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### Serpent's Court - Episode 1

by dtriter

**Summary**

**Episode 1: Shaking the Rust Within Their Throats**

"No single contributing factor can fully explain the course of events that followed. The period would be marked by political uprising and near war. It reigned over the final mortal cry of the death eaters soon to be forgotten. It would mark the beginning of the fall of Hogwarts and the rise of Harry Potter. In terms of sweeping changes none of the precedent can be ignored. However it stands inarguable that the single most influential event was the death of Albus Dumbledore."

—The Last Enemy, Vol. I: Sigillum

Daphne Greengrass

**Notes**

Prologue: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/14690474](https://archiveofourown.org/works/14690474)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)
Casualties

Casualties

misericordiam.net

Wed. 19 June

Harry Potter was dreaming. He floated in a haze of semi-aware thought. Among a deafening brightness of sensory isolation he perceived a central idea like a point of darkness on a brilliant horizon.

This was a dream.

Grasping to that awareness like a life preserver, Harry directed his attention outward. The endless void stretched to the corners of his mind.

He had heard once that to know you were dreaming would be to become a god of a self-contained ephemeral universe. He would be able to do anything. To fly. To revive the dead. To turn back time and undo past mistakes. He would give anything...

Harry Potter was dreaming.

As the fog of disorganized thought slowly cleared, Harry gained greater access to his episodic memory, orienting himself based on his last known location and situation.
The Ministry. It had been night. Tuesday, maybe. He had gone after Sirius, because Voldemort had had him! No... that didn’t seem right. Voldemort had pretended to have him. Because he wanted the prophecy. Harry shouldn’t be alive, but Professor Dumbledore had stopped Voldemort. Fought with Voldemort.

No!

Harry lurched awake in a terror. He was in a hospital. St. Mungo’s. A deathly dread possessed Harry as his mind reached for higher levels of consciousness. Sirius was dead. He had gone through the veil. Harry had killed him by trying to save him.

And Professor Dumbledore was dead. Harry could recall, the surreal moment when Voldemort and Dumbledore had frozen with their arms grappling each other. A deep penetrating cold had spread throughout his body. The sensation had lasted for what seemed like hours but could only have been minutes. Then the cold in Harry’s centre had dissipated and both Dumbledore and Voldemort had collapsed.

Sirius Black—his godfather and the closest Harry would ever come to family—was dead. Professor Dumbledore—his most powerful protector—was dead. He was alone... again. Harry felt his eyes burn. He felt the tears gather. It was now a foregone conclusion that he was destined to destroy everything and everyone that he loved. Harry let the tears fall. His voice unaided yielded a gut-wrenching cry. There was a nurse. She raised a wand. Time became fluid. He slept. Woke. Spent most of the time half-conscious.

Finally the haze cleared and Harry realized what needed to be done. Who else had been hurt? How bad? Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Luna, Neville, and even the Order of the Phoenix. If any of them had been injured or worse, it was because of him. Harry’s heart clenched in anxiety and pain. He had to know.

Harry carefully sat up in bed, rotated his legs off, and stood up. He felt a little shaky but not bad, really, considering. The hard floor felt cold through his hospital slippers. Harry wasn’t connected to an I.V. but he did have a muggle-style access line in his left hand.

Harry padded across the room and opened the heavy door to the hall. He looked up and down the corridor for a nurse station. There, at the far end to his left, was what looked like a desk. Harry walked down the hall feeling less and less shaky until he came upon a slender witch sitting behind a desk filing a large stack of papers.

“Hello.”

The witch startled, her hand clasping her chest.

“Oh, goodness! I didn’t see you there, sorry. Mr Potter, do you need assistance? You don’t need to get out of bed; you can use the pull rope at the head of your bed to call the duty nurse.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize. Do you know what room my friends are in? Ronald Weasley or Hermione Granger? I think they would’ve arrived with me.”

“Yes. Your friends arrived with you. I’ll check on room numbers, but you really should rest, Mr. Potter. Worry about your own health first. I’ll have the duty nurse come by. Is there anyone we can contact for you to let them know that you are alert?”

Harry hadn’t really considered this. Not really. He had killed both of them.

“Mr. and Mrs Weasley, I guess.”
“Ah yes. Arthur and Molly?”

The nurse turned and opened a file drawer placing the papers into a nameless manilla folder. Harry couldn’t help but observe the ample cleavage it revealed. Leave it to his adolescent hormones to recover first. It did give him a chance to read her name tag: ‘R. Martin’.

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“Oh. They were around earlier today checking on you. I’ll have the support staff let them know that you’re awake.”

Harry thanked the witch and walked back to his room. He kicked himself for not asking which of his classmates had been admitted. Or at least how many. But clearly some had. Bellatrix had tortured Neville for sure, but how bad? As Harry reached the door to his room he felt his sense of dread deepen. He hadn’t seen Ronald or Hermione or Ginny after they had been split up.

* * *

There came a gentle knock on Harry’s door. Arthur Weasley entered Harry’s hospital room.

“Mr. Weasley.”

Harry’s face brightened at the familiar presence.

“Hi, Harry.”

Arthur picked up one of the doctor’s stools and set it down next to Harry’s bed. He sat down looking grim.

“Harry, what do you remember about last night?”

Harry was hesitant to answer. He didn’t want to remember. There was so much of his continued existence that Harry had placed on the scale to be weighed against the pain and suffering he had caused. The lives he’d cost.

“I, um... the ministry...”

The rest of the explanation, the rest of the implicating details, froze in the back of Harry’s throat as if speaking the words would make the truth they described more real.

“It’s okay, Harry. Last night the order was summoned to the ministry. A contingent of death eaters had broken into the department of mysteries. Dumbledore and Voldemort were both found dead next to your unconscious body. Moody is examining the scene even now to determine what we can about what happened. Harry. You should know... Sirius fell through the veil of souls.”

He remembered. He remembered Bellatrix’s cold sneer as she hurled the death blow. She had seemed almost surprised at her success. Harry was trying to hold back tears. There was no point in showing feelings when they wouldn’t change a damn thing. He was responsible for at least three deaths. He did not deserve sympathy or even pity. But he had not been alone that night.

“What about the others?”

“Oh... uh... Miss Lovegood is fine. She got a little scratched up, but otherwise she’s fine. Um. Ginny broke her ankle. Hermione’s fine, physically...”

Harry could tell that Arthur was keeping the worst from him. Delaying the bad news as long as
possible.

“What about Ron?”

From the way Arthur repositioned himself Harry could tell that this was it. Something had happened to Ron. How bad was it?

“Harry… you need to understand that none of this is your fault.”

No, no, no, no, no, no. This isn’t what you say when everything is going to be fine. What had he done?!

“Oh god.”

Harry’s heart dropped into his stomach.

“He’s alive, Harry. But he’s hurt. He took a nasty curse pretty well head on. He’s unconscious and for now that’s probably a good thing. The doctors are still working on him.”

Arthur swallowed hard.

“Stupid. I am so stupid.”

It occurred to Harry that he might for the first time understand how Dobby felt about failure. It was perhaps fortunate that he was in no condition to abuse himself.

“Hermione knew,”

He felt his eyes burning. She had warned him, had recognized the danger. He hadn’t listened. Arthur placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Harry... Like I said, it was not your fault.”

That’s what he was required to say, Harry decided. Silence passed between the two for a few seconds before one more name surfaced to his attention.

“Neville. What about Neville? You didn’t say anything about Neville.”

“Neville is recovering. He was subjected to the Cruciatus curse. Quite severely it seems. He and Ron will both be staying in the hospital for a while.”

“Where is he? Can I seem him?”

“Which one? Ron or Neville?”

“Both… Right now Ron, I guess.”

“ICU room 117.”

Arthur stood up.

“If you have no other questions for me. I want to get back down to Molly. But Harry, just let me know if there is anything I can do.”

Harry shook his head. If Ronald really was hurt, and as badly as it seemed, then Harry would not be asking the Weasley family for anything for a very long time.
Arthur turned back at the door.

“Oh, and Harry? You should probably talk to Hermione first. She needs to see that you are okay. She’ll be in the ICU waiting room with Ginny and the boys.”

* * *

Harry stood outside the ICU waiting room. He could see through the narrow window to the left of the door the shapes of Fred and George sitting and talking quietly and then further back on a small sofa Ginny and Hermione clearly supporting each other. Harry took a deep breath. It was his fault. Hermione was going to hate him. Hermione and Ron had finally breached the wall that had kept their rivalrous friendship from transforming into love. It was serious, Harry knew. The two of them had disappeared too many times for something not to be happening.

Harry took a deep breath. It wouldn’t be any better five minutes from now. Harry gently opened the door to the room. All eyes shifted to him as he entered.

“Harry!”

A chorus of greetings circulated the room.

Hermione stood up and slowly walked over to Harry. Her eyes were looking for something in his. She stopped two feet short and then more or less jumped the last two feet embracing Harry in one of her infamous attack hugs.

“Oh, Harry. Are you okay? We were so worried. With Sirius... And Tonks told me about Dumbledore...”

Hermione’s breath sounded ragged. Harry gently set Hermione back down on her feet and backed away putting his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m definitely not okay, Hermione. But I think I will be. How are you holding up?”

At this, Hermione broke down into complete sobs again burying herself in Harry’s chest.

“It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

Ginny came up limping gently behind the distraught Hermione. Her ankle was bothering her.

“She’s decided it’s her fault Ron’s injured. She’s wrong, of course.”

This was apparently a point of contention.

“It. Is. My fault. I left myself open to attack. Ron stepped in front of that curse and took the full brunt of it because my back was exposed. If I had been more careful, if I had paid more attention to you in the D.A., then Ron would be standing here with us. But he isn’t and...”

Harry saw where this was going.

“And that is not your fault, Hermione.”

Harry pulled her away from him to look directly into her eyes. Her returning gaze was lost and searching.

“Hermione, if anyone is at fault, it’s me. I believed what Voldemort showed me. I led us there. I was duped, and you even warned me.”
“Oh, now don’t you start.”

Ginny rounded a pointed finger right at Harry.

“You don’t get to claim responsibility for hurting Ron. That responsibility falls on Dolohov alone and I will make him pay. The two of you will stop blaming yourselves right now because it’s not helping anyone!”

Hermione looked down for a couple seconds and then back up, this time more composed.

“Have you seen him?”

“Not yet. Mr. Weasley said he was unconscious so I came here first."

“Let’s go then.”

Hermione opened the door and held it for Harry to exit.

“He’s just down the hall.”

The hospital was eerily quiet as they walked.

“What about Luna and Neville? And the Order?”

Hermione kept her view straight down the hall perhaps to hide the tears that Harry could see falling on her cheeks.

“The Order came out mostly unscathed. Luna’s fine; her father took her home as soon as she was released. Neville’s physically fine, but only time will tell what the psychological effects will be. They say he’s still in pain now.”

“Is he awake?”

Hermione shook her head.

“Sedated.”

Hermione stopped and stood in front of the door to Ron’s hospital room.

“Now Harry, I need you to listen. It looks bad, and the doctors say it’s worse; so prepare yourself.”

“I have to see him, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded and opened the door allowing both to enter. Ron lay in a standard hospital bed. All-in-all he looked whole except that his whole body was covered in purple bruises. There was an I.V. bag filled with some kind of potion connected to his arm.

Hermione followed Harry’s gaze.

“It’s a blood replenishing potion. They have to keep giving him more. Whatever this spell is, he’s still losing blood even though he’s not bleeding. According to the doctors there is massive internal damage and for now all they can do is just keep him stable and let him heal as best he can.”

Harry walked over to Ron’s bed and placed his hand on the rail.

“Jesus Hermione, what did Dolohov do?”
“No one’s exactly sure. It presents like a small explosion went off inside the body. And also something keeps drawing blood out, a vampiric curse of some kind.”

Harry felt like he’d been punched in the stomach. This was way worse than he imagined. He lost his footing and nearly fell. He lowered himself into a nearby chair. His hand went to his forehead but for once it wasn’t his scar.

“What’s the prognosis?”

“Just wait and see.”

Harry could see that Hermione’s calm exterior belied a person in frantic turmoil.

“They don’t know if he’ll recover.”

Hermione sat down next to Harry. Her hand found his and they just sat thinking of all that they had accomplished together with Ron. All the experiences. The adventures. The arguments. Time passed slowly as though some cruel deity wished to draw out the pain for its amusement.

“Hermione. Where are your parents? They should be here.”

Hermione was clearly unprepared for this query about her own well-being.

“Oh, they did come. We talked it over and they are willing to let me continue studying at Hogwarts if only because Voldemort is gone now. I am going to stay with Ginny over the Summer so I can stay close to Ron.”

The Summer.

“Hermione, I just realized, I don’t know where I am going to go. With Voldemort dead, I never have to go back to Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. But Sirius is dead, and Dumbledore is dead. And honestly, I can’t stay at the Burrow. I can’t show up every morning and remind them of why their son is in critical condition in the hospital.”

“Harry, Molly and Arthur don’t feel that way. They think of you as a son. And I’d hate to think of you staying at the Leaky Cauldron again. But maybe Professor McGonagall can give you a place at Hogwarts for the Summer.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

“I think I’d like to visit Neville for a while if you don’t mind. I haven’t been by yet.”

“I think that’s a great idea, Harry. But I am going to stay here. And don’t push yourself too hard. You’re currently a patient here too.”

Harry and Hermione both stood and briefly embraced.

The two locked eyes.

“Hermione, regardless of what Ginny said, you’re still blaming yourself, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Are you?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Then consider it something we can work through together.”
Harry gave Hermione’s hand one last squeeze.

“Neville’s in room 127.”

* * *

“Hello, Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s stomach jumped into his throat as he whirled around to face the new speaker, a venerable but formidable looking woman, with grey hair and an unadorned wooden cane. His back was now to the door of room 127.

“L-lady Longbottom?”

“That’s still me last I checked. There is no need for trepidation, young man. I don’t bite. You can go on in. But he’s fully sedated. The doctors are hopeful he’ll make a full recovery, but it will take time.”

Harry opened the door and entered Neville’s room. Harry walked over to the foot of the bed. Lady Augusta Longbottom strode into the room each step punctuated by the clack of her cane upon the floor.

“Can it be so bad? It was only a few moments and then he went on fighting for several minutes.”

Augusta smiled kindly.

“The human mind is a funny thing, Mr Potter. It can flex and bend and anticipate and delay, but it cannot go forever without handling the consequences of its environment. I imagine that while you were battling, Neville’s mind was singularly focused on the goal of everyone’s escape. When circumstances allowed, his mind began to process everything that happened.

“The Crucius curse is as evil as they come. It directly stimulates the pathways in the brain that experience pain. And because it works like that, it is limited only by the caster’s power and the target’s capacity for pain.

“Bellatrix Lestange specializes in the Crucius curse and in pain. To her it is an art. Neville’s mere moments under her ministrations must have been the essence of hell itself. And then there is the added insult. Every twinge of pain would bring forward memories of Frank and Alice, Neville’s parents mind you. When Neville was only one year old, they were tortured by Death Eaters until permanently insane.”

“Yeah. Neville said something about that. It was Bellatrix herself that did it, right?”

Augusta turned a newly appraising eye upon Harry.

“So Neville told you? How about that. You must really make an impression upon him… Yes, Madam Lestrange was present that night, but there were four Death Eaters and no one knows who is fully responsible. In my mind they all are.”

“Neville only mentioned Bellatrix.”

Augusta chuckled.

“Neville has fixated somewhat on Madam Lestrange. No, it was a group of four. Bellatrix is married you know. So it was she, her husband Rodolphus, his brother Rabastan, and then Barty
Crouch Jr. who you had the unfortunate chance to meet during the Triwizard. I wish I had insisted more strongly that Frank and Alice live in Longbottom Manor. The wards on the manor are strong and in such times... Well, I do think Alice’s optimism was misplaced, but you’re not here to listen to the regretful musings of an old woman.”

Augusta carefully lowered herself into the sitting chair in the room.

“Mr Potter. I do not relish living alone, and Neville is going to be in this room for at least a few days. Arthur Weasley has given me reason to believe that you are wont for a place to stay. If that is so, please, come stay at my home at least until Neville is released. I could use the help and you won’t be alone. I am sure Miss Abbott will be around as much as she can. She and Neville have a thing you know, not that either will admit it. And Hannah will bring Susan for sure. And probably others. Hufflepuffs the lot of them.”

This last statement was accompanied by an eye roll that communicated Lady Longbottom’s opinion of said house.

“Lady Longbottom?”

“You can call me Augusta, Harry”

“Thank you for your offer. I think I would like to accept it.”

“Good. Then get yourself back to bed so you can be hale when the doctors do rounds tomorrow morning.”

* * *

Thu. 20 June

Hermione sat at one end of Lady Longbottom’s dining room table. Along the sides of the table were the faces of people she trusted and respected: Harry, Arthur Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Amelia Bones, Augusta Longbottom, and Madam Malkin. Also present was Severus Snape. Minerva McGonagall sat at the head of the table. When the professor had invited her to the meeting Hermione hadn’t understood why she should be present. But seeing the look in Harry’s eyes the reason was self-evident. If anyone could convince Harry...

This was going to be a disaster.

“As acting headmistress of Hogwarts I have asked you all to meet because we must discuss how Hogwarts and the Ministry are going to proceed from here together. I hope by now it is clear to everyone that Albus was quite correct about Voldemort’s return. Yet, the Ministry has been slandering Albus and Mr. Potter for nearly a year now. Given the current situation I believe some are considering calling for the resignation of Minister Fudge.”

Director Bones sat back in her seat with an expression of shock.

“Minerva, we cannot possibly go through a resignation right now. Dumbledore’s passing has left the Wizengamot in turmoil. And with the chief warlock and Voldemort both dead there are two huge power vacuums that are going bring in elements unknown. To even consider attempting to unseat the Minister right now is to invite chaos.”

Harry leaned forward to interject.

“But surely the people will call for his resignation when they learn of how close we came to open
war with Voldemort.”
“Foolish, as always.”

Snape’s quiet malice caught the attention of the room.
“Our young Mr. Potter needs it spelled out for him. Perhaps Miss Granger can bring it down to his level.”

Hermione did not wish to rise to this bait but perhaps it would be best coming from her.
“Harry, we’re considering if the public should know about Voldemort’s return at all. It’s sure to cause distress and destabilization that can be avoided by simply continuing on as if Voldemort never came back to power.”

Harry stood up his ire rising.
“You can’t be serious!”

Harry turned to the Director.
“The people must know. Voldemort still has supporters at large. The Ministry lied to the public and hid their own incompetence. We can’t leave a government this corrupt in power. I agree with Professor McGonagall, Fudge must go.”

“Minister Fudge, Harry. And I actually agree with Amelia.”

Harry turned to Minerva with a look of disbelief.
“Professor, if we don’t tell the truth of Voldemort’s return then Professor Dumbledore dies a discredited fool in the eyes of history. Sirius dies a wanted criminal.”

Harry pointed to the wall indicating the outside world.
“And what is to stop this whole disaster from arising again with another dark wizard? They haven’t learned anything. I won’t stand for that.”

Minerva wrung her hands while considering her response.
“Harry, this is why I called this meeting. I don’t like it either but for the common good, for social stability, we need to keep all of this strictly secret.”

“And you all feel this way?!”

Harry’s angry gaze passed over those present. Some nodded and some just held his gaze.
“Hermione?”

Hermione looked directly into Harry’s eyes. His fury was unveiled and terrifying but she owed her friend honesty.
“Yes, I agree.”

Harry deflated as though all the air had been let out of him sitting back down unable to continue arguing.
“So this whole gathering is just to convince me to keep my mouth shut.”

“To be fair Harry, I called the meeting to discuss how Hogwarts and the Ministry can work together to prevent a panic. We need to work out how we will respond to the press when they come and ask because they will. You know what Rita Skeeter can do and she’s not the worst.”

Amelia leaned forward.

“Mr. Potter, if it’s any consolation, Sirius Black has been posthumously cleared of all charges. It’s going to be kept quiet, but legally his name is in the clear.”

Hermione placed her hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Harry, the Minister for Magic must be re-elected by affirmation of the populace at least every seven years. That will be this upcoming January, so I am sure he could be convinced to step down quietly at that time.”

Hermione pointedly looked to Amelia intending to communicate that this was expected. Amelia responded only with a carefully neutral smile. Hermione turned back to Harry.

“Fine.”

Harry looked down the table again.

“I’ll stay quiet about Minister Fudge but not about Umbridge. I won’t stand for any agreement that allows her to stay in power.”

This time is was Arthur who replied.

“Harry, Dolores is a bureaucrat, she was hired into the civil service not appointed or elected. I know she was unpleasant. Fred and George haven’t let up about her. But there are laws that protect her position and without a recognized disciplinary proceeding there is no way to remove her position or salary.”

“So transfer her into a basement closet. I don’t care! But her influence over other people must end here and today.”

Lady Longbottom always quiet and poised chose this moment to interject.

“Neville has mentioned Madam Umbridge with some regularity in his letters but I fail to comprehend the animosity you hold for her. Education requires discipline, a property no longer universally found in institutions of learning. It is all fine and good to ‘relate’ to your charges, but ultimately it is the responsibility of the instructors to provide what their students need not what they want. Surely this is all the inquisitor pursued.”

“Harry. Show them.”

Harry locked eyes with Hermione briefly before raising his right hand. There were some gasps as those present read the words traced in scar tissue on the back of Harry’s hand.

I must not tell lies.

“Harry, did Dolores do that to you?”

Minerva’s wide eyes were locked on the accusing words.
“Yes. You weren’t in a position to help, Professor. And Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t see me. She’s evil, Professor.”

“This is a waste of time.” Snape’s cold voice cut through the silence. “No one here cares at all for Madam Umbridge. It seems sensible to limit her influence as much as possible regardless of Mr. Potter’s opinion.”

Harry looked at Professor Snape and the professor maintaining his customary scowl replied with the slightest of nods. Harry put his hand down and Hermione grasped it in both of hers.

Madam Malkin spoke for the first time. Hermione was still puzzled at her presence since she represented neither the government nor the order. Perhaps she represented the guilds... but did knowledge of Voldemort’s return spread even that far?

“I would be remiss if I did not explicitly clarify that I have no position on this. I am just observing on behalf of interested parties.”

Professor McGonagall looked to Madam Malkin and then exchanged a strange glance with Professor Snape. If Hermione’s analysis was correct, Professor McGonagall was not exactly sure why Ms. Malkin was present either.

Minerva took a deep breath.

“Augusta. Thank you for letting us meet in your home, an official venue would have been awkward.”

“Of course, Minerva. My home is always open to those who serve in such vital capacities.”

“I wanted to discuss another matter regarding Ms. Marchbanks. Griselda came to me after the events of this week. With the decline of the Minister’s power and the reduced influence of Madam Umbridge, she would like to petition for re-entry into the Wizengamot and is seeking support of sitting members.”

* * *

The meeting broke about an hour later and the attendees departed. In the end Augusta was left in the company of Harry, Hermione, and Arthur.

“Harry, do come visit, please. Molly has already asked after you several times. She’s worried about you. Oh, and Dumbledore’s funeral has been scheduled for Sunday. Also, Molly and I will be hosting a wake in Sirius’s honour on Saturday at the Burrow. And Harry, after you’ve taken some time, try to have some fun this Summer.”

“Thanks, Mr. Weasley. I’ll try.”

Harry’s reply sounded hollow.

“And with that, Hermione, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back home.”

“Of course. Goodbye, Harry. I’ll see you Saturday.”

Hermione embraced Harry one last time and then left with Arthur for the Burrow. As Augusta watched them go she wondered exactly how the world had come so far. Had she ever been that young?
“Harry. It’s a little early but I am going to pop off for a nap. Feel free to look around the manor. Oh, I believe Hannah Abbott will be joining us for dinner. I’ll be updating her on Neville’s condition.”

“Does Neville have any other family?”

“No. Voldemort and his followers saw to that. Neville is the last of my line. He is the last of my grandfather’s line.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“You saw him this morning just the way I did. He’s suffering... But yes, I think he’s going to be okay. Neville will be sixteen soon and— well so will you as it happens. I had forgotten that you two were born so close together. When Neville turns seventeen in a little over a year, he will take up the mantle of Lord Longbottom. When he’s ready, I hope to pass the Longbottom seat and votes in the Wizengamot to him.”

Augusta looked at Harry. So young.

“I have something to discuss with you, but if age has taught me anything it is that everything has its time and also that rest is important. Can you handle lunch for yourself? I don’t keep house elves, but I was given to understand that you can cook.”

“Yeah, if I can find the kitchen. Your home is so large.”

“It is mostly just old and dusty. The kitchen is just down the hall through that door.”

She pointed Harry at the nondescript servant’s entrance.

“I shall be at the Ministry this afternoon and tomorrow afternoon, so you will be on your own for a while, but I shall be home this weekend.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Good. This old woman is going to lie down now.”

* * *

“Mum!”

Hannah Abbott had had enough.

“Mum! I am not wearing this. I am not attending a formal ball.”

Hannah looked in the mirror at the evening dress her mother was insisting she wear. This was ridiculous. Hannah’s mother had spent almost thirty minutes putting up her hair.

“Now, dear, Lady Longbottom runs a proper house and her guests must be properly dressed.”

“Mum, I am already late. I look fine.”

Hannah’s mother sighed and looked over her daughter. She raised her hand and ran it down the side of Hannah’s face.

“Yes, you do look nice.”
Hannah swatted at her mother’s hand.

“Stop that! I’m not six, I need to go.”

“Just be back by nine, please.”

“Yes, Mum.”

Hannah reached her bedroom door.

“Is Susan still visiting tomorrow?”

“Yes, Mum.”

Hannah was at the end of the hall.

“Are you going to clean up the bathroom before she gets here?”

“Yes, Mum. I need to go.”

Hannah was just entering the den.

“Okay, go.”

At least the hearth was already lit.

* * *

Hannah had been waiting in the sitting room of Longbottom Manor. Apparently her ladyship was not back from the Ministry yet.

Hannah let out a long bored sigh.

And waited.

A thump from down the hall made Hannah jump. It was followed by a crash of metal that sounded like pans or pots or something and then a yell of pain. Hannah got up and opened the sitting room door.

“Lady Augusta?”

A low moan came from just down the hall near the dining room. Concerned, Hannah hurried down the hall.

“Lady Augusta, are you okay?”

Hannah came around the last corner and stopped dead. There, sitting on the floor in a pile of scones, was Harry Potter.

“What are you doing here? ... Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. I fell.”

“I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself, but what in Merlin’s name are you doing here?”

“Oh. Lady Longbottom invited me to stay until Neville gets out of hospital. She said you were coming for dinner, but I think she’s running late.”
Harry got up and brushed the crumbs off his trousers. He looked mournfully at the lost scones.

“Sorry, I need to clean this up.”

“Are you making dinner?”

“Yeah, well, sort of. I’m not used to carrying food down so far from the kitchen to the dining room.”

“Why don’t you use the footman?”

“What footman? I haven’t seen another soul since Lady Longbottom left.”

Hannah led Harry back into the kitchen and showed him a box on the wall.

“It’s magic, silly. You place food inside one box in the kitchen and it appears in the other box in the dining room.”

“Oh! Brilliant! Yeah, I’ll use that.”

“Tell you what. I’ll clean up the mess. You go finish up. What are we having?”

“Cottage pie.”

“OOo! Very classic. Lady Augusta will approve.”

“I hope so. Thanks.”

As Hannah left to clear the mess of scones she reflected upon what she would be telling Susan later.

* * *

Lady Augusta rolled her neck all the way around from shoulder to shoulder. She was definitely too old for this. Lord Malfoy had attached a rider to the Knockturn Alley development budget to officially define ‘magical’ as a person of at least half blood status. It had taken hours to sort that out. Augusta removed her hat and Wizengamot over-robe and looked at the mantel clock. Dinner would need attending to and Hannah was probably already here. Augusta walked over to the sitting room door and proceeded into the hall. Voices rang out clearly from the dining room. Hannah’s high laugh was easily recognizable.

“I don’t care. Those ‘Potter Stinks’ badges were ingenious.”

Then Harry’s voice.

“Yeah, I suppose. Super annoying though.”

Was that the scrumptious scent of food?

Augusta walked down the hall to the dining room archway and was met with the most welcome view she’d had in days. Laid out across the table was a proper English meal. Time for a little fun. Augusta prepared her best stern tone.

“Mr. Potter, I did not ask you to make dinner!”

Hannah and Harry stopped talking at the latest arrival. Augusta schooled her creeping smile as
Harry’s eyes turned wide. She almost felt cruel.

“I’m— I’m sorry, ma’am. I thought it would be helpful...”

Unable to hold the scowl a giant grin spread on Augusta’s face.

“And that it is, Harry. I was just ruminating on how famished I was. When I saw the table I couldn’t help but have a little fun with you. How long did you spend on this?”

“Well it was just the cottage pie and scones at first, but then you were running late and Hannah arrived and we just kept adding things.”

“Have you left the pantry bare?”

“No, ma’am, and I kept a list of what I used.”

Augusta nodded approving.

“Well then, let us not waste such a phenomenal meal.”

Augusta walked over to her chair just off the head of the table and sat down. Harry and Hannah began passing food around.

“Lady Augusta, shouldn’t the chair at the end of the table be yours?”

Augusta caught Hannah’s glance of concern in Harry’s direction. She needn’t have worried. The lady of house Longbottom was not made of glass.

“No, Harry, that seat belongs to Lord Longbottom who has not graced this hall in many years. But someday I hope Neville will sit there.”

“Sorry.”

Harry looked down clearly trying not to appear upset. He was thinking about Neville’s injuries. Poor boy. Hannah caught Augusta’s attention.

“How is Neville? Last I heard he was still unconscious.”

Augusta took a deep breath. This wasn’t going to be fun or easy for anyone.

“Hannah, I told you that I wouldn’t sugar-coat any of this for you. ... The doctors let him wake this morning. Apparently to determine how much psychological help he is going to need. Neville woke up screaming. He recognized neither me nor Harry. The doctors examined him and put him back under sedation. However, according to the doctors, he is actually progressing acceptably. He is under endurable but significant pain. Like I told Harry, the Cruciatius is as bad as they come. Arguably worse than the killing curse. You need to prepare yourself, dear. Neville could be different after this.”

Hannah’s eyes were wide. Augusta hated hurting her like this, but the truth wouldn’t change just because she lied about it to protect Hannah’s feelings. Hannah nodded slightly but looked down at her plate. Augusta let the rest of the meal pass in silence.

* * *

Hannah finished washing the dishes. After Harry got up to clear the table she had insisted on doing the clean-up since he did most of the cooking. But really she just wanted some time alone. She
placed the last plate back into the cupboard wiped down the counter and headed out of the kitchen turning off the light.

She could hear Harry and Augusta chatting lightly in the sitting room. She stopped just outside the door. What if Augusta was right? What if Neville was different? It didn’t matter, did it? He needed her to stand beside him more than ever. He deserved it.

Hannah took one last step and opened the door simultaneously adopting her well trained polite smile.

“Well, everything is cleaned up. I told Mum I’d be back by nine so I should probably go.”

“Before you go, dear, can you show Harry the guest bedroom? I haven’t had time today to get out the sheets or turn down the bed.”

She was really tired but one did not turn down a reasonable request of the Lady Longbottom.

“Sure, ma’am. Harry, the guest bedroom is just down the hall this way.”

Hannah and Harry walked down the hallway in silence. Hannah stopped at a door and opened it to let Harry into the guest bedroom.

“The bathroom is just across the hall. You probably found that already. The pillows and linens are in this closet and you can set the temperature and relative humidity of the room here.”

Hannah and Harry worked together to get the bed ready so the work went fast. Harry tucked in the last corner and Hannah sat down on the end of the bed.

Thoughts of Neville cycled in her mind. She couldn’t get them to stop as though her neurons had tied themselves into an unending loop.

“Do you think she’s right?”

“Who do mean?”

“Lady Augusta... about Neville being different after all of this.”

“I don’t know, Hannah. But Neville... he kept going. In the Ministry, I mean. He was cursed, he was tortured, and then he just... kept going. I don’t think we would have made it out of there without him. I think Neville, at his core, is stronger than just about anyone. So I don’t know if he’ll be okay, but if anyone could be... it would be him.”

Hannah nodded. She didn’t really know how she felt about it, but it was reassuring that Harry was hopeful.

“Thanks, Harry. I’ve got to go. Uh, Lady Augusta is going to be gone to the Ministry for most of tomorrow. Why don’t you come over to my house? Susan is going to visit so we could hang out.”

“I’d like that, thanks.”

Fri. 21 June

Harry slept late. Never had a bed felt so soft and warm. He could stay here all day long. Never again think about the world. Think about…

No, not yet.
Harry’s defensive hedonism was interrupted by a gentle knock. Augusta’s voice sounded muffled through the door.

“Harry, it’s Augusta, I just wanted to let you know that it is eleven o’clock and I am stepping out to do some errands before the Wizengamot session this afternoon.”

“Okay, I should get up anyway.”

“I am going to take lunch out so don’t go throwing another banquet. I’ll cook tonight. And Hannah said you might visit her. She said they have lunch at one o’clock and that you would be welcome. The floo address is on the mantle. Leave a message if you are going to miss dinner.”

“Sure. But if something comes up and I need to contact you sooner, how should I reach you?”

“Just ring the Ministry central line via the floo and ask for me by name. If the bureaucrats are good at anything it’s efficient systems. I’ll see you tonight, Harry.”

Harry got up and into his bathrobe. As he walked to the bathroom to relieve himself he planned out his day. Shower, dress, write a quick letter to Hermione, and then floo to the Abbott’s. But first pee. Definitely that first.

* * *

Susan sat at the kitchen table with Hannah. They had talked all morning about what each knew of recent events, but now that lunch was approaching Susan felt nervous.

“Sue, why are you fidgeting? It’s just lunch.”

“I am not. These pants you loaned me are just uncomfortable.”

This was objectively true, but Susan had to admit to herself that she was, in fact, fidgeting. Why was she nervous? Susan had had classes with Harry since first year.

“Those are my best retro pants. If you don’t like them, then I want them back.”

“Girls, does Harry have any allergies? I didn’t think to ask.”

Hannah’s mum, Esther, always worried over these things.

“Mum, I have no idea. He didn’t mention it, and I’m sure he would have.”

Susan ignored the familial banter that followed instead turning her attention inward. Susan had always had an interest in Harry. He was orphaned by Voldemort. He was raised by his aunt and uncle. He didn’t like all the attention he garnered. In many ways Susan and Harry were the same. But Harry had never shown any interest in her. He was always busy having adventures. Once in Susan’s life she would like to have an adventure. Maybe even experience the thrill of a real duel. But these thoughts were not appropriate. For a Hufflepuff or for a proper young lady.

Pressing down the resentment that Susan felt at the smothering boredom of her life she started a new topic.

“Hannah, Auntie Em says that Harry was there when Dumbledore died. That he saw Voldemort.”

“Ms. Bones, language!”

“Mum, he’s been dead for years. Why can’t we...”
“Not in my house!”

Hannah’s attempt to intervene was cut short.

“Challenging the Dark Lord is how Susan ended up an orphan.”

Susan blinked at this, struck at the implication that her family had been murdered because they dared utter the name Voldemort.

“Besides, The Prophet clearly reports that Dumbledore died battling and subduing Sirius Black. God rest his soul, but I’ll sleep better at night. Dumbledore did a great service to society. But I’ll not have any of this Dark Lord nonsense spread around my house.”

Hannah stood up and faced her mother.

“Could you find it in yourself to be polite to my friends?”

Susan had seen this play out before. Hannah’s mother never backed down from anyone and least of all her daughter.

“I did not mean to offend anyone, but flights of fancy are what get good people into trouble. Keep your nose down, Hannah, work hard, and you’ll make something of yourself. That’s good advice for you too, Susan. Now sit down. Dinner’s almost ready.”

Susan smirked. Hannah’s mum thought some truly unique things.

“Thanks, Ms. A.”

A bell sounded in the den.

“Ah, that’ll be Harry.”

Hannah got up and went to the den.

Susan quickly took one last look over herself. Stop it. She was not twelve and boy crazy. Esther brought the finished lunch to the table still in the pot and set it on top of a pot holder.

“Yeah, we’re eating in the kitchen.”

Hannah’s voice came back from the den. Harry and Hannah came out of the den and into the kitchen area.

“Hi, Harry.”

Did that sound too eager?

“Hi, Susan. How is your Summer going?”

“Oh fine. Auntie Em has been telling me some of the details of what went on in the Ministry. It must have been horrible.”

Well that was a stupid thing to say: of course it was horrible. Harry’s face predictably clouded.

“Yeah. And it was my fault really. I shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

Mrs. Abbott sat down having finished serving the food.
“Harry, I’m quite sure it wasn’t your fault. A child such as yourself cannot be responsible for such serious events. It just means that the adults in your life didn’t do their job to protect you.”

This was the flip side of Mrs. Abbott’s infantilizing approach to parenting. Esther looked directly at Susan and Hannah.

“You two remember that the next time you think I’m being unfair.”

Susan noted that Harry looked uncomfortable, but he didn’t say anything about it.

“So Harry, Hannah and I were going to go out today. Would you like to come along?”

“What are you planning to do?”

“Uh...”

Susan glanced to Hannah for guidance.

“Susan and I want to do some shopping.”

Harry’s eyes lit up.

“Diagon Alley?”

“No, actually a more muggle kind of shopping. Maybe we’ll go by the mall.”

“Sure, I honestly don’t have anything better to do.”

Susan reflected on this tepid response with a small amount of disappointment, but what did she honestly expect inviting a boy ‘shopping’.

“We’ll go after lunch then.”

Susan was careful after that to keep the conversation strictly neutral. Harry was obviously still hurting and it wouldn’t do to cause another incident with Esther.

* * *

Harry walked down the middle of the road just outside the Abbott household. After donning their packs Susan and Hannah had all but tore out of the home. Harry realized that he hadn’t prepared for the eventuality of needing British pounds. He had a couple galleons and handful of sickles, but that wouldn’t do any good at a muggle business.

“You know, I don’t have much muggle money on me.”

Hannah smiled at Susan and bumped her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, if you want to buy anything I’m sure Susan here would be happy to spot you some.”

Susan blushed mildly. Harry was obviously missing something. Maybe it would be best to change the subject.

“Is your Mum always like that?”

Susan snorted and answered before Hannah could.

“Yes. Esther is always exactly like that.”
“Huh… So where are we going to shop?”

This time Hannah snorted.

“We’re not actually going shopping. We’re going to the muggle cinema. My mum doesn’t stand with such nonsense, so I didn’t tell her. The picture is something about tornadoes.”

“Oh… Is that really a good idea? Not telling your mum where you’ll be?”

Susan started giggling.

“What?”

“Oh, I reacted the same way when I first started coming over to visit Hannah. This is just the way Hannah’s family works. Even Mr. Abbott does it.”

Hannah put on a mocking voice.

“We’re just children after all.”

Hannah and Susan both laughed at this.

“Well this will be nice. I’ve never been to an actual cinema.”

Susan stopped walking.

Harry turned around as she dropped behind.

“What?”

Susan’s furrowed brow expressed concern.

“I thought you were raised by muggles.”

“I was.”

“You were raised by muggles and you’ve never been to a cinema?”

“Well, we did go to a drive-in once. But I spent most of the time getting snacks for Dudley, my cousin. I really didn’t have a lot of opportunities for fun and leisure.”

Harry didn’t know how much to share. His pre-Hogwarts life was very much a downer. Like something out of Matilda.

Hannah shook her head.

“Who are these muggles? You sound like you were treated like a house elf.”

This time it was Harry who snorted at the funny if accurate analogy.

“Well, that’s not entirely inaccurate. I cooked, cleaned, and they didn’t like giving me new clothes…”

Harry glanced between the two girls faces of disbelief hoping that his comment would inject levity into a situation that made him feel vulnerable and awkward. When that attempt did not pan out he went on.
“Look, I didn’t like it, but it’s over now. I don’t have to go back there any more.”

Susan and Hannah shared a look of concern at the cruel indifference they inferred from what little Harry had shared and then started walking again.

“Well, if you’ve never been to an actual cinema before then you’re in for a treat. The station’s right over there.”

* * *

Susan watched as Harry rubbed his ears.

“That was amazing. I had no idea something could be so loud.”

They had just stepped out of the cinema.

“Well it’s still early. Hannah, how about that curiosities store. You said the stock was unique.”

Yeah, it’s just down the block. But remember, the lady who runs it is a little weird. I always feel like she knows more about me than she should.”

As they walked along the footpath, Susan relished the memory of sitting next to Harry in the cinema. His arm resting next to hers had been exhilarating though it was unlikely that Harry noticed at all.

“Is she a muggle, the proprietor?”

“As far as I know, it’s pretty rare for a magical to run a muggle business because of all the muggle rules and regulations. It’s difficult to hide who you are.”

Yeah, Hannah was probably right. Auntie Em had told Susan about several muggle businesses that had to be shut down due to risk of violating the secrecy statute, but also there were support services for providing muggle documents that would appear valid for just these sorts of scenarios.

The three stepped up to the shop. The façade was plain and the window was filled with old books. A simple sign over the door read ‘Artemis Moon Antiquities’.

“Come on, the sign says it closes at five.”

As they stepped into the small shop, a bell over the door rang alerting the proprietor to the presence of the new customers. A female voice called from the back.

“I’ll be up in just a second. Have a look around and let me know if you have any questions?”

The ground floor clearly comprised books of all kinds. There were stairs that lead to a second level. Hannah started off for a section of bookcases labelled ‘Travel.’ Harry headed off to a section labelled ‘Occult’. Susan in examining the available choices decided upon ‘Law’. Many of these books were seemingly worthless: ‘Tax Code 1976’, ‘Parliament after the Great War’. Also present were staples such as ‘Black’s Law’ and ‘Parliamentary Procedure’. Susan was about to pick up a copy of ‘The European Union - Dangerous or Definitive’ when she saw Harry standing stock still looking like he’d seen a ghost.

Susan walked over to Harry.

“Is something wrong?”
Harry held up the book he was holding.

The cover was stamped with a one word title: ‘Occlumency’.

Susan’s voice dropped to an excited whisper.

“Harry! Did you find that here?!”

“Yes. I read the first couple of pages. It outlines the process for learning Occlumency. It doesn’t look anything like what Snape did.”

Susan had inherited a razor sharp ear for inconsistency. Just like she had noted that Harry’s inexperience with the cinema didn’t fit, this latest parcel of information failed to fall into place.

“What do you mean? Snape doesn’t teach Occlumency. It’s not even in the standard curriculum for students at Hogwarts.”

Harry was obviously on the verge of tears. Susan recognized that she was on egg shells. She didn’t want to upset Harry, but Occlumency was a controlled trade craft and if anyone, even Professor Snape, were teaching it without authorization Auntie Em would be keenly interested.

“Last year, Voldemort started appearing in my dreams. There is... was I guess... a strange connection between us. Professor Dumbledore felt that I was in danger if Voldemort discovered that connection and used it against me. And... that’s exactly what happened.”

Susan placed her hand on Harry’s shoulder. A single tear rolled down his cheek. Susan didn’t have the details of that night, but Harry was carrying a heavy burden and Susan felt for him.

Harry shook his head like he was trying to shake off a fly.

“I don’t know. He had Snape teach me Occlumency, but it didn’t really seem like teaching at all. He just invaded my mind over and over. He saw things that should just be mine... and I never did learn anything.”

“Merlin. Harry, I’m so sorry.”

Harry’s voice took on a slight edge.

“No. You be sorry for Neville. For Dumbledore. If I’d really learned Occlumency then Neville wouldn’t be in the hospital right now and Dumbledore would be alive. Sirius would be alive. Ron wouldn’t be hurt.”

“I’ve heard some about that. But Harry, if you hadn’t been in the Ministry that night then Voldemort would still be on the loose. Right? He would still be killing people. Who knows who he might have killed.”

Susan shivered. Like someone was walking over her grave.

“I know and I know it’s not really my fault but it still feels that way. And I don’t want anyone to invade my mind like that ever again.”

Susan scanned the first page of ‘Occlumency’.

“It looks like a legitimate book. I say, buy it. We’ll work on it together.”

Susan smiled at Harry. The vulnerability of the returning smile melted Susan.
“What are you two birds looking at?”

Hannah had gotten curious. It didn’t help that Hannah knew about Susan’s interest in Harry and used it against her at every opportunity. Susan handed the book to Hannah.

“Whoa! This looks real. How did it end up in a muggle book shop.”

“I am buying it for Harry.”

“You don’t need to do that, Susan.”

Susan had played this hospitality game before and few could beat her at it.

“Harry, after what we just discussed, I insist.”

Hannah gave Susan a wry glance and Susan responded with her best mind-your-own-damn-business look. Hannah smiled and handed the book back to Susan.

“Are we ready to go? By the time we get back it will be dinner time.”

“Yeah, just let me buy this.”

Susan walked to the proprietor who was now manning the register.

“I’d like this please.”

The proprietor looked at the book and then back at Susan.

“8 pounds 50.”

Susan handed the appropriate amount to the lady who gave Susan an appraising look.

“You be careful with that book. It is not as much nonsense as the rest of that section.”

“Thanks. We will.”

Susan, Hannah, and Harry left the shop with Susan still shaking off the sensation that this shopkeeper was more than any everyday muggle.

* * *

As her newest customers departed the shop, Artemis reflected on how the turns of fate continued to play with her. She was completely cut off from the magical burrows of London and her tongue was restricted by powerful seals. Despite her exile none other than Susan Bones and Harry Potter himself had walked into her shop. So many years without any connection. So many years serving the Banríon in two different causal realities. And he walked in looking every bit as he did so many relative years ago. Young, arrogant, idealistic... and hurting.

And then to chose that book. Of all the books in the store, he would pick the one that she had carried with her on her return. The causal effects of that guide upon its new owner could not be predicted in any reasonable fashion. Artemis knew that she should inform Paradigm. Warn them that the lines of destiny had been knotted. But then again, good riddance. If she couldn’t have her family, which was the only good thing that ever entered her life, then to hell with the future.

* * *
After arriving back at Longbottom Manor, Harry and Augusta enjoyed a simple dinner while Harry filled Lady Augusta in on his day. He was about halfway through the meal when Augusta abruptly stopped eating.

“Harry, I have two things we need to discuss but I am procrastinating.”

Harry set his silverware down.

“First, Harry, I have successfully delayed a decision in the Wizengamot on the basis that you are busy with funerals and memorials to attend. But at the start of the next session of the Wizengamot one of the first matters decided is likely to be the matter of your guardianship.”

“What do you mean?”

Harry brought his full attention to bear.

“Harry, Dumbledore was your official guardian as far as magical society is concerned. With his passing, you will need to be assigned a new legal guardian until such time as you turn of age.”

Harry sighed.

“Do I get any part in the decision?”

“Legally, no. But you will be allowed to make a statement before the chamber. I’ll help you prepare for that. But you should be clear on what your preferences are.”

“Honestly, I’d like to be my own guardian. I basically have been for a long time anyway.”

Augusta nodded.

“We can try, but you’re not even sixteen yet. It would be highly unusual for the Wizengamot to emancipate you.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. You said there was a second thing.”

“Yes, Amelia and I have been taking it in turns to mentor Neville, Susan, and Hannah in the operations of the Wizengamot. Neville and Susan are guaranteed to inherit seats, and Hannah is likely to. Would you like to join them?”

“Why? I won’t have a seat in the Wizengamot.”

“I see... I thought Dumbledore would tell you. The Potter family does have a seat in the Wizengamot. It doesn’t wield many votes, but the seat was inherited from the Peverell family—in the twelfth century if I am not much mistaken. The votes don’t go very far, but you would have a voice on the floor of the chamber.”

“I— really?”

“Yes, the House of Potter is quite old and well respected.”

Harry thought about this for awhile.

“I need to think about this more. Can I tell you later?”

“Absolutely, the current session ends next Friday. You’re welcome any or all of those days.”
“Okay, yeah, it sounds good. I’ll let you know tomorrow.”
Sat. 22 June

Ginny waited next to the floo passing time by watching the mantle clock. It was 20:30 in the evening. She had been assigned the duty of greeting the attendees to Sirius’s wake and Ginny couldn’t help but think it had something to do with the fact that she was the girl. The twins weren’t expected to play hostess.

“Wotcher, Ginny.”

Remus Lupin had just arrived in the company of Nymphadora Tonks. They looked nice despite their motley ensemble.

“Wotcher, Tonks. Professor Lupin.”

“Please, Ginny, I am not a professor any longer. Remus will do just fine.”

“You are the only defence professor worth anything that I’ve had, so everyone else is in the next
Remus gave an artificial look of disapproval and guided Tonks into the next room.

They were so good together—odd—but good.

The flames flared and Ginny returned her attention to her duty. This time Lady Augusta Longbottom stepped out of the green flames with a young man in tow.

Harry.

Ginny gave Harry a hug and shook Lady Augusta’s hand.

“Welcome, the others are in the next room.”

Harry turned to Augusta.

“I’ll be in in a minute.”

“Of course, dear. Take your time.”

Lady Augusta walked off into the next room leaving Ginny and Harry alone. Ginny felt her heart rate increase as she noted how Harry was nervously looking at her.

“Hi.”

He remained standing looking unsure of what to say or do next. Ginny’s heart stretched at the silent vulnerability that hung between them. Her emotions were quick but her mind was slow.

How could she make it better?

“Hi.”

Ginny stepped forward closing the last foot of space between them pulling Harry into a longer gentler hug. Ginny was putting on a strong face but inside she felt like fragile glass. One rough shake or tap could bring the pane down. The soft warmth of Harry’s chest and arms held a steadiness that filled the cracks in her soul. She felt guilty at taking strength from him whilst at his most vulnerable.

No—Harry needed her more. The guests could find their own way from the floo to the party.

Ginny took Harry’s hand and led him into the adjacent room. Mum was definitely in the kitchen and Dad was presumably avoiding the social environment by inventing work that needed to be done in the garden. The pair circled the room greeting attendees all of whom took a special interest in Harry. Tonks waved the couple over to the couch where Ginny could read Lupin’s condolences on his face.

“Hi, Harry. I know this must be hard. Sirius was a loyal friend and a good man. I may not have much to offer but I want you to know that you can always come to me for help.”

Before Harry could inject a polite reply the imposing and significantly intoxicated form of Alastor Moody shifted into place across from the quartet.

“What is with the long faces? It’s a wake, boy.”

Moody took a long draught on what must have been highly alcoholic liquor.
“Come on, Lupin. You must have some womping stories about... hic... what was it...?”

Moody swooned slightly. Ginny was shocked that Moody would ever submit to intoxication. What happened to ‘ever vigilant’?

“Prongs!” Moody finally ejaculated. “That was it. Give us a story about prongs.”

As Lupin gathered his thoughts, Ginny leaned over to Harry.

“I’ll be right back.”

Ginny got up and headed toward the stairs to the upper levels. Hermione had not wanted to join the festivities but she would want to see Harry.

* * *

Hermione sat on her bed which was actually Ginny’s bed. Molly had offered to clean up the twins room and make them sleep in Ron’s room, but Hermione felt it was too much to ask of the twins and she needed the company anyway. It had been so hard. The doctors wouldn’t make any guesses. Ronald wasn’t stable, but he wasn’t deteriorating either. It was living in a film on pause: unable to move forward but impossible to go back.

Hermione’s thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the bedroom door which gently opened to reveal Ginny.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

It had been like this since the two had left the hospital. Neither really wanted to talk about it, but there was an unspoken agreement that they would just be together and share the worry and regret between them.

“I just wanted you to know that Harry is here. He came over a few minutes ago. Lupin is with him, but I thought you might want to know.”

Hermione sighed inwardly. Harry was never going to forgive himself. Why did he insist on carrying all his burdens alone? It wasn’t his fault, but Hermione couldn’t shake a small piece of resentment that if Harry had listened to her then they would have been safe and Sirius and Dumbledore would be alive.

But it was not his fault.

“Yeah, I’ll come down.”

Hermione stood up and quickly inspected herself in the mirror. It’s a sad state of affairs when one must primp before attending a funeral. She could never get her hair to sit quite right, but Ginny could always work wonders with it. Hermione pulled her unruly tresses back into a simple ponytail and twisted the band into place. As she descended the stairs following Ginny, voices echoed from the front room.

“And that’s when Sirius stumbled into the bank of flasks that Snape was working on. The whole thing came crashing down. All of the potions broke simultaneously. It was a consumate mess. I must say, the infirmary had quite a job getting that set right.”
Hermione recognized Lupin’s voice as he finishing what sounded to be an amusing anecdote. She didn’t see how humour was at all appropriate.

“Then Snape, “That’s not how it happened.”

“Hey, hic, who is telling this story?”

As Lupin concluded, Hermione reached the last doorway dividing her from the gathering. As she scanned the room, she remarked silently on how much grace Harry showed. Whatever Sirius meant to the others, it couldn’t compare to Harry. To him, Sirius had been a home when he had never had one before. It was family. It was love. He had never been loved like that.

And despite Harry’s lost childhood, he sat in the midst of adults that would leave and return to their normal lives. Would go back home. Would see their family and loved ones. Yet Harry smiled and laughed. Hermione could not understand where that came from. She had two loving parents and an intact family and still this was just so hard.

Harry looked up from his glass of what better well be apple juice and saw her. The bright smile that reached his eyes but not quite his lips brought a warmth to Hermione that she had already missed even in these past three days.

He stood up and walked over to her.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Lupin was just telling us about a time when Sirius tried to prank Snape.”

She didn’t really want to talk to Harry in front of everyone, but honestly the truth was the truth.

“I heard. I just don’t get it—wakes. Everyone pretends to be happy when everyone is just sad.”

Moody had clearly picked up on her sensitivity.

“So you want something more solemn, hic, respectful. Well sit down and let me share a story I once heard at good right-thinking funeral.”

The sarcasm was thick, but Hermione complied sitting down followed closely by Harry and on his other side Ginny.

“Now this is a story by some fella I don’t remember. Lupin! You remember the name of the bloke who wrote the story about the boats and the horizon and whatnot.”

Lupin rolled his eyes, but took a moment and did come up with what Moody was failing to describe.

“Yes. I think you mean Henry Van Dyke. Gone From My Sight.”

Moody pointed expressively at Lupin.

“Right. So there’s this mate standing by the sea. And a ship just leaving dock is spreading her sails which flutter in the morning breeze. She heads out onto a bright blue ocean. She’s a beauty. Strong and tall. This observer watches as that ship shrinks across the horizon until the ship is just a speck where the sea reaches up to the descending sky. Next to this man another remarks “There she goes.”’’
Moody paused for effect.

“Goes where? Out of sight is all. That ship, she is just as tall and proud of mast and hull as she was when she left from port. She still carries her load to destination. Her diminished size is in you, not in her. And just when some bloke says ‘There she goes,’ there are more eyes watching from a distant unseeable shore waiting to call out with joy ‘Here she comes!’”

Hermione looked over to Harry to see tears rolling down his face, falling with accusatory impunity. Harry didn’t need to be in front of all these people for this. Hermione took Harry by the hand and led him out of room and back upstairs. As they left, Hermione could just make out Molly—or was it Ginny—lighting into Moody for being an insensitive clod.

Hermione opened the door to Ginny’s room ahead of Harry and sat him down on the bed. She sat down next to him and placed her hand on his back running it up and down. How do you comfort a friend when they have lost so much?

But it was Harry who took the initiative.

“I just don’t know what to think. The worst thing, Hermione—the worst thing is that he lived his last days trapped in that horrible house. Essentially alone. I miss him so much.”

Hermione’s heart broke for her friend’s sorrow.

It might have been the story. It might have been Hermione’s warm hand. It might have just been time. Harry finally broke down. He released all the grief and pain that he’d bottled up from the night Sirius died until this moment. The sobs crescendoed until they racked his body and Hermione just held on to him waiting for the tide of emotion to ebb. Hermione tried but failed to hold back her own feelings. She cried for her friend’s pain and for the pain Ron was going through and for the memory of other family she had lost.

Neither knew just how long they sat like that. It might have been five minutes or twenty, but finally when both were spent of their tears, they felt the indescribable sense of emptiness that follows loss. A hollow place where the noise of the world melts away and the inner self can for a moment take off all of its masks. Harry gently lay his head down on Hermione’s shoulder and in seconds was soundly asleep.

* * *

Harry woke. He was not in his room. He was not in the guest room of Longbottom manor either. This was the Burrow. This was Ron’s room. He remembered the previous day. He remembered breaking down in front of everyone. He remembered the embarrassment at being unable to control himself. He was supposed to be staying at Longbottom Manor. He was supposed to be staying out of the their lives. And here he was imposing upon them again.

It was obviously early in the morning, maybe one or two o’clock, but Harry could not sleep. He got up and started down the stairs to make a cup of tea. At the landing he stopped. Was that crying? Harry sidled up next to the door, which was Ginny’s, and listened.

“It’s okay...”

That was Hermione which meant that it would be Ginny who was crying. So that was it. She was putting on a strong front, but Ron’s condition and the accumulated stress and danger were of course weighing down upon her. Harry kicked himself for not realizing how much she would be hurting. He debated with himself the ethics of entering a girl’s room in the middle of the night, but
Hermione was there.

Harry lightly knocked on the door and entered. Ginny and Hermione sat on the floor with Ginny’s head lying in Hermione’s lap. Ginny was clearly upset but Hermione’s face was wet too.

“Oh, Harry, it’s you.”

At hearing Hermione identify the interloper, Ginny sniffed and made an effort to stem her crying, but gave up when another sob racked her body. Hermione looked at Harry and mouthed the word ‘Ron’. Yeah—of course. Harry nodded a quick acknowledgement. How could he be so insensitive? Harry sat down across from the pair and placed his hand on Ginny’s upper-arm.

“I need to be strong—for Mum and Dad.”

Ginny paused here to pull a ragged breath through her runny nose.

“The boys are being strong. I have to be strong.”

Harry recognized himself in Ginny’s complaint. If there was one thing Harry hated, it was being weak in front of others. The need to rely upon others was frightening not least of all because so few people had ever been there for him. But that wasn’t true for Ginny. She had a family who loved and supported her from her earliest days. Still, vulnerability was a scary road to face, and maybe growing up among six brothers had inculcated an emotional distance that she was finding difficult to breach.

“Ginny, we all have to be weak sometimes. That’s why we have each other. I spent this entire evening being weak.” Harry smiled at this. “You saw it. There was much manly sobbing.”

Ginny chuckled briefly, but it didn’t stem the tide. Hermione jumped in.

“We all deal with grief in different ways. Your parents are keeping busy to stay distracted and the twins are spending all of their time at their new shop. You don’t have any of that, and even if you did it’s okay to cry. Harry and I will always be here for you.”

Harry nodded and set his other hand on Hermione’s shoulder in a show of support closing the triangle of contact.

“Harry, you probably shouldn’t be in here. Mum doesn’t like boys in my room—even now—even you.”

Surely Molly wouldn’t actually care, but Harry got up anyway. He had an idea that would both resolve Ginny’s concern, no matter how real, and also help everyone get back to sleep.

“Okay. Let’s all go downstairs then. I’ll make some chamomile tea.”

Hermione helped Ginny up and the three went downstairs trying not to wake anyone else and Harry started making tea.

“So how did I end up staying here?”

“Molly had a conversation with Lady Longbottom. They agreed that since you were already asleep you could stay here and that you could go with us to Dumbledore’s funeral tomorrow—today, I mean—and that she would meet you there. Oh, Harry, Professor McGonagall asked me to speak at the ceremony tomorrow, and she hoped that you would be willing sit on stage as well. You don’t
have to say anything if you don’t want to. Everything kind of blew up before she had a chance to ask. She says you can just play it by ear if you want.”

The funeral. Everyone who had depended on Dumbledore would be there. Harry had killed Dumbledore as surely as if he had issued a curse himself. But he should face those people. They deserved to see him shoulder the shame of it.

“Sure.”

Harry finished making tea and served it.

“You know, I wish Augusta had woken me. I can’t continue to be a burden on your parents, Ginny—particularly now. I almost didn’t come yesterday, because I am just a reminder of why Ron’s hurt.”

Harry hadn’t really intended to start a fight, but this was what he was going to get.

“Stop it!” Ginny exploded on Harry. “It was war. No matter what anyone said. It was a war and it was already killing people and now it is over. It’s over because you naïvely went to save your godfather. The details don’t matter. People get hurt in war and now it’s over.”

Ginny’s anger had easily overpowered her grief and worry, and Hermione was leaning back like she was trying to clear the blast radius, but Harry wasn’t going to back down.

“Ron didn’t need to be there. Either that or I should have been. If I hadn’t abandoned him—I could have saved him, but I wasn’t there when he needed someone to watch his back. He’s hurt because of me. Your Dad nearly died because of me. I track death and destruction around behind me and I am not going to inflict it upon the only family that ever really loved me.”

Harry locked his jaw and flared his eyes daring Ginny to respond and Ginny was moments from doing so when she stopped short looking back to Hermione who was quietly crying, eyes directed down to the table.

Harry quickly replayed the conversation looking for what had happened or been said. ‘He needed someone to watch his back.’ Hermione would read that as an indictment of her inability to stop the attack that injured Ron.

“Hermione, I didn’t mean...”

But this was all he was allowed before Hermione was up and out of her seat and trailing tears up the stairs. Stupid. It confirmed what Harry already knew. All he did was hurt the people around him. Ginny’s eyes could have boiled from the fire now inhabiting them. Her words previously filled with such rage now smouldered with frustration.

“Some of us just want to help you. I want you to be part of my family. And so do Mum and Dad. Stop pushing everyone away. We all chose to go with you to the Ministry to save Sirius because we wanted to, because we needed to, because we chose to. You give yourself far too much credit.”

And then Harry was alone. The last two people Harry would want to hurt had departed the room leaving an emptiness that leaked into Harry’s marrow.

‘I sometimes need help. People want to help me. People get hurt when they help me. I sometimes hurt people.’

This mantra looped in circles. Harry quietly cleaned up the kitchen and returned to bed. To Ron’s room.
‘I sometimes hurt people.’

* * *

Sun 23 June

“… to his last hour, as willing to stretch out a hand to a small boy with dragon pox as he was on the day I met him.”

Elphias Doge ended his eulogy of the man he worshipped in death nearly as much as in life. Minerva rose from her seat and stood behind the lectern that had just been vacated.

“Thank you, Elphias, that was... quite touching. Miss Granger?”

Hermione stood up. She proceeded to the lectern provided atop a small podium. The sun was situated at a angle that brightly lit the side of Hermione that was nearest Harry casting shadows back and down. A slight breeze insinuated itself among the threads of Hermione’s hair. When her voice broke the fast of silence, it was collected and steady.

An old man going a lone highway,

Came at the evening, cold and grey,

To a chasm, vast, and deep and wide,

Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;

The sullen stream had no fear for him;

But he turned, when safe on the other side,

And built a bridge to span the tide.

‘Old man,’ said a fellow pilgrim, near,

‘You are wasting strength with building here;

Your journey will end with the ending day;

You never again will pass this way;

You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide-

Why build you this bridge at the evening tide?’

The builder lifted his old grey head:

‘Good friend, in the path I have come,’ he said,

‘There followeth after me today,

A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.

He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;

Good friend, I am building this bridge for him.

—The Bridge Builder
Will Allen Dromgoole

With the delivery of the closing line Hermione turned and looked Harry straight in the eye. Of course. She was reminding Harry that he wasn’t truly alone. That even in death Dumbledore continued to look out for him. And it wasn’t just the former headmaster. Sirius and even his parents were the same. Each had come to obstacles in their lives and each had met and overcome them, not only for their own sake, but to secure the path for any that followed. For Harry. For Hermione. For the students. For all wizards, Harry looked out into the crowd and saw himself reflected in the faces of more than a hundred people. And in that reflection Harry saw words that cried out to be said.

“I have something to say…”

Harry awkwardly stood up, speaking before he’d reached the podium. Hermione graciously yielded to him.

“I don’t know if there is an afterlife.”

He had no idea where this was going.

“I guess we each have to figure that out for ourselves. But I see everyone here and I think I finally understand something. Each person here, student or teacher, witch or wizard, magical or not, has been touched by Dumbledore’s life.”

Harry didn’t know where these words were coming from but instead of the normal anxiety of public speaking he had tapped a source of peaceful reflection that now flowed from him.

“He charted a course that has directed all of us on a journey that we never even knew we were taking. And so we each carry within ourselves a part of Dumbledore. A piece of his legacy that carries on. A responsibility to continue where he left off. And that can’t die. So, I don’t know if there is an afterlife. But Dumbledore will continue if only as we live on in his name. We…”

And Harry gestured with a hand passing across the entire audience.

“We are all Dumbledore. The professor sought to bring light into the world with every step he took. And so I will carry that gift within me and shine it wherever I go.”

Harry raised his wand and almost silently incanted.

“Lumos.”

“Will you join me?”

He was never sure who was first. He had just convinced himself that this was a stupid idea. The guilty burn of embarrassment had begun to build. But one-by-one wands began to light. Hermione joined. Minerva. Elphias. Even Snape lifted his wand for the only man it seemed he’d ever
respected. In the morning light the audience of attendees took on the appearance of the sun reflecting on the gentle lapping wave of the seaside. And Harry thought back to the night before with Hermione and the tale from a seemingly very drunk Mad-Eye.

“There he goes.”

This time Harry’s voice was quiet, but Hermione heard him. As she gently took Harry’s hand and escorted him back to their seats, there came a call from the direction of Hogwarts. He tracked the sky and being a trained seeker was one of the first to spot the flame colored avian streaking through the sky.

Fawkes began a song. A terrible and beautiful song of woe and sorrow that melted Harry’s heart. Fawkes screamed his last lament for his bonded master and the melody emerged not from his beak but from the centre of every living soul. The catharsis welled up within them reaching the brim of every conscious mind.

And then Fawkes was gone—off to his private grief and to preparations for his final burning day as Albus Dumbledore’s familiar.

* * *

As the melancholic residue from Fawkes’s lament faded into the air, Daphne Greengrass allowed her light to dim and then go out. Regardless of what anyone said, Harry Potter had a leadership quality to him. Either that display was planned or not, and Daphne was leaning towards not. Even so, it was damn effective.

But the weirdest thing was that Daphne had seen the next person to light her wand. And that had been Pansy Parkinson. That was odd behaviour for Pansy. Sure she would partake of a gesture such as this for social reasons—to not be seen as callous however callous she might in truth be. But Harry had gone out on a limb and Pansy had followed with little hesitation. That eagerness didn’t fit the social calculus with which Pansy was expertly familiar.

Daphne couldn’t call Pansy her friend, not truly, and honestly few Slytherins could maintain a loyal friendship. But Pansy had been different for months. Even at the end of the Triwizard, Pansy had been reserved and ever since she had withdrawn from the endless triangulation that marked her typical social discourse. Pansy was Slytherin royalty and that required constant management. Daphne resolved to investigate at their next meet up.

* * *

Minerva gave a benediction to the memorial service and the attendees began recessing out. Harry was reseated with Hermione, Ginny, and the rest of the Weasley family who to Harry’s amazement continued to tolerate his presence despite the obvious connection between him and Ron’s condition. Harry was still reeling from the emotions brought on from Hermione’s selected reading, his extemporaneous speech, and the audience’s response. Ginny took Harry’s arm.

“Come on, Harry. I think I see Lady Longbottom.”

Ginny and Harry were about half way to Augusta when they found themselves confronted by the Slytherin ‘ice queen’ herself Pansy Parkinson. Her face was hard, but her eyes were red as if she had been crying.

“Potter, I need to talk to you—it’s important.”

Before Harry could reply Ginny stepped forward and took the matter into her own hands.
“Whatever foul plot your mind is concocting, it can wait. Can’t you see this is a funeral?”

Pansy looked stricken.

“I just need to talk to you.”

“Ginny, if she just needs to talk...”

Harry tried and failed to rein in Ginny who had history with Pansy. Well honestly everyone had history with Pansy. Ginny waved Harry off and got right in Pansy’s face who to her credit didn’t flinch.

“It is people like you that caused this all to happen. Evil courses in your veins like every Slytherin from your *sacred* twenty-eight.”

Ginny spat the word ‘sacred’ demonstrating her feelings on the particular institution before continuing.

“You hold on so tight to a world that no longer exists where you held all the power and could just crush anyone who tried to have what you had. The time of the death eaters has passed. Your dark lord is dead and gone and it is time for you to shrink back into your caves.”

Pansy didn’t budge. She had a steady visage of defiance carved upon the rock of her set jaw.

“My father is not a death eater.”

“Don’t pretend to be naïve, we all know who you and your family are. Now step aside before I make you.”

While Ginny’s expression was all fire and rage, Pansy’s was carefully sculpted neutral and devoid of the typical contemptuous sneer. She turned her face to Harry ignoring Ginny.

“The names Prewett and Weasley are among the scrolls of the sacred twenty-eight. What makes her better than me?”

And then Pansy took her leave walking steadily away in the direction she had come. Harry wasn’t sure but he thought that Pansy’s lower lip had pouted and her eyes tightened just before she turned away. It seemed unnecessarily cruel even if it was Pansy.

Harry turned back to Ginny as Pansy disappeared into the dispersing crowd.

“Was that really necessary?”

“Yes, definitely. Harry, you’ve dealt with Pansy before. She might play nice sometimes but she is a manipulative viper and she will get what she wants regardless of the body count she leaves behind. She doesn’t have a heart.”

Ginny pulled Harry further on though his gaze lingered wondering if that could be true. Pansy was callous and manipulative—that was proven true. But heartless? Harry’s musing was interrupted as they ran into Augusta about half way farther from where Pansy had interrupted them.

“My, what a large throng of people we have here. Harry, that was a singularly spectacular speech. Truly worthy of Dumbledore’s memory. If you speak even half as movingly in front of the Wizengamot, we may get you emancipated yet.”

Ginny gave Harry a questioning look.
“Apparently, who serves as my legal guardian is a matter for the state.”

Ginny nodded, but appeared to still have questions.

“I am sorry Harry, but this is too much excitement for my antiquated muscles and bones. If you don’t too greatly mind, I would like to return home.”

“Sure, of course.”

Harry turned to Ginny.

“I have to go.”

“When are you going to come visit?”

“Not for a while. Your family and Hermione need to focus on each other and Ron. I’ll be fine without you for a couple weeks, but I’ll try to come visit after we get all the guardianship nonsense out of the way.”

“Harry, you can’t still be blaming yourself for what happened to Ron. We talked about this. Your not to blame and Hermione isn’t either.”

“It just isn’t that easy.”

“It could be.”

Ginny pouted.

“Let us help you.”

Harry’s eyes began to water as his guilt got the better of him.

“You have no business helping me. You have no reason to help me. I only bring your family pain!”

“That’s not true and you know it! You say you endangered Dad; you saved Dad’s life! You saved me in the chamber! We owe you more than anything, but that doesn’t really have anything to do with it! We want to stand by you.”

“Maybe it would be better if you didn’t!”

“Harry!”

*I love you, damn it!*

Ginny held Harry’s eyes for a second and then turned and stalked away.

* * *

Harry lay down on his bed in Longbottom Manor. Despite everything from the funeral earlier today to the wake yesterday, Harry was not tired. He knew he should rest, should sleep and allow his brain to work through all the emotions of the past couple days, but Harry simply was not sleepy. After about half an hour of failure, Harry gave up and began to look for something to do. He was just about to leave the bedroom when he saw ‘Occlumency’ sitting on the dresser.

Harry picked up the book thinking to get a head start since, as far as he knew, Susan was still planning to study with him tomorrow. Harry opened to chapter one. In reading Harry came to four
conclusions.

First, Snape had no idea how to teach Occlumency. The book was very clear that practising intrusion was a step that should only be attempted once the basics of centring and shielding were understood. Otherwise, intruding into an unshielded mind would largely teach that mind to continue leaking thoughts—like repeatedly opening a wound.

Second, there were two types of Occlumency. Passive Occlumency, by far the more common, relied on emptying the mind and shielding memory. A mind employing passive Occlumency would appear blank or empty to the attacker. This form was easier by far to learn, but it was simple to detect when it was in use. As such it was less desirable than the other form, active Occlumency. When employing active Occlumency the target would project within his mind a simulation of his own thoughts. This was incredibly difficult, but tactically speaking was useful in countless ways. The attacker would have no idea that Occlumency was in use and the target could pass very convincing misinformation to the attacker. Unfortunately, active Occlumency had only been observed in a rare percentage of the population that came by it naturally and in carefully controlled situations in which the target could concentrate fully on the simulated mind.

Third, there were two types of Occludens—natural and learned. The natural Occludens required no training and protected her mind without much conscious thought. The learned Occludens had to actively train her brain to block intrusion. It occurred to Harry that Snape might be a natural Occludens and therefore would not understand Harry’s inability to learn intuitively. It would also explain Snape’s ability to defeat the Legilimency of both Dumbledore and Voldemort.

Forth, the first step to learning Occlumency was to learn the basics of meditation, centring, and internal focus. Simple breathing exercises along with concentration practice, would form the first section—probably weeks—of training.

Susan was going to get so bored of this. But Harry didn’t see any way around it. This was one of those areas where magic simply required hard work.

* * *

Harry was finishing dinner when Lady Augusta finally emerged from her rest. Harry had the table set and ready thanks to the assistance of the magical footman. Lady Augusta observed that Harry had created a simpler meal this time. She and Harry sat down to eat.

“So, Harry, have you decided to join us tomorrow on our trip to the Wizengamot.”

“I would like to, but I promised Susan I would study Occlumency with her and I am eager to get started.”

“Hmm. Susan is coming to the Wizengamot tomorrow. She must have intended for you to work together there. We’ll head out at eleven o’clock and the session doesn’t start until two o’clock, so you’ll have time to work on your Occlumency after lunch.”

“Oh. Well, then yes, I would like to come along. What will I have to do?”

“Nothing unusual this time. You, Susan, and Hannah will be sitting in the guest section of the chamber and you will be observing the procedures and politics. We’ll get together during breaks and for dinner after the session and discuss what all happened and why.”

“Okay.”

“Be sure to bring parchment and a quill. Or one of those abominable ball-point things.”
“Is there anything new about Neville?”

“Not yet. The doctors talk without saying much of anything so we still just have to wait.”

“What about Ron?”

“I asked after Mr. Weasley, but the answer was the same. His condition is unchanged and he’s still in critical condition.”

Harry went silent after this for several minutes.

“Harry, I know you probably just want time to be normal and grieve, but there is another event of which you should be made aware. Last week after what happened in the Ministry, the Wizengamot voted to hold a public memorial service for Dumbledore. Minister Fudge will be overseeing that service on Tuesday and he has been hopping out of his breeches to get me to ask you to attend. He says you can be as involved or uninvolved as you choose, but that it would be of great significance to the public to see you supporting Dumbledore.”

“To see me supporting Minister Fudge… right?”

“Yes, Harry, it is the nature of politics that the most manipulative will rise to the top.”

“You can tell Fudge that I’ll be there, that I’m doing it for Dumbledore, and I couldn’t care less if he gets thrown under the bus—a literal bus if necessary. Tell him that I have something I want to say.” Harry thought for a moment. “Do you have a Bible?”

“Yes, Harry, the Longbottom family owns a number of rather old and special Bibles. They’re in the library.”

“There’s a library?”

“A small one—more of a large study really. Would you like to see it after dinner?”

“Yes, I would.”

* * *

Mon. 24 June

Susan Bones had just finished putting on her outfit. She checked herself over in the mirror over her bedroom vanity. The simple green jewel neck top accentuated her complexion rather well. For the Wizengamot session she would be wearing a simple overrobe as that is standard for official ministry proceedings, but she wanted to look nice during the pre- and post-sessions.

“Susan.”

Auntie was calling from the front room and was probably getting impatient. Susan had taken a little longer than normal to get dressed.

“Yes, Auntie.”

As Susan emerged from her room Amelia handed her an official envelope complete with a soul-seal. This was some kind of official business and it was very unusual for Amelia to trust Susan with that kind of correspondence. Not that she couldn’t be trusted but there were designated channels for the transmission of that kind of message.
“Can you take a message to Lady Longbottom?”

“Sure.”

So Susan was playing courier. The curiosity ate at her but this was clearly important and probably none of Susan’s business.

“Now, don’t you need to be going?”

“Yeah, goodbye, Auntie Em.”

“Goodbye, Susie Q. I’ll see you after the session; we’re going to have dinner back here.”

This pet name game had gone on for years ever since Susan had first seen a stage production of the Wizard of Oz. Susan popped some powder in the hearth and stepped through emerging inside Longbottom Manor. Hannah and Harry were already waiting.

“Hi, Susan.”

“Hi, Harry. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

Susan felt a slight flush at his sentiment and then immediately schooled herself. She was being ridiculous and the nervous school girl routine was not something Harry would be interested in.

“Lady Augusta says we’ll have time between lunch and the Wizengamot session. Did you still want to study Occlumency?”

Susan smiled.

“Yeah!”

“Hannah, you could always join us.”

Susan directed all her willpower toward communicating telepathically with her best friend. Hannah put her hands on her hips.

“Are you kidding? I don’t study in the summer like some kind of Ravenclaw.”

Yes. Thank you, Hannah!

Lady Augusta stepped into the sitting room.

“It looks like you are all ready to go. Let’s get an early start then. I have a reservation at the Black Cat Café. I hope you don’t have any special dietary needs you haven’t informed me of.”

“No ma’am. Anything is good for me.”

“Oh! Lady Longbottom. Auntie Em gave me a letter for you. I almost forgot about it.”

Susan held out the letter to Augusta.

She took the letter and broke the seal with practised ease. Susan noticed the slightest expression of surprise as Augusta read the letter in full. But whatever was in it was apparently only for Augusta as she refolded the letter and directed everyone back through the hearth.
Lunch had been a unique affair for Harry. The Black Cat Café had an extensive menu but apparently specialized in ‘enhanced’ burgers. It was the most unusual burger from the most unusual café Harry had ever had. Magic couldn’t create nutritious food but it could change the flavour or texture or, in Harry’s case, add a bubbling zest to his burger’s cheese. It wasn’t bad per-
say but it wasn’t what Harry had expected either.

“So, how was yours Hannah?”

Hannah looked up from her barely eaten burger.

“Strawberry accented beef is not nearly as good as you would think.”

Susan coughed back a laugh.

“I told you to order the regular burger. Some things are just better as classics.”

Harry looked at the empty place in front of Augusta.

“Lady Augusta, why didn’t you eat anything?”

“Well, dear, when you reach my age you find that the body requires less frequent sustenance. I ate breakfast this morning, and the way you’ve been feeding me I may need to start watching my weight for the first time in decades.”

Harry started looking around the café.

“Where would be a good place to study before the Wizengamot starts? Ideally it would be quiet and allow concentration.”

“Well, you are welcome to use one of the public work offices off the atrium. There are dozens of them so at least one should be empty. The session starts at two o’clock, but I would like you back by one-thirty at the latest so I can get you situated before tapping in to my seat.”

Susan, Hannah, and Harry all nodded and got up from the table. Finding a room was not difficult. The first one they found was occupied by wizards discussing restrictions on magical creatures—specifically on where the jurisdiction over veela lay—but the second was available for use. It had a simple table and chairs and little else, but it would do.

Hannah took a glance at the room and then turned to leave.

“I am going to check out the parchment shop to see if there are any new special designs. I’ll see you guys at the Wizengamot. Don’t have too much fun.”

Hannah winked suggestively at Susan and left for a shop some ways down the atrium.

“Okay. The first part of this might be a little dull.”

Harry slipped back into his role as D.A. instructor and began explaining to Susan what they were going to do. The first step would just be practising breathing.

Harry and Susan moved the table to one side of the room and sat on the floor cross-legged and facing each other.

“Okay, the idea is to empty your mind by focusing visually on a single point and listening to your
breathing.”

Harry took out his wand.

“Lumos.”

He set it down between them.

“So three steps. One, look and focus on the light. Two, listen and focus on your breathing. Three, allow your mind to empty. It should happen naturally and there is no value in trying to force it.”

Susan nodded and looked down at Harry’s lighted wand. Harry, for his part, tried to focus on the gentle glow and his own breathing, but found himself instead distracted by the slight controlled rise and fall of Susan’s chest as she centred herself. Harry now also found himself distracted by the thumping of his heartbeat.

Harry chastised himself. There was no call for being a pervert. He was here to learn Occlumency and Susan had been good enough to help. She deserved far better then to be reduced to an object of sexual desire. But the more Harry thought about not thinking the more he thought. Damn it.

Harry clamped down hard on his thoughts that were quickly becoming inappropriate. This kind of love was not for Harry—not now at least. Harry successfully locked his gaze on the gentle light of Lumos and emptied his mind. Each thought that entered was gently swept away, absorbed in the rise and fall of Harry’s breath until all that remained was a black mental void—and then colourless. Concrete form gave way to abstract. Harry felt the void collapse inward growing ever smaller until his last thought came.

Ow.

Harry jolted back to awareness and took in his surroundings. He was laying flat on his back facing the ceiling. His head throbbed and he correctly extrapolated that he had fallen over and hit his head. As he started to sit up, the form of Susan appeared over him a visage of concern.

“Are you okay, Harry? I didn’t see you fall, but I heard the smack.”

“I think I’m fine. I think I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, I was starting to have trouble myself.”

“Maybe we should sit against the wall when we try again.”

“Yeah, but do you have any idea what time it is? I think I saw a time-piece on the wall outside the room.”

Susan got up and left the room briefly. Harry wasn’t worried; they’d only been practising a couple of minutes. When she returned she was frantic.

“Harry! It’s a quarter-to-two!”

* * *

“You’re late. Where have you been?”

Lady Augusta Longbottom levelled a stern scowl at Harry and Susan as they ran up the corridor.
outside the Wizengamot chamber. Harry and Susan were both out of breath.

“I... we... were...”

Susan began to answer but Augusta cut her off.

“We’ll talk later. We don’t have time for this now.”

Hannah peeked out from just behind and sent a questioning look directly at Susan. She gave the slightest shake of her head communicating to Hannah that this was not something to explore right now.

Augusta appeared to relax, her conundrum now solved. She led the youth further down the corridor to a set of double doors labelled ‘Wizengamot Gallery’.

“Susan and Hannah have been here before, but for your benefit Harry... You’ll be seated in the gallery. You are not permitted to speak or participate in the proceedings in any way. No talking, no clapping, no wild gestures. You are here to observe the highest chamber of law in magical Britain. Come now, young members-in-waiting, it is time to do the people’s business.”

With this Augusta opened the double doors with a slight flourish and ushered Hannah, Susan, and Harry to a set of open seats in the front row of the gallery.

“I must now take my leave or the session will begin without me.”

And Augusta left. Susan turned to Harry.

“Have you ever seen such a place?”

Susan was always enamoured with the austere but grand architecture of the Wizengamot chamber. It’s ancient majesty was an experience that could only be had in person.

“They say the chamber pre-dates the Ministry and even the Wizengamot itself.”

“Just last summer I had a trial before the Wizengamot after using my patronus to ward off dementors.”

Again Susan filed an inconsistency for later analysis. The Wizengamot did not meet in full for simple judicial proceedings. Susan saw that Harry was looking around the chamber for something—or perhaps someone.

Hannah leaned over to Susan.

“So, what happened? Did you guys...?”

Hannah let her question, along with the implication, hang in the air. Susan took a moment to process what Hannah was saying.

“What? No! You know me better than that.”

Susan’s perturbed whisper carried a little farther than she wanted, but Harry was still busy examining the members of the chamber.

“I know you kissed Justin before you’d even been introduced.”

“That was first year. We were eleven. And it was a dare.”
Hannah was clearly enjoying Susan’s discomfort but the conversation was cut short as the speaker called the chamber to order.

“Order! The chamber will be in order.”

It appeared that Elphias Doge was now serving as chief warlock and therefore speaker of the Wizengamot. His voice had a sharp gravel to it that had not been present at Dumbledore’s funeral but did have the quality of cutting through the din of the chamber.

“Noble and honourable colleagues. This session of the Wizengamot is finally coming to a close. With the passing of our dearest friend and chief warlock Albus Dumbledore, it stands before this body that a new chief warlock must be elected. As truly honoured as I have been to serve as acting speaker, I am old, tired, and do not relish continuing in this capacity. The new chief will begin with the next session starting on this eighth of July. So at this time the floor stands open for nominations.”

Susan had never seen an internal Wizengamot nomination and election process and so she watched closely as several members stood and were recognized.

“Lady Arianna Greengrass.”

The speaker recognized the first nominator.

“Thank you. I stand to nominate the Honourable Lord Aster Parkinson for speaker and chief warlock.”

As Lady Greengrass sat down, the chamber echoed with the familiar parliamentary sounds of approval and disapproval.

“The Honourable Earnest Forthright.”

As Mister Forthright made his nomination, Susan turned to look at Harry who was glaring up into the Wizengamot chamber with a malice Susan had rarely seen matched. She leaned over and whispered.

“Is everything okay?”

Harry responded quietly.

“No, it isn’t. How can he still sit in this chamber? Proud and arrogant, like nothing happened.”

Susan followed Harry’s gaze up toward the stadium benches where the members sat. She couldn’t quite figure out who Harry was referring to until the man stood up. The speaker noticed as well.

“Lord Lucius Malfoy.”

“Friends. A word...”

“The honourable member is reminded that this time is reserved for nominations and not lectures. Please make your statement brief.”

Elphias was obviously on a schedule.

“Of course. This body has been much in need of new leadership. The current administration has run this society into ruin by openly accepting muggle blood into our family lines and eroding the traditions that separate us from savages. It will only be through strong traditional values that
magical society will restore its lost grandeur and power. And no other could be as qualified to lead that revolution as Lord Abelsted Nott, whom I hereby nominate for speakership.”

Again the chamber roared with approval and disapproval, but Susan was too focused on Harry. She could see the rage roiling within him threatening to breach the surface. She knew some of the animosity between Draco and Harry, but why he felt so strongly about Draco’s father Susan had no idea.

Susan was about to give Harry an awkward side-hug when Hannah physically pulled Susan over and pointed. Lady Augusta was standing.

“Lady Augusta Longbottom”

“Honourable friends...”

The speaker sighed noticeably.

“My Lady, please, a name.”

“I will be brief. What this chamber needs is a steady hand with rock solid judgement. This body does not need a wild revolution nor can it continue to run with its eyes closed to the future. The future is here now and we must face it with intelligence, strength, and resolve. Those very qualities exist within Lady and Director of Law Enforcement Amelia Bones who I nominate for speaker and chief warlock.”

Susan’s mouth dropped open, dumbfounded amidst the comparably mixed uproar that resulted from this nomination. Auntie Amelia was on the list for Chief Warlock. Why hadn’t she told her? She looked up into the terraced seating attempting to gain the attention of her aunt. She was in her usual spot. After a few seconds of watching, Amelia turned and made eye contact with Susan. The slightest nod acknowledged that she would tell Susan all about it this evening.

“Order. Order. There will be order in the chamber.”

Susan was settling back in to listen to the rest of the session when she realized that Harry was no longer sitting next to her. He was gone. Susan got Hannah’s attention and indicated the empty seat and then the door. Hannah nodded her understanding and Susan quietly exited the gallery.

Where would Harry go? There was a men’s lavatory across the otherwise empty corridor. Susan went over and listened at the entryway. She could hear what she thought was crying, so she gently knocked on the wall outside the entrance.

“Harry?”

A few seconds passed and the sounds of crying lessened.

“Susan?”

Oh screw it. Susan walked tentatively into the men’s lavatory to find Harry standing over a sink with his eyes red and wet. He was obviously upset and unable to get control of himself.

Susan came up beside him and looked at him in the mirror.

“He was at the Ministry wasn’t he—Lord Malfoy—he was one of the death eaters at the Ministry?”
“He led the damn attack! He was responsible for the whole thing. He’s why Neville’s in hospital recovering. He’s why Ron’s...”

If Lucius had been at the ministry then the assault on the department of mysteries had been high-level. Sure it was common knowledge that Lord Malfoy was a death eater, but he rarely acted on his own preferring instead to issue directives to subordinates. But if Voldemort had been at the ministry then the order probably came direct and left Lucius little choice.

“Auntie wouldn’t tell me much in terms of details, but if he was involved why isn’t he being investigated.”

Harry shook his head and looked down at his hand.

_I must not tell lies._

The rage subsided and Harry sighed.

“Because we can’t tell anyone that Voldemort successfully returned to life and by extension we cannot explain why the death eaters were active again. Shit!”

Harry pounded his fist against the porcelain sink.

“Come on, Susan. Let’s get out of here.”

* * *

Amelia sat down at her dining table. Harry, Susan, and Hannah were seated around the circular table. Amelia had just finished serving the last of the food. Amelia wasn’t much of a cook and usually relied on her house elf Greny, but Greny was off today, and so she had managed a simple meal of spaghetti in sauce.

Amelia began serving the pasta onto plates for her guests when Susan chose to start the conversation.

“So spill! When did you and Augusta hatch this plan? And why so top secret?”

“Actually I hadn’t really decided until this morning. That letter I gave you to give Augusta was my agreeing to her plan to nominate me. We’ve been discussing it for a few days.”

“But why so secret?”

“I honestly didn’t know if she still wanted to go through with it and I thought getting you excited would be cruel if it all came to nothing. And it would be politically damaging if it got out and I wasn’t nominated. Needless to say it’s still a long shot.”

“Lady Bones?”

Harry seemed insistent upon being formal.

“‘Amelia’ please. I don’t like the Lady and Lord nonsense when I can avoid it. If you must be formal, you may call me Director as that is my work and passion. And if you hang around Susie Q enough you’ll probably end up calling me Em.”

“Sorry, Director, how can Lucius Malfoy still be part of the Wizengamot? Isn’t he a confirmed death eater? Even without confirming Voldemort’s return we could still oust Lord Malfoy as a death eater.”
“There isn’t enough proof that doesn’t raise other questions. If we are to hide Voldemort’s return, then we have to let Lucius be free—for now. But we are watching him closely. If his influence steps outside of the political arena, we’ll be there and he will be brought to justice...”

Amelia’s normally neutral face softened.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I know you wanted justice and this is a rude way to learn about the reality of justice in magical Britain.”

“I think I understand.”

Amelia nodded and turned to Susan with a wry smile.

“So, Susan, Augusta tells me that I may need to talk to you about impropriety and behaviour around boys.”

Susan blushed a beet red colour.

“It was nothing really. Harry and I just ran late. We were studying.”

Amelia’s smile did not diminish, but she did continue.

“Look, I trust your judgement and Harry seems a nice enough chap, but you need to be mindful of how things look to other people. No harm was done in this case because it was just Hannah and Augusta and they also trust you, but rumours can get started in the dumbest of ways, and rumours can affect important things, even your marriage prospects.”

Susan looked more embarrassed than chastened.

“I understand.”

“You were studying—in June?”

Susan perked back up at the opportunity to change subjects.

“Yes, Harry wants to learn Occlumency and I thought it would be easier to study with a partner. Currently we’re working on breathing exercises.”

“Really. Occlumency is a valuable skill to those who want to become Aurors someday. Is that still your goal, Harry?”

Harry looked up from his food.

“Yeah, I think so. There isn’t enough justice in the world.”

“That there isn’t.”

Amelia was impressed with the young man.

“Harry, you said you would be going to the Wizengamot sessions with Hannah and Susan. Why don’t you come here to study? That way we don’t have to concern ourselves with impropriety, which I don’t actually care about as much as I let on, and perhaps I can help the two of you. Occlumency is one of those subjects that is often taught incorrectly. What resources are you using?”

Harry excused himself and retrieved ‘Occlumency’ from his pack in the entryway. He set the book
in front of Amelia.

“Huh, no author, no publisher.”

Amelia skimmed the first few pages.

“Well, yeah, this seems like a good guide. Did you get it from Augusta? She has such a well-appointed library.”

Harry and Susan each shook their head.

“No, it came from a muggle book store.”

Amelia’s brow furrowed and she took out her wand indicating that she wanted to use a spell on the book.

“Do you mind?”

“No, please.”

“Revelio.”

Amelia then put her wand back down and instead hovered her palm over the book for a few seconds more. She felt for the telltale signs of embedded wards or curse weaving ultimately finding nothing.

“Sorry, that’s the detective in me. It looks okay. It came through the Ministry wards, so it seems safe. So... would you like to study here starting tomorrow?”

“Actually, I am going to be participating in Fudge’s memorial for Dumbledore tomorrow morning so I probably won’t be able to come to study or to attend the Wizengamot. But Wednesday sounds good.”

“Yes, of course, I forgot about the memorial. The Wizengamot will be recessed for that reason. What are you going to be doing at the ceremony?”

“There’s a passage I want to read. Actually, do you have any Bibles? Lady Augusta has some in her library but they are old translations and I was hoping for something more modern.”

“Actually I think Ms. Abbott gave me something recently. All of my other Bibles would be traditional like Augusta’s.”

Hannah who found Amelia intimidating had eaten quietly up until this point.


“I don’t remember the chapter and verse, but I could find it.”

Amelia got up from the table.

“Just a second. Let me see if I can find it.”

She left down the hall for a second and then came back.

“Yes, here it is.”

“You can keep it if you want.”

Amelia wasn’t devout by any means but a good King James would do her fine.

* * *

Tue. 25 June

“... and let us hope that Dumbledore found the peace in death that he never was able to achieve in life.”

Harry sat trying not to appear sulky as Minister Cornelius Fudge completed his speech. The Minister’s statement had been kind but ultimately self-serving. With Dumbledore now dead it would do no good to display the daylight between the two of them. Minister Fudge wanted Dumbledore’s support even though he was dead.

“And now Professor Minerva McGonagall, close friend to Albus and newly instated Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has something to share. Please, professor.”

Minerva stood up behind the lectern and cleared her throat.

“I’ve never been much for giving speeches. So I’ll keep this short.”

Harry smirked since he recalled some rather epic speeches delivered on his own behalf.

“Albus was a good friend and a great leader. Hogwarts was always safe when he was around. I cannot promise to be half the headteacher he was, but his example will always serve as my guide. He will be missed by all. Thank you.”

Minerva stepped down. Boy that was short. Harry recognized his cue. He was very nervous never really wanting the attention he was given. He stepped to the lectern. Harry gathered his thoughts. He pulled out the bible Amelia had gifted him and began to read his selected section.

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God’s word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, ‘Jump,’ and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.

—1 Corinthians 13:1-7

The Message

Harry let the passage hang for a moment to let the crowd tune in to what he would say next. Harry began slowly, projecting only enough to be picked up by Fudge’s wand which had been mounted on the lectern and was acting as an amplifier of sorts.

“It’s hard to talk about the professor. Dumbledore kept his own council. He never told anybody everything. He was secretive. He was manipulative. He controlled my life almost from birth.”

Harry smiled inside at the discomfort he could sense in Minister Fudge at the unexpected turn.
Speaking ill of the dead was a political faux pas.

Harry continued quietly almost confessionally.

“I used to resent him for lying to me. But now, I think this careful parcelling of knowledge... he did it with purpose. It was strategically designed to bring people together. To make us realize how much we need each other. I believe Albus knew he was going to die. Maybe not last week. But he was preparing us for the day when he could no longer shoulder the burden on our behalf.”

Harry paused here. Among the crowd you could have heard a wand drop.

“That day has come. And now we must stand together to hold the banner of the light and stand against the onslaught of dark that, for now beaten, is sure to return. The divisions that divide us are far smaller and less significant than the bonds that join us together.”

“Finally, on a personal note, Dumbledore tried to teach me about love. I didn’t understand, then. How could love be a weapon when wielded against a wand? I think I may begin to understand now.”

* * *

The memorial service lasted another hour, but soon enough the statements and poems and whatnot stopped. Harry was helping himself down from the stage where he’d been seated when he saw Augusta hurry up to him—as much as Augusta ever hurried.

“Harry! I have news about Neville. The doctors sent a courier; Neville is awake. We are going to head right over there.”

“Yes, of course!”

Harry waved goodbye to Professor McGonagall and hurried off with Augusta to go to St. Mungo’s. The last thing Harry saw before being dragged through a Ministry atrium floo was Pansy Parkinson running after him trying to get his attention. What could she possibly want?

* * *

Harry and Augusta emerged in the St. Mungo’s lobby and were in short order up the lift and standing inside Neville’s room. He was sitting up in bed, and if Harry had not seen him mere days before, he would have assumed Neville to be in perfect health.

“Hi, Neville.”

“Hi, Harry. Hi, Gran.”

Augusta sat down at the foot of Neville’s bed.

“How are you feeling?”

“Everything hurts, a lot. But it seems to be getting better now.”

“Don’t get too comfortable. You’re on full neuro-suppression charm, and it will be a long road with a lot of pain to get off of that.”

Wow, Augusta really didn’t hold punches. What would one say to that? Neville turned to Harry who had sat in one of the guest chairs and changed the subject.
“Harry, no one will talk to me. Is everyone okay?”

Harry took a deep breath. It was appropriate that he deliver this news.

“Most of us are fine. Ron is in worse shape than you. He took a truly nasty curse head on. He is still in critical condition, but he doesn’t seem to be declining. He hasn’t woken up at all. Other than that... Dumbledore and Sirius are both dead. So is Voldemort.”

“Oh.”

Neville’s face fell a little.

“How are you holding up?”

Harry chuckled.

“You’re the one in the hospital bed. No, I am fine. I am working through it now. The Weasleys put on a wake for Sirius—it seemed appropriate. Ginny, Hermione, and Luna made it out fine.”

“So, Gran, when am I getting out of here. I hurt, but I can take these soothing potions at home.”

“Oh, dear. Like I said, you need to come off of the charms before you can come home. Right now we hope to get you out of here on Saturday.”

Neville looked disappointed.

“Okay. Honestly, I’m really bored.”

“Oh, my dear. I would like nothing better than to sit with you all day long, but as usual politics will wait for no one. Harry told you that Dumbledore died.”

Neville’s eyes lit with understanding.

“So who’s the new chief warlock?”

“Still being decided. I nominated Madam Bones for the position. Created quite a stir it seems.”

“No way! Lady Amelia would never agree to step down as Director and she’d almost have to.”

“She actually agreed to it ahead of time. I think she’s confident enough in Auror Shacklebolt to leave it in his hands. But all this means that I have to be in the Wizengamot for the rest of the week. I can still come by each morning though.”

“Thanks. That would be nice Gran, but don’t go to any trouble.”

“Neville, you are nothing but trouble.”

Neville grinned sheepishly.

“Yes, Gran.”

“Now rest. That’s an order.”
“Good Morning, Harry.”

Amelia greeted Harry as he arrived in the Bones household. She sat at the kitchen counter eating cereal and reading the Prophet.

“You don’t need breakfast do you?”
“No, I ate with Augusta and Hannah before I came. They’re visiting Neville this morning.”

Amelia nodded thoughtfully.

“Susan’s in her bedroom just down the hall. And Harry...”

Amelia paused and must have thought better of what she wanted to say.

“Never mind. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Harry had some difficulty reconciling the casual, familial Amelia with the stern powerhouse director of the DMLE. Harry proceeded down the narrow hall that adjoined the various bedrooms and bathrooms of the home. He saw a light in the room at the very end of the hall. The door was slightly ajar. Harry knocked twice gently.

“Susan?”

“Harry? Come on in.”

Harry opened the door. Susan’s room was neat but not immaculate. It had a small dresser and vanity. Susan was sitting on her twin bed wearing a t-shirt and denim shorts reading a book titled ‘Who am I?’ by an author Harry couldn’t make out.

“Hi, Harry.”

Susan closed her book and scooted off the bed and onto the floor sitting cross-legged with her back to the bed. She indicated for Harry to sit across from her which Harry obliged with his back now against her dresser.

“So, what are we doing today?”

“I think we have to continue with the centring exercise that we tried on Monday. Hopefully this time I won’t fall over. Do you have a timer we can set?”

“Oh don’t worry; Auntie Em will come get us when it’s time to go.”

“Okay, ‘Occlumency’ suggests working with a partner. And if you are, you should work on sensing each other while centring. The idea is that one is always in tangential mental contact with those around them. The strength of that contact lessens with distance and increases with familiarity. Since we are a few feet apart and new at this, we should only really be able to detect each other if at all.”

Susan nodded with interest.

“So, we follow the exercises we did before to clear our mind and then look for each other. What do we look for?”

Harry had the same question when he read that section, so he was prepared for this question.

“According to ‘Occlumency’, it could have a few different manifestations. Some people hear a tone. Some people perceive it as a motion: rotating, oscillating, vibrating. Sometimes it’s patterns of hot and cold. Some people see colours. We’ll just have to try and see.”

Harry went to get out his wand and light Lumos, but Susan reached out and stopped him by placing
her hand on his.

“Actually, Harry, I have candles. I was thinking those might work better.”

Susan reached over to her vanity and opened the lower drawer. She retrieved a small votive candle and set it between them simultaneously retrieving her own wand.

“Incendio.”

A small flame burst forth and settled into a small flickering glow.

Harry again settled back into concentration. Clearing his mind was slightly easier now. He had practised each night prior to bed both as a sleep aid and as practice in centring his mind. Harry now gently swept the thoughts away.

He found himself distracted by the beauty of the flame, by uncertainty over Susan’s aunt, and by wondering why girls’ rooms were always clean.

He couldn’t see how he could notice Susan in his mind without thinking. Noticing was a form of thinking.

Susan smelled nice. Really nice.

So it wasn’t going easy and Harry began to question the wisdom of working with a partner of the opposite sex—and an attractive one at that—but that really wasn’t fair since this was a problem in Harry’s own head. He shouldn’t assume that she had any interest in him... that way. Finally, Harry’s mind submitted and settled into the gentle black and then into the colourless void.

Harry sat like this for several minutes of ‘mind time’ and waited for something to happen. Then Harry begin ‘looking’ around. Each time Harry’s focus changed his mind would burst with thoughts and then resettle. This went on for many actual minutes. Harry was frustrated.

He was on the verge of giving up for the day when he felt it. It wasn’t a colour or a sound. It could maybe be described as motion. This thought occurred coincident with a sharp intake of breath from Susan. And together these two stimuli shattered Harry’s concentration.

When he opened his eyes, Susan had the largest smile on her face.

“I think I did it! You were like a wave rippling out from a point of otherwise stillness. I mean not a wave, really, but more like a distortion.”

Harry returned Susan’s smile.

“Yeah, I think I got it too. I can’t really describe it. It was like seeing an image through hot air. Waving and distorted. But it wasn’t really ‘seeing’ at all.”

Harry’s mouth grasped for the words and failed.

“I don’t know. How long did that take?”

Susan checked her clock.

“Thirty-five minutes, give or take.”

“Then we have time to try again.”
Harry looked to Susan and she nodded eagerly.

* * *

Amelia was troubled, and she couldn’t quite tell why. It definitely had something to do with Susan being alone in her room with a boy. But really, she trusted Susan and Harry did seem innocent to a fault. But Amelia also remembered her own Occlumency instruction. That kind of training was rather vulnerable and intimate. It involved potentially exposing one’s thoughts and feelings to another—though neither Harry nor Susan were trained in Legilimency, so it was perhaps not the same. But Amelia knew Susan had a crush on the boy-who-lived. Really, most girls of her generation did at one age or another. That really isn’t the same thing as touching each others minds. And what if it did turn into more than a crush or a summer romance. Susan had responsibilities to her house.

Amelia was troubled.

* * *

“Noble and honourable friends, a grave matter has been brewing in the belly of our homes for far too long and it is high-time we root it out. For we more venerable members of this chamber, it is taken as a fact incontrovertible that magic is fading from this world.”

Susan was trying to listen to Lord Malfoy’s statement, but was still concerned about Harry. He was sitting calmly next to her, but she was worried about what might be going on beneath his current cool exterior.

“Magic is waning from our blood with every generation and the reason is self-apparent. The breakneck pace at which this society is accepting muggle-born and wizards of unverified descent is diluting the literal life’s blood of magical society.”

Auntie Em had warned them that this bill was being presented today.

“Of course, we dare not stumble blindly on this issue. We must study this effect in depth before accepting any dubious conclusions. Some friends of this chamber suggest that the abatement of magic might not relate to the surging influx of non-magical blood. In fact some have gone so far as to suggest that magic is not carried by blood-descent at all.”

Lucius’s slick tone made this conclusion seem absurd but Susan could not help but believe that if magic were passed by genetics then the pure-blood families would produce offspring of much greater power and talent, but this did not seem to be the case.

“Regardless of such misconceptions, we must act now to stem the tide and only then evaluate the opportunities to allow proper integration into magical society without causing the detrimental effects that we see so clearly today.

“I lay before the honourable members of this chamber the Magical Immigration Reform Act or MIR act. This proposal is co-authored by 17 members of this chamber and numerous experts within the Ministry. It contains common sense reforms to limit and measure the influx of unknown blood-descent into society.”

Lucius paused dramatically.

“Friends... an open road between non-magical and magical society will only lead to the loss of our heritage. Thank you. I request that the proposal be considered read and that further discussion be held for a period of one day so that members may inform themselves fully on the measures
described within. I yield the floor.”

As Lucius sat down Augusta Longbottom stood up and Acting Chief Warlock Elphias Doge recognized her.

“Lady Augusta Longbottom”

Augusta was in full form and her presence demanded the attention of all present.

“Would the honourable member representing the house of Malfoy stand for a single question?”

Lucius stood up.

“Lord Lucius Malfoy”

“As I said, I ask for one day’s consideration prior to responding to any questions.”

Augusta smiled.

“Surely such ‘venerable’ members as have already read and considered the drafts of your proposal might ask questions presently. Or does my noble colleague imply that he needs time to prepare answers for the proposal he himself co-wrote?”

“I would refer the noble Lady of house Longbottom to my earlier statement. It would not do to get ahead of ourselves. Noble speaker, the lady has asked and I have answered a question. Now, might we move on.”

As Lucius sat down, the chamber echoed with a few here-here’s and the speaker intervened.

“Order. Order. We will consider the proposal in depth and allow full discussion... tomorrow. The chair must respect the time allotted for arguments especially considering the approaching end of session on Friday and the need to provide candidates for the position of Chief Warlock time to speak to their qualifications on the floor. Today, I must give such time to three of the six candidates for questions and answers and that will take much of the remaining time.”

* * *

“I’m Just saying it’s codswallop. That’s all.”

Susan watched as Harry finished his abuse of the MIR act provisions and went back to eating. They were all seated along Lady Longbottom’s dining room table. All—in this case—meant Augusta, Amelia, Harry, and Susan herself. Greny had come along from home and had made an excellent dinner.

“Lord Malfoy may be a racist prick, but several studies are showing a general reduction in the power of magic. That much is true.”

Susan grinned inside at the image of Auntie Em saying ‘racist prick’, but Harry wasn’t smiling.

“Lady Amelia, that can’t be from muggleborns and half-bloods. Muggleborn students at Hogwarts are some of the strongest. If anything, magic seems to be waning among pure-bloods more than anywhere.”

“Perhaps, but the studies included in the drafts of the bill don’t show that.”

Augusta stopped Amelia at this point.
“Don’t dismiss Harry’s idea too quickly, Amelia. The pure-blood families of the sacred twenty-eight are some of the most inbred in magical Britain. Doesn’t it seem plausible that some defect is slowly leeching away their magic? Isn’t it possible that the studies have a bias?”

“Yes, and I agree with both of you, but it is politically infeasible to even suggest that in an official capacity.”

Susan interjected.

“Surely we can point out that there is no evidence that the deleterious effect comes from muggleborns though. How can we restrict the movements of citizens that have nothing to do with the problem?”

Harry picked up on Susan’s line of thinking.

“Exactly. Surely the studies should be completed prior to the institution of regulation... so the measure will be defeated, right?”

Amelia shook her head.

“I don’t think so, Harry. Without Dumbledore in the chair, the purists have more influence and more votes. With Lord Malfoy behind the proposal, I expect it will pass.”

“But the rules are draconian. If Hermione were to go home for the summer, she would need an official ministry document to return to Hogwarts even though she’s already enrolled and completed five years. The process involves invasive medical exams and personal interviews. And it doesn’t sound like the Ministry plans to approve many people. This proposal basically cuts any non-resident muggleborn off from either magical society or their muggle family.”

Augusta leaned in conspiratorially.

“Harry, I’m sorry to say that there are many troubling proposals being brought to the floor. It could be said that this is not the worst. You might suggest to Hermione that her parents visit her rather than——”

“Augusta!”

Auntie Em interrupted her so violently that everyone froze for several seconds. She had always deferred to her ladyship’s age and wisdom, but in this case her authority training had clearly been brought to bear.

“Augusta, you know that the rules prevent you from revealing anything more. That’s probably too much already. And you know that my position as Director puts me in an awkward situation with regard to breach of regulation. So I must stop this conversation here.”

“Of course, Amelia.”

No, that wasn’t right. If the laws were only going to get worse and hurt people more, then she needed to know. Harry needed to know. Everyone should know. The fact that the Wizengamot’s internal considerations were kept private was beyond ridiculous. She had to say something.

“Wait?! But if something is going to happen we need to know about it! These things that Lucius wants to do are wrong. The people should have a voice in this.”

Augusta extended a placating hand.
“No, Susan, your aunt is right. To continue would threaten my privileges in the Wizengamot and we need every vote we can get right now.”

“But...”

“No proposal is guaranteed to come before the chamber—you know that—and the chamber isn’t guaranteed to vote on it if it does. So there isn’t any issue yet. It is just a matter of caution.”

Susan noticed Lady Augusta’s use of the word ‘yet’. Perhaps there wasn’t an issue ‘yet’, but something was going to happen and somewhat soon it sounded like. This new pureblood reign in the Wizengamot weighed upon her heart. Politics were always contentious, but in years past it had always filled Susan with pride to step into the chamber. Now it was mostly anxiety. Hopefully Harry would advise Hermione. And Susan jotted down a mental note to speak with Justin about staying within the magical alcoves of Britain for the time being—though he might already be at home.

* * *

Thu. 27 June

Neville was hurting. Neville was bored, but he was hurting. Each day since that night at the ministry had been different. Some days were better and Neville could operate almost normally, but other days got worse. The overall trend line might slope towards healing, but the valleys were unbearable. Today was not a good day.

It had started with the nurse needing to replace his I.V. line shortly after midnight. It had been the smallest poke. As a young child Neville had hated needles, but he’d been able to sit politely for inoculation. Small injuries were part of life. Removing the original I.V. line had felt like fire was running through his veins but Neville had rationalized it away. Inserting the new one brought his mind crashing down. He didn’t remember anything other than the pain; he blacked out. Later he’d glanced at his chart when the nurse was away. Apparently he’d screamed and convulsed and ultimately had to be placed in a full-body bind to get the new line in.

Neville felt shame at his weakness, no matter how justified. The doctor had been by later that morning and discussed the matter with him.

“Neville I want you to understand that the pain you feel is not a result of any natural process. Recovering from the cruciatus is a long road and you are doing amazingly well. I’ve spoken with your grandmother and she has agreed to allow you to visit a psychological pain specialist. There isn’t much more we can do from a medical standpoint. We will continue to apply neuro suppression charms through the end of the week, but your brain needs access to those pathways to return them to normal activity. It will be hard and with your permission I’d like to have Dr. Soulager visit you later today.”

At the mention that the doctor was planning to remove some of his pain regimen Neville encountered a fear response. His heart rate increased and his palms began to sweat. No. He couldn’t do that again. It had threatened his sanity the first time and Neville knew that it was no idle threat.

“I don’t think I can handle it. Please, I don’t want to feel that way again. You can’t.”

“I understand what you are going through, but this is a necessary step. Yes, it’s going to be miserable, but our tests give us every confidence that you will emerge unharmed and healthier for
“But you said I could go home this weekend. I can’t handle this much pain. I need more help not less.”

An unfamiliar nurse knocked on the door.

“Doctor. The patient has visitors. Shall I allow them back?”

“Thank you, nurse. Give me ten minutes.”

Neville’s doctor waited for the nurse to leave before continuing.

“Give some thought to it. Talk with Dr. Soulager.”

As the doctor left, Neville silently thanked him for the few minutes he would need to pull himself back together. The anxiety threatened to overtake him and the last thing he needed was to fall apart again in front of Gran.

* * *

Susan watched as the doctor—she hadn’t caught his name—spoke with Lady Augusta and Hannah. The look on Hannah’s face spoke volumes. The news wasn’t positive and Susan’s sympathy stretched out to her best friend.

Neville hadn’t really been on Susan’s radar until this past semester when Hannah confessed that she ‘liked’ Neville. Susan didn’t usually put much stock in Hannah’s crushes, but this had been something more. Really, they had classes together and Neville was a powerhouse in Herbology, but other than that the boy was largely unremarkable. They travelled in similar circles during the summer break and this last semester the two had been seen together between classes and even at meals.

Hannah normally shared everything with Susan, like Susan’s interest in Harry for example. But the story of Hannah and Neville was still a mystery as far as Susan could tell.

The weight of the past several days clearly was taking its toll. Hannah’s posture was sunken, her mouth slightly open, her right index finger rested against a trembling lip as she took in whatever tiding the doctor had to give. By comparison Lady Augusta appeared—as usual—a bulwark ever unchanging.

As the conversation came to a close, Hannah turned back to face Susan who was sitting next to Harry in the primary waiting room. Hannah took a large breath and slowly let it out before walking over. Susan stood up to meet her friend and Harry followed suit.

“The doctor says Neville’s not having a good day. He’s okay with being seen, but we shouldn’t touch him and he may tire quickly. I...”

Hannah broke off again raising her hand to her lips. It didn’t take Susan’s significant abilities at reading people to know that Hannah was looking for support and comfort to reduce her severe anxiety. Susan placed her arm around Hannah’s middle back and gave her a squeeze.

“It will get better in time. We’ll be right there with you.”

Hannah returned a weak smile but nodded and the three followed as Augusta led the group to Neville’s room.
Neville lay on a standard hospital bed underneath a lightweight blanket. Hannah’s joy quelled as Neville’s distressed form played upon her eyes. He looked faint of pallor with clammy skin and his breath was cautiously measured and shallow.

His expression brightened, if not his complexion, as he took notice of his visitors. He shifted slightly in bed, but then cringed in acute discomfort. As the wave of sensation peeked his eyes closed and his teeth clenched fending off the pain.

The cruciatus had blown open the pain pathways in the brain and until they closed any contact or movement would be painful when not under full neuro-charm. That’s what the doctor had said. An emptiness grew in Hannah’s heart. She was of no use to Neville at all. She could not stop or alleviate his suffering.

“Don’t move, dear. The doctors have told you that more than once,” Lady Augusta gently scolded her grandson.

As the pain subsided, Neville nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened his eyes.

“So, what’s up, Gran?”

“Well Neville dear, the doctor informs me that as of the weekend you will be ready for discharge. I have all of the details on the charm and potion regimen that you’ll need.”

She turned to Harry.

“Harry, you’ve been good company and you are of course still welcome to stay...”

And back to Neville.

“But I am ready to have my grandson back at home. How does that sound?”

Neville hesitated. The pause grew in duration as Neville appeared to be blocked in his reply. He’s scared. Hannah’s stomach caught in her throat and she held back the tears that threatened to burn through. Neville needed strength not pity. As the seconds grew towards an awkward interval, the response arrived in a tenuous tone.

“Okay.”

Hannah could see the true answer in Neville’s eyes. Lady Augusta was always pushing him. She would acknowledge him only if everything was perfect. And even then only as if such a result was expected from the start. Every failing was caught, every weakness judged. Neville’s self-worth hinged entirely upon his achievement in areas well beyond his natural ability. Hannah felt a resentment rise directed at the venerable grandmother. The ‘great’ Augusta Longbottom should at least deign to treat her grandson like a human.

“You said just a couple days ago that you wanted to get home. That you were bored.”

And there it was. Hanging in the silent question. A judgement upon Neville’s weakness. A Longbottom would be strong, would push through the pain. A Longbottom would choose insanity over submission. Neville didn’t want to appear weak, but the alternative was right in this hospital a few floors away—his parents.

“But Gran, things were getting better. It’s not getting better any more. I need the suppression
charms to control the pain and they’ll only give them to me while I’m here. They keep taking the
dose down and each time it gets worse. I can’t handle it.”

Neville’s eyes cast downward evincing a shame that Hannah was rapidly catalysing into anger.

“Neville, dear, as you well know I have significant experience supporting loved ones in pain. Pain
is not foreign to my body either. The doctor says you’re ready and I more than agree. You brain is
convincing you that it feels worse than it does, because neural suppression charms in the pain areas
of the brain are strongly narcotic. Now you are well aware of that because that’s how your parents
recovery ended in permanent psychiatric institutionalization.”

What had been a smouldering resentment, a resolution to provide support where the Lady of House
Longbottom would provide none, flamed into rage. It would not stand. We don’t treat those who
hurt by dealing a greater burden. Hannah wouldn’t be able to convince her ladyship, but the words
bubbled against her lips threatening to escape and attack Augusta and by proxy hurt Neville more.

Hannah turned and left the room without a further word.

* * *

The seat of the Wizengamot gallery was cold and hard. It was more than a bench but less than a
chair. Harry hadn’t noticed so much during the first few sessions distracted as he was by the
presence of a death eater in the highest chamber of magical law in Britain. But the snake of a man
must have slithered to some other pit as his seat remained empty and the session was about to
begin.

The morning had been interesting, too. Hannah was a Hufflepuff and except in defense of others
Harry had observed that they avoided confrontation. It had been obvious to Harry that Lady
Augusta’s words to Neville would raise her hackles, but Harry did not envy Hannah her position.
The august Lady Longbottom could swat any of them like a fly—at least forensically—but her
words were difficult to hear.

She was right unfortunately.

Aunt Marge had once described the suffering of one of her neighbours, something like Fuster. He
was a retired military man and had lost a hand in battle. Marge had described the shady back-
channels through which he acquired his ‘medication’ as a point against the effectiveness of the
NHS, but without saying so it sounded to Harry as if Colonel Fuster, or whoever, was probably
addicted to pain killers.

Still... perhaps that was better than the threat of being driven mad with pain. In either case Hannah
seemed to have recovered and was sitting quietly on the other side of Susan.

Lady Augusta was already seated looking at once like a still statue reflected in a perfectly calm
lake but also sizzling with energy. The Wizengamot was her natural habitat and woe be the fool
who tangled with her there. Director Bones was just tapping in as the acting speaker called the
floor to open session.

“Order.”

The chamber quieted quickly in response to this opening invocation.

“Noble members of the Wizengamot welcome and good afternoon. The election of our new
speaker approaches with the swiftness of Mercury and the anticipation of Aphrodite. Today, the
chamber will interview the three remaining candidates. However, as promised, we will open with
the consideration of Lord Malfoy’s MIR act proposal. As Lord Malfoy has sent his apologies on his absence due to illness, I have been asked to recognize Lord Selwyn in his place.”

Lord Selwyn was an unremarkable man, but he did bear a scar along his left cheek. His eyes were hard, casting an almost cruel reflection upon his politic smile. When he spoke his voice was rough and shallow as though his throat was parched.

“Greetings. I won’t waste your time expounding upon the composition of the proposal. Most aspects are clear and obvious. I hope that you all can see that. But if there are questions then I am obliged to answer them.”

He was bored. He obviously didn’t care what was asked or answered. This was a hoop to be jumped through—a child’s busy work. Harry couldn’t imagine being so flippant with the responsibilities of governance, but this Selwyn clearly didn’t care.

And why wasn’t Malfoy here? Lady Augusta had called him out as a coward for not answering questions and now that appeared to be true. In his place he left a drone that could not care less whether the bill passed or not.

“Lady Arianna Greengrass.”

“Lord Selwyn, if I read the bill correctly, it would appear that the authors have placed the cart in front of the horse. Yes, if magical power is failing through the influence of a more inclusive magical society, then it must be addressed and controlled. But the language before me implements regulations upon individuals that have done nothing wrong. It commissions an arithmantical study of the effect to begin in three months, but implementation of integration limitations begin immediately. How is this appropriate? Did not the well-spoken Lord Malfoy say that we must not stumble blindly? Is this how out muggleborn children are to be treated? What say you?”

“I say that your tears for muggles who have no heritage or understanding of our society but still want to live among us and eat our food and work our jobs could drown a sea of crocodiles. I say that your tears dilute my children’s blood.”

Lady Greengrass bristled at the insult.

“If I were to weep, Lord Selwyn, it would be for us. For by turning away young witches and wizards of muggle descent we are sending them back into a non-magical world that cannot help them control their ability. How long before they expose magic to the world? What then? Does your house not record what the muggles did to witches only a few generations ago? Mine does.”

“My dear lady, if action is not taken today, there won’t be magic anywhere in Britain. Let them go their own way.”

Lady Greengrass signaled to the speaker cutting off Lord Selwyn there.

“Reclaiming my time, I will say only this. If magic isn’t welcomed here, it will show up among muggles. If you know your history, you’ll know how bad an idea that is. I yield.”

It was almost as if Lucius Malfoy didn’t care about consideration of the bill. Augusta had implied that he had the votes to pass, but is he so confident that he doesn’t feel any need to defend the bill on the floor of the chamber?

This was worrying because that was the only reason he would not be present. Either that or he doesn’t care about the legislation, but everything Harry knew about him said that he would. This was a dream for the blood-purity movement.
“Lady Amelia Bones.”

The Director stood and put on loosely feigned concern.

“Lord Selwyn, I don’t envy you sitting for argument on a bill that you did not write. One must hope that our friend the Lord of House Malfoy is not severely ill or in distress. Have we word upon his condition?”

Lady Amelia waved the speaker down. The question was rhetorical.

“Needless to say his is a well appointed household and will care for whatever needs he may have. Lord Selwyn. What are the words that are etched above the ladies’ entrance to this chamber?”

“My good Lady I have no idea where you are going with this.”

“Ahh! Then allow me to educate you. Over that door are writ the words ‘sapientia sapienti dona data’ or ‘wisdom is a gift given to the wise’. Do you know who said those words?”

Lord Selwyn just glared with disdain at the Director.

“No I would not think so. A young muggle-born by the name Florence Farr coined those words and in part by her actions this very chamber was opened to the female sex. Not just by lordly proxy, but by personal vestments. I can stand here, in the absence of a Lord Bones, as can Lady Longbottom as can many others due, in part, to the work and sweat of a muggle-born witch who never saw what was wrought of her efforts. We should think long and hard upon the prospect of closing the doors upon new blood.

“Because it brings change. Because it brings progress. Consider this. Despite the perceived abatement of magic, is your life better or worse than your great-grandparents? Easier or harder? Lord Selwyn, I will not ask you to answer. That is a question I ask all of you to consider in your own time. I yield.”

The fix was in. It had to be.

* * *

Fri. 28 June

She had to run. He was approaching. She could sense his presence closing in. Maybe if she stayed away from the centre she could evade him. She ran for the edges slipping in and out of forms here and there. Her breath was fast—her mind focused. Each moment a clarity of determination. Yes. The edge would be best. His senses would attenuate near the edge, right?

Each unit of distance became more difficult. She slowed to a slog trudging through so much grey matter that her feet finally fell too heavy to continue. She couldn’t go any further. She’d come upon the end of her realm. This was the tip of her extent—her limit.

He was still coming. Clever. She would have to hide. No motion. Don’t breathe. Be silent. Visualize a still mountain lake with crests reflected in perfect mirror. Become the reflection. Hide among the negative space.

She knew who was after her and what he wanted. He must not catch her. She had failed her escape twice and this would be the last time. It could not be tolerated. She felt the fabric of insubstance around her fluctuate. He was near. Be still. A perfect reflection. The vibration grew. She could visualize it now. A ripple floated outward distorting the space. Her mind wavered. Her presence
trembled. He reacted.

Susan was caught.

“Hah, got you.”

“Damn it.”

Susan snapped back into the awareness of her body. With her eyes opening she saw her room around her. And across from her was the invader with the most insufferable smile crossing his face.

“That was a good try. If you’d held it a little longer I would have missed you.”

Harry Potter was intolerably gracious.

“I’m going to get it one of these times. I just need to find the right part of my mind. There’s just too much distraction.”

Susan had been taking her turn as the evader in their improvised game of hide and seek. While she bristled at going zero for three at not being found. It helped that she had found Harry every single time, too. She figured that must be why Occlumency was so difficult to perfect. Easy to detect, hard to conceal.

“To be fair, we’re way ahead of where Occlumency thinks we should be. It usually takes more than three practices to reliably detect another’s presence. It will be many more before we can talk about even passive occlumency blocks.”

Fine. Harry was right. They were doing well, but Susan had a competitive streak and she was not going to be one-upped even if he was the boy-who-lived.

“At least we know there is a outer limit now. I was kind of worried I’d get lost in my own mind if I didn’t run into something.”

As had become habit after each of these cerebral sessions, Susan checked her clock. Time was just different inside one’s own head.

“It’s 11:30, we should probably stop for today or we’ll end up late again.”

Harry’s face clouded. It wasn’t difficult to guess why. Susan hadn’t had too much opportunity to interact with Harry on a personal level before this week, but she could already tell that he was not one who could stand by as injustice was done. The MIR act was going to be passed. The previous day’s arguments, or perhaps more accurately lack of arguments, had proven with little doubt that Lord Malfoy had a lock on this bill.

“Harry, Auntie Em always tells me that the law moves slowly but always inexorably toward justice. It may not seem that way, but the citizenry are moving away from the Malfoy ideal of bigotry. It will take time, but support for the purists is waning. I guarantee it.”

Susan watched as Harry nodded clearly sceptical but also not wanting to pursue it.

“Let’s get going.”

* * *

Lucius was looking smug. He wasn’t. There was still too much at stake and too much left to do. But he kept his slick veneer of confidence set upon his face. The bill would pass. It had better.
After he lost Parkinson and Greengrass, Lucius had abased himself to deal with Forthright and Jorkins. And it was all because of a scheming half-blood who hadn’t the decency to disappear quietly when shown the door. The bill was asinine. It would cost resources to little effect. It was a waste, but Lucius did badly need a legislative victory. He had to demonstrate his ability to swing and hold the Wizengamot in the vacuum left by Dumbledore’s passing.

The votes rolled in as the clerk called the roll: Bulstrode, aye. Cackle, nay. Carrow, aye. Clearwater, nay. Doge, abstention. Forthright, aye. Greengrass, nay...

On and on it went like so much droning noise. Lucius reflected on the note he’d received only a few weeks ago from Vex—a ridiculous pseudonym for a troublesome person. Vex claimed to have proof that Lucius was a death eater. And presumably had proof of the retrieval operation in the Department of Mysteries. Being labelled a death eater would be annoying, but being implicated in the matter of the prophecy and ministry assault... that would be unacceptable. Even if the Dark Lord’s brief return was being kept quiet—a fact Lucius remained ever grateful for—being publicly associated with even Sirius Black would be career killing.

So he was placating Vex and fiddling with politics. It was no skin off his back and eventually Lucius would find counter leverage. Vex should have known better than to come after him.

The clerk completed the roll and was totalling the votes. Twenty-three seats in favour of his bill. Forty-nine against. Five abstentions. Lucius smiled inside. It always warmed his heart to see his power exceed his opponents. Twice as many seats opposed the MIR act as favoured it.

But seats didn’t matter. Votes mattered. And it was close, but Lucius had the votes. The clerk looked up from her parchment.

“308 in favour, 304 opposed, 165 in abstention. The bill passes.”

* * *

‘Hi Hermione.’

Hermione held the parchment in her hands. She could almost hear Harry’s voice as she read his words.

‘I am rubbish at letters but there’s something you need to know. We didn’t get much time to talk last weekend. I’ve been going with Susan and Hannah to observe the Wizengamot. Apparently my family has a seat and I’m supposed to learn how things work. We recently observed a bill passed into law that you should know about. The MIR act.’

Hermione knew about the MIR act. She had read two different amended versions, but she was disheartened to hear that it had passed. It seemed so clearly destined toward failure.

‘The terms of the law affect you. The process for entering and leaving the magical alcoves of Britain have been modified. You need to remain within the magical bounds or you may not be able to return to Hogwarts.’

Hermione had to stop for a moment. This was very troubling. She didn’t think that such restrictions would go into place immediately and while she had no intention of returning home at this time. How difficult would it be for Mum and Dad to visit the Burrow?

A weight seemed to press on Hermione’s back. Her shoulders always seemed sore these days. She thought that maybe it was just an unfamiliar bed but maybe it was the stress of everything going on around her. Or maybe it was her morning ritual, but if so then that is how it would be.
‘Malfoy’s snake of a father is still in power. How can that be? It makes my blood boil. Please write me back. I want to hear how things are progressing for you. How is Ginny? And has anything changed with Ron?

‘Oh! Neville’s being released from hospital this weekend. It’s been a rough time for him but he seems to be getting better. And Susan says hi. I’m sorry that I am so bad at writing letters.’

It was simply signed. ‘Harry.’

As Hermione finished reading Harry’s messy signature, she took a moment to close her eyes and collect herself. She breathed in slowly, filled her lungs. Just like Uncle Dan taught her. She held the breath at the apex and then let it go.

If Lord Malfoy could swing legislation like this than the magical alcoves of Britain were no longer safe for muggles and muggle-born. Could Dumbledore’s influence have been so strong? But of course it wasn’t that simple. Blocks that might have confidently voted with the former headmaster would be struggling to consolidate and in the political vacuum the larger influences—the older and richer families—would be more agile, readier to take power.

Hermione hadn’t run the numbers recently but the small houses still outnumbered the larger. If they could vote in a block and as long as the Black family seat remained frozen due to legal proceedings, they could out vote Malfoy and his friends. But that would change when Sirius’s will was executed and if his name was in the clear than the seat would either be inherited or would fall to general population.

So who was the scion of Black?

Hermione’s heart constricted as she followed the family lines in her head. Without Sirius or Regulus, the line of Orion Black was at an end. Orion had two brothers. The first Hermione didn’t know but the second was Cygnus Black. And Cygnus had three daughters. The first son among them... Malfoy. It was Malfoy. Of course it was.

If Draco came into that inheritance, then it was over. The Houses of Black and Malfoy constituted more than a fifth of all votes in the Wizengamot, and if Lord Malfoy could already swing a majority...

This was bad.

Hermione was just about to get up when she noticed that Harry’s letter continued beneath the fold.

‘P.S. Have you heard anything from Luna?’

* * *

Luna was making soup. Daddy never had learned how to fend for himself. Luna stopped for a moment and pondered: when she was at Hogwarts, how did he manage to get fed? Eh. No matter. Luna shrugged and went back to stirring the pot.

And stirring the pot was the right phrase, too. Daddy had been angry. Still was. He scared her. Luna understood that she had been wrong to go to the Ministry, that it had been dangerous. But for the first time in years, she had friends. That didn’t seem to matter to him. After Mummy had died, she’d even stopped seeing Ginny.

And Gabrielle. Gabrielle had been away receiving an education in the Paradigm primary program for so long. Luna brightened. She had received a letter in this morning’s mail and just hadn’t had a
chance to read it yet.

Luna’s heart skipped a beat as she heard the door to the house open and then close. He was home. But the table wasn’t set. Everything had to be perfect. The soup was done. If she set it out now, then maybe everything would be okay.

The pot was heavy but Luna managed it easily enough. The distance from stove to table was small and the broth though bland to her tastes would hopefully soothe the savage beast. Daddy sat down at the table his posture slumped forward and his face slack. They hadn’t spoken much since that first night when she’d returned home from St. Mungo’s. He had been so quietly disappointed then. She was afraid of what he might do. It was like living with an undetonated Erumpent horn.

“We need to talk.”

Yeah. So it was time. Luna hated when her father was upset. She would do anything to keep him happy. It was her job as the lady of the house to care for all his needs, but sometimes he just seemed so insatiable. Emotionally, that is. He often left his food barely touched.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“I’ve been thinking about what happened two weeks ago. I’m concerned for your safety. I’m glad to see you are making friends at school. Your mother was much better at managing such matters than I ever have been. I wish I could provide you the guidance in this area that you deserve.”

“No, Daddy, it’s okay. I can figure it out. We’re doing fine.”

It wasn’t his fault. No one could blame him for what happened after Mummy died.

“No. That’s exactly the problem. You can’t figure it out—not on your own. I have never met any of these ‘friends’ and yet you feel compelled to risk your life on their behalf.”

Luna opened her mouth to defend her friends. It was unfair to blame them for the actions of the death eaters, but he cut her off with a firm hand gesture.

“Luna, dear. I understand that it is easy to be taken in by people who promise companionship in exchange for an opportunity to exploit you. You must remember that only your family will truly protect your interests. A family is a circle of trust where we always take care of each other. And your friends and that school are invading into that circle in ways that I can no longer allow.”

This was bad. Ever since mummy died, her father had insisted on controlling her entire life. Hogwarts was one of the only refuges she had. It felt like living in a play. Follow the script and everything worked out, but get off it and things would go badly.

“Do you want me to stop being friends with them?”

“No Luna, dearest. That’s not it. I am perfectly happy to have your friends visit you here where I can keep you safe.”

Silence passed. Luna knew there was something coming. In fact, she knew what it was, but she wasn’t ready to face it. It came anyway.

“I’m pulling you out of Hogwarts. You’ll be educated at home.”

“Daddy, no! Please!”
She couldn’t give up Hogwarts. It might seem like people were cruel but it was the one place that she could be herself.

“Don’t argue. I’ve made up my mind. Your mother educated you all the way up to nine without the need for any outside schools. We’ll manage it now.”

“But mum wanted me to go to Hogwarts. She said so all the time.”

Luna knew she should stop, that this could only go to dark places, but the words wouldn’t stop.

“Luna...”

“You just want to keep me all to yourself. I have friends and you can’t stand that so you want to take away the only good part of my life.”

“Luna.”

His tone was much more stern this time. Stop it, Luna. Stop. But despite her mental plea the deluge continued.

“I make your soup and clean your clothes and still you want to take more. What would mum say? What would she say if she knew...”

Finally, her lips responded to her cries to halt. But it was too late. The pulsing temple at the side of Daddy’s head told the whole story.

“You mother died. She’s gone. Is her memory a weapon to you now?”

He picked up his bowl and started for the stairs. Apparently he wanted to ride out his anger alone. Luna’s keen mind worked overtime. It would be okay. She would just make his favourite dessert tonight and layout his good clothes for tomorrow. She would convince him that Hogwarts was a good thing.

At the stairs Xenophilias turned back and looked to his daughter. He picked up the mail from the small table on which it lay including Gabrielle’s letter.

“Absolution tonight.”

Luna’s wide eyes and frozen visage of anxiety was her only response.
Pansy’s hand rested on the front door of the Parkinson residence—her home—her former home. The grains of oak were worn and familiar. The week had been exhausting. The events at the ministry, Dumbledore’s passing, and all that had happened in the Wizengamot weighed on her shoulders. They sagged from the effort of it. Papa had tasked her with one job, a seemingly simple job. Get Harry Potter into a meeting, and so far she had failed.

Part of the problem was that no one seemed to know much about where Harry Potter was living now. He had been seen in the Wizengamot with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott, but other than that—and the Wizengamot gallery was no place to get his attention—he’d withdrawn from public view. That wasn’t odd for the summer, but Pansy had even visited the muggles Harry had previously lived with—dreadful people. The Dursleys failed to distinguish between dignity and pride. It was disgustingly common.

But the truth was that Pansy was herself to blame. Twice now, Harry had been in a guaranteed location and she’d blown both opportunities and why—because no one trusted her.

‘And why should they?’

It was a voice from deep in Pansy’s heart. This was justice and what Daphne would call karma.

‘I’m sorry.’
This invocation and response was becoming common. Pansy’s mind had split into parts each unsure if it could trust another. Her logical, rational mind had pulled away and isolated itself from the assault of so many mistakes. And the her heart—the part that might have admitted to love—was crying in a ball in the corner. And lost and adrift among so much change was the part of Pansy that was left. The part that had to face the consequences.

After what happened with Draco, Mama had constantly reminded Pansy that when one door closed another one always opened and that change was the only constant. That’s why she wasn’t allowed to live at home right now. It was why she had to stay... elsewhere.

Pansy looked to the door in front of her—so familiar and yet now so alien—and knocked.

* * *

“Come in.”

Neville was sitting in the chair. He’d finally been able to get out of bed this morning for more than a few minutes. It was amazing how joyful sitting in a chair could be after weeks of nothing but lying still in bed.

Today was a good day.

As the door opened, a grey unkempt head of hair emerged. It was Dr. Soulager.

“Hi, Neville.”

The doctor insisted on informality. He clearly wished to cultivate friendliness with his patients. Neville understood this, but showing less than complete deference to adults ran against the grain of his upbringing.

“Hello, Nathan.”

“So... it looks like we’re going to get you out of here. Trust me when I say that a hospital is the worst place to recover from injury or illness—it makes no sense. But at least you’ll be able to sleep a whole night without interruption and in a familiar bed with your family close by. And sometimes that’s more important than anything else.”

Neville agreed with the sentiment, but his entire being revolted at the thought of leaving the hospital. The hospital was comfort—safety. Everything else was pain.

“Neville, when we talked last time I only wanted to introduce myself. You certainly have plenty to think about already. But now we must get down to brass tacks. You’re worried about pain. You should be—it’s no joke. What you are experiencing is completely understandable and I can’t take that fear away, but together we can fight it. There are many tools we can use and—if it’s okay with you—I want to give you one of them now.”

Neville was eager to learn any tool that could guard against the raw pain and fear that welled up from his soul. A charm, a potion, anything would do.

“Okay. What do I need to do?”

“Actually just listen. The first and most important tool against fear is hope. You are not alone. There are many patients that have gone before you and statistically there is very good chance that you’ll be able to return to a normal life.”
He tried to be gracious about it, but hope was more abstract than Neville had hoped for.

“Also, I’ve gotten to know your Grandmother. She’s a determined woman. She’s going to push you and believe me you’re going to need that. I can tell that she’s a hard woman, and so I also wanted to tell you how lucky you are to have your girlfriend close by. Hannah’s a good compliment to your Grandmother.”

Nathan paused noting Neville’s lost expression.

“Um... Hannah’s... we’re not... we’re not actually going together. At least... we haven’t talked about it.”

Nathan became animated at this with a unconstrained smile.

“Well you should! You let that lovely girl get away and I’m sending my son after her—kidding, kidding. She’s been by your side almost as much as your Grandmother. Official or not, you two have some things to talk about.”

Neville stopped to think about it. Of course he liked Hannah and was interested in her—that way. But he had just assumed that she would tire of him. He was weak and now everyone could see that. But if she had been around that much...

As Neville absorbed this revelation, Nathan’s smile fade.

“So we need to talk about the mechanics of managing your pain. Hope is an antidote to fear, but not physical pain—not directly. First of all, you should know that it is always easier to soothe pain before it gets out of control, so we’re going to be keeping you on some basic pain potions around the clock and I will teach you a charm for handling moments of acute pain.”

Yes, that is what Neville needed—what he wanted. He needed a escape.

“I’ll be available day or night if the pain does get out of control, though it would be best for you to learn to manage it yourself. Still, you must feel free to ask after me at any time. I am at your disposal for at least the next eight weeks. Now if you are ready, the time has come to step unto the breach and face your first great obstacle...”

Nathan held up an empty palm and with a swish of his other hand a folder containing at least thirty leaves of paper materialized.

“... Paperwork.”

Neville wasn’t ready. The paperwork daunted him. Each page, each signature a step closer to the unknown outside world that he thought he had understood. That he now knew he could never understand, never face.

“What about the suppression charms?”

Neville knew the answer to this question but maybe if he asked one more time the answer would change. Nathan’s normally congenial face hardened. His answer was quick and belied no opportunity for negotiation.

“This morning was your last administration. Suppression is not a way to heal.”

* * *
“I understand, but it says here that Neville is not to undergo any form of apparition for at least two weeks. Does that include getting home?”

Hannah watched as Lady Longbottom clarified the details of Neville’s discharge papers with a slender nurse technician. She felt a little guilty about becoming over-angered with her elder. After Hannah had time to think through the situation, she still didn’t agree with her ladyship’s hard love approach to Neville, but after what happened with Frank and Alice it was perhaps understandable.

“Yes, madam. The impact that a splinching could have on the patient’s psychological state advises for an excess of caution. The hospital has any number of public floo stations and of course you can get a cab to anywhere in London.”

The guttural sound of disapproval that issued from Augusta’s throat was so singularly evocative of disdain that Hannah had to turn to hide her smile. It seemed that even magic could not stop bureaucracy. The pair had been systematically working through the literally endless stacks of forms —each page silently replaced by another upon completion.

Susan had remained at the manor to prepare Neville’s room and Harry wanted to make a special dinner to celebrate their friend’s release from hospital. So busy had been the preparations for discharge that Hannah had barely more than said hello to Neville.

“This says that Neville should return once a week to be checked over. Is that really necessary?”

“Oh, let me see that one. Yeah, this isn’t right. The notes I have indicate that Dr. Soulager will be paying house calls twice a week for the foreseeable future. So an outpatient visit should not be necessary. I’ll talk to the doctor and we’ll get that corrected.”

Lady Augusta sighed with strained patience.

“How much of this remains?”

“Other than this page of discharge instructions that requires correction, we’re done. They’ll be one more form that you or the patient will need to sign as you actually leave just recording your departure.”

“Good enough, then.”

* * *

Hermione sat down at the small writing desk in the corner of Ginny’s room. It seemed that all she did any more was send and receive letters. This latest was for Mum and Dad and didn’t seem to want to end. It had six pages already. The primary obstacle to completion was that Hermione couldn’t think of a way to tell her parents about the new law potentially restricting her rights, so she was avoiding it by writing about anything and everything else. She feared they would bring her home without further input. Hermione couldn’t leave Ron, not after what she had done. Harry had said it—he could have protected Ron, but she couldn’t. She had let him fall victim and she would not shirk that burden now.

In the end she decided it was best to stick to just the facts.

“One more thing, the ministry rules have recently changed. I cannot leave the magical alcoves and return without a border proceeding of sorts. Because of political changes, the structure of the Wizengamot has shifted and the prevailing sentiment is against first generation witches and wizards. I don’t want to get into the details but you shouldn’t worry. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have made me very welcome here. Just know that in order to visit you will need to schedule an official
process through the Ministry. I’ll include a copy of the contact instructions for the muggle outreach office.’

That didn’t sound too alarming. Hopefully Mum would get the letter as Dad always worried too much and Hermione didn’t want that. The letter was already embarrassingly long. It was probably best to just sign it off.

‘I love you Mum and Dad, Elly’

When she was twelve years old Hermione had decided that Dad’s nickname was unacceptable. It was a silly, girly nickname and at twelve Hermione had been ‘mature’. But now she felt a certain nostalgic endearment to the diminutive. It wasn’t even a name, really. She had taken on spelling it as Elly, but it really was the initials L.E. to which Dad had addressed every postcard when he had traveled to India for several months when she was young. It stood for Little Emma in honour of her mother.

Hermione missed her parents. It had been a long summer and it wasn’t even July yet. She leaned forward and rested her head on the desk.

Her mind wandered.

* * *

“Hey you, sleepy head.”

Hermione jolted awake. She had fallen asleep. She wiped the corner of her mouth where she had drooled a little. Ginny was just closing the bedroom door.

“Hi! How was the game?”

Hermione quickly tried to wake up. She ran her hand through her hair failing to bring it to heel.

“Fine. The boys aren’t any real competition though. I beat the pants off them. They got too used to the Cleansweeps and forgot how to fly a standard broom.”

“How do you play with only a handful of people?”

“Oh, it’s easy. There’s no snitch, no bludgers, just a quaffle and two teams. We play to seventy but you can pick anything. We had an odd number so Dad played all-time defense. You should come next time. A flight would be good for you.”

“I don’t know Ginny. You know I am not really the sporty type and I am just tired.”

”Then you definitely need to get in the air. It’s invigorating. I never feel so free and open as when I am flying. We don’t have to play quidditch, but I am going to get you on a broom. Next week—you watch out.”

Ginny sat on her bed and flopped down on her back, her arms going behind her head. Hermione was utterly taken with Ginny. She was such a strong person and was being so kind. She was the type of girl that had made Hermione’s life miserable in primary school. No, that wasn’t fair. Ginny was actually the type of girl that had utterly ignored Hermione. But, in truth, it was nice to have a friend close by.

“Ginny, are we friends?”
Ginny sat up and gave Hermione a look that communicated both puzzlement and amusement.

“What an odd question? Yeah. I suppose so. I mean, you saved my arse in the Ministry and you seem much less uppity now that I know you better.”

Uppity. Know-it-all. Bossy. Hermione had lived with these her whole life. Why was being smart such a sin?

“Why did you think I was uppity?”

Ginny stopped and thought about it. Hermione could see her deciding how much to share before she turned directly at Hermione at let her have it.

“Because you insist on showing everyone that you know everything like it’s some kind of failing that they haven’t read the year’s text before the start of classes. You despise the ignorance of others or at least you appear to. It isn’t that people hate your smarts. It’s that they feel measured against your standard which to them seems like an impossibility and definitely not worth the effort.”

“... Ginny?”

Ginny rolled her eyes at Hermione’s reticence.

“Yes?”

“I just want you to know how much it means to me to have you with me. You didn’t need to be so kind to me after what I did to Ron. And you’ve been great, really.”

Ginny closed her eyes and took in a deep breath and then looked directly at Hermione.

“It wasn’t. Your. Fault.”

* * *

Harry placed the last serving dish on the Longbottom dining room table. It was a simple garlic mash. Harry loved cooking. He hadn’t really thought about why, but perhaps it was because the Dursleys had hated it so much. The kitchen had been hot and there wasn’t any place to sit, so they steered clear and for the most part left him alone while he cooked. Or maybe it was that food was the only contribution Harry had gotten some recognition for. But whether this or that, cooking for friends was that much more joyful as they shared in his sense of accomplishment.

Lady Augusta had returned with Neville in the mid-afternoon after which Neville had gone straight to bed to rest. Susan had gone to talk with Hannah who was still distressed about Neville’s condition. And Lady Augusta had been sending owls to friends and distant family announcing Neville’s return home. All in all the day had managed to be busy without having all that much to do.

As he had discovered on his second day in the manor, two good tugs of the call rope notified the other occupants of the manor that dinner was served.

Harry stood by the meal that was spread out across the generous table and waited for the others to arrive. The first was Susan who with no ceremony sat at one side of the table.

“Hannah’s getting Neville.”
Harry began to ponder topics to discuss with Susan as it would be impolite to let silence stand between them, but was rescued by the arrival of her ladyship.

“Good evening.”

Harry greeted Augusta and pulled out her chair, the one that was just to one side of the head of the table leave the Lord’s seat to be unoccupied. She turned to Harry with no small amount of annoyance upon her face and pierced him with her unmatched stare.

“I can manage my own chair, Harry. I don’t keep servants on principle. Every living occupant of this home is a guest or family and will behave as such. Now sit down and stop fussing over me.”

Harry nodded somewhat meekly and caught Susan’s smirk as he proceeded around the table to sit next to her leaving two juxtaposed seats for those yet to arrive.

“So, Lady Augusta, was there any difficulty in getting Neville signed out. You seemed to think you would be back sooner.”

“Bah! You would think I had centuries to live to see the time they waste—papers upon papers—signatures and instructions. It was as if the body were powered upon wood pulp.”

Despite the acerbic tone of her words Augusta beamed joy. Having Neville home was important to her and no gauntlet of bureaucracy would stand in the way of her enjoying it.

A sound from the hallway heralded the arrival of Hannah and Neville. Harry stood and opened the door as they arrived. Neville glided into the dining room seated on an old style wheelchair being pushed gingerly by Hannah.

As Hannah passed through the door she glanced at Harry communicating by grimace that this was not likely to go well. Neville looked paler than when he was released and seemed to stare at a nothingness about a foot in front of him. His head rocked almost imperceptibly forward and back.

Harry gently closed the door and returned to his seat next to Susan.

“Good evening, Neville.”

Her ladyship spoke with a distinctly softer tone. Harry had overheard Hannah explaining to Susan that for the first couple of days it would be helpful to speak quietly as Neville would be sensitive to loud noise and to any stimuli that exceeded the ambient.

Without looking up Neville responded with failed cheeriness.

“Hi, Gran. What’s for dinner?”

“Well, Harry, you being tonight’s chef, please describe your dishes.”

“Um. Sure.”

There was nothing truly special on the table, but maybe Lady Augusta wanted to recognize his effort. Or maybe she just felt awkward speaking in hushed tone.

Harry succinctly described each dish and where appropriate a bit of how it was made. He was feeling silly describing how to make mashed potatoes when a shrill noise cut through the manor. It didn’t have the ramp of a siren nor the pulse of a klaxon. It was a clarion tone that warbled only slightly.
Lady Augusta was out of her chair immediately. She closed her eyes and placed upward facing palms above her head.

Harry’s attention was drawn away to the other side of the table where Neville was rocking in distress and vocalizing somewhere between a moan and a scream. He was in danger of falling from his chair, so Harry rose and worked his way around the table crossing paths with Susan who was on her way to Lady Augusta.

“Where is it? Is it outside?”

Susan clearly had more of an idea of what was happening and Harry left her to assist.

Harry was just within reach of Neville and Hannah when he tumbled forward out of his chair. Hannah had been kneeling before him trying to comfort him and was now underneath Neville who seemed to have lost all sensibility. He was bashing his arms with fists closed in a steady rhythm unaware that he was striking Hannah at the bottom of the stroke. Harry had to get Neville off of Hannah before he really hurt her.

Harry grabbed Neville’s ankle and pulled him backwards slowly bringing Hannah free. Harry tripped on the wheelchair that was still behind him and fell on his backside. His clumsiness was rewarded with a kick to the face from the erratically thrashing Neville.

Harry scuttled backwards even more rapidly reaching for his wand. Never had Harry seen such unpossessed behaviour and he was worried that Neville would hurt himself or someone else. Harry usually kept his wand in his pocket when he wasn’t in casting robes and this position posed an awkward draw.

From across the room Lady Longbottom’s eyes opened showing a pearlescent unnatural sheen.

“I see you.”

Her voice echoed with odd effect.

Susan was still with her ladyship. She proffered her hand.

“Take me with you.”

Augusta grasped Susan’s hand and the two disapparated.

What the hell was going on?

Harry returned to the task in front of him. With one last attempt his wand came clear. Hannah was getting up. From a crouched position she waved him off.

“No don’t.”

But Neville had lost it and stopping him physically would surely cause more damage. Harry levelled his wand at Neville.

“Petrificus.”

Neville’s arms snapped to his sides and his legs locked straight and together. As the full-body bind took effect Neville’s yelling ceased. Harry knew from practice that Neville was still aware and still felt everything. He was still in pain.

Harry looked to Hannah whose face showed a rapidly forming bruise on her cheek. He lifted his
hand to explore a wet feeling and found his lip bleeding. The ear splitting tone suddenly ceased leaving a heavy silence and an accusatory emptiness.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I had to.”

A beat passed between them as Hannah refused to meet Harry’s eyes. Neville was still in pain and Harry didn’t know the right spell. Somnium would manifest pain as nightmares. Quiesco would calm his body not his mind. Hannah’s wand came out amid sniffled tears.

“Soporocoma.”

No visible change occurred in Neville, but Harry felt a great amount of tension leave the room.

“There. He’s in a deep dreamless sleep.”

Hannah still wouldn’t meet Harry’s eyes.

“I didn’t want him to hurt you.”

“Do you know what it’s like to be petrified, to be wholly unable to act but aware of everything going on around you? Because Neville does.”

Harry did know. He had practised it mean times, but that would be little consolation. Hannah stopped to take a great breath before finally facing Harry.

”You should figure out what happened to Susan and her ladyship.”

* * *

Susan was trying to keep up with a surprisingly fast Lady Longbottom. As soon as the two had materialized in the manor garden, the elder of the pair had cast a number of spells that Susan had missed. These had granted a vigour to her ladyship that was quickly challenging Susan’s physical limits.

“H-how many are there?”

She didn’t turn around. All she did was raise two fingers in response. Her wand hand came up to point her wand to her throat.

“Exaudia.”

“You will find no quarter here.”

Augusta’s confident voice echoed from out the air surrounding Susan. The comment was addressed to the intruders.

“I advise you leave or surrender, but if you insist upon a conflict I will not deceive you by pretending frailty.”

When the ward had activated, Susan had recognized the perimeter warning, but she didn’t know who nor where nor certainly why. Susan’s concern for Lady Augusta had evaporated after seeing her channel such power and now she was feeling somewhat exposed.

“Where are they?”

Augusta lowered her wand.
“There are two of them sitting on the east patio. I can’t make out their identities, but I suspect this is a message more than an attack. Come on. But stay back.”

Susan again took Augusta’s hand and apparated near the east patio. Susan’s breath caught. Sitting on the patio chairs proud as peacocks were a masked death eater and Fenrir Greyback, a werewolf. Susan remembered her training, both from Harry’s D.A. and from Auntie Em. Take in your surroundings. Wand out. Present a small profile.

“Relax, little whelp. If I meant to take you, I would have. You smell more than a little appealing. But alas I have other instructions.”

Fenrir’s slick maleficence lodged a palpable fear in Susan’s chest. Augusta did not flinch.

“I take it you are delivering a message. If so, get it out and get out. I am not by nature a merciful woman.”

Fenrir slowly arose from his chair ambling casually forward. Susan brandished her wand evoking a pair of placating palms. But Fenrir did cease his forward march.

“The Dark Lord left detailed instructions to be carried out upon the unlikely case of his demise. His instructions upon the house of Longbottom were not specific. In general I have interpreted him to mean that I should kill you and burn your home to the ground. But I could be persuaded to overlook your little den of mongrels—for a price.”

“Take your protectionism elsewhere before I relieve you of your head and with it any further desire to torment the good and righteous.”

“Righteous?! The bitch barks. Too bad your pup never had your teeth. Bellatrix made short work of him and his weakling mate.”

“Exhilema!”

The shouted incantation saw its targets thrown several hundred feet backwards before disapparating. Susan hadn’t even seen Lady Augusta draw. The electric tingle of the powerful spell ran down Susan’s back. She had never seen it before.

“Where did you send them?”

“One moment.”

Lady Augusta reached her arms out and focused ostensibly channelling magic.

“There—it’s done. I sent them out past the boundaries of the grounds and engaged the active wards. Those two will find it very difficult to enter the grounds again.”

“What did they want?”

Augusta took a deep breath and exhaled before replying.

“To make us fear them. With the Dark Lord gone, they’ve lost their main claim to power and their primary icon of fear. Greyback was always an independent soul. He intends to ensure that his reputation continues to precede him.”

* * *

Hannah finished filling her cup of tea before turning back to Dr. Soulager who was leaning on the
kitchen counter sipping his own cup. It was late for a house call but the doctor had not asked any questions. He was a patient man and Hannah felt a little bad leaning on him so soon and at such an hour.

“Thank you, Doctor. I wasn’t sure how to best unwind our spells without making Neville’s condition worse. Sorry to take you away from dinner.”

“It’s okay, Hannah. I think Mrs. Soulager is glad to have me out of her hair from time to time. It isn’t easy living with a practitioner of psychology and neurology. Every conversation carries a little too much meta.”

“Still. It hasn’t even been a day.”

Hannah wasn’t sure how this was going to work. If they couldn’t even manage for one day... maybe Neville was right. Maybe hospital was the right place for now. Hannah felt a hole form in her centre, below the lungs but above the diaphragm. It was a black void manifesting her inadequacy.

“Hannah. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was, if I understand Augusta’s explanation correctly, a freak incident that should not repeat. There was no foreseeing this.”

“But it was almost nothing. Just a sound. And...”

Hannah felt the void grow and consume her torso. Her breathing quickened.

“And I couldn’t do anything. He wouldn’t listen and then Harry had to pull him off me and...”

“Hey.”

Dr. Soulager gently put has hand on Hannah’s shoulder.

“You need to understand that it wasn’t his fault either. His brain is a little haywire. It will improve with time.”

“I... I know. The neural pathways that perceive pain are overloaded and until his synaptic activity resolves to a new balance his behaviour will seem erratic.”

Hannah had read that among Neville’s discharge papers. She understood what that meant on the surface, but it was different to experience the magnitude of that statement in person.

“Hannah, I am more than willing to talk with you whenever you need. Your continued health is important to Neville’s recovery, but you may want to consider a counsellor of your own or just an understanding friend. Sometimes talking it out or just finding a friendly shoulder to cry on can help, and my first responsibility will be to Neville.”

The sudden return to the logistics of real life shocked Hannah slightly. She paused the impending descent into self-judgement.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll... I’ll think about it.”

“Of course. And please feel free to talk to me any time. I should be getting back home, but do let me know if Neville’s condition isn’t improved by morning. I really think a good night’s rest will help everyone settle in.”

As the Doctor turned to leave, Hannah took a deep breath and collected herself. Neville needed
support and Hannah could be strong for that. She had pillows for crying and screaming.

“Two last things, Hannah.”

He paused with the kitchen door in hand.

“First, it’s okay to have feelings about this. Don’t push everything down. Let it out.

“Second, call me Nathan.”

With a small smile Nathan left for home.

Hannah was forced to consider the possibility that Dr. Soulager might be practising Legilimency without consent. He certainly was perceptive.

* * *

“No, dear. I’ll sleep in the conservatory tonight. You will stay with Hannah in my room. I think she will need someone to talk to and so I truly appreciate your staying overnight. But with a young man sleeping in the guest room just down the hall, I must—as proper chaperone—ensure you are in a room that can be locked.”

The look of exhausted aggravation that Susan returned to Lady Augusta caused the old woman to laugh with delight. If Auntie Em and Hannah were going to rib her for her interest in Harry, Susan didn’t need this crap from Augusta as well.

“Lady Augusta, please...”

“In all seriousness, I snore like an apnoeic troll and no one nearby would get any sleep at all and I do think Hannah could do with the company. And there is no point in moving Harry out of the guest room.”

Susan couldn’t help but visualize Harry sleeping only a few meters away in a room by himself. It was titillating. Susan tried to stop herself. Such interest would be inappropriate in front her ladyship. Despite this, Susan felt warmth run to her face.

“Or maybe it is Harry’s room that need be locked?”

Okay that was it. Susan was embarrassed.

* * *

Sun. 30 June

“Good morning, Susan.”

Ugh. Susan and Harry had a lot in common, but being a morning person was not one of them. Susan’s head was still full of cotton. It didn’t help that her sleep had been interrupted by Neville waking up in the early morning hours. Poor Hannah, she hadn’t even made it back to bed after that. Susan resolved to check in on them after breakfast.

“Good morning, Harry.”

Harry was already busy half-way through making eggs and pancakes, and coffee was on to brew. Where did he get this energy?
“Sleep well?”

No. But the question was merely a pleasantry.

“Yeah, I guess. Have you heard from Hannah or Neville?”

“Nope, but Lady Augusta left early for services. She said to apologize to Hannah. She was planning to go along, but her ladyship felt that she needed rest more than ministry.”

Hannah would not like that. Well, Hannah would be fine, but Hannah’s Mum would not like that. Faith was a big deal in the Abbott household and was not to be taken at all lightly. Hopefully Lady Augusta would intercept and explain what happened.

Harry turned off the stove and turned back to the kitchen counter baring the most delicious looking eggs. Harry set them down in front of Susan before seating himself just across from her.

“So what happened last night? Lady Augusta was busy talking to your Aunt for hours after the alarm. Was it some kind of attack?”

Susan briefly considered that spreading information about the incident might be non-ideal, but Harry was living here so it seemed prudent for him to know.

“It wasn’t really an attack. Two death eaters came to threaten and extort Augusta—for money I guess—to not follow through on the Dark Lord’s final instructions.”

Harry instantly keyed in on this.

“Wait! The death eaters are still following instructions left by Voldemort? We have to stop them.”

“Harry, hold on. It’s a ploy almost certainly. If they can make us fear them, then they can gather power and use it against us. In truth, if—”

Susan took a quick breath. If Harry could say the Dark Lord’s name than she could too. Particularly if he was already dead.

“If v-Voldemort is dead, then the death eaters are done. Some like Lucius still have political power, but the reign of terror is over.”

“But what if he still has influence over them—some kind of spell.”

“Harry, Voldemort’s magic was cancelled when he died, so unless there is third party magic involved it won’t matter.”

“You’re probably right. It’s just hard to acknowledge that he’s gone. I mean, it’s given me my life back. I used to plan week to week. There wasn’t much point in going further when the most powerful dark wizard in existence is out to kill you. I keep thinking that there should be some higher purpose, that I had a destiny to fulfil. What was in that prophecy? Now that’s it’s gone, will it still come to pass? Or did it already come to pass?”

Susan was taken aback by the depth of Harry Potter’s dilemma. She had never taken Harry to be a deeply thinking person. He was always an agent of action. What would that be like? To know that your destiny was governed by a prophecy only to have that destiny either changed or fulfilled before you even learned what the prophecy was.

“So what are you going to do now?”
"I don’t know. I played with the idea of becoming an Auror, but that was before this all became real. Back when I thought the future offered me nothing, Auror made sense because it aligned with the skills I needed to fight Voldemort. It still feels right though. I’ll probably stay the course and graduate from Hogwarts a mediocre student."

"Mediocre is just another way to say ‘normal’, right? ‘Normal’ can be a good thing."

"Yeah, but I’ve never given thought to much beyond Hogwarts. Where should I live? Should I have a family? Children?"

Wow, this was going to places that were uncomfortable for Susan fast. It would be inappropriate to let Harry gush about all of his dreams when Susan was at least somewhat interested in being part of them.

"Maybe you should just take it one day at a time. I’m sure when the time comes you’ll know."

* * *

One day at a time. She could do this. Just one day at a time. Hannah was exhausted. She had barely been able to get to sleep in the first place. And after Neville woke up in middle of the night, Hannah had curled into the comfortable sitting chair in the corner of his room and tried to rest. Her mind had had other ideas.

Neville was taking the whole thing really well—as well as could be expected. He was embarrassed. But since he didn’t remember the full details, Hannah had spared him most of it. Some carefully applied foundation and blush had hidden the bruise and she would talk to Harry and Susan about what to share with Neville.

Hannah knew in her heart that this was where she needed to be, but there was a part of her psyche that was asking tough questions. What was she doing? Neville wasn’t her responsibility. If he really was like this forever, was that what she wanted? Was that how she imagined her life?

No. It wasn’t.

But the questions and doubts orbited a central well of hope. Neville was likely to recover. Everyone continued to insist that this was the case. And Hannah could be part of that.

Mum had always said that the best part of finding long-lasting love when you were young was that you grew together. And if you cared for each other and cultivated thoughtfulness of each other then neither would subsume the other.

Oh, shoot! Hannah had forgotten to water the Flitterbloom again. Neville’s plants were his life, he had cultivated a garden in the conservatory. It was truly wondrous, really. Well, the Flitterbloom had missed its watering in the past without ill effect and most of the other plants could take care of themselves—a fact which was creepy now that Hannah thought about it.

A gentle knock at the door startled Hannah from her half aware musings. She crawled out of the chair and ambled over to the bedroom door. She opened it just enough to slip out and noiselessly closed it behind her.

“Hey, you okay?”

Susan’s concern was welcome despite Hannah exhaustion.

“Yeah, I didn’t get much sleep, but it’s good to know that Neville is resting. Can we talk?”
“Yeah.”

Susan and Hannah walked a few doors down to the master bedroom closing the door behind them. The words just started spilling out.

“Sue, I don’t know if I can do this. And I don’t even know if I should. And I hate myself for that. Where do I draw the line between what he needs and what I want? What do I do?”

The warmth of Susan’s hand clasping hers was reassuring. Susan led Hannah over to the bed. Sitting down to Hannah’s left Susan placed an arm over and around Hannah’s shoulders.

“You should always ask what you want first. If you want to stand by Neville, then you’ll find that you can. And if you want to go another way, then—no matter what anyone says—that’s going to be for the best.”

Hannah felt her tears start to fall. This was not the first time even this morning that Hannah had cried. How many tears could one cry in a day?

“But let’s be honest Hannah. You’re like me and I have no idea what I want. Watch the people around you and until you feel like one of those connections shouldn’t be there any more hang on to them. Because the threads that tie us together are hard to weave and easy to snap.”

In non sequitur, Susan chuckled. Hannah wasn’t exactly sure why any of this should be funny. As Susan’s jocularity passed she offered a last bit of advice.

“Maybe you should just take it one day at a time. I’m sure when the time comes you’ll know.”

* * *

A star of light trembled in a clear sea. Spikes of bright and dark vacillated evincing an ephemeral pattern that was product of a million independent variables. A singleton composed of countless non-unique constituents but forming a non-repeating identity. The ‘one’ spawned of the formless many. Individuality.

Pansy lifted her eyes from the water swishing in her clear goblet that rested in her hand to look down the Parkinson dining room table. Was that all there was to life? Was she just another indistinguishable cog in the great machine?

She downed the remains of the liquid considering exactly what to say. In the end she resolved that nothing was to be said and so she sat and waited for the questions that her father had to ask—first.

“Pansy, I gather you do not have good news to share. What is posing the problem?”

They all hated her. That was the problem. She had burned every bridge following the path laid out by an aristocratic lifestyle that no longer fit within the confines of a modern society. But that wasn’t the real question being asked.

Pansy set her goblet down gently.

An adult takes responsibility for the challenges they are presented. The problem was that Pansy wasn’t behaving like an adult.

“It isn’t a problem, Father. I have been researching the best approach. All I need to know is when the will readings occur. I assume Harry Potter is featured in both the wills of Albus Dumbledore and Sirius Black. Since he will be present at those readings, I can guarantee some result positive or
negative."

“Pansy, even if I knew the dates that the wills were to be read, you know well that the ethics of my profession would not allow me to reveal sensitive information. The participants to the reading will be notified fourteen days prior to the occurrence and not prior. And no one else. Besides is that really the best time?”

Damn it. Father could be so stubborn. The readings were perfect. Harry would be mostly alone and since they could take anywhere from thirty minutes to twelve hours, or multiple days occasionally, Harry would not have other activities scheduled. They were perfect except that the boy, being sentimental, would probably be emotional.

The headmaster’s will was most likely to be read first. The last will of a Lord of Black would take months to prepare for and possibly days to read.

One date and time. That was all Pansy needed.

“I’ll find another way.”

Pansy saw her father chuckle, but he remained silent neither challenging nor affirming her stated course of action. He was not known for his humour, so what was he playing at?

“Miss.”

Pansy startled slightly. One of the house elves had come up behind without her noticing. The elf cringed as Pansy sharply turned her attention.

“Miss, I am so terribly sorry to disturb you.”

Pansy waved off the ceremonial deference.

“You have a letter miss. It arrived certified owl from Gringotts only a few minutes ago.”

The young elf, whose name Pansy could not recall, proffered a small envelope which she accepted. The tone necessary to dismiss servants came naturally to Pansy.

“Thank you.”

Pansy turned the letter over and examined the wax seal on the back. It was a soul-seal—it was coded such that only one person could release the seal. Physical force would result in the instant destruction of the contents and sometimes the interloper.

Pansy checked the addressee one last time. She had only received four soul-sealed letters in her life.

“Accio”

From across the room a small letter opener snapped into Pansy’s hand. Pansy pointed her index finger to the seal.

“Finite”

The seal turned from a bright luminescent gold to a waxy grey, the magic holding the seal having completed its duty. Pansy slipped the opener under the seal and broke it. Inside was a small four by seven card.

The last will and testament of
ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE

who having passed this the eighteenth of June shall be executed upon the premises of

GRINGOTTS WIZARDING BANK

within the offices of the Noblesse Exchequer upon a Saturday this

THIRTEENTH OF JULY

The presence of one

PANSY PERSEUS PARKINSON

is requested.

So that’s what the smile was about. At least Pansy had her answer. She placed the card back inside the envelope and set it down on the table. Returning her gaze to her puckish father sitting at the head of the table, Pansy focused on not pouting. While that was an effective measure for manipulating her father, what she needed here was respect.

And information.

“What business does the professor have with me? You preach about ethics, but... did you do this?”

Pansy held up the envelope in accusation. Her father’s smile vanished.

“Of course not. I may or may not have known you were a listed attendee, but I would never falsify the will of a client.”

“So what does he want with me?”

“Pansy, dearest, I have no idea. But you weren’t the only student invited nor was the entire school invited. You will have to show up and see what is to be. Now, you see that you no longer need my help. Tomorrow I expect you to be back out of the house as your mother has requested.”

Pansy reflected on her long suffering exile. Get through this. Get through this and maybe things can go back to normal.

“Yes, Father.”

The two ate in silence for another several minutes. The only sounds were the gentle click of silverware on dishes and ticking of the mantle clock. Though it sounded incongruous, Pansy felt at home here—familiar. She didn’t want to leave again.

“Father?”

“Yes, dearest.”

“Why do you want to meet with Harry? He doesn’t have any significant power or influence.”

Aster Parkinson set down his utensils and napkin.

“Well, it isn’t any of your business, but if you want to know, what I can tell you is this: the boy may not have power, but he does have influence. The people will listen to what the boy-who-lived says. And who knows what the future will bring. Maybe one day he will have power and if so I
would like it to be on my side. If you are worried about me exploiting him, worry not. His interests likely align with mine, and if not that is fine, but I want to talk to him. I would already have done so if my favourite daughter were not so ineffective in her task.”

He did not say this to be cruel. Pansy knew her father well enough to know when he was pushing her. Considering what happened with Draco, Pansy’s road in life would by necessity proceed along the route of business and politics. Father had spent the last year pushing Pansy without relent to increase her mastery in economics and policy.

And Pansy loved him for it. She had to. After everything, he hadn’t disowned her or hidden her or shamed her. Pansy was so sure that her life was over, but while everything had changed the world still opened up before Pansy. And her father was the only reason that was possible, since she would never have a husband of any status.

Two weeks.

* * *

Fenrir Greyback drew a great breath. The cold, crisp Wiltshire air carried with it a deluge of useful information. It would rain. Maybe two hours. The human village was a mere six miles south. And there was an opossum in a den twenty meters roughly to his left.

Fenrir had never had a problem with being transformed into a wolf. In some ways it felt as though he always had been an animal soul trapped in a vile human body. He lived for the hunt, the fight. He lived to bring all he could see into his domain. Lycanthropy was not a curse; it was salvation. It was a release from the moral trappings and social shackles of humanity. Among wolves the smart and strong survive without concern for the weak.

Not that he wasn’t a gregarious creature. On the contrary, his pack comprised several hefty males—not too strong of course—and more than a handful of tenacious females. Vicious creatures. Violence and power were the best aphrodisiacs. Humans didn’t know what sex was.

But tonight was not about the pack. In fact, this was about protecting the family. The mark on his left arm burned with deadly threat. Curse that deformed mutt! But after tonight Fenrir’s duty would be complete and he would be free of the infernal mark.

His last target was less than a hundred meters away. Fenrir breathed deeply again. They were all asleep. Of course that would change as soon as he crossed the wards, but he was no coward. Those who refused to face the challenge were by definition weak.

Fenrir relished the coming bite. Nature was a funny thing—being a werewolf came with the normal pleasure in reproduction and while the sex was amazing, sex was not how werewolves reproduced. The desire built in his centre. No human would ever understand the blinding ecstasy of the bite, the sensual flood of the first draw, and the warm resolution of release in knowing that a former human now belonged to you.

No. Resisting this was an abomination. It was the core of his being. And he was bringing that terrifying intercourse to his target now comfortably asleep and unaware.
Mon. 1 July

It was a cacophony—each insect calling out to its mate and every leaf rustling in the wind. The clicks and murmurs that form the pattern of human speech bled into the din of nature. The pungent smell of dirt and fertilizer mixed with the saccharin scent of Hannah’s perfume. The gentle breeze
was sand paper upon his cheek.

Neville Longbottom stared at the back of his eyelids. The last suppression charm had been at least partially effective when he was discharged from hospital and even then the stark light of day had been painful. Now—two days later—the charm was gone. Surely the bright morning light of his garden would be too painful and Neville was already overwhelmed with the deluge of stimuli coming from his other senses.

But today had to be better. He would not humiliate himself again. And he could not continue to hurt his friends. Hannah was plenty capable with make-up, but she didn’t wear it to bed so when Neville had seen Hannah this morning curled up in his bedroom chair, he couldn’t help but notice the light blue and purple blotch that was all but obscured by the slight scaly texture upon her cheek.

He had done that. There was no other reason for Hannah to conceal it and it wasn’t there yesterday. Neville felt the deepest shame—a black hole in his gut. Not only was it his work, she hid it from him to protect his feelings. Neville felt moisture gather at the corners of his closed eyes.

But that was why he had to endure now. He was now a burden. He had spent his life trying to find higher ground—to stay above the rising waters—to be self-sufficient and give back to his friends rather than vice versa—as a Longbottom should.

Neville was now a burden.

And feeling that burden weigh upon his eyelids Neville lifted them open. Bright spears penetrated his cornea washing away the black with searing white. A pair of irises contracted reducing the flood to a manageable flow. The white dissolved to patterns of light and dark. Coloured gradient filled the cells of grey and Neville’s mind coalesced the packets of information into a recognizable picture.

Hannah.

“Neville!”

Hannah’s face showed concern. He should console her. A few words would go a long way, but the racket assaulted his ears and the idea of adding to it hurt. But still. He wouldn’t cause Hannah distress when he could prevent it.

“I’m okay.”

While the concern remained, Hannah’s tension resolved to a more relaxed worry which hurt far more. Why did her wide eyes make Neville want to hide? Why was his reaction tinged with resentment? It took a moment, but Neville was actualized enough to recognize it. That look. It was pity.

It was a confirmation of Neville’s greatest fears. He was weak. Insignificant. Incapable. And everyone knew it. Hannah knew it.

The hue of the world was over-saturated. An explosion of unnatural tone. Hannah’s lips were flush with red, her eyes and hair a brilliant gold, and the sky framing her face a bold blue. Her cheek was a subtle blend of all three.

The moisture that poised at the corner of each eye cohered into a first drop. And then another. And then more. The tears traced lazy lines down his cheeks.
“I’m sorry...”

The words came out funny as Neville held back against the lump in his throat that threatened a sob.

“Oh, Neville. No, it’s okay. We can come back out later. Or tomorrow. Whenever you want.”

Hannah’s face disappeared from his view ostensibly to wheel him back inside. Neville let the leaden doors of his vision close.

No. She didn’t understand. It was not her responsibility to absolve his mistakes. He could give her that at least.

“It’s not that. You don’t have to hide it. The bruise. I don’t remember what happened but I can pretty well guess that I did it. You don’t have to hide it. Please.”

Neville felt a hand upon his shoulder. He tried not to flinch, but he must have failed because the pressure retreated quickly. Most physical contact still hurt—not like it had in the hospital, but it was still there. He knew Hannah was trying to express support and he didn’t want her to feel bad for trying.

“Neville.”

Hannah was back in front of him. He opened his eyes once more. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small compact. From one compartment she retrieved a miniature wipe. That look of pity was back in her eyes and Neville quailed at it. As the layers of foundation and blush came free of her skin the extent of the injury was clear. It was much larger than Neville had thought.

“Okay. No more deception. I’m sorry, I just didn’t want you to overreact. You shouldn’t feel guilty.”

Neville felt guilty. Of course he did. But there was no point in arguing about it.

* * *

Why did they have to be so big? Harry looked from one piece to another. Was gigantic wizard’s chess a thing? Like a common thing?

Harry stood in the centre of the Longbottom manor garden chess board. It was different but also similar in ways to the chess board that he and Hermione and Ron had played across during their first year. Even then, the whole concept seemed over the top.

These pieces seemed more statuesque and less like moveable pieces of a game board, but Harry had a nagging notion that they could come alive at any moment. He of course shouldn’t worry about that. Not because inanimate locomotion wasn’t possible, but mostly because her ladyship sat on a bench a handful of meters away and had demonstrated control over her manor. And then again, maybe they were just statues.

Harry had never been very good at chess, wizard or otherwise. That title by rights belonged to Ron. It’s not that Harry had never won against Ron, but it didn’t happen often.

Now Ron lay in hospital in a bed. Harry hadn’t had an opportunity to check on Ron’s condition since last Sunday at the funeral. Hermione hadn’t sent back an owl yet, but she probably would soon.

And then there was the Wizengamot and all of the politics it comprised. In some ways it felt like a
chess board, with some unseen player moving pieces in fainty and gambits. But who were the players and who were the pieces? And what of his seat in the Wizengamot? Why hadn’t Dumbledore told him about it? Was it simply not relevant? Or was Harry just another pawn in Dumbledore’s master plan?

Because now that Harry thought about it, it was obvious. Dumbledore had played white and Voldemort had played black, but now both players were dead. In the absence of a greater directing force, the pieces had begun to move themselves. White was in chaos—pieces moving against each other, blocking each other. But not black. Lucius and his compatriots were making well thought-out political moves.

So who was playing black?

“Lady Augusta?”

“Yes, Harry”

“No Friday, we heard the results of the MIR act vote, but not the selection of the new chief warlock. Who was it? Is it Lady Bones?”

Augusta stood up and walked over to Harry.

“The Wizengamot is never without it’s pomp. The votes were collected under lunar-seal. The ballot will remain uncounted until the opening of the new session. The first business of the session will be unsealing the ballot and determining the new chief who will then preside over the remainder of the session.”

“So we have to wait.”

“For the official count yes, but don’t get your hopes too high. Lady Amelia will garner enough votes to avoid embarrassment, but it is unlikely that she can win. The vote on the MIR act has shown a new divide between the common houses and the more liberal of the noble houses.”

“If it isn’t Lady Amelia, who do you think will be elected?”

“I don’t gamble Harry, but the smart money would be on Abelsted.”

Harry shook his head not recognizing the name.

“Lord Nott. That was Lucius’s nomination and he seems to hold the greatest influence for now. It could be worse. Lord Nott follows tradition and has little compassion, but he is mostly fair in his political dealings.”

It seemed like her ladyship had more to say so Harry let silence reign for a few seconds.

“The real risk, I fear, is in Earnest Forthright. He’s unabashedly progressive to an extent that makes even Amelia uncomfortable. He has no respect for tradition and while I think him an honourable man who wants the best for the people, I worry that he might tear down the institutions that have held our small society together for centuries.”

Harry was not convinced. It seemed to Harry that stepping into the world of magic for all its majesty and wonder was still stepping about a hundred years back in time.

“Maybe a little cultural revolution would help.”
Augusta chuckled.

“You’re still young Harry. The world opens up and you cannot see beyond the horizon. If any lesson can be learned from history it is that little good comes from radical rapid change. Only painstaking, back breaking, boring incremental steps towards a good end. Progress is a mountain slope: difficult to climb, treacherously easy to fall.”

Harry did not begrudge Augusta her opinion, but his hackles were raised by the implication that a young person could not understand the difficult truths of reality. He was going to be requesting autonomy from the Wizengamot. Didn’t he deserve some consideration for that?

Perhaps sensing that she had caused offence, Augusta continued.

“But do not concern yourself with the calcified views of an old woman. There are many battles to fight in the days and years to come. And your voice will be among those leading the way.”

She was talking about the future. Harry wasn’t used to thinking about the future. So much of the past weeks had felt like floating down a river just letting the current take him where it wished.

“Is he really gone?”

“I’m sorry, dear. Who do you mean?”

“Voldemort.”

Professor Dumbledore had told Harry at the end of his first year and the ordeal with Quirinus Quirrell that Lord Voldemort could return in a number of ways. Was he really gone this time, or was it just another respite waiting for the blade of his fate to snap its bond and fall?

“The Dark Lord will not return. I have no way to guarantee it to you. The world of death is semi-permeable to magic, but there is a threshold past which none has returned.”

It wasn’t convincing.

“He already did it once.”

“No, Harry. Mad-eye examined the Ministry atrium in depth after that night. He found evidence of dark magic—a specific dark magic—that tethers the shards of a torn soul to objects of our world. If the body dies, then a portion of the spirit still resides in a substitute vessel which can be returned to a magically reconstituted body.”

“Then he can return.”

“You don’t understand, Harry. Death is permanent even if the living can sometimes see into it. This dark magic—Merlin forgive me. Harry, I must ask you to swear to me that you will never reveal to anyone what I am about to share with you. Not Neville, not Susan, not even Miss Granger.”

Harry would’ve agreed to anything to hear Augusta’s next words. If Lord Voldemort were truly gone, then Harry could close an entire episode of his life.

“It’s called a Horcrux. Do not look it up. Do not ask anyone about it. A Horcrux, Harry, is a portion of the spirit attached to an object that can outlive the casters body. So he-who-must-not-be-named never returned from death, the part of him that remained alive was given a new body. Harry, anyone who knows about Horcruxes must also know that it is a deathly living. There are only a handful of cases documented in the Wizengamot record and every one was a narrative of misery.
and regret. This is not a way to live forever. It is a way to die forever.”

Harry felt his heart fall. The hope that he was free of this menace cracked and crumbled. Voldemort would not have created only one.

“Hold on, Harry. Alastor was able to detect faint traces of magic that reached far out from the Ministry atrium. He followed several of these trails and found many strange objects. A diadem that we believe belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw was found deep inside the room of requirement. One trail led to the Lestrange family vault, but he couldn’t get inside. And one led to a very large and very dead snake. There were others, and every one that we could inspect was dead, but had been a Horcrux.”

“How?”

“We don’t know—not exactly. Albus performed a ritual of deep magic, Moody said that much. Whatever it was, it cost him his life. Albus would not have given his life easily. I think Voldemort is gone.”

“But you can’t know that!”

Harry was upset.

“The professor said that there were ‘ways’ plural for him to return. He might come back. What about the prophecy?”

Augusta’s gaze was gentle.

“And the Sun might not rise tomorrow. We live in deluge of uncertainty. Why do you think the Ministry keeps prophecies secret? ... It’s to make sure that very few know what they say. There is a good chance that no one alive today knows what that prophecy said.”

“That doesn’t help. There might have been a clue to what would happen. Now I’ll never be able to know what was in it, what my destiny is.”

“Welcome to life, child.”

* * *

Neville was exhausted. The more exotic plants of the outdoor garden were thriving and Hannah had done a magnificent job of maintaining them. In fact, it felt good to be among the familiar shapes and smells.

Everything was dialled up to eleven. The leaves were green and the sky blue. Neville had begun to take in the beauty of the overly vivid world around him. It seemed that the secret was to give up on focusing the world. Stop fighting the powerful streams of stimuli and just let it wash over you.

It really was beautiful.

She was beautiful.

Hannah sat at Neville’s feet just taking in the same sights and smells—just holding Neville’s hand—just being there.

Something had changed. In the hospital—even last night before dinner—Hannah had had an air of tension. But now, whether it was temporary or not, she seemed relaxed. Neville could imagine
what the sun rays filtered through the taller plants must feel like to her. Not the uncomfortable heat that he experienced, but a gentle warmth evocative of life. He could imagine the feeling of the breeze sifting through her hair.

Hannah was for the moment at peace. And Neville was taking vicarious joy in it.

He hurt. He was tired. He didn’t see how he could live like this for more than a few days.

But she didn’t. And she wasn’t. And maybe she could.

And if she could, maybe he could.

One day at a time.

* * *

Tue. 2 July

Luna Lovegood woke to a bright ray of sun falling across her face. Daddy had never believed much in technology particularly when simpler more natural methods persisted. And little was more natural than the sun.

It was still early. The summer sun was an eager riser and much the better for all that a day comprised. Breakfast would be first. A few years ago, the chores would have started with feeding the animals, but after Mother’s death Daddy hadn’t the heart to care for them. Luna had had to sell them.

Those days had been dark. Daddy would go long periods without speaking. He would sit without moving for hours on end. Mother had been his light, his purpose. And in the annihilating abyss of her loss, Daddy had fallen.

But those were days past, and over time Daddy had brightened and regained his purpose in a new passion. Daddy had taken a walkabout in Sweden. A last attempt to find something he had lost. He came back with field journals full of details about an amazingly elusive creature he coined the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. His eyes were lit again and that meant more to Luna than any field journal.

The Quibbler wasn’t new even then, but it found new life in publishing the details of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack and other magical creatures that Daddy had found. He always said that there was a world hidden in plain sight all around us. It waited for those who would look, and then look again, and then still yet look again. It was these special few to whom would be blessed insight into an underworld filled with tiny magical beings that controlled the weather, the seasons, and even the patterns of life and death threading through the ecosystem.

Luna believed her father. He wouldn’t lie to her and so much of what he described made sense. Why else would one tree thrive and another rise bare into the spring?

But Luna couldn’t see what her father saw. He was a genius, a autodidact prodigy and if Luna could attain even a fraction of his insight then she could be proud.

And maybe he would be too.

Xen wasn’t reserved with his praise; but in recent months he had withdrawn. The evenings when they would sit by the fire and read from the great and under-read philosophers had waned and in its place... absolution.
It was time for breakfast. The window next to Luna’s bed was east facing and her father’s was south facing. She would have an hour or so before he was awake and hungry.

* * *

“Luna, dearest. I need to submit today’s edition of the Quibbler. I’ll be gone for a couple hours.”

Of course. This was a standard part of life in the Lovegood household.

“Can you run the wash through while I’m gone? And the weeds have gotten into the gurdyroot again, can you handle that?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Xenophilias stopped at the door to pull on his cloak and grab his scragglewood cane.

“Good girl. Keep the home fires burning. I’ll be back in good time.”

And then he was gone.

Luna sighed. She missed her father when either he or she was away for long, but these stolen hours alone in an otherwise empty home... there was a lightness to it—a release from expectation and a joy in just being oneself without filter.

It wasn’t really fair. If Luna was truly herself around anyone, it was Daddy. Maybe it wasn’t an experience easily rationalized, but Luna basked in the aloneness.

She really should start on the laundry. It wasn’t just clothes. The sheets and curtains needed to be washed today and that job would take several hours, but for now Luna would steal a moment.

Gabrielle’s letter!

He had taken it last Friday and Luna hadn’t had the courage to ask for it. This was the perfect opportunity to get it without the need to ask and remind him how he came to have it.

Okay. But she should do her work first. Go get the letter and leave it in her room, and she could read it later once the work was done. That was fair.

Luna all but ran up the stairs. It wasn’t against the rules to go into Daddy’s room but it was weird when he wasn’t around. The door opened noiselessly. Most likely the letter would be in the nightstand with the condoms. Luna felt a little dirty at that thought.

Oh well.

Sure enough lying atop the unmentionables was a stack of three letters the median of which was the telltale pink used consistently by Gabrielle.

Luna slipped the letter out and quietly returned it to her room. It tempted her just lying there on her bed, but Luna knew the value of hard work. It was how everything got done. The letter would still be there when she went to bed if not sooner.

She couldn’t really tell why, but Luna picked up the letter and placed it just inside her pillowcase.

With an internal shrug, Luna returned to her chores.

* * *
It was a quarter to nineteen and Daddy had yet to return. Late days such as these were not unheard of but they were unusual. It was difficult to keep dinner warm and fresh when one didn’t know when it would be served. He could have left a message, but of course Daddy didn’t trust the floo network.

It was controlled by the Ministry Department of Teleport and Transit and that meant it was controlled by the Minister and his handlers. There was no guarantee that Dolores Umbridge or some other bureaucrat wasn’t listening to each word.

Still, what harm could a simple considerate call hurt?

Luna still hadn’t read Gabrielle’s letter. No real reason why except that by the time the chores were done she wanted to wait until bed when she would have plenty of time to read and consider what Gabby had to say.

But thinking about the letter had sparked in Luna a new idea. A possible compromise between her father’s plan to keep her home and her plan to return to Hogwarts.

Hopefully an amiable discussion over an infused cup of tea would bring things home.

* * *

Luna stared at her tea cup. Daddy’s mood was good. That was the problem. She knew that this was dangerous territory and that changing her father’s mind would either be impossible or as easy as a suggestion. It simply was impossible to know which of these roads he would tread.

“Daddy, I have a question.”

Xenophilias gave a reassuring smile to his daughter.

“Of course, dearest.”

“We talked about how you didn’t want me to go back to Hogwarts, right?”

Daddy’s smile evaporated.

“Yes. And I am decided on this. We needn’t discuss it further.”

“I understand. I thought of another possibility.”

Daddy looked down into his mashed potatoes perhaps trying to divine how he should handle his daughter. She had been causing him so much trouble lately. Luna felt guilty but she couldn’t just live inside this house forever.

“Back when Mummy was alive. We used to live in Avallen during the winter. I would always attend the Paradigm school with Gabrielle. They have a secondary program. It doesn’t align completely with Hogwarts, but it is an excellent program. And because Mummy was a member I would still be eligible for the education program.”

He didn’t respond. Didn’t make any indication as to his opinion of this at all. He just stared at the table.

“I would be away from Hogwarts, and I would have to say goodbye to Ginny and Neville and Hermione. But maybe I could still have other friends.”

He didn’t look up, but Daddy did speak.
“Stop.”

He raised his eyes just enough to connect with Luna’s. He didn’t look angry. He looked almost sorry.

“Luna, when we spoke before I thought I was clear. It is not a problem with you, dear. It’s my fault. I have failed in my responsibility to inculcate within you a discerning judgement.”

He paused for a painful number of seconds, but Luna knew this was not the time to interrupt. The last thing Luna wanted was another escalation like last time.

“I need you here—where I can watch over your development directly. You are becoming a beautiful young woman and with that comes both beauty and danger. You are too trusting; and while in the past your friends used you to further their delusional plans, you’re lucky that’s all they wanted from you.”

Ewww. That felt so wrong. The mere idea that her friends—her father presumably meant Harry and Neville—that they would take advantage of her in that way was disgusting and inconceivable.

But Daddy was right that she trusted them. All of them. Was she blind to it?

“You’ll stay home and learn with me where you are safe.”

No. He was wrong. But he was also Daddy.

“I understand.”

* * *

Luna slowly pulled the pinafore over her head. She shook her hair free of it and tossed it in the hamper on the side of her room. She unbuttoned her lace-trimmed blouse from top to bottom and shrugged it off as well. She kicked off her shoes and sat down to remove her leggings.

She took a deep breath and held it until she felt ready to burst. Then she let it out as an uncontrolled vibration against her lips.

It was late. She was tired.

The letter could wait, but Luna had worked so hard all day that not reading it now seemed a bit of a cheat.

Luna lay down on her bed and kicked down the blanket so she could slip under it. She realized then that she had forgotten to wash her own sheets. It had slipped her mind with all the thinking about Gabrielle and Avallen.

Oh well. She had endured worse and she wouldn’t forget again next week.

She slipped her hand into the space between her pillow and its case and slid out the envelope. She inserted her finger into the pink fold and gently pulled. The red seal submitted with a tiny pop. The folds of text slipped out and into Luna’s hand.

‘Dear Luna.’

The words were handwritten in Gabrielle’s flourished script.

‘I hope this letter finds you well. It has been too long since you have been to visit and we didn’t
have many opportunities to catch up during the Triwizard Tournament. I feel bad about that, but Fleur was so busy as a champion that they had us running all kinds of hours.’

Yes, other than seeing Gabrielle at the opening ceremony and after the second task, Luna hadn’t been able to get to her. Luna regretted that, but understood. If the stories that Hermione and Harry had shared were even half-true, Gabrielle likely had barely a moment spared from tasks and training and interviews.

‘Fleur is still smarting about losing the competition. She says that every turn seemed to go wrong for her, but mother always reminds her that one of the contestants that made it to the end came back dead. That usually shuts her up.’

Apolline was always that way. In some ways, she had been closer to Mummy than Luna was to Gabrielle. They were both constantly pushing the limits of societal acceptance. Daddy had been so much less uptight then. It was sad what happened to Cedric. More so that everyone lied about it, except the Quibbler of course.

‘I suppose it’ll be summer there when you get this. We don’t really have seasons here as you know. It’s nice to avoid the winter, but I do sometimes miss a day on the beach just soaking up the vitamin D.

‘Oh, I suppose, I should tell you. You saw me at the Triwizard in Beauxbaton garb. I was offered early admission based on how quickly my magic is growing in. Apparently, I am way ahead even for one quarter veela. So I was moving back and forth between France and Avallen, but then I found out I had been accepted into the Young Members of Paradigm program. So now I live here most of the time.’

Luna was not a person to be easily impressed by accomplishment—effort and attitude were far more important. But to be accepted into Young Members at Gabrielle’s age... Luna was terrible with dates and Gabrielle looked much older than she was... nine or ten? It was unbelievable. She had to be one of the youngest members ever.

‘I live in a dorm now with the other Young Members and the Matron. It’s so cool. Perenelle makes sure everyone stays in line, but I kind of like the discipline.

‘I’ve been making friends, too. The next youngest member is Michael. He’s eleven and he already has a position as intern and special assistant to the Banríon! He works with Lady Red herself!! Everyday!!’

Gabrielle’s love of exclamation marks aside. Luna could empathize. As exciting as Michael’s opportunity might seem to Gabrielle, Gabrielle’s opportunity seemed at least as exciting to Luna.

‘I think he likes me.’

OOo. Luna’s interest was piqued. Gabrielle was at that age when boys became interesting as a status symbol.

‘He seems to be making excuses to stay near me. We end up on the same assignments. And...’

‘I think I like him, too.’

Mmmm. Gabrielle seemed quite taken with the boy, and he did have impressive credentials, but Luna took a note in the back of her mind to advise caution in her return letter.

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m reading too much into it, but I can’t say I dislike the attention. Perenelle
says that brevity is the stewardship of your audience’s time, so I should end this before I start to ramble. You know, more.

‘Please write back. I must know how things are for you and your father.’

‘Truly yours, Gabrielle.’

Luna desperately wanted to write back. But she was so tired now that it would have to wait. Tomorrow was another day. Another script, another play.

* * *

Wed. 3 July

Daphne wasn’t sure her opinion of the Nymphwood Café. Not to get her wrong of course, the coffee was spectacular and the service was unobtrusive. But the greatest joy in partaking in a cup was quietly watching the world go by and slipping out of the constant stream of duty. The patio of the café opened directly onto Diagon Alley and as a result the hustle and bustle was a little too close to reach the objective joy of a quiet seat in the morning sun.

That didn’t really matter though, because Daphne wasn’t alone. So this wasn’t a retreat.

Pansy sat on the other side of an intricate stonework table and was just in the process of returning to a forward facing position having retrieved a cup of tea from the server.

“Daph. Do you still perform the Occulto Potentius?”

Of course she did. Daphne’s mother would go ballistic if she ever found out that she was skipping the ritual. But why would Pansy want to know or care?

Not bothering to wait for Daphne’s answer, Pansy gestured to herself.

“I’m not sure if I am doing it right any more. I remember Adelaide saying that it was dangerous to check. But if I have been doing it wrong for years then I may as well stop wasting my time.”

Okay. So this seemed straightforward, but it was unusual that Pansy had never found cause to check on this before.

“You’ll need to remember if your gates are left-spiralled or right-spiralled?”

Daphne’s gates were left-spiralled which was a major pain. Left oriented gates were outwardly biased which made the Occulto Potentius difficult and made inverting the gates dangerous. But if Pansy was right oriented...

“Your mother said I was right-spiralled.”

“Okay, then it’s easy. Do you remember practising the manipulation of your gates before we started doing the ritual daily?”

“Yes. Of course. We did it for weeks.”

“Good. Then all you have to do is carefully and briefly invert your first gate. But hold on.”

Daphne got out her wand. A right-handed gate inversion wasn’t going to be particularly dangerous, but an abundance of caution was always advisable.
“Protego.”

Daphne felt a slight flow of magic leave her and a tingling sensation tickle her skin. You know. Just in case.

“Okay go ahead.”

Pansy closed her eyes and appeared to focus inward. The seconds stretched. One. Two. Three. Four... until Daphne was about to stop her. But before she could, the table promptly shuddered and cracked cleanly into five pieces.

“Looks like you’ve been doing it right.”

Daphne tweaked her wand simultaneously dropping the protective ward and beginning to repair the table.

Pansy’s face was full of a rueful smile. Like her success in testing herself was an unfortunate joke at her own expense. Maybe she was thinking about Draco.

“Have you been by to see Draco?”

Pansy just shook her head.

Daphne knew that the two had broken up last year, but this whole thing couldn’t possibly be over losing Draco. The narrative was that she had broken it off (but of course that would always be the case if Pansy were telling the story). But behind a necessary veil of indifference Pansy would surely want to know what had happened. Daphne would in that situation.

“It’s a terrible business really. Mother says he fell down two full flights of stairs in Malfoy Manor. It ripped him up pretty bad. He’s been in St. Mungo’s for days.”

Pansy—still completely silent—looked down the avenue hiding her face from Daphne. So, she was concerned and didn’t want Daphne to know. Good. Sometimes it was easier to believe that Pansy had no emotional connections whatsoever and it felt good to see that she was a person too. Did that make Daphne a bad person—enjoying the sight of Pansy’s pain?

“Apparently he’s out of the woods and will recover fully. He has to be monitored due to the amount of Skele-Gro used to rebuild shattered bones.”

This time it was Daphne who looked away. Unsure if her next statement was wise.

“You should go see him. It would probably cheer him up to see you.”

Pansy finally turned back to Daphne with the typical neutral expression. The classic Pansy resting bitch face which Daphne knew was not a resting expression for her at all. Her voice was eerily calm and devoid of emotion.

“You know why that isn’t going to happen.”

Daphne knew some, but it seemed like there must be more.

“Daph, do you know how I can get in contact with Harry Potter? I have a pretty good chance coming up, but it’s a bad time. I need to talk business and the only place I am sure to meet him will be at the reading of Dumbledore’s will. So... any ideas?”

Business. With Harry Potter? With a walking death wish? Harry Potter was never anything but trouble. Daphne worked hard to avoid him in general, so she had no idea how to contact him.
“Sorry.”

But something tickled the back of her mind.

“So is that what was going on at the memorial service? You were attempting to get Potter’s attention?”

That was about as banal an explanation as Daphne could have expected. It was a relief really.

“Yes. But then the weasel girl got in my way and blew that up. She’s so self-righteous. Like if she hates pure-bloods enough it’ll make up for being one.”

Daphne had to chuckle lightly at this. The Weasley family was a case study in why not to concede power to the outside crowd. The Weasley family was still blood pure at least for the most part. But their influence and power had diluted to impotence. The Prewett family had propped up the Weasleys for years until the Prewetts met the deathly fate meted out by the Dark Lord and his followers.

It was perhaps a just irony that the last blood of the Prewett family now only found refuge in the line of Weasley.

“So what do you need Potter for? He’s not sophisticated enough to accrue his own influence.”

Pansy shook her head.

“I don’t know. Father seems to think that his voice could hold weight for some members of the Wizengamot that used to follow Dumbledore. He hasn’t said it explicitly but that seems to make sense.”

Alright maybe. But the boy-who-lived would need a lot of fixing up to be any kind of useful voice in the Wizengamot.

Well...

Maybe not. Harry didn’t seem like much of a leader or speaker, but his words at both the school and public memorial services had been powerful and the rumours about the D.A. indicated a Harry Potter that wasn’t just a clumsy hot headed Gryffindor.

“So does Aster want to align with the liberal houses or the lesser houses?”

Pansy shook her head again.

See that was the thing about the Wizengamot. They didn’t have parties in the sense that greater Great Britain did. But there were general ideological groups around which lines could be drawn.

The seats in the Wizengamot could be drawn between the noble and common seats and further between the traditional and liberal noble houses.

The house of Parkinson had until now been loosely aligned with the traditional values that Aster’s father had been a proponent of protecting. Rule by the educated elite. Maintenance of established social order and normative behaviours.

If that was changing then Aster Parkinson could single handedly shift the balance of the Wizengamot.

But how would he do it?
An alliance with the liberal noble houses like Bones, Longbottom, Hallow and others would be easier to maintain because there would be fewer parties involved, but gaining the support of the common houses could earn Parkinson support of the general public which would be good for business. It would be hard to do both, because there was a natural conflict between the interests of the noble houses and those of the common houses, but the Parkinson’s owned a rather large business empire centred around and reaching out from the textiles industry. A loss of political power might be balanced against a greater gain of economic power.

By the time Daphne had finished considering all of the implications, her coffee was cold.

“* * *”

“So, Neville. Tell me about these last two days.”

Nathan Soulager sat in a surprisingly comfortable armchair across from Neville in his wheelchair. The clock mounted on the mantle piece of the sitting room of Longbottom manor kept time in the silent void.

Neville’s case was troubling Nathan. The damage to the sensory pathways had been severe and strong over-sensitivity was to be expected, but it seemed that Neville was holding back.

“I am doing okay. There haven’t been any more incidents like on Monday.”

See that was the thing. Neville clearly was having trouble processing sights and sounds. Nathan was sure that he was in pain, but Neville wasn’t reaching out for help.

“Neville, it is possible to wait this out. To let time do the hard work and just suffer through it, but I want you to consider that your physical burden might seem lighter if you shared your emotional burden. So when I ask you to tell me about these last two days, I want to know how your are feeling and what you’ve been thinking about.”

The artificial smile that Neville had plastered on his face went away replaced by a more honest expression—exhaustion. Good.

“Doctor, I really am fine. I just need to get better so that Gran can stop worrying about me. And Hannah, I think this has been totally unfair to her. She’s not getting any rest and it shouldn’t be her job.”

Nathan saw a small crack in the door.

“So you feel like everyone’s here helping you and you aren’t helping anybody. Do you think you’re selfish?”

“No! Well... maybe. I don’t know. Harry got hurt too, but he’s making meals and doing laundry. He got better immediately. I wonder if I am just weaker than he is. Susan, Hannah, Harry... they’re all spending their Summer on me. It’s seems like a waste.”

A waste. That was concerning. Helping other people was a laudable cause. One that Nathan had chosen for a living. If Neville thought that such a pursuit was a waste, it might be because he felt himself unworthy. There was no bottom to such a hole.

“You aren’t weak, Neville. Statistically your physical progress is spectacular. At this rate you’ll be out of that chair by the end of the week. I wasn’t told all of the details of what happened to Harry, but I am aware of another young man whose injuries continue to confine him to hospital. Is he a weak person?”
Neville had a defensive streak something he clearly shared with his Grandmother. Nathan saw her eyes reflected in the look of outrage on Neville’s face.

“No! Of course not. Ron was hit with a serious curse and he was trying to save someone else. Who knows what would have happened to Hermione if he hadn’t intercepted that curse.”

“So he was attacked with a powerful dark curse while he was trying to save someone. While he was defending his friends. Sound familiar?”

Nathan let that sink in. Under normal circumstances the human mind took credit for positive outcomes and placed blame elsewhere for negative outcomes. However, it was not unusual for this internal compass to flip polarity in the wake of a traumatizing event.

Neville had been violated and his agency removed. He’d had unimaginable pain inflicted upon him and now felt that the world was not safe. That he wasn’t strong enough to cope with it.

Neville still hadn’t replied and if he really was feeling worthless then Nathan didn’t want to let that spiral.

“You said that your friends helping you is a waste. Why do you feel that way? If it had been Harry and not you who was attacked, would you want to help Harry?”

Neville was upset. His mind came tumbling out in a mess of words and phrases that conveyed a part but not all of what he meant.

“Yes, of course. But Harry is amazing. He’s strong. He’s the boy-who-lived. He fought Voldemort and lived. He will always do great things because he is a better wizard than I am. I’m a disaster. A disgrace.”

Another word. Disgrace. It was true that a person could be disgraced as an individual, but usually the term was used in reference to shame cast upon a group by a member (e.g. he brought disgrace to his Quidditch team).

Knowing Neville’s history—and the history of the Great Wizarding War—it was fairly clear that Neville was thinking about his parents. Alice and Frank Longbottom were hardly footnotes in the war. They were no Harry Potter or Albus Dumbledore, but any basic purveyor of history would know their story.

Neville felt he had to live up to that. And to the living example of Lady Augusta Longbottom. Any failure to do so was a crime against his family. Against his parents. Nathan wasn’t prepared to unpack that with Neville yet. It would be better to move on to something positive that Neville could get lost in.

“I saw your garden outside. Did you grow all of those plants? That was Dittany wasn’t it. That’s almost impossible to grow in this climate.”

It was an obvious compliment, but it was also completely true which made it the best kind. Nathan had the brownest thumb a man could be born with.

“Yes. You’re welcome to take a handful of leaves. I’ve found that it is particularly effective when reduced and mixed with Goosegrass, Rue, and Motherwort. A touch of peppermint will help with the smell.”

“Really. Motherwort, of course, but I’ve never combined Goosegrass with Dittany. I’ll have to give it a try. It truly is a wonderful talent you have Neville.”
Neville smiled meekly not sure of how to react to such praise.

“Neville, you’re doing great. So I am going to go raid your Dittany and see who else I can bother. I promise to be reasonable, but I have one piece of advice for you before I go.”

Nathan stood up and grabbed his bag before turning back to Neville.

“If you are worried that you are a waste of your friends’ time and effort, I suggest you ask them about it. It might seem awkward, but you’d be surprised how illuminating it can be.”

* * *

“I need some ideas.”

Susie Q was looking to Amelia with more than a little trepidation. Her earnest visage wavered slightly in the candlelit interior of Amelia’s study.

“They’ve all been stuck on the manor grounds for days. I feel like we need to get out and have some fun. I was thinking of going to Ajji Majji with Harry and Hannah and others this weekend, but I don’t think Neville will be ready and he needs to get off the grounds.”

Amelia felt a strong sympathy for her adopted daughter. Susan’s loyalty to her friends extended well beyond the Hufflepuff standard. And it sounded like the group did need a day out.

“I might have an idea, but are you planning on coming home sometime soon or should I have your closet moved to Longbottom Manor. It’s been four nights that you’ve been away. I’m starting to think you don’t like me.”

Amelia punctuated this with a grin followed by a slight pout.

Susan laughed. Amelia knew from experience that her face was not one that expressed the ‘pout’ well. But levity was her intention so it all worked out.

As the moment of humour subsided Susan explained her absence.

“No. It isn’t you. Hannah and Augusta really can use my help. Neville still needs a lot of direct care and they aren’t getting much sleep. I just want to help out.”

That was understandable. But Amelia wasn’t sure that Susan was being honest with herself. At least not entirely.

“Are you sure that it doesn’t have anything to do with a young bespectacled boy whom you’ve had a crush on since about six.”

Susan blushed a deep red. Amelia chuckled at Susie’s expense, but then remembered why this could become a problem.

“Susan, I don’t want to meddle in any feelings that you might be developing but we will need to discuss this...”

Susan’s blush was now adorned with eyes of anxiety. Amelia felt a little bad getting into Susan’s personal life. She was becoming such a young woman and deserved a generous measure of privacy especially after overcoming all the obstacles that life had thrown at her.

“But it can wait until after this weekend.”
Amelia reached into the left drawer of her desk and retrieved four stiff rectangular cards. She handed them over to Susan who took a few seconds to figure out what they were.

“Quidditch tickets?”

“Yes. I was planning on taking you and Hannah and Neville to a game but with everything going on I decided to let it go. But since you are looking for something to do I want you to take them. The game is tomorrow so you’ll have to arrange travel as soon as possible.”

Susan’s face lit up.

“Oh thank you, Auntie Em! Harry will be so excited.”

* * *

“You are here to care for my Grandson, Doctor. I will thank you kindly to stay outside of my head.”

Augusta Longbottom was angry. This Doctor had been invited into their home, but not into Augusta’s thoughts and emotions.

He stood across the conservatory path blocking Augusta’s view of some beautifully blooming Asphodel’s.

“I assure your ladyship that I would never intrude upon a person’s thoughts without informed consent to perform Legilimency first. To do otherwise would be a violation of my oath as a doctor and of several ministry laws.”

“I need no such assurance as any such unauthorized attempt would result in your immediate ejection from my home. Trust me I have several methods for accomplishing this.”

Some of them were even survivable. No, despite the innocent look upon his face ‘Nathan’ as he insisted on being called was very much inside Augusta’s head. Legilimency or no.

However, Lady Augusta’s position required her to make accommodation for the inconsiderate nature of some common wizards. And both Hannah and Harry had spoken well of ‘Nathan’.

“Doctor. Believe me when I say that I understand why you wish to analyse me. You wish to know as much about Neville’s environment and relations as possible to provide the best care. I don’t need that particular speech.”

Augusta paused to take a deep breath.

“That said please respect the boundary I am drawing here. I am quite capable of caring for myself and for Neville’s everyday needs. Focus your efforts on repairing the damage to his psyche and then—with all due respect—please get out of my home.”

She stood up and prepared to leave the room.

“If you’ll excuse my rudeness, I have important duties to attend to. Thank you.”

And without waiting for a reply, she walked out of the room.
Thu. 4 July

“... and the Puddlemere chaser has just been knocked to the ground by a bludger; a deft shot by Joey Jenkins, the senior beater for the Cannons. Can Joscelind Wadcock get the quaffle to the goal without a third chaser? Whoa! Joscelind dodges her own seeker who is hot on the trail of what seems to be a very ornery snitch. But undaunted Wadcock has lined up her shot. Now it’s up to Gordon Horton to stop this advance. What’s it going to be folks...”

The announcer’s narration of play was interrupted by a grand cheer from the fans of Puddlemere United as they celebrated a well fought goal. The commentary was much more subdued than that of Lee Jordan, but it also made more sense.

Harry took the moment to glance over to his right to see his smile reflected on Susan’s face. Harry wasn’t sure if Susan liked Quidditch as much as he did, but she seemed to be having a good time.

“Thanks again, Susan. And tell your Aunt that she’s awesome. Ginny would’ve loved to see this.”

Harry had been to a few pro games. And there was the final of the world cup that he’d been able to attend. Well... until the Death Eaters had terrorized the event. That had been a very bad beginning
“No problem, Harry. Auntie Em, already had the tickets and was planning to give them away if we didn’t use them. I just hope that this isn’t too much for Neville.”

At that prompt Harry turned the other direction to look past Hannah and examine Neville. He actually seemed happier than he had since before the ministry battle. Perhaps getting lost in the game was providing a distraction from what he was going through.

Harry turned back to Susan.

“He seems fine. It’s very confusing. I see Neville going through so much struggle and I’m having the best Summer since...”

Harry trailed off. This couldn’t be the best summer of his life—not with the loss of Sirius—but as his mind cast back year after year in a single instant compiling a long history of a childhood lost to caretakers that had never tried to be parents, he finished his sentence with a quiet almost sacred whisper.

“... ever.”

And then catching Susan’s earnest, asking glance, his mind dug a hole through time to the present. The last two weeks had been different to any other fourteen days of his life.

And then realizing that he was on the verge of breaking a cardinal rule of the masculine gender, Harry waved off Susan’s concerned interest.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

And then Harry made a show of turning his attention back to the game. But while his eyes tracked the quaffle from one end of the field to another, his thoughts also ran in circles inexplicably looping periodically to the caring eyes that had locked into his only moments ago.

Harry didn’t remember the rest of the game.

Puddlemere United won 210 to 160 after their seeker caught the snitch.

* * *

“Harry!”

The words hammered in Neville’s head. He’d done really well through most of the game. Beforehand—knowing that it would probably be too much—he had finally tried his first bit of magic since the ministry. It seemed that he hadn’t lost much if any of his magical control, so Neville had cast a weak muffliato on his ears before the start of the game. That and a pair of sunglasses had largely served to ameliorate the intensity of the game.

But the voice yelling Harry’s name and pounding on Neville’s temple was familiar.

“Oliver!” Harry yelled back. For some reason that hurt less. Maybe because Harry was shouting away rather than towards him.

The group had been waiting for the pitch spectator stands to clear—presumably to make it easier for Neville’s wheelchair. Despite Nathan’s assurances, his body still sat in a sedentary prison of sorts.
But from the mass of departing witches and wizards emerged the Gryffindor team captain from their first three years at Hogwarts.

“Harry, how have you been? Still a seeker last I’d heard.”

Neville noticed the odd look that crossed Oliver’s face when he saw Neville in his chair. He’d noticed that look a lot. Like no one knew where to look fearing that they would cause offence by looking too much or too little. The odd thing was that Neville just wanted people to be normal around him.

“I’ve been fine. Um, how are you? Why are you here? Not to say that you shouldn’t be. It’s good to see you.”

“Harry. It’s fine. As you know, I play on Puddlemere’s reserve team. The captain wanted me to observe the match to pick up some specific techniques off of ‘my betters’.”

Oliver included actual air quotes with this.

“Though to be fair Gordon Horton has stuff I’ve never seen before.”

Oliver shook himself as if reprimanding inattentiveness.

“Sorry, Harry. The reason I came up to the stands was because I saw you and thought you might like an opportunity to meet Puddlemere United.”

Neville didn’t need to see Harry’s eyes to visualize the astonishment upon them. Harry would surely jump at the opportunity.

“Oh! Please! Um... what about...”

Harry signaled behind him and Neville realized with a jolt that Harry was asking whether Neville’s condition would prevent him from getting into the pits. Neville flushed with a mix a shame and resentment. Harry didn’t have to make this an issue. Neville wasn’t sure he wanted to see these athletes if Harry was going to make it an issue.

“Yeah! Your friends are always welcome.”

Oh. Harry hadn’t meant Neville. Harry had just been indicating that Oliver hadn’t actually invited Susan or Hannah or Neville. The resentment drained away but the shame remained. He wasn’t a judgemental person. He really wasn’t.

He had to get out of the chair. Tomorrow at the latest. No... that wasn’t the real reason. Neville knew that in reality he resented others’ strength juxtaposed with his own weakness.

And while Neville’s natural response to this was to commit to getting stronger. It occurred to Neville—maybe for the first time—that he wasn’t that person. He wasn’t a chosen one or a leader. Maybe that was okay.

* * *

“Harry, this is Joscelind Wadcock captain and lead chaser of Puddlemere United. Jo, this is Harry Potter the boy who lived and the youngest Hogwarts seeker in more than a generation.”

Oliver Wood was clearly proud of himself. Susan Bones watched as Harry and ‘Jo’ shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.
Hannah and Neville had found a corner of the room. A ‘pit’ Oliver had called it. The two were taking a rest and just sitting in silence. Susan envied the comfort that they had found in each other. They weren’t even officially dating as far as Susan knew, but they already looked like a couple. A tired couple. But a couple.

Susan didn’t really know where to put herself. She knew Quidditch of course, but this really was a world that Harry knew much better. Her attention focused back in to the conversation between the players when she noticed her name used.

“Yeah. I’d like to get Susan or Hannah to play sometime. Or Neville when he’s ready. I finally have a Summer where I could get some actual play in and I’ve got no opponents.”

Susan didn’t love riding a broom. She didn’t hate it either. But the idea of using one recreationally seemed absurd. It was like the muggles that Justin talked about who went out driving their cars for fun even when they didn’t have anywhere to go. Some witches were broom witches and some weren’t.

“I don’t really think that I am a broom person.”

Joscelind turned to her.

“Nonsense, everyone is a broom person. You just haven’t had a chance to really enjoy it. I mean it. Promise me this—sometime this Summer you’ll get on a broom and take it up maybe one hundred meters in the air. Just take in a deep breath and feel the air around you. Trust me. In that moment, you will find yourself.”

Susan nodded politely, but inside she knew the truth. She just wasn’t a broom person.

* * *

“I don’t think I’m a broom person, Ginny.”

Hermione was being silly. Flying was as easy as breathing. She was just stuck in this guilty victim mindset. She didn’t want to be happy.

“Hermione, you did this in your first year. Anybody can do this.”

Ginny was frustrated. Hermione was the strongest muggle-born witch that she had ever met. She was determined and always accomplished what she set her mind to.

The problem was that Hermione apparently was intent on blaming herself and thus was passively riding a flow of depression and self-pity that circled a drain that bottomed out in dark places that Ginny did not want to visit.

“Fine. Just get on. We’re losing the sun and you promised me that you would do this.”

Ginny assertively took the broom from Hermione’s limp grasp and mounted it in the pilot position subsequently indicating that Hermione should get on behind.

Hermione nodded and straddled the broom behind, which recognizing a second rider protruded two additional stirrups allowing Hermione to rest her feet. Not a necessity for broom flight but psychologically comforting. Then Hermione grasped the broom just behind Ginny and closed her eyes.

Ginny sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose before placing Hermione’s white knuckle hands
around her torso.

“You can’t hold the stick or the broom will get confused about who is steering.”

Hermione definitely knew this. She must be particularly distracted today. Ginny knew that Hermione hadn’t been sleeping well. She had come to a maternal awareness that Hermione snored lightly when she was asleep. She had been keeping a tally and could assert that Hermione was sleeping no more than five hours a night.

“Sorry, Ginny.”

Ginny shook her head and visualized a flow of magic emitting from her hands and flowing into the broom as she had been taught and had done hundreds of times before.

Ginny kicked off elevating herself and her passenger to a height of ten or so meters in a couple seconds. The acceleration had its desired effect eliciting a gasp from Hermione. Ginny felt the pressure on her mid-section increase as Hermione grasped at her.

She slowed the rise and came to a steady hover feeling the breeze caress her face.

“Ginny...”

She smiled at the aggravated tone in Hermione’s voice.

“Hey, you had the chance to drive. You didn’t want to so now I get to take you where I want the way I want. You’ve been moping around like some slug, so I’m going to get your mind working and heart pumping. So... hold on.”

And Ginny leaned forward increasing the flow of magic. The broom accelerated commensurately but more gradually then before. Ginny didn’t want to terrorize Hermione, but rather she wanted to rouse Hermione from this waking sleep that had taken over a previously unstoppable witch.

She lost track of time as she was known to do when in the air. And the first few minutes went with Ginny just circling around the property feeling the rush of air and the pull of momentum around turns.

As air breezed by, Hermione’s grip on Ginny’s midsection lessened which was good because proper breathing was important for ideal broom control and Ginny was getting uncomfortable with the restriction.

“Looks like Dad needs to get into the garden again. The gnomes are overrunning it. I hope he doesn’t ask for our help. I hate de-gnoming.”

Ginny had to shout to be heard. Astride a moving broom was not the best setting for a conversation, but Ginny thought it might help Hermione stop over-thinking the whole flying thing.

“He’s had so much else to do. You can’t blame him for ignoring the garden when his son is in hospital. I...”

Ginny sighed noting Hermione’s return to Ronald’s condition. Everything came back to Hermione’s guilt. She needed to get past this.

“Hermione, do you know what an inside loop is?”

“Uh. Not really.”
“Good.”

Ginny cast a wandless sticking charm on the broom and Hermione’s hands. And began climbing. She poured on the acceleration and as the climb increased the g-forces grew. Maybe Hermione needed a small dose of terror after all.

As she and the broom reached plumb, Ginny felt Hermione begin to panic, but with her legs and hands bound she was in no real danger. Only the best racing brooms could reach damaging g-forces.

“GINNY!!!”

But Ginny continued undaunted watching the horizon to her left to keep track of the progression. The broom continued up and now back becoming fully inverted. The g-forces lessened briefly.

It was hardly the time to be thinking of it, but Ginny hoped Hermione didn’t vomit. Some people did around a manoeuvre like this. Oh well, too late to stop that. The broom stick began its downward turn and Hermione’s audible expression was reduced to a clenched ‘eeee’ sound as she bore through the increased g-loading.

Ginny shifted her view forward and up from her perspective (which was back and down relative to the ground) and again sought out the horizon to guide her level as she pulled out of the loop. The nose was pointing down. Then at forty five degrees. And finally level as Ginny gently braked to bring the broom back to an idle hover.

Hermione was breathing erratically and shaking violently. Ginny hoped that she hadn’t gone too far. This kind of physical response was not unusual for a novice flyer but traumatizing her friend and summer roommate was not her intention.

Hermione said her first post-loop words through clenched angry teeth.

“What was THAT! I agreed to get on a broom. Not be subjected...”

Hermione’s voice broke as her uneven breath spoiled her cadence.

“That was NOT FAIR!”

Ginny—always the firebrand herself—knew where Hermione’s psyche was at right now. She was terrified and felt vulnerable and was therefore responding with defiant outrage. She was ready to attack Ginny at a moments notice. So calm but firm was in order.

“Hermione. I will not listen to you berate yourself and dig an emotional hole that you don’t deserve to fall into. That was for self-pity and undeserved blame. And every time it comes from your lips I am going to do that again.”

It was weird having an argument without being able to face her opponent.

“This ‘flight’ is over! Put. Me. Down... NOW!”

“No.”

“What?! What do you mean ‘no’? You can’t say ‘no’. You brought me up here and you will deliver me back to the ground immediately.”

Hermione’s voice was tinged with fear now. Ginny kept hers steady.
“Hermione. No. You’ve been in a waking stupor for days. I have you awake and alert right now, so we are not going to land.”

Hermione was silent. Ginny could imagine the angered, stubborn eyes that pierced the back of her skull.

“Okay. What does my abductor want of me?”

“I want you to look around you. Feel the wind, smell the air, and listen to the world. I want you to taste the joy right in front of you and stop wallowing in despair.”

Ginny accelerated only slightly taking a cantering pace. The trees and farmland. The burrow with garden and in the distance the lake. They all passed under view in an almost lazy path.

Hermione seemed to relax a little, leaning in to Ginny’s back.

“You don’t understand. It isn’t that easy for me.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, but was gentle.

“First, that was very close to deserving another loop. Stop pitying yourself. But second... do you really believe that? Do you think I can’t understand what it means to have someone get hurt rescuing me? Or do you think my love for my brother can’t match yours?”

The broom riders had almost made a full circuit of the grounds. Ginny began to slow down and descend in a gentle curve.

“Everybody’s hurting from what happened, you included. But no one needs you hurting yourself constantly. We don’t want to see you do it and we don’t want to carry the burden of it.”

Ginny stopped just four feet off the ground.

“So can you wake up please?”

Hermione was crying. It had been harder to hear when they were higher in the air but the telltale sniffles were obvious.

“I’ll try. But I don’t know if I can.”

“You like thinking. So lets think ahead. What’s the worst that can happen to you now?”

“You mean other then some crazy bitch trying kill me with a flying broomstick.”

Ginny giggled and heard Hermione reflect the jocularity even if it was mixed with tears.

“Yes. Other than that.”

Hermione was silent for a few seconds.

“Ron could die.”

Ginny felt a weight drop in her stomach. She hadn’t made a hobby of imagining that possibility the way Hermione had. So the impact of the thought given a voice hurt more than she imagined it would. Yes. Ron could die.

“Then what?”
Ginny waited for Hermione to reply.

“What do mean ‘then what’? He’d be dead.”

Ginny swallowed the lump at the back her throat.

“Yes. And you would still be alive. Then what?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d go back to school when the year started and... go on.”

“And you’re going to that if he lives, right?”

“Yes...”

Ginny took a deep breath. She wanted so desperately for this to work. She couldn’t watch Hermione continue to self-destruct like this.

“So go on living right now. And when Ron gets better, you’ll still be there. You can make your apologies to him if you still insist on this guilt complex and you can move forward together.

“Or if Ron doesn’t get better... if Ron doesn’t, then you’ll be no worse off than if you sat immobilized for months.”

Ginny finally lowered the broom to the ground expecting Hermione to jump off and kiss the ground. When she remained leaning into Ginny, Ginny prompted her.

“You can get off now.”

“No, I can’t.”

That wasn’t what Ginny expected. She turned back to see Hermione’s challenging glare attempting to hide a creeping smile.

“Why?”

Hermione laughed out loud. It was a sound that almost brought Ginny to tears. A sound that had been absent from those lips for too long.

“Because you haven’t released the sticking charm that has me locked to this infernal stick.”

Shoot, Ginny had meant to dispel that after the loop. She silently issued a finite against the charm and Hermione all but fell off the broom. Ginny was suspending the broom and the broom was suspending Hermione; so when the charm released, Hermione lost her balanced and rolled of the broom. And since Hermione was still holding on to Ginny, she came along too. And since Ginny was suspending the broom, it gave out too.

Brooms don’t have feelings—usually. If this one had, it would have been very annoyed lying in a tangled pile of giggling limbs.

* * *

Fri. 5 July

Leanne Pentangle was a silly girl. She shouldn’t worry so much about what boys thought. And she didn’t in general bother with it too much, but this boy was different.
Ernie Macmillan was confident and competitive. He never let anything stand in his way. And though he sometimes said things that Leanne wouldn’t dream of—things that probably hurt people—Leanne felt a strange attraction to him.

When Ernie had asked her out on a date to Ajji Majji, she had jumped at the opportunity. Literally jumped—like on the bed.

She was slightly disappointed to learn that they were going as a group with a bunch of other Hufflepuffs, but her mother had always said that a foot in the door was all that a beautiful girl needed.

The brush sifted through her hair without catching. She had lost track of time letting her thoughts wander. She needed to put the brush down. If she didn’t, then her hair was going to fall out in protest.

She wasn’t very beautiful. She didn’t have the striking profile of the average Slytherin or the raw sexuality of a Gryffindor. No, Leanne pursued a look of natural beauty—a misnomer if ever one existed.

Ernie would be a catch though, if she could manage it. The Macmillans were a strong power in the Wizengamot. Not quite as much as the Malfoys or the Longbottoms, but more powerful by far than her own family. With influence came resources. And resources meant a comfortable life.

And the truth was, Leanne could see herself with Ernie. So many wizards of her age lacked the anchored system of values that kept society working and Leanne didn’t want to marry some old ugly wizard that would just ogle her.

And he was funny.

* * *

“Are you sure you won’t come?”

Susan asked Hannah one last time hoping the answer would change. Hannah wanted to go, but Neville really needed to stay inside and she seemed to be such a comfort to him.

“No Sue, Nathan has some exercises he wants Neville to try and I want to make sure that he has the help he needs. Lady Augusta is out with your Aunt preparing for the session that starts on Monday, so there wouldn’t be anyone here if something went wrong.”

“You have to get out sometime.”

Susan gave Hannah a knowing look.

“I know that you want to be there for him, but you can’t let it consume your life. It’ll destroy you.”

Then let it. Hannah sometimes felt weak. As though this burden would crush her. And in those moments she might be prone to despair. But this was not one of those times. Hannah felt a confidence growing. Life had started settling into a pattern. The pessimist would describe it as a rut. But Hannah would describe it as stability. And from a place of stability, she thought she could bear any burden necessary.

Hannah just shook her head.

“Tell Justin and Ernie ‘hello’ for me.”
Susan nodded in acknowledgement and turned to Harry.

“Well we need to get going, Harry. Ernie is planning to meet us out front in about twenty minutes.”

Hannah watched her best friend depart. She smiled, thinking of how uncomfortable Susan must be accompanying Harry-the-boy-who-lived Potter. She hoped the best for them both.

The mirth faded into melancholy as Hannah reflected on the task in front of them. She hadn’t shared Nathan’s plan with Harry and Susan, but the ‘exercises’ were a practice in desensitisation.

Helping Neville by hurting him would surely be harder than any other task that his recovery had required of Hannah. Nathan had provided her with resources about the treatment. The material explained the reasoning logically and clearly, but a core part of Hannah retched at the thought of what was to come.

* * *

“Leanne, this is Harry Potter. Harry, this is Leanne.”

Ernest Macmillan knew Harry from Dumbledore’s Army and knew him to be a powerful if idealistic wizard. Leanne would appreciate a formal introduction.

“Leanne.” ... “Harry.”

The group of six stood outside the main entrance to the Ajji Majji La Tarajji World of Wonders. One of a few British parks certified for magical amusements. While witches occasionally moonlighted at muggle theme parks, those with a wizardry certification could use magic out in the open.

The difference was unmistakable. The muggles would never be able to compare. It was a truth that some wizards refused to acknowledge that muggles were simply a lesser form of evolution. At some point in the last several thousand years humanity had forked into those whose blood contained the power of magic and those who didn’t.

It had never made any sense to Ernie that the wizarding world had backed down from the backwards fools that persecuted them. A wizard could crush a thousand muggles in seconds. So why did his ancestors bend a knee and retreat into hiding.

If ever faced with a similar choice, Ernest would not make the same mistake.

“Harry, I know you were brought up with the muggies. Have you ever been to a wizard’s fun park?”

Despite his prestige and notoriety, meeting Harry Potter in his first year at Hogwarts had been a disappointment. The legend of his infancy engendered great expectations. And while Harry was an accomplished wizard, he really wasn’t anything spectacular.

He lacked a certain raw quality of power or menace, an intent to kill maybe. Ernie could not see how a boy of Harry’s temperament for all his altruism could defeat a dark lord. Was he hiding a profound power or was he just an average boy who’d lived by pure chance, like a twister that destroyed home after home in a straight line only to leave one inexplicably standing.

“No, this is a first for me. Susan was suggesting I should try the scrimmage pitch—that they have a drop in game of quidditch running all the time.”
Ernie would hedge his bets on Harry Potter.

“Yeah, that sounds right up your alley. Maybe you and Zach here can show them what real quidditch players can do.”

Zacharias Smith stepped forward to shake Harry’s hand. Zach had taken the D.A. a lot more seriously than Ernie and he couldn’t deny the difference.

“Harry, good to see you again.”

“Same.”

As Zach stepped back, Justin stepped in. Justin was an okay wizard for a mudblood. He came from a family that understood tradition and knew their position in society, Justin had always respected the higher status of his betters. As such, Ernie counted him among his friends.

“Harry.”

“Hi, Justin.”

Introductions were sometimes a tiresome ritual, but civilization required order and order required protocol. But Ernie had a quiet corner of the Starlight Atrium that was calling to him. Leanne was giving him all of the right signals and he wanted to see exactly what she had in mind.

* * *

Harry certainly knew how to handle a broom. Susan wondered at the forces Harry must be feeling around those turns. It was always a balance with a broom. Since acceleration can injure even a wizard’s body, brooms were usually enchanted with governors to protect the rider. Turn too hard and the broom would slow to compensate, but too easy and your opponent would fly circles around you. Knowing the feeling of a broom that was at its full potential was one of the most important skills for any competitive or tactical flyer.

The game had been short with Zach and Harry running the field. Now the entire group was indulging in an all out capture-the-snitch competition. The prospect of flying competitively against Harry Potter had brought out dozens of participants and the pitch had begun to look like a flock of starlings with Harry Potter leading twists and turns this way and that.

The twists and turns reflected those churning within Susan’s chest. What were these feelings? She had had a crush on Harry Potter since she was little, but it was a crush and Susan knew academically the difference between that and... and what? Love? Was she falling in love?

Susan had always been overly analytical. It was part of what had drawn her to Hermione in Herbology. Hermione always broke problems down and searched for the truth of each piece constructing from the result a more complete picture than was evident from the puzzle as a whole.

Hermione had described to Susan once how she broke down spells to learn them. Each spell had an ‘internal’ half and an ‘external’ half. That’s what she had called them, but the exact difference still wasn’t clear to Susan.

The internal aspects could be divided into ‘power’, ‘direction’, and ‘colour’. ‘Colour’ was the most difficult to understand, but there were different pools of magic that behaved differently. It was possible to cast using any colour of magic, but one colour was usually the best for a given purpose.

The external aspects were ‘identity’, ‘cadence’, and ‘step’, which corresponded roughly to the

Hermione said she always broke the spell down and learned each piece before trying to put it all back together. And that thought process made so much sense to Susan that she had adopted it wholesale and had much success with it.

So how could one break down what Susan was feeling? Some part of it was fascination with Harry Potter. He was just very very interesting. And Susan wanted to know everything about him.

Part of it was that Harry was gentle hearted and protective. He looked out for others and lead others to look out for him. He was a leader even though he didn’t want to be. Did that mean he would make a good partner in life?

So much of his life was recognizable to Susan. If anyone could understand what it was to grow up without your parents—to never know them—it was Harry. He had lost so much and striven though it. So there was a familiarity... a likeness.

And there was the other thing. Susan felt a stirring in her chest whenever she thought about Harry, but sometimes—and lately more often than not—when she saw Harry she felt something lower down. A sexual attraction? Susan wasn’t unfamiliar with the sensation. She was a teenager after all. But it hadn’t ever been anchored to a specific person so much as general desire to be sated.

The aspects seemed to flow together and morph in ways that defied analysis. How could she reconstruct a complete understanding if she couldn’t isolate the pieces? Susan found this infuriating and even more infuriating was the fact that the confusion only magnified the desire to be closer to Harry.

And just on top of that composite feeling was an anxiety. Susan knew where that was coming from. Auntie Em wanted to talk about Harry and specifically Susan’s feelings for Harry. She knew that Em was only looking out for her best interests, but there was a part of Susan that knew with absolute clarity that it was none of her aunt’s business. These feelings were hers.

Would Auntie Em stand in her way? ... Why? Harry would be as eligible a bachelor as any Susan’s age. He had status and influence and money and...

And honestly... to hell with all of that.

* * *

Zach clapped Harry on the back. Harry hadn’t caught the snitch. But to be fair Zach hadn’t either. A young red-head had snatched it out of the air when Harry was just in grasping distance. He had given her an autograph which had resulted in unreserved fan-girl jumping and hugging and after that Harry was ready to move on.

Susan had been following them. She seemed preoccupied with something, but Harry wanted to talk Quidditch and when he was preoccupied he usually wanted space to think.

As they approached the Starlight—the location’s only provider of food—Harry heard the sounds of music and money changing hands and a rather loud argument.

The three stepped into the establishment and Zach immediately grabbed his shoulder and pointed over to the back corner of the building where Justin and Ernie were in each other’s face shouting angry words. They looked moments from blows.

“Why can’t you mind your own damn business?”
“Because you can’t stop being an ass long enough to see that I was trying to help?”

Leanne was in the back corner of the booth the boys were standing in front of. Her expression was taken aback but also tinged with amusement.

Harry reached for his wand to intervene, but Susan caught his hand.

“Do you really think bringing wands into this is a good idea?”

And then Justin threw the first punch. Ernie staggered but regrouped and threw his own back at Justin who grappled Ernie and struck again.

Zach grabbed Justin and Harry grabbed Ernie. And the two were hauled apart.

“Let me go, Potter. He needs to be taught a lesson.” Ernie spat these words more at Justin than Harry.

“For a ‘proper’ wizard, you have a real shitty way of treating a date. I only asked you to show some decency!”

Justin was still pulling at Zach, but Harry and Zach were easily the physical superior of their respective captives.

“The stupid mudblood doesn’t know his…”

Ernie caught what he was saying too late. The words were already spoken before they registered. Harry paused loosening his grip but Ernie had stopped resisting.

Zach still had a tight grip on Justin but he wasn’t pulling away either.

“What? What did you say? How long have we known each other? How long?!”

Justin was breathing heavy, his face a picture of betrayal. Ernie’s gaze was downward, not meeting his former friend’s glare.

“I never knew you for a bigot. ... I have things I need to do.”

Justin shrugged off Zach’s loosening grasp and stormed out. Harry wasn’t sure what to think. But Zach looked to Ernie with a worried glance.

“You better go fix that, mate.”

And then Ernie was gone, too.

Then all eyes shifted to Leanne. Her eyes grew wide when she realized that her explanation was expected. She shrugged.

“I don’t know. Ernie put his arm around me and we were talking. He tried to kiss me a couple times.... we were just playing. Then Justin comes over and starts asking Ernie about whether this is how he treats women. Ernie got mad and started telling Justin to stay out it. It wasn’t a problem, really, it wasn’t. Ernie didn’t do anything wrong.”

Except call Justin a mudblood.

Susan said what Harry was thinking.
“He shouldn’t have said that though...”

An uncomfortable silence opened up as no one knew where to proceed from here. Zach broke the moment with more than a little sarcasm in his voice.

“Well this was fun. I think we should call it a night. Leanne, would you like me to escort you home?”

“Sure, thank you.”

Leanne gathered her bag, took Zach’s hand as he helped her up, and then it was just Susan and Harry.

* * *

Susan sat in the booth letting the hot cup of tea warm her hands. The whole affair with Ernie and Justin disturbed her. They had always been good friends as far as Susan knew, and maybe they would get over this, but there was something about it that still bothered her. If she could just figure it out.

The Macmillans were a very respected pureblood family and had been close friends to the Bones family. Susan had even had play-dates with Ernie when they were little. It was hard to believe that he would see Justin—one of his closest friends—as a having dirty blood.

The moment swirled in Susan’s mind much like the milk diffusing into her tea as she replayed the event in her mind. It wasn’t an accident. It definitely hadn’t been a joke. It was like Ernie had been waiting with the thought on the tip of his tongue holding it back and Justin had finally ripped it out of him.

So he must really believe it. Either that or he was just looking for the word that would hurt Justin most, but that wasn’t Ernie’s way. They were punching each other. They didn’t need to insult each other.

And what of Justin? If Leanne wasn’t bothered—and hadn’t acted bothered, which maybe she hadn’t been because she had referred to it as ‘play’—then why would Justin intervene? This answer seemed more obvious. Justin might be jealous. It was an assumption, but it fit, but why attack Ernie. Hufflepuffs didn’t tear each other down. They built each other up.

And then there was Leanne. Susan was angry with Leanne. It wasn’t fair, necessarily, but Susan knew how to read Hufflepuff and how to read girl. Leanne had been enjoying the fight. She knew exactly what was going on and rather than put out the fire she just let it burn. It was the worst caricature of the catty teenage girl that Susan had never been able to stand.

Susan had lived with Leanne at Hogwarts for five school years and had never picked up on this strain of her personality. Of course, Leanne had never really connected with her dormmates. She had been seen many times in the company of Tracey Davis, so Susan always assumed she had aspirations to Slytherin.

“Susan?”

Susan looked up from her tea to Harry who was considering the bottom of his cup having finished his tea more quickly.

“Yes, Harry.”
Susan watched as he took a long breath and sighed very visibly.

“I need to ask you something. There hasn’t been a good time and this isn’t it either, but if the recent days have taught me anything it’s that time doesn’t wait.”

Susan felt anticipation explode through her manifesting a ball in her throat and a weight upon her chest. Why would he preface something this way?

“I like you a lot. And you’ve help so much. You’ve looked out for everyone. Not that it’s your job, or that you have to... I just mean that you do it so well. I...”

Harry shook his head, confused.

Susan knew what this was. She knew! She wanted him to just get the words out! The weight upon her chest doubled. She felt her breathing deepen and increase in pace, but at the same time she felt like she was holding her breath.

“I’m sorry. I mean that I like you. And I thought that maybe you might be liking me. And I wondered if you might want to try a date sometime...”

The weight of anxiety rose with joyous potential. Susan was right. Harry did like her and wanted to give it a go.

“... like a real one. Not like this one. Well of course not like this one. This was a disaster ... not that you were bad ... I mean of course not ... I mean with Ernie and everything ... you’ve been great...”

He was so cute right now. Susan comforted herself that finding joy in Harry’s bashful approval-seeking was perfectly normal even if it did feel a little sadistic. She needed to slow him down though.

“Harry...”

“I-want-to-go-out-with-you!”

Susan put her hand on top of his stopping the adorable rant. And not a moment too early because in the wizarding world going on a date was very different to going out together. Harry was asking her out. Her stomach leaped in giddy tumbles.

“I really like you. And I would be very honoured to accompany you on a date.”

Susan knew that there was something she was concerned about just a minute ago. It had seemed important at the time, but she honestly couldn’t remember what is was or why it could possibly matter.
“Dad!”

The effervescent joy bubbled from Hermione’s soles to her crown. Hermione ran from the front door of the Weasley’s burrow out into the garden meeting her father half-way up the walk.

“Dad!”

She crashed into him like a proton shot from a particle accelerator. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed her father’s embrace. Releasing him Hermione caught sight of his wide-grin as he chuckled at her antics. She experienced a flash of embarrassment remembering that Ginny and Molly were watching, but she was too happy to care.

“Where’s Mum?”

“It turns out that they don’t usually allow cars through into Narnia. Your mum and Mr. Weasley went back so he could escort her in.”
Narnia. Dad had taken to calling it that after he had visited Diagon Alley the first time. It sometimes seemed that way; like you’d stepped through a wardrobe into a land completely apart from the normal. But in truth, the magical alcoves of Britain were a scattering of warded locations that abutted the muggle world. When muggles approached a magical location the wards would make them forget where they were going or cause them to get lost. Unless you had an invitation of course.

“Mr. Granger.”

Molly greeted Dad.

“I apologize for my husband. A simple Ministry pass would’ve sufficed, mind you. He just wants to get his hands inside that muggle automobile. He hasn’t had a chance to fiddle with one since the Ford Anglia ran away. You’ll be lucky if it runs when you’re ready to leave.”

Hermione leaned in and confided quietly to her father.

“You’ll be lucky if it doesn’t fly.”

Her father rolled his eyes mirthfully.

“Hermione, I’ve missed you so much.”

“How did you get a visitor’s pass? The Ministry has been putting all these new rules in place. I heard that even visitation approvals were backed up.”

“Mr. Weasley pulled some strings. We’ve got established jobs and a mortgage, so were unlikely to overstay our welcome.”

She took a note to thank Mr. Weasley. His job at the Ministry was stable but not high ranking. In the current climate, it must have taken a lot for him to pull this off. And she worried that he’d done it because of her withdrawn behaviour.

But whatever the reason, Dad was here and Mum would be coming soon.

“You’re very welcome here for as long as you want to stay. No Ministry bureaucrat is going to kick someone out of my home. I’d like to see them try.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, but we have to be back to work on Monday. So no need to cause a fuss on our account.”

Hermione suspected that Molly would love to have a reason to raise a fuss about the Ministry even if it was just to Arthur.

“Hermione, we need to talk more about this new law you’ve written about. It’s hard to get information on magical governance as a normie, and you didn’t give very many details. I am not comfortable with the idea of you being trapped here.”

Hermione looked to a small parcel of papers that Dad was carrying under his arm. Following her gaze, her father explained.

“Oh! We brought your mail.”

As Daniel began to pull out select items for Hermione to review, Molly put a temporary stop to it.

“Well none of that out here. It’s a scorcher. Inside with you. I’ve got some tea on.”
Aurea paced. He’d been gone too long. The transition sometimes left him weak. It was part of what they were, but even so it had been six days. After her first time, it had never taken her longer than three days to recover sufficiently to travel.

If Vargus didn’t return soon, she would have to assume the worst. They had planned for it, but somehow it had never seemed real.

Fenrir always came back.

But if he didn’t come back, then dealing with Rip would be the first problem. Fenrir was the only one that could keep him in line. Rip wanted to be ‘alpha’, and little did he know that Fenrir wasn’t an alpha so much as a leader.

It would be okay. Aurea had made a deal with Kullin and between the two of them they would bring Riparius to heel or they would kill him. No wolf could stand against the pack.

The real problem was Lyko. He was young, impulsive, and worshipped Rip. If he followed Rip’s claim to dominance then it would hinge on Varg who was trustworthy but leaned on slyniness more than raw strength.

But Lyko would fall in line if the alternative was losing his chance at Adusta. But judging by the strong scent of Adusta’s adolescence, she wasn’t interested in Lyko at all. She was interested in Anthus though only the moon knew why.

Anthus was weak and timorous. He had no chance of holding the pack in the next generation. That would absolutely be Lyko unless Fenrir brought more into the pack. They had talked about it, but hiding twelve werewolves from the hit wizards that were always after them was difficult enough.

Fenrir had to come back.

* * *

“... and so the car helps you break and steer—like a feather weight charm.”

Emma was doing her best to humour Arthur. If his last car really had been a Ford Anglia, then he probably would be shocked by the complexity under the hood. She didn’t know enough about cars in general to educate him and his earnest interest was amusing, but the real concern was that Hermione marked Arthur as the quiet one of the family.

“Mr. Weasley, if you promise not to damage the car you may examine it to your heart’s content.”

“Call me Arthur, please. I reserve Mr. Weasley for official business meetings and my father.”

“Arthur, then”.

The walk up from the grassy yard on which Arthur had asked her to park was a fair distance, and while Emma was in good health, she was looking forward to getting out of the heat. She was, however, less enamoured with the prospect of staying in the Weasley’s home for long. Magic or not, it appeared to be on the verge of falling over.

Arthur reached the door just ahead of her and without knocking threw open the door and the two walked into the dim entryway. It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust to the interior glow after the beating rays of a clear summer’s day.
“Hi, Honey! I’m home!”

Arthur brightly shouted into the house.

The Weasley’s youngest daughter—Ginny it was—came around the corner from the next room. She was focused on taping up the bristles of a broom and didn’t see Emma.

“Dad, it was funny the first bazillion times you did it. Let it go. It’s a muggle TV show. We get it.”

“Ginevra, don’t be rude. This is Mrs. Granger—Hermione’s mother.”

Ginny’s face snapped up realizing that she’d missed the new arrival.

“Sorry! Mrs. Granger, it’s good to meet you.”

Ginny offered her hand to shake which Emma accepted.

“Your father tells me that I am to call him Arthur. If so, both he and you are to call me ‘Emma’.”

“Okay.”

Arthur now addressed his daughter.

“Gin, could you tell me where your mother is?”

“She’s in the kitchen like always.”

“Of course.”

Arthur led the way towards the back of the home coming through an archway into a very nice if rustic kitchen. As Emma scanned the room she saw that Daniel and Hermione were discussing something serious over a cup of tea.

It had better not be about that fecking law. Dan hadn’t let it go since they received Hermione’s letter. Yes, they needed to discuss it, but it didn’t need to be the first thing on the plate. He could show some graciousness as a guest first.

“Daniel? We talked about how to approach this in the car.”

Daniel got that deer-in-the-headlights look, and somewhere deep inside, she felt a warmth at how cute he was, but right now she was too busy getting angry.

“I’m sorry, dearest. It just came out.”

Hermione got up from the stool she was sitting on and rushed up to her mother who embraced her gladly. The rush of endorphins that Emma got from holding her child again was threatening to wash away the anger.

And no. She wasn’t holding her child. She was holding her adult daughter. Hermione didn’t exactly take after her father or mother in terms of her appearance, but the person in front of Emma Granger was a beautiful young women. And smart—Emma reminded herself—which was more important in the long run.

As Emma released her embrace, she shot Daniel her best this-is-not-over look and then returned Hermione’s smile.
“So your father and I want to talk about this next Hogwarts year. When we agreed to let you stay after that ugly Voldemort affair—” Arthur Weasley shuddered at this, “we had no way to know that your ability to travel freely to and from home might be limited. Part of the reason we came, other than to just visit, is to learn more about what it means and decide, with your input, whether or not this is still the best idea.”

That hadn’t come out perfectly, but it was close. Emma had been considering the best way to broach this topic with her daughter. Hermione had a very good head on her shoulders, but she was also very attached to her magic. The scowl on her set jaw attested that she was not going to just accede to her parents’ request.

“I’m not going home, Mum. Not for more than a visit.”

“We just want to talk about it.”

Emma pointed Hermione to her father and gave a prompting glance signalling him to jump in.

“Elly, the whole thing feels really bad. It seems mean and discriminatory, and I don’t want that to be the culture you grow up in. These people...”

No, Dan. It was the wrong tack to take. It would make her feel like a child. She’d rebel against that.

“’Mione, we know you’re mature enough to handle this. We just want to talk.” She punctuated this with a sharp glare at her husband.

“Elly—”

“Stop it, Dad. Mum. Both of you. Stop handling me. You’re right...”

Emma was brought up short. She didn’t expect Hermione to give in this easily. Her daughter was as stubborn as she and Dan put together.

“You’re right. I am mature enough to handle this. I want this to be a pleasant time. I miss you both so much. But I swear, if you try to take magic away I won’t just hate you. I’ll leave. And I’ll go to places that you can’t follow me. This is my choice, and if you want to take it away from me, it’ll cost you dearly.”

Emma was shocked at the look in Hermione’s eyes. A steely determination that was backed with something else, something menacing. An intent of sorts. Emma believed her daughter for multiple reasons, not least of which was that Hermione didn’t lie—not usually.

“Okay, Hermione. I’m sorry. We’re just worried about you. I want you to believe that we would never hurt you. Or try to take away your dreams.”

“Dearest, I think—”

Daniel tried to interject, but Hermione beat him to it.

“Mum, you don’t know better than I do what my dreams are or what would hurt me... so I’m telling you. If you try to take magic away you will be hurting me and I won’t let you.”

“Elly—”

Daniel wasn’t giving up. He had never been as good at reading Hermione as Emma. Well in this
situation... maybe it was better that he take the flak.

“Dad! Stop!”

The furious look on Hermione’s face was tinged with betrayal. She began to cry. Emma knew her daughter. These were not tears of sadness. These were tears of rage. They were tears reflectively accusing Hermione of not being strong enough to control her emotions.

“I just wanted to see you. I just wanted to see you because I missed you.”

Hermione was gone up the back stairs followed closely by the Weasley’s daughter. Good. Hermione would not want comfort from any parent right now, but she really would need someone to rant at. And speaking of rants...

“Mr. Granger, I would like to speak with you outside.”

* * *

“Hermione... Hermione, wait!”

Ginny leaped up the loudly objecting stairs as Hermione fled to the landing and into Ginny’s room. The door slammed with a quiet click—courtesy of the silencing charm. Being fully fed up with Ginny’s penchant for slamming her bedroom door in protest, Mother had added a permanent charm to her door frame. This had been infuriating but had broken Ginny of the behaviour.

She paused on the landing considering whether or not she should intrude. Hermione might want to be alone to calm down. Ginny sidled up to her own bedroom door feeling odd at the notion. Yep. That was a tell tale sniff on the other side of the door.

For some reason Ginny thought of Harry. He had presumably done this exact same thing the night before the professor’s funeral. That night when he had come in and sat with her. She had yelled at him that night. Hermione had been spiralling before that, but it must have hurt to hear from her best friend that her other best friend and neonatal love could have been saved if only Harry had been there instead of Hermione.

He was wrong. He wasn’t there and couldn’t know. But the last result that Ginny sought was for Hermione to sink back into sadness and continue her somnambulism. An angry, awake Hermione was better than a sad, hiatic Hermione any day.

Ginny opened the door to her own bedroom and quietly entered.

“Go away, Mum. I don’t want to talk to either of you right now.”

“It’s me.”

Hermione looked up with red eyes and a look of shock and embarrassment.

“It’s okay, Hermione. I understand.”

Hermione stood up wiping her eyes and visibly collected herself.

“It’s not your problem. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“You’ve still got credit with me. Remember, I had a hard time, too, not too long ago.”

Hermione’s visage clouded.
“It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not. Your parents just threatened to take away an important part of your life. You’re an extraordinary witch. Are you really concerned that you would be an ordinary muggle?”

Ginny walked up close behind Hermione.

“Because that’s not true. Hermione Granger is extraordinary with a wand or without.”

“Once I found out that I was a witch, I always thought magic would define me. I’m really good at it. And I enjoy it. I won’t let them take that away. I think I would rather die.”

A shudder ran through Ginny from the back of her neck down her arms and spine. Hermione had said that so coolly and without any hint that it was just a thing one said.

“Hermione...”

She shook off the hand Ginny had applied to her shoulder.

“Hermione, you were never going to be defined by magic—you are going to redefine magic. You’re not just the best muggle-born in our year... you’re the best anyone in my family has ever known or heard about.”

Hermione finally met and held Ginny’s eyes searching for the truth of her statement in them. And Ginny didn’t flinch realizing that, yes, she really believed that.

“Thanks.”

“And if your parents try to take you away, I’ll come get you. Just like Ron did for Harry my first year.”

Ginny intended this as an encouraging denouement, but Hermione’s quiet tears were struck with a sob. The mention of Ronald maybe.

* * *

“Are you sure?”

Varg was sweating head-to-toe having run a long distance to deliver his news. Their human form did not have the staying power of the wolf, but was far elevated above the humans. Varg nodded confirming to Aurea that the world had shifted.

A pack didn’t always survive the loss of its leader.

“Apparently he was run off the manor grounds, but Aurors pursued him into the countryside and when they caught up to him he refused surrender.”

Damn the fool. Fenrir was strong, but as was so often true, his strength had metastasised into pride. He was better than that.

“So he wasn’t captured.”

“I spoke with an Auror who claims he saw it. He said that animals don’t have rights to due process. It was all I could manage not to rip out his throat on the spot.”

“Well, it is good that you didn’t. There’s been far too much foolhardiness for a lifetime.”
So it was done. Aurea had spent so many years taming and constraining the monster that Fenrir was so dedicated to becoming. She had been the first. He hadn’t even wanted a pack, but he had bit her while brutally raping her at the height of a full moon and in so doing had earned himself a dependent. Aurea hadn’t from that day forward ever let Fenrir operate without her knowledge. She couldn’t undo the wrong done to her. She was a monster and nothing would ever change that. But what was better to face down a monster than another of its kind?

But in a sick kind of way. Aurea would miss him. He was a horrible, cruel bastard, but he had lead the pack well. They survived when so many of their kind were in chains or long dead.

And now Rip would be the head monster in charge—not if she could stop it. Tragically, it would likely cost Adusta dearly.

“We need to tell everyone at the same time. You know what that will mean, right?”

Vargus to his credit just nodded.

At least it wasn’t under a moon. That would’ve ensured a bloodbath.

* * *

Sun. 7 July

Susan’s mindscape swirled with an unwieldy spread of ideas. So, it turned out that infatuation interfered with Occlumency. It figured really. It had just felt different. When Susan and Harry were just acquaintances, barely friends, it had seemed perfectly natural to have him reaching into her mind—’cause that was normal in any way.

But now. It seemed a little too intimate a little too quickly. What was he thinking? What was Susan thinking? Should they be thinking about thinking when they were just dipping toes into feeling?

And this endless forest of firing neurons was why Harry had no difficulty in finding her presence every time they had practised their Occlumency cat-and-mouse game. Again, Susan wasn’t doing any worse than Harry—which Susan chose to believe was a sign he was in the same condition as she. But this exercise wasn’t working.

Maybe in a week or two. But Harry had asked her on a date only two days ago and Susan was still in the middle of processing that. And so she couldn’t clear her mind.

“It’s not working. I’m sorry, Harry. It was a good idea. With everything going on with Neville, I had forgotten about it until you reminded me.”

“No.” Harry reached out. “Don’t worry about it. I’m shite at this, too.”

Susan looked down to see where Harry had placed his hand on hers. Her heart caught for a beat and her eyes locked on Harry’s. Susan thought about kissing Harry. What would that be like? Would it be different from Justin? That kiss hadn’t felt special at all, just wet. Harry was right there, only a short distance away. She saw Harry’s eyes glance down to her lips.

Yes, do it.

Then he pulled back breaking both hand and eye contact and looking to the side introspectively. Susan was simultaneously relieved and disappointed. And flush with anticipation for the future moment when that desire would be fulfilled.
The deep emerald orbs returned accompanied by a sweet, nearly silly grin.

“Amelia said today is your birthday.”

Susan had missed it coming until about three days ago. With everything going on she hadn’t wanted to make any kind of fuss.

“Do you have any plans?”

The twisting in Susan’s stomach knotted in another direction extending perpendicular to the standard three dimensions. Love was like that she guessed. Well... infatuation, right? Was infatuation different to love or was it just a type of love?

“No. I would normally just have a special dinner with Auntie Em and maybe go out with Hannah for some fun.”

That sounded rather pathetic now that she had said it out loud.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out for dinner tonight. I don’t have any reservations or anything. I didn’t know until yesterday.”

The prospect of having a romantic dinner with Harry sent flutters through Susan and she felt a grin far sillier than Harry’s spreading on her face.

“We could invite some friends if you like. You said Hannah often comes to your birthday.”

“No!” Susan interjected very rapidly before really thinking about it. She hoped he wouldn’t read too much into her over-eager response.

“I— I wouldn’t want to put anyone on the spot. I mean it would be really short notice, right? I would really love to have dinner for my birthday. It doesn’t really matter where we go as long you’ll promise to talk with me.”

Susan wanted to feel his touch again. It had been so warm. She reached and took his hand with hers and started to stand up.

“Let’s go ask Auntie Em if she has any good ideas for places to eat.”

* * *

Hermione knew it was petulant, sitting at the Weasley’s kitchen table and overtly refusing to meet anyone’s eyes. It was not as if Molly or Arthur or Ginny had done anything wrong. And she should be strong enough to face her parents. But while she was still angry at their absence of trust and complete lack of consideration for her ability to make her own life decisions, she was more anxious than angry.

Harry and Hermione had often conversed about Harry’s special status in ministry jurisdictions. The ministry didn’t recognize muggle rules of custody and so Harry was never actually under the Dursley’s permanent care. But they did recognize parenthood and Hermione’s parents could—if they decided to—remove her from Hogwarts against her will and she would not be able to re-enroll without their permission until she was already too old to attend—even if she did run away as she had threatened.
She looked across the table to see Ginny making polite conversation with Hermione’s mother. Had Ginny really meant that she would come and get her?

Why?

She and Ginny were friends now, because of Ron and everything they had been through... but that was all new. Why would Ginny go far out of her way to help Hermione? Or was it just something that Ginny had said to make Hermione feel better?

So many questions. And each answer always asked a new question, sometimes more than one. It was a geometrically expanding uncertainty and that more then anything was causing her anxiety.

The way to resolve uncertainty was to seek its anti-particle in one of two trusted places. The first was her mother’s way. Trust your senses, examine the world, and expect consistency. That wasn’t very useful here. The variables rested on future outcomes that she could not know. So it would have to be the second way—Dan’s way. Not her father’s way, but Uncle Dan’s way. Dan was her father’s name but it was also her uncle’s name. Why this had happened Hermione would never understand.

Uncle Dan’s way was finding people, trusting them, learning from them, and expecting consistency. Consistency was important. It was what allowed past events to predict a future.

Of those at the table, Hermione trusted Ginny most. That was troubling in and of itself, but Hermione knew that adolescence brought rejection of hierarchy and an embrace of peership. It was growing up. And growing up meant taking accountability even when you didn’t want to. It meant not being petulant.

Hermione turned and looked directly at her mother.

“Okay. Let’s talk about it. What exactly are your concerns?”

Emma’s face showed worry. If Hermione had to guess, her mother was probably worried that she would damage her relationship with Hermione if this conversation went badly. Hermione wouldn’t do that to them. But for this negotiation maybe it was better that they not know that.

“Hermione, my main concern is for your safety. Everyone has said, from the first day when you got your Hogwarts letter until now, that Hogwarts is the safest place to be. That no one was stronger than Mr. Dumbledore. But honestly your own account of events seems to contradict this.”

Hermione had to concede to herself that Hogwarts had never been as safe as advertised.

“From evil professors and secret chambers with monsters to convicted traitors and even sadistic government overseers, it’s been one disaster after another. Every year. And every year you’ve been honest with us about it and that speaks to your credit.”

“Mum, don’t patronize me. I know what I’ve done right and what I’ve done wrong.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. Every time I’ve challenged anyone on this they’ve fallen back on the argument that Dumbledore wouldn’t let anyone get hurt badly, that he personally would keep all of you from harm. Even if I believed that and I sincerely don’t, he’s gone now. And he died protecting you from people who wanted to hurt you. So whatever protection you had is gone now.”

Molly interjected quietly, “God rest his soul.”

Arthur put a hand on Molly’s shoulder.
“But, Mother, he was fighting Voldemort and he’s dead now too.”

“Was it Voldemort who put the monster in the Hogwarts basement? Or put a sadist in charge of child care?! Was it Voldemort who made you break laws in order to help a convicted criminal escape capture—yes, I acknowledge that he later proved innocent, but you couldn’t truly know that at the time.”

Hermione let this swirl as her mother waited for it to sink in. It was true to some extent. It hadn’t been anyone’s fault, but ‘safe’ would be the wrong word to describe the magical world with.

Emma continued.

“So the threats are still out there. Your father and I—” Dad nodded indicating his assent to his inclusion. “We are worried that news of this law is a sign of more danger to come. The evidence is quite strong. So given that, where are we wrong?”

Hermione took a deep breath. Claim, warrant, impact. Their claim was reasonable, the impact correct. So it was the warrant that was wrong. Or perhaps it was right and their associated conclusion was just wrong. Hermione quickly put her thoughts in order.

“So life’s dangerous. Is that a revelation? I can grant you everything you’ve said and you’d still be wrong that I should come home. I am a known associate of Harry Potter and by extension Albus Dumbledore and by extension the ‘forces of light’. I’m a muggle-born so they hate me all the more for it.”

Hermione pointed out the kitchen window at nothing in particular.

“If evil forces are out there right now gathering strength—organizing—then I’m not safe at home. Muggles died during the Wizarding War and they would come for me if nothing else as a pawn to use against Harry or Arthur. Do you honestly think you can protect me? The police? Guns? It’s all worthless unless you are going to carpet bomb Diagon Alley.”

Hermione felt the fire that had raged out of control yesterday blaze brilliantly in the forge of her mind constructing thought after thought.

“If the worst comes to pass, then I am better off here. Training to make myself as strong as possible and surrounded by capable wizards that might be able to protect me. And if I were to die, I would rather do so serving a good cause then hiding hoping that the evil spirit skips my house.”

Her father was crying now. He was always so emotional about things. She addressed him directly hoping to drive her point home.

“Dad. It was war. It was just starting when it ended, but lots of people died. Not that they would’ve died. They actually died. War doesn’t spare the weak or cowardly. War doesn’t respect anything except power. And I can learn to protect myself and you and others only if I am still here with other witches and wizards.”

Her thoughts were getting dark. Hermione was arguing pragmatism when at heart she was an idealist. In truth, she wanted to stay because it was where she belonged and where she felt she could do the most good and where she could repay her debt to Ron. But the pragmatic argument was stronger because in this case it was objective. It didn’t depend on her viewpoint. She was actually safer among witches than among muggles.

Hogwarts might not be safer for her, but she hoped her mother would miss that distinction. Mum turned to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.
“Was it really that bad? Were we really at war a month ago?”

Arthur looked grim.

“Mr. Crouch, Cedric Diggory—a Hogwarts student, Broderick, Bertha... others. Many good people died. Yes, I would call it war. And last time, when it wasn’t stopped early, it wiped out whole families. The Bones, the McKinnons, the Prewetts—” Arthur wrapped his wife’s hand in his. “The Potters... We’re a small enough community that no magical family was untouched by death. You died, lost someone, or knew someone personally who did.”

Hermione knew that those were hard memories for the Weasley’s who had in many ways been blessed with good fortune during that conflict.

“Mum. One of two things is true. Either I’m in danger or not. If I am, then I need to be here. If I am not, then I want to be here and you have no reason to object.”

Hermione watched as her mother closed her eyes and sighed. She’d won. Her Dad, saw this as well and did not react well.

“Emma! Our daughter is facing a threat. It’s our duty to protect her. It is what it means to be a parent.”

Mum didn’t raise her eyes as she broke the bad news to Dad.

“She knows that. ‘Mione’s point is not that we shouldn’t protect her, but that we can’t. She is already well-known within magical circles and is therefore a target. She is her own best protector now.”

“I can’t believe this! What kind of depraved society leaves a girl to fend for herself?!”

Mum began to rub her temples frustrated at what Hermione knew was going to be an unending rant on the drive home.

“Dad, first, don’t pretend I’m weak because I’m young or because I’m a girl. If I am weak, it’s because I am untrained. And, second, I am not alone. The Weasley’s are some of the best protectors I could want to have. The Hogwarts professors are the best practitioners of their craft and powerful each in their own right.”

He was gazing at her with an unusually inscrutable expression. Was he mad? Worried? Betrayed? Stubborn?

“Hogwarts isn’t safe. It never has been. But it is a place where one can learn to be safe.”

His eyes shifted down, considering, and then he walked out of the room. Hermione heard the front door open and close. He had just left.

Hermione felt an empty place inside. It should not have hurt as much as it did. He just needed to be alone to blow off steam. But somehow it felt like a line had been drawn between them.

Emma finally looked up again and right into Hermione’s soul. It wasn’t an angry stare or worried glance. In fact it seemed devoid of emotion other than exhaustion. Instead it seemed like her mother’s mind was trying to grasp what was going on in Hermione’s.

“I’ll talk to him, ‘Mione.”
No one moved. Adusta stood apart from the others hoping for an amicable resolution. It had 
deteriorated fast. Rip had laughed at the news of Fenrir’s death and Varg had attacked him without 
hesitation. Aurea had been trying to intervene, but her sisters Seri and Amboadia wanted nothing to 
do with the conflict. They were content with letting Rip have his way with Varg. In fact Amboadia 
might even have been in Rip’s favour.

But Kullin, who was at least as smart as Aurea, had stepped in and the fight had been stopped 
momentarily with Aurea and Kullin standing between a severely injured Vargus and a nearly 
frothing Rip. Varg’s skin was torn all the way down his back and sides. He was bleeding badly. 
Werewolves fought like wolves even when in human form preferring tooth and nail to fist and heel.

That short conflict would’ve been it. Kullin and Aurea together could force Rip to submit, but 
Lyko who was only a year older then Adusta and far too young to understand pack politics had 
come to Rip’s side. Now the standoff held in Rip’s favour. Kullin and Aurea together could hold 
Rip, but one of them would have to engage Lyko which would leave the other vastly outmatched 
by Rip who would upon defeating his first opponent turn and destroy the other.

He wouldn’t kill Aurea. He wasn’t that stupid. But it would be a bad death for Kullin and Varg. 
Rip was unlikely to tolerate other males of reproductive age in his pack.

Adusta looked to Lyko. Did he know that? Fenrir had wanted a thriving growing pack. Rip would 
just want his power and his females. Did Lyko know that he would be top on the list of expendable 
werewolves?

The pups, Kurt and Susi, sat quietly both too smart to draw attention to themselves. They deserved 
a better life than Rip would give them even if he did keep Aurea around.

Adusta could think of several moves that could spin the situation in Aurea’s favour. The most 
obvious was Anthus—oh, Anthus. Adusta looked down to her right at the cowering, useless, 
pathetic young wolf that she desired with all of her being.

Anthus couldn’t match Lyko, but if he tried he might buy enough time for Aurea and Kullin to stop 
Rip. That wasn’t going to happen though. He had given himself fully over to his freeze response.

She had considered encouraging Susi and Kurt to annoy Lyko knowing that Serigala would combat 
any being that threatened her young. But that would be callous, and with Rip in a near berserk state 
they could be hurt badly or killed.

Amboadia was too attached to Rip to turn against him. She aspired to replace Aurea as matriarch 
and Rip both could and would give her that.

Adusta died inside. Aurea had foreseen this exact scenario. That’s why she had come to her 
yesterday. She could ignore it all she wanted, but she knew what had to be done.

She took one last breath of her own and then became a character that was not herself. A character 
that wasn’t madly devoted to the wrong werewolf. A character that thought Lyko’s aggression was 
attractive and desirable. A character that didn’t care how much it hurt Anthus or how much it 
crushed her own heart.

Adusta’s character sauntered over to Lyko took his hands and gave him a look of deep longing. She 
drew upon the memory of a desire that she was turning her back on.

Rip snarled at her, but he didn’t dare to attack her. He knew of Lyko’s interest.
She reached up and gently caressed the wrong cheek, placed her hand on the wrong shoulder, and stretched up to kiss the wrong lips. His eyes were still filled with the shock of it. She was comforted by his vulnerability until his eyes were adorned with a leer that spoke of his expectations.

Adusta threw up. Or rather she would have, if she still had a mouth of her own. Her body now belonged to another. A character that would smile at his touch and gasp at the feel of his breath upon her neck and shudder in ecstasy at his disgusting leer.

She took his hand once more and pulled him away. Slowly. Almost sensually. Not toward Aurea, but back toward Anthus and the pups. Adusta saw the look on Anthus’s face, finally shaken from his terror by the impending loss. A kiss among wolves was a promise. An announcement of intent.

Go ahead. Do it. Fight him. Fight him and she could kill this character in her body. She could crush its throat and smash its skull. Do it.

But as she passed by with Lyko, Anthus stepped back not forward. The threshold had been crossed and the door was now closed. She both loved and hated Anthus for his betrayal. He was a coward and weak, but unlike Lyko and Rip and even Aurea he didn’t see himself as a monster. Not entirely. He hadn’t given himself over to it. He still thought he could be a good person.

Adusta had to tell herself that this was not necessarily permanent. That maybe after the resolution of the conflict she could come back and be herself again.

Then Lyko pushed her to the ground. As he knelt down upon her and tore at her clothing, Adusta could hear the sounds of Rip’s life coming to an end.

This was wrong. She wanted to run. She had to get away. Hit him. Kill him.

But her body now belonged to another character.

* * *

“Are you sure you don’t want to go? I can probably manage it. I don’t want you to always feel trapped inside.”

Neville was dense.

“No. I think we have some therapy we need to do.”

Hannah gave Neville her best please-read-my-damn-mind look.

“Uh, okay. Yeah! Your right. I had forgotten.”

Susan and Harry were just leaving for their date and Harry had—for God knows what reason—asked if Hannah and Neville wanted to join them.

Boys were stupid.

Hannah wasn’t going to let that fact ruin Susan’s evening. Spending the evening with Harry Potter for a birthday dinner and discussion was one of Susan’s fantasies. It was the sort of thing she had written in her diary about. Not that Hannah had read Susan’s diary... much.

“Well that’s too bad. We’ll have to go together next time.” Susan’s eyes communicated what her voice did not. It was not ‘too bad’ and ‘thank you very much’.
Harry opened the door for Susan and the two were gone. Leaving Hannah and Neville alone. Lady Augusta had gone to bed early saying that she wanted to get an early start to the Ministry the next day.

“So are they going out on a date?”

Hannah facepalmed.

“Yes!”

“Then why did Harry ask if we wanted to go?”

“Because, Neville, you are all oblivious. All of you.”

Neville was quiet for a while. Hannah was beginning to think that she had offended him, but then he spoke again.

“Hannah, we need to talk about something. Can we go to the den?”

“Sure.”

Hannah took Neville’s hand and helped him slowly walk back up the hall to the door that opened into the den. He had badgered Dr. Soulager into letting him out the chair yesterday. They had spent all day getting him acclimated to standing, but it had worked. And Neville seemed much happier for it.

Neville lowered himself into a sitting chair and Hannah perched on the ottoman.

He looked serious. Neville often looked serious, but he looked like he had to tell her that someone had died.

“Hannah, what are we?”

The question took her back.

“What do mean?”

“You’ve been by my side ever since the Ministry. You’ve taken care of me...”

He seem to be getting confused.

“No. That doesn’t matter. I mean it does, but it’s not what I am trying to say. We’ve been acting a certain way, but we haven’t actually said anything to each other about it. I mean... are we together? You know?”

Hannah leaned back and placed her hands alongside her nose and pulled down adding pressure and warmth to her sinuses. She sighed in relief. They hadn’t actually said it and he was getting insecure about it.

“Yes, Neville. We’re a couple. At least, if you want to be.”

“I do.”

Hannah stood up from the ottoman. Lording her new height over him, she leaned.

“Good. You know, we’ve worked on desensitizing your hands, your feet, your legs and arms, your
back. I think it’s time to try something a little more advanced.”

Neville was holding his breath.

“What?”


She leaned in and gently planted her lips upon his. The caressing touch lit her nerves on fire and she knew it did so doubly for him. His back stiffened. He pushed back into her deepening the kiss.

Hannah had been careful not to touch him anywhere else, but he reached up behind her head just above the neck and pulled her in closer. His lips opened slightly and she felt his tongue glide across her lips before she responded in kind.

As it ended, it wasn’t like coming up for air. It was like diving back underwater with the fading memory of your first breath. Hannah was staring at Neville’s lips. They moved.

“I love you.”

Idiot.

“Not yet, Neville. Maybe... but not yet.”

* * *

Susan’s laugh was infectious. Harry couldn’t help but smile at the near giddy joy she was expressing. If he was honest, he would admit his own excitement. He wasn’t though and so he rationalized the vertiginous sensation as a response to his dinner partner.

It was weird.

But not as weird as Amelia had been. Susan’s adoptive parent had seemed comfortable with Harry before tonight, but when Susan had asked for good ideas for a nice place to have dinner, her reaction had been anxiety inducing. Amelia Bones had always been unflappable but had paused for a noticeable gap with the look of a teenager just learning they had failed a final exam. She recovered admirably, but if Harry had noticed then Susan had as well.

Susan wasn’t vegan or vegetarian. Harry knew this from numerous burgers sacrificed at the alter of her lips during Wizengamot recesses. But perhaps in honour of her head of house, she had decided upon dining at The Bower—a restaurant run by Kohlrabi Sprout, the Herbology professor’s husband.

The menu was interesting. It was short, as was often the case at nicer establishments. And it was entirely populated with vegetables, some fruits, but absolutely no meat.

Harry had ordered potato leek soup, since he was familiar with it and found it unobjectionable and Susan had ordered a ‘blooming salad’ which apparently was so named because it contained actual flowers.

Susan’s overly generous laugh which had been brought on by Harry pointing out that her salad should be called a ‘flower-garden salad’ was just dying away when Susan got a distant look. Harry followed her gaze to a table across the dining room at which sat a couple—an older gentlemen and a younger woman.
“What are you looking at?”

Susan looked back and leaned in to impart her observations quietly.

“Look at the age difference. It’s obviously a romantic interlude for the two of them, but... well I want to see if you can figure it out.”

Harry was puzzled. He looked back at the pair. The man was wearing a clean well-pressed suit and the woman was in a more than slinky dress. Harry agreed that the pair were on a romantic date, but he couldn’t really tell more from that.

“I don’t see what you see.”

Susan smiled. Harry was amazed at how Susan could catch the smallest details and glean the most information from them.

“Start with the suit. What do you notice about it?”

“It’s clean. Is it expensive?”

“I’m not sure, but probably not particularly. No, look at how well-pressed the shirt is. It’s probably been starched. Do you see the pen and pad of paper in his pocket? That’s weird for a date. I would guess he’s an academic. Now look at her. Do you see the book sticking out of her bag? Why would you bring a book on a date like this?”

Harry was fascinated with how Susan focused into the situation like it was a crime scene. Susan continued her analysis.

“He’s a professor. And he cheating on his wife with a student. She’s probably in it for grades, or access to his network of resources.”

Maybe. The well-pressed shirt. The slinky dress. The age difference. But...

“Why the book?”

“It’s probably his book. She carries it to stoke his sense of importance.”

“How do you know he’s married?”

“I don’t...”

The man put up his hand to signal to the waiter. Susan excitedly grabbed Harry’s hand and pointed surreptitiously.

“See! On his left hand.”

Harry had to look quickly as the attentive waiter responded immediately, but he did see it. At the base of the ring finger was a distinct impression of a ring.

“Maybe he got divorced.”

Susan gave him a look that said ‘yeah-right’.

“He just finalized a divorce, but has been wearing his ring anyway? And maybe he just broke up with his wife, but then do you really think his clothes would be that well cared for?”
Harry watched as the man paid the check and escorted his mistress from the restaurant.

“So, you like people-watching?”

Susan looked somewhat bashful at this.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What have you observed about me?”

“Harry Potter, are you fishing for compliments? You can earn them just like everyone else.”

Susan’s dig was punctuated with a smile which blunted the blow.

“Let’s do it the other way then. What would you like to know about me that you don’t already.”

Susan nodded and took several seconds to think before cautiously offering her inquiry.

“How did things end with Cho? I know the history with Cedric, but did you break it off or did she?”

Not wasting any time, apparently. Harry had to take a moment to collect his own thoughts. His feelings for Cho were largely at a rest, but it hadn’t been that long ago and it had been complicated.

“I wish I could tell you that it was mutual. I think it was best for both of us, but I was the one who broke it off. Cho resented the way that Marietta was treated by the D.A. She insisted that Marietta had been forced, but it didn’t seem that way to me or to anyone else. I did want to tell people to stop, but the D.A. had been banned explicitly so I couldn’t really make an announcement to have everyone leave her alone.”

Harry paused. He was being defensive. That wasn’t the right way to go since Susan was asking in earnest and had given no indication of prejudice in the matter. But Harry also knew, that his handling of his relationship with Cho would advise Susan on how to chart a course for hers with him.

“I’m sorry. It got kind of bad. And between the Marietta issue and the fact the Cho couldn’t stop asking and talking about Cedric... She kept taking me back to that night... and—”

“Harry. It’s fine. I was just curious.”

Sure she was. Harry checked his resentment. Susan might lying but it was a reasonable question with a reasonable root concern.

“Have you dated before? Other guys?”

“On dates? Sure. But I’ve never pursued a steady relationship before. This is special for me. Your special for me. I always kind of hoped that... I mean sometimes at bedtime I would fantasize about —”

Susan’s mouth snapped shut.

“No! I’m sorry, don’t listen to me.”

Susan’s deep blush said more than her words. Harry’s arrogance got the better of him. It sounded like Susan had been interested in him for a while. And... ‘fantasized’?
Harry felt a physical and emotional reaction that could only be described as singularly male. He then berated himself both for being so easy and for thinking of Susan in that way when she had asked him to forget it.

Aargh!

He wasn’t going to be able to forget it. Susan was still blushing with her face turned away. A joke had lightened the situation before. Another might smooth things out.

“Oh I get it. You always imagined that your first steady relationship would start over a bowl of edible flowers with a super attractive hunk of a man.”

Harry struck a pose hoping for laughter. Susan just stared at him slack faced and then started crying.

“Susan, I’m sorry. What happened?”

Susan stood up from her chair.

“No. I’m sorry, Harry, I’m just a hot mess. Give me a minute. Don’t go anywhere.”

Susan left the table.

* * *

Susan burst into the ladies facility overflowing with horrified embarrassment. He had been mocking her.

What the fuck was she doing?

She had dreamed of Harry Potter ever since she had met him during her first year at Hogwarts. As her hormones had grown in, those dreams had turned to fantasies. Very private fantasies. And was she just going to confess them on their first date? Was that the type of girl he would want? More importantly was that the type she wanted to be?

No.

She needed to get control over herself. Harry probably thought she was a psycho right now. Obsessing with a cheating couple and confessing fantasies.

Susan double-facepalmed.

He’d made a joke and she’d run away in tears.

Susan went to the mirror and pretended to touch up her makeup to distract herself. Buy time. She needed to think.

Her makeup was fine. Shit.

This was a bad idea. Harry was a person. He was a person with feelings and a mind and individuality. He wasn’t a programmed player in her personal erotica. She knew that. But for some reason facing a real person was breaking her.

She had faced the fact that he might hate her—when she had sat down with Harry at Hannah’s house over lunch—that he might take one look at her and declare her boring. But it had not occurred to her that she might hate him. Or find him lacking. He was Harry Potter.
But she didn’t hate him, or find him lacking. He hadn’t done anything wrong. Why was she reacting to this? Was it just too real?

Susan stared at herself in the mirror.

Shut the fuck up. Her mind berated itself turning in circles. There is nothing wrong. You need to calm down and put yourself together and have a wonderful evening. Just don’t tell him about any more fantasies.

Susan’s determination took over. That part that resonated with Gryffindor stepped up and she felt a sense of clarity. Not calm but clarity.

She closed up her bag and walked to the restroom door. She grasped the handle and opened it stepping back into the dining room. What the fuck was she going to do now? This was the definition of awkward.

Her mind replied with a most infuriating shrug.

Oh screw it.

* * *

After Susan had left, Harry struggled against the idea of going to see what was wrong. But there were only so many times that he and Susan could storm in on each other in the loo and have that be socially acceptable. And something seemed different about him storming into the ladies room to Susan storming into the gentlemen’s.

He had seriously worried that he’d broken something. Had she regretted agreeing to date him? Was she going to come back?

But she came back. She looked nervous, vulnerable. Susan had given up a fact about herself that she worried he might judge her for. Harry wanted to reassure her.

As she approached the table, Harry stood and pulled out her chair for her. The tension was palpable and Harry could only think of one way to break it. As he pushed her chair in he leaned over her right shoulder and whispered conspiratorially.

“I’ve fantasized about you, too.”

Susan stiffened. Harry didn’t know whether he had offended her—if she would think him a pervert or over presumptuous, and he reminded himself that that sense of uncertainty was the whole point. They were now mutually vulnerable.

Harry went back to his seat and sat down.

Rather than tucking back into dinner, Harry caught a frozen stare from Susan. Their eyes locked together with each periodically jumping from staring at one pupil to the other. Harry saw that they were stuck and kicked himself for making an awkward situation unbearable.

“Yep. I’m an idiot.”

Wait. Had he said that out loud?

A generous person would say that Susan laughed at this. Harry was usually generous, but in this case Susan actually snorted and started giggling uncontrollably. The absurdity quickly infected
Harry and the two quite conspicuously devolved into hysteria.

Susan recovered first wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Oh my god, what is wrong with us?”

Harry offered his hand across the table and Susan took it. She had said ‘us’.

A sense of ease settled over the subsequent conversation which decided to steer clear of further relationship questions.

“So, Harry, I have an open slot in my class schedule this year. It turns out that I am unredeemable in Transfiguration.”

Harry was about to object and offer to put a word in with Professor McGonagall, but Susan waved him off.

“No. It’s true, and I’m okay with that. I just don’t know what to take in it’s place. I was thinking about trying another Divination course. I dropped it after third year, but I’ve heard good things about the course now that Firenze is staying on.”

Harry shook his head.

“I wouldn’t bother, really. It’s never made any sense to me. And honestly after the way Hermione quit it... You’re planning to replace your Aunt someday in the Wizengamot, right?”

“I don’t think anyone could replace Auntie Em. But yeah, someday.”

“Then why not try a year of Muggle Studies. It’s not popular, but it would give you a better understanding of muggle relations and where muggleborns are coming from.”

Susan scrunched her lips in thought.

“Yeah... I guess I could do that.”

“I mean, it’s your schedule. Don’t do it just because I suggested it.”

Harry saw a flash of Hermione in Susan when she tilted her head in an expression of long suffering annoyance.

“I don’t do anything just because someone suggests it. Your argument makes sense and there are other benefits. There aren’t a lot of Slytherins who take Muggle Studies, and it would be nice to get a break from the constant smugness.

“It would also be nice to have a more intellectual class, with apparition and all of the N.E.W.T. level courses to contend with.”

Harry had heard a little bit about apparition and it sounded terrifying. Apparently when you disappeared from one place and appeared in another, it was possible to leave pieces of yourself behind.

“Yeah, it’s not like anyone’s ever died or lost a limb in Muggle Studies.”

Susan laughed. She was amazing. He kicked himself for ever doubting that she would accept him.

* * *
“Are you sure you don’t want to come inside?”

Harry gave her a weird look and then shook his head. Susan had to remind herself again that infatuation would fade, but it was one thing to know that and another to feel it. It was a painful happiness.

“No, there’s a public floo station just around the block. I’ll head back to the manor from there.”

Susan stood only a foot or so from Harry on the doorstep of her home. Susan observed a big, silly grin spread on Harry’s lips. Her view lingered there.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Of course.”

She wanted his lips. She wanted more of him, but that would not be ‘good and proper’. But a kiss? He was inches away. His eyes shifted downward. He was looking at her lips. Then back to her eyes. Down again. Time stretched tortuously.

“Well, see ya.”

He turned away and headed off down the street.

Susan worked to calm her breath. Oh well. It hurt to see him walk away, it was a pleasant sadness. Like a promise left on the wind.

Susan turned back and let herself inside. She set her things down just inside the door and went back to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Her mouth was dry. The night with Harry had been exhilarating from end to end, but now she found herself suddenly tired.

As she walked down the side hallway to her bedroom, she stopped at Amelia’s study seeing a light peer out from under the door. Auntie Em would want to know that she was back.

Susan knocked gently.

“Come on in.”

As she entered the familiar study, Susan felt a tension in the air and noted the grim look on her aunt’s face.

“How was your evening?”

“Great. It was fun. Harry was great. Is something wrong?”

Amelia just nodded and indicated that Susan should sit.

“It has to do with the estate and certain by-laws. I can see that you’re tired, but if you can bear it I need to explain it to you.”

Susan nodded her consent. The tension in the air didn’t clear. Amelia was puddlefooting around the issue and Susan was smart enough to know that it was about Harry and their nascent relationship. It was like a seed that had just budded and an incautious foot could stunt it. Any time Auntie Em mentioned the ‘by-laws’ Susan knew that what would follow would contain more inexplicably esoteric insanity than good sense.

“The story—and I had to do some research to learn this—starts with a direct ancestor of yours.
About seven hundred years ago the Bones family was threatened with extinction of its name because of the Black Death. Many houses were wiped out because the population at that time was already small and was cut in half by the plague.

“You know the marriage requirements for the House of Bones right. They are much older yet. The prima proles, first offspring, of the house must marry in genere, within the blood. In the original reading of the by-law this meant any of witchborn.”

Merlin. She was talking about marriage requirements. Susan’s head short circuited. She wasn’t ready to think about marriage. With Harry? Whatever the issue was it could wait. They’d barely finished there first date, or was it their second? Did the fun park count?

Stop it.

“Most houses have that basic requirement. It’s designed to maintain a purity in the line.”

Susan shook her head. That was so much bullshit.

“I know. I agree with you, but I am not going to change thousands of years of tradition. Purity of line isn’t important to me and I know it isn’t to you, but there are other considerations... social... political...”

“But Harry is witchborn. He’s a half-blood.”

Lily Evans was muggle-born, but she was a witch.

“Yes and no. And it doesn’t matter, but the tradition was that since Lily wasn’t born to a witch that she was a sorceress not a witch, so it would skip a generation—”

Amelia shook her head and waved Susan off.

“It doesn’t matter, because that standard doesn’t apply any more. Any parent of magical ability is enough to be considered witchborn today. So forget that.

“The current by-law which was changed somewhere on a hundred years ago is that as the firstborn Bones you would have to marry a member of a sacred twenty-eight family.”

So that was it? Harry’s last name didn’t sit on the all holy list of true-pure. Amelia signaled with a palm-facing gesture that Susan shouldn’t jump to conclusions.

“I would gladly make an exception to that rule for you. There’s precedent for it and the Potter family is well respected. But there’s more.”

Seriously?

“So when the Bones were nearly wiped out during the plague, your ancestor—Caliculus Bones—established a special case rule in the by-laws. In his time, the Bones line had been reduced to himself and his three daughters. When Caliculus died he would leave only female heirs and he feared that one or more of them might still succumb to plague.

“In that time, the wife always took the husband’s name if he was a magical. It was required except of muggle husbands.”

This was so stupid.

“Caliculus feared that when his daughters married, the name of Bones would be lost as a tributary
to another house.”

Oh, God. Susan could see it. It made a stupid creepy kind of sense. Auntie Em showed a look of intense sympathy as she confirmed Susan’s suspicion.

“He made a rule that if all possible heirs are female, then the firstborn must marry a muggle which would ensure the continuation of the Bones name.”

Susan’s head exploded. She couldn’t think and she couldn’t not think. Hysteric tears cascaded upon her face. Her voice came out like a petulant child.

“But Harry could choose to take my name. You could change that much.”

“The rule was already changed that way—by your grandfather actually. But even if Harry’s house doesn’t have a similar rule—and it might—would you ask it of him? He’s the last of the Potters just as you are the last of the Bones. Would you ask him to give up his house to be with you?”

Through eyes blurred with tears Susan saw the answer that floated to the foreground.

No.

No. She wouldn’t.

She shook her head.

“I know it hurts, but that’s real love you’re feeling. If you had any doubt. It takes love to inspire sacrifice.”

The words rolled in Susan’s mind crushing the beautiful and delicate flower that had only begun to bud.

“I’m so sorry. I would’ve told you sooner, but I honestly didn’t think it would matter.”

It mattered. It really fucking mattered. And Susan hated her Aunt for it. She hated the world. She hated magic. And she hated her parents for dying and leaving her to this.

“You can still be friends, but you should end it. It’ll only get harder. I can do it if you want.”

Susan slammed her hand down on Auntie Em’s desk, turned around, and stormed out of the room. Tears of rage fell freely as she slammed the door.

The flower was gone. It had been pulled like a nuisant weed and in its place was an empty dead hole that no tears would fill.
The sun shone through Ginny’s window casting a warm glow upon the room. In the bright rays, Hermione could see the sparkles of dust caught momentarily in the light—thousands of little entities flashing in and out of view, but never ceasing to exist. She wondered if that was what death was like. She hoped so—like Moody’s story—just over the horizon, waiting for the day when their loved ones would join them.

Hermione felt a lightness in her chest that she hadn’t for weeks. It wasn’t happiness necessarily, but more as though the inertia had momentarily been removed from her life. She’d forgone her morning ritual over the weekend with the excuse that she would be unable to continue it if her parents chose to take her home. Tomorrow she would start again.
“Hermione?”

Ginny was at the bedroom door.

“Mum wants to know if you want breakfast?”

Hermione hadn’t been eating breakfast with the family; she had been getting it as part of her morning routine. She wasn’t deliberately lying about it, but it just hadn’t come up and somehow she was protective of it.

“No. I can make myself a snack later if I get hungry.”

Ginny nodded and yelled down the stairs.

“She says she’s good.”

Hermione had to smile at the ease with which Ginny fit into her family. It was so different and yet fundamentally similar to her own.

Ginny came in and shut the door.

“How are you feeling?”

Really? If Ginny was asking about feelings, it must be really bad. But ironically, Hermione was feeling okay.

“I think I am actually doing okay.”

Hermione smiled honestly at Ginny.

“So... can I convince you to come play quidditch with us?”

Hermione thought quidditch was stupid. It had to be a mass delusion amongst the magical community that kept it going. But Ginny liked quidditch and Hermione had come to like Ginny. And after that broom flight, Hermione knew that she would have to hide her true feelings from Ginny. She could never discover the pain Hermione was putting herself through. She would never tolerate it.

Ginny had in many ways been her protector despite being one year her junior. She’d run interference and given her a shoulder to lean on. Her reason for doing so defied Hermione. Ginny couldn’t save her from her penance.

That wasn’t allowed.

But Hermione didn’t like quidditch, so there was no rule against it.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Wait, really?!”

“Yeah. You’ve sold it continuously for days now. So yeah. I’ll come play. I just want to look through this mail that Dad left first.”

Ginny actually ran to her bedroom door opened it and yelled full throated as she leapt down the stairs, “She says she’ll play!”
What had Hermione just gotten herself into?

She picked up the bundle of letters that her parents had brought. Most were just normal things such as college advertisements and holiday cards, but towards the bottom was an official looking letter labelled from the ‘Gringotts Muggle Post Interchange’. The back was sealed with a soul-seal, which was odd. Even her first Hogwarts letter hadn’t been sealed that way.

The last will and testament of

ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE

who having passed this the eighteenth of June shall be executed upon the premises of

GRINGOTTS WIZARDING BANK

within the offices of the Noblesse Exchequer upon a Saturday this

THIRTEENTH OF JULY

The presence of one

HERMIONE JEAN GRANGER

is requested.

She had been invited to the reading of Professor Dumbledore’s will but had no idea why the professor would have taken an interest in her. She felt a responsibility to attend even if she didn’t deserve his countenance.

The card was concise but Hermione read it again to be sure. The thirteenth of July was this coming Saturday. She had nearly missed it, so her parents’ visit could be seen as having had at least one silver lining.

Dad was still mad. He couldn’t understand the duality of the argument. If she were in danger, then he would throw himself in its path however foolish it might be. This produced, in parallel, feelings of warmth and frustration. Ultimately though, Mother had made him see the way of it. Or at least that it wasn’t going to be his way.

She wished they had parted on better terms.

She leafed through the remaining correspondence and not finding anything of further interest, Hermione headed outside to meet up with Ginny.

~ diffindo ~

Susan didn’t want to do this. She’d gone over and over it in her mind. Her mind kept reminding Susan that it was for the best and that she needed to be talking to her heart.

Her heart wasn’t convinced.

In fact, her heart was missing. A great gaping hole had opened in her chest evacuating the joy and excitement that had once lived there. Anger had given way to sadness, and the sadness had given way to exhaustion, and exhaustion was all she had felt since.

Until this morning, when the prospect arose that he would soon arrive at her bedroom door expecting to practice Occlumency. With a tempest of emotions crashing through her mind, the idea
of him caressing her thoughts and feelings was terrifying.

Now exhaustion had given way to anxiety.

Susan knew the right thing to do. Greet him. Close the door. Explain that she wasn’t going to continue their relationship. Do not address why. And hold firm the gap between his sense of betrayal and hers.

She had briefly considered telling Harry everything. It would have made her job simpler and he wouldn’t hate her if he knew why. But Harry wasn’t the type to give up. He was a natural martyr. He would probably throw down his name and take up the mantle of Bones entirely of his own accord, and Susan wasn’t sure that she had the strength of character to turn him down.

No. She had to end it cleanly. He could hate her if he wanted, but it was the best thing for him. Her mind agreed, but her heart was hiding.

A knock at her door harbingered the end of her anxiety and the advent of terror.

“Um, Harry? Hold on one minute.”

His voice came muffled through the door but was sharp in her mind.

“Yeah. Amelia said to head back.”

Susan looked around her room frantically for several seconds before she realized that she was looking for a place to hide, which was absurd.

“Okay, you can come in.”

The brilliant smile on Harry’s face threatened a seduction from what her mind told her was necessary.

“Hi.”

“Hi, Susan. I was thinking we should start by reviewing the basics since we’ve been off practice for a while. So, just some breathing and focusing. I’ll understand if that’s too boring.”

She just stared at him. Speak, damn it.

Harry—unaware of her distress—got the candles from her vanity and sat down lighting them with his wand.

She just stared at him. Fuck!

Expecting her to have sat down with him, Harry finally looked at her properly for the first time and picked up on her tension.

“Is something wrong?”

Susan just stared at him.

She had to say something. This was horrifying.

“We don’t have to practice today, if you don’t want to.”

Say something!
Susan just stared at him.

“I’m on my period.”

~ diffindo ~

“You told him WHAT?! Good grief, Susan... why?”

“Just kill me, please.”

Hannah’s best friend held her face in her hands as she pleaded for a merciful end. She had known that something was wrong the moment Susan and Harry had emerged from the floo.

First, there was the body language. She had expected the pair to be hand-in-hand and smiling. Instead they were turned inward and keeping a careful lack of contact.

Then, there had been the weird way that Harry had asked Susan if she was feeling okay and if she wanted to get some ice-cream or coffee or something.

The final straw had been when, as they sat down in the gallery at the beginning of the session, Susan had forcefully pulled Hannah down next to her rather than sitting next to Harry.

After the session Hannah had pulled Susan into an empty office and said ‘spill’.

But this? This was stupid.

“Look it’s horrifying, but he’s going to have to face the fact that you’re a female eventually. What did you expect?”

“You don’t understand! I am not even on my period right now.”

Hannah shook her head in disbelief. Had falling in love just driven Susan insane?

“I don’t get it, then.”

Susan closed her eyes collecting her thoughts. Hannah was dying to know, but her friend was obviously upset.

“I can’t marry, Harry Potter.”

Hannah had to stifle her natural impulse to snort.

“Not to be contrary, but isn’t it a little early to be deciding about marriage?”

“No, I mean ever. I am not allowed. Because I’m a girl.”

Hannah had to find a way to slow Susan down. Her mind was running in overdrive and Hannah could not catch up. Despite this, Hannah couldn’t help but ask the obvious question that came to mind.

“Harry’s gay?”

“No! No, no. It’s not him, it’s me.”

“Susan! Stop! I have no idea what you are talking about. You aren’t allowed to marry Harry because your a girl? That’s doesn’t make any sense!”
Hannah was relieved to see Susan finally stop and collect herself. As Susan laid out all that her aunt had told her, Hannah felt her stomach churn. Susan had been through so much in her life. It wasn’t fair that she had to deal with these absurd and archaic rules.

The Abbott family had rules, just like Susan’s, but Hannah had never concerned herself with them because her cousins were in front of her for house leadership. They were silly lazy gits who wanted their parties and their friends, so Hannah’s uncle had for some time been planning to pass the seat in the Wizengamot to her, but the house lordship would naturally fall to the eldest brother. This relieved her of almost all responsibility to the house by-laws.

But when Susan’s father and her uncle’s entire family had been killed by death eaters, Amelia became the Lady-scion of the house and Susan her heir apparent. Even if Amelia married and had children, Susan’s adoption and Bones blood would ensure her position. It must weigh on her.

“I’m sorry, Sue. It’s not fair. How did you tell him?”

“I haven’t. I wanted to, this morning, when he came over to practice Occlumency.”

“Oh you didn’t, did you? Practice Occlumency?”

“No, but I couldn’t tell him either. I froze... And then I told him I was having my period— God— kill me!”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I can’t do it today. Not after this morning. Maybe tomorrow.”

Hannah nodded.

“Just don’t wait too long. He still thinks your dating.”

~ diffindo ~

As she sat upon the cold marble bench waiting for the girls and Harry to exit the gallery, Augusta Longbottom reflected on the gratuitous opulence of the Ministry atrium. How many galleons had been wasted for the sole purpose of striking awe into the visitors? Now that Abelsted was the chief warlock maybe some things would change. He was an insufferable elitist, but he also favoured austerity.

“Girls! Harry! Over here.”

“Hi!” chorused the voices of three youth.

“Come on. I reserved a meeting room for the next hour. We’re going to talk about how a member of the chamber requests an assignment of guardianship on behalf of a citizen.”

That would get Harry’s attention if not the others. Augusta had been working through the details of how Harry’s proceeding would by necessity continue.

The group of four shuffled into the reserved meeting room and Augusta closed the door.

“Okay. So, Harry. I’ll be moving the chamber to consideration of your guardianship tomorrow. Normally, the Ministry Office of Dependents Welfare would be responsible for reassigning you to a new family, but since I intervened on your behalf the case was elevated to a parliamentary matter.

“I could release my injunction and allow the department to reassign you, but they are not
authorized to emancipate you. In order to have a chance at that, you’ll need sponsored time on the floor. So tomorrow, I’ll move to consideration of your matter and then reserve my time for discussion on Wednesday.

“Then, Harry, on Wednesday it’ll be your turn. Have you figured out what you want to say?”

Hope drove people forward and so Augusta did not want to crush Harry’s hopes, but the chamber would not emancipate a fifteen year-old. The chances were essentially nil, but he deserved to speak his piece.

“I’m not done with it, but yeah more or less I know what I want to say.”

“The only key thing to remember is that it will be your only opportunity to speak before the chamber. Somewhere in what you have to say you must make a formal recommendation for guardianship other than emancipation. The chamber will vote on Thursday; and if it doesn’t go our way, a vote to establish your legal guardian will be taken immediately after based on your recommendation.”

“Why?”

Harry clearly didn’t like what he was hearing. Technically, Augusta had taken responsibility as his acting guardian when she had placed an injunction upon the ODW. When she brought the matter to the floor for consideration, she would have to remove the injunction which would terminate her guardianship and the proceeding could not be resolved until Harry’s status was affirmed. So, short of a recess called by the chair, the vote would have to be immediate.

Augusta explained this to Harry.

“I don’t have anyone to recommend. All the people who should be my guardian are dead. I don’t need a parent. I need to put this whole thing behind me. Can I just use you?”

Augusta shook her head in disappointment. She wasn’t prepared to take on a dependent, especially Harry Potter whose misadventures were well known to all members of the Wizengamot.

“No, Harry. You need to figure it out by Wednesday.”

Harry looked thoughtful for a few seconds.

“What are the rules?”

“On your guardian? They need to be a living adult who can declare to the Wizengamot their intent and unless they are a blood relative they need to already have nexus into magical jurisdiction... they have to already know about magic.”

“Okay, I’ll figure it out.”

Susan who had been keeping an unusual distance from Harry came up and put her hand on his shoulder.

“You could ask Auntie Em?”

Harry turned to Susan. His hopes must have been raised by her propinquity, because he gave her a look of warm affection.

“Wouldn’t that make us siblings?”
Susan turned away in embarrassment. That struck Augusta as odd. Yes technically it might mean that, but not in any way that would prevent a relationship.

“Susan. It’s just a legal formality.”

She turned partially back so Augusta could see tears gathering in her eyes.

“Oh my dear. What is wrong?”

“I— “

Susan turned away again and left the meeting room perhaps not wanting to cry in front of Harry.

Augusta first turned to Harry who had the same look of worry and confusion that Augusta felt on hers. Then she turned to Hannah.

“Do you happen to have insight into Ms. Bones’s distress?”

Hannah got wide eyes. Augusta took guilty pleasure in intimidating the young adults.

“Uh— She’s on her period.”

~ diffindo ~

Tue. 9 July

Spells were funny, finicky things. Few knew this as well as Hermione who had learned that her life could be automated with simple adjustments to otherwise common spells.

Each morning she woke to a sharp jolting rousal as a lacuna rennervate she had cast the prior evening finally came to resolution. The usefulness of the spell had been proven continuously and despite the discomfort that came with waking in this manner, Hermione felt a modicum of pride at her ingenuity.

So it was time to get up.

Time to fulfil her duties and make right what could be made right.

For the first couple of weeks staying with Ginny, Hermione had gone to bed in a nightgown which she despised because it always ended up choking her in the night. But now as she had become comfortable with her hosting roommate, Hermione had returned to sleeping in knickers and a sports bra.

She had been worried that Ginny would be uncomfortable with the arrangement.

As it had turned out, Ginny’s two-piece pyjamas were a thing for visitors as well, because she now slept entirely nude. This did make Hermione uncomfortable, but it was Ginny’s concern what she wore to bed, so Hermione tried not to obsess over it. But she had had trouble the first few nights not fixating on the reality that a warm body was completely naked not two meters away.

Hermione had always been more full-figured than Ginny, but Ginny’s was a body toned by an athletic ability that rivalled Greek ideals. She was toned and tight, but not sculpted. She never lost the feminine curves that spoke of a soft place to lay one’s head or to place one’s arm.

Enough of that. Hermione had things to do.
She got dressed in stretch jeans and a plaid button down top she had borrowed from Ginny. She would need her range of movement for the gym and it turned out that Ginny’s clothing which had been selected to allow physical activity had proven ideal.

Hermione left the room quietly thankful but still oddly disconcerted by the silencing spell upon Ginny’s door.

As she lit the floo, she looked forward to learning apparition in the coming year. It was a pain always needing to find a floo station to get around.

Moments later Hermione arrived in the waiting room of St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The first time she had arrived for her morning ritual, she had spent several minutes talking with the intake witch, Lucy, since she had no idea where she was going or what the rules would be.

Now though, she just waved in greeting and proceeded into the back corridor. Normally, she would need to be escorted, but she and Lucy had come to the joint conclusion that it was a waste of time.

It was odd how the boundary between the visitation and care corridors was so obvious. At one point it was all carpet and warm tones, and the next cold hard floor and bright unforgiving light.

Hermione had become habituated to counting the room numbers as she approached his room. 123, 121, 119... 117.

A countdown that reset each day stuck on an asymptotic grade. Each day she would stop at the door and a part of her that wasn’t rational would genuinely expect to open the door to an awake, talking, and inevitably hungry Ronald Weasley.

She opened the door which revealed the cold reality of life that would not be penetrated by the weak hopes and dreams of one little girl.

He looked better. The purple had begun to fade after the first week when the head hex surgeon had located and deactivated the vampiric draw that had been slowly sucking the blood out of him.

Day by day, his colour had returned and the lacerations had healed. There were scars. There always would be. But that wasn’t the problem. The damage hadn’t stopped with the finé of the spell.

Hermione had read books about the cold war and the experiments that were done on nuclear radiation. This wasn’t that—thankfully, but it had a similar effect. His body didn’t want to heal. The doctors could encourage the process. They could stimulate growth, but it wasn’t fast enough. It was all that could be done to keep his vital organs functioning.

It could have been her.

It should have been her.

Her tears had long since run dry. She didn’t need or want pity. She needed penance.

Hence the morning ritual.

“Hi, Ron. Your family’s still doing okay. Ginny got me to play quidditch yesterday. Promise not to tell her, but it was kind of fun. We miss you. We want you to come back.”

It was unlikely that he could actually hear her. In a magically induced coma there was little that
could break the mental lifeboat that protected him from his own senses.

But Hermione wasn’t only doing this for him.

This was her duty. Her punishment.

Change didn’t come from comfort. Change came from pain. And Hermione would face that pain, because she would never allow her loved ones to be hurt again. Not if she could help it.

Hermione leant over the bed rail and planted a kiss on her lover’s forehead. She hadn’t told anybody. And despite her fears, he hadn’t either.

It had been after a D.A. meeting. They were already out breaking rules that night and Hermione had been flush with success from casting her first fully corporeal patronus. She had taken him by the hand and led him to a particular corridor, one that she knew well.

He hadn’t seen it coming. She had found out only afterwards that it had been his first time. It had been short. It often was with inexperienced boys. Not that Hermione was ‘experienced’, but she hadn’t been a virgin either.

She remembered how his hand slid down her shoulder and onto her chest. The tentative and inept squeeze that had followed. She remembered the caressing sensation as he had slid the same hand up her hip and under her shirt continuing upward and brushing past her breast. How she had lifted her hands encouraging him to continue disrobing her.

She wanted to see those eyes again. They had been transfixed, focused like nothing else could ever matter again.

As is often the case following a positive sexual encounter, more followed. Each explored new ground, searching for the boundaries and choosing when to step over them. The last had been the night before everything had gone to hell with Umbridge. After Hagrid was driven off and Professor McGonagall put in hospital, Hermione had been afraid. She hadn’t wanted to sleep alone that night.

So she had climbed into Ron’s bed before he had come up to the dorm and pulled the curtains. She even cast a repellent charm to discourage the other boys from checking for Ron.

Surprise was a pale word to describe his reaction to Hermione ‘warming’ his bed for him. She knew that sex was the most likely outcome for that evening and she was ready for that. She didn’t really want to—not with all the fear surrounding them—but he had been a true gentleman. He had spooned her from behind and just held her, his strong and warm arms calming her fear and uncertainty.

She’d woken him later that night. Hermione smiled melancholically at exactly how she’d done it. She had dreamed about that interlude almost every night since the ministry.

The smile faded as her attention returned from her memory to her senses, to the broken body that—once so full of strength—now lay prone and unmoving except for the shallow rise and fall of his breath.

“I’m sorry, Ron.”

Hermione checked her watch. Twelve minutes more. That was the rule.

~ diffindo ~
It had taken her almost a week to locate the correct establishment in the magical realms, but Jean had found a spell arena that didn’t make too many rules about what she could or could not do. She slipped the coquettish desk supervisor, who knew her as Jean Ranger Grey, an extra galleon and no questions were asked.

Jean had started with a simple reflection charm, protego resulto, and a stinging jinx. The first time she had fired on herself she had clenched at the incoming projectile spell. The pain had been brief but she had allowed herself to flinch.

That wasn’t allowed. So she did it again. And again. And again, until her non-casting arm—the one she was throwing into the attack—was completely numb to any sensation. It didn’t hurt any more.

That wasn’t allowed. She used a slicing hex. That hurt so much Jean nearly blacked out the first time.

Perfect. But it was difficult to hide the scars. She was good at healing magicks, but you couldn’t damage the human body over and over and not leave scar tissue behind. The scar tissue was ugly to look at, but paradoxically it hurt less when lacerated by magic. And she was worried that someone—most likely Ginny—would notice and intervene.

Intervention was not allowed.

Thus Jean Grey had begun an ever escalating pursuit of the most painful magicks that left the fewest physical signs.

The worst she had tried was Expulso which had thrown her into the back wall of the arena and knocked her out for nine minutes. It had severely bruised her back and she had had to simulate a controlled fall down the burrow stairs to explain away the obvious damage.

None of the spells really ‘did it’ any more. None of them made her feel less guilty. They weren’t enough; they weren’t anywhere near enough.

So today was it. The absurdly obvious solution to her problem had been sitting in front of her for weeks now, but she always just skipped past it. Some part of her psyche was trying to protect her from it.

That wasn’t allowed.

Jean had doubled and then doubled again her reflector. This spell had to go right were she intended. She took stance. Raised her wand.

She knew it was unforgivable.

But then—so was she.

“Crucio.”

She had thought it would be a white-out situation. That it would hit and the pain would cascade upward knocking her out. That didn’t happen.

Instead the spell sort of... looped. The emotional pain poured out of her and then back in as physical pain. The depths of her self-anger and self-loathing had nearly no bottom.

It went on for forty-five seconds, but to Jean it was forever. The self-disconnected screams kept
time for that eternity of ephemeral moments during which she didn’t feel the aching hole that had eaten her insides. The pain had wiped it out.

It didn’t last.

Again.

~ diffindo ~

Ceannara Dunbar was consumed with curiosity. She had seen people come and go from the arena. Her boss had been unmistakably clear about the boundaries of her responsibility. Take the money. Call the end of the session. Leave the customers to their whims.

But most patrons she saw were men or military. Most at least had some possible use for a ‘no questions asked’ business.

Jean was a young woman barely older than her sister and had come in almost every day, had paid an extra galleon almost every day, and had found some use for the arena for an hour almost every day.

The curiosity was unbearable.

There was a monitor. For security purposes there was a local scrying mirror just behind the desk. But if her boss ever found out...

~ diffindo ~

The pain was exquisite. It still cycled in her system. Her hands shook, her whole body trembled. But the hour was coming to an end and Jean would need to walk out on her own power or risk drawing attention to herself.

She got to her feet and took one unsteady step after another. The physical effort of it was astounding. Distracting.

Was that allowed?

Oh, fuck, it didn’t matter.

As Jean went by the front desk, she stopped and tried to sign out finally settling for a scribble that looked kind of like a name.

“Thank you.”

Her voice barely slurred. Good. In a few minutes there would be no evidence left behind. Now the cheery receptionist would ask ‘same time tomorrow’ in that infuriatingly bubbly voice.

“Are you in trouble? Do you need help? There are places you can go.”

What? That wasn’t what she was supposed to say. Jean looked up into the desk worker’s eyes and could tell instantly that she knew what spells had been cast in the arena.

Shit. Was an unforgivable curse illegal if you only cast it on yourself?

She reached into her bag and retrieved another five galleons and fumbled them onto the counter and ambled out of the business before further inquiry occurred.
Ginny didn’t understand why Hermione insisted on being so industrious. She had come back from whatever she did every morning and promptly announced that she would be de-gnoming the garden. Apparently, she was serious about not letting Dad do it.

But of course, Mum wasn’t going to let her do it alone.

So Ginny had taken an end and Hermione had taken the other and they were working toward the middle. Hermione was not moving very quickly and Ginny was concerned she might be getting sick because she seemed unsteady on her feet.

Ginny had suggested she take a break, but Hermione had just said that ‘it wasn’t allowed’, which had struck her as odd.

The end of the current row was in sight when a yelp sounded through the stalks dividing the two girls. The grimacing moans that followed had Ginny running to her friend.

“What is it Hermione? Is it your head?”

Hermione was breathing heavily and clutching her head.

“I’ll— I’ll get, Mum.”

“No!”

“Hermione, your writhing in pain. We need to figure out what’s wrong.”

“You can’t. It’s not allowed.”

“Screw what’s allowed. You need help.”

Ginny got up, but Hermione grabbed her wrist almost painfully.

“Don’t! Please, if you’re my friend and want to help me take me somewhere private. Your room has a silencing charm on it.”

It wasn’t okay. Whatever this was, it was getting worse. Hermione’s arms and legs had gone from trembling to shaking.

“There’s no way to get you inside without Mum asking. Please, let me just get her.”

“No! Your window. Put me through your window.”

That was crazy and Hermione must have seen it in her eyes.

“Ginny, please. Just do this for me and I’ll explain it to you. I can’t right now.”

A muffled yell escaped Hermione’s lips and her back arched bending her body abnormally.

Fine... Fine!

“Levicorpus.”

~ diffindo ~

Hermione would learn in the days following her episode that the torture spell was far more evil.
than she thought. The pain during its application was unknowable, but even after, the pain would continue in waves that crested and crashed through her body.

All thoughts of the ritual were lost.

There weren’t rules any more.

Just pain.

And no hope.

How long would it last?

Would it stop?

Would she be sane?

Her bedrock anchor was Ginny. She’d left only briefly to tell her Mum they were napping. Hermione had gripped Ginny’s hand in a vice. It had to hurt, but she couldn’t care less right then.

So Ginny stayed by her side. Wave after wave. Coaching her between peaks in amplitude. Reminding her that she would be fine. Ginny didn’t even know what was wrong with her. She just trusted that Hermione’s stamina would be enough to endure it. And that Hermione would not have stopped her from getting help if she was in danger of life or limb.

~ diffindo ~

The minutes stretched into the next hour. Soon Ginny would have to come up with another excuse because ‘napping’ was not going to cut it.

But the pain appeared to be subsiding into smaller more rapid waves.

Ginny had had to cast a numbing charm on her hand after the first few minutes, but over last few peaks Hermione had barely squeezed.

She’d rolled onto her side and was sobbing quietly.

Hermione was going to fess up to whatever this was, because there was no way Ginny was going to risk it happening again.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and lay down behind Hermione gently hugging her and feeling the ragged rise and fall of Hermione’s breath.

“I’m sorry.”

Hermione hadn’t spoken a word after convincing Ginny to levitate her through her bedroom window.

“Worry about that later. Just rest.”

She nodded ever so slightly and relaxed again.

They had just lain there for ten minutes or so when Hermione began to laugh. The noise was so incongruous with the situation that Ginny was worried that she really had lost her mind.

“I was— just thinking what— what a good birth coach you would be. And then I just now decided
that I never ever want to give birth.”

Hermione’s chuckles infected Ginny. It wasn’t funny. This wasn’t funny. But imagining Hermione in labour was kind of funny. Maybe.

“You owe me an explanation, you know.”

“How about if I agree to be your labour partner when you need one?”

No. And not funny. Ginny wasn’t having kids until she had established her career as a professional quidditch player. She was only half facetious about that. No kids until she knew what she wanted to be when she grew up.

“Yeah, no. You’re going to do both. So start explaining.”

Hermione was quiet. Let her think about it. She didn’t break her promises, ever.

“I’ve been doing penance.”

“Is that what you call where you’ve been disappearing every morning?”

Hermione rolled over to face her with a look of disbelief on her face.

“You know?”

“Hermione, I know when you aren’t sleeping. I definitely know when you leave in the early hours of the morning.”

“I... I’ve been going to visit Ron.”

“Why?”

“Penance. I need to face him. I need my mistakes shown to me each day until I fix them. I made rules about how long and what I could do.”

Jesus. Ginny had been by to visit regularly and it was emotionally difficult, but if Hermione was doing it everyday just to satisfy some sense of guilt...

“So you’re torturing yourself.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Not yet, I don’t. What else do you need to tell me?”

This had to stop.

“I, uh... Don’t make me tell you. You’ll hate me.”

“It sounds like that’s what you want, isn’t it? Is that one of the rules. You have to hate yourself?”

This was bad enough, but it didn’t explain what Hermione just went through. Hermione had just ridden out pain unlike any she’d heard about—outside dark magicks.

“Come on. What did you do to yourself?”

Hermione’s tears turned to sobs again.
“I don’t want anyone to ever be hurt for me again, so I wanted to make sure I could handle the pain. I started small with little jinxes, but it stopped hurting.”

The horror was almost too much for Ginny. Her friend had been literally and viscerally torturing herself for days and she’d had no idea. She’d been casting pain inducing magic against herself and it had gotten out of control.

“Hermione, did you cast the torture curse against yourself?”

She wouldn’t face Ginny, but through her tears she nodded.

“You can’t do this any more. Never! Do you understand me? If you want to hurt yourself, you bloody-well come to me. I’ll gladly beat the shit out of you.”

Ginny was getting angry. She didn’t mean to, but this was so big.

“Damn it, Hermione. How could you? This is the same bullshit that Harry has been pulling. I think he’s finally coming out of it and I find out... this!”

They needed to talk. Harry had found a better way through this, so he and Hermione needed to talk.

~ diffindo ~

“I’m sorry that Ginny bothered you with this, Harry. I’m fine. Really. She’s just overreacting. I’m handling it and you have enough to worry about.”

Hermione’s head was down. She was carefully averting her gaze. Harry knew that something was wrong but Hermione wouldn’t open up about it. They’d been stepping around the eggshells for almost a half an hour and he hadn’t gotten anywhere.

Ginny’s heated call to him at Longbottom matter had struck Harry’s heart with a cold fear. He knew that Hermione was blaming herself for what happened to Ron, but she had always been so stable and capable that he had allowed his own problems to eclipse his friend’s need.

“Hermione, I don’t need you to be considering my feelings right now. It needs to go the other way... Look, I’m good. I mean, it still hurts sometimes when I think of Sirius and that night, but— really—some new, great things have been happening, so... I’m good. You can tell me what’s going on. I’m not glass.”

Ginny had dressed Harry down after he had tried to skive off visiting Hermione. Lady Augusta had driven the fear of God into him about being late not to speak of missing it.

He caught a smirk on her face.

“When you say ‘new things’... you mean Susan?”

Her upward turned lips spoke of a vicarious interest in Harry’s growing romance. It brought a shy smile to his face too. If he could just get through the next few days, he could start anew.

“Yeah, but that’s not why I’m here. I want to help. Ginny sounded really upset and while she’s quick to anger—”

“—among others—”

Harry finally caught Hermione’s eyes as she glanced up in light-hearted accusation. It was true; he was not a paragon of stoicism himself. And speaking of stoics... He didn’t see any way to get
Hermione talking about whatever was going on.

“Hermione... If nothing else, I just want you to come to me if you need anything. If it stops being okay or you decide you can’t handle it. Anything at all. I’ll make time—”

He caught himself at the very end. Despite being legally untethered, Harry had found that his time was less and less his own. But even so... he would always make time for Hermione. She and Ron were his family. The only ones left that mattered.

“Okay, Harry. I’ll try...”

Hermione reached over to the end table next to the chair where she sat and retrieved a small envelope.

“Did you get one these?”

“Yeah, for Dumbledore’s will?”

“Yes.”

“Professor McGonagall delivered me one earlier. Are you going?”

Hermione responded with a solemn and silent nod.

“Me too. I thought... I thought about not going. You know—as a kind of protest. But it seemed stupid once I thought about it for awhile. He’s already gone, so it’s not like it would change anything.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. He felt tears of sadness mixed with resentment threaten his eyes. This wasn’t about him. It shouldn’t be about him. This visit was about Hermione.

“You should go, Harry. It isn’t about the professor. It’s about you. You were on the stage at both of his memorials. I don’t think it was a good way to grieve. Maybe this can give you better closure... let you say goodbye without all the eyes on you.”

“Why do you always end up comforting me? I came here to help you, Hermione.”

She looked down again. Her voice was coy but her expression didn’t match it.

“Oh, I’m just distracting you from the fact that you are about to tell Ginny that I seem okay and that you’re going back to Longbottom Manor to get a good night’s rest before your speech tomorrow. She’s not going to be happy about it.”

She was right. Ginny was a year his junior, but it was her judgement upon his worth that seemed to matter the most. It cut the deepest. And Ginny knew how to dig it in.

“You don’t seem okay, Hermione. You seem like you’re hiding something and trying to get rid of me.”

She bit her lip and then glanced up with a pained smile.

“Nevertheless, Harry, that is what you will tell her—that I seem okay. Because if you don’t, she’s not going to let you leave. And you need to leave, Harry. You can’t get stuck here.”

Harry was sick and tired of being pulled in all these directions. His soul felt thin like it was spread out over a drum with fate playing a pounding cadence.
“Hermione...”

She chuckled lightly.

“Oh, come on, Harry. I’m just joking. I really am fine. But not about Ginny, though, she really is going to be pissed with you. Go on. It’s not going to get any better later.”

~ diffindo ~

“Ginny, I can’t stay. I have be on the floor of the Wizengamot tomorrow.”

He was a coward. Why was he always running away? Since when did Harry Potter ever give a lick about what the Wizengamot thought? Hermione was not okay. It was obvious. He had to see that. He couldn’t be that dense.

“Your best friend needs you. You can’t just pretend that she hasn’t been there next to you every step of the way. And you’re just going to abandon her! What kind of man are you?! Please, Harry. Trust me. She needs you.”

She saw his fear of her escaping through his wide eyes. She had leverage. He cared what she thought of him, but Ginny was already pushing too hard. He and Hermione had descended into an agreed upon story that had no accordance with reality. They would just agree that everything was fine until one of them crashed completely.

He wasn’t going to stay. Not for her. And not even for Hermione. He was going to leave. The betrayal almost stole Ginny’s heart, but she staved it back. Harry’s life had been different to her own. He didn’t understand the depth of family ties like she did. He deserved a small amount of slack. A very small amount.

“No. I’m sorry, Gin. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

She couldn’t bring herself to absolve him—to tell him it was ‘okay’—but she would let him have his way. This once. If this was what he needed, then he could spend this chip with her. But just this once. Ginny turned and fumed her way upstairs as Harry’s body disappeared into the emerald lit hearth.
Earnest Forthright was standing up. Not just literally—though he was—no, more to the point, he was standing up to the insanity of an archaic, bloated system. Lord Nott—now residing in the chair of the chief warlock—recognized him.

“There is an administrative office specifically vested with the duty of carrying out the judgements that are being sought by the motion. That would be the Office of Dependants Welfare which has a generous outlay. Since the legal guardianship of one boy needn’t rise to the consideration of the full Wizengamot I ask general consent that the issue be remanded to the existing administrative body and the injunction lodged by the representative of the house of Longbottom be revoked.”

Now of course Lady Longbottom would object, but at least then the consent request and objection would be on record.

“That wasn’t a woman’s voice.

The speaker recognized Lord Malfoy. Why was Lucius objecting to this?

“I object to the general consent motion and lodge my own point of order. All proper procedures
were followed in the submission of this motion, thus no rule has been broken. The member’s point of order is invalid and thus his general consent request is out of order.”

“Lord Malfoy, you cannot both object to the consent request and argue that it is out of order.”

The new chief warlock was annoyed. Great. Lord Nott rubbed his cheeks in thought.

“Lord Malfoy, your point of order is affirmed thus the original point of order is out of order, the consent request is denied, and the objection by nature withdrawn. Now. If we have wasted enough time complaining about how we waste time...”

~ diffindo ~

Harry wrung his hands. He was nervous—partly about the prospect of speaking before the entire Wizengamot—but mostly because he feared the ire of Lady Longbottom. He had been ushered into the centre of the chamber and asked to sit in an absurdly Gothic throne-like chair. His back was to the gallery, so he couldn’t see Hannah or Susan or Neville. Harry was relieved that Neville had finally decided to attend a session now that he was walking again. The rate of his recovery was spectacular in Harry’s opinion, but of course he wasn’t a doctor of any kind.

Harry was shocked out of his thoughts by the speaker.

“You may proceed, Master Potter.”

Harry nodded and stood up. He had no intention of sitting in this ridiculous throne any longer than necessary. He hadn’t asked for permission, but better to ask forgiveness—right?

“Greetings—”

Harry cut off as he heard his voice echo through the chamber. He spotted a young ministry official pointing his wand in Harry’s direction. It was Percy Weasley who nodded in encouragement.

Harry reset.

“Greetings and salutations to the members of the chamber. I am profoundly grateful for the countenance that you have afforded me. I seek to explain only what I know. May I have your ear?”

He had practised that formal introduction with her ladyship. It grated on his sensibilities. It smacked of privilege and deference which Harry had no intention of affording.

“Your petition is heard and answered. Speak your mind.”

“Thank you.

“I would like to begin by thanking the honourable Lady of Longbottom by whose hand I am able to petition you today. Thank you, m’lady.”

That part he had practised with Amelia Bones. She had been different lately. Ever since his date with Susan, she had been more kind and maternal. It was the exact opposite of the reaction that he had expected, but he took it as a sign of her approval of his association with Susan. Harry’s heart swelled at the thought that soon this chapter of his life would close and another one would open. One that he hoped would include Susan.

“Okay. Formalities aside. Please understand that I do not mean to offend. But ceremony does not come to me naturally.
“Her ladyship—um, Lady Longbottom—has informed me that I must at all cost choose a new guardian, but that beforehand I would be allowed to present an alternative.”

Harry turned to the acting speaker with a question.

“How— how long can I speak?”

“Take your time Master Potter, but the rule is five minutes. I can make allowances if necessary, but do be considerate of the chamber’s time.”

Harry nodded nervously.

“I think it might help if you knew a bit about my history after the night my parents’ were killed.”

He considered invoking the name of Voldemort and would have if he weren’t desperately dependent on the good will of his audience.

“Professor Dumbledore had identified that a special magic had been employed to protect me, but that it would only work as long as I stayed with blood relatives. He was right about that, so I don’t hate him for it. But they were terrible people. They treated me as a servant. I cooked, I cleaned, and never heard an encouraging word from them. They isolated me from friendships and made sure I knew why.

“They treated me no better than some of you treat your house elves. Please consider how they must feel when you get home tonight. It would be a kindness to me if you would try.

“I don’t share my story in this way to play the victim. I don’t want your pity or your handouts, but I do need your understanding. I have never been allowed to run my life, but I have nonetheless been expected to be self-sufficient.

“When I turned eleven and learned I was a wizard—yeah, they hid that from me, too—my master changed, but I was just as shackled to a fate beyond my control. Unlike my relatives, Dumbledore was kind, so I don’t hate him—I really don’t, but gaining his attention was like shouting from the base of a hundred foot tower.

“I have fought evil wizards, killed mythical monsters, mastered spells well beyond my years, threaded the eye of time without fraying it, and I have brought many of my peers along with me on my journey of self-reliance.

“I ask you to overlook the meagre years that adorn my skin for a much older soul now inhabits it. I know that I can care for myself. I have done so for more than a decade. I have never needed someone to run my life. And for those who know me, they know that I don’t put up with it.

“I do not intend to sound defiant, but only to give you insight into the person who stands before you.

“I turn sixteen in three weeks.

“I have lived my life bound to guardians who couldn’t or wouldn’t be parents. I have been trapped—weighed down—like a kite tied to a boulder... Cut my string. Set me free.”

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed deeply. That speech had come out in much more profound tone than he had practised. Hopefully the Wizengamot would see it his way. He looked back up scanning the chamber.
“I ask for unanimous consent to proceed to consideration of a motion to grant Harry James Potter the full rights and vestiges of majority. Thank you.”

Harry turned to sit, but the speaker stopped him.

“Point of inquiry, Master Potter. Do you intended to finish you statement without specifying a preferred permanent guardian.”

“Other than myself?”

“Yes... other than yourself, Master Potter.”

Harry took a deep breath and looked to Lady Augusta whose look of accusatory intensity bore into Harry. She would not be happy if he left it here, but she was going to be less happy about what came next. Harry had reviewed the language of the guardianship statute and there were other requirements, but none that precluded his choice.

“If I am not to be set free, than I could trust my life to no better soul than this.”

Harry raised his hand and with some drama snapped his fingers. And waited.

Nothing happened.

Harry snapped again.

Nothing happened.

The chamber began to be restless.

“Greatest apologies, Harry Potter.”

Gasps circulated the chamber as the members identified the newly extant voice that now stood next to Harry on the floor of the Wizengamot.

“Dobby is sorry, sir. Dobby has failed again.”

Harry communicated quietly out of the side of his mouth.

“Not now Dobby.”

Dobby turned to the chamber recovering his composure.

“Dobby, as a free elf, has accepted Harry Potter’s request to become his legal guardian.”

Harry snuck a glance at Lady Augusta and regretted it immediately. Her eyes could have lit fire to ice. Amelia looked more confused and worried. But Harry had read the statute over and over again... Dobby was eligible. Harry most wondered what Susan would think.

~ diffindo ~

“Of all the stupid— inconsiderate— what does he know of law and regulation— just throw it all away.”

Susan was worried at how enraged Lady Augusta was. She had seen her angry and passionate before, but she was worried the venerable woman would do herself in if she didn’t calm down.
Auntie Em had agreed to retrieve Harry. And Susan had hung back, because the only thing scarier than a berserk Longbottom was a tragically smitten Potter. Hannah and Neville had wisely gone their own way.

“Is it that bad?”

“Is it that bad?! Is it that BAD, she says?!”

Augusta stopped pacing and looked directly at Susan.

“Yes, it is that bad. He’s given up his only chance to be put with a sympathetic guardian. Foolish.”

She went back to pacing.

“— a house elf?! — as a guardian?! — a ridiculous stunt.”

Susan had secretly thought the idea brilliant. Dobby knew the value of liberty and while she didn’t remember the exact wording of the statute she was pretty sure that a free elf would qualify to the letter of the law. And there was a certain poetic justice in a free house-elf serving as legal guardian to a famous wizard.

~ diffindo ~

Amelia’s headache was bad. She didn’t know where these were coming from. She absolutely had to get to a doctor next week.

“Harry, do you know why what you did was foolish?”

“Because it was disrespectful?”

Amelia shook her head.

“No, because now you have no chance to influence who you will be placed with.

“But Dobby is absolutely eligible to be my guardian. I checked... repeatedly.”

“Yes, I actually think he might be. But you don’t get to choose your guardian, the chamber does. They won’t allow Harry Potter to be placed in the care of a house elf. Their constituents would fry them for it—not literally of course.”

“Okay, well then they can emancipate me.”

“That’s not how it works. You don’t have any actual power, I’m sorry Harry, but that’s the way it is. How would you like to be placed with Abelsted Nott? Or be a foster brother to Gregory Goyle?”

Harry who had been joyously disengaged finally stopped and paid attention.

“Those aren’t likely outcomes, but they are more likely now that you haven’t given them a viable alternative. We’re going to do what we can, but you should consider what you just did to Augusta. She put her neck out for you and you made a circus on the Wizengamot floor.”

Harry looked down.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. But it’s my life, and no one seems to care or acknowledge that.”

“I do, Harry. I— my history isn’t important. But I can understand some of what you are going
through. We’ll just have to see what happens tomorrow, but I would suggest staying clear of her ladyship for the rest of the day.”

~ diffindo ~

“You have to tell him!”

Hannah couldn’t believe her best friend would be so cruel to someone she cared about.

“I can’t, Hannah. His future is up in the air right now. I can’t go in there and pull out one of the legs his life is balanced on.”

“You have to! How is it going to be better? How are you going to do it? He’s leaving for a week at the burrow on Sunday. He’s attending a will reading on Saturday. You cannot let him leave thinking that you are still dating when you have known for days now that you can’t be.”

Susan hugged her legs to her chest and rocked lightly back and forth.

“You have to tell him. I’ll arrange a time for you two to be alone, but you can’t blow this. I am tired of running interference between my best friend and her ex who doesn’t even know he’s an ex.”

Susan burst forth from the chair.

“Oh! I got it! There’s no template for this. But if you get me ten minutes alone with him. I’ll do it.”

“Swear to me.”

Susan’s eyes showed a betrayal of her trust.

“I swear.”

“Okay.”

~ diffindo ~

It was a new day and a new cup of coffee. It was the same café. It was the same classmate and the same problem. Daphne had agreed to meet Pansy for lunch again. It wasn’t weird, really. It was networking... usually. But not today.

Something was wrong with Pansy. Daphne knew her as both a vast resource and a powerful rival. If Pansy was royalty than Daphne was the chief aspirant to the throne. Among slytherins this was the state most closely analogous to friendship.

Rivalries had value. They allowed two entities in competition to hone their skills against each other so that each might grow more powerful, influential, and eventually successful. Daphne didn’t want to be on top of the pile—not yet. It drew more attention than a carefully cultivated second place which held nearly equal influence.

But... for more than a year Pansy hadn’t been keeping up her end of that bargain. Sure, she could handle a social event with deftness and turn a phrase with the best of them. But the real power was in initiative and Pansy had done nothing but react through the whole nightmare with Dolores Umbridge. She had only joined the inquisitorial squad when the alternative had been offending the rest of Slytherin.
“Pans, I would never believe this of you, but I think you should know, Lavender has been spreading a rumour that you’ve given up. That you’re not even trying to be a prefect this year. She is always spouting off about things she doesn’t know. But you should tell her off before it spreads.”

That wasn’t true. Lavender hadn’t said anything at all, but Pansy and Daphne had developed a coded language for such things. The truth was that Professor Snape had mentioned to Daphne that Pansy wasn’t registered for prefect duty. Framing the question as rumour from a third party provided a way to ask the question without implying an expectation of weakness.

Daphne had catalogued about three different groups of responses to this. When Pansy broke eye contact she got something entirely different.

“Lavender is a good person. I understand what you’re trying to do, but you have no idea what you are talking about. You can tell Professor Snape I’ll have my registration to him by the end of the week.”

What was wrong with her!? Daphne’s frustration was mixed with worry. Daphne had a lot invested in Pansy’s position in the house and if she was just going to sit back and let opportunities float by then Daphne needed other plans.

“I’ve also been thinking about our study group. You are so far ahead in Potions and Arithmancy that I thought we should reorganize. Tracy Davis has been struggling in some classes. I think I could help her. She has ideas about an inter-house social club that could be going places.”

Pansy had been a surprisingly pleasant person to associate with. She could be petty at times, but there was an odd streak of loyalty that ran through her. Daphne really wanted to know if their association was coming to an end. Study groups were rarely about academics. Mostly they served as venues for coordination and social planning.

Upward social mobility among girls came with a language and Daphne knew that “reorganizing” was a polite way to ask if she should bugger off. She would already have done so, but Pansy was in the dominant position and so she controlled the relationship.

Daphne was forcing the issue which was risky. Pansy could attack her for her show of dominance and cut her off from social resources, or she could reconcile which would shift the power dynamic in Daphne’s favour. But the status quo was no longer tenable.

“Why don’t you ask her to join us? There is plenty of room in that classroom. A social club sounds interesting.”

No! She’d given up. Pansy had given up. Or something. If given the opportunity. Tracy would wrap the slack Pansy was giving around her neck and strangle her with it. You could not be Slytherin and idle. You lead, followed, or got crushed.

Daphne relaxed back from her forward leaning position adopting a more neutral posture. This was a well-known signal between the two that the conversing parties were temporarily disarming. Again risky, because Daphne was still playing the game and Pansy might pick up on that. But maybe if Pansy were more at ease...

“So did you find time to see Draco?”

Pansy frowned.

“Why...? Did he ask for me?”
“Well, I—”

No, he hadn’t as far as Daphne knew, but Draco’s contacts through his father’s business empire were extensive and valuable and Pansy could still leverage them if she would just try. The far-away look that crossed Pansy’s mask at the mention of Draco was the exact mirror of the one she had seen on Draco’s face when Pansy had been mentioned.

“I didn’t think so. It really isn’t your concern.”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

The shape of exasperated disgust that took up residence on Pansy’s lips communicated crystal clear that Daphne had gone a step too far.

“Really! ... You just think I would be happier if I took your advice. It has nothing to do with his economic resources.”

This was bad. The language of social mobility did not have a word for forthright which was how Pansy appeared right now. The earnest frustration came out in her voice.

“I understand that you think an alliance with Draco is wise. I understand that you believe his influence to be critical. I know that you wish me to use my former relationship with him to garner support for you. I see that you are challenging the manner in which I maintain my position. If you want to seek another set of coattails to ride upon, feel free. Right now, I would rather just sit and drink this cup of tea with a friend.”

The small downward tilt of Pansy’s head as she closed her statement held the implied question. ‘Are you my friend?’

Shit. How do you answer that? Pansy was better at social engineering and Daphne knew it. Was she being played? Daphne had three choices. One, challenge Pansy by professing zero understanding of what she was accusing. Two, assent to this new more direct arrangement by declaring her friendship and try to turn it to her advantage. Or three—and this was the most disturbing option—just sit and enjoy her coffee and treat Pansy as a true friend.

The third option shouldn’t feel so hard. Pansy hadn’t asked any personal or private information or for any mutual assurance of vulnerability. And Daphne missed the simple nature of her childhood friendships. Devoid of the complex calculus that governed decisions today, they had been natural and warm.

So if Pansy was playing her, then Daphne would murder her. Actually murder her. In cold blood. Socially.

Daphne nodded. She could still choose later whether or not to be genuine, but she would consider it a trial period.

“Have you been able to get a hold of Potter yet?”

Pansy shook her head.

“He gave a speech to the Wizengamot which my father neglected to tell me. On purpose, I’m sure. No... at this point I’ll have to talk to him just before the will reading. I would hate to do it after.”

Actually Daphne had a question about that, and if they were on honest terms...
“Did your father... you know... with the invitation?”

“No. I asked him directly. He was angry that I would suspect him of it and his indignation seemed honest, so I have to assume that Dumbledore actually wanted me there.”

“Why do you think?”

Pansy shook her head but then her eyes locked onto empty space.

“I... I’m not ready to share what I think yet.”

~ diffindo ~

Thu. 11 July

As Susan closed the door to the ministry work office, she felt as if she were closing the door of her heart. A part of her had wanted to rebel and throw caution to the wind. To take Harry’s hand and run. Run and not stop until they were both hopelessly lost. That’s what would have happened in one of Lockhart’s books. The protagonist always got his love.

But Susan knew that life didn’t work that way. Auntie Em’s words echoed in her mind. ‘He’s the last of the Potters just as you are the last of the Bones.’ So they had been doomed from day one. She had even considered that they could make a special arrangement: they could have at least two kids and grant each name to each. But the entitlement laws didn’t function that way and she knew it.

And it would be a huge risk.

She had to be the future Lady of Bones before she could be Susan.

“This isn’t going to work.”

She had a script. She’d actually written it down with forks predicting certain responses she would need to handle. Harry’s face was concerned. He thought he had offended her...

“I know the Occlumency is boring and I’ll completely understand if you want to stop. It might get awkward anyway.”

Yep, that was one of the expected misunderstandings. The funny thing was Susan still wanted to practice Occlumency. If not for his benefit then for her own. Now that would be unlikely.

“No, Harry. The relationship that we are starting. It isn’t going to work. I am ending it before we get hurt worse.”

Now Harry looked betrayed.

“Why? We’ve barely started dating. Tell me what’s wrong. Maybe I can change it.”

This is the point in the flowchart where Susan had put a box with ‘it isn’t you it’s me’ and crossed it out in a big scribbled ‘x’.

“Some things just can’t be changed. It would make this easier if you would respect my autonomy and let this go. I would like to continue to work together, but it has to stay that way.”

“So you don’t even want to try?”
He just stared at her now. Susan was breaking inside. A continuum that contained this conversation did not deserve to exist. It was wrong. Susan would not answer his question because one of the answers wasn’t allowed and the other was a lie.

“Okay then.”

His voice was quiet. Disappointed.

Harry turned and walked out of the room.

Susan melted into a goo of sadness. She didn’t feel it when her legs buckled or when her bottom hit the floor. She didn’t feel her face collapse into her palms. All she felt was an all encompassing sense of abandonment. He’d fucking left. He didn’t want anything to do with her.

It didn’t serve as consolation that she’d met the goal she’d set. She’d reached the end of the flowchart.

Goal achieved. Five fucking points to Susan Bones.

~ diffindo ~

Harry stormed through the Wizengamot. A cloud of anger and frustration trailed behind him. She had wanted to try going out. She had said ‘yes’. They’d had gone on one date and now she just declared that it was over. He had no say in the matter?

‘No’. The reasonable part of Harry knew the answer. Relationships were mutual. Little was worse than forcing a person to associate against their will. It was this voice that had led Harry to leave rather than yell and scream.

But now he couldn’t keep it in. It wasn’t fair. It was working and she damn well knew it. Harry stopped and banged on the corridor wall.

As he approached the Wizengamot chamber, he saw Hannah and Neville waiting outside the entrance. He didn’t want to talk to them. He didn’t want to talk to anyone.

“Not now!” He barked at them trying and failing to regret those words.

He stormed into the witness waiting area and sat down in a huff. She didn’t get to do this. Why would she do this?

Because he was dangerous. As the anger cooled into despair, the conclusion seemed obvious. He might be fun to toy with, but Harry Potter would never be stable enough to be a husband. To be a father.

Harry tried not to think about the children but he couldn’t help but visualize them. He and Susan and their children all playing quidditch on a sunny afternoon. Just a few days ago, he had told her that he didn’t know what he wanted to do with his new life.

Now he did. And it was already too late.

Stupid. What did he do? When did he do it? He did something wrong.

Was she disappointed that he hadn’t kissed her after their last date? Harry had thought about it, but it had seemed too forward and he had feared rejection.
Look how that had worked out.

“The Wizengamot calls upon Harry Potter.”

Harry hadn’t even noticed the session starting. He got up and proceeded out of the waiting area and down a short ceiling-less corridor. He walked around the witness ‘throne’ and sat down.

He didn’t even really care any more. What was freedom when you were undesirable?

“Master Potter. Thank you for appearing voluntarily upon request. Before the chamber begins consideration of your situation, there is an issue that has been raised to me. Can you summon the house elf who has agreed to serve as your guardian if requested?”

Harry nodded sadly.

“Dobby?”

A beat passed with the Wizengamot in anticipatory silence.

“Yes, Harry Potter. Dobby is at your service.”

Harry lifted his hand to point the newly apparent Dobby to Lord Nott.

“Oh! My apologies, good sirs and madams. How may Dobby be of service?”

“Dobby, you have agreed to serve as Master Potter’s legal guardian is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you believe that you are eligible to do so?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dobby, are you free?”

“Dobby is a free elf!”

“Tell me Dobby, where were you just now prior to apparating within this chamber?”

“I was working in the Hogwarts kitchen, sir.”

“And you heard Master Potter summon you? Across all that distance?”

“Yes, sir?”

Dobby was less confident with that answer. Harry didn’t really see why. House elves seemed to be aware of many things across great distances.

“Have you answered the summons of any other person or creature recently?”

“Recently, sir?”

“Let say, in the last year.”

“No, sir.”

“Interesting... Tell me Dobby; five years ago, were you bonded to a wizarding family.”
Dobby stopped and thought about the maths for a while.

“Yes, sir.”

“Which family?”

“The Noble House of Malfoy, sir.”

“But you are no longer bonded to them?”

“No, sir. Dobby is a free elf.”

“Did Master Potter play a part in gaining you your freedom?”

“Dobby cannot say, sir.”

“Cannot say or won’t?”

Dobby just stared the speaker down.

“Fine. Dobby, have you bonded yourself to Harry Potter?”

What an absurd question. Of course Dobby hadn’t. His freedom was more important to him than anything. Probably more important than his life.

But Dobby wasn’t answering.

“Dobby. I can and will compel you to answer truthfully if I must.”

Dobby looked back to Harry.

“Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter.”

He turned back to the chamber.

“Yes, sir. Dobby is bonded to the good wizard Harry Potter. His will is my action. My life is his.”

Audible gasps could be heard throughout the chamber. Harry’s mind was blown. Why?

“Thank you for your honest testimony, Dobby. You are dismissed.”

Dobby turned to Harry for permission.

Harry nodded vacantly.

Dobby disapparated.

“Master Potter, I now have a very important question for you. I must remind you that it is a punishable offence to lie to the Wizengamot. If I feel that the answer to this question is a lie or that you are evading the truth, I will call for you to testify under truth serum.

“Master Potter, did you know that the elf Dobby had bonded himself to you?”

He hadn’t. He really hadn’t.

“No.”
Lord Nott considered this carefully. Harry waited as his fate hung in the balance. He did not want to testify under truth serum.

“I am inclined to believe you, but understand Master Potter, Dobby is your legal dependent. He cannot be your guardian.”

“Then don’t give me one. Let me take care of myself.”

“Master Potter. Thank you for your testimony. Out of respect for the impact that the next votes will have on you personally, I will allow you to remain in the witness chair while we consider the matter. Do not disturb the proceedings or I will throw you out and dismiss Lady Longbottom’s motion summarily and with prejudice.”

Votes. Plural. Lord Nott was assuming that he wouldn’t get his way.

“The chamber will stand open for consideration on the matter. Members will be recognized in order and will be given five minutes to either ask questions or make statements. At the end of that time the chamber will vote on the motion raised by Master Potter to the matter of his legal majority. The speaker recognizes the Lord to house Parkinson.”

Harry’s head swam. It was too much. His statement, then Susan, then Dobby, and now this sterile discussion of his life. He absently noted that Lord Parkinson had said something affirming which some part of his mind found surprising.

What was he going to do? How long had Dobby been bonded to him? What did that even mean?

Dobby had always been a loyal soul with a servant’s heart, but to agree to this knowing that he would be found out. He was clearly driven to seek affirmation and destructive to himself when he didn’t receive it. Saying ‘no’ to Harry must be almost impossible for Dobby.

He would remember that, because if the elf was his dependent than it was Harry’s responsibility to ensure his health and liberty at the same time.

Harry noticed that Augusta had been speaking for some time.

“... This young man has been assisting me in my home for weeks now. He is responsible, considerate, and motivated. I have studied what notes I have found regarding his upbringing with care. And his determination to stand before you should be enough to grant him his desire. In a few days he will be sixteen. In a single year this proceeding will be moot. There is no person who has any business caring what young Harry does with his life. Anything other than this is an abrogation of common sense and a wicked waste of time and resources.”

He was ashamed. Lady Augusta had championed his interests from the very beginning. She’d put her power behind his voice and he had made a mockery of her.

He resolved to apologize to her... somehow.

There were several other statements, but they all seemed generic and hollow like they didn’t refer to a living breathing person who sat in front of them. It was pathetic and Harry was numb to the proceeding.

He didn’t care any more.

~ diffindo ~
Amelia felt for Harry. She saw so much of her roots in him. His determination and anathemic response to injustice spoke to his character. She had never wanted to be a parent. Her service was her life. It always had been and always would be, but life as it was wont to do had interjected upon her plan and given her Susan.

Susan was the dearest thing to her heart and the intercision between her young spirit and Harry’s was nearly breaking Amelia.

There was another card to be played. But Amelia wasn’t sure she was brave enough to play it.

~ diffindo ~

“Master Potter, your motion has failed. By necessity we will now continue on to the matter of your legal guardianship.”

Harry had known this was coming. It was obvious from the tone of the Wizengamot, but somehow it hurt more when it was said. Harry was a failure. He had obviously failed with the Wizengamot. He had definitely failed with Susan. He was still failing to understand why he had failed with Susan.

But most damning of all. He had failed at fulfilling his destiny. Whatever was in that prophecy, it couldn’t have been this. He had missed his turn off the freeway of life and now he was cruising without a destination and dangerously low on fuel.

“Your preferred guardian is ineligible. As a matter of fairness, I think the best course of action is to return your case to the O.D.W., so before we open the matter to the floor for discussion. I will ask for general consent to remand the case to the Office of Dependents Welfare.”

Harry looked to Augusta to see if she would object. She closed her eyes in a grimace but did not stand. That’s okay. He wasn’t worth any more of her political capital. Sometimes you rolled all ones.

“Objection!”

What? Harry spun to see the speaker, but he knew that voice. That voice haunted his dreams. It echoed among the image of a million glowing orbs.

“Harry Potter’s service to wizardkind deserves more than a passing moment of the Wizengamot’s time. In fact, I for one would benefit from an adjournment to research the best possible outcome. No less will do for the boy-who-lived.”

Lucius Malfoy was smiling. It wasn’t a kind smile. It was a cruel smile filtered through a sieve of saccharinity.

“Lord Malfoy. It is still early in the second hour. An adjournment would be unprecedented.”

Lord Nott was scared of Lucius. Harry could hear it in the Chief Warlock’s voice.

“Was not his defeat of the Dark Lord unprecedented? Has not his accomplishment earned him the respect and dignity of your time?”

“But what of the matter of young Master Harry’s guardian?”

“I move to reinstate Lady Longbottom’s injunction.”
“Second.”

Lady Amelia wasn’t going to let that opportunity pass by.

Lord Nott was scrutinizing Lord Malfoy. It looked weird, but Harry suspected that the speaker would bend his knee.

“Without objection the injunction is reinstated. The Wizengamot will stand adjourned until tomorrow morning.”

~ diffindo ~

“It doesn’t make any sense!”

Augusta and Auntie Em were not arguing, but to any casual passer-by the din was indistinguishable.

“He’s up to something. I’m telling you.”

Susan quietly watched her elders discuss the unexpected turn of events.

Em was convinced that Lucius was going to try some trick, but she couldn’t articulate any method or opportunity that made any political sense. Augusta, for her part, believed that it was a public relations strategy, both demonstrating his control of the Wizengamot and attempting to get on the record as an ally to Harry Potter.

Auntie Em was right, though. Susan hadn’t come up with a political opportunity either, but Harry had spoken enough ill of Draco to motivate any father to revenge. He probably wanted to make Harry as miserable as possible.

Well it was too late for that.

Harry was already miserable.

“Sue, are you going to be okay if Neville and I head back.”

Hannah was worried about her. No surprise there. She had gone to find Susan after Harry had stormed by into the witness waiting room. She was so intuitive. Susan wished things came to her as naturally.

“No, Han. Go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

She wanted to be alone anyway. She was only waiting to see him one more time. Before she left for the Bones residence and her bed, which she would have no reason to leave for the rest of the summer.

He was taking a long time, actually.

“Auntie Em...?”

The two adults just kept talking.

“Auntie Em!”

Amelia held up a palm.
“Can it wait, Sue?”

“Sure. But where’s Harry?”

The three all stopped and looked around the rapidly emptying corridors. The witness entrance was right in front of them.

“I’ll check.”

But Susan knew—deep down she was absolutely sure—that they wouldn’t find Harry anywhere in the Ministry.

~ diffindo ~

Harry bolted down Knockturn alley. He would not let them come to him. He could not tolerate their comfort. And if Susan was with them... Harry’s heart had turned inside out. He yearned to hold her, but also could not conceive of seeing her. His anger and longing mixed with horror and pain.

He didn’t know where he was going. But also didn’t care.

When he had slipped from the witness room after the disastrous hearing, Harry had beelined for an external floo station. He had problems and they were his own...

Except for Susan, she had a part in this, but due to that very reason he couldn’t possibly face her. He had done something wrong. He didn’t know what, but no matter what she claimed, it could only have been his failure.

Harry stopped. A part of him wanted to return and another part to tear on. He had always known anger. It was as familiar as a childhood friend. He had grown and learned to care for it. To manage it properly—sometimes. But this empty tragic feeling that ate at his core, it was unbearable. He needed to exterminate it, extinguish it, quench it.

Harry looked up a set of stairs ascending to the top of a tattoo shop. A small wooden sign held the name White Wyvern. He could see a carving of a mug on the door to what must be a pub.

He had seen this drama play out. Not least of all with Aunt Marge’s beau. Alcohol didn’t fix problems. But no one claimed it didn’t take away the pain... for a while. And in this moment, as this person, Harry needed an escape. Just for a few hours.

He took a first step up the stairs and knew he was making the right decision. He couldn’t go back upstream and going forward might lead to more violent rapids. Best to row ashore for the day.

He was thinking himself clever for his analogy, when the door burst open and ejected a supremely drunk witch. She was dishevelled, but she wore a shimmering dress of crimson satin. She turned to yell back into the establishment.

“Fuck you, Gary.”

She turned taking note of Harry for the first time.

“Hey, looks like fate might be smiling on me yet. How do you feel about an evening of reckless fun? I’m free... and willing... and as yet unaccompanied...”

He considered it. He actually did. She wasn’t unattractive, but a moral part of Harry’s mind that
still functioned signaled a deep understanding of how wrong that would be.

“I— I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Oh, so another little fucking dick thinks he knows what I need. When your in bed alone tonight, I want you to imagine this.”

The woman—for Harry still did not know her name—attempted to look sexy even pulling down one sleeve of her dress to show more of her cleavage. This might have had its intended effect upon the virginal boy, but he had noticed on his way up that the top step of the stairs was loose and had chosen this moment to all but dump the drunk down the stairs.

Shit. As she fell, Harry knew that she would be hurt. It was too uncontrolled, too sudden. As her body came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs Harry saw that her head sat at an ugly angle.

Please don’t be dead.

Harry rushed down the stairs. He knelt down and checked for a pulse. He wasn’t really confident about doing that on another person, but he didn’t feel anything.

“Oh, for the Mojal’s filthy balls. Remy! Remy, are ya’ dead?”

He didn’t get it. She was gone. She had been alive just seconds ago and because of a stupid accident she was gone. She was vibrant...

“Fuck off, Gary!”

Her harsh voice took Harry by surprise.

“Okay... shit. That hurts.”

She looked up into Harry’s concerned eyes.

“Merlin... I’m not dead, ya’ twat. Next time check for breathing.”

Harry’s eyes widened with recognition.

“I know you!”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, from the hospital.”

This was the witch Harry had talked to when he first woke from the ordeal at the Ministry. Her expression shifted from confident to anxious.

“Look. I don’t need my co-workers treating me like a basket case ‘cause Harry-bloody-Potter told them I got pissed, okay? You keep this to yourself.”

“Damn it, Remy.”

The man—who Harry now knew was Gary—turned to him.

“Son, help me get her back up the stairs. She’s too drunk to go home right now.”

“Like I would go back to that fucker.”
Remy was heavy. Okay, she wasn’t ‘heavy’, but adults were heavy. Gary took Remy’s torso and Harry picked up her lower half. This became awkward because the most logical position for carrying her up the stairs was for Harry to grasp her thighs which put him right at the apex of her legs. It felt dirty—not least ways because she was semi-conscious.

What would someone think if they came by? Two guys carrying a passed out woman in a dress into a private area.

Of course, this was Knockturn Alley. No one gave them a second glance. That made Harry more sick than anything.

“Alright, lad, put her down over here.”

He couldn’t get over the sight of Remy lying at the bottom of the stairs looking completely lifeless. He hadn’t actually seen Dumbledore die or Sirius really—he had simply fallen through the veil, nothing had been left behind. People had a presence, a light, and to see that extinguished—even if he’d been wrong. He couldn’t get over it.

“Okay, there.”

Gary set Remy into a booth towards the back of the pub. She slumped awkwardly, but didn’t seem to mind. Gary offered his hand to Harry.

“Mr. Potter, it is an honour to meet you personally, but I must leave the pleasantries there for the moment. I have some food in the oven that I am readying for when we open tonight. Just don’t let her leave. She’s in no fit state.”

Harry expected another ‘fuck you’ from the highly intoxicated woman, but instead she stayed silent. He thought he saw her tearing up, but maybe that was just the booze. She went to the trouble of sitting up and slouching onto the table as Gary went to attend his kitchen.

“You know, they have no idea what he did to you.”

That was relatively clear speech compared with before.

“What do you mean? And why are you suddenly less drunk?”

She scoffed and looked downward with eyes closed.

“Don’t tell Gary, but I fake most of it. I come here now to pick up one-nighters and the whole drunk routine seems to keep the good boys away. They’re a waste of time usually.”

Harry had never met anyone quite like Remy. She was so forward with everything.

“Don’t look at me like that. I gave you a shot to fuck me and I told you you’d regret not taking it. Now I have a headache, so you’ll have to use your imagination instead.”

“What did you mean that ‘they have no idea what he did to me’? Who?”

“The doctors. Dumbledore did some fucked up magic the night you were brought into the hospital. And a part of it seemed to centre on you. They were supposed to tell you—it’s an ethics violation not to. But someone with connections wanted it hidden from you.”

“Do you know who?”

Remy just shook her head. Harry felt himself well up.
“I’ve completely destroyed my life.”

Why would he tell her that? She was a drunk stranger who liked picking up other strangers for the odd afternoon tryst.

“A young man of good breeding wanting to get pissed in a pub in Knockturn Alley in the early afternoon. I’d wager half my clitoris that you have a girl problem.”

Eeeek. Too much. But she was right, and what other chance was Harry going to have to talk to someone he would likely never need to see again.

“Susan. Things were going really well, but then she just ended it. She wouldn’t even explain why.”

She took a deep breath and nodded in thought.

“You need to get shit-faced. And here’s my advice on your girl problem... fuck her. You can take that advice one of two ways. Or—if you’re a real ass-hole—both.”

~ diffindo ~

“We have to find him! Who knows what state of mind he’s in?”

Susan was frantic. Panic cascaded upon a keel of guilt. Harry was god-knows-where and it was her fault. He could be hurt... or hurting himself.

Susan and Amelia stood on the threshold of one of the Ministry public floo stations. They had checked the entire complex—at least those parts that Harry would have access to. It had been early evening when Amelia had agreed to check the floo logs.

“You could use the trace!”

She rounded on her Aunt.

“He’s a minor, you can track him.”

Amelia placed a hand on her shoulder attempting to soothe her. It didn’t work.

“Sue, I can only ping his location if he uses magic. And it would be a violation of countless regs to do so without articulable cause.”

“There’s plenty of cause. He could be hurt or alone. He might need help.”

Now she was hyperventilating. An excess of oxygen was filling a void of thought as her brain short-circuited her reasoning.

“Or—Sue—he may just want to be alone. According to the floo logs he went to Diagon Alley. He’ll probably just take a walk and eat dinner. He’s asking to be treated as an adult. Shouldn’t you respect that? Let’s go home. He knows how to get there or to Longbottom manor.”

Auntie Em turned to collect her bag.

It was Susan’s fault. The panic began to subside. But more subtle emotions flowed as it ebbed. Guilt. Shame. She could have told him the truth. That she wanted him—desperately—but that fate had determined otherwise. He would fight it, but that was only harder for her, not for him.

This had been easier for her. She didn’t have to face the truth that she was making a choice. Amelia
couldn’t force her to satisfy the contracts. She could just say goodbye to the House of Bones and let the name die.

But she didn’t want to.

She’d made a choice and taken the easiest way out for herself.

The hearing would’ve hurt. The realization of what Dobby had done would be disturbing. But Harry wasn’t a coward. If he ran, it was because she had rejected him and refused to tell him why.

“No.”

Amelia turned back to Susan.

“I’m sorry... ‘no’ what?”

“No, he’s not an adult. Not tonight.”

She turned her back to her aunt and walked into a neighbouring floo station picturing her desired destination.

~ diffindo ~

To Susan’s advantage, tracking Harry Potter was easier than about anybody. It must be infuriating to have every magical soul constantly watching what you do.

If panic was the product of energy, then despair was the product of weariness. Three separate people had seen Harry Potter enter Knockturn Alley. That was a place that Susan did not go. That good people did not go.

Asking whether the natives of the darker corridor had seen Harry was nerve racking. How do you evaluate who is a threat when everyone is broken, worn, and dirty? With the exception of a few mentally deranged, she had been surprised by how helpful they had been.

She catalogued that evidence of her bias for later analysis.

But the trail had run cold.

He had been sighted not a hundred meters back, but now no one had seen him. It was as though he had just disapparated in the middle of the alley. But unless Harry was lying about his skill, he didn’t know how to apparate.

If you eliminate the impossible...

If only it were that easy.

As usual the decision came down to forward or back. Susan considered the case for each. Forward: the witnesses had missed him and he had continued on (or become invisible somehow?) Back: Harry had stopped at one of the less seedy businesses.

If Auntie Em had come along, then she might suggest splitting up, but the logical course of action was to check this area before moving on.

As Susan tracked back up the alleyway, she wasn’t sure what she would say when she found him. Should she confess the truth? Or would that make it worse? Her mind couldn’t focus enough to decide. The only thing that mattered was finding Harry and making sure he was safe.
Wait.

She’d passed it on the way down thinking it was a residence, but there was a warm light from a window illuminating the sign of the White Wyvern.

Susan looked around.

None of these other establishments were open. If she had fled down Knockturn Alley, she might select a pub to retreat to too.

Well there was no time to delay. If he wasn’t here then she would have to move on. She grasped the heavy wooden handle at the top of the stairs and pulled open the door.

The interior was dim, but she knew his outline well enough to recognize him sitting in a corner booth across from an older but still attractive witch.

As she approached the table, Susan wasn’t sure what she was more jealous about—that Harry was having drinks with an attractive woman... or that he was flat-out pissed and Susan wasn’t.

“Harry?”

His response was slurred and tired.

“Susan? How did you find me?”

The woman in shimmery red cut in before she could respond.

“Susan? The bitch? Why would the bitch who dumped you come looking for you in a pub down Knockturn?”

“Rem, for the last time, she’s not a ‘bitch’. I said she’s a ‘witch’.”

“I heard you fine, Har. I’m telling you—and you...”

Rem drunkenly pointed at Susan.

“That you’re a bitch!”

Rem giggled. Susan was not amused.

“Harry... I think you should come home now.”

“Fuck off, bitch witch... witch bitch...”

Harry didn’t respond but he did get up to leave.

“Why did you come get me? You don’t want anything to do with me.”

Susan wanted to tell him. But now wasn’t right. He was barely conscious and she didn’t really want more interference from ‘Rem’. Merlin, he was drunk.

“Come on. I promise I’ll explain everything.”

Susan gave a nasty glare to Gary on their way out. He had no business serving a minor in this state of mind.

“He’s only fifteen. I should have you arrested.”
Gary just shrugged.

“I didn’t sell to him. I sold to her. What she does with it after that is her business.

Susan just shook her head in disgust. She had to get Harry somewhere safe.

~ diffindo ~

Amelia had been relieved to see Susan arrive back at home even it is was with a very drunk Harry in tow. All-in-all it could have been worse, but Amelia was extremely curious as to where he had been found.

Susan had greeted her and then proceeded to lie Harry down in her room. In her bed.

Sigh.

Amelia was now just outside her bedroom door at the end of the hall trying to hear what was happening.

“Harry. You didn’t have to do this. I know that the hearing upset you. And I know that I did too. So I’ll understand if you want me to leave you alone.”

There was a pause and Amelia almost cast a one-way transparency charm on the door. When Harry replied it was deeply slurred.

“What the hell do you want? This morning it was all cold ‘respect my autonomy’ and now you want to talk? I know girls don’t make sense, but if you don’t want...”

“Harry, I—”

“What happened? What did I do?”

“It’s... it’s not something that I should tell you.”

“This morning I thought I could accept that. But I can’t. I can’t. I need to know.”

“It really wasn’t anything you did.”

“So there’s something wrong with me. Did you decide that I’m too dangerous to be around? I wouldn’t blame you for that.”

“No, Harry, it isn’t about you...”

“No! You don’t get out of it that easily!”

Harry must have tried to stand up because the bed creaked loudly as a body collapsed back onto it.

“Just sit, Harry. If you don’t want to lie down, then just sit. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“A little late...”

This time the pause widened with pregnancy. Harry was polite, but with the alcohol damping his inhibition he wasn’t going to go easy on Susan. Amelia was a little worried he might become belligerent.

“It’s a house rule. A by-law of my house.”
No. Don’t tell him. She mustn’t tell him that. If he knows he’ll never let it go.

“What...?”

Harry was sounding more tired now.

“After our date to The Bower, Auntie Em told me about it. That’s why I was so awkward.”

“How can there be a law...?”

He was having trouble understanding. Amelia was quietly thankful for this. If it came to obliviation, she might do it. It would be highly illegal—obliviation had only escaped the status of unforgivable curses because of how often it had to be used on muggles to protect the secrecy statute.

But maybe he would just forget as intoxicated as he was.

“Harry. Please lie down. You look like your going to be sick. I’ll tell you the whole story. And then I’ll leave you alone... from now on if that’s what you want.”

As Susan related the whole story, Amelia resolved to let the matter be. She would step in forcefully if necessary, but the casual use of memory charms was too horrific even if it was to save her house and name.

“... so Caliculus basically made a rule that since I am the only heir and a girl I can’t marry you. Only a muggle, so I can keep the Bones— Harry? Harry are you...?”

So he was asleep. Good. Lord, please let that boy forget the whole evening. Amelia needed to go since Susan would be out soon and she didn’t want to be caught dropping at the eaves.

She needed to get to her own bed. Tomorrow would be a landmark day for her influence in the Wizengamot. The House of Bones had never gone to political war with any other noble house. It had always been far better to lay low and network slowly. But the truth was her predecessors had just been scared. And she knew this because she was scared.

It had taken only a hour of thought to see the purpose of Lucius’s recess. He needed a specific document. So Amelia had gotten a similar document. The question is whether she would use it. Lucius was ascendant in the Wizengamot and challenging him at this junction could destroy the influence of Lady Bones.

But it could work.

~ diffindo ~

Fri. 12 July

Harry’s head hurt. He’d left Hannah and Neville at the door to the witness room but Susan hadn’t come today. He wished he could remember what happened yesterday. He remembered Remy and the stairs and then drinking. Then he remembered waking up in Longbottom Manor.

There were flashes in between. Of Susan. Of her room. Her bed. But it was all so fuzzy. Why would she come after him? He felt like he should know. Like the information was hidden somewhere in his mind like a lost ring of keys.

One thing he definitely had lost was his self-loathing. Perhaps he just reacted oddly to a hangover,
but in the morning he had been ready to move on. Ready to step forward and stop dithering over what life would or would not grant him.

Harry didn’t know what was going to happen, but after Lucius Malfoy had come to his aid, Harry had been sick at the prospect of what he must be planning. He had an idea. Lucius might intend to declare himself guardian, but Harry could not figure out why he would want to except to make them both miserable.

He smiled at the thought of Draco learning about the new arrangement. But it wasn’t funny, really.

Harry had waited for almost an hour before they were ready for him. He didn’t even bother sitting in the stupid chair this time.

“Before I open the floor to discussion of the guardianship of Harry Potter, I would like to remind the members of this chamber that four days is enough time to devote to this issue. There will be no further recesses or adjournments.”

Lord Nott was annoyed at the antics... good.

“Members will be recognized at the will of the speaker or with objection in priority order. The floor is open.”

Lucius rose and was recognized.

“Honourable colleagues, first I must thank the chief warlock for his consideration of my untimely request for adjournment. I would like to assure the chamber that I called for it with the greatest necessity upon a matter of gravest importance.”

Listening to Lord Malfoy speak was sickening. His earnest seductive timbre induced a terrible cognitive dissonance between the words and their intent.

“In many ways my family was fortunate during the conflict with he-who-must-not-be-named. I am grateful everyday for that fact. And of course I owe deepest gratitude to the young man before us today by who’s person the Dark Lord was defeated. We all owe the boy-who-lived a debt and very likely our lives.

“This is the reason—and I will explain fully—why I asked for the adjournment yesterday. Because I desperately needed to set in place an opportunity for this hero of our community.

“It has long been a privilege of noble wizarding houses to grant assistance to those in need and in times of greatest need to take individuals into our homes and under our protection. I desired to offer this protection to Mr. Potter. He deserves the best our community can offer, and I would have him as a member of my house... as a second son. But there was an obstacle that needed to be removed.

“Ward-ship—under the law—is a contractual matter and thus requires the consent of both parties and in the case of a minor—the case that stands before us—the consent of his legal guardian. Since Harry has no legal guardian, as we consider his plight, it would seem that none can consent to benefaction.

“I could not stand before my wife and child and declare to them that I did not do all that could be done to protect the soul that stopped the Dark Lord. In that manner of thought, I sought out the Minister for Magic and requested a writ of noble privilege to permit me to speak on behalf of the government—who in the absence of an ostensible individual—serves as Mr. Potter’s authority.

“The Minister, who is also very fond of Harry and recognizing the sense in my request, saw fit to
approve it. It is no small thing to extend the rights and privileges of a noble house, but it is the least I can do for the Dark Lord’s bane.

“I have taken enough of your time. Chief Nott, I yield.”

The contents of a Harry’s stomach scrabbled at his oesophagus. He had been told that he had no say in the matter, but for some reason he thought he would be given a choice. Lady Amelia had been right. He had played himself directly into the hands of his worst living enemy. Was he even a person? Did he have any authority over his life?

No. The answer was no.

He couldn’t live with Draco. He couldn’t live with it.

“If there is no further discussion upon the matter I will declare issue closed and dismiss the witness.”

“I object.”

It was quiet and much unlike the normally confident and crisp voice of Amelia Bones. Harry wasn’t sure what she could have to say about it; but unlike Lucius whom Harry couldn’t listen to without feeling sick, he hung on every word.

“With leave of the chair, I have a statement regarding the matter.”

Harry saw that Lord Nott couldn’t avoid catching the eye of Lord Malfoy. Yeah, what does he tell his master now?

“The floor is still open, good lady. Please, proceed.”

Amelia’s voice grew in confidence.

“I would never seek to cast any doubt upon the intentions of my colleagues, but I do not believe that Lord Malfoy’s house is the best fit for Mr. Potter.

“I have come to know him quite well over the past few weeks. He is good man with a strong sense of justice. A person that I can respect. He is loyal and brave and forthright.”

She let these words hang for a moment. Each compliment produced a burst of warmth in Harry’s chest. If only the thought of Amelia did not lead his mind down the path to Susan.

“I don’t think the Malfoy family is the best home for the witness. Therefore, during yesterday’s adjournment I too acquired a writ of noble privilege allowing me to speak on Harry’s behalf and I do not consent to his warding to the house of Malfoy.”

“Speaker!”

Harry couldn’t muster a smile, but his eyes did widen in wonder and the sound of indignant frustration in the voice of Lord Malfoy urging the chief warlock to intervene.

“Lady Bones, Master Harry has been assigned a guardian you cannot remove consent after the fact. Also, it would be a pernicious problem to permit multiple final authorities on Master Potter’s matter.”

“My good lord and speaker, there are not multiple final authorities to Mr. Potter. There is only one person who is vested with the duty and that is I the Lady of Bones.”
The speaker shook his head.

“Lord Malfoy’s writ was entered into record first.”

Lady Augusta, in an uncharacteristic outburst, shouted from her seat.

“Potentia auctoritatem inducit.”

Now Lady Bones was smiling as she laid out her position to Lord Nott.

“Preference among writs of noble privilege is given to the house of highest nobility. Within the walls of the Wizengamot this is determined by vote seniority and unless the House of Malfoy has acquired some hitherto unknown votes, the House of Bones is still five votes the senior.”

Lord Nott’s mind had broken. He was surely unable to avoid Amelia’s conclusion but feared the blow-back from his puppet master.

“And unlike Lord Malfoy I will afford Harry the chance to direct his own choice. Mr Potter, I will consent to whichever warding you choose or, at your direction, I will consent to neither and send your case back to the ODW.”

Harry felt moisture on his cheeks. Stopping Malfoy would have been enough. He had created his own mess at least in part. But he wasn’t prepared for how deep his gratitude would run to the great lady for extending him a piece of true autonomy. A slice of recognition for his own destiny.

“I would be honoured—honoured to accept an offer from the House of Bones.”

“Lord Speaker!”
They had arrived. Hermione should have been giddy. She should have been off the wall and near irrational. She loved being scored—being told how good she was at the tasks set before her. She had always been an exceptional student and so the positive feedback loop had run rampant leading to hysteria as a normative behaviour.

But underneath the envelope containing her O.W.L. scores was another one. Ginny had tried to intercept Ron’s envelope, but her mother had overruled her. Molly had said that it brought her a sense of hope—like a light at the end of long tunnel—and that Hermione deserved that as much as anyone.

Hermione and Ginny had shared an intense stare across the table as Ginny decided whether or not she was going to keep the secret or reveal exactly why Hermione shouldn’t be constantly reminded of Ron’s injured state.

But Ginny had stayed true and now Hermione possessed Ronald’s scores.
She stood just outside his room as she read through them. She was surprised at how well he had fared. Divination and History of Magic, sure; he had always been terrible in those. But other than Astronomy he’d managed Exceeds Expectations in all of his other courses.

Even Potions.

Pride mixed with her anxiety. She knew—justifiably—that her intervention in his naturally lazy demeanour had spurred much of his success.

But he should be here to gloat. She could see with her minds eye—his ebullient reaction as he pointed out to anyone that would listen his pride at his score. She could imagine his bemusement at Hermione’s own critique of her limited failures.

Humph, ‘limited failures’? In school perhaps.

He would want to see them. His scores.

Hermione opened the door to his room. She hadn’t been in here since he was injured. There was too much to remind her of him. And she’d already been visiting him each day as part of her ritual. It had just seemed unnecessary.

Hermione was so thankful for Ginny. She hadn’t put a stop to her penance. Only made additional rules. Now the two of them went to the arena together. Instead of firing at themselves they would spar. The rule was Ginny would return anything that Hermione was willing to cast at her.

This put a sort of self-limiter on the seriousness of the engagement.

It wasn’t really effective in masking her pain any more. But spending time with Ginny seemed to be displacing the pain with common purpose. Ginny had insisted that the goal be training. And fundamentally Hermione was fine with that. She didn’t want to let anyone get hurt on her behalf any more, so a raw physical regimen fit the bill.

And if she left herself open occasionally... Took her falls hard... Leaned into the blast...

All the better.

Hermione had always hated exercise. It was thoroughly unpleasant, and she didn’t understand the individuals that insisted that it felt good. Being sweaty, out of breath, and sore was not among her desired states.

But now she kind of got it. It wasn’t pleasant. Exercise still sucked. Stem to stern. From the moment she started until the moment she finished.

But after—when she was cooling down—there was a warm sort of ache. A righteous fatigue. It always arrived coincident with a sense of accomplishment. Hermione knew that this was probably a neurochemical effect. Dopamine maybe. She’d wanted to look it up, but hadn’t made time.

Allowing the memory of that pleasant sensation to drift away, Hermione turned to look around Ronald’s room. Where could she leave his scores so that he would see them if—when he recovered?

No... if.

She took a moment to collect herself and feel the room and to smell the air which in Ron’s absence had cleared of teenage boy smell, but still contained a hint of his scent.
Ever since Ginny had taken her hostage on the broom, Hermione had been doing this more.

Stopping.

Clearing her thoughts and tension and just feeling the world around her.

It made her feel more... alive? Present?

His trunk.

She would put his results in his trunk with his other school supplies. That way, even if he forgot about them, he would have them when they got to Hogwarts.

Ron’s trunk was old and worn. But the latch swung with reliable ease. The inside was neat and tidy. Very unlike Ron, but that made sense since it was probably a house elf that had to pack it for the trip back to the burrow.

She saw his wizard’s chess set. That would be a good place where he would find it for sure. She flipped the latch and swung open the lid. She set the envelope carefully inside the box and was about to close it when she noticed a small folded piece of parchment held to the lid with a pair of elastic bands.

Hermione was never devoid of curiosity. And thinking they might be a copy of the rules to wizard’s chess—at least according to Ron—she gently retrieved the scrap and unfolded it.

‘Dear Hermione.’

An electric shock ran through Hermione. It was a letter to her. Or rather it was a draft of a letter to her as testified by numerous sections that had been scribbled out and edited in between the lines.

‘I don’t know how to say I love you enough.’

He was speaking to her. It wasn’t dated so she didn’t know when he had written it. Her hands were shaking.

‘Words aren’t my thing, never have been. But I know they are yours. So I’m going to try. I know you’re angry about what I said at dinner. I shouldn’t have said that. I’ll make it up to you, promise.’

Hermione wished for the power to reach into the letter, to reach back in time to the temporal nexus where these thoughts had been bound in ink upon the parchment. She wanted to hug him. Tell him it was okay.

She didn’t even remember the fight. Or why she had been angry. And through the lens of her current thought space, every argument and every disappointment seemed immaterial. Hermione would give almost anything to be mad at him again.

‘Even if you can’t forgive me, I’m going to protect you Hermione. It wasn’t that you were just a girl. Or weak. You are the most important part of my world. The only thing that really matters. Please, don’t ever doubt how special you are.’

She couldn’t read any more. Maybe later, but not now. Not through the blurred tears of regret. Because she remembered now.

Ron had been boasting about how he would take care of her and keep her safe. And she had gotten
offended at how he was putting her on a pedestal as though she had no agency of her own. No personal competence. She’d forgiven him but...

But then he’d thrown himself in front of a deadly curse meant for her.

~ diffindo ~

“Because you’re a bloody idiot, that’s why!”

Serigala had not let up on him for the entire week. When was she going to move on? He had only followed the traditions of the pack. They were the rules. He hadn’t made them up. Adusta knew what she was doing.

“But we haven’t seen a hit wizard in months. And they got Fenrir, so there’s no reason to believe they even know we exist.”

“On the contrary, they know Fenrir was active in this area so they are going to be looking for us, which would have been bad enough, but then you decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with Rip and then abandon him which forced Aurea’s hand.”

Lyko couldn’t have seen all of that ahead of time. Everyone was treating him like he was supposed to be some kind of seer. And what they’d done to Rip was wrong.

“And with all that noise. Who knows what heard us? So get yourself out of here and pack up. We head north at dawn.”

As Lyko left Serigala’s tent, he spotted the second-to-last person he wanted to see. Anthus was leaning against a tree and staring Lyko down with malice that he had never seen from him before.

“What?! When is this going to end?”

Anthus inclined his chin in an expression of disdain.

“I don’t forgive rapists.”

Fuck him. And fuck Seri. And fuck the pack if this continued. Lyko didn’t know where this confidence had come from. Anthus was a whelp. A weak nothing. But ever since that day—since the misunderstanding—Anthus seemed to have shed his puppy coat and finally taken some responsibility for himself.

“I’m not even going to respond to that any more. She announced herself. It didn’t start with me.”

“You’re blind as fuck then. You couldn’t read what was happening?! What Rip was up to?!”

Lyko had been hurt and defensive, but now he was mad.

“At least I’m not a murderer! You all killed him like he didn’t matter! You killed the strongest member of the pack, because you didn’t want him in charge. It was his right!”

Anthus didn’t respond to this because he knew that Lyko was right. That Rip’s death was no more just than what happened with Adusta. It was like Rip had said, when you live among monsters the monstrous will happen.

“If you wanted Rip to live maybe you shouldn’t have let yourself be distracted by a quick fuck.”

Lyko’s rage boiled over. It wasn’t his god-damn fault. She’d tricked him. He ran at Anthus. This
was going to stop right now. If Aurea could kill Rip, then he could kill Anthus. And what honestly
would be lost.

“Stop.”

Lyko stopped. His rage was extinguished in a cold drench of panic. He turned around to
acknowledge her. She was stepping out of Aurea’s tent. His heart still rose into his throat whenever
he saw her.

Adusta cast her eyes upon him. They were always sad now. His instinctive shame battled with his
rationalization.

“Adusta...”

“Don’t talk to me. I’m just here to tell you both that you need to stop. The pack is leaving. We’re
moving on. It’s time for you two to get over yourselves.”

She passed her gaze to Anthus and then returned back to Aurea’s tent where she had slept every
night since he’d accepted her fake proposal.

She’d proposed! That’s what that was among the packs. It wasn’t unclear in any way.

~ diffindo ~

As the flap closed behind Adusta her eyes dilated to the dim interior of Aurea’s tent. She pushed
down her anger and resentment. Feelings didn’t matter any more and if she was required to ignore
what had been done to her then the least the rest of the pack could do was reciprocate.

Aurea hadn’t apologized. She hadn’t held her as she cried or told her that it had been evil. No, as
Adusta had screamed into the dirt where he had left her, Aurea had approached covered in Rip’s
blood and simply said ‘You saved the pack today, thank you.’ And then she had turned and left.
No advice. No sympathy. No regret.

Adusta had been bubbling over with hate born of pain and for the long hours before the sun rose, a
distributary of that crushing loathing had flowed in Aurea’s direction. After all, she had known that
this would happen. That it might happen.

But as Adusta watched the sun rise over the horizon after that long sleepless night, she silently
thanked Aurea for her honesty. At least it had meant something. If Aurea had confessed her regrets
and apologies, then Adusta would’ve hated her for throwing away... what?

See that was the thing. Adusta felt a deep empty scar gouged in her being, but what had Aurea
done? What had Lyko done? There wasn’t a clear rational explanation of why her mind broke
whenever it queued to the beginning of that night. There wasn’t a clear rational reason to cower in
fear when Lyko or Kullin or even Anthus approached her.

And so Adusta had chosen in that moment to become a clear rational being. That was the right way
to think of things. The bright sheen of reality would cleanse away the mistaken feelings of a overly
sensitive princess.

And it hurt less. It just hurt a little less.

“If they continue this behaviour, I’ll have Kullin intervene. It isn’t helping anyone.”

Aurea had not spoken of this issue since, except for indirect references like that one. At dusk
subsequent to that first lidless crucible dark where she questioned her ongoing existence she had arrived at Aurea’s tent, entered, rolled out her mat, and laid down a few feet from the only person she might now trust.

Aurea hadn’t questioned her about it. She just provided an extra blank and went to bed without another word.

“What did you have to give Kullin to get his support?”

This unknown had worried at the back of Adusta’s mind just waiting for room to come forward.

“If you’re asking whether I agreed to support him as pack leader, then no I did not. And he didn’t ask for it. His agreement is really only with me. It isn’t an issue for the pack...”

Adusta didn’t really put up with crap from anyone any more and she had no intention of indulging Aurea even if she was her only ally. Her scowl said all that needed to be said.

“Fine. I agreed to carry his young. At least two.”

She screamed inside, so was a female’s power only tied to sex? Was that all there was? A weak body doomed to the predations of the stronger male.

“Adusta. Please listen. There will be more to life. I can’t promise it will be easy, but things are going to change. I already started. And before you hate Kullin, I want children too. I just couldn’t bring myself to have them with Fenrir. We’ve had this agreement for a while. It wasn’t about Rip. Not really.”

Life was what it was and naiveté wouldn’t move it.

~ diffindo ~

Amelia stepped up to the storefront. Its façade spoke of an eccentric maturity. For all that it was, it appeared every bit the normal muggle curiosities store. There was no one to be seen through the display window. A high pitched peal heralded her entry as she stepped over the threshold.

The first floor which was mostly filled with book cases was divided into sections. The potentially offending one was labelled ‘Occult’.

Her inspection of the shelves was interrupted by a thump followed by a yell from the second floor.

“Hold on. I’ll be right with you.”

The voice was muffled as it resonated through the floor and between exposed joists. A short wait later the proprietor came down the stairs.

“Hello, I almost never get customers at this hour. I was packing away some old inventory, so I appreciate your patience. How may I help you?”

The storekeeper was spindly with strikingly platinum blonde hair. Her face was at the threshold of betraying her middle age. She wore dark leggings under a grey skirt all of which was adorned by a simple white pea coat. Her hair was straight and her eyes blue... and knowing.

When Susan had said the woman seemed to know things, Amelia hadn’t really understood why. But now the glimmer of an acute focus resting in the back of her eyes testified to a discerning mind.
Time for the test.

Early in the history of the Ministry of Magic, the need to establish a unknown person as muggle or magic had become obvious. You couldn’t just ask if they were a wizard. The exact form of the test had varied throughout the years, but there were some common practices.

Step one. Amelia reached into her pocket and set a round piece of metal on the counter.

“Do you know what this is?”

The piercing blue eyes shifted to the gold coin sporting a dragon with wings unfurled. They rested there for a moment longer then expected. Their gaze returned to penetrate Amelia who redoubled her Occlumency blocks just in case.

They looked back and forth between the windows of Amelia’s soul trying to read the intent there.

Then back to the coin.

“It’s a coin. Fairly newly minted by the look of it.”

“Do you know more specifically then that? What is it called?”

The eyes remained on the coin.

“Well if the first word ‘unum’ matches the numeral one at the bottom edge it would be safe to say the coin is named in the second word ‘galleon’.”

Urm. Clever.

“Have you seen one of these before?”

“If it is a currency, it is probably common as money tend to be.”

Urm.

Step two. Amelia placed a shaped oaken stick on the counter.

“How about this?”

“I would say it’s a wand. They are common among the Wicca. I’ve seen more than a few in my time.”

“Have you ever performed any magic?”

“Magic is not a practice. It is a living, breathing web of energy that, with our permission, can encase our every action.”

She said that like a quote of some kind. She was definitely being evasive.

Step three. Amelia leaned in and watched the corners of those deep blue orbs.

“Voldemort.”

There! That had been it. No long-time member of a British magical community could hear that word without forewarning and fail to flinch at least a little.

“Who are you?”
The woman slouched slightly.

“You can call me Artemis. Artemis Heartwell if you need my full name.”

“I need to ask you some questions about a book that you sold to a young man and woman some weeks ago.”

“My memory isn’t what it used to be.”

Urm.

“The book has no listed author or publisher only a title, ‘Occlumency’. The young man who bought it was kind enough to let me inspect it and it is clearly an object covered by the secrecy statute. So... where did you get it and why did you sell it from a unregistered muggle-accessible business?”

“You’re making several assumptions, Director. You seem to assume that you have jurisdiction here.”

Amelia smiled.

“First, my office has jurisdiction over all matters of law enforcement relating to or abutting the magical realm. This shop resides in Great Britain, you sold an artefact of shadows, and unless you intend to continue pretence you appear to be a member of magical society. But—”

Amelia raised a finger indicating pause.

“Second—and far more fascinating—I didn’t tell you I was a Director of anything. You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Given the potential statutory violations you are facing, I think it is time for you to even the table lest I come to the conclusion that you are being evasive. Truth can be compelled.”

The sharp blue eyes no longer contained any humour.

“I wish it were that easy.”

The woman Amelia now knew to be Artemis raised her left hand and began to wave it in the pattern of an incantation.

“Stop! I will not allow you to cast a spell upon me.”

Amelia’s Auror training hit full tilt. Her shields instinctively went up. Her wand snapped into her hand by mere mental call. Her legs shifted to a combat stance. Her mind started to catch up. The gesture was a mental awareness spell.

Nearly impossible to block. Amelia had to attack first. Her wand came up. She took a millisecond to aim. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Artemis doing something with her other hand.

No time.

“Stupefy.”

As the spell left her wand Amelia knew it wouldn’t hit anything. The gesture in the right hand had finally reached recognition. A relocation spell. Her spell passed through empty space and in nearly the same moment a whisper came from behind.
“Intervigilum.”

Her mind began to close. She didn’t have time to dwell on how stupid she’d been to underestimate this adversary. The Director of the DMLE did not get taken by surprise.

“I’m sorry Director. It wasn’t entirely up to me.”

In her last moments of consciousness Amelia sucked her cheek between her left molars and bit down hard, a secret signal to herself to check for obliviation and mental manipulation when she regained awareness.

~ diffindo ~

Gabrielle Delacour sat on a bench just off the promenade. The Paradigm Central Speyr towered far into the air reflecting off the auxiliary coolant pools. The many floors and faces abutting the outer surface of the speyr-complex glinted like the facets of an enormous crystal. The dome shaped shield was invisible behind the speyr curtain—the illusion of sky painted just within the dome—but a shudder ran down her spine as she contemplated the magnitude of magical energy being released from the apex to maintain the shape and volume of Paradigm City Central.

It wasn’t alone in it’s duty. The city had long ago outgrown the reach of even the magnificent central speyr, so now satellite speyrs maintained overlapping protected bubbles. They paled in comparison to the central tower but were stunning in their own right for the ability to shift load among each other to prevent auxiliary warnings.

One was deep within the history tomes before reading of the full failures that had brought disaster crashing down, and Gabrielle lived in the comfort that she and her fellow magical citizens were safer than any other witch and wizard in the world.

The promenade was quiet today. Most services chose to close their doors at least once a week and it seemed that Saturday had become the consensus. A family frolicked in Uther Park, but other than that it was quiet.

Gabrielle held a prized object in her hands. Mail did not travel quickly to and from Paradigm. The wards and seals that protected its location and very existence required extensive examination of anything passing in or out. Or so she had been told. Michael had heard rumours in the Banríon’s office that some elders were being allowed to communicate with the outside world directly for the first time in decades.

But she was not one of the elders, so her correspondence traveled at an excruciating snail’s pace. It wasn’t that bad really. But when internal communications occurred almost instantaneously, the slow crawl of the post was galling.

The letter was in a simple white envelop. It had been mailed to her parent’s in France since that was the only address that Gabrielle had been allowed to give to Luna even though Luna had lived in Paradigm on and off with her mother and father. After Pandora’s death, Luna never returned and so they had become pen-pals of a sort.

As Gabrielle opened the letter she recognized Luna’s unique script. Messy but very legible.

‘Dear Gabrielle.’

‘I would like to tell you that I am doing very well, but I am afraid that might be a lie. I don’t like to lie.
‘Events have been moving quickly here. You may have heard reports that Sirius Black was captured and killed and that in the battle Professor Dumbledore died. These reports are the typical lies put out by the co-opted press. Don’t believe anything you read about it unless it comes from the Quibbler.’

Gabrielle felt sad. It had always been hard to see Luna trust her father so blindly. He was incredibly intelligent, but it was impossible to divide the crazy from the genius. And Luna—being a good daughter—had chosen to assume genius.

The respected press did appear to be manipulating the truth.

The popular conspiracy theory was that Albus Dumbledore had broken into the Ministry on a fools mission to break into the department of secrets and steal privileged prophecies. And had been killed in the process. And that to cover it up Sirius Black had been executed in custody having never actually escaped Azkaban.

The reality according to a brief that crossed Michael’s desk on the way to the Banríon was that Sirius Black and Albus Dumbledore had fought together to defeat a reincarnation of the great British dark lord, Voldemort.

Both theories broached the incredible.

‘Trust me. I was there. The Quibbler has it right.’

Gabrielle was ashamed to admit that she had never bothered to read the Quibbler. She had seen a few excerpts years ago foisted upon her by Luna, but they always came off as unhinged.

But Luna had been there? Luna didn’t lie. Not usually. Why had Luna been in the middle of a fight between some combination of Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black, and Voldemort? It didn’t make any sense.

‘About your new beau, he sounds like a spectacular person, but be sure to steer clear of Wrackspurts. They make people do funny things and you wouldn’t want to do anything you regret.

‘I have included a pair of Spectrespecs for your use in that regard. Sometimes they pick up other forms of magic, so you’ll need to double check. If you find you have them, check the April issue of the Quibbler. We publish a list of under-reported magical maladies and the corresponding remedies.’

Sure enough. Tucked within the innermost fold of the letter was a pair of folded cardboard glasses. One lens was red and the other blue.

Gabrielle smiled and shook her head. Luna was weird; but she was a cute, benign kind of weird. And her advice, once filtered—like light through the Spectrespecs—did make sense. Michael was perfect. He was everything. They fit together like it had always been meant to be.

She hoped.

He hadn’t picked up on her subtle clues. Her careful insinuations into the scenarios of his life. He was still very much her friend and that was becoming frustrating.

Fleur didn’t believe in fated love. In love at first sight. But Gabrielle knew she was wrong. Maybe she was more in tune with her veela heritage, but a part of her pulled away to some distant destination. Some distant person. The key for her lock.
She wasn’t naïve. Destiny didn’t come with a welcome poster. You had to find it. Watch for him. Prepare for him.

But everyday had made Gabrielle more sure than ever that Michael was that person. He was confident—sometimes arrogant—but never cruel or dismissive. He would care for her. Protect her.

But Luna was right. She needed to be careful. Particularly if her heritage ever became common knowledge among the young members of Paradigm. Perenelle had been kind and had allowed Gabrielle to leave her veela ancestor off her induction forms.

It wasn’t shame. Gabrielle was proud her grandmother. Mamie was a powerful, dangerous, and independent enchantress. And she had lived in an era when that was a hard life for a woman.

But there was only one thing all people knew about veela. And they never considered it from the veela perspective. Veela did sex. They fucked. It was the key to their identity and an evolutionary imperative. And this was the first and often last thing someone bothered to know about an ange de l’amour.

Men and women both would unshackle their carnal nature in the false assumption that all veela wanted sex all the time. Rape was an ever-present threat to the lesser veela. Full veela still carried the ancestral defense. The blue fire. Flamme d’azur. But, in the mix, this ability faded first. Some half veela could conjure the fire with great effort. But Gabrielle was only a quarter, so she had to be careful.

‘I—’

Here Luna had scratched out several lines.

‘Daddy worries me.’

Gabrielle felt an odd sense of anxiety. It wasn’t like Luna to mince words and the tortured care with which she had considered this section brought her pause.

‘He’s always been broody—ever since Mummy at least—but he’s been getting angry. I worry that I am not able to fulfil his needs. Mummy used to predict his needs. She was always exactly enough, but I just am not enough. Or maybe I am too much.’

Gabrielle didn’t know what to think. The Lovegoods had always been a close knit family. If Xen was isolating himself from her, she must be hurting bad.

‘He’s keeping me home from Hogwarts. He says I am not safe there. I—’

Then there was another break of several scratched out lines.

‘I have friends. I made them this last year. I haven’t really had any Hogwarts friends before. But now he’s taking them away and it makes me feel angry. He’s right, of course. He’s... Daddy. But sometimes I feel like he doesn’t understand.’

Luna was rebelling. Gabrielle had rebelled young. That ran in the female line of family. And Luna—sheltered for so long—probably was a latecomer.

But to pull her out of Hogwarts... seemed so extreme. On the other hand, what had Luna been doing in the Department of Mysteries?

~ diffindo ~
Gringotts was bigger on the inside than the outside. Not just the seemingly endless caverns and tunnels below, but the hallways of the ground floor turned corners that could not exist. Intersections that should obviously exist did not. Harry wasn’t even sure if following the path back the way they came would lead them out. Though he was hopelessly lost anyway.

The waiting room was named or numbered—he couldn’t tell which—in gobbledygook that he could best describe as scratch-swirl-cross-bang.

The interior of scratch-swirl-cross-bang was sparsely decorated in muted neutrals somewhat different to the conspicuous consumption evinced throughout the rest of Gringotts. Perhaps in respect for the solemnity of the ritual ahead.

Augusta Longbottom sat just to his right. She had not been invited to the will reading and could not attend, but had offered to accompany Harry as emotional support. He didn’t deserve it. Her ladyship had every reason to be done with him.

But he needed it. Harry was doubting himself more than ever. He’d really screwed things up for Lady Amelia. First, by doing whatever he’d done to make Susan angry and then by forcing her hand in the Wizengamot.

“Lady Augusta?”

“Yes, Harry.”

“What exactly will happen to Lady Bones in the Wizengamot? I know that there must be more than the obvious implications. And I am grateful to her beyond measure, but I don’t know how guilty to feel about it. Is Amelia going to be fighting Malfoy now? Is that the problem?”

Neither Augusta nor Amelia had spoken about his adoption—if you could call it that—after the drama on the floor. Harry had just sat in the witness room until Augusta had come and collected him and flooed home to Longbottom Manor.

And yeah, Harry hadn’t really thought about it, but it did feel like a home. Perhaps because he was going to be leaving it for the next week or so to check in on Hermione.

Hermione hadn’t arrived yet, but many others had come by. The Hogwarts heads of house. Hagrid. Lavender Brown. Elphias. Narcissa Malfoy. The session started in a few scant minutes, so where was everyone else? Shouldn’t there be more?

Augusta leaned over to confide her answer to a question that Harry had almost forgotten he’d asked.

“Amelia represents the House of Bones which is one of the oldest and most prestigious of the noble houses. In general, this means her house has greater sway over the proceedings in the Wizengamot and out. But the nobility of the houses is largely on paper. In the past, the houses maintained their own land, economies, and even military forces. The houses flourished in feudal times.

“As the age of renaissance seeped into the magical realm, the powers were merged into the overall Ministry authority and in exchange the houses were granted privileged positions with the government. The Wizengamot, essentially. This happened coincident with the signing of the secrecy statute which required some central authority to keep both the populace and the houses in check.
“Ever since then the real power of the houses has faded. We are now echoes of an older time, but the general public tolerate us because we keep the floo stations fired and maintain the peace.

“However, particularly in the last century, resentment has risen among the commoners. They feel that it is unfair we hold privileges by nothing other than luck of birth and it is hard for them to perceive the weight of responsibility that comes along with it, particularly when some young noble lords-to-be are content to gallivant around the magical world and live in excess.

“So there is an unspoken rule in the Wizengamot that the houses do not claim priority over each other or even elected members. The power of the noble houses is to be wielded with the highest dignity. Not dispensed for matters of convenience or efficiency.

“We must remain above the fray or the whole edifice may be torn down by regular people misguided in the belief that there is nothing of value left in the noble institutions.

“So no, it isn’t really about Lord Malfoy though he will seek retribution if he can. It’s more that she used a power we would rather not see used.”

Wow. That was a lot to take in. Harry hadn’t ever thought about it that way before. He really did see the noble houses as dead weights holding back what could be steady progress. The magical world was far behind the muggle world in that way.

“With respect, Lady Longbottom, what is the value of the noble houses? They seem to just hold good things back.”

Augusta smiled ruefully.

“Your viewpoint is quite common unfortunately. The value is exactly what you just indicated was the cost. The magical nobility are the anchor of our society. It is true that much good progress has been held back or slowed because our influence. But it also holds back the bad and the evil.”

Harry thought back to their previous conversation in the garden.

“Because it’s treacherously easy to fall.”

“Correct. Slow and steady progress. Back breaking blood and sweat over many lifetimes. That is what you see around you today. Even in the muggle world, the modern societies were built over centuries not decades and months the way the radicals wish.”

Harry felt a loss. It didn’t hurt like the grief he’d gone through recently. But some part of his idealistic perspective had died.

~ diffindo ~

“No ma’am. This is scratch-swirl-stroke-bang. You need scratch-swirl-cross-bang. It’s three doors back. A right. A left. And then it’s the third door on the right.”

Pansy left the young goblin grumbling about how ‘it was perfectly easy to read’ and that ‘if wizards would bother to learn the civilized languages’.

This was of course how this was going to go. She’d be lucky to make it on time and she had no idea if she would be allowed late entry. She definitely wouldn’t have time to talk to Potter before the proceeding, so she was stuck with exactly the worst case scenario. A tired, emotional Harry.

And if she was honest, she would probably be tired and emotional too. If she was right about the
headmaster’s interest in her. And what else could it be.

A right. A left.

There weren’t any doors in this corridor. At all!

Shit.

She could see that little gremlin in her mind laughing at her. He’d led her astray on purpose.

~ diffindo ~

“Greetings. My name is Grabthar. I am the senior bereavement coordinator for Gringotts. Many of you may have noticed the unusual nature of these proceedings. However, given the special relationship between the Gobelin Syndicate and the deceased, the General Ledger has given special permission to carry out the instructions of the will despite their unusual nature. In normal course, the complete text of the will—minus any private messages—shall be provided to you at the consummation of this proceeding.”

Hermione had barely made it on time. The floo had been unusually busy and there had been a delay in transit. She had never seen that before. As she had burst into scratch-swirl-cross-bang, she caught sight of Pansy just a few meters ahead of her.

Grabthar’s assistant had ushered both of them into the presentation room with the expected grumbling about the witches propensity to ignore simple schedules.

Hermione had wanted to sit near Harry, but unfortunately—as the last to arrive—there were only a couple seats open and these lie across the room from her friend. Pansy took one and Hermione took the remainder.

“Mr. Dumbledore has asked that each attendee receive their portion of the decedent’s will in private or in small groups as I shall indicate. He has included private messages for each of the attendees which will be delivered in the form they were provided which is by pensieve memory. Gringotts has gone to some trouble to acquire two pensieves specifically for this occurrence. And we thank Hogwarts for the temporary loan of theirs at no cost.”

Hermione was excited and anxious at the prospect of experiencing a pensieve for the first time. She was saddened by the circumstances though.

“If anyone needs a private room to grieve, there is just such a room available through the doors to your left. The pensieves are each through the doors to your right. The order and grouping was predefined in the will, so I am obliged to ask some of you to wait.”

She didn’t want to wait. This whole affair was stirring up conflicting feelings. Pride that the Professor would single her out, but unworthiness for that recognition. Excitement at the unknown, but anxiety at what it might mean. Warmth at the thought that Ginny and her family would be waiting for her when she was done, but emptiness at the thought that Harry continued to isolate himself.

“For now I ask the following individuals to follow me. Minerva McGonagall, the first door... Severus Snape, Pamona Sprout, and Filius Flitwick, the second... Alastor Moody, the third.”

So she wasn’t in the first group, but as they rose from their seats Hermione saw an opportunity to sit closer to Harry and took it. As she worked her way over to the seat just evacuated by Filius, she caught Harry’s attention.
“Hermione!”

She wasn’t quite prepared for the rush of emotion that ran from her stomach and extremities into her chest. She had so much she needed to tell him, so much she wanted to express, and so much she darn’t say.

He rose as she closed the last few feet and hugged her eagerly. He spoke in a muted tone not wanting to break the solemn mood of the room, but Hermione almost beat him to it.

“I’ve been away too long. I’m sorry. I just—”

“No, it’s okay, Harry. I—”

The two broke off simultaneously and shared a glance communicating that neither knew exactly what needed to be said. Instead, he gestured for them to sit.

“How mad is Ginny?”

She was angry, but honestly more hurt. Hermione understood why Harry hadn’t been able to come running and it was not as if she was worth it. But she understood Ginny’s perspective, too. It was easy to feel abandoned when associating with Harry Potter. Events always seemed to swell past the normal breach line of everyday life.

“You can imagine, Harry. I think she’s just worried.”

“You can tell her I’m fine, Hermione.”

“Tell her yourself. You’re coming back to the burrow, right?”

“I— yes. Yes, I will, but I also need to talk with Amelia Bones. She did something for me and I need to know what it really cost her.”

“Yeah, Arthur mentioned it yesterday. It sounds like she really saved the day. From a fate worse than...”

“... Malfoy.”

Harry completed her sentence and the two giggled lightly before remembering where they were. Hermione glanced around and there were a few glares, but not too bad.

“Here isn’t the place, but when we get back to the Burrow. I need to ask you about how girls think. What a particular girl might have meant. Or not meant.”

Hermione had no idea what Harry was talking about. It sounded like he might be flirting with a relationship which Hermione was totally supportive of. Shockingly excited about actually. But he was right. Not here.

“Okay, but Harry, please remember that females aren’t some homogeneous mystery. Sometimes we make less sense to each other than guys. Sometimes we make the least sense to ourselves.”

That cut a little close to her heart.

“I don’t think that’s a girl thing, Hermoire. I think that’s a human thing.”

Hermione just nodded.
“On the topic of girls though, Pansy has been staring at me ever since she arrived. And she has been trying to talk to me ever since Dumbledore’s funeral. Maybe before. I don’t know what she wants.”

“Why don’t you just talk to her?”

“I wanted to, but Ginny said I shouldn’t trust her. I’ve been avoiding her ever since.”

Hermione shook head. Ginny was amazing, but she could hold a grudge.

“I’m not suggesting that you trust her, but maybe you should talk to her. Just don’t accept everything she says as a fact. You know... grain of salt.”

Harry nodded.

~ diffindo ~

Pansy channelled hatred well. It wasn’t a virtue, but it was a fact. When Professor Flitwick had risen to head over to his room, Pansy had seen dashed the opportunity to intercept Harry and take care of her mission before he got emotional from listening to what the Professor had to say. The bushy haired goody-goody muddy-muddy beat her to the seat.

But Pansy took a moment to calm herself. She wouldn’t get into Harry’s good graces by insulting his best friends. And she was probably going to need every bit of his childish good will intact to get him to consider meeting with her father.

She wasn’t in control and that was what made her so angry. It was why she felt the need to run over and tear Hermione out the chair and replace her. Make him listen. She would wait. Carefully watch. If she had to catch him after then she would. She could get aggressive then.

~ diffindo ~

It was hard to look upon him again. Albus had been her friend and ally. He had been her role model as a young instructor. And now—looking at this facsimile—she felt dull. A pale replacement.

“Greetings Minerva.”

Oh.

“It would seem my will is being carried out as instructed. It is a kindness. As such, you are the first. I am afraid I have left you a mess. No matter what end I have met it is unlikely that your road will be easy. You are more than up to the task to replace me.”

She couldn’t help but reply. Even though he was only an echo—less than a ghost.

“Albus, I could never replace you.”

“Yes, you can, Minerva, and you must.”

Minerva stepped back in shock. Her eyes were wide and wary.

“You can respond to queries. How?”

“Some magicks are better left unexplained. Suffice it to say that am here for today and gone tomorrow.”
“Albus. What happened? What magick did you do? Can we bring you back?”

“No! Don’t even think it. I damn myself with even this.”

“But you’re here. You can speak.”

“And I will do so again when I awaken in my frame, but that isn’t what you mean. You mean that I am still alive. Partially, yes. But it cannot last. It mustn’t. And I have binding assurances from the General Ledger that my remains will be properly disposed of.”

“But...”

“It’s best not to think on it. Tempus fugit, Minerva. I am sorry, but as always we must do our business first.”

“Of course, Albus.”

“The board is going to be on your back. It took all of my political capabilities to keep the faculty independent. And even then, there was the inquisitor. I don’t have any leverage that I can share with you, so you will have to expect them to come with demands. And you aren’t going to like them.”

Oh, the board. The Board of Hogwarts were some the oldest, stodgiest, and most arrogant fools in the magical alcoves.

“Just remember. Hogwarts is more than just a school. It is a home and it is a crucible of dreams. Hogwarts must remain.”

He paused waiting for Minerva to respond. When she didn’t, he continued.

“You’ll need a new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. When you leave here, I hope to have guilted Alastor sufficiently to take up the position. If not, you may need to rely on Severus. And if so, you will need to call upon an old friend. He’s been in hiding, but you should be able to locate Horace. I would start in the township of Budleigh Babberton.

“Then comes the matter of the secret words of Hogwarts. The wards and embedded magicks should have already transferred into your control. But in order to create and revoke them yourself—or to access certain special areas of the grounds—you will need the Hogwarts words of power.”

He was motioning her forward. He leaned in to her left ear and whispered.

“Said the Hogfather: they’re not meant to be safe.”

“I don’t understand, Albus.”

“I think you will. Give it time. And speaking of time, I must now bid you adieu. You were well met, Minerva.”

And then he was gone.

~ diffindo ~

“I’m sorry madam. You can represent Master Malfoy for the purposes of receiving the public will. However, you cannot receive the private message meant specifically for him.”

Narcissa found this beyond degrading. This little monster didn’t know who he was talking to.
Draco shouldn’t miss out just because he was still weak from his accident.

“Do not dare to speak to me of what I may and may not do for the benefit of my son. Do you have any idea who I am? Who my husband is?”

Draco was not going to debase himself by attending a proceeding with such riff-raff and this obstreperous little gremlin was not going to get in the way of what was rightly his.

“My duty is to the will of the deceased. If you demand redress of your concern, you may bring it to the attention of the General Ledger. He’ll be in the bank again and available for official business on Monday.”

And then he turned his back on her and walked away.

“Ms. Parkinson, as one participant is not present, you may proceed at this time.”

Narcissa’s lips curled as she held back disgust at the presumptuousness. Grabthar’s days at Gringotts were numbered.

~ diffindo ~

As Pansy lowered her face into the pensieve, the swirl of disorientation mirrored her feelings. The more she had considered it the more certain she became that he could only be interested in her for one reason. It was pathetic really.

“Miss Parkinson.”

As the memory resolved, Pansy found herself face to face with the half-moon bespectacled wizard. She locked her feelings away in a familiar vault and stood tall—ready to hear his message. As if he could understand her and what she had been through.

“Would you like to sit down I was hoping we could talk for a while?”

Pansy was wary. She’d experienced memories of lost relatives and they were rarely this interactive. The powers of magic didn’t usually violate causal information flow. That was the second rule of cognitive magicks. You can’t know what hasn’t happened only all things that can happen. Pansy remained standing.

“Hmm. It makes sense that you would be sceptical. How is young Mr. Malfoy? I hear his injuries were severe.”

That had happened after the professor’s death. This was no mere memory.

“What is this? How can you do this?”

“A mysterious wizard must be mysterious. Mystery is important. Rest assured this condition is temporary... as all life is.”

Now Pansy was acutely uncomfortable. Sitting through a recording of the professor’s memory recounting the destruction of her first best life would have been excruciating, but to talk about it. No one must ever talk about it.

“What do you want from me?”

“Miss Parkinson, I am dead. I want nothing from you. But I have some idea of the burden you carry and how important it is to you that no one ever find out about it. So who better to listen than
a dead man. ... Walk with me.”

The memory around them shifted. A flower-lined garden path materialized around them. It was beautiful. Pansy took a moment to hit a stride matching the ambling remnant of Albus Dumbledore.

“I didn’t know you aspired to be a gardener, Miss Parkinson. Your family is not known for it’s green thumb.”

“What do you mean?”

The professor looked at her with surprised amusement.

“I am very limited in my current form. This environment was born of your mind, not mine. It is quite remarkable really.”

As Pansy took in each plant and leaf and flower, she realized that he was right. This was the garden she imagined in her dreams. Her sanctuary when she ran from the nightmares. She felt at peace here.

He wanted to talk about it and he was right, she would never have another opportunity to talk about it again.

“I thought you knew everything that happened at Hogwarts...”

“... so why didn’t I protect you? It is a very fair question and one that I cannot answer to your satisfaction. I was busy. Distracted by the politics and the machinations of the death eaters. I do not excuse myself.”

“So that’s it. You say you’re sorry and I’m supposed to just accept that.”

“I do not apologize, Miss Parkinson. My decisions were correct and you fell victim to that.”

“I— what??!”

“Miss Parkinson, your assault was horrific and—”

“And you don’t know anything about it! I can’t tell anyone and no one would believe me if I did! Every night I see his face. It torments me! But I’m glad you made the right decisions. I’m very relieved.”

Pansy did not disguise the venom in her voice. She spat her disgust at him. She’d lost everything. Years of control and careful consideration. Maintaining her integrity and her reputation, and it was all gone in a few minutes.

“Tell me about that night, Pansy. It may not feel like it, but in organizing your thoughts into a story that you can tell, you might find some resolution. I will not interrupt, only listen.”

It wasn’t the professor’s fault.

It was his.

“I see his face every night. I remember his eyes the most. They were empty and grey and staring through me like I didn’t matter. He never spoke a word. He just set that pointy jaw with a look of disgust like I was beneath him. I was nothing to him but an accessible body. A convenient place to seek his pleasure.”
Dumbledore—good as his word—didn’t stop her for a moment as she spilled the whole of her long hidden saga. The story came out in disjointed pieces never quite as clear as Pansy thought she had remembered it.

~ diffindo ~

“I regret that Mr. Weasley couldn’t join us. I was informed of his circumstances. Alas, time will not wait for his recovery.”

Hermione thought she was taking this rather well honestly. A talking spirit of a dead person should put one off. Really, was he alive or not? She was more puzzled though by the lemon drops that Grabthar had forced into her and Harry’s hands—one each.

“Miss Granger, I have both a gift and a test for you. First, the gift. It may seem cliché, but I offer you my personal library. Before you get excited, it is only about one hundred books and most are not about magic, but I can think of no better home for them.”

“Thank you.”

“I am not done. You also have a new responsibility. When you return to Hogwarts, you will find yourself in possession of a key. I have—as one of my final acts as headmaster—added your name as an honorary librarian. Madam Pince was not amused, so use the privilege wisely.”

Librarian...

“As a librarian, you will have access to review any book in the library. I suspect you may need information in the future that would not be available anywhere else. But be warned, some things once understood will change you and no book can be unread. Use your judgement.”

The speaking, thinking avatar of Albus Dumbledore now turned away from Hermione whose eyes were betraying her with blurring moisture. An empty hole of regret was punching through Hermione’s heart and soul.

“Mr. Potter. Harry. I have done you much wrong. I cannot seek to apologize for it, because more of it was necessary than was not. The information I have been supplied makes me quite certain that in my final hours I determined a way to lock Tom away forever. I regret somewhat that I did not leave myself a note as to how that was done. I am very curious.”

Hermione felt empty as though something precious has been lost and could never be replaced. And she saw that emptiness on Harry’s face.

“To you, too, I leave a gift and a responsibility.”

Professor Dumbledore had given Harry enough responsibility. Surely he would not seek to add to his burden now.

“My gift is meagre recompense for what I have had to steal from you, but my estate—such as it is—minus any specific items set aside for others now belongs to you. I don’t have any investments or businesses. Just some modest personal belongings that you may do with as you please.”

“Sir, you don’t need to repay me...”

“Nonsense. I could never repay you enough, but I also must ask something of you. One last demand from your mysterious wizard.”
Hermione didn’t want Harry to hear this. It was the height of arrogance to believe that Dumbledore could request anything of Harry and have such a request be just. But the wizened one continued unaware of her complaint.

“Live your life, Harry. Live it your own way. Don’t let anyone tell you what you have to be, where you have to go, or what you have to do. You have earned the right to an easy and privileged life. Regardless, existence will—have no doubt—ignore that accrual and take from you in due course. But don’t accede to it. Don’t let fate take you quietly.”

Albus Dumbledore sighed. It was as though—finally at the end of a long workday—he had finished his quota. Filled his share. Done his work.

“I have seen many prophecies. You would be surprised how contradictory they can be. But knowing some of what is bound to come, I can only advise the two of you. Stay close to each other. Your best futures always intertwine.”

Albus waved his hand and a gumdrop appeared in his hand.

“So at the last, a toast—albeit an unusual one... To finding love, and then keeping it... if you can.”

~ diffindo ~

“Neville, do you think Harry and Hermione are doing okay?”

Hannah looked up from Neville’s cross-legged lap where her head now lay. His thigh was firm and warm. They were resting in Neville’s room and just talking. Neville had finally reached a critical plateau in his recovery. A place where he no longer feared each day. And so Hannah felt safe again. Stable. Secure. She felt she was enough.

In answer to her question, he just looked down at her with a shrugged smile and shook his head. But then his eyes shifted away and his smile faded. His gaze was lost, focused on empty space.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why did you do all of this?”

“What?”

“Help me. Stay by me. It couldn’t have been worth it.”

Hannah shifted. She rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up onto her knees so she was facing him.

“It wasn’t about it being worth it. It was about being where I needed to be. Besides, I got what I wanted.”

Hannah rotated and nestled herself in the crook of his arm. His hugged into his warmth—found residence there.

“Oh sure. You got to push me around and listen to me scream and cry. You had to feed me and dress me... I hit you. Was that what you wanted?”

Hannah saw the cloud of shame coalesce over his brow. She moved again this time hovering her body over his. Her eyes gazing at his lips.

“You’re just jealous.”
“Jealous? ... Why would you say that?”

“Because I’ve seen you naked.”

Neville wilted inward. He must have realized that that had been a necessity of caring for him, but hadn’t really thought about it. Bashfulness was cute on Neville. She kissed him. It was soft and gentle and a rush of warmth left her burning for more.

“You have nothing to worry about. But do you think it’s unfair— is that it?”

Neville locked onto her eyes clearly following her thoughts. But he wasn’t bold enough to voice them.

“... M-maybe...”

Hannah put on a sultry, concerned face.

“Do you think I should fix that?”

Neville didn’t say a word. She could see the breath caught in his chest. His eyes were frozen wide in fascination. They blinked in spite of his will.

Hannah stood up. She gently eased her arm out through a sleeve. She push her arm out the bottom causing the hem of the garment to rise exposing her midsection.

She had been afraid that he might reject her. Hannah wasn’t the prettiest of the Hogwarts female student body. But the rapture in his anticipatory gaze wiped all doubt from her mind. She slipped out her other arm and then pulled the shirt over her head. She felt the cool air of the room lick at her bosom. She paused inviting Neville to examine her chest and mid-section.

Her hand moved to her jeans. She popped the button from it’s home releasing the waist and allowing the fabric to fall pooling around her ankles.

Now she had only her bra and knickers. She hadn’t really thought about how far she wanted to take this. She probably should have, but her own arousal was pushing her forward.

She reached behind her back with one hand and grasped the double clip that entrapped her breasts. A quick pinch later she felt a release from the pressure of the underwire.

Hannah felt a moment of modesty. She turned briefly away not wanting to be seen. She wasn’t very big—not really—not compared to other girls... Susan was much bigger than she was. But she could still feel his eyes upon her. Full of wonder and of a gentle lust.

She wanted to show him what he desired. She wanted to be desired. But this could go too far very quickly.

“Neville.”

His voice returned almost breathless.

“Yes?”

“You can look this time, but don’t touch. Not unless I tell you to. And no matter what, your trousers stay on.”

She looked back over her shoulder and caught his eyes. He swallowed hard, his Adam apple
“Okay.”

Hannah let the bra fall forward onto her elbows and then she opened her arms giving breath to her chest and allowing the cloth to fall to the floor. She turned to face Neville again.

He was looking at her like she was a goddess. Like the world had fallen away and all that remained was his essence and hers. Their minds danced over each other in a cadence of excitement.

He roamed her body. She revelled in the attention following his gaze until it landed at the apex of her thighs. It lingered there.

Hannah answered the wordless question as she slipped her fingers underneath the band and push down gently. She shivered as she was stripped of her last barrier of protection. They fell to join her jeans.

She was naked. Exposed. She wanted him to touch her. To trickle electricity through her body allowing his touch to follow in his eyes wake.

An unconscious force pulled her forward. One step. And then another. She approached him. He leaned back almost fearful. She knelt down to bring her lips to level with his. She leaned in and kissed him. Despite her slightly elevated position, the cotton material of his shirt tickled her nipples. Her mind yelled a wild ‘yes’ at the contact. She yearned for more.

The kiss deepened. It extended, slowly penetrating her desire. It continued even as her body cried for breath. When they separated, she found herself giddy from a deprivation of oxygen.

She only then noticed the tingle on each side of her mid-section. Neville had placed his hands on either side and was slowly rubbing them up and down producing a sharp tickle of arousal that radiated inward toward her core.

Her eyes pulled his with her as she looked down at the hand applied to her left side and back to his. With her lip turned up to one corner and her eye brows raised, she silently asked ‘are you sure you want to do that?’

He timidly and somewhat mournfully removed his hands.

Hannah sat back on her thighs coming to an erect position. She reached out took each of his hands in hers.

“Here.”

She guided each hand to a breast now flush with arousal. His touch was warm and tantalizing. Her nipples slid between his fingers sending a shiver down her back. He cradled them like precious glass.

“You can squeeze them a little. It feels nice.”

He did. And it did.

His jeans did not allow her to see his erection. But she could imagine how rigid he must be. She felt herself becoming moist.

She kissed him. Harder this time. Not waiting for his response. He became more aggressive. The
gentle kneading turned to a proper squeeze. It hurt. She isolated her lips from his again.

“Not so hard... like you did before.”

His compliance made her feel powerful. His touch was so much better than her own. She wanted him. She wanted him to pick her up and put her on the bed and take her. Her friends had told her it would hurt. The first time at least. But her body didn’t care. The pain would wash away amidst the pleasure. It would be so easy. She was ready for him. Just a couple layers of cloth stood in the way.

She sat back.

That would be too far. She had to stop here. They weren’t ready for more. Her breath was deep and measured as she controlled the euphoric adrenaline running through her. Her voice was breathy and quiet.

“Are we even now?”

~ diffindo ~

Pansy was shaking. She gripped the sides of the presentation room chair to hide the tremors. Her heart was impaled upon a knife. She had watched that night in horror as it was projected upon the back of her eyelids. Each night the screen came down and each night the film was the same.

A story once written could not be retold without becoming a different tale altogether. She told herself this each time, but it never seemed to bring the end any sooner.

But it had always been disjoint. It was different when you encoded it for someone else to understand. The hard authority of chronology and the unforgiving critic of consistency stood sentinel between her and any other human being. She had given a full statement to her father the next morning—a legal formality—but she didn’t remember anything from the days that had followed that night any more.

Telling her story to the now late professor had brought order to her thoughts. And it was terrifying. She could hide in ambiguity and subjectivity. But of course there were choices she could have made differently, ways she could’ve avoided that fate. And they were now more starkly obvious than ever.

If she hadn’t gone to the Yule Ball—hadn’t been Draco’s arm candy that evening. Then it wouldn’t have happened. Right? It couldn’t have... Right?

But it wasn’t that simple. It would’ve been someone, so who better than the pugnacious bitch of Slytherin. The evil queen with a heart of ice. I’m sure the authors of the universe found themselves quite clever. Fuck God.


The words echoed through Pansy’s mind. She’d been religious. Still was. She needed God. She needed him now more than ever. But she could hate him. Job had hated God. Pansy hadn’t understood that lesson before. Now she did.

So preoccupied was she with her hate that it was a subconscious layer of her mind that brought to her attention that something was wrong. She had forgotten something. Her eyes came up. And her ears locked onto a voice that had just passed by.

“I’ll be at the Burrow soon, Hermione. I really do need to stop by and talk to Director Bones.”
By the time Pansy got up and grabbed her obscenely expensive bag, Harry was already turning the corner of the door exiting scratch-swirl-cross-bang. She had to catch up. It was everything. If she couldn’t do this, then what use was she.

She turned the corner and saw Grabthar escorting the pair of friends down the corridor.

“Harry!”

She called out but soft walls of the corridor ate her plea.

“HARRY!!”

It sounded almost panicked, but she did see the trio turn and notice her. Harry made some kind of apology to Hermione who returned a supportive pat to the shoulder. Then Grabthar and the... ‘muggle-born’ continued on. Harry waited.

Pansy hurried forward breathless from her urgency.

“Potter. You aren’t easy to contact.”

“Look. I’m only listening to you because Hermione said I should. I really don’t need this right now. So make it quick.”

She took a deep breath. She did not need her acute social sense to know that this was not the right time.

“My father would like to talk with you about your positions with regards to the Wizengamot. I think. He definitely wants to meet with you.”

His eyes narrowed and his lips turned up into a sneer. Pansy had seen that face on Draco on a nearly daily basis but never on Harry Potter. He was shaking his head at her like a nuisance.

“I don’t have time for this.”

And he turned to leave.

No! Not now. Pansy had too much banked in this pot. He couldn’t do this to her. She wouldn’t allow it.

“Stop!”

Harry kept walking.

Pansy’s fists balled. She stamped her foot. And knowing that it would appear petulant shouted at that boy-who-lived just outside the bereavement office following the last words of his legal guardian.

“Harry Potter, you will listen to me!”

He turned on the spot, seamlessly reversing his momentum. He stalked back at an alarmingly belligerent pace. He came up within inches of Pansy’s face. He was taller so she was left looking up at his rage-filled eyes. She hadn’t noticed how much taller he was. She felt small.

“Why?! What could you possibly have that I want? After everything that you’ve done to my
friends, to everyone, why should anyone care one lick what you want? Who do you think you are?”

Pansy knew that she couldn’t yield, so she stared him down. She hid the fear she was feeling. Her heart was beating fast and her hands shaking through her closed fists.

“I want to answer that question. But I can’t unless you listen to me. Please.”

This last entreaty sounded more desperate than Pansy intended, but she wasn’t in any kind of negotiating position so maybe calling upon his ample white knight fantasy would help.

He stared at her. He was judging her and she felt the weight pressing on the other side of the scale. All of the horrible things she had done for years. All of the mean words. The manipulation. The bullying. She knew her entreaty didn’t weigh up against that.

“Two minutes.”

Pansy nodded shakily and extended a suddenly weak arm to indicate a bench resting against the wall of the corridor. She needed to sit down before her knees failed her.

As Harry sat down next to her, she sighed letting the adrenaline drain out of her. She felt so tired.

“My father has asked me to arrange a meeting with you. He says it is for your mutual benefit.”

“Why? What possible interest could your father have with me?”

“I— You should talk to him about it. I’m sure it has to do with your position in the Wizengamot.”

“Pansy, I don’t have a position in the Wizengamot.”

“But you could. There’s precedent for it and... And I’m supposed to arrange a meeting not explain my father’s position for him.”

“I can’t work with a death eater. Even if he isn’t one any more. I just can’t do that.”

Pansy had been on the defensive but she was sick of this death eater bollocks.

“My father is not a death eater! He has never been a death eater. You’re making assumptions about my family just because—”

“Because you collaborate with death eaters. You and your father both. I can’t believe you would be that intentionally ignorant.”

“Potter, I can assure you that my father never served the Dark Lord... at least...”

“Not so confident, now, are you?”

“He isn’t a death eater. Just come meet with him. Tomorrow. You don’t even have to unpack... I heard you talking to Hermione about the Burrow.”

Harry closed his eyes. He was considering it. This was good.

“Okay.”

Yes!

“But not tomorrow. I have other promises that I need to fulfil. Next weekend, though. Saturday. I’ll
meet with your Dad on Saturday. But I am not making any commitments.”

Pansy pulled out a copy of Papa’s business card—signed Aster Magnus Parkinson—and handed it to him.

“His office address is listed at the bottom. Thank you, Potter— Harry.”

~ diffindo ~

Luna rocked gently. Soothingly. Her brain fuzzed with incomprehension. An unconscious part of her mind wanted to stay here. This place was safe. It was reminiscent of her memories in the womb.

But Luna’s sensory suspension was disturbed by a perception of pressure in her lower body. It felt strange. Like an odd fullness. Her mind still struggled for organized thought. But it was wrong. It seemed wrong.

She could feel her body, but not really control it. She felt herself moving, but she was no longer the agent. She felt her hands press against hard rough skin that wasn’t hers.

Something was inside her mind. She had to get it out. Whatever it was.

‘Get out! Get. OUT!’

She felt her body go slack as though the puppetmaster had collapsed. Eight terrifying words entered her mind unbidden from a foreign entity.

‘I’m so sorry, Luna, I wasn’t strong enough.’

Luna felt her muscles again. She could move. She opened her eyes and looked into her father’s.

And panicked.

End Notes

Hi! Daphne says I need to stay out of your way. So... bullets!

* My muse feeds upon your comments. It's hungry right now. Please feed the hungry muse.

* I'm looking for more beta readers. Thanks, Pip117!

* I'll put everything else in the comments.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!