exit, as silent and stoic as an emotionless rabbit.

Harry inhaled a breath full of smoke, watching them gather on the other side of the ward, and he prepared himself for Croaker to perform the Fidelius Charm.

He was ready.

He was ready for all of it.

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Reference:


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Chapter End Notes

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