A Disarranged Marriage

by Seselt

Summary

The Wizengamot has passed punitive Marriage legislation to cripple the pure-blood families who did not support the Order of the Phoenix during the Second Wizarding War. Their retribution has earned the ire of Hermione Granger, champion of justice and reluctant bride.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Hermione Granger lay on the dust-sheet covered sofa in the living room of her parents' house. The millennium was a day old, replete with possibilities. Bright shiny and new. Hermione did not feel bright or shiny or indeed new. Mostly what she felt was stunned.

Part of that was the aftermath of a truly stupendous New Year's Eve party at the Burrow, from which she had emerged yesterday afternoon dazzled as a mole to slink back to her childhood home. She wanted everything nice for her parents. Today she would have spent tidying up, uncovering the furniture and airing the place. A plastic tub of cleaning supplies stood ready in the kitchen.

And importantly, far far more importantly than anything else, two glass spheres filled with what looked like quicksilver nestled in a carry case in her father's safe. All that her parents' had been rested in those penseive globes. She had kept them safe for years while Monica and Wendell Wilkins enjoyed Australia.

The wait had not been easy. She had missed her mum and dad so much. She needed them. She had cried for them. But because you do not just turn off a war, she had delayed their return until she could be sure it was safe. There had been no question of her not going back to Hogwarts for her NEWTs, which would have meant months away from her newly returned parents. That would have been cruel, to all three of them. So she had promised herself she would bring them home after graduation.

It had been hard with them not there. She had to duck off to the loo to cry even though she had been deliriously happy. Her mum and dad would have been so proud of her. She had taken photos of everything and had even tried to use a camcorder so they would not miss a moment of the celebrations once she had them back where they belonged.

The restoration spell had taken longer for her to perfect than she had expected. It was complex and it had to be perfect. Hermione would not settle for anything less than total precision. But now she had the rite, the pensieves and the incantations exactly as she needed them. Waiting for the supplies she required had been nerve-twangingly frustrating. That last delay had been the worst of all.

She had spent Christmas in a variety of disguises following her parents to make sure they were alright. They were. They'd had a picnic on the beach then a lovely dinner out with friends. Her dad had got her mum a Season Pass for the symphony orchestra and her mum had got her dad a set of golf clubs. With the time zone difference, Hermione had celebrated her Christmas with the Weasleys. With Ron, in increasing degrees of awkwardness.

She had avoided him in the week between Christmas and New Year's, spending those days sending Howlers to suppliers who had not lived up to their promises. The last parcel, a tincture of Tuscan blue rosemary pressed under the full moon, had arrived on the 31st.

Getting absolutely plastered had not been part of her plan. A few drinks, some dancing and some chatting in the kitchen had been her expectations. But she had been so relieved to have everything finally ready that she had got a tad carried away. Whatever had been in those Goblets of Fire cocktails George had mixed had been potent and quite resistant to sobriety potions.

Last night she had slept in her own room, in her own bed, in blissful certainty she knew what the future held. This morning had proven it was just as well she had quit Divination class because she had no precognition whatsoever. Hermione considered that she could probably find some reserves of murderous rage still in her subconscious, leftover from the war.
Yes, very probably. Right now Apparating to the Ministry and personally rendering the Wizengamot
down to their component molecules sounded a pretty good plan. Not terribly effective long term,
true, she mused, but really appealing in the aftermath of shock.

There had been quite a few owls waiting for her when she'd woken. Most were routine, confirmation
of deliveries and effusive job offers. Some were scrawled notes from her friends on the theme of
'whoar, what a party'. One was from the Ministry notifying her the Reconstruction Bill had passed
with a few amendments.

Hermione had given a long interview early last year at the request of the new Minister. Kingsley
Shacklebolt had wanted her opinion on how the wizarding world should move forward to heal and
repair. She had been honoured to be consulted. So as well as the interview, she had submitted several
feet of suggestions. What had that earned her?

An engagement to a pure-blood wizard of the Wizengamot's choosing.

One of the amendments tacked on between restitution orders and provisions for orphans was a
nuptial clause. The Ministry had helpfully included it when they had sent the notification of her
pending marriage. Hermione had read it, twice, and stared at it now.

Broadly, every unmarried pure-blood witch or wizard between the age of twenty-one and fifty would
be matched with a Muggle-born. The arranged marriages carried a lengthy list of caveats, all
designed to keep the pure-bloids from wriggling out of the decree. Their options were to marry, to
surrender their wands and live as Muggles or to emigrate to a nation that did not have a reciprocal
legal arrangement with the Wizengamot.

The Ministry had been ridiculously generous to the Muggle-born partners. Large bonuses, tax rebates
and free child-care were just a few of the big ticket incentives. Hermione smirked at the 'free child-
care'. That was another little sting in the legislation. The pure-blood partner could only petition for
divorce after two children had been produced from the marriage, and they faced hefty fines for

So the Wizengamot had finally found a way to break the old wizarding families. The pure-bloods
would either submit to having their heir and a spare be half-bloods or die out. The age limit was a
nice touch too. It neatly caught anyone likely to have been actively involved in the support of
Voldemort, while leaving those who had been under-age at the end of the war with the threat
hanging over their heads.

There would be an exodus of pure-bloods. Hermione thought idly of which countries did not have a
Gamut Treaty with the United Kingdom. There were not many. She would have to look that up for
her own curiosity. At least the Ministry was not vindictive enough to annul existing marriages
between pure-bloids. There were also criteria for exceptional circumstances, most notably 'service in
the defence of Muggles'. That would give an escape clause for the Order of the Phoenix and their
allies.

Nicely done, really. The Wizengamot had brought the pure-blood families to their knees. Oh,
certainly they could appeal the legislation. But that would take years. Years in which young pure-
bloods were not marrying. For a section of society with already low birth-rates, having their youth
forcibly chaste might cripple their chances of children. Or they could pay the illegitimacy fines and
spend years trying to gain legal acknowledgement for their base-born heirs. The Wizengamot had
them over a barrel.

Hermione felt sorry for them. She did. Plus courtesy of the Time-Turner, she was within the age
group for Muggle-born spouses, which she hoped the Ministry had not realised. But that was not
what made her angry. What made her bloody furious was that in 1937 her grandmother had been banned from marrying the man she had loved by an edict very similar to the one Hermione now held.

She was not going to bloody accept it. This was not what she had fought for. Sitting up, Hermione hunted for a scroll and quill. She had left her bag somewhere. Rummaging through the house, she found her trusty satchel still transfigured into an evening bag on the hall table.

When the doorbell rang, Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. Her head gave a warning throb. It was still punishing her for the New Year's Eve party. At least her mouth no longer tasted of petrol and old socks. She wrenched the door open, trying not to swear. If it was someone door-knocking for charity they were going to be sadly disappointed.

Tall, dark and unhandsome stood on her parents' doorstep. Shoulders squared, arms resting at his sides with hands clenched, face grim and ready to bear a lioness in her den. Hermione glared at him. He stared levelly back at her, cloak rippling in the cold breeze.

“Good morning, Granger.” The words were careful, spoken through his teeth. Straight teeth now, she noticed.

“Come in.” She stepped aside so he could enter. “We have a lot to talk about, Flint.”
Truth and Toast

Marcus Flint was even larger than she remembered from school. Years of professional Quidditch had been good to him though it had done nothing to soften his arrogance. He sat on a stool at the counter, filling the galley kitchen with his presence while she made them tea. He loomed while seated and Hermione was finding it difficult not to edge away from him. Or throw things. To be fair, if Tinkerbell had shown up at her door right now, she would probably have wanted to throw things at her too.

“Have you eaten?” She asked, setting out crockery.

“No.” He answered flatly as though he thought it was a jibe.

Hermione went to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs. She had stocked up in anticipation of her parents' return. All their favourite things. She planned to cook bouillabaisse and beef stroganoff and... that was entirely irrelevant at the moment. Cracking and whisking eggs gave her something to do while she tried to assemble a conversation with a man she most distinctly recalled dressed up as a Dementor.

“How did you get this address?” Hermione started with the easiest question. Let's be civilised, she cautioned herself. There were bound to be more people beating a path to her door as soon as the news of the legislation got around. Let's not start the yelling just yet.

“It was included with the notice.” Marcus dropped a scroll on the counter and watched it roll along the smooth surface. He caught it before it fell off the edge then rubbed a finger on the countertop to investigate what he had thought was stone.

“It's a plastic laminate.” She explained for no sensible reason other than not wanting to stand there silent. The look he shot her conveyed how little her words meant to him. “Layers of artificial lacquer glued onto wood.” She clarified. “Why would the Ministry send you to my parents' house? I've been staying at the Burrow.”

“Location charm.” Marcus watched her pour the egg mixture into a pan, which was sensible enough, then take two slices of bread out of a bagged loaf and put them in a box with two holes in it that was leashed to the wall. She pushed down a lever. Apparently that did something. “I am supposed to bring my suit to you immediately.” He had been on his way out when the owl arrived and had Apparated after a cursory glance at the Ministry parchment. “Aren't you too young?”

“I used a time-turner in my third year.” Hermione added bacon rashers to the pan then started dicing tomatoes. He watched the knife. “I've kept to my calendar birthdays for convenience but legally I'm older.” All those hours added up. “And do you intend to press your suit?” She looked pointedly at his worn sweater and slacks. They both knew it was not that sort of suit. “Aren't you touring with your team? Why don't you just leave the country?”

“The League is bound by the new law.” He tossed the scroll in his hand, catching it with barely a glance. “Part of having a team qualify is signing on to the Gamut. If I want to play professionally, I have to be resident in a registered country.” He met her gaze in a hard stare. “And I want to play.”

“Do you have a girlfriend? If she's Muggle-born, you could petition to marry her.” Hermione turned her back on him to add the tomatoes to the eggs. Not quite scrambled and not quite an omelet but it would be edible.
“No girlfriend I would want to marry. Just Snitch-snatches and Nifflers.” He laughed when she spun around to glare at him. “The top players have to beat them back like Bludgers. I thought you had a thing with Krum.”

“I was fifteen!” She slammed the frying pan down on the stove.

“I have had younger throw themselves at me.” Marcus shrugged.

“And have you had younger?” Hermione demanded tartly.

“No.” His answer was as stony as his name. He glared at her. Her with her stupid Muggle ways and Medusa hair. She had the spell that would unlock everything he wanted and they were arguing about dumb slags he had long ago got bored of shagging. “I like women with tits.” Marcus looked pointedly at her shirt. It was an old one, bought when she was smaller. The picture on it now stretched over her bust. He looked to pay her back for the ‘had younger’. And because she had nice tits.

“I like men with manners.” Hermione waved the eggy spatula under his nose like a wand. “I don't have to accept this. I'm not bound to do anything. The Ministry can try to buy my cooperation all they like. I'm going right there after breakfast to be very tactless and loud in my refusal to abide by their edict. Feel free to tag along. I expect we'll have a lot of company.”

“I don't.” Marcus jerked his head towards the leashed box that had just spat the bread out with a metallic noise. “Damn thing is pushy.” He grabbed a piece of toast and sniffed it experimentally. Hermione plonked a plate, knife and the butter in front of him. “Your lot made extinct at least a dozen family names. Carrow, Avery, Lestrange and so on. No one is getting out of Azkaban to sire. Won't be any pure-bloods left soon.”

“All the more reason to protest.”

“All the more to keep your damn head down and protect what heirs you have.” He buttered his toast with surprising finesse. Hermione stared at his hands. They looked too big for deftness. He had scars across his knuckles. “Malfoy is down to one. Goyle too. The Notts' have Theo and a nephew somewhere but he is a Squib. No one wants to catch the eye of the Ministry and have some new charges found.”

“I'll get this obscene law repealed.” Hermione scraped the eggs out of the pan. She should have warmed the plates in the oven, the witch thought to herself. “Pepper, salt?” He shook his head, accepting his plate and tucking in. Hermione did the same as she ruminated. Most of what she was thinking was either violent or inconsequential. None of it particularly constructive. “I should've put the bacon on first.”

“Put some mushrooms in with it. Do a stir about.” Marcus suggested, behind his hand as he was still chewing. The eggs were not bad. “You look like you could do with some grease. Partying hard, Granger?”

“I don't usually drink much.” Hermione had the fridge door open before she thought to object to his assumption she wanted to keep cooking. Resting her head against the appliance for a moment she had to concede she was hungry. She put on some more toast and sliced the mushrooms. “You don't look hung-over.”

“I don't go out.” When she gave him a disbelieving look, he shrugged. “Only so many times you can get pissed with the same blokes and my team is full of pantywaists who drink cocktails.” At her groan, Marcus grinned. “Stick to Firewhiskey. Less likely to come home without your knickers.”
“My undergarments were intact, thank you.” Hermione dumped the mushrooms in the pan then stirred while staring at the tiled splashback. Her knickers had been one of the reasons for the awkwardness between her and Ron. She rubbed the back of her neck. Damn damn damn. Something else she did not need right now. Why couldn't Fate just give her a little breathing room? Just a bit would do so she could get what she wanted in order.

His stool scraped when he stood. Hermione heard it but did not care; she would polish the floors before her parents came home. When Flint moved behind her and put his hands on her shoulders she let him. He dug his thumbs into the knots at the base of her neck and rubbed. She closed her eyes, grimacing as he found a particularly painful knot.

“Wound right up, aren't you?” He was not surprised at how much tension she was carrying. Always rushing about fixing other people's problems. He was tempted to suggest another way he could help her relax but that would likely get him brained with the skillet. Instead he kept massaging.

“I, ah, have things, ow, to do.” She leant against him as his fingers migrated down her spine, trying not to grunt as he reached the really sore spot just below her shoulder blades. “I need, oh, that's the bit.”

“Here? Yes, I can feel it.” Marcus worked his thumb in a slow circle around the bunched tendon. “Lift your arms.” He picked up one of her wrists and moved it to the top of the sloped shelf thing with the buttons. She lifted her other arm as requested then squeaked when he kneaded his fingers into her flesh. “How did you do that to yourself?”

“Mortar and pestle.” Hermione groaned, feeling the nerve response shoot right up her arms. “Grinding knarl quills.”

“What the fuck to they do?” Marcus used his knuckles to work out the knot then smoothed the tendon until it eased. The witch let out a long sigh of relief then breathed in slowly.

“Anchor memories, bolster protection wards and they integrate well to secure locking wards.” She was pleased to be rid of that stabbing hitch whenever she breathed deeply. “A plethora of other uses in Advanced Potions, though mostly tisanes not powders there.”

“Did not do Potions for NEWTs.” Moving his hands back up to her shoulders, he made circles with his palms to loosen everything. “Snape barely gave me an Acceptable OWL, even with arse-kissing.”

“Which subjects did you do?” Hermione asked, unsurprised that the uncompromising Professor would limit his bias. He had favoured the Slytherins, certainly, but his pride in his field would not allow him to jolly along someone sub-par. Though he probably evicted Flint with more tact than he did poor Neville.

“Took Herbology and Divination, passed Care of Magical Creatures.” Marcus gave his usual answer, well prepared for her to think him a duffer. Everyone else did.

“Hagrid must've been pleased to have someone for NEWTs. He was upset about losing Buckbeak all that year.” She had felt guilty about dropping Care of Magical Creatures after her OWLs. Hagrid had looked so forlorn.

“Yeah, that little toe-rag Malfoy went crying to his father. We could not settle the herd for weeks.” Marcus put his fingertips on either side of her neck and turned it gently. Moving well now. He raised his hands, putting them on hers so they spooned against the stove. “Seduced yet, Granger?”
“No.” Hermione mimicked him, refusing to stiffen despite him invading her personal space. It would be hypocritical to be offended now, since she had accepted the massage. She got the impression he was trying to prove something. “How crispy do you want your bacon?”

“I am not a Yank. It does not have to be charcoal to be done.” Patting her bum, he returned to his seat. When she dished out the bacon and mushrooms, he noticed the scar on her arm. It surprised him she had kept it. Hermione noticed him noticing and met his gaze. Mutely, he pushed up his left sleeve to reveal a hairy but unadorned forearm.

“I knew that. I would never have let you into my house otherwise.” Her tone was firm and Marcus did not mock her. He ate his bacon. She ate her bacon. The house was quiet. That was nice. After they had finished, Hermione scraped the dishes and loaded everything into the dishwasher. “So is that your plan, Flint? Seduction?”

“If that is what is needed, sure.” Marcus gave the required leer but his attention was on the white box with the racks in it. Weird. She had a sink. “Am prepared to court, if you want to be formal.”

“I’d rather just hear your reasons why you would consent under duress to marry a complete stranger. You’ve mentioned Quidditch.” Hermione started the dishwasher then crossed her arms waiting for him to begin.

“For myself, I want a wife and kids. Want to live in my family home like every other Flint for the last fourteen hundred fucking years.” He bit off his anger before it made his voice harsh. Reasonable question, reasonable gods damned answer. “For my family, I am an only son. I need a responsible, practical and decent woman to be Lady Flint. It would kill my father if I brought home some painted slut.”

“There are many more Muggle-borns than pure-bloods. You won't run out of choices if I refuse.” She did some mental arithmetic. Fourteen hundred years meant seventh century, which would tally with the Old English family name. Hermione wondered if they had any original Saxon manuscripts in their library. Holograph runic works were difficult to find.

“Would you marry me for my money and title? For my stunning body and charm?” Marcus smirked. He had some charm. He kept it in a vault at Gringotts. A very small vault.

“Of course not.” Now that did offend her. “That's one of the objections I am going to raise with the Ministry. I will not be bought. Nor should anyone else. Making the old families crawl is not the right way to bring equality. It'll only engender more resentment. We'll have another Voldemort in a generation.”

“See, I will take your word for it. You have proven yourself. But every other Muggle-born I have met has either wanted to sail my Galleons or thinks I am barely a rung up from a Death Eater.” It did not bother him any more. He had a thick skin, mention of which only got more troll jokes.

“And how many exactly have you met? Scaremongering propaganda aside, most of the wizarding population are half-bloods.” One of the things Hermione wanted to accomplish in her life was a true census. Accurate demographics would help fix many of the social problems in the magical population. But after two wars, she could not blame anyone for being leery of putting their hand up.

“Plenty of Muggle-borns in the colonies and the States. Anywhere the old families do not have a solid hold. And it is a big thing now. It's trendy, apparently.” He grimaced at the memory of a dire publicity meeting with the new Marketing rep. After half an hour he’d been ready to hex himself unconscious. “We need to embrace the emergent culture. We need to be proactive in our enfranchisement. What shite.”
“Oh, no, I have one better.” Hermione smiled then straightened, putting her hands to the lapels she did not have. “Given these fractious times and the great tenderness of wounds left yet unhealed we must compartmentalise our travails to better strategise our paradigm.”

“Who the hell do I have to Bludger for saying that?”

“Robards. He's been reading Business Management guides or self-help books. He went on and on like that when he interviewed me to join the Aurors.” The misused jargon had been painful to hear.

“Auror, eh? Going to take the job?” Marcus tried not to show he was impressed. The feisty little lioness was going to show everyone her teeth.

“I haven't decided yet. I want to get my parents back and talk things over with them first. They always planned for me to go to university. That might actually be a good idea. Some time away from everything might be useful.” Hermione checked her watch. “Right. I'm going to get changed and go. If anyone asks, I'm in Australia.”

“Fleeing the country already? The Land of Oz is a Gamut signatory, you know.” He chatted while he watched her make up her mind about how much to tell him. “Got quite a few good teams. It is a bugger to play there though. I got heat stroke on our last trip.”

“I'm just going to pick up my mum and dad. I sent them there, Obliviated, during the war.” The Ministry could wait. She wanted to build up a good head of steam prior to facing them down, and coordinating beforehand with Harry and Ron would add greater weight to their objections. “That wasn't an invitation, Flint.”

“Did not take it as one.” Marcus bared his teeth in a smile what more than one journalist had described as carnivorous. “I have literally nothing better to do than persuade you, so I am going to tag along. Pathetically wooing my intended.”
Flint's intended took them to Perth. Hermione had a port-key aligned to the bushland park at the end of her parents' street. It was deserted just after five o'clock and blissedly the sea breeze had come in to moderate the heat. The witch and the wizard paused to transfigure their clothes into something cooler before emerging from the trees.

"Why Australia?" Marcus strode along the footpath in his 'tropical' kit; white shirt, khaki shorts and loafers. He was poor at transfiguration, as McGonagall had dourly assessed, but he could manage a specific set of changes with practise. If he wished to dress differently, he packed something.

"My parents had always wanted to visit. One of my grandmother's brothers emigrated here after the Second World War. I have cousins somewhere. We lost touch when my gran died." Hermione had opted for capri pants and a loose cotton blouse with a broad hat as she sunburned almost as easily as Ron.

"How do you lose a cousin?" He had a few cousins he would like to misplace. Millicent was tolerable but the Gamp shrews spent far too much of their time on his private affairs.

"Great-Uncle Simon didn't write much. Gran kept in touch with his widow but her kids moved around a lot. Three sons, I think. Mum would know." She shrugged, walking up the driveway of a nice bungalow to knock on the front door. "Not everyone has tapestries of their lineage."

No one answered. Hermione waited, knocked again then waited again. There was no car on the drive but her father preferred to keep it in the garage. Palming her wand, she tapped the door and murmured an unlocking charm.

After a quick survey of the empty house, Hermione consulted the calendar on the fridge. There was nothing written in for today though yesterday was a golfing day and on New Year's Eve there was a note for fireworks on the foreshore. She expected her parents had probably gone out for an early dinner but checked the answering machine in the study just in case.

There were six unanswered messages. Hermione pressed play and listened, growing more numb as she did. The first call was from one of her father's golfing friends about her dad missing a tee-off. The second call was from the police. So was the third. The last three were from the registrar of Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital asking to speak with next of kin.

Marcus said nothing, did nothing other than check the garage as she requested while she called the hospital. He reported no car, got a nod then listened as the witch lied quite fluently to the person on the other end of the Muggle device. And watched her fingers tighten whiter and whiter on the cord.

Hermione hung up, took a deep breath then called a cab. While they waited, she went to the safe. Her parents always had a safe the same as they always had locks on the windows. Their dental practice had been broken into many times by drug-seekers so the security was simply habit. She retrieved their passports, insurance details and the emergency credit card.

When the taxi cab arrived, Hermione gave the hospital's address then sat staring out the window. Marcus folded himself into the seat beside her and glared at the driver when he tried to banter. They drove in silence. Once they got to the Emergency Department, the witch realised she did not have any Australian currency on her and the cab had no facility for her to use a card.

"Go. I will handle this." Marcus leaned across Hermione, opened the door and almost pushed her
out. Sufficiently rattled, she went without asking questions. He got his wallet out and rifled through it
until he found some of the colourful slippery notes the Australian Muggles used. Marcus gave the
driver a green one. The man did not argue at all when he said to keep the change.

He found Hermione speaking with a short man behind a tall desk in a large room full of stupid
people. That was Marcus's impression of the variously crying, moaning or tooth-gritting Muggles
sitting in ugly chairs. Fast moving people in navy blue did things that needed doing. There was a lot
of beeping and form filling.

Marcus took position a pace behind Hermione as she signed multi-coloured pieces of paper. A tired
woman in a smock joined them at the desk. She and Hermione talked, using words the wizard had
never heard before to explain something about an accident.

They went to a set of metal doors that opened into a tiny room that moved. It took them to a floor that
had rooms with glass walls and curtains along a central corridor. It smelled of alcohol but Marcus
expected they cleaned with it rather than drank it as everything was scrubbed bare.

The smock woman, a Healer he guessed, took them into one of the rooms where an older woman lay
on a high bed. She had a mask on that had a tube that ran to a box with lights on it. There were a lot
of tubes.

“Mum?” Hermione sat by the bed and held her mother's hand. Her cold and unresponsive hand.
“Mum, it'll be okay. I'll make it all okay.” She started to cry and Marcus took himself out of the room
to give her some privacy.

He stood in the corridor watching Healers walk briskly past. There seemed to be a hierarchy. He
thought the navy blue people were the middle rank, with the smock people and the ones with the
oddly bagged shoes higher in authority. The ones wearing shirts with embroidered badges that
pushed the wheeled beds around were probably servants.

And then there were the people who stood in hallways or sat in the room with sofas. They did not
rush about. They waited. Periodically one of the bagged shoe people came to talk to them. There was
crying. Sometimes good crying. Mostly not. Marcus came to the conclusion that this floor was for
patients who were not coming home.

“Excuse me.”

He turned in surprise when the Healer who had brought them here addressed him. She had a
clipboard, like his team's Muggle-born assistant coach used. This one had a broad metal piece on the
back so it could hook over the end of the wheeled beds.

“Yes?” Marcus looked her in the eye. That usually got people talking fast. The Healer did not seem
to be intimidated and drew him away from the door so they could speak quietly.

“Ms. Granger's father has been moved to the morgue.” The woman spoke calmly, accustomed to
giving this sort of news. “The body needs to be formally identified. Is it possible you could do it? I
think it might be best for Ms. Granger to have as much time with her mother as she can right now.”

“How long?” If he had been anywhere else, Marcus would have laughed at the incongruity. Muggles
and wizards were very different. He treasured those differences. But the coded phrase the Healer had
used sounded so very like what the Medi-witch had said to him when he visited his mother for the
last time.

“Mrs Wilkins is on life-support. There's minimal brain activity. What happens now is up to her next
of kin.”

Marcus thought about lying. He could wave his wand and make the smock woman go away convinced everything was sorted. And he thought about how much Granger would hate him for it. This was her world. These were her parents. Her heritage. Her right. He shook his head.

“I have never met her family. I cannot spare her this.” He must have said the right thing because the Healer put a hand on his arm sympathetically before going back into the room. Marcus stood on the threshold like a gargoyle, feeling as useless as he usually did off a Quidditch pitch.
Hermione had signed more forms while carefully being organised. She had identified her father. The mortuary staff had moved his body to the chapel so she did not have to see him in the morgue. That had been kind of them. Now she was making a list. She was sitting at her mother's bedside and making a list of what to do after her mum died. Her hands clenched around the paper, crumpling it.

“Granger.” Marcus took the list out of her hands and put a cup into them. “Drink this. I bribed a child to show me how to make the coffee machine work.” He had been more than prepared to hex the infernal thing when the boy had chanced past and pitied him.

The wizard had not been pleased to be patronised by a Muggle a third of his size but the boy had been waiting with his grandparents in the ward almost as long as they had. So he had been civil and had paid for the boy to have a hot chocolate. It seemed a fair exchange.

“Thank you.” Hermione sipped, the hot sweet liquid doing a little to revive her. Flint went away and came back with another chair, setting it down beside her. He seemed in no hurry to go anywhere. She found that comforting. And he was quiet. Right now she needed quiet.

Her parents had been involved in a head-on collision on their way home from watching the fireworks. The driver of the other car had been drunk and had swerved into the oncoming lane. Her father had tried to avoid him but had only had time to turn the car enough for her mother not to be killed on impact too. The other driver had died at the scene and a young couple in a third car had been badly hurt when they had hit the wreckage.

Her mother had sustained multiple fractures, including three to her skull, which had caused bleeding on the brain. The surgeons had operated but there was little they could do. Artificial respiration kept her mother alive. And sometime tonight, she would turn it off.

“I thought I would feel guilty. For not being here, I mean.” Hermione spoke when she had emptied her cup. “It’s a standard response, saying that ‘I should’ve been there.’” She shifted in her chair to lean against him, cold in the air conditioning. “But if I had been in the car I would’ve been killed too. And if I had Apparated right there, there would’ve been nothing I could do. Dad died instantly and mum... left. Even if I healed all the damage, she wouldn’t be there.”

Marcus put his arms around her and kept his mouth shut. He did not tell her how much he wished someone had sat with him, held him and brought him awful coffee when he had kept this vigil for his mother. Hermione cried, trying to get all the tears out at once so she could do something. She had to do something.

What she did was ask for a chaplain because her mother would have liked that. They had spoken abstractly, as parents do with their teenage children, about funerals and responsibilities. Her mum had only gone to church fitfully but she had believed.

This shift, the pastoral care provider, as listed on one of the helpful pamphlets, was an Anglican Reverend. He shook their hands and seemed to know all the right questions to ask. Hermione found his calm demeanour steadying and answered collectedly.

“We read the 23rd Psalm at granddad's service. Mum said that was her favourite. I would appreciate if you could please say that one, before...” Cutting herself off before she lost her composure, Hermione breathed in slowly. “Before I speak with the doctor.”
Marcus stood at her side while the chaplain recited. The Reverend had his Bible open in his hands but he did not need to look at it. He knew the verses by heart. Hermione closed her eyes, remembering the last time she had heard those words. She reached for a hand instinctively and finding one, held tightly.

And then it was over. The doctor and ward sister came at her request. There was a brief discussion, more a reassurance for everyone that this was being done appropriately. The chaplain stayed out of respect while they waited the few minutes required for it to be official.

And then it was over.
And she was an orphan.
And there were more forms to sign.
It was just dark enough still to risk Apparating when Marcus took them directly to the bungalow. Hermione was shaking too much from the aftermath of shock to do more than mumble thanks before putting herself to bed in the spare room. He saw her huddled there, pale as milk with blue shadows under her eyes, and gave in.

Marcus kicked off his shoes to get under the covers too. The witch did not protest as he snuggled her against him. Her skin was clammy, heatless. He shifted, pulling his shirt off so she could steal his warmth. Hermione nestled against him like a mouse in her den, falling quickly into an exhausted sleep.

One of the lesser known talents of a touring athlete is the ability to nap anywhere. Marcus could doze off on a locker room bench if he had to. An orthopaedic mattress was no challenge. He planned to lie there until Granger settled then take himself off to a sofa. He reckoned she would not want him in her bed when she woke.

He roused much later when someone leant against him, hair tickling his chest. Granger was looking at him with red rimmed eyes but a calm face. Still half asleep, he smoothed a hand through her mussed curls. She rested her head on his shoulder and they just lay there for a while staring at the walls. Hermione broke the silence first.

“I don’t know whether to sell this house or keep it to rent out.” That was not an urgent decision. It was simply a decision she could make relatively emotionlessly. She would keep her parents’ house in England though she was not sure if she would live there. It would be nice sometimes to escape the Burrow.

“Keep it.” Marcus advised. Selling a house was something you did just before you ate your own boots. As a pure-blood, he had been raised to accrete property. And magical artefacts, grudges and in the case of his great-grandfather tapestries. The old geezer had been mad for them. “Keep it quiet. Nice little bolt-hole.”

“There'll be blowback from that stupid law.” Hermione mused. It had been years since she had marvelled at the need for a safe-house. More than five years, if she tallied it. What a miserable way to live.

“Yes.” He did not want to be so grim so early in the morning but he had never learned the habit of optimism. “You will be a big target. Should have thought of that before I asked you to play along with it.”

“Harry will be in the thick of it too. He doesn’t need that extra stress on top of Auror training.” She made a face, proud she did not resort to casual blasphemy.

“Golden Boy will manage.” Marcus chuckled.

“Harry's a hero.” Hermione was quick to defend her friend from mockery.

“So are you. So is Weasley, any of the horde. So are dozens of other people. Hell, Longbottom did more with less without Dumbledore bending over backwards for him.” Stopping at that point, he cursed himself. This was why he did not talk to people. Running at the mouth had not been a survival strategy in his House. Strong and silent, that was him.

Granger did not say anything. Marcus was surprised. He turned his head to judge her expression. It
was thoughtful not wrathful. Of course, she might be thinking about turning him into a newt.

“You have a point.” Hermione had long been troubled by the Headmaster's machinations. Too many secrets. They would have done much better if he had been honest with them from the beginning. She could not shake the feeling of being a pawn. A pawn who after the game was done would be packed away quietly until she was needed next.

“You do not have to sweet talk me to get me into bed. Granger.” It was a joke but there was a hard edge to his voice.

“I'm not patronising you, Flint.” She sat up, self-consciously aware she had been cuddling him like a teddy bear. “I meant it.” For no sensible reason, tears welled in her eyes. Hermione angrily scrubbed at her face. “Damn it.”

“Hey, don't.” Marcus felt like a right cad now. He pulled her back down, wrapping his arms around her. She was a petite morsel. That took him aback. All wound up and crusading, Granger stomped about like Boudicca. Weeping now, she was young and alone. “Fuck it. Cry all you want.”

“I don't want to cry!” Hermione said angrily to his sternum, sniffing wretchedly. “I want to pull myself together. I need to...” She gasped at the pain in her chest, the physical ache of loss.

During the war, she had lost friends. She had fought and mourned and stood with her friends as they mourned. But there had always been a sense of something greater, something drawing them towards a conclusion. They were at war and wars ended and her war would end in victory.

Her parents were supposed to be safe in Australia. No one would be able to hurt them. She would be able to bring them home and normal would return. They could go to France again or take that skiing holiday she had missed. Ordinary, Muggle things that made her feel sane.

“Breathe.” Marcus rubbed the flat of his hand in slow circles over her back. Yesterday he had planned to fly out to the Shetlands and coast on the winds. Just him and the North Sea squalls. He had needed some air. Now he was just adrift.

“I sent them away to be safe.” Hermione spoke through gritted teeth, trying to stop her heaving sobs. She had worked so hard for years to make the world right for people like her parents, and one drunk idiot had ruined it all.

“My father sent me to Moldova, to a cold water hut in the middle of an old Soviet air base. There was ice on the inside of the windows.” There he went again with the talking, Marcus berated himself. Having shared that, he had to make a point with it. “Safe is an illusion.”

The statement stuck in her mind, giving her something to hold while she pushed away the frank panic rising inside. Thinking about other things would keep the pain at bay. Hermione realised also there was a lot more to Marcus Flint than she had thought.

“Why did you stay? At the hospital. You didn't have to.” She did not lift her head, which was aching again. Dosing herself with Dreamless Sleep and just giving up for a while had a great allure at the moment.

“I know.” Hesitating, he flipped a mental Knut. If he told her, he would be sharing something very private that he did not want bandied about. On the other side, she had just been through the same thing herself. She would not use it against him, probably. “I was with my mother when she died. It was just us. I was sixteen.”

“I'm sorry.” Hermione automatically hugged him. She barely knew him but there were certain things
you just did. He had done the same for her. “Where was your dad?”

“At home, indisposed.” Marcus enunciated carefully. That did make her look up at him. Ah, the keen Granger interest in bloody everything. He might as well tell her now. His chance with her was pretty much over. It was horrendously inappropriate for him to ask for her hand while she was in mourning. “He was in Azkaban for three years, after the first farce with the Dark Lord. It broke him.”

“He was a Death Eater?”

“Sympathiser. But Crouch was aflame with righteous bloody zeal. Father was in Slytherin two years behind Riddle and he had been cronies with the worst of them. But he is not the sharpest spoon in the drawer, and they all knew it.” His own bitterness surprised Marcus. He had thought he did not care. “So Father hosted them and let them pretend it was all so fucking civilised. I think he might even have believed it. He did not give much of a defence when he was hauled in, but he had heard what the Lestranges had done to Aunt Alice and her husband by then.”

“Aunt Alice? As in Alice Longbottom?” It never ceased to surprise Hermione how interconnected wizarding families were. It was astounding they didn't all have two heads by now they were so inbred.

“Alice Gamp, as was.” Marcus nodded, not happy to be talking about it but unable to stop his tongue. Seeing Granger's mother must have shaken him more than he thought. “My mother's younger sister. She took tea with us sometimes, very quietly. Nice lady. Used to sneak me sweets.”

“Neville visits them often.” Hermione meant it as a balm so he would know someone was still looking after Frank and Alice. She was not prepared for him to tense. She felt his muscles clench and let him go, sitting up to study him.

“Longbottom and I do not speak.” It had been a mistake. In hindsight, he could admit that to himself. Discussing it now with her was not the problem. Taking it out on his ten year old cousin then was. “Last time I saw him at St Mungo's, I broke three of his ribs.”

“What happened?” There was a lot of 'not speaking'. Being sent to Conventry was an old wizarding tradition, evidently. Hermione did not see much change in Marcus's careful impassivity. Slytherins cultivated that cold mask. He breathed in deeply, held it then breathed out slowly. Meditatively keeping his temper.

“It was that old bat Augusta who started it. Making fucking snippy remarks about sacrifice and justice. As though my mother had cheered when her sister was tortured. Mum did not even fucking know until it was in the papers.” Marcus bit into the words. “Then Longbottom started asking questions and I could not stand it. My mother had just died. So I hit him and the bitch dragged him and herself off.”

“Why Neville?”

“He was there. I couldn't bloody hit an old woman, could I?” Marcus grimaced. In the circumstances, one punch had been restrained. He had wanted to smash the harridan's face in.

“You might revise that prohibition if you ever met the Weasleys' Aunt Muriel. She makes Mrs Longbottom look mellow.” Hermione admitted, which earned her a genuine laugh from the wizard. She felt a tiny smile curl her mouth. It was not much but it was there. “Thank you.”

“Don't mention it.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I will deny it if you do.” Marcus smirked. “I am the Montrose Menace. I lead the League in penalties. I'd go for the full seven hundred if there was a
way to smuggle a broadsword onto the pitch.”

“Please don't. I was deaf in both ears for hours after the last game between the Magpies and the Cannons. Ron and Harry dragged me there, in the rain, to support Chudley.” That had not been a pleasant afternoon. “When you fouled all three Chasers at once, Ron was ready to climb out of the box to hex you.”

“When are you going to tell them? I will clear out before they arrive.” Marcus did not dwell on why he would have preferred to stay. He would certainly not remain and cause a scene with Weasel and Lightning Boy.

“I'm not.” Hermione spoke slowly, airing her own words to herself. She had not been conscious of the decision until that moment. But she was sure. “I'll let Harry know where I am though not why.” She breathed in slowly, feeling disloyal. “I don't want this to be about them. The Weasleys are wonderful people. It's just they fill up all the space around them.”

There were many things Marcus could say. Anything from snide remarks on fecundity to sympathetic drivel. He said none of it. He understood.

“My parents are Muggles. They were always there for me, supported me, loved me. When I say good-bye, I want it to be about them. I don't...” Hermione took a deep breath and blinked rapidly. “I don't want them to be marginalised at their own funeral.”
The next few days were spasmodic. The time crawled while she waited for the hospital to release her parents’ bodies. It rushed when she met the funeral director as her mum had insurance and a service plan. She had braced herself for an excruciating afternoon that did not happen. Organising flowers was easy too. Native Australian wildflowers and white roses from the bungalow garden.

Hermione put a notice in the newspaper then sat down with two mobile phones, two day-planners and one glass of wine. She called everyone the Wilkins' had known, to cancel appointments, to break the news and to accept commiserations with a leaden heart. Those hours shuffled by like zombies.

Marcus answered the door, portkeyed back and forth to England to retrieve things and generally made himself useful. It felt good to do so, though he had no damn coherent reason why. After his mother had died, he had let his cousins fuss around arranging things while he took to his broom. Or shouted at his father.

Now he chopped vegetables in a Muggle kitchen. Granger wanted to clear out the pantry before the food spoiled. This involved making stews, that went into the ice-box to go back to England, and skewers to go on the barbecue. Marcus could make exactly one meal from scratch without magic; a sandwich.

“Why would mum have four cans of asparagus?” Hermione asked the cupboard as she levitated down the provender. “What would anyone do with four cans of asparagus?”

“Make soup.” Marcus bisected a capsicum with a chef's knife. It was new and sharp. He missed sharp. “I had a creamed asparagus, cauliflower and Parmesan soup in Brussels. Delicious, unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately?” She put the cans on the counter, adding a container of grated Parmesan and a head of cauliflower to the stack. All through the kitchen were small heaps of ingredients ready to be processed. It was a reassuring sight, reminding her of a potions laboratory.

“Pucey was seeing the owner's daughter.” He gutted the pepper the way Granger had shown him then cut it into chunks. “When he had seen every inch of her, he dropped her. We had dined there with him. The girl's father threatened to turn us all into casserole.”

“He'll be on the receiving end of the marriage legislation. That should limit his sight-seeing.” Hermione began washing potatoes, scouring them industriously. Marcus watched her as she scrubbed then put his knife down to intervene.

“They are clean, Granger.” He caught her wrist and held it, turning her arm over to extract the denuded potato.

“Pucey is a bastard.” She said crisply. “That sort of behaviour is unacceptable.”

“Is this when you tell me why you do not want Weasley here?” Marcus spun her around slowly as though they were dancing then fixed her with a level stare. “I am not as green as I am cabbage looking.”

“You were a Slytherin.” Hermione reminded him of his House's colour.

“You were a Gryffindor.” He reminded her of her House's salient attribute.
“I don’t want to tell you. I don’t.” Even to herself, she sounded pathetically indecisive. She didn’t, yet she did. He was so easy to talk to, and so easy to blame if this blew up in her face. “Ron left.”

The silence filled the kitchen, disturbed only by the slow roil of the stew pots. Hermione had the distinct feeling Marcus would stand there waiting until dust settled on them both.

“When Harry, Ron and I were hunting horcruxes, through miserable months on the run, we all got low. The locket kept whispering foul things. It tormented Ron. And when we needed him, he abandoned us.” She put her hands on Flint’s chest to push him away but did not in fact push. “I don’t want him to leave again when I need him. I couldn’t forgive him again.”

“It does not sound like you have forgiven him once.” Marcus put his hands on hers. “Granger, you need someone with you. He will come if you ask. Doing this alone is shitty, believe me.”

“I have someone with me.” Hermione pointed out with a decent facsimile of calm. “You stayed.”

“Do not make this about me. I do not need Weasley and Potter kicking down my door.” Enough Aurors had tromped through his family estate this century. He did not want any more.

“This isn’t about you. This is about my parents going to their rest without the circus. This is for me. I’ve been to enough funerals. I know what I am doing.” She dropped her hands to her sides. “Please just take my word for it.”

Marcus inclined his head in a bow and went back to the capsicum. Hermione stared at him. Stood there and stared, waiting for a sulk or a martyred sigh. He just chopped vegetables.

“Flint?” She hesitated. Using his surname was old habit. Everyone at school who was not her immediate friend, she had addressed by their family name. She had graduated six months ago. Perhaps she should leave Hogwarts behind, in this instance at least. “Marcus, what are you doing?”

“Taking your word for it.” The smirk was audible. Even with his back turned, the witch knew. Marcus knew she knew and smirked harder. He could feel her watching him, her eyes heavy on his back. He started on a zucchini and mentally counted, barely reaching five before she spoke again.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.” Hermione cleared her throat, quickly leaving the kitchen before she did something mortifying. She went into the living room where Marcus had dumped all her mail from England. And did something foolish.

But it would buy her time to think about things, important things, and to rain fire on the Ministry. Let them choke on it. She might even give an interview to the Prophet. Then heads would roll.

Hermione went to the bathroom, washing her hands and face to settle herself. Foolish, yes. But she had made a lot of promises to herself while lying in that tent trying not to listen to Salazar’s locket. One of those promises had been to make sure no one ever, ever had to feel as helpless as she had felt.
The funeral was...

The funeral was... enervating.

Hermione stood by the graveside in respectable black and puppeted herself through the service. Her parents had chosen something simple, almost tidy. They had loved, lived well and wanted to reassure their mourners in a last act of consolation.

Quite a few people had sent flowers but only she, Marcus, the pastor and the funeral director were there. Hermione had expected that. Her parents were... had been sociable but private and had only been in Australia for two years.

When she asked for some time alone, the three men fell back to the hearse, to stand quietly uncomfortable as strangers often did at funerals. She turned her back to them. This was something entirely between herself and her parents.

Hermione pulled out two silvery globes from her handbag, cradling them to her. Faint whispers came from them but the distant voices were familiar and comforting. She kissed the pensieves then dropped them into the graves. They shattered in a prismatic rush of colours while she felt more than saw her parents' memories dissipate.

Breakfasts together, school runs, holidays, quarrels, careful explanations about magic, shared achievements and love. The deep, unconditional love of a parent for a child. Gone now into the ether.

She rejoined the trio with nod, consciously keeping herself upright. Marcus held her hand as they walked back to the gates of the cemetery. Hermione did the expected, said the appropriate words to end the one of the few rites Muggles still performed. It was a relief she did not have to speak to anyone else.

The witch and the wizard took the train from Karrakatta station into town, giving themselves a plausible exit. That they travelled only to the next stop before Disapparating from a discreet vantage, no one noticed.

Hermione slammed the front door and dropped her handbag. She took her dress off in the hallway and threw it away from her. She kicked off her shoes and threw them too. One hit the end of the sofa in the living room, the other skittered into the kitchen. That annoyed her. She wanted to throw them further, to send them far away so she would never have to see them again. So she had no fetters to make her remember.

Marcus shrugged off his suit jacket and hung it around her shoulders as she stood trembling in her underwear. Hermione jerked at the touch of the fabric before sending the coat flying down the hall. She spun around and grabbed his tie, pulling it off before tossing it aside too.

“You're wearing too many clothes.” Hermione informed him, stretching up on tip-toes to unbutton his shirt. The wizard let her strip him down to his briefs as he waited for her to come to her senses. But whatever was possessing her did not burn out before she grabbed his shoulders to pull him down into a starving kiss.

“Granger.” Marcus lifted her up so they should look eye to eye because he would be damned before he knelt before her. “Stop it.”
“No.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, burning and hungry and
desperate.

“Granger, if you don’t stop, I won’t.” He knew it was a bastard sort of thing to do but if she insisted,
he would happily provide. He was no white knight. There were all sorts of excuses he could use to
square this with his conscience. Which was in the vault, right next to his charm. But she had to say
yes first. That was a rule.

“I want you to take me to bed, Marcus.” Hermione said firmly nose to nose with him. “You, me,
now. Yes?” She let go of him and he let her drop to the floor. Grabbing her handbag, she pulled out
her wand then tapped herself on the abdomen. “Contraceptio.”

Marcus Flint said nothing. He removed his shoes, picked up the witch and carried her to the spare
room. Underwear came off but he did not immediately jump on her. Yes, she was willing but she
was also tense and strung out. He started with her hands, kissing her palms before working up her
arms, kissing, kneading, touching.

Hermione put her hands on his cock to hurry him up, stroking but he would not be rushed. Marcus
gripped her shoulders, pushing her back onto the bed before moving his attention to her breasts. His
tongue traced around her nipples, licking until the little nubs hardened and she swore at him.

“You need this first.” He kissed his way down her chest, down her stomach, down to her crux. He
kissed her there too, using his tongue to open her. “Take my word for it.”

Her response was a look. Not angry, not demanding, not begging. Something passed between them.
Some unspoken connection. Marcus relented. If she regretted this later then so fucking be it. He
penetrated her slowly, gritting his teeth at her tightness.

Hermione lifted her hips to help him, shoving a pillow under her to get a better angle. Everything that
she should be thinking right now she resolutely did not think. Right now all that was important was
feeling alive again.

Marcus started slow until she adjusted to him, doing nothing too adventurous. This was not some
athletic rut behind the bleachers. He pushed himself up so he could admire her as she rocked against
him. Her eyes were closed but her mouth curved into a smile.

Not a bad wake as wakes went. He dug his knees into the bed and she responded by hooking her
legs over his, moving with him. Marcus picked up his pace. Hermione dug her fingers into his
shoulders. He did not mind.

They worked together to bring each other to climax. It was not mad passion but it gave them both
something they needed. Marcus held Hermione as she convulsed and cried out. Hermione held
Marcus as he buried himself deep inside her and groaned. It was enough.

Lying together afterwards, she was so glad to have his arms around her that she could not find words
to thank him. Instead she pulled the sheet over them both and hoped he understood the gesture.
Trust

There was some awkwardness afterwards. Marcus expected it. The comfortable silence between them lasted through the clothes-gathering and the separate showers. Then Granger went downstairs to organise something and to pace around the kitchen.

He kept out of her way, labouring over a letter from the Magpies' manager. Cormack McLeod was not a man to accept anything gracefully. He sacked players for defiance over the slightest infraction. Some of the team called him the 'Dark Lord' behind his back. Though never around Marcus.

The Marriage Law would cripple the team. Maddock, a Muggle-born, had been kicked out over his obsession with Muggle balls. That left the Campbell brothers the only ones who were not pure-bloods, and Angus had only joined the team that summer.

McLeod's missive was half profanity, half threat. Marcus picked through it wishing it was a Howler. At least the nasty little red envelopes got to the point.

“Fuck you too.” The wizard snarled when he finally finished. McLeod had given him an ultimatum, given Brun, Maconne, Cabot and Liang the same command. Find wives in accordance with the legislation, find them before the League resumed play after the holiday break, or be fired.

“Is there a problem?” Hermione asked as Marcus cast a fire-making charm on the scroll he had been reading. He shook his head in reply, still cursing under his breath as he swept the ash into his palms. Marching outside, he scattered the remains over the garden before visibly taking himself in hand.

“Nothing you can fix.” He was terse but not unkind.

“I signed the decree.” She said quietly, transfiguring his frustration into offended pride.

“You do not need to make an honest man of me, Granger.” Did she think him bedding her was a play to strong-arm her into marriage? Marcus unconsciously squared his shoulders as he girded for battle. She was not going to do this simply because they had shagged.

“I signed it yesterday.” Hermione faced him down, 5'2 to 6'4, and won. His stance eased but he did not regard her with any amity.

“Because I stayed.”

“Yes, and because you took my word for it. That's rare coin among my friends.” Hermione had started the conversation with her arms crossed. She uncrossed them now, not wanting to seem confrontational but then she did not know what to do with her hands. “Look, I...” She straightened. “I had a variety of reasons for my decision. And I will get the law rescinded. But in the meantime, let's make the best of a bad lot.”

Marcus stared at her. He remembered a fearless twelve year old with fluffy hair rubbing Malfoy's nose in his father's nepotism. She had grown up but she had not changed. He was a lucky man.

“Thank you, milady.” He bowed, unwilling to make this debt feel any less weighty than it was.

“None of that, please.” Hermione shifted uncomfortably. “Just play Quidditch and spread the word. If you know anyone who has legal experience or is willing to confront the Ministry with me, I'd appreciate the reinforcements. I'm going to need a parliament of owls to deal with this mess.” She rubbed her neck. “And I must speak with Ron and Harry as soon as possible.”
“Want me there?” Marcus did not have much imagination. It was not an asset for a child reared among Death Eaters. But he could picture the Golden Boys’ reactions to the new Madam Flint.

“I would rather you weren’t present for me telling my boyfriend I cheated on him.” It stung her to have done that to Ron. It stung her that she had so easily pushed him from her mind. “Ron is going to be angry, as he has every right to be. I want this between him and I. If you’re there, he’ll blame you.”

“Let him.” The Slytherin saw no difficulty with taking the blast for this. “No need to fall on your sword when you have an asp to hand.”

“Absolutely not.” Hermione heard her voice rise in pitch. Countless people had remarked on how shrill she could be. She was trying to abate that as it was not a great communication strategy. “I did this. I will own it. I will explain to Ron and accept the consequences. He’s one of my best friends. I won’t hurt him more by pretending this was anything else but me being selfish.”

“That is not how it looks to me.” Deep breath in. Hold. Deep breath out. No hexing beggarly gingers.

“Marcus, I'm sorry, but Ron won't give a damn about why I slept with you and the marriage will only make it worse.” Hermione winced inside with every word. That she had not planned to be unfaithful was a feeble excuse. “I have to be honest with him.”

“You are so Gryffindor it hurts to watch.” Marcus did not think it funny but he had to laugh. “Very well. To your crusade go.” He pulled his signet ring off his right hand, crossing the room in two strides to give it to her. “I do not expect you to wear it but it will get you past the manorial wards. If you need somewhere to weather the storm, you are the lady of manor.”

“Thanks.” Hermione closed her fingers around the heavy ring, not looking at it. “I shouldn’t put this off. If I go now, it'll be Saturday morning. Ron will be at the Burrow for brunch.”

Hermione was grateful Marcus did not try to talk her out of it. They used the portkey and walked quickly out of her parents' house without looking at anything. Even locking the front door make her feel raw and hollow as though something had been ripped out of her.

They Disapparated from a blind lane between a newsagent and a bottle shop. Marcus went to the Montrose clubhouse to get McLeod off his back. Hermione went to Ottery St. Catchpole and walked to the Burrow, hoping the brisk air would clear her head.

She told herself it was better to speak to Ron where he felt comfortable, rather than at the crowded flat he shared with the other trainee Aurors or in some public space with reporters around every corner. The Burrow was snug, brunch was a familiar ritual and she was welcome there. Hermione wondered how long that would last once she confessed what she had done.

As luck would have it, she caught sight of him sitting on the garden wall idly brushing snow off the drystone. He did not look up until she was standing in front of him and when he did, Hermione took a step back.

“Don't bother.” Ron snapped. “I already know.”

“I was coming to tell you.” She got the words out quickly, defensively before the anger burning in his blue eyes sparked a shouting match.

“I need a drink.” He pushed himself off the wall. When she made to follow him, he shot a glare at her over his shoulder. “Stay here. I don't want mum upset more.”
Hermione stood in the snow and waited for him. She cast a warming charm to keep her hands busy. How could he know? Had Marcus told him? Surely, he wouldn't do that. Was there some sort of consummation confirmation on the marriage writs? Her cheeks burned with mortification. She would not put it past the Ministry to include something so medieval.

Ron came back with two mugs of mulled cider and thrust one into her hands. He took a gulp of his then leaned against the wall glaring at her. Hermione took a sip and swallowed politely. Molly always put in too much cinnamon but the heat of the drink was comforting.

“Ron, I didn't mean to hurt you. I know I did and I am sorry.”

“Marcus fucking Flint!” Ron spat. “You married a bloody Slytherin bastard and you didn't mean to hurt me?” He tried not to yell. He did not want anyone interrupting this.

“It was because of the Reconstruction Bill. Marcus came to me and asked for help.” Hermione began to explain but Ron cut her off.

“Why do you care? Those snobs are finally getting what they deserve, getting taken down a peg. Why do you give a damn? All they've ever done is look down their noses at you!”

“It isn't about the pure-bloods. It's the principle. The law is wrong!” Hermione stopped herself. She had not come here to argue politics. She took a long swallow of the cider then held the mug tightly. No pointing accusatory fingers if she had her hands full. “Ron, please, I came to apologise.”

“You should!” He took a deep breath. She was here. Time for some answers. “Fine, 'Mione, fine. You marry someone else, you disappear for a week with him and you swan back to grovel.”

“I didn't disappear! I told Harry where I was!” Hermione blinked, willing, demanding the threatening tears not to flow. “I told him I needed some time away.”

“Yeah, he said that's what you'd written him. Him, not me.” Ron slammed his mug down onto the wall. “And I can bloody guess why, too. Off on your bloody honeymoon, right?”

“You!” She was so furious she could not even curse him. Her breath caught in her mouth, choking off the word.

“Off spreading your legs for a snake!” Ron accused.

“Yes.” Hermione heard the word force itself out, felt her lips form the traitorous syllable and went cold.

“Bitch.” He did not even raise his voice. He did not flinch when she flung her cider in his face. The over-spiced cider he had spiked with Veritaserum.
“You want the truth?” Hermione hissed, throwing the empty mug at him. Quidditch practice made it easy for him to deflect it and she resented that she had finally seen a use for that damn fool game. “I came here to tell you! And you said you knew!”

“I knew you’d married him. Percy told me. He saw the scroll.” Ron’s chest heaved with the effort of not screaming at her. How could she? How could she betray him like this? In a deep, hidden pit in his soul, he remembered the damn locket showing him Hermione embracing another man. How ironic the cursed thing had been right all along.

“I agreed to the vile writ so he could tour. I never planned to sleep with him.” She tried, truly tried to be calm so she could explain and apologise properly. Which he had not trusted her to do so.

“Didn’t take him long to change your mind!”

“It wasn’t anything he did! I asked him to. I stripped him in the hallway!” Hermione put her hands over her mouth before she said anything else. She needed to tell him about her parents but not like this. She refused to use the funeral against him. It had been her decision to keep everyone away.

“You slag!” Any pitiful hope he had misunderstood, that it was Flint’s fault, that there was some way he could forgive her withered at her admission.

Words, angry bitter cruel words, were right there on her tongue. Hermione bit her lip hard to keep anything from escaping. She would not make this worse. She would not tell him her parents were dead. She would not tell him she had not wanted him at their funeral. Had not wanted any of her friends, any of the Order of the Phoenix there because she blamed them for not protecting her parents during the war.

It was not that the Grangers had been spurned. They simply were not a priority. So many other people were more important than two middle-aged dentists from Kent. That her parents could be so easily dismissed had stuck in her craw. No one gave a damn that her dad had got a first class Degree or that her mum had worked three jobs to put herself through university. They were just Muggles. As interesting in their way as spark plugs.

“I apologise.” Hermione spoke through her teeth, not able to do better because of the Veritaserum. Not trusting herself not to be compelled to speak more caustic truths. “I won’t bother you again.”

She Disapparated.

Ron stared at where she had been, and where she was now not. Not. There was an emptiness in her leaving that made him feel sick. It was like Fred dying. There was a space where someone should be and they were not there. He slid down the wall, ending in a crouch. He stayed there, staring at the snow until Harry found him and dragged him back to the Burrow.

The warm concern of the Weasley clan enfolded Ron protectively. Molly plied her youngest boy with hot chocolate and fussed over him while Ginny stormed through the room she shared with Hermione throwing everything that belonged to the other witch into a trunk. With a good helping of Wizard Wheezes.

Downstairs, Harry, Percy, George and Arthur held a quiet conference. Bill had stayed home with Fleur, whose morning sickness was turning into all day, all night sickness. Charlie was somewhere in Uruguay and not due back for weeks. From their collective expressions, each wizard guessed his
companions wished they too were in South America.

There was little they could do. Percy had lodged exemptions for all of the unmarried Weasleys. Those exemptions had been approved speedily. Neville's and Ernie's too, even though they were not yet of age to be subject to the Law. Everyone in the Order was nicely shielded. Why Hermione had not exempted herself, no one could guess.

“You don't suppose she actually likes Flint, do you?” George asked in the aftermath of a particularly explosive crash from upstairs. Ginny was not taking the news well.

“Don't be ridiculous.” Percy, one year behind the Slytherin, had suffered seven years of the older boy's arrogance. “He's barely literate. All he did at Hogwarts was get into fights on the pitch and grub about in the dirt. Hermione got nine NEWTs. They have nothing in common.”

“So, Imperius, then.” Harry shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Flint couldn't compel Hermione to give him the time of day.” The too-frequent dismissive tone from Percy raised hackles. Molly and Arthur had forgiven their son for his disloyalty but it was still a sensitive subject.

“A conspiracy. Wonderful.” Closing his eyes for a moment, Harry marshalled himself. “Right. Arthur, you stay here and keep Ginny from hexing anyone. Percy, head to the Ministry and find a way to contest the marriage. George, come with me. We'll go have a word with Flint.”

As they were leaving the Burrow, George caught his not quite brother-in-law's arm and had his suspicions confirmed when he noticed Harry's hands were shaking. They stood in the door way, letting the moment stretch until the Boy-Who-Lived took a deep breath.

“I don't have another war in me.” Harry said quietly to someone who would know exactly what he meant. The death of his twin had gutted George. “The Auror stuff is hard enough, but I can do that in chunks. Leave it at work. I don't want to hide.” He took his glasses off and polished them on his shirt. “If this thing with 'Mione is a reprisal... Damn it, George, is it wrong to wish she's just doing this to put off Ron?”

“It has been tense between them.” He conceded. “Ron's been pushing to get married pretty hard.” His little brother was not the most patient person. “But if I was in Hermione's shoes, it'd take more than few arguments to get me to 'I do' with a Death Eater.”

“I think so too.” Grimly, Harry replaced his glasses. “Right. We'll go to the Magpies first. If Flint isn't there, they'll know where he lives. He'll have Hermione with him. Whoever's doing this wouldn't risk her shaking off whatever they have her under.”

Scotland was as cold as charity and as grey as Azkaban. Montrose looked Dickensian, cloaked in dirty snow. There was an Apparition cordon around the stadium so Harry and George had to squelch their way on foot to the gates. Which were firmly shut and guarded by two men who looked like shaven bears.

Shaven bears who were delighted to let them in, in exchange for a photograph with the Saviour of the Wizarding World. George teased Harry about blushing, as he still had not reconciled himself to being a celebrity. As they were escorted up to the Manager's office, Harry Potter and George Weasley were relaxed, purposeful and clear-headed. That lasted about thirty seconds after they met a furious Marcus Flint.
“My new wife, my clever, war hero Gryffindor wife just Floo called me in bloody tears.” Marcus snarled at Golden Boy and a random Weasley. He and McLeod had been arguing about interviews and damned stupid public appearances when Hermione's face had appeared in the grate. “She warned me you fuckers would come after me.”

“We're here to talk, Flint. Some questions have been raised about compulsions in securing your marriage.” Harry used his best Auror voice. He'd been practising and it came out now with an undertone of menace. Flint's possessive claim of his best friend had appalled him. He did not like the implications of ownership in the brute's words.

“Bugger off.”

“We're here for Hermione's sake. We're concerned that the, um, provisions of the Law might not be clear to her.” George assayed some feeble diplomacy and tried to cue the stocky man behind the desk to intervene in the argument. The older wizard leant back in his chair, visibly doing some fast calculating. He did not however rein in his Chaser.

“And which bloody one are you? All you Weasels look alike.” Marcus kept on the attack as people were more honest when they were threatened, at least with him. He was not in the mood for Ministry verbiage.

“Son of a bitch!” Almost without thinking, George found his wand was in his hand. His hex hit Flint square in the chest, blasting the large man right over the desk and into the wall behind. Because it sure sounded like the bastard was rubbing his nose in Fred's absence.

“So the marriage is legal, then?” McLeod asked blandly, turning in his chair slightly to put a restraining hand on Marcus before he retaliated. “You said compulsions. You did not say objections. You did not say you were sent by the Ministry, either.”

“We hoped to deal with the matter privately.” Harry heard the unspoken threat and hedged, unwilling to back down but not wanting any more violence. Flint would press charges. One hex they could explain but not an open brawl. “We know of no reason why Hermione would agree to marry a S...stranger.”

“She hates the damn law.” Marcus picked himself up slowly, hiding any wince. Cracked ribs maybe. Skull was fine, no problems with his vision so no concussion. Arseholes. “You ask her.”

“We would, if we knew where she was!” George shouted, watching the sneaky bastard's expression closely. One twitch, one smirk and it would be on for young and old. No thrice-cursed Voldy-kissing snob would mock his family ever again.

“She and Ron talked then she just left, no word to anyone. Didn't even pick up her things.” This was not going as well as he might wish, which did not surprise him. George's hex probably had not made it any worse. Harry had to admit it would be awfully satisfying to blast Flint until he told them the truth.

“She is your friend. If she did not tell you where she is, maybe she does not want to see you.” It was not quite a sneer. Marcus kept his temper in check only because he trusted McLeod to use this situation to their best advantage. That did not mean he would not twist the knife. “She does not have to dance attendance on you any more.”
“We won’t let you keep her from us.” His hand clenched on his wand but George held himself in check. Maybe just maybe Flint did not know where Hermione was. If she had been at his family Manor, the tosser would have thrown that in their faces. “We know what you are, even if you got those troll teeth fixed.”

“Six teeth, jaw broken in two places, fractured cheek bone and a cracked skull.” Cormack McLeod listed the injuries as though intoning a litany. He pointed to the framed photograph of a cheering team, now hanging crookedly on the wall behind him. “The ’98 Championship game. Flint took a Bludger to the face. Still scored the winning goal. I know what he is too, Mr Weasley. My best Chaser, whom you assaulted.”

“Hermione...” Harry protested before the Manager cut him off.

“Madam Flint seemed genuinely concerned for her husband's well-being when she called. She was under the impression her friends would hold him responsible for the rift between herself and the youngest Mr Weasley.” McLeod spoke like a lawyer. “Which seems the case. I suggest you take your concerns to the proper authorities. As we will.”

Marcus kept silent as Potter took himself and Weasley away before either of them caved to his needling. That was a bit of a disappointment. He would have liked to bruise his knuckles on their self-righteous faces.

“I will put in a complaint to the Ministry. Find your wife, Flint. I want her standing beside you when we speak to the Prophet.” The Manager gave an outright order to his seething player. “And if you draw your wand on any of her friends, you're off the team.”

He went. He had no option not to go. McLeod always made good on his promises. Marcus went to the locker room first and had a hot shower to ease his aching side. Not worth a trip to the team Medi-wizard. Besides, a little pain helped him think better. He stood under the steaming spray and considered.

Potter had said Hermione had not taken her belongings with her. Did that include her cat? Marcus knew she had a cat because Malfoy had plotted inventive things to do to it until Bole, who had a Kneazle himself, vowed to skin him if anything happened to the orange beast. Hermione would not have left her pet behind.

She had made no mention of the cat while they were in Australia. Marcus laced his fingers behind his head, stretching his back with a grimace. So who liked Hermione and cats enough to mind her familiar? He grimaced again as the answer came to him. The old Tabby was an old tabby herself.
Quid Pro Quo

Crookshanks had the knack of all cats to sit on the exact book she required. That meant his witch had to pet him to convince him to move, which she did. Sometimes she paused in her research to cuddle him or cry into his fur. Then he sat on another book and waited for her to need it.

Hermione had not felt this miserably isolated since first year. That this was all her fault made her feel even worse. What had she been thinking?

Nothing.

That was the problem. She had been blind-sided just like her parents and all the buried resentment and little hurts had come bubbling up. Things she had thought she had put behind her had clawed back into her head. Being the third wheel, the sexless encyclopaedia, good ole 'Mione or worse Ron's Oedipal Molly substitute.

Perhaps she should have given herself more time before throwing herself into NEWTs. She had pushed all the trauma to the back of her mind so she could win her own private victory. So she would have a parchment to show the whole damn world irrefutably that she belonged.

Except that she didn't.
Not really.

Not in the despised underclass sort of way but as a migrant. Hermione had worn short sleeves all summer to show off the scar. To reclaim it. The bitch who had carved that hateful word into her arm was dead leaving her feeling robbed that she had not killed Bellatrix herself. Yet she was still foreign.

Ron's expectations of their life together had driven that home. It was perfectly normal for witches to marry young and try to bang out as many children as they could then to just plod along doing the same thing for a century. Social change in the wizarding world made plate tectonics look hasty.

None of that was 'normal' for her. She was only twenty-one even with the Time-Turner. Her mum and dad had not even met when they were her age. They did not have her until they were in their thirties with a business running smoothly and a house kitted out. They liked Ron well enough but she had been looking forward to having their support in putting off getting married.

But they were gone and she was Mrs Flint.

Hermione rested her head against one of the stack of books crenelating the table. She had not done many stupid things she could not attribute to the influence of Harry and Ron. But this stupid stupid thing was all her own doing. And she had taken him to bed. Practically dragged him there. Did sleeping with two men qualify her as a slut? Was there some sort of minimum penile contact requirement?

She did not start sobbing in hysterical laughter because she was in the Library and Madam Pince would not be amused. Crookshanks butted his head against her chin, his lambent eyes quizzical.

"Mummy has done something horrible, Crooks. I was a coward." She should have told Ron more firmly she wanted to wait. Except that she repeatedly had. But Ron took 'waiting' as 'waiting for something' so she had to keep finding excuses. Her NEWTs, her parents' memories, his Auror training... he would not leave her alone about their wedding.
Well, she had solved that problem good and proper now. Hermione sniffed, rummaging in her pockets for a handkerchief as her eyes swam. Stupid cruel craven bitch.

Crookshanks yowled a warning as someone approached. She hastily mopped her face and turned back to reading so she would not be disturbed. Minerva had kindly allowed her to use the Hogwarts library to search for ammunition, though she had not phrased it that way. Feelings about the amended Reconstruction Bill were mixed amongst the Hogwarts staff but the Headmistress’s sense of fairness had been offended by the implicit coercion.

As the daughter of a witch and a Muggle, Minerva did not as cavalierly dismiss the inherent difficulties of a mixed marriage as the Ministry did. She had said as much when Hermione had come to her for help. Her former Head of House had offered the library, tea and sympathy.

“Find anything?” Marcus asked his wife quietly to avoid the wrath of the pinch-faced shrew who lurked amongst the shelves. Pince had few favourites among the students, and he had assuredly not been one of them.

“Not yet.” Hermione cleared her throat with a low cough to mask the hoarseness of her voice. She indicated the ranks of books. “Most of these are to confirm the references cited in the amendment. I did not expect anything to be in error but it pays to check.”

Marcus regarded the tomes with the residual loathing of a poor student. Crookshanks hopped up onto one of the taller stacks to study him, fluffing himself up to make himself look bigger. He did not like sharing his witch and the other male was standing too close.

Meeting the cat’s eyes, Marcus put his hand palm down on the stack next to the marmalade. Crookshanks stretched and sniffed his fingers then jumped across to walk over his hand. With pointedly sharp claws. The wizard did not shift his gaze from the half-Kneazle.

“Crooks, leave him alone.” Hermione chided her familiar, who gave her a lazy look of non-compliance before scrambling up Marcus's arm to sit on his shoulder. “You look like you have eaten the parrot.” She informed the cat as she tried not to smile. Crookshanks sat up very straight so he was taller than his new scratching post.

“What parrot?” He let the animal have his show of dominance, hiding a grin.

“It's a Muggle reference.” She expected that to be enough but his steady stare prompted more information. “Pirates are commonly depicted with a parrot on their shoulder. It is hardly accurate but the image persists.”

“One of my ancestors was a corsair.” As a child, Marcus had delighted in the tales of the blood-thirsty adventures of his great-something grandfather and his ghostly ship crewed by Inferi. “Did well for himself, burned a few ports and retired to the Manor with a dragon's weight in treasure.”

“One of my ancestors arrived in England with the clothes she wore and a handbag. She had to share a winter coat with her cousin.” Hermione was not impressed by Galleons. “Why are you here?” That sounded ruder than she meant. “I mean, for what reason have you come to this place?”

“You.” There was no room to sit at the table so he leant against a bookcase, twisting slightly to avoid pinning the cat's tail. Crookshanks bit his ear but Marcus did not take it personally. Bole's Kneazle had used to steal his socks. While he was wearing them. His toes still had scars. “Potter and a Weasley came to the clubhouse.”

“Which Weasley?” Hermione closed the book in front of her and studied Marcus. He made a face
when he shrugged. Long experience of boys injuring themselves prompted her to raise an eyebrow. He feigned obliviousness.

“I do not bloody know. Never spoke to any of them much.” Marcus had put a suit on because he could not shake the need to wear a tie at Hogwarts. It had been almost six years since he had finally graduated and he still got tense. There had been some happy times and months away from his father were always good but his schooling had not been enjoyable. He did not want to be here. He met her gaze and the secondary tacit conversation they were not having continued with her crossing her arms at him.

“Bill's scarred, Percy is pompous, George looks lost and Ron would've been furious.” Hermione provided short descriptions as she watched him breathe. He could stand Crookshanks's weight on his shoulder so it was not collarbones or scapula. He could pivot so he had not jarred his spine or hips. Thus ribs, Hermione frowned.

“One of the twins.” He recalled two Weasley Beaters from the Quidditch team. They had been good, always keeping the Bludgers moving but Wood had not let them play aggressively enough. Pushing for a few more fouls would have pinned down opposing Chasers much better.

“George, then. Fred died during the final battle here.” She spoke quietly. Everyone still missed Fred. His brother seemed dimmed without him.

“Did not know that.” As the son of a Death Eater crony, Marcus had kept his head well down in the aftermath of the war. He asked no questions. None of his friends wanted to talk about it anyway.

“There was a big funeral.” Hermione heard herself speak carefully neutrally. She had given her virginity to Ron to comfort him after the ceremony, which was something she was absolutely not going to discuss with Marcus ever. “I didn't tell Ron about my parents. I couldn't, not after he'd called me... never mind.” Diverting the conversation abruptly, she pointed to his side. “You've hurt yourself.”

“It's nothing.” He said through his teeth. Not because he was in pain. He was sore but it was dull and ordinary. What got him gritting was the bone-deep urge to castigate the Weasel. No one sneered at his wife.

“And how did nothing happen?”

“Weasley got hex-happy and sent me into a wall.” Marcus would have shrugged except for the cat. “McLeod will sort it. We will make a complaint and pin his freckled arse to the floor.”

“Please, don't.” She pleaded then realised there was no earthly reason why he would oblige her. He had been assaulted. He was well within his rights to go to the Aurors. George would have to go through a hearing. Harry too possibly. Damn it.

“What will you give me if I don't?” He grinned, suddenly enjoying himself.
Cup full of Sympathy

“Episkey and my esteem.” Hermione flicked her wand at his side, mending whatever damage was troubling him. She met his gaze with a coolness she did not feel. His grin transfigured into something infuriatingly more than smug. “Nothing else.”

“You have no intrigue at all, do you?” Marcus raised a hand to stroke the cat on his shoulder and got a cautionary bite for his trouble. He chuckled at the collective defiance of witch and familiar. “You could bargain, milady. Or demand consideration as your due.”

“This isn't a Gothic novel and I've never batted my eyelashes in my life.” She did not like 'milady' or the expression on his unlovely face but it was difficult to start an argument with someone in such good humour. “I don't want Harry or George in trouble.”

“Then do a press conference with the team. McLeod expects you there.” He rubbed his bitten finger wondering when he had started getting off on women being angry with him. Maybe it was the residue of the healing spell or maybe it was the way her chest heaved as she tried to keep her temper in check.

“Now who's bargaining?” Hermione demanded sotto voce.

“Not I.” Marcus smirked. It was a pity they could not slip away to a discreet spot behind the stacks so he could persuade her to cooperate. But she would never agree to besmirching the library. So it was the high road. “Bald fact. My Manager ordered me to parade you before the Prophet. How you agree is your choice.”

“I could refuse.” That statement was a matter of form. It got a curled lip of contempt. Hermione ignored the sneer as she was considering the advantage of airing her opinion on the amendment in public. Loudly. “I could, but I won't. Providing neither you nor your team presses charges against George or Harry, I will cheerfully front the newspaper.”

“That was not so hard. A little conspiracy every day and soon you will be Minister.” He knew McLeod would not be happy with not lashing Weasley but he would hold off for the sake of a war heroine's compliance. “He will give you a statement to read.”

“I will have my own.” She swatted a hand at the ranked books. “I'll have a nice opening salvo. Do you know some of the precedents for the law go back to Roman times? Pre-Arthurian paterfamilial nonsense.” She fumed. It was salving to be angry at someone other than herself right now. “They didn't write anything so archaic into the amendment itself but the intention is there.”

“Have not read it.” Marcus admitted with a shrug. Crookshanks protested. “I'm a bad perch, I know, tiger.” He risked a hand again and this time the cat accepted a pat. “Skimmed the precis and did not hang about.”

“It isn't particularly pleasant reading on your side. Whoever drafted it took some time over tightening loopholes.” Hermione was more grim than discouraged. This would be a challenge. “We need to get a team together to work on strategy. I need to talk to Harry too. I wouldn't blame him if he thinks I've run mad.”

“Fairly sure he thinks I have Imperiused you.” The scion of the House of Flint chuckled. “I do not know why I think that's funny. Irony, probably. I expect you can cast all three Unforgivable Curses.”

“I can and I have and I don't think that's at all funny.” She said heavily. “I didn't have the luxury of
innocence. I wish I didn't know the dark places in my soul but I do.” That seemed melodramatic but there was no other way of putting it. The power of a Cruciaus came from intent. “And I didn't fight the bloody war to have this fascist obscenity foisted on us.”

“Come home with me.” The gripping urge that forced the words out of him was not purely sexual. It certainly was not pure.

“I won't do that to Ron.”

“If not Flint Manor then one of our properties. There is a terrace house in London where you can stay. Alone.” Marcus turned the exchange into something about accommodation. She could not stay at Hogwarts and he was certain she would not want to stay at either of her parents' houses. He had not been able to enter his mother's suite for weeks after she had passed through the Veil.

“How much is the rent?” Hermione asked an ordinary question and got a blank look over a cultural gulf. “We're only married on paper. I'm not going to take advantage.”

“But you are prepared to give offence.” He folded his arms across his chest, telling himself she had not meant the insult. “You, Hermione, are not a tenant.” When she prepared to argue that point, he shook his head. “None of that. I do not fucking charge you to stay at my home.”

“Is the property in your name?” She avoided conceding she had not given any thought to where she would be staying. All her personal belongings were at the Burrow, assuming Ginny hadn't set them on fire by now. “I want to make it up with Ron, not show him I'm being kept like a mistress.”

“You are not my mistress.” Marcus shaped those words around his teeth. “The terrace house came with one of my great-grandmother's dowries. The deed is still in the Fawley trust.” If any of his grandfather's sisters had survived infancy, one of them would have inherited the jointure. There had not been a female heir since, though his daughters would be eligible if they married. “Discreet enough if you want it.”

“Just for a little while.” Hermione agreed then found her manners. “Thank you, Marcus. What with everything, even thinking about going somewhere is exhausting.” That got her a crisp nod, which made her feel like they had reached an accord. Crookshanks agreed, clambering down to wind himself around his witch's ankles. “Could we go now? I'm all in.”

Of course they could not simply leave. Hermione insisted on tidying away all her books and thanking Madam Pince, quietly. Their meeting with the Headmistress in her office was his wife's fault too. Marcus could have merrily gone the rest of his life without seeing the old bat again. From her tight-lipped frown, the feeling was mutual.

“Mister Flint.” The greeting was cold. The barely civil offer of a seat was refused politely by Hermione on his behalf.

“We won't take up any more of your time, thank you.” The witch stepped in front of him as though her diminutive self could shield him from the Scot. “Though with your permission, I would like to use the library further. This is going to take a lot of unravelling.”

“Certainly, Miss Granger. I will inform Irma and arrange a study for you. Do let me know if there is anything else you need.” McGonagall was positively effusive, something Marcus had never heard before but his surprise did not stop him from correcting her mistake.

“Madam Flint.” He said stonily. “Not Miss Granger.”

The ambience in the office chilled as though a Dementor had appeared. It took all of Hermione's elan
to extract them before her mentor turned her unfortunate husband into a tea cup. She propelled him out of the office, out of the Castle and across the grounds in a frigid silence.

Since the repairs to the school were ongoing, there was a designated Apparition point near Hagrid's cabin. Enough people transited to make an awkward audience, forcing Hermione to defer the ear-bashing she intended to give Flint. As they waited for a clear moment to Apparate, she was distracted by a shout.

“HERMIONE!”

She turned in time to see Hagrid cast his wheelbarrow aside and stomp over to them. The groundskeeper engulfed her in a warm hug, lifting her off the ground and twirling her like a little girl. When he set her back down again, she could not help but smile albeit dizzily.

“How are you, Marcus? Did you get the dung?” Hagrid slapped him on the back as he pumped his hand. The half-giant was the only person the Flint heir could shake hands with without feeling like he would crush their fingers.

“I did.” Marcus confirmed his receipt of several barrows worth of Thestral manure. He had never received a more noisome Yule gift but it was second to none in the garden. “The boots suit.”

“Aye, they do that.” He swept aside his heavy coat to show off his monstrous footwear; thick soled, heavy graphorn leather waders with brass buckles. “And the socks you made for me fit in ’em a treat, Hermione.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” The witch admired the hard-wearing boots. They had that air of understated quality that cost real money and they looked tough enough to kick in doors by themselves. “Hagrid, if you see Harry or Ron, would you tell them I'd like to speak with them, please?” She bit her lip. “We had a fight.”

“O' course, I will. Don't fret.” The half-giant patted her on the shoulder consolingly. “It'll all come right, you'll see.”
An hour later in Devon, the silence grew. It ran deep, ran dark, became almost a living thing no one at the kitchen table dared touch. Percy, whose words had birthed the monstrous silence, broke first and cleared his throat.

“Any questions?” His voice seemed unnaturally loud and querulous. He shuffled the papers he had brought home then protested when Ginny took them out of his hands to read herself.

“She did. She really truly did.” The witch spat after a few moments, slapping the embossed parchment onto the table. “She fucked him.”

“Language, Ginny!” Arthur and Molly scolded simultaneously though their hearts were not in it. Mrs Weasley looked furious. Mr Weasley looked ill. Both of them looked to Harry.

“If we can't appeal the marriage due to consummation then we can't.” He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. Why was he in charge again? When did the Chosen One get to shrug and walk away from a problem? Not today evidently, with six redheads looking to him for guidance. Glasses back on. “I'll talk to Hermione myself.”

“Not sorry about knocking that toe-rag into the wall.” George grumbled to his tea. His father patted him on the shoulder. There would be an investigation but they had weathered far, far worse.

“Next time don't do it in front of a witness.” Ginny hissed. Hermione was her bridesmaid! The tart had been so involved in planning the wedding that the redhead couldn't look at the unsent invitations without swearing.

“Ginny!” The collective protest from her brothers and parents was more firm this time. The young witch shoved her chair back from the table but she was cut off from her rant by the arrival of an owl. It landed on the table, dropped the ragged scroll it carried in front of Harry, hopped around, knocked over the teapot then bit Percy.

“Definitely Errol's son.” Bill gently picked up the disorientated bird and took him into the kitchen for an owl treat. Harry shook the letter dry as Molly mopped up the tea.

“It's from Hagrid.” He told them then read his big friend's sprawling script with an increasing frown. “Hermione and Flint were at Hogwarts.” His blushing bride muttered an obscenity. “He says they looked friendly but Hermione was upset about fighting with me and Ron.”

“If she hasn't been cursed, I'll not have her back in this house.” Molly wrung out the tea towel vengefully. “After all the three of you've been through, Ron deserves more than this. That Flint boy is no better than his father, and he went to Azkaban.”

“I'll talk to her.” Harry tried to reassure but was muted by a glare from Ginny. “I know you're angry but Hermione is one of my best friends. I'm not going to leave it like this. Ron and I deserve an explanation.”

“It doesn't matter, mate.” The weary voice came from the stairs. Ron's eyes were almost as red as his hair. He had washed his face and mopped up and had changed into a crisp shirt. “I don't want to think about it. It's Saturday night. Let's go out.”

“Sure, Ron, sure.” George rallied quickly to jolly his brother along. “The Leaky's got an all-you-can-swill unknown beer week going. Bound to be a bit of a laugh, right?”
“You don't care what she's doing?” The question was diffident. Harry wanted confirmation Ron was giving up on his relationship with their friend.

“Probably shacked up at that wanker's mansion eating off gold plate.” He jeered. “I need a drink, and my drink needs a lot of friends.”

Meanwhile in Knightsbridge, Hermione stood in front of what Marcus had specifically called a terrace house. Being a suburbanite, she had a good idea of what a terrace should look like. They did vary depending on the vintage. Flint's house was rather more vintage than she had expected.

“Marcus.” She began in a careful, calm voice. “This is an excellent example of the culture shock Muggle-Born witches and wizards encounter.” Hermione gestured at the pillared frontage of the Georgian mansion. The architectural gem sat between sibling buildings converted into luxury flats. “This is not a terrace house. It's a London residence for Regency nobility during the Season a la Georgette Heyer.”

“It is in a terrace.” Marcus asserted bluntly.

“I can't stay here. It should be a Listed building!” Her voice rose and she hurriedly hushed herself, looking around the posh street. There were a few people strolling self-consciously fashionably but no one was paying them any attention.

“Listed by whom?” He did get her point about culture shock. It was as though they were speaking different languages. Mostly it was her speaking Gobbledegook.

“English Heritage.” Hermione answered the question then asked herself one. Was this the argument she wanted to have with him? It was not. “Why were you so rude to Professor McGonagall? As soon as you stepped into her office, you were hostile. That 'Madam Flint' comment got right up my nose.”

“She has it in for me. Has for years.”

“Because you come across as a violent bully, which you were in school.” It struck her as incongruous that she was quarrelling in the street while holding a cat. Where was that normal she craved so much? “Minerva did not say an unkind thing about you when she and I spoke. The worst you got was 'unfortunate'.”

“Damning with faint praise.” Marcus smirked. The harridan could flay with an acerbic glance. “You are Madam Flint. To refer to you otherwise is a slap in my face. Solely paper or not.”

“So you stood on your dignity, looked like an ass, and I will have to apologise for your crassness!” Hermione snapped, suffering deja vu. This was so like a fight she'd had with Ron she had to pause to marvel. “Is this another pure-blood thing?”

“Yes!”

“It's bloody annoying!” But they could use it. The individual, personal insult of a disrespected spouse would be a humanising aspect to their objections. She made a mental note of it as she had an armful of Crookshanks. “Don't do it again. I know who I am. The whole damn magical world knows it.”

“Then what is the sodding problem with the house?” Marcus stabbed an angry finger at the white frontage. “It is not that large.”
“It doesn’t have to be big to be horrendously inappropriate.” Hermione jerked her head in the
direction of one of the converted neighbouring buildings. “A flat there, a small one, costs thousands
of pounds a week to rent. You could buy a home in the suburbs with the property tax on your
‘terrace house’. It’s so far beyond that is reasonable that it could be on another planet.”

“Your Weasel's penury does not mean you need to slum too.” He had a vague idea of the exchange
rate Galleon to Pound but he did not bother with the mental arithmetic. Only Muggle-borns caring
what things cost. Real wizards got the best and kept it.

“This isn’t about Ron!” She shouted loudly enough for whatever obscuration charms on the Flint
building to shiver. A man across the street looked in their direction for a moment before walking on.

“Where will you stay?” He demanded, irritated that she had snubbed his house. Weasleys might
allow themselves to live in a hovel. Flints did not.

“I'm going to find a nice impersonal Muggle hotel that takes pets.” Hermione was bone weary but
she refused to back down. When Marcus protested, she simply Disapparated. End of discussion.
All Sorts

Ron had a pint in front of him. It was only half empty. Unfortunately, it had been a very friendly pint and had brought along several of its friends. He had lost count when the shot glasses had joined the party. His brothers, Harry included, had come with him to the Leaky Cauldron but had steadily excused themselves as the night dragged on. Only George and Harry were still there.

“I think they went to the loo. Not together, I mean. Unless guys can do that now.” He remarked to the witch who kept giving him bowls of little nubbly things. They were quite good, properly crunchy. “Your eyes are very blue, you know.”

“I know, Ron.” The blonde smiled gently then hurried along the bar to pull a pint for another customer. It was a busy night. Puzzled but pleased to be recognised, Ron watched her go. She had long legs and a short skirt. He was sure he knew her but the friendly beer made it difficult to think.

Except about Hermione.

He could think all he didn't like about Hermione.

With Marcus bloody Flint, the Quidditch star.

Montrose had finished third last year only because they'd had such trouble with Maddock. They had a good chance for the championship again, the bastards.

Ron decided he hated them too. For playing with Flint.

Like Hermione was, probably right now.

Bitch.
Whore.
Slag.

Ron stared morosely at his beer, not feeling the best of chums with it any more. What had he done wrong? He would've married her right after the battle, right there in Hogwarts with the fires still burning. He knew she was the girl for him.

“I just want to settle down, you know? Everything back the way it should be, right?” He asked his pint and the blonde appeared again.

“It'll be alright.” She put a hand on his, offering another bowl of snacks. Hannah had been plying him with food to keep him from getting as stinking drunk as he obviously intended. No one wanted him to make a spectacle of himself. “Have something to eat. You've had quite a bit to drink.”

“How do you know?” Ron asked, petulantly. How did she know it would all be right?

“I've been serving you drinks for hours, Ron.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, 'course.” He looked at the witch again. She was smiling at him. That was nice. Hermione seemed to have forgotten how to do that, like smiling wasn't on her To Do list. With all the other things more important than he was. “The beer's forgotten your name.”

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“Hannah.” Hannah Abbott said kindly, unsurprised. Other than Lavender and Hermione, Ron had never really looked at the girls in their year. “I think you and the beer should go home now.”
Sending customers away early would get her in trouble with Tom but Ron was miserable.

“I don't want to go home. She won't be there. She's with Flint in his fancy house fully of flinty things.” Ron scowled. That hadn't come out quite right. Flinty? Did he mean fancy? “Yeah, fancy.” He nodded to himself then noticed her covertly trying to take his glass away. “Fancy a drink?”

“I work here.” She spotted Harry winding his way through the crowd, trying not to be rude avoiding people wanting to shake his hand. People still did that to all the DA. Even to her. It was a little creepy.

“No, I mean not here. Later. Somewhere nice. You're a nice girl.” Ron patted her hand like she had patted his. “I'm not drunk, you know.” He said with dignity. “I, Ron, would like to take you, Hannah, for a nice drink somewhere nice.” Tightening his grip on his pint glass, he nodded to the beer. “And I won't leave until you say yes.”

“Harry.” Hannah conveyed a lot in one word and a tilt of her head. Harry nodded.

“Come on, Ron. Let's get you home. Your mum will be worried.” He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. “George is throwing up out the back. I'll return for him once I get you to the Burrow.”

“Don't want to.” Ron hunched stubbornly over the bar. “Not going. I asked pretty Hannah out on a date. I can do that now. A pretty date with a girl.” He frowned at his beer. It was making him get things wrong again. And it had been so friendly earlier. “What's in this?”

“Everything.” The barmaid grimaced. Tom hated wasting the dregs when he changed the kegs so he had taken to tipping them into a barrel for later. Once he had filled the barrel, it was 'unknown beer' time. She had to be careful not to go into the cellar with a naked flame.

“S'bloody good.” He knocked back the last of his pint then put the glass down carefully. “Please say yes, Hannah.” Ron tried to clasp her hand in his and missed, scattering nibbles across the bar. “Sorry. So sorry.” He sniffed. The blonde witch surrendered.

“Yes, Ron. I'll go out with you. Somewhere nice, later.” She added her hand to Harry's on his shoulder and gave a small shove, just enough to nudge Ron off the bar stool. He stumbled to his feet then bowed shakily.

“I will send a chariot for you, princess.” Ron declared then let Harry steer him to the door. “See, over her already.” He said in a mumble as they stepped out into the cold. “Asked out someone. Fancy free, me. And she married a troll. Ha ha to her.”

“Yes, Ron.” Harry walked him through the snow covered street, relieved his friend could still walk upright. Molly would not be pleased if he had to levitate two of her sons home in the same night.

“Why doesn't she love me, Harry?” Ron kicked at the snow. “I love her. We're supposed to be together. It's like fate. You and Ginny, me and Hermione. Like a prophesy.”

“Rather over prophesies, myself.” The Chosen One drew his wand and Apparated them to the Burrow. “More trouble than they're worth.”
Hermione had expected to sleep badly, lying restlessly tormented. She did not. As soon as she reached the bed in the anonymous single room and closed her eyes, she was unconscious. It had been a long, fraught day. No qualms intruded until the morning when Crookshanks woke her with a myriad of complaints. Although she had made arrangements for him before she had collapsed into slumber, he was not happy.

“Am I a bad person?” Hermione asked her familiar as she transfigured the armchair cushions more to his liking while she investigated the mini-bar. Outrageously priced boutique snacks did not appeal. The virtues of quinoa eluded her. She sat on the floor feeling wretchedly unencumbered.

“Crooks, I'm so relieved.” The witch started to sob great snotty tears that defied tissues. So relieved Ron would not keep pressuring her to marry him. There was so much more she wanted to do, wanted to experience before shackling herself to a stove. She wanted a career. She wanted to change the world. She wanted to do something sensible.

“I screwed that up, didn't I?” Hermione choked, trying to blow her nose and stop crying. It ended messily. “I should've done something smarter. But he wouldn't listen and now I've hurt him. I never meant to hurt him. I love him.” She cried harder because the bond she had with Ron, a bond she cherished, she feared she had broken because she did not have the words to help him understand.

To explain that she loved him and wanted him in her life, wanted to be with him and share with him but that he would never be her whole world. That he suffocated her when he pushed for more. She didn't have any more. The war had taken so much from her she could not give him what he craved.

“I never meant to hurt him, I swear I didn't.” The soulless hotel room gave her no answers. It was at least quiet, excepting the traffic noise outside and her own abject tears. “I should have been honest.”

Those words lingered. She had been honest. She had asked for more time. She had tried to compromise. She had gone away, insisted on finishing at Hogwarts. On recovering her parents. But Ron needed more.

And she did not have it.

Hermione hoped she would have it someday. That when she had caught her breath and found her footing that she would be able to be the wife he wanted. She hoped. She did not quite believe. That worry was an old one. It had seeped in long before she and Ron had dated. It had in fact started as soon as the three of them had become friends. The worry that she would be forever their mother.

She did not want to be a caretaker. She did not want that obligation weighing her down for the rest of her life. That somehow because she was part of the Trio she had to be the responsible one.

Well, sleeping with Marcus had hardly been responsible. Hermione was immensely reassured she had at least been coherent enough to use contraception. Having that complication add to the maelstrom would have just been the end. Stupid stupid stupid.

And selfish. She had to admit that to herself. All her choices had been made for her own benefit.

Which she did not regret.

That made her feel even worse. The witch cried, alone with the realisation that she felt no remorse over keeping the funeral to herself. To protect her parents one last time from the pandemonium they
had never wanted. They would not be lessened by being mundane. Their death rites would not be novelties to be marvelled over by the enlightened. They would not be foreign in their own world, like she was.

That she had betrayed Ron, she did rue. She had slept with another man without the common decency of ending her relationship. That was not kind and certainly not honourable. Ron had every right to be furious with her.

But he should not have drugged her cider.

He should have trusted her. She had made a mistake and had told him about it immediately and had been prepared to take whatever he had thrown at her. Because in reaching for Marcus, who expected nothing of her, she could see how little she wished to remain with Ron right now.

Hindsight told her now she should have ended it rather than drag it out trying to placate him. She should have had the backbone to say she did not have what he needed. In trying to avoid the cruelty of rejecting him outright, she had wounded him even deeper. He would be right never to forgive her for that.

Hermione gave up on tissues and took herself into the bathroom for a hot shower. She washed everything. Scrubbed everything. Then she took herself downstairs to the hotel salon and had a chatty woman cut her hair. It was an act of contrition, like a collaborator being shorn.

The pixie cut let the cold winter breeze chill her scalp. The bite gave her a little clarity. She had transgressed. But there was atonement. She could remedy something for someone at least. Hermione collected her cat, checked out and went to her parents' house.

She did not want to be there. The memories weighed her down, sapping her resolve. But this was where she needed to be. She cleaned up as she had intended to do before the Ministry owl. She made beef stroganoff because damn it she had bought gourmet field mushrooms and refused to throw them out. She wrote letters.

She answered the door when Harry came in response to her owl. That was when Hermione found herself winding down. The resolution that had motivated her drained suddenly when she met his steady gaze.

“Tea?” It was a feeble ritual but it gave her a little time to collect herself.

“Thank you, yes.” Harry could still taste the suspicious beer from last night. Neither Ron nor George had emerged from their beds for breakfast. Molly had taken lunch up to their rooms but it had done little to tempt them. “I want to understand, ’Mione.”

“I know you do. I wish I could explain this better. It wasn't something I planned. It just happened and I feel as dumb as that sounds.” Hermione fussed with cups, saucers and tea bags. “But I did this to myself. Marcus told me you and George confronted him. He isn't at fault. I am.”

“He's an arsehole.” He petted Crookshanks as the cat took an interest in what they were doing.

“Not to me.” She took a deep breath. “I went to Australia to see my parents. They had been in an accident. A serious accident.” Hermione had to pause for breath again when grief choked her. “A drunk driver killed them. My dad on impact. My mum died in the hospital.”

“For Hell's sake!” Harry jumped up from his seat at the counter. He caught himself and went to her, offering a hug and giving it when she accepted. Carefully not saying the first things that came into his mind, he found something he could say. “I'm sorry.”
“I couldn't tell you. I couldn't write it down. I didn't want it to be real.” Hermione clung to him and shook, fighting not to cry. She could do this. She was strong. Harry deserved an explanation. “That's why I stayed away. Not for a honeymoon, like Ron said. God, Harry, he put Veritaserum in my drink.”

“Flint did?” There seemed to be a step missing from the conversation. Harry felt her shake her head against his shoulder. “Ron did?” This got a nod. “Right.” That did not help much. “When?”

“When I came to tell him I'd been unfaithful. After the funeral.” Hermione swallowed and broke away to pour then gulp her tea, cooling it with a charm so she could drink. “I told him right away. I didn't lie. I didn't want to keep it from him. But I couldn't explain with the truth potion in me. I was upset.”

“Hermione.” Harry assembled some very tactful words. “I think that everyone is upset right now.” That was an understatement. “I brought your things. You should probably check them for surprises.” Ginny was still hexing gnomes in the garden, calling each of them by their friend's name. “We would have been there for you. You didn't need to shut us out.”

“I did. Don't you see?” Hermione put her cup down slowly, not wanting to chip it. Calm explanation. No shouting or crying. Calm. Try to rationalise. “No one gave a damn about my parents. They never said so, but it was there. I had to send them away. Me. The Order should've fallen over themselves to help, but they didn't.” She caught him about to speak. “And don't bloody say there were a lot of people to protect. I know! We protected them. But it was just me for my parents.”

The resentment took Harry aback. Hermione had always got on with things. Soldiered on. He had relied on her and she had been there for him. That she felt she could not rely on him in return was bitter gall.

“I would've been there.” He asserted. “I would've walked on water to get there. You didn't need Flint.” A Slytherin over him! When did that make sense? Harry clenched his hands when he felt them start to tremble. “You should have told us.”

“I didn't want you there! I didn't want everyone looking at my mum and dad like they were freaks! Like they were some sort of pathetic monkey people not quite civilised!”

Harry took a step away from her anger. He had to say something. He could not just walk away and leave her there. Pulling her trunk out of his pocket, he set it down on the floor and cast finite on the shrinking charm.

“’Mione, I don't want to argue with you right now.” But there would be an argument later. By Merlin, there would be a fiendfyre hot quarrel about this. “I am sorry about your parents. I am here for you. But not here right now. I think I need a little time to get my head around everything you've said.” Hopefully Ginny had left some gnomes for him.
a Serpent's Eye

Marcus Apparated into the back garden of the Granger residence to avoid the notice of the neighbours. He stood still for a moment, breathing and letting his innards realign themselves. Brooms were so much better. He looked around at the barren yard, thinking that although painfully small it had possibilities. Someone had loved this little space enough to make an effort.

The wizard knocked on the backdoor as he considered the espalier roses. Not bad for Muggles. He hoped they there red. A good rich colour would go well with the dark brick of the house. When Hermione stopped flinching at any mention of her parents he would ask about the garden.

She answered the door in the cusp of anger and sorrow. Her face was expressive giving him fair warning not to attempt to kiss her. Marcus stepped inside, knocking the snow off his Oxfords. The witch looked him up and down seemingly surprised by his smart clothes.

“McLeod likes to remind the press his players are gentlemen.” He was wry, recalling more than one occasion where he had been bleeding into his dress shirt after a game.

“Does it have to be tonight?” Hermione tried not to sound petulant. She wanted Harry and George out of trouble but facing the Prophet right now seemed like slow torture.

“Yes.” Marcus answered flatly. That got her back up so he gave an explanation rather than bring down her simmering temper on himself. “I have skipped out on too many interviews. I hate them. So McLeod keeps me on a bloody short leash. No excuses. No rescheduling. The Prophet will print something for Monday. If we do not give it, the bastards will make something up.”

“Do you know who will be interviewing us?” She went to the sink to wash her hands. That was mostly habit as she had been levitating her belongings out of the trunk but it helped her feel tidy. Everything would need double-checking before she put it through the wash. Ginny had transfigured Whiz-bangs into all sorts of innocuous things. Hermione had never expected to have to detonate her own socks.

“Wood, probably.” The animosity between the Montrose Chaser and the former Puddlemere United Keeper was well known. Any time the Prophet wanted to jazz up their sports page, they sent Wood to the Magpies.

“Oliver? Isn't he still playing professionally?” Hermione had thrown herself so whole-heartedly into her NEWTs she was still reconnecting with her acquaintances.

“Three year ban. Bringing the game into disrepute.” Marcus did not attempt not to sound contemptuous. “The League tried to batten down all the heroes before the end of the war. Didn't work.”

“Surely those bans would've been rescinded after Tom Riddle died.” She took grim satisfaction in referring to Lord Voldemort by his given name. “There must be an Appeals process.” Marcus's smirk told her otherwise. “Feudal nonsense.”

“The League is not beholden to the Ministry, and all penalties are final. Wood and the others will be back next season. Most of the teams kept them on as Reserves. Show of solidarity and all that rot.” This time his casual sneer earned him a militant glare. Marcus met her gaze for his own pride. “They did bugger all to shield their players during the war. No points for coddling them now.”

“A Slytherin railing against hypocrisy? That's a novel attitude. Are you feeling unwell?” She had
agonised her best friend today. Verbally sparring with a schoolmate was nothing. Hermione felt no concern over her jibes until he grinned.

“Fierce and spitting mad, that is what I need, milady.” He chuckled as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Marcus put his hands over his heart in a truce gesture, showing he held no wand. “You wanted to light a fire under the Prophet. Cannot do that looking woebegone.”

Fuelled by annoyance, Hermione went upstairs and changed. She chose the navy blue suit she had bought optimistically for job interviews. Paired with a crisp white shirt, the witch thought she looked professional with her new hair cut. Finding her notes, she nodded to herself in the mirror. She would do this for her parents. She would make the world a better place.

Marcus Apparated them to the clubhouse then spent a few minutes breathing deeply looking stricken. Hermione put a hand on his arm, fearing he was going to be sick but he shook her off and straightened.

“That is why I bloody well fly.” He adjusted his black and white tie, mentally girding himself. McLeod had read him the riot act before sending him off to fetch his wife. No smirking, no sneering, no goading Wood. He would let his Manager and Hermione do the talking while he glowered in the background.

“Peppermint helps. Aids mental focus and settles the stomach. You can keep a few mints in your pocket. No one will think you odd.” Or weak. Hermione did not say that aloud, aware of how prickly wizards could get when you suggested they were not up to snuff. Marcus was sufficiently uncomfortable merely to nod.

That discomfort did not last long. It was salved by the sight of Lady Flint making Oliver ‘I've got' Wood take a step away from her as though he would hide behind his Self-Writing Quill. Marcus had stood impassively throughout the interview as McLeod did his spiel before Hermione began her crusade. Once she started laying into the Ministry and its damn stupid law, he could not help but smirk.

It was all very precise. In language that sounded polite as it hid the knives, Hermione corrected the Wizengamot on several policy points. She kept it simple as the Prophet wanted headlines not diatribes but her critique was surgical. She ended with a question: when had the Ministry decided to become pimps?

“Pimps.” Oliver said carefully.

“Forced marriage is a Human Rights violation.” Hermione cited, placid and sure. “The Wizengamot may think they are enacting an outgrowth of the arranged marriage tradition, but even formal betrothals require consent. Which is sorely lacking here. I am being kind in assuming the Ministry does not intend to facilitate sexual assault. But they are certainly bang onside prostitution.”

“Can I quote you, Mrs Flint?” He admired the witch's fire, but Oliver wanted to caution Hermione before she set herself up to be seen to be calling herself a whore in print.

“Certainly.” Her tone was cool. She had planned for that allegation. “My husband had to sell himself to tour with his team.” A quick glance at McLeod cued the Manager into a protest on behalf of the Magpies and the League at large. Hermione was not the only one who had come prepared.

After Wood had left with a flea in his ear, Marcus pulled off his tie and accepted a glass of Firewhisky. He raised his drink in a toast, quoting the Sorting Hat. “Their daring, nerve and chivalry set Gryffindors apart.”
“Thanks.” Hermione took a sip of her drink to sedate her racing pulse. As public speaking went, she had faced larger audiences as Head Girl but the prospect of being heard by the literate population of wizarding Britain was daunting. “We’ll need to keep up the pressure. I don’t want to be the only one shouting into the wind.”

“Trust me, Madam Flint, you will not be alone.” Cormack McLeod lifted his glass to her and considered privately that whatever whim of Fate had gifted the witch to Flint, his Chaser did not deserve it. The eloquent Miss Granger would be very useful for as long as Flint could keep his temper in check. After that, well, there were a great many players coming back into the League next year. Keeping in the witch’s good graces was suddenly a priority at Montrose.
Ron had never liked Mondays. They were expectant and pushy. But he wanted to be an Auror so much for so many reasons that he dragged himself out of bed. He washed, ate, left, and trained. Feeling half alive, a sensation no amount of Pepper-Up would diminish. He ate lunch because Harry insisted but sent Hannah an owl for himself.

She was a nice girl. That understanding had stayed with him drunk and hung-over and sober. Hufflepuffs were loyal. That was one of their prides. They wouldn't go slagging around with Championship Quidditch players as though she wanted to rub his nose in it. Pure-blood Sacred Twenty-Eight only son and rich, like she had a bloody check-list to find someone better than him.

Ron hexed the stuffing out of two training dummies before he could think straight again. Probably too soon to start dating. He needed to clear his head. But he'd sent the owl. He couldn't just send another one 'sorry changed my mind'. Hannah didn't deserve that.

When the trainees finished for the day, they went in a group to the Leaky Cauldron because it was cheap and they were on apprentice wages. Ron let Neville order for him. He stewed at the table thinking himself a wuss until his classmate started flirting clumsily with Hannah.

Ron was not much for introspection. He found himself at the bar before he realised he really did not want Neville talking to the pretty blonde before he'd had a chance to explain.

“Um.” The wizard heard himself, knew his ears were going red then decided he did not want to sound like a fool. So think of something. “We still good for the weekend, Hannah? If you've changed your mind, that's alright.” Bloody hell, now he sounded Confounded. “Sorry to interrupt. Your round, Neville.”

Both wizards looked at the witch, both awkward and not wanting to seem a cad by snubbing a friend over a girl. Hannah's smile let them off the hook. She poured a butterbeer for each of them.

“The Prismatic Dragon is having an wine and cheese tasting this Friday. I would quite like to go, and if both of you go with me, you can give me your opinions on the food.” Hannah suggested, reckoning that brie would be a good chaperone. She liked both Ron and Neville, did not want to play them off each other, and the food would fill any gaps in conversation.

Neville looked at Ron. Ron looked at Neville. They came to an accord. No one was stepping on anyone's toes if they went to a cocktail lounge together. Plus the Prism was the place to go if you wanted to brag about it at work. Proper London posh.

Tuesday went in a blur. Wednesday dragged. Ron found himself wanting to talk to Hermione about some ward problem then realised she would not be at the Burrow when he got off work. He lay in his bed in his tiny room in the trainees' flat staring at the off-white ceiling. Hermione would not give a damn about his ward problem. She was Mrs Flint. Probably picking out curtains right now.

Unless she was staring at Flint's bedroom ceiling.

Shite.

Ron got up because he was not going to cry over her. He was going to go to the Burrow and eat his mum's shepherd's pie. He would listen to Ginny complain about try-outs and Percy drone on about regulations or something. Instead of going directly, he stopped at Diagon Alley and bought a tub of his dad's favourite ice cream. Because family mattered.
Thursday was a bit better. He trained. He chatted to his mates. He managed the whole 'getting over it' bit until he saw Malfoy's ferret arse loitering at the Ministry with a bunch of other snakes. They looked right put out. Good. Ron made sure to grin as he strode past. He would have made a rude gesture except he'd promised his mum to keep a lid on his temper.

Friday saw him on the floor during duelling practice. The new restraint spells were a challenge. He wasn't the only one bowled over like a nine pin. But he held his ground and his shield and got Dean with a tendriculos hex that needed three wizards to undo.

So, Ron told himself in the bathroom mirror, he could face fancy drinks and runny cheese. No moping in his bed feeling like a failure. He was very nearly an Auror. He used all the grooming charms he knew and found some clean trousers. Ginny had been so pleased that he was going out she had bought him a blue waistcoat she assured him was very fashionable.

The door-beast at the Prismatic Dragon did not seem to agree about the waistcoat. There was a distinct sniff as he walked in. Hannah was already there and Neville due any minute so Ron got himself a drink and joined the witch at her table.

“I should've worn something bright. People keep mistaking me for a waitress.” Hannah smiled, nodding at his outfit. The blue brought out the colour of his eyes. She was wearing her best dress, a little black number, and felt shabby. “Some of the handbags cost more than my rent.”

“We don't have to stay if you're uncomfortable.” Ron said politely. He had left a lot of events early due to Hermione's dislike of parties. He was surprised when Hannah simply shrugged.

“I don't mind. Most of the bags are ugly.” She tossed her hair in a playful, dismissive gesture. It had taken her hours to get rid of the beer odour. Hannah promised herself her next job would not leave her smelling like a distillery. “How was your day?”

“Good.” He answered shortly then flushed at her sympathetic look. “Sorry.” He groaned at himself. No moping. Nice, pretty girl and good booze. Don't be a prat.

“We were learning the advanced arrest hexes. All the Ministry approved take-downs. It went well.”

“Your sister owled me twice to make sure you had a fun night.” Hannah was not sure she should tell Ron but guessed if he found out some other way, he would think that she had gone out with him out of pity. “So, do you want to try a few of the silly cocktails or elbow our way into the reception room for the cheese?”

“Cheese. Definitely cheese.” Ron vowed to have it out with Ginny for interfering. He might have left then however Neville arrived at that moment so he couldn't retreat without it looking like he was conceding the field. They talked about work some more and Quidditch. Hannah was mad for the Caerphilly Catapults, which got her into a friendly argument over bumphing with Chuddley Ron and Wimbourne Neville.

Biased referees and suspect fouls got them comfortably through the first cocktail and into the wine tasting. The Prismatic Dragon had several private rooms for VIP events. One of which was given over to the lavish spread of nibbles and self-satisfied alcohol. Another was an exclusive party. As he sampled some Belgian cheese with a name like a spelling mistake, Ron noticed a lot of baddies slithering into that room.

Both Carrow twins, a Yaxley, three Rosiers and a brief glimpse of white pale hair that had to be Malfoy. Trainee Auror Weasley took his companions aside to share his concerns. All three of them were DA. Some things never left you. Ron kept an eye on the door while Neville found a fireplace and Hannah tried to wheedle some information out of the barman.
A amiably curvy blonde could do a lot of wheedling. Her intel did not make Ron feel any better though. They sauntered over to the Sauternes table in the corner to cover their discussion. Hannah was good at reading people and she was sure the bar staff were falling over themselves to bring drinks to the VIP room. Whoever was there was spending hand over fist.

“The owners have opened the executive floo. One of the cocktail waitresses said the room was booked as a birthday party. Specifically as a 'private family event' to conform with the Ministry house arrest and probation rules.” Hannah’s affable demeanour faltered. “Not enough to let the real bastards attend but I know that Pansy Parkinson is in there.”

“Can we get in?” Ron thought about borrowing Harry's cloak but Kingsley had been rather firm on them not using it, at least until they were Aurors. A Notice-Me-Not would not be enough. Someone in such a large group would spot something. No time to Polyjuice. “We can disguise ourselves as waiters. We need to find out what those bastards are up to.”

“It really is a birthday party.” Neville padded up to them with surprising stealth for such a tall man. He had a small tray of crackers he had caught as it floated past. “A friend at the Permits Office confirmed it. Lucian Bole's twenty-third. The paperwork is properly signed off. He even submitted a guest list.” He waited until Ron swallowed his mouthful as he did not want to be sprayed with masticated biscotti. “Hermione's on it.”
One of the upsides of spending a year on the run from fanatics was it gave a marvellous perspective on misery. Hermione knew she had endured worse weeks than this one. Quite a few, in fact. She might be wretchedly forlorn but she was not in any physical danger. She had food on the table and a roof over her head.

Quite a nice roof, if she were honest. Marcus had used Crookshanks and an almost-apology to convince her to look at another of his family's properties. It was a Victorian-era flat in Maida Vale. Small but crisp, and filled with bookshelves. His scholarly great-uncle had used it as a refuge from his relatives. He had only two interests beyond literature judging from the décor; maps and cushions.

The little apartment reminded Hermione of her grandfather's study. The only thing missing was the smell of pipe tobacco. Crookshanks had hidden under one of the leather couches and had refused to come out. When Marcus had moved the couch so she could retrieve him, the half-kneazle had sped away to hide under the bed in the spare room.

So she had agreed to stay there, if only until she could bear being in her parents' house without them. Moving in had been quick, unfortunately. The speed of the shift had left her time to fret. About her mother and father and Ron and Harry. There was only so much research she could do before she needed a solicitor.

Which the Flint family had, naturally. That got things moving. By Thursday, she had something to take to the Ministry. The difficulty was she could easily win herself an exemption and have the Wizengamot dismiss her objections out of hand. A class action was necessary.

Which was how she found herself at a party so Slytherin the invitations should have been in Parseltongue.

Initially, Marcus had handed her his address book and gone to Quidditch practice. After owling the people in it she knew from Hogwarts, she had hit the first snag. They could not freely congregate in groups larger than three due to the provisions of their paroles except for very specific circumstances. Which had to be verified by the Ministry.

That had caused some spousal swearing. Hermione had listened involuntarily impressed to the rant. Marcus had quite an extensive vocabulary of invective. What he did not have was any contacts at the Ministry. The Flint seat in the Wizengamot had sat in abeyance since his father's return from Azkaban almost fifteen years ago.

Out of the country during the war, Marcus had not claimed the seat after he had reached adulthood at seventeen. Once he had returned to Britain, he had simply ignored the Wizengamot's owls. When Hermione had asked how he could do that, he had conceded it had taken a bit of effort.

Finding an excuse compliant with the parole requirements had fallen to her. Marcus was quite happy to run errands, shout at people and fend off Howlers but he appeared allergic to correspondence. Hermione sent owls, received owls and conspired.

The end result was a lavish birthday for Lucian Bole, who had spent the war blamelessly and ostentatiously in New York with his mother's family. The Cowells had threatened to disinherit him if he joined what they termed the 'idealist's war'. So he was clean as far as the Ministry was concerned.

The Slytherin Beater had agreed to hosting the Polyjuiced conference biddably at the request of his
former Captain. His only stipulation was an open bar. Hermione had frowned at that, she wanted to coordinate a legal action not a bacchanal, but Marcus had agreed. He soothed her by explaining Bole could only hold one idea in his head at once. He was not their target.

They needed Theo Nott, Alun Rosier and Leota Yaxley, who were smart and stable. Marcus briefed her on all the invitees, rattling details off the top of his head while she took notes. Nott she knew from school but Rosier had gone to Beauxbatons and Yaxley to Durmstrang. Everyone else was weight for the appeal.

Thus Hermione found herself in heels and a new cocktail frock discussing caveats with the son of a Death Eater, the nephew of a Death Eater and the niece of a Death Eater. Nott would not meet her eyes but Rosier and Leota were all business.

“Forty if he was a day!” Pansy Parkinson’s acid voice interrupted the strategy meeting in the corner. Hermione turned to see an already sloshed witch hanging off her quasi-husband's muscular arm. He looked impatient. When Pansy noticed the new Mrs Flint's attention, she smirked. “I feel so sorry for you, Marcus. At least you made her do something with her horrid hair.”

“Shut the fuck up, Parkinson.” Marcus had been doing the rounds confirming his marriage and intimidating anyone who commented on it when Parkinson had latched on.

“All right for you, Flinty. She's young enough to give you an heir. What do I get? Some pikey with a moustache. He drinks lager!” Pansy protested, waving her Manhattan at the bar as though her assigned spouse was lurking there. “He probably can't even get it up any more.”

“Then you appeal on the grounds of barrenness.” Hermione said tightly, thankful she had stuck to ginger ale. Getting pissed in a viper's den was not on her agenda. “Have you read the provisions?”

“I have better things to do.” Pansy made a rude noise and finished her fourth little drinky. She was so ecstatic to be out of her house she didn't even mind talking to the Mudblood. “You're the swot.” She started to giggle. “I bet that's why the Wizen-thingy gave you to him. So you can read him bedtime stories before he fucks you into the mattress.”

“I do not hit women, Parkinson, but I will bloody merrily push you through a Floo.” Marcus dragged her away from his wife before Hermione decided to let all his friends suffer. The private hearth was flaring by the minute as people arrived. He left the party still hauling the cackling witch along with him.

And walked right into a Weasley.
Ballistic Brie

If Ron had known what kismet was, he would have called it kismet. The solution to all his frustrations, wrapped with all the excuse he needed, materialised right in front of him. Flint pawing a simpering Pansy intent on dragging her off for purposes bloody obvious by pug-face's smirk. And Hermione was here. She would see it.

Kismet.

But Ron did not know the meaning of the word so he just punched Flint in the face. The Aurors had trained in hand-to-hand combat just in case. It had seemed a bit pointless when they all had wands but right now, Ron would buy the best whiskey he could afford for his martial arts instructor. Flint's nose broke with a gloriously satisfying crunch.

He stumbled backwards. Pansy grabbed at him, maybe trying to keep him upright. That was okay, Ron thought as much as he was thinking anything other than 'take that, you bastard'. He drew his wand. Two bottles of whiskey; the second one for Sturgis who had taught him this curse.

“Resilio!” Ron whirled and flicked his wand then laughed as Flint flew up to smack into the ceiling then the floor then the ceiling again like a rubber ball. He'd been spoiling to use the Rebounding Curse on the Bouncing Ferret but bloody Flint would do nicely.

“I have a wand too!” Pansy crowed, flourishing Marcus's cherry wood wand. The Ministry had confiscated her own. That had been demeaning but now she could show them. Best test it first, yes. Marcus was such a duffer he probably only used his wand to polish his broom. She laughed and corrected herself. No, that was Granger's job! “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The cheeses arranged on the Bordeaux table levitated. Pansy flung them at Weasley, Longbottom and whichever blonde tart they had lured along. The wand worked. She followed the cheddar with the wine, almost preening when people had to dive out of the way of her ballistic bottles. Served them right for taking her wand away!

“Stand down!” Ron shouted at her from behind a small table Neville had hastily upended. Glass shattered against it, leaving them kneeling in a spreading red pool. Unpleasant memories seethed at the edges of his mind. So much blood.

“I will not.” Pansy said petulantly, looking around for more things to throw. There seemed to be rather a lot of glassware. A slow smile twisted her snub-nosed face. She threw hexes with merry abandon, turning the lounge of the Prismatic Dragon into a whirlwind of sparkling shards.

Hannah flinched as something else smashed. She had a shield up but there were so many flying splinters that her Protego was rippling with the effort of deflecting them. She looked to Ron and Neville for a plan. They could not stay bailed up here while Pansy had a tantrum.

“We need to herd her into one of the rooms. Keep her away from the crowd.” Neville spoke as quietly as he could and still be heard by his friends as broken stemware hailed down on them. “Back into the Slytherin party. She might not be so keen to hurt her cronies.”

“You've met Parkinson, right?” Ron shook his head but they did need to contain the destruction. He would rather the Death Eaters took the brunt of the maelstrom than decent people. “Right. Hannah, you levitate this table and bring it with us. We can bull rush her if we have to. Neville, you keep throwing Stunners. I'll go with the restraint hexes. On three.”
As a team, they rose and charged. There was no way to avoid Parkinson seeing them coming. She was wound up enough that her magic was running wild. She blocked Neville's Stun and partially deflected Ron's Tendriculos. It rooted her to the spot with winding vines but did not immobilise her arms. Then the drunken witch started on the real curses.

Hannah got the table between them and the first Cruciatus. It exploded in a cloud of sawdust. Neville stuck to the plan and sent another Stunning curse while Ron switched to an old favourite.

“Crucio!”

“Stupefy!”

“Expelliarmus!”

“Accio Flint.”

The fourth voice was lower, making a try for surreptition. Ron caught sight of Hermione edging along the wall towards the unconscious bugger she'd married. Parkinson in her imprisoning tendrils blocked her way and the witch shrieked as her wand went flying into the trainee Auror's hand.

Hannah put her all into her shield charm, pushing the bubble out to protect Ron and Neville. Hermione dove across Flint's body. Pansy collapsed. The storm of glass fell in a beautiful deadly crystal shower then lay still - a scintillating carpet.

Ron crunched hurriedly to Parkinson and put a Body-Bind on her. Then he looked around at the damage. Bloody Hell, he hoped he wouldn't be the one paying for it. The crazy tart had done a number on all the posh nibbles.

Hermione used a Scourgify to carefully clean the broken glass off herself and Marcus. He was out cold, a red bruise across most of his face. She looked accusingly at Ron, noticing then he had two wands.

“That's Marcus's.” The first she had known of the fight had been her boyfriend's shouted curse. Ex-boyfriend. She and the newly formed Strategy Committee had peeked out the door then retreated. A very hasty conference had resulted in them doing what they could to limit the collateral damage.

“Spend a lot of time looking at his wand, do you?” Innuendo dripped from his words.

“Honestly, Ron!” Hermione felt cold. Her second thought on seeing Marcus's battered face was how she could square this with him to keep Ron from losing everything. If an argument had cost her a press interview then the price to make grievous bodily harm go away would be stratospheric. “Think about your career! Don't say anything. Give me his wand. Get Parkinson out of here and pray there's something he wants more than revenge on you!”

“He was sneaking off to shag her, 'Mione!” Ron said hotly. Her so familiar schoolgirl expression took him right back to a time when he thought everything was sorted. “You didn't see them! She was all over him.”

“Of course she was. She's halfway to drunk. This is her first time out of her home in almost two years. The first thing she did when she arrived was grope a waiter and down a cocktail. Marcus was escorting her to a Floo before she did something socially inappropriate.” Hermione spoke quickly, aware of the injured man at her feet. “Escorting her, not going with her.”

“Socially inappropriate.” The words even tasted sour. Ron tossed Flint's wand at her, realisation slowly coming to him that he had started the fight. He would be in trouble. A lot of trouble. “At a
Death Eater party. That would've been something to see.”

“Neville, please.” Hermione turned to her fellow Gryffindor. She did not know exactly what she wanted him to do but someone had to get Ron out of the club. The lanky young man nodded, not sure what needed to be done and painfully aware whatever it was had to be done quickly.

“Get to St. Mungo's. We'll clean up here.” Neville noticed without wanting to how Hermione cradled Flint to her before she Disapparated. Of course, that may be because she suspected he had a spinal injury. Maybe.
Awakenings

Marcus knew this rite. The pain came first. Something always hurt. This time it was his face mostly though one knee and a shoulder ached too. He tried to relax into the pain, waiting for it to ebb with the potions. He knew he had drunk a pain potion, his tongue felt furry, and the lingering aniseed taste meant he had been dosed with that new anti-inflammatory tincture the team Medi-wizard was keen on.

So he had been injured again. Marcus confirmed that with himself, the bit of himself that was doing the thinking while the rest of him floated in the misty darkness of semi-consciousness. He quite liked it there. It was quiet, no one expected anything of him and it was entirely acceptable to be supine. Supine was pleasant.

Noise was coming back, unfortunately. No one was swearing. He was not at the clubhouse then. McLeod or the team Captain Maconne would be profaning. Always did if someone got knocked out due to the League stipulated medical review and bench time.

He could smell ginger, which meant St Mungo's. The concussion ointment had ginger in it. Must have really given himself a wallop. Marcus kept his eyes shut as previous experience warned him he would have a headache as soon as he opened them.

Someone was holding his hand. That was also pleasant. Probably an apprentice Healer. They did that sort of daft thing. He lay still while quite a bit of him throbbed. His nose hurt a lot. Another bloody Bludger to the face probably. That could mean a dose of Skele-gro. Marcus grimaced.

“You're in hospital.” A woman's voice, concerned but not agitated, told him. Concerned was fine. Unconsciousness merited concerned. No agitation meant nothing was badly wrong. He had punctured a lung once. That had earned agitated from the Healer.

“Yerg.” Marcus confirmed he had heard. Someone squeezed his hand. He squeezed back a little. He was fine. Nothing seemed to have fallen off. He was just going to lie there for a while doing not very much until more of him woke up.

“You had a fractured nose and cheekbone. Quite a bit of bruising.” The voice explained. Marcus groaned another affirmative as the ambient ache confirmed what the woman was telling him. He must have hit the ground. That was not too bad. He had done that often enough.

“We win?” That was another part of the rite. Regaining consciousness was much better if he had been knocked out in the cause of victory. McLeod was much more generous with his fruit baskets if they had won. Last time he had sent one with papaya. Marcus liked tropical fruit. Except mangos.

“No, Marcus. You were in an accident.” The woman sounded upset about that so he squeezed her hand again. She put something cool on his forehead, which eased the thumping. He risked cracking an eye open then screwed it shut again at the light. The voice cast a dimming charm. “There, not so bright.”

Marcus would rather have stayed out but there were things wrong with the usual regaining consciousness rite. He recognised the voice now and she was not a Healer. He was not wearing Quidditch robes. He really wanted to hex Ronald Weasley.

Fragments of the evening percolated. Bole being happy. Lots of people he had not seen since before the war had congratulating him with wincing politeness on his marriage. Hermione plotting with the
brains trust like old chums. Fucking Weasley.

“Punched me.” Marcus was not completely sure about that. He was always a little vague about what happened just before he got knocked out. He had been marching Parkinson out of there before she disgraced herself.

“Yes.” Hermione confirmed with a leaden stomach. Marcus was going to be furious. She had sat there for more than an hour waiting for him to wake and shout at her. His dark grey eyes fixed on her face, aware but not quite focussed.

“You hurt?” He asked, wanting to get all the important pieces sorted in his head before he exacted revenge. It would be a glorious vengeance. However a little patience now was necessary.

“I'm fine.” She offered him a glass of water with a straw and he drank moderately, cautious from multiple hospitalisations Hermione suspected. The Healers had left a bowl in case he was sick. “Several people were cut by flying glass and Pansy was arrested.”

Marcus edged up into a sitting position and just sat for a while to allow his head to decide whether it wanted to roll off his shoulders. It appeared willing to remain attached. A Medi-witch noticed he was awake, coming in to do the expected diagnostic spells. She would not give him any more pain potion until she was confident he would not faint or vomit.

He sat silently collecting more of his wits as the matron fussed and Hermione asked sensible questions. Weasley had hexed him, apparently. That was fine. Useful. Marcus was quite prepared to take a few bruises to get what he wanted. He had to play this right though. This was a long game.

Also, his head hurt so he was not keen to start any dramatics. But he could think so he thought. Mostly what he thought was how much of a bastard he could be. That passed the time nicely. That he would opt not to be a complete cad was less diverting. Had to be done, though.

“Got any fruit?” Marcus asked after the Medi-witch had given him the all-clear. He had escaped the Skele-gro ordeal. He would feel like an old man for a few days while his muscles forgot they had been bruised. Nothing new. The wizard carefully did not nod when the Healer outlined what he could and could not do before leaving him to Hermione's care.

“You seem very calm, considering.” The witch ventured, still braced for an explosion.

“This is old hat. The team always books a bed here before a big game.” He held out the cloth she had put on his forehead for another cooling charm. Hermione obliged and he pressed it to the back of his neck. “McLeod's going to have my hide.”

“Because you won't be fit to train for a week?” She was not pleased about that. Professional or not, Quidditch was just a stupid game.

“That too.” Marcus rested his head against the bedstead and closed his eyes. He might have drifted off for a moment as the next thing he noticed was her hand on his shoulder shaking him gently.

“Because you won't be fit to train for a week?” She was not pleased about that. Professional or not, Quidditch was just a stupid game.

“That too.” Marcus rested his head against the bedstead and closed his eyes. He might have drifted off for a moment as the next thing he noticed was her hand on his shoulder shaking him gently.

“Why will McLeod be upset?” Hermione asked in her best 'reasonable question' tone. If this was something she could fix to keep the Magpies' Manager from pillorying Ron, she wanted to know.

“Told me no fighting with Weasleys. He's worried about the team.” He put his hand on hers and removed it from his shoulder. “Sore.” Marcus retained his hold however, interweaving his fingers with hers. “Don't worry. I'll square it with him.”

“Ron could lose his training place.” She did not want to ask. Did not want to beg. Hermione stared
into his face searching for some prompt as to what she should say. What she saw was a pained look swiftly hidden by a smirk.

“Making a big stink about this will distract from the appeal.” It was a good excuse and the Ministry would jump at the chance to divert attention from the Marriage Law.

“You're safe, Marcus.” Hermione reminded him, half to reassure and half to see his reaction. He had striven to help those effected by the legislation but most of them were Slytherin alumni. She wanted to know how far his altruism extended.

“At your whim.” He was matter-of-fact.

“I would never hold that over you!” She protested, affronted. “That is exactly the sort of extortionist coercion I'm fighting against.” Her rant would have continued, she had fought a damn war to get rid of disenfranchisement, except something in his expression changed. “You're baiting me.”

“You were baiting me.” Marcus countered and kissed her on the cheek. Hermione blinked at him, stunned enough by his gesture that he had to laugh. “I can ogle your tits if you prefer.” She was still in her cocktail dress and her cleavage was at his eye height. “Admit it, you expected blackmail.”

“Honestly? Yes, I did.” There was a perfunctory flare for the crude comment but he was not far from the mark. “That's how Slytherins negotiate, isn't it? I had the distinct impression from Rosier that he believed I was doing this because I had something on you. So I could be Lady of the Manor.”

“Higgs asked me the same thing, though he thought I had something on you.” He glanced down at her hand he was still holding. He had forgotten how comforting it was to have someone by his bedside. His team-mates would visit if he had a long stay in St Mungo's but only to check-in. Never to sit with him.

“Charming.” As Slytherins went, Higgs had a good reputation at Hogwarts. He had played fair on the pitch and had dated half-bloods. By the standards of his House, that made him a woolly liberal. That he had suspected extortion meant it was a near universal assumption.

“What happened after?”

“When we realised the Aurors would be called, Pansy had shattered every glass in the place, we sent everyone to Bole's. It was his party and the catering was paid for.” Hermione felt no need to remark on the speed with which she, Nott, Rosier and Yaxley had got everyone out of the Prismatic Dragon. Far away from any negative publicity.

“Was the cake any good?” He had been looking forward to that cake. It had been heavy with the dark promise of chocolate. Hermione had ordered it from a Muggle chocolaterie with a ridiculous name.

“I wouldn't know.” Hermione sighed, suddenly feeling the tension leave her. “I'm ravenous.”

“Head back to your flat. I'll be here overnight.” Marcus considered kissing her again, he wanted to do a lot more than just kiss, but not right now. He settled for keeping hold of her hand when she rose to take her leave.

“This is sorted?” She hesitated.

“I'll demand a big breakfast tomorrow and call it even.” He smirked. “Merlin couldn't make me eat what they serve here.” Her face was still cloudy. Gryffindors truly did wear their hearts on their sleeves. “If Weasley keeps his mouth shut, so will I.”
“Thank you, Marcus.” Hermione smiled and left without kissing him, and wondered all the way home why she had noticed that.
Tonic

Everild Proudfoot steeped shredded ginseng in a dented pewter teapot. She had come out of the Second Wizarding War with exactly four possessions beyond the clothes on her back; a teapot, an umbrella, a battered trilby and her wand. Everything else had gone either when Death Eaters had sacked her cubicle or razed her cottage. And she only had the teapot because she had picked through the ashes of her home after the Battle of Hogwarts.

“I’ve been instructed to pour disdain upon you from a great height.” The witch sat back in her uncomfortable new chair in her bare new office and shook her finger at Ronald Weasley. “You naughty boy, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“That’s it?” Ron had been sweating a little when he had been called into his supervisor's office. Proudfoot was in charge of all the trainees and had a reputation for being difficult to please. She knew what being an Auror took and what it cost.

“Merlin, no.” Everild poured herself a cup of the infusion that was supposed to do something to help the curse damage and sipped it. Would have been improved with brandy, but alas she and alcohol were no longer friends. “That is merely the supply of disdain available for someone who punched a Flint.”

“I didn't just punch him.” He had come clean in his report. Well, mostly clean. There had been quite a bit of 'the girlfriend stealing arse deserved it' in his first draft. Ron hoped he had edited out most of the worst of that. He would've asked Hermione to proofread it, before.

“That is where we start having difficulties, Weasley.” She grimaced at the taste of her tonic and at the impulsive boy. “We can't give in. Even when we want to. Even when the bastards deserve it.” Everild sighed. “Especially when they deserve it. Down that road Riddle lies.”

“Am I going to be charged?” Ron was proud himself for sounding confident. He wasn't but at least he could pretend. No one with a criminal record could be an Auror. That had been a rule since 1741. It had never been broken. It would never be broken, not even for a war hero. Aurors needed to be a cut above.

“To my great bogglement, no.” The witch had been expecting a cascade of scrolls from the Flint solicitors. “The muscle-bound bully-boy has made a statement of complaint. Correctly spelled, too. Someone must have been holding his quill for him.”

“You don't like Flint either, then?” Letting his breath out slowly, Ron risked a grin. He hastily removed it when Proudfoot levelled a gimlet stare at him.

“I arrested his father. I've had to deal with the family more than I wish.” Everild had been expecting to haul the son in on much the same charges but pater Flint had banished his heir for the duration. She'd made inquiries though no one in Moldova had anything on him. “The complaint will stay on your file. You'll be under review. One whisker out of place and you'll go before Kingsley to explain yourself.”

“Just a complaint?” Ron frowned. He had been expecting more than that. Parkinson had been packed off to Azkaban before the ink had dried on her docket, no contest. But her family had still levelled a formal objection against his actions. They would have made a noise in the Prophet too but had been gagged as part of their own paroles.
“Someone must like you, Weasley. Or you've been quaffing Felix Felicis on the sly.” The Auror frowned too. “My personal feelings aside, that is not the Flint style at all. You dodged a dragon there, trainee. It might not have cost you your place here but you could easily have been rusticated. You absolutely must keep your nose clean.”

“I will.” He promised, sincere but shaken. Ron knew who it was who 'liked him'. Somehow Hermione had persuaded Flint not to make things difficult for him. His stomach clenched at the thought of what that troll might expect as a favour. He was still angry with Hermione. Angry and terribly hurt. But the thought of her having to submit to Flint's whim for his sake made him sick.

Proudfoot dismissed him with a wave and he shot out of her office to the nearest loo. He sat in the stall until he had himself in good order. He had to do something. Not drink fancy wine in snooty clubs filled with Slytherins would be first on his list.

List. That thought cut him like sectumsempra. He used to tease Hermione for all her lists and study plans. Once, he had highlighted several lines at random in different colours just to see what happened. Fireworks had happened. When she was angry her eyes shone and her mad hair almost crackled with magic.

Hermione hadn't been angry after the fight at the Prism. A bit cross, maybe. A stamped foot or two but considering some of their barnies, she'd been tepid. She'd told him to go to protect his training status.

After she'd flung herself over Flint to shield him from the glass.

Ron turned that memory over his his head, wishing he had a pensieve to have a better look at it. Hermione had tried to get Flint out of trouble. Hermione had tried to get him, Ron, out of trouble. 'Mione did that often. Always had. She always tried to help those who needed helping whether they asked for it or not.

He hit his head lightly against the stall door. It was the damn Law, wasn't it? Ron thumped again. Hermione had leapt into the breach to help the persecuted and Flint had taken advantage. Her concern for the bastard had not been the frantic worry of a woman in love. It'd been a nurse's duty of care for an unconscious man.

Who she'd slept with.

Ron stopped slowly head-butting the door. She had bonked Flint. He couldn't remember exactly what she had said when she had told him. He'd been too angry. Something about her asking Flint to take her in a hallway? That did not sound like Hermione at all. She'd never been spontaneous. Up for it once they were in bed but never, well, fun about it. They'd tried it once in the garden when everyone as out but she'd lost her nerve when the gnomes had started snickering, and wouldn't let him touch her for a week.

He didn't know if he could forgive her for cheating on him. Didn't know if he wanted to forgive her. Some things mattered. But in the cold sweat aftermath of his interview with Proudfoot, Ron found himself being analytical. He needed some answers.

Harry was in their shared cubicle being methodical about some of the endless paperwork. Aurors were dashing, powerful wizards and witches who got the job done. Then spent days writing about every bloody detail just to tin plate their arses. The trainees had it the worst. They had to fact-check and review old cases, and not even the interesting ones.

“Harry, what's Hermione said about getting married?” Ron asked after checking the question for
obscenities. He'd been swearing a lot and didn't want to get into the habit. It upset his mum.

“Not much.” Harry put the scroll down and cast a Muffliato. “That hasn't been the big weight on her mind.” He looked up at his best friend, standing so casually as though they were just chatting. “She didn't go away with Flint. He was there, yes, but that wasn't the reason for her going to Australia. Hermione went to visit her parents and got some bad news.”

“They're dead, aren't they?” Ron had heard a lot of 'bad news'. When Harry got that grim expression and spoke carefully, he knew exactly what his mate wasn't saying.

“Car accident. I don't know any more than that. Hermione didn't want us at the funeral.” He was sorry, he was. He understood what it was like to lose family. He did not understand why she had wanted to keep it private. Not telling anyone would not make it hurt any less.

“Bloody Aunt Muriel.” Ron muttered. Harry stared at him blankly. “You were off with Ginny on a wedding planning thing. Flowers or something. Aunt Muriel asked Hermione when we were getting married. Grilled her a bit. Then said it was a pity her parents wouldn't be there. Mione thought she meant because of the Memory Charm and said she'd bring them back. But Aunty meant because they were Muggles. They wouldn't understand wizarding customs. They didn't belong.”

“That's not the same.”

“Isn't it? All sorts of things 'Mione tells me about Muggles sound barmy. Has to be true the other way. Maybe she thought we'd all laugh or something.” Ron shrugged then held his hands up placatingly when Harry glowered at him.

“You can't not be angry she didn't want us there. After everything we've done together!” Harry felt like he had lost Hermione too, that she wanted to forget him and pretend the war had not happened. She'd gone hell for leather over her NEWTs as they had all expected. After she had graduated she still didn't seem to have time for them. Sure, he and Ron were busy with Auror training but she could've made the effort.

“I don't want to go to another funeral.” Ron snapped, that sick feeling coming back. “I never want to go to another one. I mean it. Never.”

“So you don't mind she didn't want her best friends there? That she'd rather have some Slytherin who used to try to push me off my broom?” The youngest Gryffindor Seeker had a long memory for fouls.

“I mind more that she fucked him!” His voice boomed, testing the efficacy of the Muffliato. Ron kicked the wall. “I mind, Harry, alright? I mind. But not about her parents. They were Muggles. I don't know if they even cross the Veil. Them going wherever they go, the Muggle way is fine. It's right, you know. Proper.”

“He's using her.” Harry changed the subject because he did not want to feud with both of his best friends.

“Of course he is. He's a snake.” Ron gloated at the memory of Flint's nose breaking. “But she got him not to put me up on charges. I can guess what he wanted.”

“She wouldn't.” He did not want to think about Hermione in that way. Harry had an awkward enough time thinking about Hermione and Ron together let alone Hermione and anyone else.

“Bloody Flint wouldn't not be an arse just because Hermione asked nicely.” His teeth grated and his hands clenched, wanting badly to throttle the troll. “He wouldn't do anything just because she
asked.”
a Hearty Meal

After spending a dull night in St Mungo's and an irritating early morning of signing himself out and visiting the apothecary, Marcus Apparated to his great-uncle's flat. To someone reared in an echoing manor, the place seemed cupboard-sized. The wizard always expected to land on something when he visited or splinch himself into a bookcase.

He did not. He stood there waiting for the gorge to rise as it always did but all he tasted was peppermint. Marcus turned the pastille over in his mouth. The trip had left him feeling light-headed but that passed gradually. He grinned to himself, cracking the strongly flavoured candy between his teeth. One more reason to keep Hermione.

“I'm in the kitchen.” The witch called at the sound of his arrival. Marcus sniffed as he strolled in to the bachelor sized niche that served as both kitchen and dining room. It had a table for two, which Hermione had already set with cutlery and glasses.

“The peppermint worked. Thank you.” Marcus expressed his gratitude promptly before stealing some toast out of a warming dish. He surveyed her attire. She was still in her pyjamas and looked tired. He put a hand lightly on her arm when she turned to scold him for bread theft. “Do you really want to cook me breakfast?”

“You said you'd want one and I want everything resolved.” Hermione had slept badly. The visit to St Mungo's had painfully reminded her of the last time she had seen her mother. She had dreamed of her parents in their car with the windows smashing. Red visceral dreams of them being cut to pieces with flying glass.

Marcus flicked his wand at the pot-bellied stove. The fire went out and lids went onto the pans. Other than the toast, Hermione had not got much further than pulling everything out of the pantry.

“Why don't you go back to bed?” He suggested, not inviting himself to join her.

“I won't sleep.” She needed to be up and doing something but even scrambling eggs had seemed a Herculean task. Hermione scrubbed her eyes as tears filled them. She had been so looking forward to cooking for her mum and dad. Indulgent brunches where they could catch up on all that had happened in their absence.

“Come with me to Flint Manor. The elves can whip us up something.” Marcus offered her his arm in a courtly gesture so ingrained he could not remember not knowing it. He would rather have been born knowing something more useful than which way to pass the port.

“And will they be adequately compensated for their labour?” Hermione demanded pugnaciously. “House Elves are not slaves, even if they have been exploited for centuries.”

“Damned if I know.” The wizard shrugged. All the Flint elves did was mind his father and fuss around the estate. Marcus did not even know how many served his family. “What's adequate?”

“I have a chart, with pay-scales.” She said frostily, expecting derision and sticking to her principles. The knitted hats had stopped but her commitment to the cause had not.

“Give me a bill and I'll settle it.” He smirked at her militant expression. “You are the Lady of the Manor. Running the household is one of your duties. If you want the elves paid then we'll pay them.”
“We're not really married, Marcus.” Hermione protested, wanting to say the same thing to Ron and Harry. “I signed the papers so you wouldn't be penalised for your blood status. So I wouldn't be bloody Umbridge.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Ducking his head to look her in the eye, the scion of the House of Flint spoke soberly. “I do not have to do much with my life. But there are rules. One of those is to make sure my wife is given her due. By me, by everyone. That rule does not bend.” Marcus rubbed her arm, giving contact without encroaching. “So for as long as it lasts, you are the chatelaine of my estate.”

“How many of your ancestors are rolling in their graves right now?” She leant into his touch. Hermione did not want it to be Marcus putting his arms around her right now but she did want someone to hug her. He provided, smoothing a hand in circles over her back.

“If they wish to complain, they can haunt me.” As with most schools of magic, he had no talent for necromancy. If any of his dead relatives wanted to speak with him, it would be down to them to facilitate it. His living relatives were penance enough.

“Someone else cooking sounds good.” Hermione spoke to Marcus's sternum, her eyes shut. He Apparated them. She felt old magic, blood and rune, wash over her. It accepted her, which surprised her. If she had given it any thought she would have expected some hostility. The worst the witch could sense was a hungry longing.

The room where they arrived was stone-flagged with dark oak beams. Sconces flared with light at their presence warming the rustic chamber. Marcus led her to the feasting table, pulling out a chair for her before summoning an elf. Hermione ran her fingers over the scarred wood and studied the carved legs. Migration period, she guessed from recollections of Viking artefacts she had seen during visits to the British Museum.

Wizarding Britain truly was another world. Maybe after this was all done, she should take some time to be a Muggle. Reading Ancient History at university would certainly improve her Latin. There would probably be courses in Old Norse available. Ideal for Runes. Or she could undertake a science degree. Pharmacology or molecular chemistry would be useful if she wished to do Potions research.

She was a witch. She had potentially more than a century to study and hone her knowledge. But her time in the Muggle world would run out well before her own life did. How many ninety year olds were doing doctoral theses? Plausibly, she had fifty or sixty years before British governmental administration started to take an interest in her identity. Unless she started Obliviating social workers. Hermione never wanted to use that charm again.

A full English breakfast appeared before her glistening with the promise of cholesterol and clogged arteries. Black pudding, white pudding, sausages, back bacon, fried slice and hash browns fought for position on the platter in between the eggs, beans, mushrooms, tomatoes and toast. She stared. What she noticed was that while she had been provided with two forks and a spoon, there were no knives on the table.

There were no knives anywhere in the medieval kitchen. Hermione let her eyes track over the hanging pots, the ironmongery, the plates in the oak dresser, the hearth and the trough sinks. Someone had removed with great care anything sharp from a place where sharp things should have abounded.

Marcus had said his father was 'indisposed', that Azkaban had broken him. Hermione considered the blunted tines on the forks and suspected she would not find anything with a cutting edge in the manor. Magic was the cure for so much but it could not mend everything.
“How well can you read, really?” She asked, another observation crystallising.

“How well.” Marcus speared a sausage off the platter and conveyed it to his plate, adding egg and toast. “Short words, short passages. The more letters there are, the more they move about. I can keep up if I pay attention but that gets exhausting.”

“How did you manage at school?”

“I paid classmates to tutor me. Mostly to read the textbooks aloud.” He used the two forks to pry the sausage into chunks. “I took as many practical classes as I could.”

“You said you did NEWTs level Divination. I would hardly call that practical.” Hermione felt daunted by the fried extravaganza before her so she began with the mushrooms and tomatoes.

“Trelawney was hardly strict. So long as I could spew shite in a dream journal I could scrape through. Got quite good at foreseeing doom.” Marcus chewed with a little more force than needed. He had never discussed his weakness so frankly with anyone. “Learned to avoid words I couldn't spell. Not too easy in an exam though. Found about a dozen ways to write ceraunoscopy.”

“Did no one realise you had a problem?” She thought about a boy in her primary school who had worn tinted glasses in class, and who had got into fights when other kids had called him stupid.

“I was not a Squib. That is all that really mattered. I could be as fucking terse as I liked.” Marcus shrugged. He knew he was not an idiot so the frustration had been with the school-work not with his inability to do it. Quidditch had helped. He was bloody good at that.

“Failing didn't bother you?” That was not an especially tactful question and if she had not been so weary she would have caught herself before she asked it. Hermione made to apologise but he waved that away.

“I didn't care. I wanted to do what I liked and I did. I was not the only one. Derrick could barely spell his own name.” He settled down to eat while the witch stared at things and played with her food. She was thinking so he let the silence grow. She was in his house, at his table, breaking bread with him. What more did he need to say?
After the fiasco at the Prismatic Dragon, Hermione had a close look at the parole statutes with Leota Yaxley. The fair haired witch was half-way through her pupillage to become an advocate, the wizarding equivalent of a solicitor. They dealt mostly with civil disputes in order to limit the frequency of duels between litigants.

“Newer businesses and homes are more likely to be exempt simply by lack of precedent, Madam Flint.” Leota sat stiffly on one of the leather sofas. Her posture would have delighted a deportment teacher but Hermione found it irritating. The rapport they had seemed to have at the club had cooled considerably.

“Have I committed a faux pas of some sort?” Hermione asked bluntly. She had offered tea and biscuits, which had been accepted but not consumed. The flat was clean. She was wearing presentable clothes for all she felt like she had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

“No.” The Durmstrang alumna met her hostess's raised eyebrow with an elegantly curved one of her own. “Not essentially.” She clarified then reminded herself Muggle-borns truly knew nothing of polite society. “You are the Lady of the Manor and we are not in it. That gives the strong impression I am not welcome there.”

“I'm living here. I've no plans to move into the estate. I definitely have no plans to be the Lady Bountiful.” Hermione took a sip of tea to cut herself off from an acerbic comment on antiquated customs. “You, Leota Yaxley, are welcome in this flat. I would very much like your advice on where we can hold meetings. Do try my shortbread.”

“Thank you, I will.” Leota took a dainty bite and found it too sweet like all Muggle desserts. That Madam Flint had bought or baked the biscuits herself made them a more welcoming offering than simple house elf-made food. Assuming she knew the difference.

“We need somewhere accessible by the approved list of Floo destinations.” Hermione tapped a scroll, making it hover so they could both read it. “That is designated a public space or is otherwise not prohibited due to association.” She did not make the second scroll she cited hover. It was too heavy. The list where parolees could not go was extensive. That piece of legislation reminded her bitingly of the werewolf cordon laws. “How much of Muggle London falls into that category?”

“Most of it. Not the City of London itself, due to ancient treaty, but the rest is largely ignored.” She unrolled a map she had borrowed without permission from her pupilmaster. Borrowed after she had been informed due to her impending marriage, her pupillage could not continue until she had the permission of her husband. “Unless the land is owned by a pure-blood family.”

Hermione studied the illuminated chart. It looked a kittened yarn-ball, with prehistoric trackways, Roman roads, and medieval streets interwoven haphazardly. Quite a bit had been revised after the Great Fire in 1666. A Welsh Green and densely packed wooden buildings did not mix well. However there had been little modification after the Victorian sanitation works had cleansed the Thames.

“Canary Wharf.” Hermione did some dead-reckoning of geography with what she knew of the chronology of urban development in Muggle London. Her dad had loved modern architecture and had taken her on several walking tours to admire the glittering edifices. “We'll book a conference venue.”
“That will be popular.” Leota remarked sarcastically. She had only learned of the Isle of Dogs' reclamation when she had become lost in the Underground. The witch expected most of her peers still considered that area of London a stinking lower class mire. “We will need a great number of illusions to mask so many wizards.”

“Not at all. Give everyone a Tudor bonnet and we will be a Charter society. Have a few people on mobile phones and no one will look at us sideways.” Her experience on the run had solidified a long-held belief in Londoners' disinterest in fellow pedestrians. So long as they all looked like they knew what they were doing, and pure-bloods radiated arrogant self-confidence, it would be fine.

And it was.

Yaxley had been sceptical. When they had told Rosier and Nott about the venue, Alun had admitted he had been to London only twice as a child and Theodore had argued about their planned use of public transport. Marcus and surprisingly Tabia Shafiq had assured their fellows all would be well.

The very merry widow Shafiq had spent the war in Dubai, shedding both her Death Eater husband and British society for the sake of ridiculous luxury. She had returned to England only after her elderly father had become too infirm to manage the family holdings. Which included an impressive real estate portfolio.

“It was not quite the thing during Riddle's War but my family has always held property in Muggle cities. That is where the money is, and all the best shops.” Tabia led a fellowship of wizards from the tube station out into the cold light of modern Britain. “We have the conference room for the day and there will be catering. Our food, not theirs.”

Madam Shafiq did her spiel and escorted the group along the footpath to the skyscraper, getting them into an elevator with a minimum of fuss. She had been doing this all morning with the panache of a tour guide. All the while making certain that everyone saw her with the Flints. While disinterested in politics, Tabia had a keen instinct for influence. The new Madam Flint could bend the world to her will.

The new Madam Flint had a check-list. Hermione marked off all the attendees as they arrived while Edmund Fawley, an Auror and divorced father of two, verified that the parolees were wandless. Not everyone at the meeting was on Ministry Restrictions. Quite a few had portkeyed from overseas, having fled or sat out the conflict. Several dual nationals had learned of the legislation only on receipt of a notification of pairing scroll.

Marcus and Justin Finch-Fletchley did the rounds as question-wranglers. Justin had presented himself to Hermione as soon as he had arrived from Switzerland. His parents had sent him to Le Rosey to finish his education rather than comply with the Muggle-Born Registration Commission. He regarded any Ministry directive with an extremely jaundiced eye.

“I cannot believe the Wizengamot expects us to go from cockroaches to prize livestock without demur.” Justin said in an aside to Hermione when they finally shut the doors to begin the meeting. “I haven't said a thing to my parents. They think I'm recovering from my dissolute twenty-first birthday party. That Ministry owl was a simply delightful present.”

“Put it all in an official statement. We're trying to get as many voices as we can. A wider spectrum.” Hermione did not add 'than only pure-blood elitists' but from Justin's comprehending nod he heard the tacit addendum. They took their places as Alun Rosier opened with a polished ice-breaking speech.

Then Hermione took the floor to outline their strategy. She spoke ably and concisely, reassuring and
frank. Marcus listened with a growing feeling of pride. Tabia Shafiq, who had positioned herself near him, noted his smile. Leaning in conspiratorially, she murmured some advice. He gave her the ghost of a grin then returned to paying attention to his wife.

Yaxley, Nott and Rosier joined Hermione to take questions. The one most urgently pushed was where to go to avoid the law. The Gamut Treaty covered the ‘civilised world’, according to one plaintive witch. Wincing at the colonial mindset, Hermione cast a charm to display a world map centred on south-east Asia.

“Palau.” The witch said crisply, pointing to the small archipelago east of the Philippines. “As a republic in free association with the United States, it is neither a kingdom nor a sovereign country by wizarding law.”

“Furthermore, its use of the US dollar as its currency means it is not tied to Gringotts directly. Thus anyone with their assets seized or under audit can still do business there.” Theodore Nott stepped up to do his piece. He had spent days diligently working through all the nations of the Muggle and wizarding world to find one that was either new enough, obscure enough or remote enough to be a refuge. Palau was the undisputed best of the meagre results.

Theo outlined the residency requirements and the benefits of settling in the tax haven. Palau was a tropical paradise with most of two hundred and fifty islands untouched by anything but indigenous magic, so the aura would be harmonious and restful. A perfect hopefully temporary sanctuary.

There were complaints. There were always complaints. The Strategy Committee headed off the worst of the whinging by requesting all concerns to be submitted in writing so that copies could also be sent to the Ministry. That would keep the cursing to a minimum as well as bolster their petition.

The meeting ended with petit-fours, canapés and gossip. Hermione retreated to a quiet corner to catch her breath. It had gone well. They would be able to present something to the Wizengamot quite soon and then the slog of legal appeal would begin. It felt good to be back in the fray again.

Madam Shafiq brought her coffee and congratulations. The fashionable witch had done a quick circuit of the crowd before drifting so naturally over to the Muggle-born. She toasted with cafe hellenico then aired a well-practised friendly smile.

“Well done, my dear. This is rather herding cats but you will save us from yourselves, again.” Tabia carefully did not laugh. She was actually sincere in her appreciation as she had no wish for another arranged marriage. Particularly to someone with no breeding, manners or heritage.

“It's a group effort.” Hermione sipped the black coffee and blinked at the rush of caffeine. “Can we count on you for a donation to the island sanctuary? Not everyone affected by the law has the resources to relocate to avoid it.”

“Of course. My family will give generously.” She had several nieces and nephews she fondly wished to remain at liberty for several more years. Tabia had seen nothing of the world before her wedding at seventeen. “May I offer personal congratulations on your marriage? I have known Marcus since he was a baby. I have never seen him so happy.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Really.” Tabia chuckled softly. “May I offer some unsolicited advice? Consider politics. Oh, and keep him. It is difficult to find a wizard who will stand as a shield-man while his wife brings order to the cosmos.”
“I don't need a husband to have my own career.” Ms Granger, daughter and granddaughter of professional women, was not amused.

“No one does, dear, but speaking as a woman who had to bite her tongue while the reckless idiot she was married to nearly ruined her life, it is nice to have someone who listens.” Madam Shafiq raised her coffee cup in salute. “You will have to fight for your due all your life. Find a rock to brace against.”
Ron and Harry had tried for days to get into contact with Hermione. They had used the Floo, owls and even the fellytone. Harry had insisted he be the one to phone the Grangers' house on the off chance Hermione was there. No one had answered. As a last resort, they had sent an owl to Flint Manor. The letter had been received but no response had come.

In the end it was luck that brought them their friend. Late on Friday after a frustrating week of paperwork, old cases and theory lessons, Ron had caught sight of a knot of snakes. They had been slithering around Level Two near the Wizengamot Administration Services office. He had rushed to drag Harry out of their cubicle.

Ron's instincts had been rewarded when Hermione had exited the office twenty minutes later flanked by Nott, a short man in French robes, and a raw-boned blonde. They looked pleased.

"Hermione." Harry hailed her with a discreet wave. They needed to talk and he didn't want to make a scene. There were too many Slytherins loitering for him to feel at ease but if she left before they had a chance to speak, who knew when they would find her again?

"I'm rather busy, Harry." Hermione said, conflicted. The appeal had just been lodged. There was so much to do. And one of those things was reconciling with her boys. Making a decision, the witch handed her dossier to Theo. "I'll be at the briefing tomorrow."

The rest of the Strategy Committee left without comment. The official policy was to keep public discord to a minimum. They needed to present an united front to coax social opinion onside. Getting into a slanging match with two-thirds of the Golden Trio would not do that.

By mutual agreement, the three Gryffindors went to the trainees' cubicle in the Auror Department. It was on the same floor and private enough they could speak privately. Once there, no one seemed keen to break the silence. No apologies were forthcoming.

"Do you love him?" Ron asked in a rush, tormented by the quiet. Hermione shook her head. "Then why?"

"He had to comply with the nuptial clause. He stayed with me. His own mother had died like mine. He took my word for it. I wanted to help." She listed her reasons. She had thought about it a lot since the New Year. "I wanted to stop feeling dead. That's the 'why' you want most, I expect. I wasn't thinking about anything except how much pain I was in. Marcus took some of that away."

"It hurts that you didn't include us. That you deliberately excluded us." Harry took his cue from her coolness and kept his own voice level, trying to be matter-of-fact.

"My parents lost me when I turned eleven. I went to another world, where they could not follow and would never ever belong. Then I sent them away to the other side of their world." The stabbing pain of grief had ebbed enough that she could talk about her parents without feeling like she was going to have a heart attack. "Then I lost them."

"We would've been there." Ron and Harry spoke so close together their words were almost simultaneous. Hermione shook her head.

"It would've been about us, that way. About our war. Like all the other funerals." There had been so many funerals. "I didn't want to be a hero standing at a place of sacrifice. I wanted to be an ordinary woman saying good-bye to her parents without having to explain anything."
“I can follow your reasoning.” Carefully, Harry fitted words together that meant what he was thinking without any of the bitterness he still felt. Hermione was as close to a sister as he had ever had. Even if he had not known her parents well, he still felt like family. Being reminded that he was not would sting for a long, long time.

“Are you telling us that Flint didn’t need anything explained?” Like how to use a door knob or dress himself in the morning? Ron tried to keep the sneer out of his voice. They were doing well. They were having an adult conversation without anyone shouting or hitting each other. It was rather novel.

“His mother died when he was at Hogwarts. He was there alone with her. He knew the drill.” That sounded far more callous than she meant but Hermione could not think of another way of phrasing it. “Marcus got me coffee and sat with me. I was on auto-pilot. It was all I could do to keep my story straight for the hospital. Monica and Wendell didn't have any next of kin listed.”

“And after?” Ron asked, unflinching at Harry's discomfort and Hermione's tight-lipped frown. “It matters. It really matters to me. I thought we were going to get married.”

“We’re twenty! All we’ve done is go to school and fight a madman. I don't even have a job. I am not ready, Ron.” Hermione shook her head so hard her hair bounced. “I love you but I can't snap my fingers and be what you want.”

“I'll wait.” He said, a stomach twisting mix of stubborn and uncertain.

“Please don't.” The witch took his hand then reached for Harry's too. They stood together, as they had so often. “Please give yourself a chance at a normal life. Find some peace. Do something constructive. We've spent so long destroying things I've almost forgotten how to build something.”

“Mione.” Ron did not know whether to be angry or sad. He got that feeling a lot. Being with her had helped him focus and push away all the echoes from the war. Harry clasped his hand to close their little circle.

“So what's the plan then? Getting this law repealed?” The Chosen One asked to keep Hermione talking, wanting to re-establish their camaraderie. Harry thought the idea behind the marriage legislation was good. Forcing people into it was not.

“We can't repeal it outright. It's tied to reparations and restructuring measures. We can amend the clause.” Hermione had listened to Leota explain to everyone using small words the minutiae of the legal niceties. She had made notes. She had also made a quiet resolution never to become a solicitor. “We are petitioning for another reading, an appeal against the wording of the law rather than its substance.”

“What'll that do?” The frustration in Ron's voice was patent. He did not want to talk about this right now but Harry seemed determined, leaving the ginger wizard no option but to hang about.

“The Wizengamot will have to sit again to review the clause, which will pause the issuing of match notices.” She did not add it would buy many people time to spontaneously decide to go to Palau on a whim. “Once the legislation is 'open' again we can jump through antiquated hoops to have it changed. Leota knows the procedure.”

“Doesn’t Leota want a Muggle husband?” Ron inquired snidely. Hermione was wasting her talents saving Death Eaters from their own desserts.

“She's a lesbian, Ron.” Her hand twitched in his but she did not let go. She did not want another fight. “This is about more than inbred racists whinging, you know. Justin’s not a Swiss citizen. He
faces deportation back to England if he doesn't marry. This is serious.”

“You told us to find peace. Won't you do the same?” Harry exercised his tact again and left out any suggestion of a speedy divorce. He'd pay the fees himself if it got Flint out of Hermione's life.

“I will. This appeal will take months. I'm going to give myself time to figure out what I want to do. Maybe sit on a beach somewhere.” Someone would have to act as liaison with the island refuge. Maybe she could learn to scuba dive. “But we didn't get rid of a tyrant to set up an oligarchy. I want a damn Golden Age for the Golden Trio. We've earned it.”
They parted with plans to talk again. It was not a resolution but the lines of communication had been re-established. Hermione felt better about that. A burden lifted. She did not know if they could go back to how they had been and she wondered whether it was, well, healthy to do so. Being friends in war-time was not the same as being friends in peace.

You had to live with your decisions, for one thing. There were consequences long-term. She sat on Marcus's great-uncle's comfortable sofa, succumbing to the urge to kick off her shoes and put her feet on the furniture. Hermione lay on her side on the rubbed soft leather trying to turn her brain off for a moment. She shut her eyes.

Someone nudged her.

“Crooks, other sofa. Good boy.” The witch mumbled, rousing guiltily aware she fallen asleep. She blinked, staring into eyes definitely not the topaz orbs of her familiar. Stone grey eyes with one eyebrow raised. As a teenager, she had practised that quizzical brow in the mirror but had only ever managed startled rather than snarky. Hermione considered she did a much better stern.

“If you want me to make dinner, it will be sandwiches.” Marcus sat on his haunches, still in his Quidditch robes from practice. “How are you feeling?”

The timbre of his voice was just a shade too casual. Hermione was starting to pick up his tells. He was good. All Slytherins were very good at obfuscating their emotions but a little something in his tone gave him away.

“Who tattled?” She sat up, hand going instinctively to restrain her hair before she recalled she’d had herself shorn. The pixie cut was a little rumpled but there were no tangles. She might actually look presentable. “I know someone must have told you I spoke with Harry and Ron. I’m not upset. We didn’t argue.”

“What is it the Americans say? I plead the Fifth?” Marcus smirked, unwilling to reveal he had received owls from several former House-mates informing him his wife had been seen with Golden Boy and Weasel number six. “The Fifth what?”

“Amendment. Their Constitution allows citizens to avoid self-incrimination.” Hermione provided. She and her parents had played the List Game, quizzing each other on Muses and Seven Wonders and all sorts of trivia. She could still rattle off most of the periodic table. “Sandwiches would be fine.”

Marcus took himself off to the kitchen, where he was ambushed by Crookshanks demanding a Danegeld of chicken. He fed the half-kneazle then assembled a smorgasbord while contemplating tactically how much he should ask about what his wife had discussed with her friends.

She spared him the necessity of cunning gambits by taking a seat at the kitchen table and just telling him about it. The guilelessness of Gryffindors was astounding. Any leverage she might have won through inspiring jealousy or withholding information, she discarded lightly.

“There's still a lot we need to talk about.” Hermione sighed, taking off her robes and hanging them on the back of her chair. She would have to press them again as they looked candidly slept in. “I’m still angry about parts. I’m sure they are too. They have every right to be.” She sighed again, breathing out slowly. Perhaps she should take up meditation. “I feel less like I've been cut to pieces.”
“Invite them over this weekend. Talk some more. I'll be in Ireland.” Marcus brought the tray of open sandwiches to the table along with two bottles of Butterbeer. He was off alcohol for the season. McLeod liked to keep the team dry, particularly when tempers ran hot towards the finals. He would have the Championship or heads would roll.

“First game of the year?” Hermione asked, feeling she should be polite. She would give the invitation some thought. The flat was not Flint Manor but she doubted the boys would see it as neutral ground. Unless she did not tell them of the Flint connection. Which was hardly how she wanted to start rebuilding.

“Against the Kestrels. They trounced us last year. Bloody Maddock kept arsing about.” Marcus opened the bottles and drank a long swallow to wash away the taste of defeat.

“Do you think I could get tickets?” A thought occurred. A way of making it up to her best friends without grovelling. “I'm sure Ron and Harry would love to go to the game.”

“You could get box seats gratis.” He chuckled. McLeod would sacrifice him to Hermes if he let this opportunity slip. “Montrose would be honoured to treat you, Kenmare would be honoured to host and a private box would keep the three of you from being mobbed.” Marcus smirked. “And your friends can cheer for the Irish, if it would make them feel better.”

“Putting you, Ron, and Harry in the same place suddenly does not sound like a bright idea.” Hermione cavilled. There would be other games on the weekend, though the prospect of sitting through another Chuddley defeat made her want to baulk at the whole idea.

“I will be on the field. McLeod wants everyone to be chums. If the Montrose Menace can behave, surely Potter and Weasley can also.” Marcus put it to her reasonably, and sincerely. “Do you need a wizard's oath?”

“I'll take you at your word.” Hermione covered her awkwardness by eating. Taking her friends to see the Magpies play might be the bridge she needed to negotiate a proper truce. They would probably support Kenmare but she could forgive them that. “Alright, yes. Please get me three tickets.” She grimaced at the number. “I'd usually invite Ginny along too but I am not her favourite person right now.”

“Were you close?” He asked, knowing the girl only vaguely as a miniature redhead hovering over Lightning Boy.

“I tried to be, but we didn't have much in common.” She slid a slice of chicken out of her sandwich and gave it to a patiently expectant Crookshanks. He obligingly sat on her feet to warm them, and to keep her from escaping her feeding duties. “Once she joined the Quidditch team and was dating Harry, she didn't need my advice any more. Story of my life, really.”

“Pay her no mind, then.” Marcus put a hand on hers; a comradely gesture. “There is no shortage of exploitive people in the world. You are under no obligation to carry her. Be polite, be calm and be better.”

“Is that a Slytherin credo or a Flint one?” Hermione tried to make light of what was still a sore point. She could not shake the impression that Ginny had been friends with her solely because she was Harry's friend then Ron's girlfriend. Even the invitation to be a bridesmaid had been for Harry's sake.

“Our family motto is ‘Butan Synleahter’. Without Stain.” He gave his wife's hand a gentle squeeze. “Some Old English proverb about fire purifying and the stone of fire being forever clean.” Out of respect for his lineage, Marcus did not roll his eyes. “Fairly sure the Slytherin motto is ‘me first’.”
Hermione snickered, giving his hand a reciprocal squeeze. They ate in silence but parted amiably. When the flare of the Floo had faded leaving her alone in the flat, the witch prowled restlessly. She sent an owl to Harry and Ron then tried to did some reading. After she had picked up then put down the same book three times, she went to bed and for no sensible reason cried herself to sleep.
Much Wrath

Hermione woke to owls from Harry and Ron confirming they were up for Quidditch so she sent the tickets and portkeys. Their replies were not effusive but she was quietly hopeful that she could at least show them she was not dancing attendance on Marcus like some fangirl. That would go a long way to reassuring Ron.

There was some wardrobe flurry getting ready. She wanted to look nice for the private box but not too nice so no one thought she was dressing up to impress anyone. Hermione settled on dark grey slacks, a white blouse and a red sweater. She thought she looked quite chic. She wished she did not also look quite nervous.

Staring at herself in the mirror, Hermione told herself sternly to calm down. This outing was another step towards putting things back the way they should be. It would be a nice, ordinary excursion. No need to wind herself into a tizzy. She had invited her friends to a Quidditch game. They would all have fun and she would not sneak a book in to read during the boring bits.

Meeting at the private bar at the Quidditch grounds would give them a chance to talk before going up to the box. Hermione used the portkey with plenty of time before the start of the game then ordered a mineral water. The barman gave her an odd look but she insisted she just wanted water. She was drinking so much Butterbeer and coffee during long strategy meetings she thought she should mind her sugar and caffeine intake.

The Kenmare stands were a throng of emerald green and yellow. Several large floating ‘K’s glittered as fans showed off. The smaller crowd in black and white were summoning magpies to peck at the glowing letters. Looking out the bar windows, Hermione thought everyone seemed to be having fun. The atmosphere was very different to the grim persistence of Chuddley games.

She finished her drink, waited a bit longer then ducked upstairs to the box wondering if Ron and Harry had not seen her in the bar. The steward, jauntily dressed in green velveteen to mimic the team mascot, assured her he had not seen Mr Potter or Mr Weasley. He would certainly have noticed their arrival.

Hermione asked him if he would mind checking at the gates in case there had been a problem with the tickets. He was more than happy to do so. She went back to the bar and tried not to fret. No one had ever accused Ron of being punctual and Harry had a lot to do with the wedding. They were probably just running late. No need to dwell on childhood incidents of being stood up or left behind to add to her worry.

When five minutes before the game started Cormack McLeod strode into the box to glad-hand the celebrities, he found Hermione alone. The steward, jauntily dressed in green velveteen to mimic the team mascot, assured her he had not seen Mr Potter or Mr Weasley. He would certainly have noticed their arrival.

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When five minutes before the game started Cormack McLeod strode into the box to glad-hand the celebrities, he found Hermione alone. The steward reported he had alerted the staff at all the gates to send the war heroes straight up as soon as they arrived.

“Could something have happened with the portkeys?” Hermione asked, doing her best not to sound plaintive or paranoid. They should have met at the Burrow or the trainee Aurors’ flat. She had suggested meeting at the Quidditch grounds to avoid a repeat of the quarrel she and Ron had had before Christmas over the state of the shared accommodation. Several bachelors together were likely to get slovenly, fair enough, but underpants should not be used as tea towels.

“I will send someone to check.” McLeod found a minion and dispatched him to verify the private portkeys were all functioning properly. He had personally arranged for the tickets to go to Madam Flint, to avoid Marcus having any last minute lapses of memory.
Kenmare was leading 60 to 30 when the minion returned. Hermione eavesdropped without apology. There was nothing wrong with the portkeys. According to the registry, both were active and unused. She debated with herself whether she should send a patronus to check. Surely this was not an emergency. Ron and Harry were just late.

By the time Montrose had taken the lead 140 to 110, Hermione had to admit to herself her best friends were more than late. She used the Floo in the Kenmare Manager's office to call their flat. Dean Thomas answered. He was helpful but could not say more than both had left for breakfast at the Burrow. He offered to Apparate there to check. Wanting to play it cool, Hermione thanked him and refused the offer. Whatever the delay was, it clearly was not urgent.

So she sat and watched the game and made conversation with Cormack McLeod. Several more of the Montrose staff joined them as did quite a few from Kenmare. Hermione put on her best heroine face to shake hands, smile, and socialise. There were at least twenty people in the box when an owl arrived for her with a bright red letter.

Hermione took herself and the Howler into the toilets. She cast a Muffliato Charm before opening the missive. Ginny Weasley's voice, strident and vengeful, echoed in the stall.

“You miserable, heartless, selfish bitch! You gold-digging filthy whore! How dare you! If I ever see you again, you po-faced slag, you'll beg for a Crucio! I hate you! I hope you die like your bloody parents! If you ever, ever speak to Harry again, you'll think Bellatrix was a fucking lark compared to what I'll do to you! Lying, cheating, two-faced cunt!”

The Howler exploded in a shower of confetti leaving Hermione sitting shocked. Her scar throbbed. She dragged her sleeve up frantic with the fear it had opened. She stared at the livid word carved into her arm and shook.

Montrose won 520 to 430.

Cormack McLeod asked the Kenmare assistant Manager to go into the women's facilities to coax out Madam Flint. Bridie Leheney spoke to the sobbing witch through the stall door and returned to the gathered team management with Hermione's request for Marcus. Chaser Flint, nose still bleeding from a cobbing foul, took his wife home and put her to bed with a dose of Dreamless sleep.

Exhausted by emotion, Hermione slept through the evening and night. She woke slowly becoming aware of details in a muffled, drifting away. Crookshanks was purring under her chin, half under the blankets like a furry hot water bottle. Someone else was lying behind her, one arm curled over her. Moving the arm and the cat, Hermione got out of bed.

Padding to the bathroom, she confirmed she looked a fright in yesterday's clothes. Marcus had taken off her shoes but nothing else. Hermione felt centred by that detail. She had been upset, he had helped, he had not done anything else and now it was morning.

After a shower and punitive tooth-brushing, Hermione put on pyjamas and got back into bed. She could deal with morning later. There was a glass of water on the bedside table beside a stack of letters. The witch rolled over, turning her back on the correspondence.

“Do not read the newspaper. We are on the front page. Above and below the fold.” Marcus murmured as his wife tentatively settled against his chest. He had gone for a fly in the grey light predawn then picked up the Prophet from the Manor. The daily rag had not been worth the trip.

“After we finish the Marriage Law, I am going to get some libel legislation passed.” Hermione vowed to Marcus's singlet. He rubbed her back and she missed Ron, who smelled of home cooking
and sunshine. Marcus smelled of fresh air, bruise salve and something. She sniffed. “Spearmint toothpaste?”

“Broke my nose in the game. Cannot use a cleansing charm after an Episkey on the face.” He always remembered that prohibition after their Keeper Brun started bleeding from the eyes. The Healing Charm mended all the fine blood vessels but left them sensitive.

“I missed most of the game.” She admitted. Marcus shrugged, aware she was not a Quidditch fan. “Did those letters come here? I really don't want Ginny to know where I am.”

“To the Manor. The elves said owls had been arriving all night.” He was not surprised when she rolled over again and retrieved the stack. The Flint heir smirked when he thought what his forefathers would have said if any of their wives had been reading letters from old lovers in their bed. He got up to give her some privacy.

When she had not emerged after he had made and finished a mug of coffee, Marcus made one for her and took it into the bedroom. Hermione was sitting up staring at the opposite wall. The envelopes were open on the bedspread though some of the letters had been torn into tiny pieces. She accepted the cup with murmured thanks then spoke quietly.

“Harry cancelled the wedding. It is all my fault.”
“We both know it is not your fault.” Marcus spoke as though his words were chiselled in stone. He met her gaze over her coffee mug. “Whatever Potter did, it is his responsibility not yours. If you could control him, we would have had a much shorter war.”

“These say otherwise.” Hermione thrust the letters from Harry and Ron at him then took hold of her cup with both hands to reassure herself she still had a grip on something. Holy shuddering Hell! Her grandmother used to say that, trying genteelly not to swear. Right now she did not have enough curse words to suffice.

Marcus took the letters and looked at them. Potter had not been Chosen for his handwriting. The missive opened with a badly blotted few lines about trying and failing to calm Ginny. Or Jimmy. Or possible Sammy. He gave up on that one. Weasley was less agitated in his script. Picking his way through, Marcus noted 'bloody' a lot and 'misunderstanding’, which was a long word but was spelled as it sounded.

“Potter and his fianceé argued.” He diagnosed, picking up the other letters after a nod from her. It was very poor manners to read someone else's correspondence without permission. Marcus was certainly not doing this on a whim of curiosity. The other letters were from Weasleys. Percy had a wonderfully round hand, easy to follow but he still swore at what he read. Fucking drivel about needing family time.

“Harry loves Ginny. He wants to marry her. Why did I blather on about finding myself? Hippy-dippy nonsense. God, how my dad would laugh. He'd have handed me a street guide and said 'you are here'.” Hermione sniffed, wiping her nose and trying not to cry. She could hear her father's voice. “I miss them. They'd have loved this flat.”

“And hated me.” Marcus smirked, hearing what she had not said.

“Well, no, actually.” She thought about it, trying to marshal some coherence. “Not hated. They could understand the paper marriage. One of dad's college friends married a woman so she could stay in the country. The legislation would've had them protesting in the street. Mum could get quite bolshie when she thought something was unjust. Her dad was a trade unionist.”

“I have no idea what that is.” It sounded political and Muggle, a combination that would have had him reaching for his broom to make a hasty exit except he liked conversing with his wife. “Is this where you threaten to take me to a library to remedy my ignorance? I am prepared to grovel to avoid it.”

“That'd be rather unkind of me.” Hermione put her coffee aside and hugged her knees to her chest. “If you have the time, you could watch documentaries at my parents' house while I tidy. I need to sort out their things. I've been putting it off. I think you'd like some of my dad's movies.”

“I think you should put it off for a while longer.” Marcus shifted closer and smoothed a hand over her hair. “No need to rack yourself in penance. Someone needs to go to Palau and set everything up. You can access my accounts.” He had pledged funds to help and trusted her to spend them wisely. “Why not do that? We need to get people out of the country before they are liable for fines.”

“I have to help Harry get back with Ginny.” She protested, wincing at how feeble that sounded. She wanted to help Harry more than anything. She had not the foggiest idea how to do that without making it infinitely worse. Hermione glared at the shredded letters. “Which will be a bit difficult
when Molly, Arthur and Ginny would 'prefer if I kept my distance' for a while 'so wounds can heal'."

“Why is the entire ginger horde writing to you?” He demanded. Percy had been just as prissy as he had been at Hogwarts but had only alluded to poor advice and letting tempers cool. Nothing much to explain the flurry.

“I was coordinating the wedding. Ginny's busy with try-outs and Harry's flat out with Auror training. Molly wanted to do everything but she doesn't know about Muggle stuff. Harry and Ginny want or wanted, I suppose, a modern ceremony. No robes, no old customs no one knows the meaning of any more.” Hermione explained wearily. “That's part of the problem. Ginny wants nothing to do with anything I've organised. Wants me out of the wedding completely.”

“Sounds like she was the one who cancelled it, not Potter.” Marcus hid his grimace about 'modern'. He wished he had half Golden Boy's luck. Most of the weddings he had attended had been lavishly antiquated and tedious. The only consolation had been the endless drink. His own ceremony had been ideal; one signature, no fuss.

“It was a huge argument. The whole family was at the Burrow for breakfast and heard it all. That's another reason why everyone wrote. Either they want an explanation from me, want to tell me what to do or want me to keep my nose out of Weasley business given I'm now a Flint.” Hermione let her breath out a long, exasperated sigh. “Ron says he'll sort it out.”

“Then let him.”

“I know, but...” She cut herself off, closing her eyes for a moment. Maybe if she gave everyone a little time to talk to each other this would just blow over? Was that craven? Should she write Ginny to explain? She wanted to but that Howler had stabbed deeply. “She said she hoped I died like my parents.”

Marcus pulled her into a hug and she let him, burying her face against his chest so he did not see her cry. She did not see his expression. The heir of the House of Flint had been born into a world of feuds. He was quite prepared to add Ginevra Weasley to his roll of enemies. The bitch would pay for her offence. Not immediately. He would be patient. He would wait for the proper time and then they would all pay for making his wife a pariah.

“What's in the paper?” Hermione asked his shirt. She might as well get all the bad news out of the way at once.

“Fucking pathetic lies.” Marcus snarled. “A piss-pot of speculation. I bribed you. You were seeing me at Hogwarts. I rigged the spouse match. Weasley smashed up the Prism in a fight with me over you. You are pregnant.” He would not have minded the last one being true but not announced like that. “I can guess the source of that one. No one but expecting women buys water at an Irish Quidditch match.”

“Palau is looking very inviting right now.” Pushing her hair out of her face, she straightened. “Thanks, Marcus.” That seemed inadequate but she certainly was not going to kiss him. “Um.” So eloquent. “Do you think we could be friends? All documentation aside? You've been kind to me and I appreciate it.”

Marcus stared at her speculatively then extended his right hand. “I'd be honoured.”

They shook hands then went out to Diagon Alley for a late breakfast and to stick two fingers up at gossipmongers.
Words Said in Anger

If Ron had ever contemplated a career in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, this week cured him of it. Any faint delirious urge to be a diplomat, politician, hell even a courier, evaporated under the strain of trying to talk to everyone. He was doing his best to be a peacemaker and all he had achieved was being shouted at for days.

But he persisted because his little sister was crying herself to sleep every night and his best friend wasn't sleeping at all. He was a bloody war hero. He could do this, Ron told himself as he dragged his weary feet into the Leaky Cauldron with the rest of the trainees. Harry had not wanted to go to their usual Friday night swill but his friend had insisted.

Ron had asked Hannah and Neville to help him get Ginny to the pub. He had tried asking, begging, pleading, blackmailing and bribing his sister but nothing had worked. Ginny wandered around the Burrow like a sleepwalker. She had set fire to the wedding invitations and had thrown her dress out the window.

The blonde witch behind the bar gave him a covert nod. Ron managed a smile for her. Such a nice girl. She would never leave him to sort out a flipping great mess she'd started by telling Harry he should live a little. A flipping great mess Harry had made worse by trying to tell Ginny they should wait to get married. That had gone down like a lead balloon.

Ron steered a bleary Harry to a small table at the back of the pub then tried to act surprised when he noticed Neville and Ginny sitting there. His heart clenched at sight of his sister. Ginny's eyes were bloodshot and her knuckles white on her pint glass.

“Please just talk.” Ron beseeched, again. He was not going to give up. It might take months but damn it he would get them to speak to each other. “He loves you. He just thought you both needed time to sort stuff out. Job stuff, not love stuff. Just stuff.”

“Why doesn't he say that to me himself?” Ginny asked tartly, half rising from her seat. “He had a lot to bloody say when he was defending that bitch who ruined everything.”

“Hermione didn't mean it.” Harry roused, looking faintly surprised to find himself at the Leaky. Hadn't they been training? It was getting hard to remember what he was supposed to be doing. “I didn't mean it. I was trying to say that if you didn't want my best friend at the wedding that we could take time to change things.”

“Like take time to change my mind so you get your own way!” The witch slammed her glass down. “I won't have her there, Harry! I won't! She betrayed Ron! I don't care that she's your friend. I thought she was my friend! But friends don't fuck snakes then try to spoil your happiness!”

“Ginny.” Neville attempted to calm things by intruding while Ron frantically shook his head at Harry to keep him from saying something that would make it worse. “Why don't you just elope? That's romantic. Just you and Harry hand-fasting. Just you two together.”

“I want my family there! I want everyone happy!” Ginny shrieked, remembering that Fred would not be there. She had wanted the perfect event so everyone could share her joy and believe the world was a wonderful place again.

“Hermione is my family!” Harry surged to his feet. “She was always there, even when no one else was!” He shook off Ron's hand and stormed out of the pub. The wizards stared at his back then at
each other. Neville went after him. Ron hugged his sister as she sobbed.

“It'll be alright. I'll make it all right.” Ron consoled. He had sat awake at night wracking his brain to find some way of making this all better. He had seriously considered spiking Harry's and Ginny's drinks with a Calming Draught to get them to speak to each other with shouting. He winced again at that idea. It had worked so well for him with Hermione.

“I love him, Ron. I do. I love him so much.” Ginny gulped, trying to breathe through her tears. “Why can't he just love me best? But there's always someone else. Or he's pushing me away. I thought that finally we'd be together.” She choked, anger warring with sorrow. “He's mine. I won't share him with her.”

“I'll talk to him. I promise.” He hugged her tightly. This he could fix. His own love life might be in the privy but he could help Ginny. All he had to do was convince Harry. Maybe a Full-Body Bind to get him to stay and listen. “I promise. But you have to help. I want you to go home to mum, have a big dinner and get an early night. Just trust me. You'll get to wear your pretty dress.”

“Not that one.” Ginny said with some bitter satisfaction as she wiped her face with a sleeve. “It's dusters now.”

Ron hugged his sister again then sent her to the Burrow. He had a quick chat with Hannah to thank her for her help, and to ask her very quietly to let him know if Harry or Ginny confided anything in her. He didn't like to ask her to break a confidence but he was at the end of his tether.

Unfortunately neither of the lovers had mentioned anything to Hannah. If they did, she promised to let him know as she was worried about them too. She did have a hug for him, which put a little steel in his spine. He could do this.

Neville had stopped Harry from Apparating away in a huff but when Ron joined them, the conversation had not progressed any further than 'I don't want to talk about it'.

“She didn't tell you about the funeral.” Ron leapt in with both boots. He didn't like it but if he had to choose between fighting dirty and having Harry walk out of his sister's life, then it was no choice at all.

“I'm not going to not invite her to get back at her for that.” Harry hissed, his hands balling into fists. He had not forgiven Hermione for keeping her parents' deaths from him but he would not be so cruel to her in return.

“I'm not saying you should.” It made him feel sick inside but he had to get Harry to compromise because Ron was cast-iron certain Ginny would not. “But 'Mione wouldn't be surprised if you did. She hasn't written back, has she?” Truthfully, he had not checked his mail in days. He had been so flat out he had not had time for anything but training, sleeping and mediating. “Please, mate. You'll feel much better if you make it up with Ginny.”

“I'll think about it.” Harry said unwillingly then Disapparated.

“Well, shite.” Ron let his breath out in a long, frustrated sigh. He could see now why the Imperius Curse had been invented. It was so tempting and so easy to just make someone do what they were told. He felt even worse after thinking that. Maybe he should take his own advice and have an early night. He was starting to think like a Slytherin.

“Did you mean that about Hermione?” Neville asked. Ron was so distracted by self recrimination he did not notice the careful way his friend spoke.
“Yeah. Her parents died in an accident at New Year's. She didn't tell anyone. Except Flint. That fucker was there, worming his way in.” Ron gritted his teeth. He'd happily use an Unforgivable on Flint, and it wouldn't be the Imperius.

“Oh.” He stared at the ginger wizard, waiting for further explanation but none came. Ron thanked him sincerely enough and Disapparated home. Neville stood there thinking about Imbolc and the last time he had spoken to his cousin Marcus Flint. Then he went to Montrose.
It surprised, and embarrassed, Neville how much latitude he could get as a war hero. When he showed up at the gate, one of the ticket sellers recognised him and sent for the Magpies' Manager. He suspected McLeod was angling for something so he kept his request to speak to Flint purposefully vague, couching it as a family matter. That got him right into a private box.

Montrose was playing Wimbourne, which was a particular treat for him as he was a long-time Wasps fan. Unfortunately there were journalists there and what Neville had hoped to be a quick private word with Flint turned into a bit of a circus. He had to answer awkward questions as tactfully as possible, defaulting to 'private family matter' as often as he could.

He nearly choked on a canapé when one journalist asked him if it was true Madam Flint was expecting. Neville surreptitiously coughed cracker into a napkin and passed that question off to Flint himself while trying not to sound like a prig. He was very fond of Hermione but he could have gone his whole life gladly without the mental image of her cradling a miniature troll.

Wimbourne lost by a nail-biting twenty points after the Magpies' team Captain Bludgered the Wasps' Seeker right off his broom allowing Lennox Campbell to catch the Snitch. Neville did the gentlemanly thing and congratulated McLeod, suffering several photographs of them shaking hands.

When he finally escaped the box, he was in no mood to pander to Flint's arrogance. Neville strode right down to the locker room. The lead Chaser came out shirtless to speak with him, a sneer already on his face.

"I need to talk with Hermione." Neville told him crisply, noting that despite his late adolescent growth spur his cousin was still taller. He felt confident though that if this turned violent he would be able to hold his own. Since Nagini, he had been taking fencing lessons. The feel of a hilt in his hand helped with the nightmares. A sword in the mind. "And I think she needs to talk with me."

"Bugger off." Marcus bit the words. He scanned the hallway anticipating an ambush from Potter or miscellaneous Weasleys. Pride be damned, at first sight of them he would have to shout for reinforcements. He would not draw his wand.

"I'm not here because of Harry or Ron." His ribs ached, recalling the last time he had spoken with his cousin. "Hermione's my friend and I know what it's like to lose your parents."

"So do I." Menace darkened his voice. Marcus tensed to attack. One word. One fucking word about his mother from Longbottom, and he would merrily risk losing his Quidditch contract.

"Look, Flint, this isn't about us." Neville stood his ground. "I'm not here to argue. I don't know why she married you. I don't know why Ginny blames her. I didn't know about her parents until Ron told me this evening." He squared his shoulders, unconsciously mimicking the other wizard's stance. "I want to know where Hermione is so I can offer my condolences."

"You would be the only fucking one to bother." The snarl was reflexive, territorial. Inside, Marcus was thinking. He wanted Hermione to trust him. And Longbottom was family. Muggles might be able to forget inconvenient relatives but he was a Flint. Flints remembered.

"Please, cousin." Alice Gamp's son asked Alexandra Gamp's son. Neither man wanted to play on their kinship but both saw it as the only peaceful way of getting what they wanted.

"My wife is in Palau." Marcus saw the name meant little to Longbottom. That did not surprise him. If
He had not been at the strategy meeting he would not have known where the archipelago was either. “It is in the western Pacific. Same longitude as Japan.”

“I expect she is avoiding the newspapers.” Neville had seen the front page of the Prophet. It was like fourth year all over again. “Can I reach her by owl or Floo?”

“No. It is a pain in the arse to even Portkey there.” That had been a big problem for the those affected by the marriage legislation. Getting multiple multi-leg mass portkeys from the Ministry was a non-starter. It might have been possible for someone to Apparate repeatedly from one of the islands to England but that would require them to be familiar with every stop on the 12,000km journey.

“How did Hermione get there?” He could wait. It appeared he would have to. It seemed uncharacteristic of the proudly Gryffindor witch to run away and hide, though.

“Muggles have these things called airplanes.” Marcus smirked. His wife had solved their transport difficulties elegantly. Having checked flights and done a trial run herself flying commercially to Seoul then to Koror, Hermione confirmed it was a practical route. So the Strategy Committee had chartered a jet.

“When will she be back?” Neville refused to rise to the bait. Partly because he did not want to give Flint the satisfaction and partly because he was surprised how accepting the Slytherin was of Muggle methods. Hermione must be rubbing off on him.

“No idea.” If it were up to him, he would have sent Longbottom off then and there but this was for Hermione so Marcus exerted himself to be civil. “Wait here.” He went back into the locker room and returned, handing over a Muggle business card. “That long number is for her telephone.”

“How do I use it?” The card had ‘Strategy Committee’ printed on it, as well as an address in Kensington he presumed was for owls. The string of numbers under the address made little sense to him.

“Are you supposed to be all for Muggle shite?” Marcus was surprised Longbottom had not taken Muggle Studies. It was a soft elective well suited for a near Squib.

“I’ve never had to make a telephone to someone.” Neville tucked the card away in his robes. “I’ll ask Harry.”

“You will not.” He jabbed a finger at the younger wizard. “That feeble prat has his head up his arse. I do not want him anywhere near Hermione. I had to take her home in bloody tears when Potter’s ginger bitch let loose.”

“You like her.” That revelation was stunning. Neville stared at the wrathful Slytherin so astonished he did not even rally to Harry’s defence.

“She is my wife.” Marcus said flatly. “I will honour her, and see that everyone else honours her. I thank the Fates every day that they gave her to me. She will save my family.”

“Hermione loves Ron.” Neville felt he was treading on dangerous ground here. Flint seemed rational enough though anyone with a connection to the Black family had to be careful of obsession. “Ron loves her too. They were going to get married.”

“His present behaviour puts that to the lie.” Folding his arms across his chest, Marcus regarded Longbottom stoically. “Hermione could divorce me with a snap of her fingers. She has not yet. I count that as a successful courtship.”
Those Left Behind

Neville went to Hannah for advice. She was easy to talk to and as a half-blood, she would be able to guide him through the telephone ritual. Hopefully without laughing at him. If Flint could be blasé about it then he could too. He did not want to leave Hermione thinking she was alone with her grief.

Hannah made it look easy. After she got off work, they Apparated to her Muggle grandparents’ house. She was minding the place while her grandmother and grandfather were on a Caribbean cruise.

“They caught the travel bug when they had to leave England after mum died.” Hannah explained as she escorted Neville into the cozy sitting room. “They'd never been out of the country before. Now they're junketing all over the place. They went to the Pacific last year and Alaska the year before. They like cruises. My granddad's knees aren't too good any more.”

“Does your dad go too?” Neville asked. He wanted to ask how Mr Abbott was but did not know the family well enough to pry. He could not even pick him out in the photographs all over the walls, though it was difficult to judge likeness from the still images. The wizard found the static pictures faintly disquieting.

“They don't get along.” The blonde witch said simply. “Mum didn't see much of her family while she was with dad. It was too awkward. Dad tried hard to blend in but things always went wrong. He had a lot of accidental magic problems.” Hannah smiled at the memory of a levitating Christmas turkey. At seven years old, she had thought that the best trick ever. “Mum didn't want her relatives constantly being Obliviated so we didn’t visit often.”

“I don't know what that's like. It was all my family could do to provoke me into something magical. Great-uncle Algie almost made it a hobby.” Neville had lost count of the number of times he had been dangled, pushed, surreptitiously shoved, or otherwise prodded near something dangerous to prompt a magical outburst.

“The pure-blood Abbotts all have control issues. Aunt Bethany had to be warded against poltergeists it was so bad. That's why dad's parents let him marry a Muggle. They were frightened if he had kids with a witch, things would start exploding.” Her dad had been so relieved when Hannah had not blown anything up when she had got her first wand. Mr. Ollivander had looked quite relieved too.

“Would you, um, marry a wizard?” He tried to make the question sound idle. It mostly was. There was nothing serious yet between them or between Hannah and Ron. Neville thought he should ask though. Because if there was going to be something, he wanted that something to be serious.

“Depends on the wizard.” Hannah winked. “I'd be more interested in his heart than his magic.” She handed him the phone. “You press those numbers in order on the keypad here. There'll be some beeping noises. When Hermione answers, tell her who you are. Calling long-distance to a mobile will be expensive. She'll keep it short.”

Happy to change the subject after his awkward inquiry, Neville pushed all the buttons that corresponded with the line of digits on the card. There was a repetitive sound then a sort of chime before Hermione answered.

“Hello?” She did not sound far away so Neville did not shout.

“Hello, Hermione, it's Neville.” The wizard spoke exaggeratedly clearly, uncertain how garbled the
transmission would be. There was crackling in the background.

“Give me your number. I'll call you back.”

Stricken, Neville handed the telephone to Hannah, who rattled off a string of numbers including area codes and international codes. It sounded like Arithmancy. Then Hannah put the handset back down. He jumped when it made a loud ringing sound a few moments later. She handed back it to him.

“Do you have to do that every time?” Neville asked, wondering at the procedure.

“I'm using the hotel phone now.” Hermione laughed, in good humour. “The cost of the call will be billed to my room account and the line is more reliable. Mobile service out here is patchy.”

“Are you well?” That was the most important question. “I just found out about your parents. I am so sorry, Hermione. Flint gave me the card with your number. I want to offer my condolences.”

“Thank you.” She bit her lip, not wanting to start crying in the lobby. “I appreciate that, Neville. It's been an awful beginning to the year but I'm coping.” To divert them both, she pulled her notebook out of her bag. “Look, Marcus is paying for my stay here so I can't chat but I think I found something very interesting. I'm almost sure it's an Arachnis orchid. If you've got time to come out here, talk to Justin. He's organising the bookings.”

“The magical Arachnis went extinct when their native hopea species was over harvested in the Philippines.” Neville had read extensively on the epiphyte as it had once been a promising ingredient. He and Hermione had been researching memory restoration potions to help their parents. When they had discovered the Arachnis was gone, they had turned to other resources.

“A lot of Filipinos settled here during Spanish colonial times. More once the Americans annexed the islands. I think someone must have brought garden samples over. I found a little grove while I was touring.” Hermione had been visiting less developed areas of the archipelago to find a suitable retreat. “Justin will be able to include you in our travel plans if you want to see for yourself.”

“I'll speak with him.” Neville assured. Perhaps it would be better to talk with Hermione in person. The Arachnis was a good excuse to go, if he could get the time off. As an apprentice, he was not supposed to leave his Master's borough without permission. However, as his Master was Professor Sprout, he could probably wangle a holiday.

“Good. I'll see you then.” Hermione said cheerfully. Her voice faltered a little as she added. “And thanks again, for my parents. I hope you understand why I kept it private.”

“I understand.” Neville confirmed. He had kept his parents' medical condition to himself for much the same reasons; the less he had to talk about it the less real it felt. Pretending circumstances were otherwise had helped him deal with the loss.

After Hermione had said good-bye and there was a clicking noise, Neville looked to Hannah for further instruction. She mimed putting the phone down so he returned it to its stand. He had successfully used a Muggle device for the first time.

“It's the same number every time to reach Hermione so you can call her from any phone.” Hannah gave him a playful nudge. “Better than having to stick your head in a fireplace, isn't it?”

“It is.” Now he had done it without making a fool of himself, Neville could laugh at his own nerves. “Could I telephone Justin? Does he have a number?”

“Most people have phones. It's a basic service like water and electricity.” Hunting around in her
handbag, Hannah found her address book. It was yellow with badger stickers on it. “Don't laugh. I've been getting badger presents since I was sorted. My uncle Jeremy gave me a stuffed badger for my fourteenth birthday. A real one, stuffed, not a toy. He thought it was hilarious.”

“My gran wears a vulture on her hat. I won't laugh. I'd never make fun of you.” Neville did smile though when Hannah handed him the number she had written out on a scrap of paper. Their fingers brushed and suddenly he felt twelve and awkward. He clutched her hand then hesitated unsure whether to pull her towards him or move closer to her.

Hannah made it look easy again, stepping up to him and pressing her mouth against his as though it was the simplest thing in the world to kiss him.
Hermione went Palau International Airport to meet the Asiana Airlines flight from Seoul. She had organised several buses to take everyone to the private ferry, which would in turn take them to Melekerai. The island she had selected had a modern dock used by scuba tours but little else in the way of infrastructure. It was north of Peleliu, which had seen significant fighting during World War Two, but had not itself been touched.

Its magical ambience was as pristine as the most sensitive pure-blood could wish, and it was a beautiful limestone outcrop that shared a lagoon with two nearby smaller atolls. Ideal for snorkelling, swimming and fishing. Hermione had bought licenses to run an 'Eco-Friendly Wellness Retreat' along with a bevy of other permissions. The supplies they needed had come by freight the day before.

Magic was fantastic. The witch had rarely been so delighted to simply wave her wand and have something done. Usually she felt vaguely guilty for being lazy and doing things the easy way. Setting up tents for more than a hundred people had taken her only a few hours. Fresh water, food and sanitation were easy for a woman who had spent a year on the run. Hermione rather envied those who would be staying on the island.

The first person off the plane was Justin Finch-Fletchley, who looked very much the part of the tourist in a bright blue shirt and board shorts. Hermione smiled at the words on his t-shirt. The 'Aviophobics Therapy Support Group' was part of the cover to gloss over some of the wizarding folks' unfamiliarity with air travel. Getting the group through Immigration and Customs at Heathrow and Incheon had not been easy.

Justin lead the parade into the terminal. Everyone with a passport had been buddied with several without. Hermione had been unsurprised, though dismayed, to discover how few pure-bloods had the necessary documentation for mundane international travel. The blue shirts had been charmed to repel Muggles and everyone was under strict orders to stay with their buddies.

No one relaxed until they were on Melekerai. After seventeen hours in the air and several more in transit, few of the wizards or witches wanted to do anything but sleep. Hermione had made guide maps to the sanctuary camp so everyone could find their designated tents. Within an hour of the ferry landing, she was alone with Neville, the Strategy Committee, and Justin in the canteen.

“There will be another plane coming next weekend.” Theodore Nott helped himself to some guava juice. Cooling charms kept the humid air pleasant and the canvas chairs were surprisingly comfortable. He felt ridiculous with bare legs when it was winter in England but could not deny the serenity of the island. “The nuptial clause has struck many Muggle-borns as sinister.”

“The feeling is we're being blamed for social problems again.” Justin lounged, fanning himself with a pamphlet from the Palau Tourism Department. “Being made to carry the can, and face the backlash when opinion turns on the law. I've been contacted several times by people who've just moved back to the UK, who are worried they'll have to become ex-pats again. We shouldn't have to keep fleeing our own country.”

“Shacklebolt has introduced great deal of legislation on the nod. Perhaps we could bring it to his personal attention.” Alun Rosier was audibly diplomatic. His opinion of the former Auror was not high. As the eldest male Rosier not incarcerated, he had to fend off a great deal of interest in his prominent former Death Eater family.
“I sent him three owls.” Hermione pulled out her notebook, opening it to the section devoted to logging communications. She had started it to make sure they did not double up on letters. The committee members had been each assigned a list of prominent people to lobby, tailored to their own background. The Order of the Phoenix was Hermione's responsibility. “He replied non-committally. He's dealing with a lot of 'the bastards must pay' demands.”

“Do we know who suggested the clause in the first place?” Leota Yaxley did not like the glaring tropical sun and had positioned herself with her back to the tent opening. “I did some digging but all I could learn was it had been discussed at an advocacy hearing.”

“Likely on a Friday afternoon over beer.” Justin made a face. “It sounds like a conglomeration of ideas hastily jotted down.” He met Hermione's gaze, self-censoring as Alun had done. That was the key to their unlikely alliance. Everyone tried to keep every remark professional.

“I don't think we'll get anywhere trying to pin the legislation on any one person. We need to keep to the legal side and put pressure on the Wizengamot to rethink their votes.” Hermione heeded the former Hufflepuff's unspoken suggestion to edge the discussion away from blame. “Any thoughts?”

“You could take your husband's seat, Madam Flint.” Theodore used his schoolmate's full title to emphasise the point. They had an asset they were not using to the fullest. “Marcus will not sit but as the Lady of the House you can.”

“I'd hoped to avoid doing that. It feels wrong to take advantage.” She did not want to poach any more of her entitlements. Spending Marcus's money for the good of the cause was one thing. Usurping his birthright was quite another.

“He thinks you're the salvation of his House.” Neville had been quiet since they had landed. In truth, he had been thinking more about the Arachnis orchid than the Marriage Law as he was exempted. “He's taking your marriage very seriously.” He cautioned. “He'd give you the seat.”

“I know.” Hermione heard the warning. She and Marcus would have to have another talk about 'Madam Flint'. Unfortunately, until the law was repealed or she divorced him, he was right. “Theodore has a point. Are there any other seats in abeyance we can fill?”

That simple question caused the pure-bloods to go quiet. Hermione and Justin turned to Neville for a cue as the scions of Nott, Rosier and Yaxley looked anywhere but at them.

“There are a lot of empty seats.” Neville filled in the conversational gulf unwillingly. “It's hush-hush.”

“I know the Wizengamot began as a Wizards' Council, with representatives from the old families and the major wizarding settlements.” Hermione's History of Magic NEWT studies came to the fore. “Which led to rotten boroughs and gerrymandering, though that was never explicitly stated. Are you telling me that none of the empty places have been resolved? Since 1544?”

“Bluntly, yes.” Leota, as an advocate, stepped into the breech. “To remove a seat is to acknowledge a weakening of magical society, which the old families refuse to do. Those hereditary seats belonging to lineages who have died out have simply been left. The seats still 'sit' as it were. They simply do not vote.”

“How can the Wizengamot fill a quorum?” How the hell did anything get done when the government did not even cull its own bureaucracy? Hermione had a vision of four and a half centuries of paperwork rising in a parchment tsunami.
“Periodically since 1707, the Ministry has passed extraordinary measures bills to shrink the numbers required to pass legislation. It’s a matter of course now, lumped in with allowances and such. I doubt anyone even reads it.” The expressions on the faces of the Muggle-borns made Leota feel defensive. “I imagine it is much the same with Muggles.”

“It’s not.” Justin snapped. “Politicians go through everything with a microscope, particularly the minor parties. Even if something like that was passed, it’d be tattled to the press. The Freedom of Information people would be on their soapbox. We know our governments lie to us and we try to hold them accountable. You are aware there are about one hundred and twenty democratic countries in the Muggle world, yes? You live in one.”

“We live in the magical world.” Leota’s tone was mild; a teacher correcting an errant student but it still rankled. “We wish to remain there, which is why we have made such effort in deporting ourselves to the other side of the Muggle world. I am a witch. If I wished to be a democrat, I would simply surrender my wand to the Ministry as they insist.”

“I wish my American friends could hear you.” Justin muttered, trying not to laugh. This was why his parents sometimes looked at him as though he were an alien. He stood up. “It has been a long day and as I am thankfully not on the committee, I think I will call it a night.”

“I’ll discuss the Flint seat with Marcus.” Hermione took a deep breath, trying to smooth ruffled feathers. “I think we should investigate how many of those empty seats we can salvage. If there are any lineal descendants, particularly through Squibs, we need to find them.” She did not say that she expected no one had previously bothered to look very hard. “We can coordinate names with family tree websites. People often pay for that sort of research.”

Neville, exhausted from the flight, slept late the next day and woke suddenly to the sound of giggling. He rolled over expecting to be in his bed then suddenly found himself on the floor. The cot he had been sleeping in tipped over onto him, which caused even more giggling. Opening his eyes, he pushed himself upright to confront the person mocking him on the other side of the mosquito netting.

Who was about five years old. She was dressed in a smock and sandals, with a large floppy hat tied under her chin. The little girl waved at him then still giggling ran off. Neville stared after her as wakefulness gave him answers to the philosophical questions plaguing anyone woken suddenly.

He was in a tent on an island in the Pacific on a mission to warn a friend about her husband. And to find an extinct orchid. The wizard retrieved his wand, washed and changed then went to find Hermione. Neville was not surprised at all to locate her easily by the sound of lecturing.

She was in the study tent, provided for the school age children who had accompanied their parents. Only Hermione would bring a whiteboard to a tropical resort. The witch was explaining the eldritch intricacies of the internet to a group of pure-bloods, who looked half convinced she was playing an elaborate prank.

Neville slipped into the tent, taking a place at random beside a middle-aged witch in a floral robe. She had a quill in hand and was making notes in rapid runes. The symbols looked like little men dancing to Neville, who had thankfully not been expected by his grandmother to take Ancient Runes.

“Internet service is available on Koror and at several of the posher resorts. Connection speed is frankly woeful so I think it probably best if everyone writes down their family trees and we do the research in the UK.” Hermione concluded, getting back on topic. “Please include all those relatives you do not speak about. We may be able to find Muggle-borns with descent conforming to vacant entailments.”

No one looked pleased with her request but no one objected either. Neville realised how seriously everyone was taking the nuptial clause. It had been a tiny addendum tacked on to workaday Ministry stuff to him. But it had Sacred Twenty-Eight willing to admit to having Squibs in their families. Perhaps the Wizengamot was playing some sort of cunning double bluff.

Neville managed to snag Hermione when the seminar dispersed for lunch. His friend looked very Muggle in shorts and t-shirt, with her wand tucked out of sight at her waist. He hesitated before broaching the subject but he had come halfway around the world on the strength of his concern for her.

“Hermione, I’d like to talk privately.” Neville waved absently at the Portia trees beyond the camp. They headed there, stopping when they were out of sight near a lush growth of Scaevola. He was not sure of the exact species and picked a few of the fan-shaped white flowers to study later.

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“I don’t normally make you this nervous.” Hermione noticed his fidgeting. She hoped the Weasleys hadn't strong-armed him into being their messenger.

“I tried to run through this conversation in my head on the plane but everything I thought of saying sounded snobbish or rude.” He put a stasis charm on the flowers then tucked them in his pocket. “The best I came up with was a general warning against Flint, which I expect you’ve heard already.”
“Ron and Harry have expressed their concerns, yes.” Her voice was studiedly bland. Neville chuckled a little at her restraint.

“I'd love for you to marry into my family. I should say that first, I suppose. You're my friend, but you're worth ten of Flint and his attitude worries me.’” Neville recalled his cousin's confidence. “He really wants you to be his wife. I don't know what he's said or what he's done but with this thing with the Weasleys, I don't want you thinking that you're isolated.”

“I know I'm not.” Hermione reassured, extending a hand to him. He took it and straightened, more confident once he had confirmed he had not offended her.

“The Weasleys are very fragile right now. It's hit them that they have to move on without Fred. Ginny's wedding was going to be the first big family thing without him.” Neville paused, seeing her mouth tighten into a taut line. “I won't excuse Ginny, but I think you understand why she's gone off the deep end.”

“She was happy enough for me to organise it.” She could not help but sound aggrieved. Dodging paparazzi, Apparating across England to get just the right flowers, and the endless fittings. Hermione had expected to get tetanus from all the pinpricks from the dressmaker.

“Because she trusted you to make it perfect. She needed it to be perfect, so she could forgive herself for being happy without Fred and everyone else we lost.” He had been thinking a lot on the plane to distract himself from the fear whatever magic was keeping the huge device in the air would suddenly stop.

“And now it isn't perfect, she's taking it out on me.”

“She's mostly taking it out on Harry and herself.” Neville had dragged Ginny to the Leaky Cauldron under the pretence of needing her advice on courting Hannah. “They're at loggerheads.”

“I'd like to help, but I've been told very firmly this is a family matter and I am not.” Hermione tried to hide her resentment. This was the second time she had been pushed out into the cold. She didn't want to keep a grudge but the rejection stung enough that it was difficult not to want to disengage entirely.

“I'd write to Harry but the last time I sent a private letter to him and left out Ron, it caused Ron to hit the roof.”

“Ron's in a right state over his sister and Harry. They need someone to give.” the wizard sighed, recollecting how futile his own efforts had been to get either of the couple to see reason.

“Do you think if I told Harry I choose not to go to his wedding, he would marry Ginny?” She asked meticulously, contemplating doing so as she spoke. Would it help? “Their argument was about a lot of little things. I don't think they've properly sat down and talked.”

“If they had to do their own organising, make their own decisions together then I think they'd get to a good place.” Neville shrugged. “I'm no Seer. But having someone else as an excuse does let them do a lot of shouting without a lot of listening.”

“I guess I can see this as the price I must pay.” Hermione did feel a debt to Ron over her cheating. Missing out on seeing Harry get married would certainly be punishment enough. “Damn it.” The witch blinked away tears. “Right, yes. I'll talk to Harry as soon as it's a decent hour GMT. If I call Hannah, she can relay a message to Harry. Do you think if I asked nicely she'd mind him using her phone?”

“I think I could persuade her.” A shy smile curled his mouth. He was thankful he'd outgrown any
tendency to blush.

“Well done, Neville!” Impulsively, she hugged her friend. “How long?”

“Not very. We haven’t even gone out. Well, we went to the Prism but that was with Ron.” That caused a wince of discomfort. Neville didn’t want the other wizard to think he’d been elbowed out of the way during his distraction over his sister. “What a mess that was. We were sure it’d cost Ron his trainee place.”

“Marcus was quite reasonable about it. I expected far more bargaining.” Ruminating on what Neville had said, Hermione considered something implausible. “You don’t think he’s in love with me, do you? He came over as soon as he got the Ministry owl.” It was flattering to think Marcus might be but so awkward as well.

“That’s not how it works with pure-bloods.” Neville tried to explain. “We’re used to arranged marriages. We know what to expect, how to behave. Love, if there is any, comes later.” He did contemplate it, though. His cousin had been quite intense. Maybe? “No, I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t know Flint well. Gran never let me visit my Aunt Alexandra. After I spoke with him, I was more worried he’s trying to ingratiate himself.”

“Seems rather unnecessary. After the clause is rescinded, Marcus will be able to have any witch he wants. I doubt he’s so hard up for company he’d need to settle for an unemployed aimless Muggle-born.” Hermione smirked, being honest with her current life situation. “He did say he wanted kids, but if I’m not ready for that with Ron, I’m definitely not ready for it with anyone else.”

“He said you’d be the salvation of his House.” The wizard still did not like the sound of that. The phrase stuck in his ears, a worrisome echo.

“You’ve mentioned that.” She cocked her head, unconsciously mimicking Crookshanks. “Why does that bother you so much?”

“I don’t know what he wants. Why does the House of Flint needs saving? They did alright. His dad went to Azkaban but he’s been out for years and we didn't hear a squeak from him during the war.”

“Marcus feels overwhelmed by the responsibilities. He hasn’t said so, but I can see the little things getting on top of him. That’s probably why he wants to play Quidditch so much. I know Harry used the game as an escape.” Hermione gave Neville’s hand a squeeze then released it. “I’ll go to Koror and call Hannah. If that doesn’t work, I’ll brief Justin on the Palauan bureaucracy then head back to England to talk to Harry personally. With sackcloth and ashes if I have to.”
They were in the Leaky Cauldron again. It was useful neutral ground but Ron was tired of the smell. The ground-in old beer stink was particularly irritating today because he was drinking butterbeer. He was so tired any alcohol would have him on the floor. But he was there because Harry and Ginny were there, finally talking, in one of the booths.

“How are they doing?” Hannah asked, bringing him a bowl of crunchy nibbles. They seemed in much demand as the bowls near the bar were empty of all but crumbs. Ron had spent his lunch hour lying in the infirmary convinced he was a spaniel. Sleep deprivation and Imperius curse resistance training did not mix well. As Auror Proudfoot had sternly informed him.

“No shouting thus far.” Ron turned to look at the couple, silently imploring Merlin that whatever Harry had been thinking about all day was good. His best friend has been brooding since Hannah had relayed the request from Hermione for a phone call. Harry had consented but had not spoken of the conversation since.

“That's a good sign.” The witch was trying not to spy but was having a hard time resisting the temptation. If she could have waved her wand to mend the pair's troubles, she would have. Instead, she refilled the snack bowls from a large plastic container. Ron, desperate for something to distract him, eyed it with interest.

“Where'd you buy these? They're great.” He ate a few more. “Sort of cheesy.”

“Oh, I made them.” Hannah lowered her voice as though embarrassed or conspiratorial. “I'm trying a few recipes. The ones you're eating are cheddar and herbs. I have some bacon ones that are okay but the Parmesan sticks were a bit of a disaster. I owe my nan a new baking tray.”

“Why are you making your own?” Ron sat up a little straighter. A nice girl who cooked. He smiled for the first time in a week then toned it down a little because Neville had flown halfway across the world to help Harry and Ginny.

“I want my own pub. A proper one with good drinks and food. Where people come to put their feet up with friends.” She surveyed the surly lone drinkers and tight huddles of workmates. The ambiance was more chaff than affable. “Tom knows his beer but he's tired. Running the Leaky's getting a bit much for him.”

“You want a pub? That's it?” He envied her being so certain. Ron had become an Auror because he thought it was the right thing to do. He would have married Hermione because he thought he loved her. He thought he was helping Harry doing what he thought was best for Ginny. Bloody hell, he thought a lot. No wonder he had a headache.

“Pretty much.” Hannah answered airily. “I'm proud of what I did with Dumbledore's Army. I'm proud I stood up and didn't run or hide.” But she hadn't gone back to Hogwarts. One day, she would. That was a promise. Just not now. Not until she stopped jumping in fright at loud noises. “But it's over now.”

“You did well at the Prism. Your Shield Charm is one of the best I've seen.” That probably wasn't what a girl wanted to hear from a bloke, Ron admitted. It was true, though. “You could be an Auror.”

“I want to have babies, and you can't do that if you're being hit with curses all the time.” The
Carrow had thrown dark magic around like it was Samhain every day. After the Battle of Hogwarts, Hannah had seen a Healer just to make sure there was no lingering damage. She was mostly fine. “It adds up, you know.”

“Yeah.” Ron thought about Harry's scar and Hermione's scar. He had scars too, but from Splinching. He hardly noticed them except when they itched. “Would you marry an Auror? I mean, would that be a thing you'd avoid?”

“I don't know if I could spend nights worrying if my husband would come home.” Hannah admitted candidly. “I've spent a lot of nights worrying already. About my family, about my friends, about everything. I couldn't turn it off. I call my dad every night just to check. It'd be like fighting the war all over again, really slowly without knowing who's the enemy.”

“Do you think Hermione thinks that?” His words came out slowly, tentative. He wanted to sound casual, like they were still just chatting.

“I'm sure she does.” The witch left to hurriedly answer a drinks order then returned, brushing her hair off her face. “Worse than most, I expect. You know what she was like in school. All those study plans.” Hannah still had the one Hermione had made for her, carefully folded with her Hogwarts things. “Take it from the girl who needed Calming Draughts for her OWLs, Hermione worries.”

“I know that. It drives me mental. She's always fussing about stuff being just so.” Ron hadn't considered the reasons behind why Hermione harped on about his defensive spells or nagged him about practising. He'd put it down to her being a swot. He'd survived the war. That had to mean he was pretty good already. He hadn't realised she wasn't worried about him; she was worried for him.

“Because she loves you.” Hannah said it like it was obvious.

“Doesn't show it much.” He grumbled. “She married Flint.”

“True.” The Hufflepuff grimaced like a badger, all teeth and huff. “I guess she felt sorry for him. I mean, look at her cat. I like cats but that fluffy thing was a menace.”

“You think Flint's her pet?” Ron chuckled, picturing the Slytherin with a collar and a bell. Hannah laughed too and he felt a pang. How long had it been since he had just talked with a girl? They weren't even flirting and he already felt better.

“Well, he isn't as ugly as Crookshanks but he sure plays it up on posters. Always scowling. And you know what they say about the Flints and their troll blood.” There was no way she would bring Flint home to meet her grandparents, which was Hannah's litmus test for potential boyfriends. If her nan didn't like them then they were gone.

“I don't like thinking of them together.” That was harder to say aloud than he thought it would be. Telling someone made it difficult. Of course it was obvious and his family could figure that out but saying it was something else.

“I don't blame you. It's a hard thing to forgive.” Hannah helped herself to some of her own nibbles, which she tried not to do as they were moreish. She waited for Ron to ask her advice. He had that look on his face.

“Should I forgive her?”

“That's not easy for me to say. I don't think I'd know what to do if I were in your shoes.” That was honest but not especially helpful. “Look at Ginny. She was mad for Harry since always. But she dated other people. Quite a few. And she got quite serious about it according to gossip, sorry Ron.”
“I really don't want to think about that.” He took a long swig of butterbeer to wash away the memory of walking in on Harry and Ginny snogging. As far as he was concerned, they held hands and that was all.

“You might have nieces and nephews one day.” Hannah teased. “Ginny could take after your mum.”

“Merlin, I hope not.” Ron laughed into his drink. He reached across the bar to hold her hand.

“Thanks, Hannah. For listening. And for not telling me what to do.” He sighed. “Not sure what I will do. I'll figure it out, though.”

“I'm sure you will, and it's no problem listening. I like helping.” She smiled then moved Ron's hand from hers to the snack bowl. “Have you eaten a proper meal today?”

“Would you eat with me? As friends?” He added the last bit hastily. Until he knew what he should do, he didn't want to muck anything up. Looking to Harry and Ginny's booth, he groaned. “They look like they're going to be here forever. I'm starving.”

And just then Harry slid out from the table, dropped to one knee and held out something to Ginny. She put it on her left ring finger then kissed Harry in a way that had Ron looking hastily back at the bowl of nibbles.
The witches and wizards on Palau celebrated an unorthodox Imbolc by having a barbecue on the beach. They cleansed themselves with salt and water, and brought light to the darkness with bonfires. Fresh fish, taro and sweet potato served as the feast. It was a joyous first day of spring for the temporary exiles.

The Strategy Committee, all introverts, had retreated collectively to the study tent when the festivities became raucous. Alun had procured a pitcher of the banana slush that was a favourite on the island and in the spirit of the holiday, they toasted Brigid out of coconuts while collating family trees.

“I have another lost cousin from the Rowles.” Theo underlined the name on the whiteboard. “Though I would not put much hope in finding any of them. Thorfinn Rowle was very free with the Killing Curse. If he knew of any Squibs in his family tree, I would not put it past him to prune.”

“We could try the cadet branch that married into the Urquarts. Professor McGonagall would know about the family. Her husband was an Urquart.” Hermione was working on the extended Travers - Doge - Burke pedigree. It was not quite as bad as the Hapsburgs but only because it was illegal in Britain to marry your own niece.

“I think I have an Avery. One of the daughters was sent to France in the Sixties, in disgrace but was not disowned. If it was the usual reason then we may have two.” Leota flicked her wand and the lineage scribbled itself onto the whiteboard.

“The usual reason being pregnant?” Hermione asked, making a note of Machtilde Avery in the contacts section of her notebook. They had a lot of people to track down.

“To a married man, yes.” Leota was too well-raised to make a face but her mouth tightened fractionally. “Otherwise she would have been married off. But no one would waste a fertile woman so she would be packed away until she was useful.”

“She'd never be received again at Avery Manor. Grandfather Avery was rather particular on legitimacy. He was born six months after his parents were married, and woe betide anyone who mentioned that.” Theo had no fond memories of his maternal grandfather. “But if she had a boy, he have might been acknowledged privately.”

“If you're related, can you sit on both the Avery and Nott seats?” She was learning a great deal about arcane governance, and all of it was getting right up her nose. Hermione was seriously considering emigration.

“Unfortunately not. When the Gore family tried to monopolise the Daubney and Eckers seats, a statute was passed to prevent simultaneous sitting. Heirs or manorial spouses only.” That was one of the first things she had checked, as they had several people who could qualify for multiple seats. Leota frowned then assayed a suggestion. “Theo, if you married, your wife could sit for Avery. We could nominate your cousin for the Grebe seat.”

“My father's elder sister's only son does not much care for wizards.” The Nott heir made his relationship to his Squib cousin painfully precise. Theo weathered a glare from Hermione. “He's in his fifties, married to a Canadian woman. I only know that much because my father married late and was not certain of having an heir. If I had not been born, Nott Manor would have gone to that man.”

“Honestly, we have someone we can actually find rather than chasing maybes and you're standing
on your dignity?” Hermione put her fountain pen down to avoid throwing it at Theo. “Invite him home. Apologise for your bloody father. Explain the situation. He might actually give a damn if you don’t treat him like shit.”

“Can Squibs sit on the Wizengamot?” Theo asked Leota while glaring at Hermione, the old schoolyard rivalry flaring.

“If he can recite an oath on his lineage and cast the Hereditas Charm, yes. We will need to do the latter for any of the candidates regardless, to ensure we do not look like fools for nominating the wrong person.” The advocate had checked that too.

“How difficult is the Hereditas?” It did not surprise her she had not heard of that specific spell. There was book after book of heritage charms, consanguinity charms, fidelity charms and other such baggage attendant on being a pure-blood. Hermione had tried a few for the novelty of it, confirming both that her parents were sufficiently unrelated to legally marry in Wizarding Britain and that she was their biological child.

“It is fiddly but not hard.” Alun spoke up at this point, mostly to dilute the tension between Theo and Hermione. “I cast it after a bit of practice. You need to have a copy of the sigil of the family from which you wish to claim descent.”

“That is easy enough. The old families slap their sigil on absolutely everything.” Hermione recalled the Black family crockery, linen, curtains, carpets and cutlery. The Blacks had been keen to show everyone what was theirs.

“I have a list here.” Leota shuffled parchments until she found it. “We can teach everyone in Melekerai the Charm then have them work through the list. Fate might smile upon us.”

Fate did smile, albeit crookedly.

Alun went first to demonstrate the charm. He touched the Rosier sigil then cast. The wizard glowed brightly, a crisp blue than indicated direct legitimate descent. To show the variations, he performed the charm again while touching the Prince sigil. This time he shone much less intensely and with a tint of red, indicating descent through the female line. His maternal grandmother had been a Prince.

“The Hereditas is strongest through patrilineal or matrilineal descent.” Alun touched the extinct Wiblin sigil and got a hazy response that was a muddy mulberry colour. “Those being the traditional lines of inheritance. We could use other charms to prove kinship but the Wizengamot uses this one as it is the most conservative.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Hermione rolled her eyes. But she cast the charm and touched the Granger sigil. Nothing happened, which did not surprise her as she had looked into the ancestry of Hector Dagworth-Granger. The famous potion-maker’s father had married a French heiress, whose family had insisted he hyphenate his name. It would have been nice to be related but ’granger’ meant ’farm bailiff’ so the surname would have been quite common at one time.

She touched a few sigils at random just to check if she was doing the Hereditas correctly. The Radford mark yielded a faint reddish-purple, somewhat more maternal than the mixed colour Alun had generated. Hermione tried the Wiblin sigil and received mulberry too. So did Justin after he strolled in with a tray of fish kebabs.

“The Wiblins went extinct in the male line at the end of the fifteenth century after Samson Wiblin vowed to have no wife but Alberta Toothill.” Theo showed a youthful enthusiasm for Chocolate Frog cards. “The wizards of that family were quite rampant outside marriage. Quite possibly most of
the magical population of England is related to them somehow.”

“Not particularly helpful.” Justin tried the charm, choosing the families with the most recorded links to Muggle nobility as his own family were high born. He got quite a few instances of mulberry, confirming the general assumption that Muggle-borns were descended from Squibs somewhere.

“We'll test everyone and cherry-pick the best results, with priority to the families who have gone into abeyance most recently.” Hermione shrugged, moving her left hand down the list as she cast with her right. Nothing, mulberry, mulberry and mulberry. “Were the old families so chronically inbred that if you're related to one, you're related to most?”

“I believe so, and one of the signs a House is failing is the increased numbers of Squibs.” Alun watched in frank surprise as Justin and Hermione got that muddy not red, not blue colour for far more sigils than he would have expected. “Why so many?” He wondered aloud then answered his own question. “Squibs are healthier than Muggles. Wizards rarely get mundane diseases. They might not have much magic, but that little bit evidently counts.”

“Survival of the fittest. Disease resistance is less of a factor since the invention of antiseptic and antibacterial drugs but I imagine it would have been a significant asset even only a hundred years ago.” Hermione remarked on Alun’s observation as she flicked her wand. “I wonder if we drew the sigils on the sand, had everyone stand around them and cast, if we could get this done faster? We'd be better able to judge the intensity of the results too. We could make it a bit of a game.”

“I expect everyone has been enjoying the daiquiris enough by now that any excuse to play around on the beach would seem entertaining.” Leota smirked, hearing quite a bit of laughter drifting up from the party. “May Brigid bless our attempts to create new kin.”
The first dawn of spring saw Melekerai very quiet indeed. Few of the revellers were bestirring themselves so early and Hermione had cast a Silencing charm on the outboard motor of the small boat laden with expedition supplies. Neville levitated the ‘tinny’ into the water then helped the witch into it. He waded through the surf, made sure the propellers were well clear and climbed in himself. They motored away purposefully.

The island where Hermione had found the remnant Arachnis orchid was a few kilometres from their sanctuary, well within Apparating distance but until they were more familiar with the location, they would take the boat. Neville steered, enjoying the thrum of the engine and the bounce of the waves. Sunlight gilded the water, turning the sea into molten gold.

The wizard was a little less enchanted with the tropical paradise when he had to squelch through a fetid mangrove. Neville was keen on anything botanical but was less fond of leeches and anonymous buzzing insects. The repelling charms that kept them from being bitten could not do much about the smell of decaying vegetation.

“It's certainly humid enough for orchids. I was worried about the salt spray. It encrusts on the bark, making it difficult for epiphytes.” Neville paused to wipe his face and recast a Cooling charm. “Are you sure it's this way?”

“Do you know, I think Marcus is literally the only person I know who just takes my word for things.” Hermione said on a laugh, handing Neville the sketched map she had made of the route to the grove. “I made sure I could find it again. I didn't want to haul you all the way here on a goose chase.”

“That's because he wants you to have his babies.” Neville said sourly as he checked her map with a Navigation charm.

“I'm fairly sure Ron was keen to procreate and he still didn't take my word for it unless something was on fire.” She was slightly discomfited by the assertion Marcus had serious plans. Permanent children sort of serious plans.

“Was?” He looked up from the parchment. “He hasn't written you off.”

“He asked me to give his family time, so I have.” She was slightly discomfited by the assertion Marcus had serious plans. Permanent children sort of serious plans.

“You ask after a dog or sick uncle. You've been friends for almost ten years.” He pointed out, ignoring the water seeping into his socks.

“What else am I supposed to say?” She demanded, blinking rapidly. “How exactly am I meant to make this all better? I've been trying everything I can think of and it just keeps getting worse.”

“You could divorce Flint. That'd be a big step in the right direction. Ron's an easy-going bloke but no one would like seeing their girlfriend with another man.”

“I'm not with Marcus. I'm not 'with' anyone. I'm alone! Completely fucking alone! My parents are dead and I have nothing.” Hermione choked, her eyes swimming with tears. “I want my mum and dad.”
Neville hugged her, holding her close as she shook. He smoothed her shorn hair, wondering if she had cut it off in a Muggle funeral ritual. Did people do that? Was there something he should say here and now? Something that would make the loss not as awful as it was? Nothing anyone had said had worked for him.

“I miss them, Neville. So much.” Hermione wept. She thought she'd been holding it together fairly well. They hadn't even been talking about her parents. But the discord with Ron was all tied up in her grief and it took bloody nothing to set her off. Work helped, she had enough pride to not want the other committee members to see her blubbering. “It hurts worse than the Cruciatius.”

He led her over to a fallen tree, checked for creepy-crawlies then sat her gently down and held his friend as she sobbed. Neville didn't try to soothe her as he suspected she had not allowed herself to do enough of this. In typical Hermione fashion she had thrown herself into work, neglected her own well-being and dug herself into an emotional pit.

When the tears had at last abated, Neville offered her a handkerchief and some counsel.

“You aren't alone. I know it feels like it.” He had felt the only person in a grey world when he had finally understood his parents were never coming home. “But you aren't. And this will get better. But you can't fill the emptiness with work.”

“They need me.” Hermione said damply, drained from her outburst.

“They needed you to point them in the right direction and to kick their arses into gear. There's nothing like pure-bloods for sitting on their hands and complaining.” Said the pure-blood, with a wry smile. “But you don't have to lead the charge.”

“I don't want to just abandon them.” Being deserted was a lingering bruise in her psyche, it ached even now with a good friend's arms around her.

“You won't be. You'll be the glorious figurehead sounding the trumpet while your minions do all the work.” Neville chuckled at the mental imagine. “It'll be fun having minions, you'll see.”

“I get so tired when I'm alone. Like I'm hollow.” Hermione inelegantly blew her nose. She had never been able to cry photogenically. She suspected no one could.

“That passes.” He sighed, weary himself by proxy. “It feels like forever but it isn't. Gradually there's colour again and everything stops feeling so heavy.”

“It feels pretty fucking heavy right now.” She mopped her face. “If that God damned drunk hadn't died with them, I would've found him.” Hermione wrung the handkerchief. “There's no closure. I didn't get Umbridge. Or Bellatrix. Or the bastard who killed my parents.”

“I got a snake.” Neville knew what that felt like too. In the darkest hours of the war he had kept himself going with plans of revenge, of justice meted out with as much mercy as the Lestranges and Crouch had given his parents. That had not happened.

“It was a big snake.” Hermione sniffed.

“If there had been anything left, I would've had a pair of shoes made. I'd have settled for a belt.” He made a little joke as she seemed to be feeling better. Her laughter was watery but it was still laughter. “What do they actually need you to do?”

“We haven't started the internet searches for the lost relatives and we need to submit stay requests for all the pending matches and...” She let her breath out slowly. “A lot.”
“I’m sure the Muggle-borns can handle all the internetting.” Neville spoke blithely, unencumbered by any notion of what that entailed. “Yaxley is an advocate. Let her sharpen her teeth on the paperwork.”

“I need to sit for Flint. He won’t be able to keep up with all the reading.” Hermione did not protest at his airy delegation, which told her how tired she was. Stepping back a bit might be a good idea.

“He can pull the broom out of his arse and try harder.”

“It’s not that simple. He has a learning disability. His brain doesn’t process letters the right way.” She explained, ready to launch into a lecture on dyslexia and other related conditions.

“Like mistaking ‘b’ for ‘d’ and so forth?” Neville raised his eyebrows. “I used to do that. Gran made me copy out the alphabet over and over until I got it right. I still have to use a charm to check my spelling.”

“It could be genetic. You’re first cousins. Have your families intermarried much?” Her curiosity diverted her from her grief. Hermione knew she was grasping at conversational straws but any topic right now was a good one.

“The Gamps always had a lot of daughters, who always married other pure-bloods. My mum was one of five girls.” He tried to remember which aunt was which. He knew one of them had married a Bulstrode and Alexandra had married a Flint, resulting in Marcus, but he wasn’t sure about the other two. “Mum had a lot of biological aunts too, who never visited.”

“Bitches.” Hermione cast a Scourgify on the handkerchief and gave it back. “You want me to go home and make it up with Ron.”

“I think you’ll feel better for it.” Neville spoke diffidently, carefully tactful. “Even if you don’t date or whatever, you need to put it right with him. You, Harry and Ron are not complete without each other. You’ve been through too much together.”

“When did you get so sensible?” She gave him a thankful hug.

“Oh, seventh year. Spending so much time in the Room of Requirement avoiding the Carrows gave me a lot of time to think.” He stood up, offering her his hand with a grin. “I also know how to play an astounding number of card games. Though I never want to play strip poker ever again. Ginny cheats.”

“Pairs of socks count as one item.” Hermione firmly repeated the rule from previous Weasley poker games.

“Yes, but ten pairs?”
When Ginny wanted something, she was not afraid of working for it. And after the shock she'd had with Harry wanting to 'reassess' their wedding, she was not going to let any moss grow on her. All the big plans went out the window. What she had cried most about when she thought she had lost her dream, was her family and friends not sharing her special day.

Not the flowers or the dress or the music or the decorations or any of the rest of the tat. Friends and family. So that's what they'd have, the witch vowed. Ginny press-ganged her family into helping her clean up Grimmauld Place, particularly the ballroom and the big room known as the 'chair room' because of all the hoarded dusty seating heaped in it.

George made tiny fireworks that filled the dingy rooms with light. Percy sent out the invitations. A copy of the list had fortunately survived the post-Hermione purge. Molly made cake. Arthur bought a dragon's weight in ice cream. Bill called in some favours and got a few musician friends to play at short notice. Charlie rushed his Uruguayan trip and brought his little sister a gorgeous sapphire blue llama wool robe. Ron ran errands and tried to look cheerful.

Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley were married on the 5th of February standing in the snow in the garden of their soon-to-be marital home. The house thronged with people, toasting with French champagne from Fleur's family and eating lavish ice cream sundaes as the married couple's nod to Muggle culture.

All the Weasley boys danced with their sister then took turns lighting more fireworks, making increasingly daring frozen cocktails or just mingling. Ron found himself dancing with Hannah, who looked like a snow fairy in her bridesmaid's dress of soft blue and silver.

“‘You look lovely.’” Ron smiled, trying not to keep glancing at the ballroom door. Neville and Hermione had flown in the day before, just in time for Neville to be best man. But Hermione wasn't there. She wasn't coming. Her note had said as much, as she wanted the big day to go smoothly. Her wish that he would enjoy himself was proving difficult to fulfil.

“‘You look very handsome yourself.’” Hannah twirled, having given up on trying to waltz to whatever the musicians were playing. It didn't matter as everyone was having fun. Seamus was juggling bananas while Oliver and Alicia tried to tango but were laughing too hard to remember the steps.

“Harry still had the deposit for the suits.” He was not sure about the top hats and tails but back in the day Ginny'd had her heart set on them. Now most of the hats floated around the room filled with ice for the champagne. “I wanted to thank you for helping get Harry and Ginny back together. You and Neville have been great.”

“About Neville and I.” She ventured and then sagged in relief when Ron simply nodded.

“I don't know what I'm doing right now.” He stopped dancing so he could hug her in what he hoped would seem a jolly way. “But if I had a clue, I'd hope it'd lead to you. Neville's a lucky man. I envy him.”

“Really?” Hannah arched an eyebrow. She'd plucked the damned things into delicate curves, she might as well use them. “You're not drinking, you're trying to be happy and it isn't really working. I don't think you're pining for me.”
Ron frowned. He didn't want to talk about it. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He didn't really talk. Not serious, brass tacks talk. About what he wanted and what he hoped. What he was prepared to forgive and what he was not.

“She should be here.” Ron kept his voice low. Ginny had inherited Molly's keen hearing. Years of raising sons had honed her maternal sonar. Or was it radar? Hermione had tried to explain the difference once when the three of them had been chatting idly about how high broomsticks could fly.

“She wants to make up for what happened between you.” Hannah had not asked for specifics from anyone. It was not her business to critique other people's dirty laundry. “I think you want to forgive her.”

“Yeah.” He sighed, walking them over to a quiet corner so they could talk and he could try to blue coloured ice cream. It was very blue indeed. “I want it to never have happened. But that won't fix the problem, will it? Hermione and I need to talk and I don't know what to say. I get so angry when I think about Flint and then we start arguing and it goes down hill.”

“Maybe you could write down what you are thinking? Write a letter to yourself. My mum used to do that when she was bothered about something. It helped get her thoughts in order, she said.” Hannah tried the blue ice cream too and blinked at the sweetness. “What's it supposed to be?”

“Bubblegum, I reckon.” Ron ate another spoonful. He could write a letter. Hannah's idea seemed like a good one. No one needed to see what he'd written, so if it came out soppy or mean, no one would get hurt. “Sometimes I hate her. Then sometimes like today when there's an empty space where she should be, I miss her.”

“Sounds about right to me. Maybe talk to Dean. He'd understand.” She gave up on the dessert and waved to the trainee Auror, who was trying to untangle himself from Luna's hat. “Nothing has to happen instantly, you know.”

“Flint could instantly turn into a toad. I'd be quite happy about that.” Ron chuckled, and gave Hannah a blue kiss on the cheek before heading over to help Dean.

The two trainees ended up taking a bottle of bubbly out onto the front step to talk and watch the snow flakes drift in lazy eddies. They were still out there when the older guests started to head home. Molly dragged them both inside to farewell the bride and groom. Kingsley's wedding gift had been a portkey and a weekend in a spa resort in Iceland, guaranteed to be out of sight of the paparazzi.

Arthur was comforting an emotional Molly when he spotted his youngest son. He patted his wife on the back, gave her a banana split with tiny marshmallows and reassured her she wasn't losing a daughter. On that theme, he took Ron aside.

“Well, that's done.” The Weasley patriarch began then stopped awkwardly. He pursed his lips in thought, knowing what he wanted to say but feeling conflicted about it. “We'd have her back. In a little while. If you wanted her back.”

“Mum said she wouldn't have her in the house.” Ron winced. Ginny and Molly had said a lot of things about Hermione. That was one of the reasons he was hesitating. There was a lot that needed to be forgotten on both sides before he could have the big happy family he wanted.

“Your mum loves you. She hates seeing you hurt.” Arthur turned to include his wife in the conversation only to find her dancing with Charlie, with a match-making expression on her face. “It won't be easy, and it definitely won't be quiet but what I'm saying is we'll make the effort if that's what you want.”
“Thanks, dad.” Hugging his father, Ron had to blink a couple of times. Because it was dusty. Old houses always were, no matter how many times you cast Scourgify.

“Anything for you, Ron. You know that. Your mum and I are so proud of you.” And so thankful you came home. Arthur had to blink a little himself. “We'll muddle through, right?”

“Right.” The trainee Auror grinned. “Let's get the last of that cake before someone Apparates away with it.”
Sweetness

Ron brought cupcakes as the result of much cogitation. He was temporarily sated with ice cream, flowers were awkward, chocolates seemed too much, a picnic hamper was too fiddly, and alcohol was unwise. A half-blood witch had started a patisserie near the Ministry and did all the fancy little Muggle cakes. Possibly as a way of sticking two fingers up at the world that had sent her to Azkaban.

He had picked an assortment and carried the box in both hands to keep from fidgetting. Ron told himself he would be calm about this. They would sort their problems out, talk like the sober, responsible, respected war heroes they were and then eat cupcakes. Together.

Hermione had chosen the neutral ground of Hyde Park and he had named the day and time. She was there already, rugged up on a bench overlooking Serpentine Lake. Ron hoped the name wasn't an omen. She had already brushed the snow off the bench so he could sit beside her, leaving him with nothing to do other than smile tentatively.

“I brought an assortment. They had your favourite buttercream. Had quite a few posh kinds. Not sure about the one with candied fruit but it looked happy.” Ron opened the box to offer the cupcakes to her. Hermione had a basket with a thermos and poured them both hot chocolate. She noticed his wince when she handed him the cup.

“You didn't need the Veritaserum. I would've told you everything.” The witch spoke quietly, trying hard to be non-confrontational.

“I shouldn't have done that.” Ron admitted, sipping the sweet drink. Made with real chocolate and cream, it reminded him of their first Christmas after the war, when she had come home to the Burrow from Hogwarts. Everyone had been there, except Fred. So nearly perfect. “I didn't want to believe it. I guess I thought it was some curse or prank or something.”

“That's what I thought when I found out about my parents. I kept expecting someone to jump out and yell 'April Fools'.” She tried one of the jaunty little cakes, licking the rich icing off first.

“Like Fred.” He stared at the lake. It was mostly frozen, except for a few patches in the deepest parts. The most dangerous bits, Ron thought absently. Like this conversation.

“Like Fred.” Hermione echoed.

“I'm sorry if I pushed you away.” Ron had written down those words or words like them repeatedly over a whole scroll of parchment. He wanted to get them right, get them into some sort of rational order so they stopped bouncing around in his head.

“You pushed, but you didn't push me away.” She answered carefully. “I still love you, Ron. I think I always will, whatever happens. We've been through too much, we three, for that to ever change.”

“But.” He heard the cavil and she nodded.

“But now the war is over, and everything's gone back to normal, my normal isn't the same as your normal.” Hermione was unsure whether normality was even appropriate in the context of the wizarding world. “Maybe I should use 'ordinary' instead. I can't use average because the Ministry doesn't have any demographics data.”

“What's demographics?” Ron asked, going with her on the conversational segue. If they were talking
and not shouting then he was fine. For a while, anyway. But if she started to discourse about the Marriage Law, he was going to review Quidditch League stats in his head.

“In this case, essentially it's me looking up the average age of first marriages in the United Kingdom. Which is thirty years old for women. That's my normal, Ron. I'm happy for Harry and Ginny, but getting married at eighteen only happens in romance novels.”

“We could be a romance novel.” The wizard suggested then shook his head at his red velvet cupcake. “You don't need to say it. I know we aren't. I wanted that fairytale, same as Ginny. But we're not the heroes Harry is.”

“I am very happy not to be the Chosen One.” Hermione bit her cupcake, imagining it was a Death Eater. Chomp chomp chomp, vanquished! “We still sacrificed our childhoods, though. I don't think we've lived enough life between us to make a whole ordinary one.”

“I hate mum's clock.” Ron laughed at his nonsensical comment but the feeling was there. “Watching, counting down, ticking away into Mortal Peril. I'd have liked a bit more lying in on a Saturday and a bit less running for my life.” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed her shift uncomfortably. “I came back.”

“You did.” She agreed. “And that mattered. And it would've been hard coming back to face us. And you saved Harry.”

“But.” That word was becoming arse quite quickly.

“I wanted to run too, and I didn't. Whenever I see big differences between us, that miserable bloody tent comes back. God, I never want to feel like that again.” Hermione blinked and gulped hot chocolate. “I want to forget, and there hasn't been enough time.”

“Will there ever be enough time?” Ron asked after a long pause. Her constant putting him off when all he wanted was a firm date, something to work towards, something he could set in his mind as a rock rose like gorge now. He wanted a foundation to build upon.

“I don't know. I hope so.” She folded the cupcake wrapper and put it in a plastic bag in her basket. “I've been jumping into things too fast. Hogwarts, getting my parents back, the legal challenge. It's like I'm still in war mode and I have to work quickly before someone else dies.”

“Training's a bit like that. If I get things wrong, it's bad.” He grimaced at 'bad'. There were better words. “Gutting. A complete failure. I see where Harry was at school, taking things so personally. I don't want to be that bloke. I want to be able to do a good job then come home and rest.”

“Are you sure you want to be an Auror?” Hermione had not previously voiced her misgivings about Ron embarking on a career that would forever put him in Harry's shadow. Now seemed to be the moment to do it. Laying all her cards on the table, she continued. “It'll never be a job you can leave at work. There will always be more Dark Wizards somewhere.”

“Yeah.” Ron slouched back and rubbed his left arm, thinking about the Dark Mark and paranoia and turning into Mad-Eye Moody. “Fuck Constant Vigilance.”

“That's why I refused when Kingsley offered me a place.” She brushed a strand of hair off her face, tucking it into her beanie. Hats were so much easier now she had less hair. They stayed where they were put, for once.

“I want to finish training though.” He reached for another cupcake, one with pink frosting then hesitated. “Fuck pink too. I hate that colour.” He picked another one with sprinkles. “George could
use some help.”

“It’s a good business.” Hermione nodded. “You’d be able to mind the kids and help out at home, and not be at work all the time.”

“I want to do that.” Ron affirmed, hearing the indirect question. “I know mum runs the Burrow like no one else knows how to use a frying pan but I’d pitch in once I was married. Properly, not just half-arsed like I do at the flat.”

“I think half is generous. I’ve seen your shared bathroom.” She smirked then chuckled with him when Ron laughed.

“I’ve stopped turning on the light when I go in there. Best not to look.” He grinned. Harry was in for a shock when he started living with Ginny. For all she left her Quidditch gear everywhere, his sister liked things clean. Floors should not be sticky.

“I want to go to university.” Hermione pulled out some pamphlets she had picked up, handing them to him so he could follow what she was contemplating. “I haven't decided where yet. There are so many courses I want to do. Depending on how I can parse my transcript to avoid awkward questions, I may need to do a bridging course somewhere.”

“How long will that take?” Ron flicked through the shiny advertisement for clever people and wondered why so many of them were wearing the same white jacket.

“Three to five years, depending on the course. I hope to start in September so I have a little time to get myself organised. I probably won't live on campus.” Living in her parents’ house was still daunting. Maybe she could rent out both properties and find a little bedsit somewhere before she became too comfortable living in Marcus's flat.

“Three to five years would give me time to finish training, maybe try the job a bit to see if it does follow me home.” He mused around his cupcake. “If it does, then I’ll talk to George. Might do that anyway, just to keep him going. He still can't look at himself in the mirror. Keeps seeing Fred.”

“He needs counselling. There are grief counselling services. He wouldn't have to mention anything about being a wizard. I've looked into a few myself.” Hermione shrugged into her coat as the wind picked up. “Seeing a doctor, someone who can treat him without any baggage might help.”

“I'll suggest it.” Ron turned to face her, all nervousness gone now they were just chatting again. “Do you want to be a bit apart for a while? Live a little? Do you think that'll help us?” He reached for her hand and held it lightly. “I miss you but I'm still pissed at you.”

“The same.” Hermione squeezed his fingers. “Our timing was all twisted around, like we jumped into the middle of our relationship. We never just dated. I'd like to start afresh, to see if we'll fit together without someone trying to kill us.”

“I can do that.” He took a deep breath then let it out. Time to be bloody adult about things. “How long do you think the Marriage Law appeal will take?” Ron was not going to mention Flint if he could avoid it.

“Months, but it should be done before I start university. If you can persuade Harry to stand for the Potter seat and your dad to stand for Weasley, then we can rattle a few dovecotes.” Hermione was looking forward to that. She was going to stride into the Ministry and hit them over the head with their own legislation. “I'll be standing for the Flint seat.”

“I bet he loves that.” Ron gritted his teeth. Mature and responsible, remember? “I'll transfer to the
Welsh office to finish my training. Won't need to see any of the snakes Slytherin about.”

“That's a terrible pun.” She groaned.

“I know.” He chuckled, unrepentant. “So, fresh start? I meet this pretty college girl at a cafe and see how it goes? No luggage?”

“Baggage, and yes.” Hermione turned their clasp into a handshake. “Just you and me, in some cheap student coffee place.” She smiled, feeling better than she had in weeks. “You can bring cupcakes again.”
Cordial

The first thing Madam Flint did upon taking her husband's seat in the Wizengamot was to enjoy a moment of private gloating. Hermione was entirely aware she was only a proxy but the robes gave her a heady sense of power. The headpiece was uncomfortable but it was no more clownish than a woollen periwig or stereotypical pointy hat.

Gloating done, Madam Flint graciously and soberly accepted the formal welcome from the Chief Warlock. That droned on for a while, allowing her to scan the chamber and gauge who was in attendance. This was an ordinary sitting, meaning not all Members were present. That was good. She hoped to sneak through some motions to get the appeal process moving.

Movement was clearly an unfamiliar concept in the Wizengamot.

By the time she had been in the Chamber for six hours, Hermione would have settled for sneaking in a pillow. The chairs were so old and so inured to magic they refused to accept a Cushioning charm. No wonder the Members looked austere. Years of doing this and they were probably numb from the buttocks down.

Hermione made a note to warn all the new Seat candidates to bring something comfortable to sit upon or the committee risked losing their volunteers. A strong chemical stimulant would also be useful as various witches and wizards mumbled through readings, blathered on about clauses and sub-clauses or just nattered quietly amongst themselves. Parliamentary Question Time was a laugh riot compared to this.

But when she nominated her own bill and had it go through its first reading with barely a raised eyebrow eight minutes before tea break, Hermione knew she could do this. She crab-walked out of the chamber trying to surreptitiously rub some feeling back into her rump before joining the Strategy Committee.

“Was it read?” Leota asked anxiously, oblivious to the ink on her face from endless revisions. The committee had not been idle while their sitting Member sat.

“Yes, with nary a twitch. All that legalese slid through nicely.” Hermione accepted a cup of lukewarm coffee from Theo. “Second reading is next session. I was surprised it was so soon.”

“They're jamming through all they can before the recess at the vernal equinox.” The advocate smiled tightly, prepared to forgo sleep to get as much of the paperwork they needed lodged on the nod in the doldrums of the short spring sitting.

“Then I'll attend every session.” She made a face. “We need someone who knows the minutiae of Wizengamot protocol. If we can sit in relays, we can keep our voting numbers high without having everyone camped out at the Ministry.”

They might not be actually living at the Wizengamot Chambers but it did not take long for it to feel like they were squatting there. The Flint Rooms, all the ancestral seats had offices for the sitting Members, became their headquarters once twenty years of dust had been banished.

Hermione lay on her stomach on a green suede chaise longue with her feet on the armrest. After a double-sitting, that was the only comfortable position she could find. A stack of books rested on the floor as she reviewed Leota's briefing on the procedure to counter an unofficial query on a pending second reading before an informal hearing.
“Or you could challenge a hundred and three year old wizard to a duel to stop him being such a pedant.” Alun sat with his bare feet propped up waiting for the swelling to abate. He had disturbed the nest of something in one of the Archives and whatever it was had bitten him several times, through his shoes. Fortunately the fleeting creature had not been unduly poisonous. His toes were the size of bratwurst however.

“No duels. We’ve already headed off a two century old feud no one knew about until the ancestral curse triggered.” Theo staggered in under the weight of a document box that refused to be levitated. A great deal of the impedimenta of the Wizengamot was resistant to magic, ostensibly to prevent tampering. Mostly it just caused incipient back strain.

“That did verify both candidates were blood relations to the families in question.” Hermione rolled a scroll across the floor to Alun, who leant over and picked it up. Neither of them was going to move any more than they must. “Who has the 1385 Charter of Burgage and Privilege?”

“If it is the one that snarls, I put a brick on it.” Leota indicated a low table laden with documents under impromptu paperweights. Medieval anti-forgery curses took on semi-sentience after long disuse. Some of them were quite defensive.

“It's the one with the little seal feet.” Hermione flicked her wand at the pinned parchments, riffling through them to see if one had a fringe of wax embossed ribbons. “I think it might have wandered off, damn it.”

“I have the bloody thing.” Marcus announced as he strode into the Rooms bearing bags of take-away. “It tried to get past me in the hall.” He had a fat scroll tucked under one arm, its ribbons thrashing like tentacles. “They were out of duck so I got combination egg noodle.”

The wizard dispersed the Chinese food then sat down on the chaise after shifting Hermione’s feet from the arm. He began to massage her legs, which, in addition to paying for things and going on food runs, was his contribution to the appeal. They had yet to find a way around the horrendously uncomfortable wooden chairs. Courtesy of a 1561 edict banning ‘all thrownes, highe settles and ye chaises of courting’ all Members had the same egalitarian seating.

“Combination of what?” Leota was still dubious about Muggle fast food but as house elves were banned from the Wizengamot Chambers by a complicated mesh of wand-related ordinances, and as she was no cook she ate the strange meals.

“I did not ask.” He rubbed his fingers over Hermione’s toe socks, sending little star bursts of pain down her calves. “I spoke to my father. He could not help much. Did say to wear the Flint ring.”

“Will doing that magically make the seat less of a torture device?” Hermione dug into her fried rice still lying on her stomach. After nearly fifteen hours in session, she had barely been able to walk out of the Chamber. But she had gone to every sitting and stayed the entire duration. They had got four new Seats opened to candidates as well as furthering the contested reading of the Nuptial Clause.

“It might.” Marcus shrugged, flexing her ankle to loosen the cramped tendons.

“I expect it is a lingering curse against Muggle-borns.” She shifted, trying to stretch against the knots. “I am the only one currently sitting. I think I will casually mention that to the Prophet. It gives us another angle to attack the legislation. It was definitely not passed by the people it apparently benefits most.”

“You haven't done too badly.” Theodore remarked, waving his chopsticks at Marcus. The Slytherin grapevine had informed him of the reconciliation between Hermione and Weaselby. He did not want
that détente jeopardising their efforts to overturn the law.

“Paper marriage, Theo. We're just friends.” Marcus ran his hands familiarly over Hermione’s legs with every sign of equanimity. His wife had told him she was talking again with the ginger and that she hoped the wretch would court her in the autumn. He would deal with that when it came time.

“I've met a lot of people I never would have known or worked with, since the legislation.” Hermione looked pointedly at the pure-bloods in the room. “I'd like to think we are all friends.”

“Point taken.” Leota resolved to have a quiet word with Theo. His defence of his fellow Slytherin’s interests was loyal but premature. “Have you had a chance to speak to Potter about standing for his family seat? No problem of lineage there.”

“I asked Neville and Hannah to broach it.” Hermione sighed. Ginny was still guarding Harry as though she expected him to be abducted. “I'm sure he'll do it but making it a decision between me and his wife won't help. The sooner Ginny gets on a Quidditch team, the better. She might let Harry out of the house unguarded then.”
When she heard Ginny had made the Holyhead Harpies' Reserve, Hermione sent a congratulatory bouquet. She tried not to mind when it came back with every flower carefully beheaded, and did not mention it to Ron. But she was upset enough that when Marcus came over for dinner he took her out to eat in wizarding London to cheer her up.

They had a nice night and ended up dancing at the Prismatic Dragon, something they had missed on their first visit. Hermione showed off the ballroom lessons her mother had insisted she take as a child, laughing when Marcus confessed much the same ordeal. They waltzed to Muggle jazz and stumbled home tipsy in the early hours.

Hermione woke late, rushing breakfast and downing an energy drink to clear her head for a planning meeting. She Apparated directly to the Flint Rooms, courtesy of the signet ring, managing to beat Alun Rosier to the table and avoid a charge of tardiness.

The Strategy Committee was upbeat. Harry Potter was taking his Seat today and they had a perfectly crafted rebuttal to defuse an objection to rescinding the Nuptial Clause. They were still arguing technicalities but they had the Wizengamot on the ropes. In a month or two, they would have the numbers to call for a vote on the modified Reconstruction Bill.

Harry winked at her as they went into the Chamber. Hermione smiled but the Flint and Potter Seats were far enough apart she could not easily talk to him. She did cheer when he was confirmed as his family's sitting Member and applauded when he stood to make his inaugural speech, expecting it to be short and to the point.

It was.

Her best friend Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, hated public speaking. He wanted to do as little of it as possible. He had talked with Kingsley Shacklebolt the night before to get the Minister's advice on how to do as little oration as possible.

Harry didn't much care about the Marriage Law. Hermione did have a point that it was unfair but it was optional. And it taught the purest of the pure-bloods a valuable lesson on karma. However, Hermione was on the warpath about it being a matter of principle. She wouldn't ditch Flint until the legislation was overturned. Harry wanted the Slytherin gone from his friend's life, so he did the obvious thing.

He simply asked the Wizengamot to strike down the clause.

“And they did.” Hermione sat in the Flint Rooms thirty minutes later still stunned. “A conscience vote. Just like that.”

“All that work.” Leota Yaxley poured herself a drink then stared at the Fire Whiskey. Theodore Nott took the bottle from her, poured for himself and a mute Alun Rosier then passed the drink to Marcus Flint.

“Must be nice to be Gryffindor.” Theo said bitterly, tossing back the contents of his glass.

“This isn't Gryffindor!” The Muggle-born witch protested. “This is fucking wizarding nepotism at its worst! A bloody magic wand to make everything just like you want it! For the select few.” She gestured at her husband, who poured her a shot. Hermione sipped, gasped and continued to rant.

“This is not how it should be! I don't care if we got our way, this isn't right!”
“I thought it's what you wanted.” Harry stuck his head around the door, taking in the unhappy expressions on the people he most expected to be rejoicing. He hadn't told Hermione his plan in case it didn't work. But it had and now she was free to get back together with Ron. “Everyone you packed off to that island can come home and you can get a divorce.”

“Harry, do you realise what sort of message this sends?” Hermione thumped her glass down before she was tempted to throw it in frustration. “You can't trade on your reputation. You can't be seen to be able to be bought. It's corrupt. It makes you look as much a crony as the rest of the Wizengamot!”

“Don't get your wand in a knot. With all the bad press and complaints, and all your arguing, Kingsley said the Members were hanging out for an excuse to axe the law.” He had been happy to provide, though he had expected a little more thanks than this.

“An excuse that didn't come from Mudbloods and Death Eaters.” Theo sneered, refilling glasses and handing Hermione hers but not offering Harry a drink. He indicated with the snub exactly who was in his social circle and who was not.

“You'll still accept it, though, won't you, Nott?” Harry sneered right back. He would not take that tone of voice from someone who only missed out on the Dark Mark by accident of timing.

“Of course, we'll accept it. We're hardly going to petition the Wizengamot to reinstate the legislation just so we can continue to appeal against it.” Hermione reined in her frustration to attempt to head off an argument. “Thank you, Harry. You've helped hundreds of people by resolving this quickly.”

“I didn't do it for them.” Nearly Auror Potter looked at Flint pointedly. “It was a stupid law and it deserved to be got rid of. I'm sure you'd have got it done, 'Mione. I just did it faster. Seeker, remember?”

“We appreciate your help.” She offered Harry her glass so he could join them in a toast but with a smirk at Theo, Harry refused.

“We can celebrate properly later. I've got to get back to work. Training's nearly done. I'll be on fieldwork soon.” He grinned at his best friend and strutted out not quite sticking up two fingers at the pure-bloods.

Hermione crossed the room and shut the door quietly. She put a hand to her mouth, noticing in an abstract way that it was shaking. Marcus noticed too, moving to put an arm around her. She rested her head against his chest trying to find a way not to feel a failure.

“Well, I will say it if no one else will.” Alun raised his glass. “To the defeat of the Bill.” The Strategy Committee joined in only a desolatory toast. “To us, then. Slayers of paperwork.”

“Vanquishers of bureaucracy.” Leota lifted her Fire Whiskey. “A partial victory, at least.”

“You get used to it.” Theo, remembering the House Cup loss of his first year, took the toast too. “Hermione, I know your principles are smarting right now but no one outside this room will care how we did it. Finch-Fletchley would have ridden through London as naked as Godiva if it had helped. So, we grit our teeth and get on with our lives.”

“You care, though.” Hermione took a deep, steadying breath.

“I care deeply.” The Nott heir confirmed. “Which is why I am going to stay in politics and reform where I can. I hope once you have your advocate qualification, you will help me, Leota. We make a good team.”
“I will give it serious consideration. I am not going to stay with my pupilmaster any longer than I must.” She had previously anticipated joining her mentor’s firm but his heavy-handed attitude to marriage altered that plan. “I will introduce him to my girlfriend before I leave, though.”

“I have had enough of paper.” Alun gestured at the drifts of parchment blanketing the Rooms. “I am going back to France, back to my expensive mistress and my wine. I think I will go to Marseilles and be indolent. You are all welcome to join me.”

“With your mistress?” Hermione teased and Alun gave her a Gallic shrug that diffused the tension. “I’ll go to Palau, spread the news and help everyone return to England. Then I think I will sit on the beach staring at the sea for a while. At least until it all makes sense and I can come home a better person.” She looked up at the wizard holding her. “What about you?”

“I will play Quidditch.” Marcus smirked. “The game’s not won, yet.”
“And what are the Bioethics of Neuropharmacology?” Ron asked, reading the title of a textbook before tossing it onto the coffee table. He cleared a handful of highlighters then stretched out on Hermione's sofa. It was shabby blue suede, second-hand and so ridiculously comfortable it lured you in. He had spent many nights unconscious on it under an eiderdown quilt and Crookshanks.

“Drug use, mostly. Administration of psychoactives on patients with diminished capacity. An endless amount on research protocols.” Hermione walked in from her flat's tiny kitchen with a covered tray. She set it down on Ron's lap, paused for effect then lifted the lid to reveal a single cupcake.

But it was a glorious cupcake of great decadence. It was iced with chocolate buttercream, dusted with curls of coconut. It had sparklers. Ron laughed.

“Best 'quit your job' dessert I've ever seen.” He pulled out the sparklers and devoured the cupcake. They always had cupcakes on important occasions. It was their tradition. “Mum's not speaking to me again.”

“She does that.” Hermione was tart on the subject of Molly Weasley. Ron's mother had 'not spoken' at length and volume when Ron had begun visiting Oxford casually. When their seeing each other over coffee had progressed into going to places alone together, Mrs Weasley had prophesised doom.

“She's going to be even less talkative in a bit.” Ron licked icing off his lips, taking a deep breath. He didn't meet Hermione's curious look as he didn't want to lose his nerve. Instead, he slid off the sofa onto the floor on his knees. On one knee.

“Oh.” The witch said, eloquently.

“Yeah.” The wizard took another deep breath. “You said, before, that you wanted a fresh start. A proper courtship. And I've had a great time just being a guy you know and then being your boyfriend.” This wasn't the speech he had planned. That speech had poetry in it. But these words came from the heart. “But now I'd like to be your husband. Will you marry me, Hermione?”

“Yes.” Hermione said in a tiny voice. She stared at the little box Ron held in his hands. She offered him her left hand and they did the slightly fiddly ring thing, both trying not to laugh while failing entirely not to grin.

“It's grandma's ring. Dad smuggled it to me.” Ron spoke with a tightness in his chest. They had done it right this time. Just for the two of them. “Happily ever after, right?”

“Happily ever after.” She affirmed, blinking away joyful tears. “Or nearest approximation thereof.”
As usual, Australian (British) spelling throughout.

And there's an alternate ending called 'Divorce and Other Courtship Rituals'.

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