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Chapter 1

What are you looking at Granger? Draco thought to himself, as he shifted in his seat at the Slytherin table. Hermione's glare was piercing and full of contempt. Draco looked away from her, nonplussed. He knew very well what she was thinking, and he didn't care. She and the rest of the wizarding world would have to get used to the changes that were to come, now that Voldemort had returned.

Hermione's hands were shaking. She tried to keep her glass steady but it was no use.

Dumbledore had asked the students in the Great Hall to stand and honor Cedric's memory with a toast, but many of the Slytherins had remained seated...defiant...flat out refusing to honor the boy that had died at the hands of Lord Voldemort.

She wasn't the only Gryffindor to notice, but no one wanted to make a scene. They were all exhausted, tired from their sleepless nights of mourning Cedric, and wondering what was going to happen now that Voldemort had returned.

Pansy Parkinson whispered something into Malfoy's ear, and he stifled a laugh.

A vein in Hermione's temple throbbed.

Malfoy and the other Slytherins would go home this summer, and listen to their parent's plots...former Death Eaters now ready to rejoin Lord Voldemort. They would become accomplices to their parent's crimes, then return to Hogwarts at summer's end as if they'd taken no part in anything at all...

Hermione's blood chilled as Draco's gaze fell on her. He gave her a weary look, letting her know that her anger made no difference to him, Cedric's death meant nothing to him. She wasn't surprised, but still...there was something that unsettled her. Their meeting at the Yule Ball had shifted something between them.

Hermione looked into her glass, and the sounds of the Great Hall faded away as she let her thoughts wander back to that night...

MONTHS EARLIER, THE YULE BALL

Ron was shouting at her, but she was no longer listening. He had come up with the ridiculous notion that she'd betrayed Harry by accepting Krum's invitation to the ball.

"You're going to help him win the tournament!" Ron shouted.

Hermione gaped at him.

As if she wanted Viktor to win over Harry!

And speaking of Harry, he was no help. He was sitting next to the pair of them, staring up at the ceiling, hoping that the argument would end as quickly as possible.

Hermione stood. She'd had enough. Ron was completely irrational and he was spiraling out of control.

She ran away from him, tears burning her eyes.

Why did he have to ruin everything?

It had been a perfect night with Krum until now.

Hermione left the Great Hall and stormed down a corridor.

She knew Ron wished he'd asked her to the ball himself, but he just didn't have the guts. He was too afraid to tell her how he really felt, and she was tired of waiting.

"I see you got your teeth sorted out, Granger," said a familiar, drawling voice.

Hermione froze. She'd stormed blindly down the halls, not seeing where she was going. She spun around. Malfoy stood behind her, a smirk on his face. He was the last person she wanted to see, especially now that she was in tears and caught unawares.

She looked at him coldly, remembering the fight he'd had with Harry in the dungeons. They'd tried to jinx each other and Malfoy's spell ricocheted and hit her full in the face, causing her to sprout fangs. Luckily, Madam Pomfrey had sorted her out quite nicely.

Malfoy took note of her tear-stained face. "Who made you cry, Granger? I'd like to thank them personally."

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes and marched up to him. "Very funny Malfoy, why don't you get lost and find your date? That is if there was anyone desperate enough to attend the ball with a ferret!"

She knew full well he'd taken Pansy Parkinson to the dance, but still, she enjoyed watching his face flush red with anger.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut across him.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way..."

She pushed past him and thought that was the end of it, when he shouted, "Forgetting something, Granger?"

Keep walking, Hermione told herself, but curiosity got the better of her. She spun around. Malfoy was holding a pair of earrings in the palm of his hand. She recognized them at once. They were her mother's earrings. She had leant them to her for the Yule Ball. They were an iridescent blue that matched perfectly with her periwinkle gown.

She must have dropped them when she ran away from Ron...

"I thought you might like them back," said Malfoy, extending his palm out to her.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously and made to take the earrings, but he swiftly moved his hand out of reach. "Tell you what Granger," he said. "I'll duel you for them."

Hermione couldn't believe her ears. First Ron, now this. She was exhausted. She hadn't even said goodbye to Krum. All she wanted to do was go to her dormitory, shut out the lights and pretend the argument with Ron had never happened.

Malfoy stepped closer to her.

"Unless you don't care for them? I'm sure my date, Pansy, would like them."

Hermione's blood boiled. She'd rather die than let Pansy Parkinson wear her mother's earrings. She pulled out her wand. Malfoy did the same.

"Stupefy!"

"Protego!"

Malfoy ducked her spell and bolted into the classroom behind him.

Hermione chased after him.

It was pitch black inside and she let out a yelp of pain as she crashed into a desk.

"Lumos!" she shouted, and the lights went on. She looked everywhere but Malfoy was nowhere in sight. Then a voice behind her shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Hermione's wand flew out of her hand. She spun around.

Draco emerged from the desk behind her.

"Well, well Granger, that lasted all but what, two seconds?" he said, now holding her wand. "I have to say I expected a bit more out of you."

"Give me back my wand Malfoy!" she shouted.

Draco laughed. Hermione looked uneasily at him, she could still hear music coming from the Great Hall. The dance hadn't ended yet. If things got too out of hand she could call for help.

Malfoy seemed to read her mind. He smiled, an idea occurring to him. "Enjoying the ball, Granger? Why don't you dance?"

"W-what??"

"Dance!" He raised his wand, "Voltare!"

Hermione started spinning uncontrollably. She collided into chairs, desks, and finally a large bookshelf, unsettling a heavy globe perched right at the top. She watched it teeter at the edge of the shelf...it was going to fall right on top of her...

Suddenly, something heavy crashed into her chest, and the wind was knocked out of her.

She blinked.

It was Malfoy.

They both went flying backwards, and the globe landed on the floor with a sickening crash.

Hermione's heart pounded violently. Just a few seconds longer and she would have taken a blow to the head. Her brow furrowed. That globe looked like it weighed a ton, she could have been hurt! What was she doing here dueling with Malfoy, anyway? What did h—

That's when she noticed something that horrified her. She and Malfoy were standing impossibly close. His hands were at her waist, and she could feel his chest rise and fall. His heart was pounding as loudly as her own. Their eyes locked and all Hermione could think to do was yell at him.

"You could have killed me! You stupid git!" she shouted, pushing him away with more force than was necessary.

Malfoy's eyes widened in shock, then he recovered himself and stood to his full height. "You should be thanking me Granger," he said, dusting off his robes, as if touching her had contaminated him in some way. "I could have easily let that globe fall on that bushy head of yours."

Hermione let out a scream. "You are insufferable!"

She lunged at him and made to wrench the earrings out of his hand. Malfoy held her at arm's length, but she was tired of playing nice. She kicked him hard in the leg. He howled in pain and started hopping up and down on one foot. She prized the earrings from his hand and made for the door, but not before he grabbed the skirt of her gown and yanked her backwards.

They both landed in a heap on the floor. Hermione saw her wand hanging out of Malfoy's pocket. She reached for it, managing to take hold, but then Malfoy seized her arm and they struggled with each other.

She was about to kick him again when the door flew open.

"I heard shouting, I—" Viktor Krum stopped dead when he caught sight of them. "Herm-own-ninny! Let go of her!"

Viktor raised his wand, ready to curse Malfoy.

"Viktor don't!" pleaded Hermione.

Draco released her and scrambled to his feet.

Krum marched up to him.

Draco paled, seeing that Krum was a whole head taller than him.

"Malfoy stole my wand, but I have it back now," said Hermione, rushing to stand between them. "Let's just go, okay?"

Krum looked ready to hex Malfoy into oblivion, but then he saw the anxiety on Hermione's face and lowered his wand.

She steered him towards the door, but before they left, she turned to look back at Draco.

He gave her a searing look, letting her know that things weren't over between them.

Hermione followed Krum outside, failing to control her rising anger.

She launched into a tirade all the way back to the Great Hall, cursing Malfoy's ridiculous behavior, but Krum was silent.

"Is something wrong?" Hermione asked.

Krum stopped walking. "First Harry, and the article that Skeeter lady wrote, saying you ver together...and now these blonde boy. How many boyfriends do you haff Herm-own-ninny?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock. "If that's what you really think of me then—then going to the ball together was a mistake." And with that she stormed off to the girl's dormitory, leaving Krum looking crestfallen.

PRESENT DAY, GREAT HALL

Hermione refused to be grateful to Malfoy for pushing her out of harm's way, seeing as he had put her in that predicament in the first place. Still...he could have let her get hurt. So why didn't he? Was it an involuntary impulse? Fear of a life sentence in Azkaban in the event of her death? Or was it what she feared?

Throughout their years at Hogwarts Malfoy had always insulted her. His words were cutting and cruel, but there were times when she caught him staring at her in class, in the halls or during dinner. Also the night she made her entrance at the Yule Ball. She had always told herself he was only thinking up new ways to torture her, but after the ball she couldn't ignore the truth.

She had some kind of hold over Draco Malfoy.

She didn't know exactly what he felt towards her—curiosity or obsession—but she would use it to her advantage.

A war was about to begin, and information was power. Hermione didn't know how, but when the next term started she would gain Malfoy's confidence, and learn his family's plans. It wouldn't be easy, but she had to try. She knew Lucius had been one of Voldemort's top supporters in the past, why shouldn't he be again? She'd pass any information she had to Dumbledore, Harry and the Order. She knew they had already set their own plans in motion to stop Voldemort...

She just had to devise a solid plan over the summer, and when term started she'd put it into action.

She only hoped Hogwarts was still standing by that time...

SUMMER, MALFOY MANOR

"The papers have confirmed it, Potter won't be returning to Hogwarts," said Lucius, slamming a copy of the Daily Prophet down on his desk. "No doubt Dumbledore has stashed him away somewhere."

"I don't see why anyone is going back to school at all," said Draco lazily, sitting across from his father and playing with a thread on the edge of his sleeve.

Lucius ignored him. "We'll find out where he's hiding. Our good standing with the Dark Lord depends on it. But we must not raise suspicion. We can't be seen to take sides, at least not yet. And that's where you come in."

"I don't understand," said Draco wearily, suddenly giving his father his full attention.

"The Granger girl is key. She must know where Potter is hiding," Lucius looked at his son as if seeing him for the first time. "It's a relatively simple task the Dark Lord asks of you."

Malfoy knew exactly what his father was implying.

He shook his head. "It would never work, she's too clever."

"More clever than you?!"

"You expect me to entangle myself with that mudblood—"

"The Dark Lord has risen and we will gain information in whatever way we can. You will seduce the Granger girl. I don't care how you do it, I don't care how long it takes. Tell her you renounce your family, tell her you want no part in the Dark Lord's plan...tell her you need her help. You will make her love you Draco. You will win her trust, and then she will lead us to Potter."

Draco gazed into his father's face, he observed the heavy lines on his forehead, the streaks of white in his hair...brought on by years of plotting to rise higher and higher in power. He didn't care who he served—Voldemort or a wealthy politician—as long as it meant a personal gain that's all that mattered.

"You know the consequences for us if you fail," said Lucius gravely. "Voldemort is not one to forgive. And we must survive by any means necessary."

Draco knew that by the end of the war, neither one of them would be the same. For better or worse he did not know. All he knew was that everything was going to change.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you so much for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :)

Chapter 2

Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ looked nothing like Hermione remembered. The Ministry had sent a battalion of Aurors to patrol the station. They looked like a large swarm of angry bees, keeping a close eye on everyone. The tension in the air was palpable. Parents were barely given enough time to say goodbye to their children, before Aurors rushed them in line to board the Hogwarts Express. Ministry officials were also taking down names, making note of every student that was returning to Hogwarts.

The Ministry had launched an extensive campaign over the summer, assuring parents that Hogwarts was the safest place for their children, safer than their own homes. They had heightened security around the castle, and placed a number of enchantments, even added the Hogwarts Guard, a group of specially trained Aurors to protect the school. But despite their many promises, Hermione knew the truth. No one was safe anymore, not even at Hogwarts.

Many parents thought the same. The most skeptical had decided to send their children abroad, to foreign wizarding schools, while some students simply remained at home.

And yet, a good number had decided to return.

Hermione spotted Ron at the other end of the station, saying goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"I'll send you a letter by owl as soon as I get to Hogwarts," said Hermione, hugging her parents. "Arling will see you home."

Upon Dumbledore's request, the Ministry had assigned an Auror to her parents, and another to Ron's family at the Burrow. As Harry's closest friends, their families ran the highest risk of kidnap and torture by Voldemort's followers. She tried not to think of the endless count of murders that were reported over the summer. She had made sure to tell her parents the truth of the situation, feeling that they deserved to know.

"We love you," Hermione's mother whispered into her ear.

Hermione hugged both her parents tightly. She didn't want to let go, but then an Auror appeared at her shoulder. "It's time to board the train now," he said.

Hermione nodded and followed him to the Hogwarts Express. She gave her name to the Ministry official at the front of the train, then climbed on board.

Ron was waiting for her inside, and as they walked down the corridor everyone started to stare.

"Think they know where Harry is?" whispered a second year Gryffindor to his brother.

"It looks like Potter left his friends behind to fend for themselves," said a Slytherin girl loudly.

Her friends laughed.

Hermione pretended not to hear.

"Over here," said Ron, motioning Hermione into an empty compartment. He helped her with her suitcase then shut the door behind them.

"How was your summer?" asked Hermione quickly, hoping Ron wouldn't dwell on the incident in the corridor. She looked out the window, watching as her parents left the platform with Arling.

"Never had a moment of privacy," said Ron, slumping down into the seat opposite her. The Auror the Ministry assigned us was way too jumpy. "Mum was cooking in the kitchen one morning, got distracted and dropped a couple pans, and he stormed into the Burrow, wand at the ready, thinking we'd been attacked."

"Look," said Hermione, gesturing to the window. Eight of the Aurors were boarding the train, ready to escort the students to Hogwarts. The other twenty remained behind.

"Blimey," said Ron, watching them board. "Ministry sure is tightening up security, aren't they?"

Hermione nodded, and Ron looked at her, choosing his next words carefully.

"Why did Dumbledore tell you and not me?"

"Tell me what?" asked Hermione.

"About Harry, and his mission."

"I don't know, maybe he supposed it was safer if only one of us knew."

Ron was silent, clearly not satisfied with her answer. "Well I suppose Harry's safe," he said finally. "But I don't see why I've been kept in the dark."

Hermione glowered at Ron. She wanted to tell him that Harry was not safely tucked away, instead he was risking his life abroad, recruiting an army with the Order. An army for Dumbledore and the Ministry. An army for them all.

She thought back to the argument she'd had with Dumbledore months earlier...

"He's only fifteen!" she had shouted, when Dumbledore had told her his plans.

"You will find," Dumbledore had calmly answered, "There are things I can't disclose, and Harry is well aware of what he will face. He didn't want to leave without one of you knowing where he was going."

"Why tell me and not Ron?"

"Mr. Weasley is a loyal friend to Harry, but he is impulsive, and that can be dangerous in times such as these."

"And Harry is the only one that can complete this mission?"

Dumbledore had nodded.

In a way Hermione had understood. Although Harry had only been a baby, he was the one who had taken Voldemort's power before, and he was the only one that could convince people to rally against him now.

"And now, Ms. Granger, we must discuss how you can help Harry, if you are willing."

Hermione had agreed and Dumbledore had told her his plans. She'd also taken the opportunity to tell him her plans for Malfoy, and Dumbledore hadn't rejected her idea, but he'd advised caution.

"You must tread carefully, Ms. Granger. Although Draco is arrogant and vain, we must concede that he is intelligent, and not easily fooled. I would not want you to put yourself in harm's way."

Hermione had assured him that she would be careful.

Hermione's thoughts returned to the present and she looked at Ron. He was sitting right across from her, but it felt like he was an ocean away.

A few compartments further down the train, Malfoy took a seat across from Theodore Nott. The boy kept loosening his tie and tapping his foot nervously.

"Is something wrong?" asked Malfoy, irritated.

"Coming back was a mistake," said Nott flatly.

Draco lowered his voice. "Returning to Hogwarts is the best way to avoid suspicion."

Nott shook his head. "Things are going to get bad very fast."

Draco raised an eyebrow. He had never seen his friend panic before. "What are you worried about?"

"If things go wrong...for our side, who do you think Dumbledore and the Ministry are going to question first? They can hold us for ransom, torture us for information, until our parents give in to their demands. Hogwarts is the worst possible place to get caught if things go wrong. We'd be trapped."

Draco laughed. "Dumbledore? Torture students? He'd never do it, it's not his way...not in his line of thinking. And he wouldn't allow the Ministry to do it either."

Nott rolled his eyes. "Dumbledore isn't Minister of Magic, is he? They're desperate to catch the Dark Lord. I don't think there's anything they wouldn't do."

Malfoy leaned back in his seat. "Why don't you ease up mate? It's a long ride back to Hogwarts, and I don't fancy your attitude."

Nott looked out the window, looking like a man preparing for his own hanging.

Pathetic, thought Malfoy as he turned away from him.

Nott was crumbling already and they hadn't even set foot in Hogwarts.

"I'm hungry," said Ron. "Fancy anything from the cart?"

"I—" began Hermione.

BANG!

Her words were cut short by a deafening explosion. The whole train shuddered, and they were tossed forward.

"Are you alright?!" yelled Ron, helping her up.

They heard screams.

"What's going on?!" someone outside shouted.

They opened the compartment door and hurried outside, looking for the source of the explosion.

A group of Aurors were blasting spells at the end of the corridor. A student was hysterical, and they were trying to subdue her.

She dodged their spells and aimed her wand at them.

"I WANT TO GET OFF THE TRAIN! NOW!"

Hermione recognized the girl, it was Hannah Abbott.

"What is it?" asked Ron, spotting Neville in the compartment further down.

"It's terrible," Neville shouted, "the news just came over the Wizarding Wireless Network. There was an attack on King's Cross. It happened just after we left. Hannah's parents were killed. She wants to go back to the station."

Hermione felt the world slow down, and she hung onto Ron's arm for support.

"Was anyone else killed?" asked Ron.

"We don't know, said Neville. "The attack hasn't ended..."

"I'll be right back," Ron told Hermione, hurrying forward to get more information from Neville. Hermione felt dizzy, she had seen her parents leave Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ but had they made it out of the station? She took a step backwards.

"Watch where you're going!"

Hermione turned. "Sorry, I—" She stopped short. It was Malfoy.

He opened his mouth to yell at her, then stopped when he saw the commotion at the end of the corridor. "What's the matter with her?" he asked distracted, looking over

Hermione's shoulder.

Hannah Abbott had been seized by three Aurors. She was writhing, trying to break free from their grasp, and she was red in the face from screaming. Finally they all shot stunning spells at her, and she crashed to the floor, landing on her back. Her eyes were stretched wide in horror and her mouth hung open, a look of shock on her face.

The students in the corridor started to panic.

"What if the train's attacked? Maybe we should get off?" started a Hufflepuff.

"We have to go back for our parents," exclaimed another student. "We have to help them!"

"SILENCE!" an Auror shouted, storming down the corridor. "Get back to your compartments! No one is getting off this train!"

Hermione tried to get back to Ron, but an Auror blocked her way, and opened the compartment to her right. "Inside!" he yelled at her, Draco, and a second year Ravenclaw standing behind them. He opened the door. "No one exits their compartment until we arrive at Hogwarts. Now!"

They hurried inside, and the Auror shut the door firmly behind them.

Hermione tried the handle.

It was locked.

"Alohomora," she said, pointing her wand at the door.

It didn't budge.

Malfoy sat down. "You don't really think that will work, do you Granger?"

Hermione ignored him, then saw that the Ravenclaw girl was in a terrible state. Her hands were shaking and she was gasping for air like a fish out of water.

"What is it?" Hermione asked the girl, fearing she was having a panic attack.

"My brother dropped me off at that station, and I'm—I'm worried that he's—"

Dead? thought Draco to himself. No doubt a likely possibility. He supposed Voldemort hadn't resisted the temptation of attacking a large group of Aurors. They had made it too

easy for him. So many gathered in one place, with no easy escape route. And no doubt more than a few bystanders would die in the crossfire.

"You can't think that way," said Hermione. "You just have to be calm—"

The girl pushed Hermione out of the way, and made for the door, pounding her fists on it. "Let us out!! Please, let us out!"

Hermione grabbed the girl by the back of her robes, forcing her to sit. "What's your name?"

"Millie," she mumbled, crying uncontrollably.

"Try to relax, everything's going to be fine. Here, take—"

"Oh for the love of Merlin!" shouted Malfoy. "Stupefy!"

A jet of red light issued from his wand, and hit the girl squarely in the face. The Ravenclaw girl slumped in her seat, rendered unconscious.

Hermione looked at Malfoy in disbelief. "That was hardly the right thing to do," she said, an edge in her voice.

"Better than hearing her yell her head off all the way to Hogwarts," Draco said calmly, making Hermione believe he was simply annoyed. The truth was that he couldn't stand to hear the girl's cries, she reminded him of the endless screams he'd endured at Malfoy Manor over the summer. His father had tortured several witches and wizards at Voldemort's request, people who had disappointed him, or betrayed him in some way. Their cries of agony and his father's merciless laughter still rang in his head.

Hermione made the girl comfortable, then sat down. She wanted to give Malfoy a piece of her mind, but she would use this moment alone with him to her benefit. She momentarily pushed her fears for her parents to the back of her mind, and tried to focus. No doubt Malfoy knew about the attack at King's Cross before it happened. Maybe he knew of attacks that were still to come...

She snuck a glance at him, Malfoy looked calm and collected as always, leaning back against the window, wisps of blonde hair falling casually across his forehead, his gray eyes unreadable.

"I know what you think I am," said Malfoy slowly, meeting her gaze. He folded his arms across his chest. "You think I'm a potential Death Eater, a traitor, a liar. Am I wrong?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow in surprise. She hadn't expected him to be so candid. He was up to something, but she would play along.

"Aren't you?" she asked, holding his gaze without fear.

"Because I wear this uniform?" he asked, pointing at the Slytherin crest on his robes. "Because my father is Lucius Malfoy and I must be exactly like him? No mind of my own, a puppet?"

Hermione was caught off guard, she hadn't expected a wave of questions.

Quick as lightning, Draco reached for her wrist and dragged her forward. She gasped, struggling for balance.

"You know nothing about me, Hermione," Draco said vehemently. He paused. He'd started the conversation to unsettle her, but he found he meant every word.

Hermione looked at him in surprise, he'd never called her by her first name before.

"Why don't you say it out loud?" Draco persisted, "Call me a Death Eater to my face."

Hermione looked at him, unsure of what to say. All she knew was that she refused to stoop to his level.

Draco tightened his grip on her arm. "Your silence doesn't make you better than me," he said, reading her mind. It makes you a coward."

"Enough!" she shouted, wrenching herself free from his grasp. "You were there when the Dark Mark was conjured at the World Cup. You knew what was going to happen that night, you wanted people to get hurt."

"Wrong again," said Malfoy, a smile on his face now. The night of the cup, I warned you...you and your friends, to keep your head down. Especially you, a—muggleborn."

Hermione looked at him incredulously. He was twisting everything. "That's not tr—"

"Really?" he challenged. "What were my words, exactly?"

Hermione racked her brain, then grudgingly repeated what Malfoy had told them that night in the forest. "You told us to hurry along. You told us the Death Eaters were after Muggles."

"So you do remember."

He smiled inwardly, seeing the seed of doubt take hold in her mind. He leaned further back in his seat, and stared out the window. His father underestimated him. He'd have Granger in his power sooner than he expected.

Hermione knew the conversation was over. She didn't believe Malfoy was innocent for one second. By the smirk on his face, she could tell he thought he'd won the argument. He had mistaken her confusion for doubt. But she had no doubts, Malfoy was up to no good, that was for sure. She realized his arrogance made him vulnerable, and suddenly, an idea occurred to her...

Hours later the Hogwarts Express pulled into Hogsmeade station.

Hermione opened her eyes, realizing she'd fallen asleep. She looked around her. Malfoy had already left the compartment. Millie was still next to her, unconscious. She shook the girl awake.

"Wake up Millie, we're here now. We have to get off the train."

As Hermione stepped off the train, she saw that the students were arguing with the Aurors, some demanding to get back on the Hogwarts Express, determined to return to London to find out what had happened to their parents.

A tall woman in yellow robes approached. "My name is Romena Wright. I am head of the Hogwarts Guard, appointed by the Minister of Magic himself. Listen to me, you are the future of the magical community in this country. Your safety is of the utmost importance to us. I know you are all concerned for your relatives, but no one is going back. We will let you know the minute we receive news from London."

Many of the students exclaimed in anger, but she held a hand up to silence them.

"You should also know, there will be no trips to Hogsmeade this year. Curfew will be at eight o'clock, and you may only walk the school grounds for lessons. Members of the guard will be patrolling the castle at all hours."

"You can't hold us here against our will!" shouted a 7th year.

"Believe me, I can," said the woman. "And I will, for your own safety."

"I can't believe this," Dean Thomas whispered to Hermione.

"It's bloody ridiculous," Ron agreed, making his way over to them. "Are you ok?" he asked Hermione. "I didn't see you after I talked to Neville."

Hermione nodded. The students made their way to the carriages. Someone helped Hannah into one. She had woken up, and she was beside herself with grief.

"I told you," said Nott, as he and Malfoy stepped into a carriage. "They're fashioning this place into a fortress. A prison."

As Hogwarts loomed before them, Draco wondered if Nott was right. Still, there was no going back. There was too much at stake for him, too much relying on the success of his mission, and the only way was forward.

He spotted Hermione as her carriage passed him. She was staring at him, the ghost of a smile on her lips. She was planning something, he was sure, and he was going to find out what it was.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you so much for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :)

Chapter 3

The list of the fallen were reported the following day. Two Aurors, three muggles and Hannah's parents had been killed. Several more were injured, and were sent to St. Mungo's Hospital.

The Hogwarts Guard, in their yellow uniforms, spread through the halls and corridors of Hogwarts like a massive flood. Filch was affronted by their presence. His prime function at the school had been to harass students, and now there was a whole army to do it for him. His life's purpose suddenly taken away, he let Peeves reign free, taking delight when the poltergeist dumped buckets of cold water on members of the Guard at random.

In the Slytherin common room, Draco opened a letter from his father. It was written in code. A seemingly harmless note to the outward eye, contained a secret message.

The Guard had been reading all the mail coming into Hogwarts, intercepting owls and breaking seals, stopping at nothing to catch anyone who might be communicating with Voldemort or his followers.

The note informed him that Pansy had been given a special assignment. Draco continued reading, trying to figure out exactly what she was required to do. The more he read, the angrier he became. He couldn't believe her family was letting her handle such an important mission. There was no way she was up to the task. He had to talk her out of it, or convince her to let him do it himself.

He burned the note and went to find her.

In the Gryffindor common room, Hermione was decoding a note of her own. It was in the form of a poem. Over the summer Dumbledore had informed her that she'd receive several messages throughout the year. The messages contained assignments, sent anonymously by members of the Order, Harry or Dumbledore himself.

Hermione took note of every third letter in the first 5 stanzas, and every two in the last three.

She deciphered the message. The note confirmed that Pansy Parkinson was delivering a letter from her father to a member of the Hogwarts Guard...a John Murdoch. Apparently the Order suspected that Murdoch was working for the Death Eaters.

Hermione continued reading. The note stated that it was vital that Pansy's message never reach its destination, or the consequences would be devastating.

Dumbledore had told Hermione that she'd never receive the full details of the Order's operations, only the most necessary information, for her own security and that of those involved. The lack of insight made her uneasy, but she trusted Dumbledore, and tried not to dwell on what she wasn't told.

Hermione reached for her class schedule. She and Pansy were both in Professor Sinistra's Astronomy class. If Pansy hoped to deliver the message at noon, she'd probably do it right after the lesson was over.

Hermione made her way to the Astronomy Tower, determined to get a hold of the note.

The class consisted mainly of Ravenclaws, a handful of Gryffindors, one Hufflepuff and two Slytherins—Pansy and Malfoy. Malfoy received top marks in the class, while Pansy barely scraped by. Hermione suspected Pansy had joined the class to keep an eye on Draco. She'd caught him kissing a very pretty Ravenclaw after class the previous year, and had made a scene so terrible, the teachers were required to intervene.

Hermione took a seat next to Neville, and focused her attention on Professor Sinistra.

The professor had clear blue eyes and red-gold hair that was pulled back into an elegant braid.

She cleared her throat and addressed the class. "For those of you who are new, welcome to the study of the planets and the stars. This year we will explore distant galaxies...found in the furthest reaches of the universe." She paused. "Galaxies that muggles can only dream of exploring."

Professor Sinistra looked disdainfully at the muggleborns in the class. She was a pureblood, and while not as vile as Professor Snape in her treatment of muggleborn students, she liked to flaunt the superiority of wizarding knowledge whenever she could.

"Now you will work with the person sitting next to you, and chart the stars and planets of the Alcibiades galaxy..."

Hermione watched Draco and Pansy talking in hushed tones at their table. They seemed to be debating something.

"Have you lost your mind?" said Draco loudly, forgetting to keep his voice down.

Could it be about the note? Hermione wondered. She glanced at Pansy's school bag, no doubt the message was safely tucked away inside.

Professor Sinistra marched over to the two Slytherins. "I require total concentration in this class. Be silent and apply yourselves. I'm surprised at you Draco," she said, an eyebrow raised. He was one of her favorite students.

"Forgive me, Professor," he said in his most charming voice.

For the next ten minutes, Pansy and Draco worked very quietly. Hermione looked away from them and pretended to focus on her chart.

"Do you suppose this is where the planet Goran should be?" Neville asked her. "Or is it Tanith?"

"I think it's Tanith," said Hermione absentmindedly.

Suddenly she heard Pansy say. "You can't! Not again!"

"Very well," said Professor Sinistra, approaching the Slytherin table once more. "I'll have to separate you..."

Her gaze fell on Lavender Brown and Padma Patil, seated together at a table in the far corner of the room. "Ms. Brown, come to the front if you please, I need you to switch with—"

"But Professor, we've nearly completed our chart," Lavender pleaded. "It wouldn't be fair. We've already done all the work."

"I'll switch with Malfoy," Hermione offered, hoping to get partnered with Pansy and steal the note from her bag when she wasn't looking.

Neville looked at her like she'd stabbed him in the back. "But we're almost finished with ours too," he whispered.

"No," said Professor Sinistra. "You'll partner with Draco. Parkinson go with Longbottom."

"But Professor!"

"Now!"

Hermione watched as Pansy grabbed her charts, and grudgingly slung her bag over her shoulder.

She made her way over to them. Hermione's eyes were glued to the bag. It was so close she could almost reach it...

"Better Longbottom than a mudblood for a partner," said Pansy under her breath.

Hermione flinched but made no comment. She gathered her things and walked over to Malfoy's desk, furious with herself. She had missed a precious opportunity to get her hands on that note.

"Granger."

"Malfoy," she said evenly.

He glanced sideways at her. "I had no idea you fancied Pansy for a partner," he said. "Don't have enough friends of your own? Must be a solitary life with your head buried in all those books. And now with Potter gone, I suppose there's only Weasley to talk to. Not very bright is he?"

Hermione wanted to slap Malfoy, but instead she said, "I just thought I'd save you and Pansy the embarrassment, seeing as no one wanted a Slytherin for a partner."

"How self-sacrificing," said Draco, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"It's not a sacrifice," Hermione began, deciding to set the trap she'd planned for him. She'd intended to approach him later in the day, but now was as good a time as any. "I'm glad we were partnered."

"And why is that?" Draco asked, expecting a clever retort.

There was a long pause. It took every ounce of determination for Hermione to force the words out. She had to say them, she just had to do it. "Because I want to apologize," she said finally. "For what I said on the train the other day."

Inside she was screaming, she never in a million years imagined she'd ever have to apologize to Draco Malfoy, of all people. But it was for the greater good, she reminded herself. It had to be done.

"Excuse me, Granger I thought I heard you say—"

"I don't think you're a pleasant person," she continued, "You have foul manners, you're arrogant, conceited, pompous—"

"I thought this was an apology?" interrupted Draco.

"But..." continued Hermione, "that doesn't mean you're exactly like your father, or that you'll become a Death Eater," she finished, making sure to keep her voice low, so that the students around them wouldn't hear. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Pansy watching them intently.

Draco frowned at her. Had hell suddenly frozen over? Granger's expression was sincere, and the light from the windows lit up her hair a lovely golden brown, giving her an angelic appearance. An angel with sinister intentions, he thought. What they were, he didn't know yet.

"I'm pleased you've admitted you were wrong," he said finally. "I know how hard that must have been. Know-it-all that you are."

She clenched her fists in anger. *Keep it together*, she told herself. *Don't lose your temper*. She looked away from him and grabbed hold of her quill, ready to start work on the chart in front of her.

"But all the same," he said, placing a hand over hers to stop her from writing, "I'm glad that you did." He looked at her with an intensity that made her lose her focus.

The spell was broken when Professor Sinistra clapped her hands together. She lifted her wand and a jet of blue light soared over the room, erupting to form a replica of the Alcibiades galaxy. The other students looked up in awe, transfixed by the stars that floated around them.

"And now, if you please, take note of the galaxy's sphere of dark matter..."

Draco released Hermione's hand.

She snuck a glance at the back of the room. Pansy was still staring at them, her eyes narrowed into slits.

They worked diligently for the rest of the hour, and eventually Professor Sinistra announced the end of class.

"Attention please! I'd also like charts on the Zagros galaxy on my desk by next lesson. If you did your summer reading, it shouldn't be too difficult."

The whole class grumbled.

Hermione turned to Draco. "We can meet in the library later today to finish the charts," she offered. "Six o' clock, don't be late." She looked over her shoulder. Pansy was already making her way to the door.

"And if I don't show?" Draco challenged.

"Then good luck finding another partner," said Hermione. And with that, she turned on her heel and left the tower.

She raced down the spiral staircase and into the hall, trying to see which way Pansy had gone.

She spotted her walking down the next corridor, and down a set of stairs. Hermione followed her all the way to the third floor, where a large group of second years were leaving their History of Magic class.

Hermione pushed past the students, and saw Pansy approach a member of the Hogwarts Guard—a very tall woman with long, blonde hair.

"I'm looking for John Murdoch," said Pansy.

"He didn't report in today," said the guard. "You can check back tomorrow when he's on duty."

"You don't understand," said Pansy, alarmed. "I have to see him today."

"He's not available," the blonde woman repeated firmly.

"This is ridiculous. Tell me where to find him!" shouted Pansy, a look of panic on her face.

The guard narrowed her eyes at Pansy. "If you persist, I'll have to take you to Romena Wright. For *questioning* —"

"That won't be necessary," Pansy spat, and she stormed off.

Hermione ran after her, but the halls were filled with students making their way to the Great Hall for lunch, and by the time she caught up to Pansy in the dungeons, she was already making her way through the stone door that led to the Slytherin common room. The door shut firmly behind Pansy with a resounding thud.

Hermione was out of breath, she'd just have to corner Pansy the next morning. If she didn't meet with Murdoch before classes, then she'd steal the note from her in Astronomy, only this time she'd create a diversion to make sure she was successful...

Later that evening, Hermione waited for Draco at the appointed time in front of the library. She looked at her watch. He was twenty minutes late. She was beginning to doubt if he was going to show. She tapped her foot impatiently, then spotted him walking down the hall, his broom in hand.

"Hope you haven't been waiting long, Granger," he said, no trace of sincerity in his voice.

"Why did you bring *that* ?" she asked, pointing at the broom.

"I don't know, I thought, why not work outside, where we can actually see the sky?"

Hermione laughed. "I don't think so."

Draco sighed. "Where's your sense of adventure? Or do you only live vicariously...through your books?"

He saw her wince. He had hit a nerve.

Hermione glowered at him. Under normal circumstances she would have sent him to hell, but she had a mission to accomplish and she was determined to see it through. "Very well," she said, folding her arms. "And how do you propose to get past the Guard?"

"It shouldn't be too difficult," he said, taking a step closer to her, "If you stick with me and do what you're told."

"I'm afraid you have me confused for a house elf," Hermione said icily.

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "No one would mistake you for a house elf. I doubt you're capable of staying quiet for more than two seconds." He took a full minute to appreciate her face turn a violent shade of purple, then he said, "Let's go."

They made their way up the Grand Staircase. No one stopped them on the first few floors, assuming they were headed for their common rooms.

When they finally reached the Astronomy Tower, they stopped in their tracks. Two guards were patrolling the corridor.

Draco reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small, golden object. A pair of red stripes ran across it. Hermione recognized it as a Ticking Time Bomb.

"Stand back," Draco whispered. He took aim towards the door at the end of the hall, threw the device, and three seconds later a very loud BANG sounded in the corridor.

The guards crouched down and covered their heads, expecting the ceiling to cave in.

Instead, a red mist filled the hall, obscuring their vision for several minutes. When the mist cleared, the first guard ran towards the door, and the other started to follow, but then Hermione stepped backwards into a suit of armor, causing it to fall over with a loud CLANG.

Hermione froze.

Draco had ducked into an alcove, and he was looking at her with an expression of mingled frustration and horror. He reached forward and grabbed her by the waist. The guard turned around just as she whipped out of sight.

Hermione's back was suddenly pressed to Draco's chest. He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "Don't move."

Hermione's pulse raced. Draco's breath was warm against her skin, and his lips brushed her ear. She felt a small shiver travel down her spine.

The guard walked in their direction. He passed the alcove, and looked at the fallen suit of armor, then into the room beyond. When he saw that it was empty, he assumed the suit had tipped over of its own accord, and left to follow his companion.

When the coast was clear, Hermione pulled away from Draco.

"I don't know why I let you talk me into this stupid—"

"You're the one who nearly got us caught," he hissed, taking hold of her hand. "Let's go."

They climbed up the spiral staircase that led to the Astronomy Tower, eventually reaching their classroom.

They shut the door behind them.

Draco wasted no time, forcing open a window.

"Come on," he said.

They climbed through the window and stepped out onto the terrace. A set of Looking Scopes were aimed at the night sky.

"We'll go out by the lake," said Draco.

"Why not stay here?" suggested Hermione. "We can use the Looking Scopes."

"The guards might circle back, we can't risk it."

Draco mounted his broom and waited for her. Hermione approached him, then hesitated. Was he really taking her to the lake, or did he intend to murder her in the dead of night? Not likely, she thought. Not with the Guard on high alert.

She sat behind him on the broom, and looked uncertainly over the edge of the tower. It was easily a seven hundred foot drop. She felt her stomach turn over. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea...

"Granger?"

"Hmm?" she replied.

"You have to hold on, unless you fancy flying off the end."

"Right," she said. "Of course." She circled her arms around Malfoy's waist, but still kept a safe distance, sitting an inch away from him.

He laughed, grabbed her arms and pulled them tighter around his middle, forcing her to edge forward on the broom, thus closing the space between their bodies.

"Scared, Granger?" he whispered.

"I'm not—"

Before she could finish he kicked off and they soared into the night sky.

Hermione screamed. She'd always hated flying. She didn't know how Harry managed in Quidditch, especially during that storm in third year when he'd almost fallen to his death.

The guards patrolling the grounds looked like tiny dots. She was hanging onto Malfoy for dear life now, as they went higher and higher into the air. It didn't help that he was making a big effort to show off. Making the broom swerve this way and that, and finally spinning them into a loop.

He circled the lake a few times, made sure there weren't any guards nearby, then landed gracefully by the water's edge.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief when her feet hit solid ground.

Draco dismounted first and offered her his hand. She pushed it away.

"There was no need to fly like—like that!"

"Quiet," he warned. "Or do you want to alert the Guard that we've left the castle?"

She got off the broom and stepped away from him. She felt the world spin. He reached forward and caught her before she fell.

"Steady now, Granger," he cautioned.

His arms were strong, and she was tempted to let him hold her until her head stopped spinning, but their sudden proximity made her self-conscious.

"I'm perfectly alright," she said, pushing him away. But she wasn't. It felt like the ground was still moving. She slung her bag off her shoulder and made to sit by the lake. As she tried to get her bearings, Draco watched her from afar.

It wasn't going to be easy to win her confidence. Not with their history. And there was something he couldn't figure out. Hermione had apologized to him in class. She seemed to want to change things between them, and yet...she constantly kept her guard up. *What was it*, he wondered, *that Granger really wanted?*

Eventually, Hermione took out her charts, a textbook, and a quill, avoiding eye contact with him the whole time.

"Well," she said, finally inviting him to sit next to her. "We should get started."

Draco sat beside her and looked at the chart she'd laid out on the ground.

He looked up at the sky, "It says here we need to find the planet Alcander."

Hermione cracked open her Astronomy book and started looking for information on the planet's galaxy.

"No need for that," said Draco. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a miniature gold Looking Scope with four lenses.

"Look through the fourth lens," he said.

Hermione gasped as he held the lens up to her. It suddenly felt like the whole world had zoomed forward and propelled her into the night sky.

Through the lens she spotted the planet Alcander. Its colors were bright turquoise and vivid gold. The planet seemed to be surrounded by a circular ring of white light. "It's incredible," she whispered.

"The planet's colors are meant to lure the unsuspecting traveler," said Malfoy. "Dangerous creatures live there, sea monsters and the like."

She knew Wizards had explored the universe, and gone much further than Muggles, but she hadn't found any books at Hogwarts detailing their travels. She figured the Ministry wanted to keep the information private, to what end...she could only imagine.

"How do you know so much about all this?" she asked Draco.

He looked lost in thought for a moment. "My mother taught me. When I was a child we'd sit outside the manor for hours...she told me about the stars, the planets, the galaxies." His eyes lit up. "The best Astronomers are in Egypt. They have the most advanced Looking Scopes there. The Luxor Scope is the only way you can see the Lasthenia galaxy, it's the galaxy at the end of the universe. No one's ever been there, it's too far even for wizards to reach, but it's said to have the most extraordinary planet. Colors you can't even imagine. Some are even driven mad by it."

"Will you go there sometime?" asked Hermione. "To Luxor?"

"Maybe one day," said Draco. "After the war's over."

"And your mother? Will she go with you?"

Something in Draco's face changed, and it was several seconds before he answered.

"She's not interested in the stars anymore. She's...changed over the years."

His father had made sure of that.

"And your father?" Hermione asked, echoing his thoughts.

Draco forced a smile. "Let's just say we don't sit down to tea and swap stories."

They were both silent.

Now Hermione understood Draco's interest in astronomy. It reminded him of a simpler time, when his mother was well and he was happy.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, thinking of the complicated relationship he had with his parents. "I can't imagine what that's like, not being able to count on the people that should always be there."

"But you can," Draco replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Potter," he said slowly. "In the end, he decided to save his own skin instead of stand by you and Weasley, his so-called friends." He shook his head. "There was so much talk about him before he came to Hogwarts. The Boy Who Lived..." Draco smirked. "He turned out to be an average wizard, worried for his own mortality. Nothing more."

Hermione looked at Malfoy in disbelief.

He was making Harry out to be some sort of coward.

"You don't know anything about him," Hermione said fiercely. "Harry is *not* weak."

Draco was silent. He realized he'd pressed too far too early. He changed tactics, hoping to distract her. "I'm starting to think you're in love with him, Granger."

"What? I'm not!" she exclaimed, completely caught off guard. "We're friends." She frowned at Malfoy. "Not that it's any of your concern."

"And Weasley?" Draco asked, genuinely interested in her answer this time. "Is he a friend too, or something more?"

She turned bright red. "That's—that's none of your business. We should go back to the castle." She stood up and reached for her bag.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Sit down. I promise I won't ask you any more questions about your love life."

She scowled at him.

"Honest," he said, holding his hands up as a sign of defeat.

Hermione sat beside him. They finished their charts, and didn't speak again until it was time to go.

"Ready?" he asked, as they mounted the broom.

She nodded.

Hermione closed her eyes as Draco kicked off into the air. He didn't try to show off this time, flew smoothly, and minutes later they landed on the terrace of the Astronomy Tower.

It had been an interesting night, to say the least, Hermione thought. In all their years at Hogwarts, that was the longest conversation she'd ever had with Malfoy and it hadn't been entirely unpleasant. But how much of what he told her was the truth?

"Well good night," Hermione said. "I have to admit you're a slightly better Astronomy partner than Neville."

Draco laughed. "Only slightly?"

"Well," she conceded, "you managed to get the assignment done."

Hermione turned to go, but then Draco seized her arm and swung her around to face him.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"Come now, Granger, that's not really what you came out here for."

Hermione paled. Had she blown her cover somehow? Had Draco seen her follow Pansy? Did he know she was working for Dumbledore and the Order?

"And what did I come out here for?" Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Draco pulled her closer, so close that his face was only inches from her own.

They were very near the edge of the tower. Did he mean to throw her off?

"If you don't tell me what you want Malfoy, then I'm—"

"This," he said, and to her surprise he leaned forward, and pressed his lips to hers, wrapping his arms around her waist so that she couldn't get away.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you so much for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :) The next chapter posts on Wednesday.

Chapter 4

Draco realized he'd wanted to kiss Hermione since the Yule Ball. He remembered that evening as though it were yesterday. All night he'd watched her dance with Krum. He'd admired the way her dress showed off her small waist...observed the way she'd tilted her head when she laughed. He'd longed to dance with her, to run his hands through the cascade of curls that fell around her shoulders. Seeing Krum so close to her had made him feel ill, like he'd been hit by a horrible curse that had rendered him speechless. And then without knowing what he was doing, he'd followed her out of the Great Hall, transfixed...determined to find a way to approach her...but it had all gone terribly wrong.

And now she was in his arms. Draco buried his face into Hermione's neck. He breathed her in, letting her sweet, intoxicating scent wash over him. A small part of him was triumphant when his father had told him about the mission. It would be a chance to get close to Granger, even if it meant she would only hate him in the end...

Draco pulled Hermione tighter against him. His hands worked their way into her hair, his lips traveled down her neck, then he lightly tugged at her blouse to kiss her shoulder.

Hermione felt lightheaded. Of course she knew this might happen...getting involved was the quickest way to complete her mission.

But she hadn't expected Malfoy to make a move so soon. And it wasn't so much the kiss that surprised her. It was the *way* Malfoy held her...gentle and at the same time impatient, cautious but at the same time bold. He lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, then he carried her to the window seat behind them.

Hermione tilted her head back to watch as he took her hand and kissed her wrist.

In between kisses Draco stole glances at her, brushed his hand against the smooth skin of her cheek, and traced the outline of her lips.

He was holding her as if she was something delicate, breakable. As if he wanted to keep her safe...savoring every second, knowing that she might soon come to her senses and curse him into oblivion.

Draco's lips found hers again and he kissed her more urgently.

Hermione closed her eyes. She had expected to feel nothing...to have the upper hand...to feel detached. Now she found she didn't want to pull away. No one had ever kissed her like this before. Krum's kisses had been clumsy and awkward, his caresses too rough and unskilled. But Malfoy knew exactly what he was doing, and she no longer trusted herself around him.

"I think we should slow down," Hermione gasped, breaking away from him.

Malfoy rested his forehead against hers. "If you say so," he whispered. Then, to Hermione's surprise, he laughed.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "Just that I see why you want to take things slow." He winked at her and placed his hand under her chin. "I can tell you're relatively new at this sort of thing."

Hermione turned bright red. "Excuse me?"

"I can tell Krum wasn't a very thorough teacher. But don't worry, I'll better the instruction."

He leaned in to kiss her again, but Hermione slapped him, hard.

Draco stumbled backwards. "What was that for?!"

"Krum was an excellent kisser! Much better than you!" Hermione lied. "And don't flatter yourself, I don't need a teacher."

Draco's eyes flashed with anger. Hermione made for the door to the Astronomy classroom, then paused. "You're not the first person to take me out flying, Malfoy. And after tonight it's clear you bought your way onto the Slytherin team. Krum had *real* talent. I doubt you'll play on any team after Hogwarts."

Draco's face paled and before he could think of a response, she turned the handle to the Astronomy classroom and stormed off.

How dare he?! The bastard! And to think she'd actually enjoyed kissing him! And that routine! How many other girls had he taken out flying?

Hermione shook her head. Malfoy had to work much harder than *that* if he hoped to get anywhere near her again.

Hermione slept fitfully that night. She was soaring high above the countryside, in a land that seemed quite foreign. The air was warm and felt like a soft embrace. The sun was low in the sky, casting a glow over distant peaks and valleys.

Perched upon a huge bedrock was a castle with slate roofs and blue-gray turrets that shone in the waning light. As Hermione flew closer she saw that the front of the castle was shaped like the bow of a ship. It almost appeared as if the castle was sailing towards her, cutting through the thick forest below.

Hermione circled around on her broomstick, flying past several arched windows, and looked inside. The halls and rooms appeared empty, but candlelight flickered along the walls letting her know *someone* was there.

She landed on the terrace. She spotted a boy standing a few feet away from her.

At once, she recognized his untidy black hair and bright green eyes.

"Harry?" she whispered.

He was standing by a large wishing well. He looked down into its depths. He seemed to be searching for something. Hermione called his name again, but he couldn't hear her.

After a few moments, he turned away from the well and opened a door behind him. Hermione hurried after him and rushed down a long spiral staircase that seemed to go on forever. They finally reached a large gallery, but it was dimly lit. Hermione froze. She sensed a third person moving in the darkness.

"Harry?" she asked, grabbing his arm. "Who's that?"

Suddenly, a tall figure emerged, armed with a wand.

"Who are you?" Hermione demanded.

Suddenly, a jet of light issued from the figure's wand and Harry crumpled to the floor. He screamed, and his body twitched this way and that, his eyes rolled back into his head, and his screaming grew so loud Hermione thought her ears would burst. Then, for

a few moments, Harry gasped for air, struggling to make any sound at all. Patches of light burned bright on his arm, and like a network of veins they traveled up to his neck then to his forehead. The lights blazed brilliantly then faded, and just when Harry caught his breath, they formed again, causing him terrible pain.

Hermione knew Harry was dying. It was a slow, painful death, unlike anything she'd ever seen before...

Suddenly, the figure advanced on her and raised the wand once more.

"Noooo!!!" she screamed.

Hermione opened her eyes and nearly fell out of bed. She looked around her. There was no one in the girl's dormitory, but somehow, the screaming hadn't stopped.

She reached for her sweater and pulled it over her head, then raced downstairs to the common room. Everyone was huddled around a copy of the Daily Prophet. The screams were coming from the picture on its front page.

A crowd of muggles were running away from a large explosion in Central London. There was a woman lying on the ground and she was writhing in agony, just as Harry had done in her dream. A Death Eater stood over the woman, his wand pointed directly at her chest.

Hermione spotted Ron standing at the back of the room. "What's going on?" she asked.

He looked pale, like he was going to be sick. "Voldemort invented a new killing curse."

"What?" Hermione gasped.

"It kills you slowly. You feel like you're burning alive and drowning at the same time, eventually the pain becomes so terrible you wish for death. They're calling it Mors Mularum."

Hermione looked at Ron, shocked. Had she seen the future? Would Harry be met with this curse? She had to tell Dumbledore...

Dumbledore! He had asked her to steal the note...the note she'd failed to retrieve from

Pansy the day before. Hermione looked at the clock hanging on the opposite wall. She was already late...

Hermione rushed to her room to change, then left Gryffindor Tower, an uneasy feeling settling into the pit of her stomach.

She waited outside the Slytherin common room for an hour, but Pansy didn't emerge. She began to panic, searching for her in the Great Hall, in the corridors and even the library—but it was like she'd vanished into thin air. Finally, Hermione made her way to the Astronomy Tower. It was a few minutes before class, and the room was empty.

Craving some fresh air Hermione opened the door that led to the terrace. Her cloak flapped violently in the wind. It was cold outside, and the sky was grey and stormy. She suspected it would rain any minute now...

Hermione wrapped her arms tightly around herself, then made her way to the edge of the tower. She leaned against the railing, and despite her best efforts, she remembered Draco's kiss from the night before.

She put a hand to her lips. *Why couldn't she just forget about it? Why did he have this effect on her?*

Suddenly, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and the rustling of a cloak...

"Just the person I wanted to see," said a voice.

Before Hermione could turn, someone hit her from behind, pitching her forward.

Hermione clung to the railing for support and looked over her shoulder.

Pansy was staring back at her. She seized Hermione's robes and turned her so that they were facing each other.

"Why were you following me yesterday?"

Hermione screamed as Pansy shoved her backwards, flinging her over the railing.

All the blood rushed to Hermione's head. She was hanging upside down. The only thing that kept her from falling was Pansy's vice-like grip on her legs.

"Hoping to save the day, now that Potter's gone? " Pansy spat, digging her nails into her.

Hermione felt drops of water on her cheek. It was starting to rain...

Pansy's feet slid as she struggled to keep her footing.

"You're imagining things!" Hermione shouted. "I wasn't following you—"

The wind whipped Pansy's jet-black hair into her face. Her eyes were narrow, snake-like, and she had a demented look on her face that sent a chill through Hermione's spine.

"Don't play games with me, Granger!"

"Pull me back over!"

A flash of lighting lit up the sky, and what had started as light rain soon became a torrential downpour.

Hermione tried to pull herself up but Pansy pushed her down again. She screamed as she slid further back.

"ARE YOU MAD?!" shouted a male voice.

Hermione struggled to see. She twisted to her left and saw Draco running towards them.

Pansy turned, distracted.

In that moment, Hermione saw Pansy's school bag swing forward and without a second thought she thrust her hand inside it.

This was her chance.

Quickly, she felt around for the note.

Pansy narrowed her eyes at Draco. "Go away! Leave us alone!"

"Let her go! NOW!"

Hermione took hold of the note and stuffed it into her robes.

Pansy turned to Hermione. For a split second she thought the Slytherin would let her fall to her death, but instead she pulled her back over the railing.

Draco rushed to her side. "Are you alright?"

Hermione nodded.

"I was only having some fun, " said Pansy innocently, a twisted smile on her face.

"You've completely lost your mind!" shouted Draco, seizing her arm and dragging her away. "What's the matter with you, do you want Dumbledore and that Romena woman to lock you up in Azkaban?! You could have killed her! If I hadn't been here..."

Hermione waited for their voices to trail away, not daring to move until they left the Astronomy tower.

When the coast was clear she raced to Dumbledore's office, the note finally hers.

Moments later Hermione sat across from Dumbledore, soaked to the skin, her heart pounding in her chest. She watched as he poured over the note and its contents.

"They are coordinates," he said gravely. "The castle will be attacked in a few days time. All the exits and entrances to Hogwarts are clearly marked here."

"What should we do?" asked Hermione.

"You will secretly return this note to Ms. Parkinson, and let her deliver it. Perform a memory charm if necessary."

Hermione looked at him, shocked. "You're going to let it happen? You're going to let Voldemort attack Hogwarts?"

"Voldemort will attack sooner or later," said Dumbledore calmly. "This note tells us exactly when and how. It is our best form of defense."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue but Dumbledore spoke first.

"Do you remember how our friends from Durmstrang arrived at the castle, Ms. Granger?"

"What?" she asked, completely flabbergasted.

"Durmstrang?" Dumbledore repeated pleasantly.

"They arrived by ship," Hermione said slowly. "They emerged from the lake."

"Precisely," said Dumbledore. "I've spoken with the new headmaster at Durmstrang, and he will lend us their ship. I'd like you, when the time comes, to lead the evacuation. All first and second years. You will leave the moment I send word."

"And the rest of the students?" asked Hermione.

"The rest will remain here at Hogwarts."

Hermione had a sudden, sinking feeling. "There isn't enough room for everyone, is there?" she asked Dumbledore.

"Their best chance is to remain here," said Dumbledore softly. "The Order will do their best to protect them. And those who'd like to fight will be permitted to do so."

Hermione walked to the tall windows that surrounded Dumbledore's office. She watched a handful of students make their way across the school grounds. "They shouldn't have come back," she whispered.

Dumbledore stood behind Hermione and followed her gaze. "They have remained alive this long *because* they returned to Hogwarts."

He motioned for Hermione to follow him.

"The ship will dock on the coast of Étretat."

Hermione racked her brain. The French name sounded familiar, then she remembered it was a coastal town famous for its white cliffs, natural rock arches and dazzling water. The magical community there was known for its healing abilities.

"The students will be granted asylum, and later reunited with their families when their safety can be assured. You will sail on to Spain to meet Harry. He needs your help."

"Harry?"

"He's waiting for you...in the Alcazar of Segovia."

Dumbledore held out a pensieve to her. "If you please, Ms. Granger."

Hermione leaned forward, and her blood chilled as she saw the image reflected in the pensieve. It was a castle with high turrets and spires, and an exterior that looked like the bow of a ship...the castle she saw in her dreams.

"You will receive further instructions at a later time."

Hermione nodded absently.

"Is something troubling you?" Dumbledore asked, observing her closely.

Hermione looked into his clear blue eyes and expectant face. She was tempted to tell him about her dream, but she didn't want Dumbledore to think she was weak.

"No, nothing."

"Very well then, Ms. Granger. You may go."

She nodded and hurried out of Dumbledore's office.

"It's going to happen soon," said Nott.

"What is?" asked Malfoy. They had finished Potions and were making their way to the Great Hall.

"The attack on the castle."

Draco stopped dead. "I thought we had weeks, months even..."

Nott shook his head. "The Dark Lord's changed his mind. Whatever Potter's up to—it's made him restless. My father wants me to leave. Tonight. We made a deal with one of the guards...the one that's working for our side."

Draco looked at Nott in disbelief. "Where will you go?"

"Salem," said Nott. "I'm finishing the year abroad. You should come too if you know what's good for you."

Draco's jaw twitched. "I've been initiated, it's too late for me. You know that."

He followed Nott around the corner. They came upon a long hallway filled with suits of armor. At the end of the corridor they saw a group of Ravenclaw boys. They were all huddled around a copy of the Daily Prophet, discussing the new killing curse.

Malfoy recognized Roman Everley, head of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. He looked up and saw the Slytherins walking down the corridor.

"Well look who it is," Roman shouted across the hall, pointing at the Daily Prophet. "Proud of yourselves, are you?"

Nott and Malfoy stopped in their tracks. Roman marched up to them, "On your way to celebrate your victory?"

"Get lost," said Malfoy, but Roman didn't move.

Moments later the other Ravenclaws surrounded them too.

They were outnumbered.

"You're a pretender Malfoy, just like your father," Roman spat. "You're playing both sides...but it's only a matter of time until you're found out."

"Bit paranoid today, are we?" Malfoy retorted.

Roman's face screwed up in anger. "Come off it, your whole family's out there supporting You-Know-Who. They're—"

"Get out of our way, or you'll be sorry," said Nott, raising his wand and taking aim.

"Why should I?" Roman challenged.

Nott smiled. "Very well."

He muttered an incantation. "Lumine Ignis!"

Roman's robes caught fire. The flames traveled from the hem of his cloak, all the way up to his sleeve. He screamed and his wand clattered to the floor.

The other Ravenclaws reached for their wands, but Nott was too fast for them.

He muttered a curse and they were blasted backwards.

A smile crept onto Nott's face, and the light from the flames shone in his eyes, giving him a diabolical appearance.

The Ravenclaws boys tried to move, but the curse kept them pinned to the ground.

"Aguamenti!" shouted Malfoy dousing Roman with a jet of cold water. "Hold still!"

But Roman was twisting this way and that, desperate to get away from the flames.

Finally, Malfoy seized Roman's cloak and tore it off, then stamped out the last of the fire. He turned to Nott. "Release the others," he hissed.

Nott rolled his eyes, and with a lazy flick of his wand, he muttered a spell.

A jet of blue light hit the Ravenclaws, and they were freed from the curse.

"YOU'RE MAD!" shouted Roman pointing at Nott, then at Malfoy, his voice trembling with rage. "ABSOLUTELY MAD!"

One of the Ravenclaws grabbed Nott, and the other boys closed in on Malfoy, but Roman waved them back. "Don't bother. I'll finish him off."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "There's no need to play the hero—"

Roman punched Malfoy in the face.

He fell to the ground and blood spurted from his mouth. Roman bent over him, then dragged him up by his collar.

"There's no one here to help you, Malfoy. And you'll be locked up in Azkaban soon enough—you and your pathetic excuse for a father."

He pulled his fist back to hit Draco again.

"Leave him alone!" shouted a voice.

Draco turned. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione racing towards them.

Roman's eyes narrowed. "Stay out of this, Gryffindor."

"I will not stay out of it," said Hermione indignantly. "Release him this instant!"

"You're defending *him*?" asked Roman in disbelief. "After everything he's done to *Potter*?"

Hermione clenched her fists. "If you resort to violent means then you're no better than the Death Eaters."

Roman released his hold on Draco and marched up to Hermione. He pointed a finger at her. "You're lucky you're a girl, because if you weren't—"

"Leave her alone!" Draco warned, getting to his feet.

Malfoy moved towards him, and unable to find his wand, Roman pulled a spear from the suit of armor behind him.

"Stand back!" he warned, using it as a weapon.

Several things happened at once.

Nott kicked the Ravenclaw holding him, and in his hurry to get away, crashed into Malfoy.

Malfoy lost his footing and stumbled forwards.

Without thinking Roman lunged, and Draco gave a horrible, ear-splitting cry that echoed throughout the corridor.

Hermione covered her mouth with her hands.

The spear had gone through his side.

Draco crashed to the floor. He clutched his side in agony, and when he moved his hand away, Hermione saw blood seep through his robes.

Roman shook his head as everyone turned to stare at him. "I didn't mean to, I—I thought he was going to attack me."

Hermione rushed to Malfoy's side and lifted his shirt to see the damage. He was bleeding profusely.

"It's going to be alright," Hermione whispered, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

She looked at the Ravenclaws standing around her. "Don't just stand there! Call Madame Pomfrey! Hurry! He's losing too much blood..."

Before any of them could answer, the windows above them shattered. Glass went flying everywhere. Hermione covered her head with her hands.

Nott and the Ravenclaws stumbled backwards.

When the debris cleared, Hermione looked up. A man on a winged horse had blasted through the window.

"Urgent message for Dumbledore," said the man.

Hermione felt a rush of wind hit her face as the horse flapped its enormous wings.

"The Ministry has fallen. Voldemort has taken complete control. Hogwarts is our last hope."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you so much for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :)

Chapter 5

Draco's vision blurred. There was a rush of color and sound, and he thought he saw the outline of a man on a winged horse. The man looked down at him briefly, then kicked the horse's side, and galloped down the corridor.

Draco felt himself moving, and realized someone had levitated him. There were screams, as students caught sight of him drifting down the halls, drops of blood trickling onto the floor after him.

It seemed as though they were going in the direction of the hospital wing...

Soon, the sounds of hundreds of footsteps could be heard, as students rushed out of their dormitories and classrooms—news of Voldemort's attack spreading fast.

"Minister of Magic dead!" Peeves cackled, spinning into a fiendish loop above the hordes of students coming down the grand staircase, many of them already in their night clothes.

"Go to bed!" Filch shouted. He grabbed a broom from the cupboard behind him, and tried to swat a third year with it. "It'll be detention in the dungeons for the lot of you, you filthy brats!"

Draco suddenly became aware of Granger by his side, yelling at students to move out of the way as she and the Ravenclaws tried to get him to the hospital wing. It was then that he noticed how terribly cold he was, a bone chilling cold that contrasted with the warm, sticky liquid running down his stomach.

It was blood, he realized...

Minutes later, someone blasted a set of doors open, and he was thrust through them.

"My God," Madame Pomfrey breathed as she caught sight of him. "What's happened?"

They set him down on a bed, potions whizzed into the air, then Pomfrey's face loomed before his. She had a pair of scissors in her hands...she was going to cut his robes open.

No, he thought vaguely. He couldn't let her. *Then they would all see...how would he explain?*

He fought against her, and thinking he was mad with delirium, she stuffed a potion down his throat.

"You should all wait outside," Hermione said, turning to the Ravenclaws standing behind her.

Roman Everley was white as a sheet, and he looked like he was going to be sick at the sight of so much blood.

"Come on mate," said his friend, putting a hand on his shoulder. "There's nothing we can do."

Hermione watched the Ravenclaws leave.

Madame Pomfrey cut Malfoy's robes open, then struggled with his shirt.

Hermione twisted her hands nervously as she watched.

Suddenly, Madame Pomfrey looked at her, incredulous.

"Get Dumbledore."

"What's wrong?"

"I need the Headmaster at once," she insisted, a sudden edge in her voice.

Hermione nodded and rushed out of the infirmary.

She tore down the passages, crashing into students, a knot rising in her throat. Draco's injuries were severe, and she knew the more blood he lost, the harder it would be to heal him by magic.

"WHAT'S THAT OUTSIDE?!" a student screamed, as Hermione reached the entrance hall.

It was Lavender Brown.

Everyone turned to face the windows.

The Hogwarts Guards pushed open the doors to the castle. A handful of students ventured outside, Hermione among them. A dark cloud had formed, and it was slowly obscuring the night sky. In a matter of moments, the stars were no longer visible.

Hermione's breath caught, and everyone next to her stood frozen, unsure of what was happening. The dark mass rolled out like a fog, expanding as far as the eye could see.

It was some kind of dark magic, Hermione thought. An enchantment of sorts...

For a few seconds she stared up at the sky, entranced like everyone else, then the guards shouted at them to get back inside.

They bolted the doors to the castle.

There was no time to waste...Hermione knew she had to get to Dumbledore.

She was out of breath by the time she reached the third floor, and skidded to a halt in front of the gargoyle that concealed the headmaster's office. "Fanged Frisbee," she panted.

The gargoyle sprang to life and moved aside. Hermione sprinted up the circular stone staircase, her heart hammering in her chest.

When she reached Dumbledore's office, she saw that the door was slightly ajar. She peeked through it.

She heard the voice of a man she didn't recognize. She turned to her left and saw that it belonged to the wizard that flew in on the winged horse. He had a shock of red hair, a large mustache and a white suit with pale blue trim. On his chest was a badge that read: Magical Alliance, with three wands intertwined. On his left stood Romena Wright, and further down, Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Voldemort has cast an obscurement charm of a magnitude we've never seen before," said the man in a heavy accent she couldn't quite place. "Britain is completely cut off from the outside world. Dementors are patrolling the skies, the floo network is shut down, muggle planes are grounded. No one can leave the country. The muggles think it's some kind of weather anomaly. And the allies...we don't know if they made it in time. The battalions from Norway and Finland set out last week, but we don't know if they reached the Scottish border."

"The enchantments we've placed around the castle won't hold for long," said Snape dryly, looking at Dumbledore.

The red-haired man spoke again. "I was only able to break through the magical barrier because I had knowledge of the spells that were cast. It will take the Death Eaters much longer."

"If you'll excuse me, Aksel," said Dumbledore, speaking suddenly. "It seems we have a visitor."

Without looking at where she was standing, Dumbledore gestured to the door, "Ms. Granger, join us if you please. This next part requires your attention."

Hermione slowly entered the room.

"Ms. Granger, meet Aksel Agarby, head of the Magical Alliance."

"Magical Alliance?" she repeated, shaking the hand of the red-haired man. "But that hasn't been invoked since—"

"1761, quite right," interrupted McGonagall. "During the wizard-vampire wars. A union between British, Finnish and Norwegian wizards."

"We've always regretted our inability to offer you aid in the last war," said Aksel, referring to Voldemort's first rise to power. "We couldn't refuse a second time. Not after —" He stopped mid-sentence, as if afraid to reveal something, but quickly recovered himself. "Not after seeing the devastation that's ravaged the country. If we don't stop You-Know-Who, this madness will surely spread across the continent."

Is that where Harry had been? Hermione wondered. In Finland and Norway, convincing members of the alliance? Is that what Aksel didn't want to reveal? But that must have been months ago, because Dumbledore had told her he was in Spain now...

Hermione looked questioningly at the headmaster, but he shook his head, now was not the time to discuss such matters.

"This is why the Bulgarian ship is the only way out, isn't it?" Hermione asked. "It's the only way to leave the country undetected. Voldemort can control the skies, muggle transport, the borders...but not the sea, and dementors have no way of surviving underwater."

"Precisely," said Dumbledore.

Snape rolled his eyes at her and muttered under his breath, "Insufferable know it all."

"When did you last hear from the allies?" asked Romena Wright, turning to Aksel. "If they fail to arrive, the Hogwarts Guard is more than prepared—"

"The allies gave us our word," answered McGonagall curtly. "They will arrive as scheduled."

"We can only hope," said Dumbledore softly. He turned to Hermione.

"It seems you have news for us, Ms. Granger."

"Yes," said Hermione, ashamed that she had almost forgotten why she'd come in the first place. "Draco Malfoy is gravely injured. We have to go to the hospital wing at once."

When they got to the infirmary, it was clear what had made Madame Pomfrey so nervous. Draco was lying unconscious on the hospital bed. His robes and shirt had been removed. And there, on his left forearm, was the dark mark: the image of a skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue.

"I thought you should know, Headmaster," said Madame Pomfrey breathlessly. "The boy may not survive the night."

Professor McGonagall covered her mouth with her hands at the sight of Malfoy's wound.

Although Draco was unconscious, his body began to shake violently. "He's going into shock," Madame Pomfrey exclaimed. "Minerva, help me!"

"Professor McGonagall took out her wand. Snape and Dumbledore did the same.

Pink, gold and blue lights emerged from their wands and formed arcs over the bed, as they performed healing spells. Draco looked ghostly white, like a marble effigy in a cathedral, lifeless and cold.

Snape and McGonagall were shouting instructions, jostling past her, but Hermione stood frozen. The sounds in the hospital wing were muted, the movements of the professors distant. Blood rushed in Hermione's ears. She felt betrayed by the boy that lay helpless before her. But she couldn't contemplate the thought of his death. Malfoy had always been a part of her life at Hogwarts...even if he had made much of her time there unpleasant.

These past few days had been different. Draco had pulled his mask away, if only for a second—and she had seen something real. And when he kissed her, it had felt right...in some strange way.

But maybe he had only been pretending. Maybe that was his one true talent.

It felt like an eternity passed before Madame Pomfrey announced that they had done all they could do. Despite all the healing spells, Draco's color had not returned. And now, there was nothing to do but wait. And they waited and waited. Not sure if he would live or die.

Hours later Hermione was shaken awake. Professor McGonagall motioned for her to approach the hospital bed. She turned quickly to the window. It was near dawn, but the sky was still dark...the obscurement charm remained. *For how many days would they be submerged in darkness?* she wondered.

As Hermione got closer to the hospital bed, her heart leapt in her chest. Malfoy was moving. He seemed to be in between sleep and waking. His lips were parted...his brows knitted together. It had taken the combined effort of three teachers and the school nurse, but he had survived the night.

"We must question him," Romena whispered. "He may have inside information on the incoming attack."

"I don't advise it," said Madame Pomfrey. "He remains in delicate health."

"There are lives at stake! It must be done!" Romena hissed.

Pomfrey looked to Dumbledore for advice. He nodded at her.

She fished a potion out of a cabinet and told them that it would make Malfoy lucid temporarily, but she warned that they must not exhaust him, or he would weaken again.

She tipped the vial forward, and a liquid-gold potion dropped into his mouth.

Moments later Malfoy coughed violently. A few seconds passed before he was able to open his eyes. He looked at his surroundings wearily. There were a great number of people standing by his bed, and it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust.

Slowly he remembered the fight with Everley, his injury, and he looked at his left forearm. There it was—the Dark Mark—exposed—for all to see. He had to think fast, if he did as his father had instructed, maybe he could make it through this...they had prepared for every possibility...

"It seems we have a snake in our midst," said Romena Wright through gritted teeth.

"Romena," Madame Pomfrey warned. "You mustn't upset him."

"He's a lying, traitorous little sneak," she said spitefully. "Forgive me for making a Death Eater uncomfortable."

"I'm not a Death Eater," said Draco, his voice raspy. "And I know nothing of Voldemort's plans."

"We can see the mark clear as day!"

Draco's eyes fell on Hermione. "I was branded with the mark, but I'm not a Death Eater," he repeated, just as his father had instructed him to do.

"Explain yourself," Professor McGonagall demanded.

Speaking was costing him a great effort, his wound was still raw, and a burning pain started up his side.

"I ran away from home and returned to Hogwarts against my father's wishes. I *chose* not to serve Voldemort."

Romena flinched. "You speak his name?"

"He will not be punished for that," warned McGonagall.

Romena laughed. "A likely story. You will be locked away where I see fit. You-Know-Who has no doubt taken over Azkaban once more, but there are other places..."

Dumbledore had remained silent until now. "He will remain in the castle until he has recovered from his injuries."

"HE IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED!" spat Romena. "I am beginning to question your sense, Dumbledore. You have a long history of trusting the wrong people." She spun around to look at Snape.

He looked down his hooked nose at her and simply glowered.

"Severus has my complete confidence," Dumbledore told Romena. "And his loyalty will not be questioned, not while I remain at this school."

She turned to Malfoy once more. "You will give us the names of every last one of the Dark Lord's followers and their hideouts. Including your father's."

Malfoy was silent for several seconds. Then he lifted his face to Romena's. "No," he said simply. "I'll give you whoever you want, but not my father."

Her eyes bulged in their sockets. "How dare you!" she hissed.

Under the covers, Draco jabbed at his side, upsetting the wound and prompting tears to form in his eyes.

"Lock me away if you want!" he shouted, letting his voice break. He felt the tears spill down his face...the pain was unbearable, but he needed to show a display of emotion if he wanted to appear convincing. He wedged his fist further into his side. "But if the Death Eaters find me, they'll kill me as soon as they storm the castle. That's the price of betrayal. And you won't have gained anything." He gave a sharp rasping breath and threw his head back onto the pillow.

"We must let him rest!" insisted Madame Pomfrey. "Our work will come undone. You may question him again once he has recovered more fully."

"I will not—"

"Enough," interrupted Dumbledore.

Romena turned on him. "I was appointed by the Minister of Magic—"

"The Minister of Magic is dead," said Dumbledore severely. "And his successor is in hiding. I am still headmaster of this school. It is my wish that you remain along with the Guard to perform the service that you were entrusted to do, and protect the castle. The allies may or may not come," he said gesturing to the window, and they all looked at the pitch-black sky.

Romena glared at Dumbledore, then she spun on her heel and stormed out of the hospital wing.

"It's time for Mr. Malfoy to get some rest," said Dumbledore. He turned to McGonagall. "We still have much to discuss with Mr. Agarby."

He paused, sensing another presence. "Ms. Granger, it seems someone is waiting for you."

Hermione turned and saw Ron standing by the entrance to the Hospital Wing. Dumbledore nodded at her and left with McGonagall. As she walked towards Ron, she snuck a glance back at Malfoy, his face was screwed up in pain from his injury. She'd have to speak to him later....

Draco watched Hermione walk away. Snape, however, lingered by his bedside.

"You lie almost as well as your father," he said.

Draco looked at him wearily. His head was beginning to spin. The effort it had taken to argue was taking its toll.

"Although, you shouldn't have upset your wound," said Snape pointing at his covers. A spot of blood was blossoming on the bed sheet, spreading like spilled ink. "You are of no use to the Dark Lord dead."

He raised his wand, "Scorgio."

The blood was wiped clean. Next, he pointed the wand to Draco's side, where his bandages had come undone.

"Reparo."

Draco gasped in pain, as the bandages pressed back into him.

He clutched his side. "I do what I must to survive, Professor. Same as you. You know well, where my loyalties lie." He looked at his Dark Mark.

"And your mission?" asked Snape, his black eyes glittering. They both turned to look at Granger. She was speaking in hushed tones with Weasley. "I presume you are close to discovering Potter's whereabouts."

Malfoy kept his face blank, and he could almost hear his father's voice in his ear. *Snape is not to be trusted. We cannot be certain of his loyalty to the Dark Lord.*

"Very close," Malfoy lied.

Snape nodded.

And you professor? Malfoy thought to himself. *Has Dumbledore not relayed Potter's hideout to you?*

Dumbledore trusted Snape with everything, how could he not know that one vital piece of information?

Snape moved closer to him, his voice barely above a whisper. "I've been tasked with telling you some unfortunate news. The Dark Lord has taken your mother prisoner to ensure that you complete your mission. If you fail, he will kill her."

Malfoy looked at him in horror. He felt what little blood he had left, drain from his face.

"Your time is running out. The Dark Lord needs to expedite his plans—for reasons I cannot discuss here."

Snape made to leave, but Draco grabbed a fistful of his robes. "Why not just take Granger prisoner during the attack? It would be the easiest way."

He felt guilty as soon as he said the words, but he thought of his mother locked away in some abhorrent cell, Merlin knew where. Maybe if Granger gave Voldemort what he wanted, he could help her get away unscathed—not likely, of course, but he would cling to the possibility.

Snape's lip curled. "We will torture the girl of course, if you are unable to complete your mission. But we both know that would prove... *disappointing*. She would sooner choose death than betray her *precious* friend, Potter."

Snape looked down at Draco's hands. "I hope for your sake...you do *not* fail." He snatched his robes away and left Draco's side.

Draco watched him leave, panic starting to consume him...then his eyes fell to Weasley and Granger.

Hermione had taken no notice of the exchange between Snape and Malfoy. She was too busy trying to ascertain what had happened to Ron.

His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair was unkempt.

"Ron, what is it?"

He glanced in confusion at Malfoy's direction, but was too distraught to ask her what was going on.

"It's my mum...she's gone missing."

"W-what?"

"I got a final owl, before the enchantment was cast. She was reported missing two days ago."

"Oh Ron," Hermione whispered. "I'm so sorry."

She wrapped her arms around him, and he dropped his head on her shoulder.

From afar, Malfoy watched their every movement. It seemed the Weasel was devastated by some piece of news he had received. Malfoy's stomach clenched, as he saw Ron pull Hermione into a tighter embrace. The simple act infuriated him. But then Hermione caught his eye, and he looked away.

"Dad's completely devastated. Bill and Charlie are out looking for her. I need to find a way to leave the castle."

Hermione shook her head at him, and kept her voice low, aware that Malfoy was staring at them. "You can't leave. And you can't go back to the Burrow. You're one of Harry's best friends. You'll be tortured or killed."

"That's why I need your help," he said, taking her hand in his. "I need a few vials of the Polyjuice Potion you brewed over the summer."

Hermione thought back to the laborious month she had spent preparing the potion...she knew the time would come for them to use it, but Ron's plan sounded flawed, too many things could go wrong...

"No," she said firmly.

Draco strained to hear, but Hermione's voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke.

"Dumbledore found a way to get the younger students out of the school, and he wants me to lead the evacuation. You can come with me."

Ron frowned at her. "I won't run away like a coward. My *mum* is missing Hermione." He dropped her hand. "I'm leaving with Fred and George as soon as we find a way to get out of the castle."

"What about Ginny?" Hermione asked.

What about me? she thought, but she didn't have the courage to form the words.

Ron seemed to know what she was thinking. "Dumbledore will make sure you're safe, and I know you'll look after Ginny. Now please, help me."

Hermione was silent for a long moment, then she crossed her arms over her chest. "No," she said steadily. "I won't help you get yourself killed."

His face blanched, and for a few seconds he could do nothing but gape at her.

"Fine, then I'll get the vials myself," he snapped. He turned on his heel and made for the door, heading for the Gryffindor common room. "Ginny will know where you've hidden them."

"Ron!" she shouted, chasing after him. "This isn't what your mum would want! You shouldn't risk your life!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT MY MUM WOULD WANT!" he screamed, spinning around to face her. DON'T TALK ABOUT HER LIKE SHE'S ALREADY DEAD!"

Hermione gasped, taken aback.

Ron marched up to her, and when he spoke again his voice was low, seething, "I'm *sick* and *tired* of you always telling me what to do." He breathed in deeply, trying to contain his emotions. "I'm leaving *tonight* ."

He stormed away. Hermione watched him leave, incredulous, her feet rooted to the ground.

Things were spinning out of control, much faster than any of them could have imagined...

A day passed before Draco saw Hermione again. At least he thought so. It was hard to tell how much time had passed, when the sky remained dark. Madame Pomfrey made him sit up, and she was about to replace his bandages when Granger walked in.

Hermione noticed how starkly the Dark Mark stood out against Malfoy's alabaster skin. It made her stomach turn.

"Ms. Granger," said Madame Pomfrey brightly. "It's a good thing you're here. I must speak with Dumbledore urgently, we need more supplies. Will you tend to Mr. Malfoy, here?"

"Of course," Hermione answered. She waited for the school nurse to leave before addressing Draco.

"You lied to me," she said, careful not to let her voice betray any emotion. "When you said you weren't like your father..."

"I'm not," Draco started. He paused for a long moment before he spoke again. "I hate what he's done to my family—"

"But you protect him!"

"He's my father. Would you turn yours in so easily?"

Hermione was silent for a long time, then she said, "My father would never do what yours has done."

Draco nodded. "You're lucky in that way, to trust completely in your parents. But the truth is, you've lived a sheltered life, Granger, you've never had to decide between two horrors...you only see right or wrong. The world doesn't work that way."

"You have to turn him in," Hermione pressed. "You can't let him walk free, even if he is your father."

Her stubbornness pushed him over the edge. "I heard you refuse Weasley, when he asked you for help the other day. If that's how you treat your friends, I'd hate to think how you treat your enemies. You're cold and unfeeling, and that's why Weasley will never touch you."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock. She swung her arm back to hit Draco, but he caught her wrist firmly in his grasp.

"You will not raise your hand to me again, Granger, do you hear me?"

Hermione was shaking with pent up rage. She wanted to curse Malfoy into a million pieces. "I see that you're much better now," she said, looking at the hold he had on her arm. "I shouldn't have come."

She wrenched her arm away and turned to leave.

"Madame Pomfrey won't be back anytime soon," he shouted. "Will you let me bleed to death?"

She froze in her tracks and spun around to face him. She looked like she had every intention of leaving him to his fate.

Hermione marched up to Draco. She knew she had two choices. Go up to her room and cry, or beat him at his own game.

Draco watched her closely. He winced as she yanked his shirt off and reached for the bandages.

She healed him, and pressed the new bandage to his side, then let her hand wander to the curve of his neck. His breathing became slow and he looked up at her, taken aback. She leaned in close, and brushed her soft lips against his.

He froze.

"But you don't mind that I'm cold and unfeeling, do you, Draco?" she whispered, reciting his words back to him. "The other night on the Astronomy Tower, you didn't mind at all."

Hermione gazed at his mouth, inviting him to come in closer. He leaned towards her, hardly daring to believe she wanted him...but then she pulled away at the last second.

"This, whatever it was," she said, waving her hand dismissively in the air. "Is done. Dumbledore will decide what's to be done with you."

He tugged at her arm, and pulled her down roughly, until she was forced to sit next to him on the hospital bed. He laced his fingers into her hair and put his lips to her ear.

"You don't get to decide how this ends," he hissed.

He fixed his grey eyes on her intently, challenging her to reply.

Hermione placed her hand on his bare chest, intent on pushing him away, but Draco only smirked at her.

"Feeling me up, Granger?"

Her face heated. She tried to move her hand away, but Draco held it fast.

"You want this, just as much as I do—even if you hate yourself for it."

Hermione swallowed. "You're wrong," she said, but not as strongly as before.

"Kiss me," Draco demanded. "If you feel nothing for me, then prove it. Kiss me, and show me you feel nothing."

He didn't wait for her to reply.

He grabbed her collar and pulled her to him. Their lips met, and Hermione gripped at his arm. He kissed her roughly before she could argue.

Their emotions were completely unrestrained. This kiss was nothing like their first. It was a savage, bruising kiss. Hermione bit his lower lip, hard. He grabbed a fistful of her hair and tugged on it. They were at war with each other, each trying to subdue the other.

Hermione dug her nails into his arm, where the Dark Mark was, and he abruptly released his hold on her. He knew she was only kissing him out of anger, out of rage. He'd hoped she had been worried for him, fearful of his death even, but the look in her eyes said otherwise. There was none of the concern there she had shown for Weasley.

"Send for Pansy," he breathed. "She'll see to me. I won't be tended to by someone that thinks I'm a Death Eater."

Hermione's face darkened. "Malfoy—"

"GET OUT!"

Hermione stood up, and she took two steps backwards, shocked at his sudden outburst. She looked at him like he was mad, not understanding his spiraling anger. She bit her trembling lip and stormed off, shouting at a first year in the hall to send for Pansy Parkinson.

Draco watched her leave, resentment in his eyes.

His father was right. Learn your enemies' secret desires, their fears and weaknesses. Granger had come undone, exactly as he said she would. But then again so had he. Because it meant that she still loved Weasley, and that, was what he couldn't stand. The extent of her loyalty to him, he hadn't known until now. She loved Weasley. And she most certainly did not love Draco.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you so much for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :)

Chapter 6

A terrible scream rent the air, deep within Hogwarts castle.

"Had enough, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco's wrists were tied together, and his legs felt like lead.

"I've told you everything I know."

"Then brace yourself," Romena warned, a malicious smile on her face.

Draco shut his eyes.

She raised her wand and there was a loud CRACK as an invisible whip struck him for the third time.

He doubled over in pain.

He would make her pay for this, he thought savagely, as blood streamed copiously down his back.

He had woken up in an unfamiliar part of the castle, in a large cavernous room that looked much like a dungeon, but Draco knew all the dungeons near the Slytherin common room, and this one...this one simply did not exist.

How long until someone noticed he was missing? Or worse, what if they assumed he'd escaped, and left the castle?

He suspected Romena had cast a powerful deception charm. For all he knew they were in an empty classroom, on one of the upper floors.

"Dumbledore won't stand for this," Draco hissed.

"Dumbledore doesn't know where you are," Romena replied. I've made sure of it." She grinned madly, turning to the guard standing behind her.

He nodded in agreement.

Malfoy subconsciously reached for his wand then remembered it was gone, most likely stolen when he'd been in the hospital wing.

Romena moved towards Draco, muttering an incantation.

He braced himself again...his whole body tensing...

There was an explosion. A large reptile-like creature erupted from her wand and flew through the air...

"Nooooooooo!" Malfoy screamed, as it landed on his neck.

The reptile's fangs pierced his skin, tearing at his flesh. He reached for the animal, trying to yank it off, but its grip was unyielding.

In a matter of moments his face started to swell...his breathing slowed...his heartbeats grew more and more magnified...

He sank to the floor, and then...

Nothing.

All the pain was gone. He looked around, searching for the fanged beast, but there was nothing...all he felt was a rush of wind.

Draco dropped his hands, trembling...it had been a false spell.

Romena laughed.

She had planted all sorts of horrors and hallucinations into his mind for the past hour. Advanced confundus charms were her specialty, and she took great delight in their creation.

Draco clutched his head. He was disoriented, and it was becoming harder to distinguish what was real.

"You haven't told me everything, isn't that right, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I *have* ," he said desperately.

It was partly true. He had given Romena the names and hideouts of numerous Death Eaters...useless information as they constantly changed locations, but *still* , information nonetheless.

"You've left out the most important detail," she said, her voice pouring over him like acid.

He swallowed, thinking she meant to ask about his family. He was a skilled Occlumens, and so far he had been successful in shielding his mind from her...

Without warning, she flicked her wand, levitating him high into the air.

Invisible ropes tightened around his neck, choking him.

She made another movement with her wand, and Draco rose higher still, his legs flailing.

"Surely you must know of You-Know-Who's plans?" Romena asked, her voice light and airy.

The ropes closed tighter and tighter around Draco's neck, strangling him...his eyes rolled back into his head, and just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore...

"Relashio," Romena said lazily.

Draco fell ten feet, landing on the cold, stone floor with a thunderous crash.

"Still don't remember?" she asked, stepping closer to him.

Draco looked down and saw that his leg was bent at an awkward angle, most likely broken.

"Surely, you must know more..."

He crawled away from her, gasping for air...

"Come now," said Romena, grabbing a fistful of Draco's hair and dragging him backwards. "The boy needs encouragement," she said silkily, throwing Malfoy at the guard's feet.

The guard nodded. He raised his foot and let it fall onto Draco's broken leg.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"YOU CAN MAKE IT STOP!" Romena shouted wildly, kneeling in front of him.

He turned away from her.

"You-Know-Who has discovered a new form of dark magic, has he not?"

The pain was unbearable, but Draco said nothing.

"Siccare novit potestatem," Romena whispered into his ear.

Draco felt his stomach dissolve.

" *How* has he done it?"

Draco shook his head. "It's a rumor—"

"SILENCE!"

Romena kicked him in the stomach.

Draco felt her invade his mind. His attempts to block her were feeble, having endured hours of torture. She easily navigated through the inner layers of his mind, bringing his deepest thoughts to the surface.

Suddenly, the dungeon became blurry....it was fading away...he was falling back...far back into a memory...

Draco was at Malfoy Manor.

He was hidden behind a large pillar, spying on Helen and Mason Mackay.

Draco suspected the Death Eater couple had returned to Voldemort's side for personal gain.

"Come now Helen, we both know the Dark Lord's return is only the beginning. His plot to kill Dumbledore and Potter...a mere first step towards greater plans."

"What do you mean?" asked his wife. "What could possibly be greater than his plan for immortality?"

Mason looked over his shoulder and took his wife by the arm.

"He has found a way to control and manipulate the magic of others."

"By means of the imperious curse?"

"No...much worse. He can take away a wizard's magic all together."

Helen looked at him darkly. "What do you *mean* , take it away?"

"Drain you of magic until you're no more useful than a squib."

Helen clapped a hand over her mouth, but Mason pulled her forward, and they continued pacing around the garden.

"He has found a way to upset the connection of wizard and wand...wand and core, he replaces himself as the core, and the wand's loyalty is to him. It does a witch or wizard's bidding only as long as that witch or wizard is true to him. It's the only way for the Dark Lord to know his real followers. Muggleborn wizards and blood traitors will be stripped of all magic."

Helen raised an eyebrow. "But magic can be performed without a wand. And so *many* are against him."

Mason laughed. "A wizard's magic is not nearly as powerful without a wand. The Dark Lord trusts no one...no one living at least. His sights are set on the future. He will control and temper magic, school and instruct future generations of wizards... until they believe as he does, act as he does, and there's no need for anyone to feign loyalty..."

"But *how* has he done it?"

Mason looked around, sensing they were being watched.

"We can't talk now. Meet me in the—"

Draco felt the garden spin. It was the end of the memory. He shut his eyes, feeling the ground move beneath him.

"So the rumors are true," Romena said simply, as the dungeon came back into focus.

Draco looked at her resentfully. He doubted she'd let him go...even now that she'd stolen the memory she wanted.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're clearly not working for Dumbledore or the Order. And you're obviously not on the Dark Lord's side. What's your stake in all this?"

"I work only for myself, Mr. Malfoy. That's all you need know." Romena considered him for a moment. "You remain of use to me," she stated matter-of-factly. "When your father learns that his only son is at my mercy, he will do my bidding. I intend to learn more of You-Know-Who's plans. Although, it may be easier with you dead," she said,

lifting Draco's chin with her wand. "Your parents will believe you remain under my power, regardless. There's no need to keep you alive, is there?"

Draco sneered at her. "It won't make a difference to my father if you kill me. I betrayed him...I ran away hoping for Dumbledore's protection...he already considers me dead—"

"I don't need to invade your mind again...to know that you are lying," Romena said, her voice cold, emotionless. "I'm no fool, and you are no great wizard. How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

She laughed.

The guard opened the door, and Draco caught a glimpse of two others standing outside, and a corridor beyond. Romena swept past him into the hall, passing a large painting of a golden unicorn.

As soon as the door closed behind her, the room started to shrink.

Panic rose in Draco's chest.

The room grew smaller and smaller until he thought it would suffocate him.

He shut his eyes. Even when Romena was gone, she continued to toy with him, he thought grimly.

He stretched his arms out, hoping to stop the walls from caving in. And just when he thought they would swallow him whole, they shuddered to a halt.

A few moments passed before he opened his eyes. His suspicions were correct, he was not in a dungeon but in a hidden chamber on the seventh floor. He recognized the painting in the corridor of the golden unicorn. He had explored this part of the castle once before, in his second year, when he had been trying to find the Heir of Slytherin...

He'd been beside himself with excitement, thinking he'd discovered the Chamber of Secrets.

This part of the castle had been sealed off long ago, and he'd found dust and decay everywhere he'd looked.

Draco had discovered four rooms, and soon realized they were the living quarters of the Four Founders.

They had been stripped bare of furniture centuries ago, and only the crests above each chamber told him whom they had belonged to. He had spent countless hours in Salazar's quarters, searching the place tirelessly, convinced it was the Chamber of Secrets or that it led to a secret tunnel.

But then he'd heard rumors that Potter had found the real chamber, far beneath the lake. Draco's disappointment had been tantamount and he had exploded in a fit of rage, much to Crabbe and Goyle's dismay.

The memory of this place had haunted Draco for years. Why would someone seal the Founder's Chambers if there was nothing to hide? And how had Romena discovered them?

He doubted the Gray Lady had confided in her, as she had confided in him.

Draco had seen her ghost pass through the same drab wall on the seventh floor every night. He'd followed her and heard her crying on the other side. She'd always mumble the same thing over and over, "Forgive me mother. Forgive my betrayal. I'm sorry I did not return in time to say goodbye."

She'd stay hidden every night and emerge through the wall in the morning, looking solemn.

Draco had befriended the Grey Lady, learned that she was Ravenclaw's daughter, and eventually, after he'd gained her trust, she'd told him what was behind the wall. Her mother's old chambers....

And if Ravenclaw's chambers still stood... so did Salazar's.

The Grey Lady had shown him a trap door that led to a secret passage. He'd needed Pansy and Goyle's help to get inside, but they had never found anything of value, and when he'd asked the Grey Lady why the rooms were sealed off, she refused to speak to him again.

Draco looked around, his thoughts returning to the present...

Every part of his body ached. He looked down at his leg, hoping it wasn't actually broken...maybe it had only been a hallucination.

But a quick glance told him that he hadn't imagined it.

Draco shut his eyes.

He had to find Potter. Until he did so, he and his father would be nothing more than Voldemort's lap dogs.

Over the summer he had seen things he could never unsee, things impossible to imagine even in his worst nightmares, and he knew those memories would haunt him long after the war was over.

And now Voldemort had taken his mother prisoner.

Draco refused to let her die..he could not fail her...

Granger would lead him to Potter.

She would lead him to Potter even if it meant putting her in harm's way. He had to face the prospect of her meeting a worse fate than his own. He did not let himself mull it over, it would only set him back....but the memory of her lips on his, the smell of her skin, made his blood rush.

No...he couldn't let her cloud his thinking.

He had to convince Granger that he needed her, make her believe that she was his only hope...and for that he needed to set the stage.

He knew Hermione well enough to guess that she couldn't refuse anyone who asked for help.

He had to appear desperate, at his wit's end, a drowning man...

Draco looked at the ring on his left hand, twisted it to the right three times and waited.

It sparkled and shimmered, until a flash of light erupted from its center. It illuminated the room, casting a harsh glow on Malfoy's face.

"Draco, is that you?"

Pansy's image was projected from the ring.

"Pansy," Draco whispered, his voice hoarse.

He crawled to the back of the chamber, so the guards wouldn't hear.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The charm they had practiced worked. Their house rings were now powerful tools of communication.

Pansy gasped when she saw the blood dripping down his back. "What happened to you? Where are you? I asked for you in the hospital wing—"

"Romena took me prisoner. I'm on the seventh floor...in the Founders Chambers. You have to tell Granger that I'm here."

"But I can get you out. I remember the secret passage—"

"No, it *has* to be Granger. You know why. And you need three people to open the entrance, remember?"

Pansy bit her lip. "I don't like this Draco. I don't trust her, and neither should you."

"I don't have a choice, do I?" Malfoy spat, losing his temper. "My fate's tied up with hers."

It was a while before Pansy spoke again. "I have a message for you, from your father. It was delivered right before Voldemort's attack on the Ministry."

She held it up so that Draco could read it. He worked out the codes in his head, until he deciphered the secret message his father had written.

What Snape told you is true. The Dark Lord has taken your mother prisoner. You must get to Potter. It is the only way. Your mother is in Edevane's keeping. You know what that means. Use any means necessary. The Granger girl knows more than she lets on. Whether Dumbledore lives or dies, she is the key. Do not leave the castle without her.

Draco shuddered. Edevane's unhealthy obsession with Narcissa Malfoy was well known to all of Voldemort's Death Eaters.

If his mother remained in Edevane's care, it would be a fate for her worse than death.

He looked at Pansy. "I'm going to need your help. We're running out of time."

Screams erupted in the Great Hall, and Hermione watched in horror as Blaise Zabini drew his wand.

"Crucio!" Blaise yelled. The curse hit Cormac McLaggen in the chest. He fell backwards, upending plates and goblets on the Gryffindor table.

A bowl of grapes went flying into the air, smacking Neville Longbottom squarely in the face.

Hermione backed away as McLaggen's legs flailed dangerously in her direction.

Blaise lunged at him, grabbing hold of his ankle.

"Mr. Zabini!" yelled Professor McGonagall rising from the head table.

Next to Zabini, stood his sister, Elaine, a fair-haired girl who was sobbing uncontrollably.

"She's lying to you!" McLaggen stammered.

"You'll pay for what you've done!" Blaise spat.

McLaggen was in excruciating pain, but he couldn't break free from the curse.

The Gryffindors tried to pull Zabini off, but their attempts were thwarted when several Slytherins rushed to his side.

It wasn't long before the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs joined the fight too.

Hagrid left the head table and marched towards the chaos, making the ground quake with every step.

Hermione ducked her head as a goblet went flying overhead.

"Get the headmaster, we're losing control!" McGonagall shouted to Flitwick, as one student forgot his wand altogether and started throwing punches.

"Zabini, release Mr. McLaggen at once!" she cried.

She rushed to the Gryffindor table, Professors Sprout and Snape at her heels.

A crowd had formed, and everyone was shoving each other.

Professor Sprout climbed to the top of the Hufflepuff table, calling for order.

"You've lost yer minds! Dumbledore would be o'shamed," Hagrid said gruffly, trying to restrain two sixth years from hitting each other.

Hermione glanced at Dumbledore's empty chair. She hadn't seen him all morning, only received a message from Fawkes detailing the plan for the evacuation.

She was distracted by a loud crash. In the commotion, Professor Sprout had toppled over and landed on the floor, taking a first year down with her.

Two of Romena's guards rushed forward, trying to break the students apart.

Snape approached, his black robes billowing behind him. "ZABINI!"

Hagrid was faster. He swooped down, and lifted both boys in one swift motion. He shook Zabini senseless until his wand clattered to the floor.

Professor McGonagall marched up to Snape. "You will control your house, Severus!" she shouted, tightening her grip on her wand, as if she expected him to perform an unforgivable curse on her too.

Snape raised his wand high into the air.

There was a loud CRACK, like a gunshot, and everyone screamed.

"It's not me you want," Blaise spat, trying to squirm out of Hagrid's hold.

"We'll see what Dumbledore has ter say abou' that."

Silence fell upon the Great Hall as everyone looked at Snape.

"Set them down," he commanded.

Hagrid let both boys fall to the floor.

"You have performed an unforgivable curse, Zabini."

Blaise was so angry he was shaking. "What McLaggen did to my sister is far more *unforgivable* than any curse." He pointed at McLaggen. "Tell them!"

Elaine's loud, racking sobs echoed in the Great Hall

"That Slytherin *slag* is a liar," McLaggen said fiercely. "We never—we didn't— *It* isn't mine!" he said quickly.

There were murmurs from the students as they whispered to each other.

" *What* isn't yours?" McGonagall asked, suspecting she wouldn't like the answer.

Elaine wrapped her arms protectively around her middle.

Professor McGonagall moved closer to her. "Are you..."

She paused, looking extremely uncomfortable. She chose her next words carefully. "Are you expecting?" she asked gently.

Elaine nodded slowly, her cheeks wet with tears.

"And Mr. McLaggen is responsible?"

She nodded again.

"He told her to get rid of it," said Blaise. "And when she wouldn't listen to him, he gave her a potion that nearly killed her."

"I didn't know it would be that strong!" Cormac exclaimed. "I didn't mean to hurt her."

Everyone was silent, and only Elaine's shuddering sobs could be heard.

Blaise was seething. "You told her it was a potion to calm her nerves. You lied to her and nearly ended her life."

McLaggen looked down at the floor.

It was a while before Snape spoke again. He looked at Blaise.

"While I understand your motivations, Zabini, you have attacked a fellow student. You will both leave the castle."

Blaise's eyes widened. "But professor—I—I have nowhere to go."

"You should have come to me first," Snape said sharply, turning to look at the guards standing behind him. "Now there is nothing I can do for you. The Ministry will not turn a blind eye to violence at Hogwarts."

"We will escort you outside," said one of the guards.

Blaise stood rooted to the spot.

"NOW!" Snape shouted, making him jump. "You too McLaggen."

"But—" sputtered Cormac, he turned wildly to look at Professor McGonagall.

"Professor—"

"What you have *done* Mr. McLaggen, has deeply disgraced Gryffindor house. You will do as Professor Snape says."

A member of the Hogwarts Guard stepped forward. He had scratches on his face from trying to wrestle a third year.

"Attacks will not be tolerated," the guard said coldly. "Anyone who harms a fellow student will meet the same fate."

Everyone stood in shocked silence.

The guard spoke again. "From now on Slytherins will have separate mealtimes. Romena Wright's orders. And they'll be moved to the fourth floor where she can keep close watch on them."

Hermione's pulse quickened. She knew the move had nothing to do with the fight. That was Dumbledore's doing. They needed the dungeons and the Slytherin dormitories clear for their plan to work.

There were murmurs of dissent from the Slytherins. "But the rest of us haven't done anything!" said a fifth year.

"The rest of you will go up to your dormitories," said Professor McGonagall curtly. "Prefects, take your houses in an orderly fashion at once."

Hermione paced her room, hardly believing what McLaggen had done. She felt terrible for Blaise and Elaine, two people she never thought she'd feel sorry for.

It was impossible to choose sides in the middle of the chaos that surrounded them.

No one knew which way the war would turn. Tomorrow anyone could be the victor, and everyone looked at each other with suspicion.

Hermione's thoughts were interrupted by Crookshanks, who had streaked past her to climb to the window ledge. She patted his head absentmindedly.

Mass hysteria had gripped the castle, and the fight today had been the worst of many that had broken out all week.

Hermione bitterly conceded that she had learned nothing of Malfoy's family or his plans. She hadn't seen him since the day they'd argued in the hospital wing. His words had stung her more than she liked to admit. He had a way of drawing her in and then throwing her off balance, just when she thought she was getting closer to him.

The only useful thing she could do now was to listen to Dumbledore, and get the younger students out of the school.

She had never felt more alone. Harry was gone. And now Ron was gone too.

Hermione shut her eyes. She had caught Fred and George before they left, and given them half the polyjuice potion she'd brewed over the summer. She had planned to give it to Ron, but he'd left ahead of his brothers before she could say goodbye. A part of her was angry at him for it. Ginny had been furious too, and she'd shut herself up in her room, refusing to speak to anyone for days.

Hermione looked out the window.

The ship from Durmstrang had arrived last night, and was sitting at the bottom of the lake, waiting for Dumbledore's signal. If all went well, she and the students would leave the castle after midnight.

But what if Voldemort attacked before then? Hermione wondered. The Order's intelligence suggested they still had time to escape, but no one had heard from the allies. And there was something that made Hermione uneasy. What would happen if the older students caught on to what she was doing? They wouldn't take well to being left behind. They could try to stop her, or take over the ship. Uncertainty and panic had already spread through the castle like a dangerous plague...

Hermione's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

It must be Ginny, she thought, reaching for the handle. *Maybe she was ready to talk...*

Pansy Parkinson pushed her way into the room before Hermione could protest.

"What are you—"

"Relax, Granger. I won't stay long."

Crookshanks jumped down from the window and hissed at her, but Pansy paid him no mind.

Hermione tightened her grip on her wand. "What do you want? Who let you in?"

"Longbottom," she said, smiling. "It didn't take much to coerce the password out of him. He's locked in a broom cupboard, but I'm sure he'll find his way out eventually..."

Hermione glared at her.

Pansy spoke again. "Romana Wright is holding Draco prisoner, I thought you should know."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "That's not surprising, seeing as he's a Death Eater."

"She's torturing him, Granger. He's newly recovered from his injuries, and she's putting him through hell. You're going to go to Dumbledore, and you're going to make it stop."

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure you're exaggerating. Dumbledore has more important things to worry about. I'm not going to—"

"She'll *kill* him! And Dumbledore's too distracted to notice! You're the only one who can make it stop. You have to help him. If she doesn't kill him, then *they* will." Pansy looked out the window, as if expecting Voldemort and his Death Eaters to materialize on the grounds at any moment. She paused, weighing her next words. "You're his only chance."

Hermione folded her arms. "The last time I saw Malfoy, he made it clear he didn't want *my* help."

"Forget your stupid Gryffindor pride for one second, and listen to me—"

"Why not ask his friends to break him out?" interrupted Hermione.

Pansy sighed. "Nott left the castle, and Crab and Goyle aren't up to the task. Now with Blaise gone...that only leaves you."

"And what makes you think I want to help him?"

"You know the answer to that better than anyone," said Pansy bitterly. "I saw you on the Astronomy tower...the night that he kissed you."

Hermione's face flushed. "I—I—"

"I don't want an explanation," Pansy cut in. "I just need to know if you'll talk to Dumbledore."

Hermione shook her head. "No one has seen Dumbledore today, and—"

"Then we'll have to do it ourselves. He's in the Founders Chambers."

"The what?" asked Hermione dumbfounded. She didn't remember reading anything in *Hogwarts: A History* about—

"They're hidden rooms," said Pansy, interrupting her thoughts. "They were sealed off after the last Founder died. There's a secret passage that leads to them, I can get us in, but we'll need at least one other person. The entrance—it takes three people to open it."

Hermione stared at Pansy, at a loss for words.

"No one in Gryffindor will help," she said truthfully.

"No one in *Gryffindor*," Pansy repeated.

Hermione frowned at her. What was she hinting at?

And that's when it hit her. There was one person who would help. She had seen the look of guilt on his face when Malfoy was taken to the hospital wing...

"I'll need to go to Ravenclaw Tower," Hermione said quickly. "I need to find Roman Everley."

"Do you think she'll come?"

"She's soft-hearted Draco. Her conscience won't let her do otherwise. And she thinks of you differently...I could see it in her face."

Draco stared into his ring, Pansy was back in the Slytherin common room, sitting in front of the fireplace.

"You think differently of her too," she said resentfully.

"I don't."

"I've seen the way you look at her, just don't get yourself killed—promise me, you won't risk your life for hers—"

Pansy stopped, suddenly alarmed. "Do you hear that?"

Draco frowned. "Hear what?"

There was a rumble and then—

BAM!

Draco fell forward. It felt like someone had hit the castle with a large battering ram.

The walls shook, and clouds of dust fell from the ceiling.

Draco looked down at his ring. Pansy had disappeared.

"Pansy—Pansy?!" he asked, hoping she could still hear him.

All the lights in the Slytherin Common room had gone out.

"I think it's him, Draco," Pansy whispered in the darkness. "It's Voldemort, he's here."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thank you for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review!

Chapter 7

Hermione was halfway to Ravenclaw Tower when she heard the blast.

She froze, her blood chilling in her veins.

"Voldemort," she whispered.

Suddenly, it was like someone had turned over an invisible hourglass. She ran back the way she came, knowing she had to find Ginny.

Hermione flew through the portrait hole that led into the Gryffindor common room.

Seeing that it was empty, she tore up the stairs to the girl's dormitory.

Ginny was sound asleep, holding Crookshanks in her arms.

The ginger cat glared at Hermione as she shook Ginny awake.

"What's going on?!" the younger girl cried.

Hermione dragged her out of bed. "I need you to run!"

They raced out of the girl's dormitory, flying down the staircase that led to the Gryffindor common room, as a second blast hit the castle.

Ginny cried out in alarm, clutching Crookshanks to her chest.

Below them the Gryffindor common room shook with such force that bookcases and paintings crashed to the floor.

"I have to get you to the dungeons," Hermione said. "You'll be safe there."

Above them they heard shouting, students were calling to each other in panicked voices, some of them shaken awake by the blast.

"Come on!" Hermione urged.

They raced down the stairs to the common room, climbing over fallen desks and chairs, desperate to get to the other side of the room.

They heard a loud snapping sound behind them, and Hermione watched in horror as the last bookcase detached itself from the wall.

Hermione crouched down, pulling Ginny down with her.

"Protego!" she shouted.

A sea of books rained down upon them, bouncing left and right.

"Come on! We have to keep moving!"

They climbed out of the portrait hole and raced down the corridor.

Ginny struggled to keep up. "What about Padma and Lavender? " she asked. "Shouldn't we wait for them?"

Hermione shook her head.

Minutes later they reached the landing of the seventh floor, and stopped, waiting for one of the moving staircases.

"But I've left all my things, can't we— "

"We can't go back, Ginny. You'll have to trust me."

The staircase reached them, and they jumped on, moving left.

"But Hermione—"

"There's not time to expla—"

A third blast hit the castle.

"Hold onto something!"

The staircase shook violently.

Ginny shut her eyes, trying not to panic as they swayed left and right. She squeezed Crookshanks so tightly that he hissed at her.

They waited until the shaking stopped, then hurried down the staircase. They were about to catch the next one when they heard movement.

"What's happening?" someone behind them shouted.

Cho Chang skidded to a halt on the landing of the sixth floor, Michael Corner and Susan Bones at her heels.

"We're going to the Great Hall," Hermione lied. "The teachers will try to gather everyone there."

"Maybe we should go back to our common rooms," Cho said worriedly. "Wait for the prefects."

"Do as you like, but Voldemort's already broken through the barriers. The fighting will start soon."

Cho flinched at the mention of Voldemort's name.

Susan hurried to the staircase, and after a moment's hesitation, Cho followed, but Michael Corner stood rooted to the spot.

"I'm waiting up here," he said quickly. He turned on his heel and ran down the corridor.

Hermione swallowed, feeling uneasy.

She and Ginny only had until midnight to get to the ship. Then it would sail off, and there would be no way to leave Britain undetected.

Hermione and Ginny jumped onto the next set of stairs.

Susan followed, then Cho, but just as she landed there was another loud BANG.

They were all pitched forward, and Cho lost her footing.

Hermione watched in horror as she flew over the railing. Susan lunged forward, trying to catch hold of her robes, but the cloth slipped through her fingers.

Cho fell several feet, hitting sets of stairs as she went, her hair flying up around her...

She plummeted with the speed of a bullet train, falling lower and lower, until she hit the ground with full force.

There was the sound of cracked stone.

"CHO! CHO!" Susan bellowed.

The students and teachers gathered below cried out in fright.

Ginny's eyes were wide, and her knuckles turned white with how tightly she was gripping the railing.

For several moments Hermione's chest rose and fell, and all she could hear was her own heavy breathing.

And then someone turned the volume back up, and she could make out, clear as day, Susan's screams of anguish.

"CHO!"

"We have to keep moving," Hermione said quickly, finding her voice. She pushed Susan forward, forcing her to go on, but Ginny wouldn't move.

"Ginny, come on."

She shook her head, completely petrified.

Hermione half dragged, half carried Ginny to the landing on the fifth floor.

Susan backed away from them. "You two go on, I can't—"

Before Hermione could convince her otherwise she ran away from them.

Ginny's knees gave way, and she sank to the floor, shaking.

Hermione knelt beside her. "Ginny, look at me, we have to keep going. We *can't* stay here. We'll be fine alright? Just stay close to me."

"But Cho, she's—she's—"

Ginny couldn't force herself to say the words.

Hermione helped her stand, and they took the next set of stairs.

They dodged falling paintings, candles, torches and uneven staircases. It felt like an eternity passed before they made it all the way down to the entrance hall.

There was a crowd gathered around Cho's body.

Hermione pushed past students and teachers, trying to get to the front. Her breath caught in her throat when she finally made it there. Cho was lying in a pool of blood, her head split open, a look of shock permanently etched on her delicate face.

Hermione felt Ginny move behind her, but she held her back.

"Don't look," she snapped. "You don't need to see."

Hermione dragged Ginny away from the crowd and steered her towards the dungeons.

"I need you to listen carefully. Go to the Slytherin common room. Take Crookshanks with you. If I'm not back by midnight, leave without me. Hagrid will take you to safety."

Hermione had sent Hagrid an owl just the day before, asking him to assist her in the evacuation. In the event that anything should happen to her, she'd asked him to lead the younger students out of the castle.

"What are you talking about?" Ginny asked, bewildered. "Why do you want me to go down *there*?"

"You have to trust me. You'll be safe in the dungeons, Hagrid will explain if I'm not back in time."

Ginny panicked. "Don't leave me. Not you too!"

"Ginny, promise me."

She looked at Hermione for a moment, trying to decipher the secret she was keeping. Her brothers had kept secrets from her all her life. They'd always told her she was too young to understand. She'd thought it would be different with Hermione, but apparently there were things she kept to herself too. She guessed it had something to do with Dumbledore, something he needed her to do.

"I promise," Ginny said, fighting back tears.

Hermione nodded and rushed back to the main staircase.

"Where are you going?!" Professor Sprout cried, catching sight of her. She clutched her robes. "Are you mad?! It's not safe up there."

Hermione wrenched herself free from her hold, and looked up.

The moving staircases made her head spin. Some had been blasted apart, others were splintered, looking like they might collapse at any second. The image of Cho was still fresh in her mind, but she gathered the last of her courage and moved forward.

She didn't want Malfoy to die simply because she hadn't *tried*. She would do her best to save him while Hogwarts maintained its defenses. If Voldemort or the Death Eaters managed to break into the castle, she would head straight to the dungeons.

Hermione jumped from staircase to staircase, trying to formulate a plan.

She would reach Everley, and they would meet Pansy. No doubt Malfoy's guards had abandoned their posts by now, realizing the castle was under attack...

There was a loud cracking sound, and the staircase swayed ominously, threatening to collapse.

Hermione ran for it, seeing the ledge of the fifth floor landing.

It was now or never.

The staircase gave way just as she jumped. Her arms flailed wildly in the air...

Hermione's chest slammed hard into the ledge. She cried out in pain, her hands slipping as she struggled to maintain her hold.

The staircase crumbled to pieces, and she heard shouts from the people gathered below as they hurried to get out of the way.

Hermione yelled furiously, using the last of her strength to push herself up. Her arms and legs trembled, and for a few seconds she lay face down on the floor, unable to move.

Keep going, she told herself.

She crawled away from the ledge, and bile rose in her throat. She clutched her stomach and retched, the shock of what happened to Cho finally hitting her.

The rolling wave of sickness coursed through her body over and over again, until there was nothing left for her to bring up, her stomach empty.

Hermione wiped her mouth on her sleeve and looked up.

Students were screaming and running out of Ravenclaw tower.

She hurried towards them, trying to shake the dizziness that she felt.

"Have you seen Everley?" Hermione asked as she reached the crowd. "Roman Everley, has anyone seen him?!"

She pushed through the sea of students and rushed into the common room.

It was a wide, circular room with arched windows and a midnight blue carpet. The domed ceiling above her was covered with stars, and in the center of the room stood a large, marble statue of Rowena Ravenclaw.

Bookcases had fallen over, and half open trunks lay abandoned.

Two students were huddled in a corner, crying.

"Roman!" She shouted. "Roman Everley!"

"He's over there," said a girl, pointing behind Hermione.

Roman was in a far corner of the room, talking to a male prefect.

"Where are the first and second years?" he demanded.

The prefect had gone extremely pale. "I don't know. McGonagall and Flitwick took them earlier. They—"

"I need to find my brother, surely you must know *something* ."

The prefect bristled. "I—"

"I need to speak with you," Hermione interrupted, marching up to Everley.

He turned, recognizing her voice.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I need your help."

"I can't help you Granger. We're being attacked in case you haven't noticed."

He rushed away from her.

"I know where your brother is!"

Roman stopped dead.

He spun around to face Hermione, waiting for her to speak.

Hermione swallowed. "I need your help with Malfoy first. Romena locked him away and I—"

Everley marched towards her, and thrust his wand into her neck. "I will blast you to pieces! I don't give a damn about Malfoy! Tell me where my brother is—"

"GET OUT THE WAY!" a student behind them shouted.

Hermione heard a loud rushing sound, and turned to the windows. An orange-red glow was reflected on the glass.

A great ball of fire was shooting towards Ravenclaw tower, and she and Roman were standing directly in front of it.

"MOVE!" Roman roared. "MOVE NOW!"

He dragged her out of the way just as the fireball crashed through the window and smashed into the center of the room. The blue and gold curtains around them caught fire, and in a matter of seconds the tower was engulfed in flames.

The other students raced out of the common room as fast as their legs would carry them.

Hermione and Everley were about to follow, but Ravenclaw's marble statue tipped over and hit the floor with a thunderous crash.

"We have to move it," said Roman in a panicked voice, seeing that it had blocked their way.

He and Hermione raised their wands.

"WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!" they shouted in unison.

The statue lifted an inch then fell again.

"No!" Roman cried in frustration. "WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!" he shouted, but the statue wouldn't budge.

"It's too heavy!" said Hermione, panicking as the heat from the flames pressed in on them.

Roman turned to her. "Wait here."

He made for the stairs that led to the dormitories.

Hermione seized his arm. "You can't go back up there!"

He twisted free from her hold, and charged up the stairs two at a time.

Hermione heard someone outside in the corridor, shouting. "Fire in Ravenclaw Tower! Get help!"

The flames hissed and shot sparks at her, forcing her further back into the room.

No one was going to arrive in time to save them. They had to find another way...

Hermione ran up the stairs, coughing and shielding her mouth with her cloak. "Everley!" she shouted.

"In here!"

"What are you doing?" she asked, running into his dormitory.

"I need to find my broom. There! Look! It's stuck...help me lift this."

Hermione craned her neck to see what he was looking at.

Roman's broomstick was trapped under his four poster.

She positioned herself at the other end of it.

Roman nodded at her. "On the count of three."

"One....two...three! Push!"

They lifted the bed.

Roman freed his broom and mounted it. "We have to go. Come on."

Hermione scrambled up behind him.

They zoomed down the stairs and back into the common room, dodging flames and falling paintings.

"Is there anyone else here?" he asked Hermione, squinting through the flames.

"No, they all made it to the corridor before the statue fell."

"Alright, hold on!"

They flew out of the broken window.

As soon as the night air hit their faces, curses whizzed past them. Hermione looked down and saw a sea of hooded figures.

Roman swerved the broom to the left.

"We need to get inside the castle again!" Hermione shouted. "The seventh floor!"

He was a skilled flier, dodging spells and curses, spinning the broom out of the way whenever one got too close.

"There's so many of them," Hermione said, looking down at the Death Eaters.

In the distance she could see more of Voldemort's army gathering. He had brought all sorts of creatures with him. Dragons, dementors and who knew what else. She thought she heard the distant howl of a wolf. They'd reach the castle gates much sooner than she'd predicted.

A jet of green light shot past her ear. "Hurry!" she shouted. "That window there."

The Death Eaters sent another round of curses at them, but Roman spun them out of the way.

Hermione screamed.

They were flying upside down now, moving at breakneck speed...

They crashed through the seventh floor window. Hermione cried out in pain as shards of glass cut her face and her arms.

With a forceful jerk they were unseated from the broom, landing facedown on the cold, stone floor.

Hermione's lip burst open and bled.

"Watch out!" Roman shouted.

The broom hit the wall and smashed to pieces.

Hermione covered her head with her hands as the debris fell over her.

"Do you hear that?" asked Roman.

Hermione yanked a piece of glass out of her leg, stifling a cry of pain as she tossed it aside.

She heard the sound of rushing wings, and then a multitude of high-pitched shrieks.

"What the—" she started.

A flock of turquoise birds pelted through the window, flying straight at them. They had orange markings around their eyes.

"Get up," Roman yelled, reaching for Hermione's arm. "They breathe fire, we have to move!"

He yanked her up and they raced down the corridor.

"Granger?! Is that you?!" said another voice.

Pansy turned the corner and crashed headlong into Hermione.

"Where have you—"

She stopped short, her eyes widening in surprise when she caught sight of the birds.
"Come on, follow me!"

Hermione and Roman tore down the halls, chasing after Pansy, turning left then right then left again.

"They're gaining on us!" Hermione shouted as she looked over her shoulder.

"Here!" said Pansy, stopping suddenly.

She pulled back a tapestry to reveal—a solid wall.

"Where have you taken us?!" Roman cried in disbelief.

Pansy dug her hand into her pocket and pulled out a flat gold pendant. She pressed it to the wall. There was a flash of blinding blue light. Hermione instinctively lifted her

hands to shield her eyes.

The wall began to dissolve stone by stone until it was completely gone, revealing a small corridor beyond.

The three of them ran inside, and Pansy crouched down, tapping the floor with her wand.

She muttered an incantation.

"Hurry!" Hermione urged, hearing the roar of the birds draw closer.

A trap door appeared out of thin air, and Pansy reached for the handle.

She rattled the door.

"It won't budge! It's stuck!"

The high-pitched shrieks grew louder.

"They're getting closer, we're not going to make it!" Hermione warned.

Pansy and Roman tugged the door with all their might.

Hermione ducked her head into the hall. The beasts were turning the corner, making a dive for them.

"There!" Pansy shouted.

Hermione turned. The trap door had swung open.

"Once you're down, stay close," Pansy instructed. "Don't dream, or you'll be lost. I'll need the two of you to open the entrance."

Hermione and Roman looked at her like she'd gone mad, but there was no time to ask questions.

The birds were upon them.

Roman raised his wand. "Expecto patronum!"

A silver blue fox erupted from his wand, and charged at the beasts. They scattered left and right, momentarily stunned.

Hermione looked over her shoulder just in time to see Pansy disappear through the trap door.

Roman made to follow, but hesitated, looking at Hermione for the briefest of moments.

He didn't trust Pansy and he didn't trust her, but the alternative was to face a fiery death, and so he lowered himself down.

Hermione watched him disappear.

She knew she was out of time. The patronus Roman had conjured was weakening, and the birds moved back into formation, preparing to charge at her.

She ran to the trap door and made a jump for it. A rush of cold air hit her face as she plummeted into the abyss.

She heard the door swing shut above her and everything went dark.

As she fell, for some strange reason Harry and Ron's faces flashed through her mind.

Here she was going down a secret passage like so many times before...except tonight she didn't have her friends with her.

She wondered where Harry and Ron were, if they were safe, and she hoped that one day, she would see them again.

Author's Note: Thank you for reading! Hope you take a sec to vote and review :)

Chapter 8

Hermione plummeted down the secret passage.

A white mist wrapped around her, binding her body and suspending her in thin air.

She tried to move, but her arms were pinned to her sides.

The mist swallowed her whole. It covered her from head to toe and a sweet-smelling scent filled her senses, drugging her.

Her eyes started to close...

Then the mist pushed Hermione forward, building in speed, but she could do nothing to stop it.

She sensed a shift in her surroundings, and her eyes shot open. There was light, so much light it was blinding.

Then she saw a large wooden door. She hesitated. She had no idea what was behind it...

She was about to reach for the handle when she was yanked back by an invisible cord.

The scene changed.

She was outside, walking in a field of lilies, but something was wrong. When she tried to touch the flowers they moved just out of reach, and the sun was bright on her face but she didn't feel its warmth.

The flowers started to grow.

Hermione jumped back.

They shot up and towered over her.

She ran blindly, trying to fight her way out...but then the scene shifted and she was pulled back into the white mist. It reached for her with icy fingers and twirled her like a spinning top.

Hermione's stomach clenched and everything shifted again.

She was standing on a roof now. The air was warm around her and the sun was setting. Harry was next to her. He was standing beside a well. He looked at her with his bright green eyes, beckoning her to follow him. He gestured to the open door behind him...a door that revealed a long spiral staircase.

Hermione froze.

She'd had this dream before, and she knew how it ended. She couldn't follow him.

She turned away from Harry and walked back to the well, but just as she reached it, the scene in front of her vanished. The ground tilted and she fell back into the mist.

What had Pansy said? Don't dream or you'll be lost....don't dream or...

Another door appeared in front of her, but she moved away from it. *It wasn't real, none of this was real.*

The mist dissolved.

Hermione fell through thin air and eventually hit solid ground.

She cried out in pain.

"She's disoriented," someone said, but their voice sounded like it came from very far away.

"We'll have to give her a shock."

Hermione's head snapped to the side.

She felt her eyes water and her cheek stung.

Someone had slapped her.

She blinked at her surroundings. She saw blurred shapes and it was several seconds before Pansy and Roman came into focus.

"What happened?" Hermione asked them slowly. "I kept falling and—"

"You only fell ten feet, Granger," Pansy interrupted.

Hermione looked up, she could still make out the outline of the trap door.

Why had it felt like forever?

"It's a spell," Pansy said. "An illusion to trap unwelcome visitors."

"And you didn't think to tell us about it?" Roman snapped. "What if we'd been stuck like that for hours?"

"I didn't have much time, did I? Those birds nearly—"

"Enough," Hermione said. "We need to find Malfoy."

Roman narrowed his eyes at her. "I don't know why I listened to you. The only reason I followed you, was so that you'd tell me where my brother was, and for all I know, you don't have a clue."

Hermione turned to him. "I *do* know where your brother is, and if you help us, I'll take you to him, I promise."

Roman pointed an accusing finger at Pansy. "What if she's tricking you, Granger? Trying to save you for the Death Eaters? Did you ever think of that?!"

"I—" Hermione's voice faltered. An uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach. *Had she been stupid in coming here?*

Pansy laughed. "I don't have a twisted plan for you Granger. I want to help Draco, that's all."

Roman raised an eyebrow. "Give me your wand."

Pansy rolled her eyes.

"Now," he insisted.

"Fine!" she said, handing it over to him.

Roman pointed down the passage. "Lead the way."

It was so dark they could hardly see. Pansy started running through the passage, and Hermione and Roman chased after her, trying not to fall over loose rocks and broken tiles.

"The passage ends here," Pansy announced several minutes later.

Roman lifted his wand. "Lumos!"

There were markings on the wall...engravings of old symbols, and in the center, a large hourglass.

Hermione squinted at the markings. They looked familiar. She thought back to her ancient runes class, and a pair of symbols she'd seen in her third year.

Pansy pressed her palm to the wall, over the first engraving. She gasped in pain. Blood was drawn from her hand and trickled down to fill the hour glass.

"It draws our blood?" Roman asked apprehensively. "Why?"

"You'll see..." said Pansy. "When we enter the next room."

Hermione stepped closer to the wall. There was an inscription in latin at the bottom of the hour glass. It read: Only united can the truth be discovered. Three minds alike. Three minds enlightened.

What truth? she wondered.

"Your turn," Pansy said sharply.

Hermione pressed her hand to the wall. She felt a pinch.

She bit her lip as her blood was drawn. She watched it slowly fill the hour glass.

Roman was next.

When the hour glass was filled with his blood, the wall moved aside to reveal a very narrow passage.

Hermione frowned. It wasn't big enough for them to stand in.

"We'll have to crawl through it," Pansy said, lowering herself down.

The space was hot and cramped. Hermione crawled forward on her hands and knees, trying to move as quickly as possible. She winced each time the heel of Pansy's shoe moved dangerously close to her face.

"Are we almost there?!" Roman shouted from behind them.

Pansy shook her head. "Just a bit more!"

They heard the distant sounds of bangs and curses. Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts was intensifying and Hermione knew it wouldn't be long before he made it inside the castle.

She felt a cold dread sweep through her. They were taking too long. How much time had passed since she'd left the entrance hall? Hagrid would make sure Ginny and the students made it to safety, but she'd be trapped at Hogwarts if she failed to reach the ship by midnight.

Malfoy had lied to her, he was a Death Eater and all logic told her she shouldn't trust him. But something compelled Hermione to keep moving. The night he'd kissed her on the Astronomy Tower, it had changed everything. She sensed Draco was more than just an arrogant boy with a penchant for cruel words. And she could no longer deny she cared for him—much more than she should.

Hermione's thoughts were interrupted by Pansy.

"We're nearing the end," she said.

They emerged on the other side of the passage. They saw a set of stairs that led to a silver door.

"We'll be tested...before it opens to us," Pansy said slowly, trying to catch her breath. "The Founders took our blood, now they know our deepest thoughts, our fears. They'll want to know if we're worthy."

"Worthy of what?" Roman asked.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "Worthy of keeping their secrets."

"I don't understand," said Hermione. "How did you find this place?"

"The Gray Lady told Draco about it," Pansy said, staring at the silver door. "The chambers inside are empty, but this place holds *something*. Something the Founders wanted to hide. We never found out what it was..."

They climbed to the top of the stairs until they reached the silver door.

Pansy turned to Roman. "I'll need my wand for this."

He gave her a withering look, then reluctantly handed it over.

Pansy stepped forward and touched the door with the tip of her wand.

A grey mist reached out to them, and split in three. A hand emerged from each end, reaching out to touch them...

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard a soft, melodic voice inside her head.

Young girl of fifteen, come to seek the truth ...

Her blood chilled. Something had taken control of her body. She was compelled to kneel.

A true Gryffindor, courageous and daring, but is your purpose noble or self-serving?

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

I've come to save a friend, she thought, hoping the bodiless voice would understand.

Save a friend, the voice laughed mirthlessly. *And risk the lives of countless others. The youngest and purest of Hogwarts school."*

That's a lie, Hermione thought, sensing the voice was trying to push her limits. *They'll make it out of the castle no matter what happens to me. Hagrid will make sure of it.*

Will he? the voice went on. *What if Hagrid needs your help? What if he's attacked? A selfish choice to save young Draco, your lover. To save one, instead of many.*

Hermione bit her lip. The voice was twisting everything.

You've got everything wrong, Hermione told the voice. *Draco and I, we're not lovers...*

But you want him to be yours, the voice said. *"You've dreamt of it, even though he's hurt you...hurt your friends..."*

Hermione grew uneasy. The voice seemed to be reaching into the furthest corners of her mind.

Yes, she answered the voice. *I want him even though I shouldn't. He's hurt me, but even so, he doesn't deserve to die, and I'm one of the few people willing to help him. He's made so many enemies you see...*

The voice laughed quietly, but it was fainter than before. *"Good luck, Ms. Granger of Gryffindor...you have answered...truthfully."*

Hermione felt the mist release its hold.

The feeling returned to her body. She could control her movements again.

Hermione looked around her.

Pansy and Roman were on either side of her. They had passed the test too.

The silver door above them clicked open.

They hurried down a corridor, and on the wall to their left they saw a painting of a golden unicorn.

Hermione's mouth dropped open when they reached the end of the corridor.

The rooms had high vaulted ceilings, and stained glass windows. There were towering columns, and the crest of each founder was emblazoned above each chamber.

On the far right, there was a fading outline on the wall, and Hermione guessed it was the original entrance to the chambers. It looked like there had been a door there at one time, but it was sealed now.

"Over here!" Pansy said, suddenly, running to the last room on their left.

Roman and Hermione hurried to catch up with her, stopping at the threshold.

Malfoy was lying on the ground.

Pansy rushed to his side and untied the rope binding his wrists, but she stopped short when she saw the welts on his back.

Hermione's eyes widened in horror. He had been tortured, and his flesh was still raw from Romena's lashings.

"Scourgify," Pansy said, cleaning his wounds. Next, she performed a healing spell and his flesh began to sew itself back together.

Draco grimaced with pain, feeling invisible needles threading through his skin.

"It's alright," said Pansy, embracing Draco and he collapsed into her arms, exhausted.

"They weren't healed in time, they'll scar," Pansy said slowly, tracing the injuries on his back with her hand. "I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner."

Hermione looked away. Draco was lying half naked in Pansy's arms, and although she knew they were intimately acquainted she didn't like seeing it for herself. The two Slytherins spoke to each other with the ease and familiarity that came with knowing someone for years. She supposed at one point she'd had that ease and familiarity with Ron—but things had never progressed beyond friendship. They had never held each other the way that Pansy and Draco were—

"What about his leg? It's broken," Roman observed, interrupting Hermione's thoughts. He looked at her. "Can you heal it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No one learns advanced healing spells until seventh year. Maybe you—"

"I'm no good at them," he said swiftly.

"Isn't there *anything* you've read that can help?" Pansy asked Hermione. "All those hours you spend in the library—"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm no expert in mending bones. Short of levitating him—"

Pansy laughed. "That won't help if we're attacked and need to make a run for it. He needs to be able to defend himself."

"Come now, Granger," Malfoy drawled.

Hermione jumped. The sound of his voice shocked her. He hadn't spoken a word to her since they'd entered the Founder's Chambers.

"Second year," Malfoy prompted as he lifted his gray eyes to meet hers.

Hermione frowned at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Lockhart turned Potter's arm to jelly that year. You're telling me you *didn't* run to the library to find out what went wrong? Surely, you wanted to know how the spell was properly done?"

Damn him, damn him and his ability to see right through her...

"I—I did," said Hermione defensively. "But it's a very advanced spell and I've never performed it. Second year was a long time ago. I didn't read up on it again."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Liar."

"Excuse me?!"

Draco smirked. "You mean to tell me there's a spell you weren't interested in learning? A spell you weren't interested in *perfecting*?"

She sighed heavily. "Malfoy I know you won't like it, but we'll just have to levitate you and hope for the best."

"Coward."

That was the second time he'd called her that this year. Hermione's hands balled into fists. Her rage was like an overflowing cauldron about to bubble over.

"It's a very complicated spell," she said firmly. "If it's not done right, your leg can be damaged permanently."

Draco shrugged at her. "Scarhead looked just fine to me, even though Lockhart made a mess of things."

Hermione resisted the urge to swear at him. "That's only because Madame Pomfrey got to him in time. If she hadn't, the Skele-Gro wouldn't have worked."

Of course, she had never told Harry this. He'd been so furious with Lockhart at the time...

She looked at Malfoy again. "Things *can* go wrong and I won't be able to reverse the damage if—"

"I'm aware of that," he said coldly.

Hermione threw her hands up in frustration. "Malfoy—"

"I trust you," he said, cutting her off.

Hermione's mouth dropped open.

She wasn't expecting that.

"I trust that you'll do it right."

Hermione gaped at him, unable to believe her ears.

"You're—you're just trying to flatter me so that I'll do what you want," she said, crossing her arms.

Malfoy sighed. "Granger, take the poker out of your a—"

"Oh, go to hell, Malfoy."

"Gladly! Only right now I'm stuck here with *you*. I can't walk away now, can I?!"

"For the love of Merlin," Roman interrupted. "Will you do the damn spell, Hermione?" He pulled her to one side, away from Pansy and Draco. "We need to get out of here. And as soon as we do, you're going to tell me where my brother is. That was the deal."

Hermione looked at Roman guiltily. She couldn't tell him about the evacuation and the ship waiting at the bottom of the lake.

She'd have to modify his memory once this was over...

But he was right. She needed to hurry.

"Fine," she said. "I'll do it."

Hermione knelt in front of Draco. Their eyes met. His expression was strange. Outwardly he appeared irritated, but there was something in his eyes. Almost like he was shocked to see her there, like he hadn't expected her to come and find him.

"Well...get on with it," he said impatiently, acting like she was a house elf preparing his tea.

Hermione bit back a retort and rolled up his pant leg carefully.

His skin was swollen and bruised, and the bones in his lower leg were fractured. She reached out to touch the hollow space between the broken ends, seeing where she needed to focus the energy of the spell.

Draco did his best to keep his face blank but his mind was spinning. He couldn't believe Hermione had come. He studied her face, but he couldn't tell if she was glad to see him, or if she resented him for dragging her here.

Hermione's hand was warm and slightly trembling. She was nervous, and so was he, but he refused to show it.

Hermione raised her wand, making every effort to keep her arm steady. *If this went wrong...*

Draco sighed heavily. "By all means take your time."

She glared at him. "Don't distract me."

Hermione focused her attention again, remembering the incantation. "Brackium Emendo!" she shouted.

There was a jet of blue light.

Draco screwed his eyes shut. He felt a tug, then a sudden, building pressure.

Hermione stared down at his leg, her face rapt with attention. His skin was becoming translucent....

What did the spell book say?

The caster will catch a glimpse of a shift, then a swift break and renewal. The caster must not break contact at any point...

Beads of cold sweat ran down her forehead. She saw the bones move and reassemble.

They were aligning themselves now, a callus forming around them...a soft bridge between the broken parts of the bone. She watched the callus harden...

The next few seconds lasted an eternity, and the silence spiraled horribly as everyone waited with bated breath.

The callus fell away, revealing solid bone.

Draco opened his eyes, and he heard Hermione breathe a sigh of relief.

"Try moving," she said.

He nodded.

It was extremely painful but he was able to shift his leg left and right.

Hermione waved Roman over. "Help me lift him."

Once he was up, Draco attempted to walk. His leg trembled violently, but he was able to move.

"It'll get better as time goes by," Hermione told him.

"Take this," Pansy said, digging for something in the pocket of her robes. She handed Draco a red oak wand. "I stole it from Goyle. I figured you'd need it more than him."

Draco smirked at her. "Thanks, Pans."

His shirt lay discarded in a corner of the room. He collected it and mended it with Goyle's wand.

He threw the shirt over his head and nodded at Pansy. "Let's go."

Everyone was about to make their way to the exit when they heard a loud rumble.

"What was that?" Hermione whispered.

Suddenly, there was an earth-shattering blast, and the castle was rocked to its foundations.

"Get back!" Malfoy shouted at Hermione, as the entire room swayed back and forth.

Hermione stood paralyzed, unable to move. Voldemort had hit the castle with something much stronger than before. The floor seemed to tilt sideways, and Hermione felt something hit her shoulder. She looked up. The ceiling was caving in.

Malfoy pressed Hermione against the wall, blocking her body with his own.

Pansy and Roman scrambled to get out of the way.

"We need to make a run for it," Draco said.

He took Hermione's hand, and they made for the exit.

Pansy and Roman were ten paces ahead of them.

Everything around them was crashing down. A pillar next to them crumbled, and to Hermione's surprise, swords, shields, jewels, and a book inlaid with gold tumbled out of it.

The items hit the floor.