Divorce and Other Courtship Rituals

by Seselt

Summary

It would have been romantic to say their courtship began with their divorce but Hermione had to admit the ending of their marriage had been more about tidying paperwork than pathos. She stopped being Madam Flint with a handshake and a nice Italian dinner. But Marcus was not a man to give up on what, or who, he wanted.

Alternate Ending to 'a Disarranged Marriage'.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Hermione's new flat in Oxford was spartan but it was close to her campus. Her landlord had been happy to allow her to repaint the '80s era pastels, and courtesy of some circumspect magic she had a crisp clean white space. Which today she was filling with second-hand furniture and books, the Muggle way.

“Turn it a little to your left. I think one of the feet is stuck.” Hermione suggested, huffing a strand of hair out of her face as she tried to keep her grip on the sofa. Her pixie cut had turned fluffy over summer and now resisted all restraint, reminding her why she had grown her hair long in the first place.

The wizard helping her move obligingly rotated the sofa to his left and coaxed it through the door. He was strong enough to make it look easy, though he had questioned why she did not shrink all the furniture. Her explanation of neighbours remarking upon an instantly furnished flat had got a smirk. Flints did not have neighbours.

Crookshanks, who had been noticeably absent for the work, hopped up onto the sage suede and made himself comfortable in the middle of the cushions. His witch scolded him affectionately then left to bring in a box of kitchen things from the rental van. Marcus toted a coffee table ahead of her, not noticing the admiring look from the tenant in the ground floor front flat. Hermione smiled as she passed the stylish young man. He smiled back, introducing himself as Eliot.

“Hermione.” The witch gave her name, expecting the usual polite amusement or quizzical reaction to the uncommon appellation.

“Shakespeare or Lully?” Eliot asked, his gaze following Marcus up the stairs. “Fit boyfriends are handy, aren't they?”

“Lully.” Hermione smiled, pleased he had got the reference. “My parents were opera buffs.” She noticed where Eliot was looking and tried not to chuckle. In an effort to blend in, Marcus was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, which complimented his Quidditch body well. “He's not my boyfriend, actually.”

“Do you think he'd like to be mine?” The architect saw no harm in asking. If his new neighbour had problems with his life choices best to find that out quickly. He was reassured by the brunette's unaffected manner.

“He's my ex-husband, so perhaps I'm not the best person to ask.” That seemed the most tactful way of answering, as Hermione was unsure how open-minded Marcus was and explaining the wizarding world's lack of social progression compared to the non-magical world would be impossible.

“What's wrong with him?” Eliot inquired frankly.

“He's a ratbag.” Ron had caught the tail end of the conversation as he arrived and replied quickly, wanting to caution the Muggle to keep away from Flint. He ignored Hermione's frown instead holding out his hands to take the box from her. She handed it over with a quelling look he also ignored. The wizard headed upstairs to tell the Slytherin his assistance was no longer required.

“That would be the boyfriend, then.” Sensing the atmosphere, Eliot made an educated guess.

“Ron and Marcus don't get along.” Hermione explained though that much was obvious. “I'd better go referee them. Nice meeting you, Eliot.” They shook hands in that middle class way of tacit
approval before the witch hurried to her flat.

The wizards were glaring at each other, not quite circling and snarling like predators. When Ron had reluctantly rescinded his offer to help her move due to sudden work commitments, she had asked Marcus. Hermione had never intended them to cross paths. But at least neither of them had drawn a wand.

“Why don't I make some tea?” She suggested, trying to inject some compulsory civil conversation.

“No, thank you.” Marcus gave her a nod, politely excusing himself to avoid another incident with the hot-tempered blood traitor. Hermione thanked him then waited until the front door had shut before taking the box, which contained her electric kettle, from Ron.

“Honestly,” Hermione didn't expect the wizards to be friends but considering the effort she had made to keep Ron out of trouble, she would have liked a little more truce. “I appreciate you coming.” She said, instead of starting a quarrel. Her friend was not going to tolerate their former school-mate so she might as well spare her breath. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please. I had to use an old Floo connection no one's cleaned for years.” Ron said, horribly conscious of soot in Hermione's bright white flat. She didn't scold him for seeing off the snake, which was good because he wasn't done. Once the witch was out of sight in the kitchen, he dashed out the door to catch that bastard before he slithered off and caught up to him on the stairs.

“Stay away from her.” Ron snapped. “I want you out of her life.”

“Hermione is a good woman and a good friend.” Marcus spoke with restrained calm and an unrestrained sneer. And reasonable confidence that the Muggle neighbour could hear them through his door. “I do not want to see her crying again because of you, Weasley.”

“We're getting back together, Flint. I'm going to make her happy. And you are going to make yourself scarce.” The newly minted Auror crossed his arms so there could be no suggestion of him going for his wand. Ron was mindful of his supervisor's warning to keep his nose clean. “Don't make me tell you twice.”

“Ron?” Hermione called from her flat. Ron, having said his piece, hastened upstairs. He was prepared to be told off for interfering. He was not prepared to let Flint think he was welcome at Hermione's new digs. Particularly as Ron intended to make good on the second go of their relationship.

Marcus showed himself out of the building at a leisurely pace, and hid his smirk when the Muggle neighbour came out to so-casually check his mailbox. The wizard aired a socially acceptable smile although it was not his habit even after getting his teeth fixed. Cultivating the other people in Hermione's building was a sensible tactic.

“Bit possessive is he?” Eliot ventured, not sure who was the bad guy in this scenario. He was all for a bit of drama but only on telly.

“The three of us went to school together. Weasley and I never got along.” Marcus opted for honesty as he disliked having to remember his own lies. Besides, anyone who knew he had been in Slytherin House expected his tongue to be forked.

“You married a secondary school chum?” The architect reluctantly mentally revised his assessment of their ages, and their class from 'intelligentsia' to 'chav'.

“It was a matter of inheritance. I had to be married. Hermione obliged.” He heard the judgement in
the pretty boy's voice and looked down his nose at him. “She is twenty-one and we were married for only a few months.”

“Oh, my apologies.” Eliot was relieved. Having finally got rid of the harridan in the flat above, he'd been hoping for someone with a bit of culture. “It sounded like Hermione and the ginger had some history. Seems a bit incestuous, if you don't mind my saying so.”

“That is the upper class for you.” Marcus relaxed a little, reminding himself he wanted this Muggle onside. He offered a hand. “Marcus Flint.”

“Eliot Harris.” They shook hands and Eliot did some more social revision. “Private school, then?”

“Very.” The wizard smirked.
It was more than a week later when Hermione wrote Marcus. She had an excuse to talk to him, which even Ron had to concede was necessary; their divorce. The Ministry owl had dropped off the heavy scroll with an aggrieved hoot. In the magical world, it was far easier to tie the knot than untie it. The ream of paperwork had taken her several days to read through, in between signing leases on her parents' houses in Kent and in Western Australia. The witch was feeling rather swamped by forms and dashed off a brief note to her very-nearly-former spouse.

Marcus came by the flat with a bottle of champagne that evening. He had added a leather jacket to the jeans and t-shirt, looking like the sort of man her mother would definitely have warned her against. Hermione let him in and put the bubbly in the fridge.

“If you still feel like celebrating after you've read through that verbiage, I've found the glasses. I'm not convinced magically packing everything was more efficient. I keep finding things in the oddest places.” She wondered if she was babbling, decided she was and stopped talking. For some reason, she was on edge and not understanding why made it worse.

“If you have read all that dross, I will spare myself the ordeal.” Marcus glared at the parchment. “I thought it would be simpler. The Ministry insisted on the marriage. Surely they can undo it with as high a hand.” He did not want his union with Hermione to end but it was not strategic at the moment to argue with her.

“Don't get me started.” Hermione put the kettle on then rooted around the cupboards to find something to offer her guest. She hadn't been grocery shopping yet. Living off frozen leftovers did not make for great catering. “I talked with Theo and Leota about it. They're neck deep in the aftermath of the Marriage Law. Everyone who was strong-armed into marrying wants an annulment. The Ministry has stated it won't grant any quickie divorces.”

“Are you considering another legal campaign?” Marcus sat down on the sofa and Crookshanks hopped onto his lap with deliberately pointy feet. “Don't blame me for your witch moving out of my great-uncle's place.” He told the familiar companionably. “I said she could stay.”

“That wouldn't have been a good idea. Ron's still cross you helped me move and Harry asking, tactfully for him, how the divorce is going.” Hermione gave up fussing around the kitchen, joining Marcus on the sofa so it didn't look like she was keeping her distance. “You didn't say anything to Ron that day, did you?”

“We spoke.” The wizard confirmed. “I was polite. I have been warned to keep out of trouble. The entire Magpies management, from McLeod to the waterboy, has been cautioning me to behave.” Marcus scratched Crookshanks behind the ears. “Weasley told me to bugger off.”

“I guessed something of the sort.” Hermione leaned back into the thick cushions. Ron had been out of sorts that afternoon and hadn't stayed long. His decline of an invitation to dinner had been awkward. She rather suspected his mother knew where he would be and had insisted on a family meal. Molly Weasley did not forgive easily. “I'm sorry.”

“No need to apologise. I understand you want him. That will mean dancing to his tune until he trusts you again.” No amount of good intentions could keep him from sneering at that but he did manage not to swear.

“Yeah.” She got up quickly when she heard the kettle boil. “I know he's trying to forgive me. I do
want try again. Term starts in a week. We'd planned to meet for coffee like students.” Hermione set
two bone china teacups on the counter. She hadn't found the ordinary mugs yet. “I'm worrying I've
set us up for the same old problems. He and I are great as friends. Maybe we should stay that way.”

“You have to try.” Marcus craned his neck over the back of the sofa to look at her. “You know that.”

“I know that.” Hermione agreed. “It's performance anxiety, I suppose. Making it up with Ron will be
nothing to getting his family back on side. I had to sneak around to see Harry on his birthday. He had
to pretend he was going out for more beer.” Ginny was holding a grudge like a Greek goddess. “The
divorce will help.”

“As milady commands.” He chuckled, sketching a bow.

“Please don't.” She made a face at him. “Madam Shafiq sent me an owl yesterday. You know her.
Sacred Twenty-Eight, completely disinterested in the future political ambitions she would like me to
have.” Hermione grumbled. “I told her ages ago we were ending our marriage, and she still keeps
inviting me to things.”

“Do you go?” Whenever he received invitations to dire pure-blood events, he always pleaded
Quidditch practice.

“Most of the time. They're usually to gallery openings and museum events. We went on a private
tour of the V&A. It was amazing.” Hermione put teabags in her grandmother's china and felt she was
letting the side down. “I don't want to start ignoring everyone I met when we were appealing the
nuptial clause. I went boating with Justin. His father is an old Etonian.”

“Is that the sort of private school that would impress Eliot?” Marcus asked and got a laugh from the
tense witch.

“I expect so.” Her downstairs neighbour was a nice guy but a bit of a snob. “I told him we all went
to a terribly Calvinist boarding school in the highlands. He probably thinks its Fettes College. That's
the Eton of the North. My parents wanted to send me there.”

“Were they disappointed with Hogwarts?” They had not spoken much about her late parents. Marcus
had been there at the end and did not feel the need to remind her of her loss. But she had brought
them up so perhaps she wanted to talk about them.

“Not exactly. They were chuffed about the magic part. And relieved they weren't seeing things.”
Hermione brought the tea to the coffee table. “But they wanted me to get a good education.
Hogwarts was hardly GCSE compliant.”

“Is it always acronyms with Muggles?” Whenever he ventured into realms of the wandless, they
spoke in initials. When in Melbourne, he had been asked by a perfectly sane appearing man how to
get to the AFL reserve at the MCG. When he had confessed ignorance, he had been accused of
being a French apple.

“Naturally he has his G.” She remarked with a private grin. “You get your G after your K.”
Hermione added when Marcus looked at her as though she was under a Babbling curse. “It's a quote
from a TV, sorry, television show I watched as a child. And yes, Muggles do use acronyms often.
It's because we're always in a rush to be seen to be doing something.”

“So what is the GSCE?” Marcus asked, wanting to know for the future nebulous plans he had
regarding Hermione and school-aged children.

“The General Certificate of Secondary Education is the English standard qualification. Scotland uses
a different one, most of the time. There's also an International Baccalaureate. The Americans use a different system too.” Hermione sipped her tea. The bags were stale, there was almost no bergamot in her Earl Grey. She really did need to do some shopping.

“You completed one of those as well as NEWTs?” Any vague assumption Muggle-borns had an easier life free of the social obligations of their pure-blood peers disappeared. Marcus would have transfigured himself into a broomstick rather than try to spell 'baka-lorry-ate' far less sit one.

“Technically, no. The Ministry's fiction of Muggle-borns being home educated covers most problems but you still need A Levels, which are getting increasingly difficult to fake. I had to sit a special examination before applying for any university places.” Her summer had been spent pouring over science textbooks and trying to select subjects she could plausibly pass.

“Have I mentioned how much I like clever women?” Marcus grinned at her scholarly enthusiasm. He got a tart look in return.

“I believe you once said you liked women with tits.” Hermione had not forgotten that comment but it felt good to banter. Marcus was restful company.

“Brains and tits.” He let his gaze travel from her face to her chest then back to her face. “Feeling better?”

“A bit. I'm wound up about a lot of things. Ron, Probate, Uni. Ron.” Hermione had another mouthful of tea then gave up. “It's rice crackers for dinner unless we get take-away. Assuming you're staying to work through the divorce scroll.”

“I walked past an Italian restaurant that smelled delicious. I also have a solicitor.” Marcus shot a contemptuous look at the sheaf of parchment. “Owl him the damn scroll and come to dinner with me.” He saw her cavil and added a touch of cunning, “As friends, which I hope we remain after you go back to Weasley.”

Reassured his intentions were honourable, Hermione agreed then ducked off to her bedroom to change into something clean. She did not see Marcus smirk at Crookshanks, who purred contentedly. This wizard had never called him a pig with hair.
Fresh Air

The first week of term was a mad rush of lists and double-checking and meditative breathing. Hermione signed herself up for a yoga course in an acknowledgement of her need to learn how to manage her stress. Her first lesson left her feeling self-conscious in gym gear and faintly ridiculous trying not to fall over but it was a useful distraction from the prospect of her first lecture.

The witch felt alien, illiterate and moronic as she stared in stunned incomprehension as the lecturer rattled through the precis of the unit. That sense of unreality only abated when the student sitting beside her leaned across to whisper.

“Do you have the foggiest idea what he is on about?” She sounded as fretful as Hermione felt.

“None.” The witch confirmed, discreetly flicking through her notes on the readings she had done in preparation for the class. “I think he’s doing polymerase reactions but that’s only a guess.”

“Hepworth always does this.” An older student with a North American accent immediately behind them murmured. “Likes to panic the newbies.”

“Bottle fame.” Hermione muttered to herself as her alarm subsided. The lecture continued at breakneck pace for about ten minutes until the students became restless and began to raise hands in query. Only then did Professor Hepworth turn to address them to give his introductory speech to inform them they would have to understand everything he had put on the whiteboard to pass.

Afterwards, Hermione rubbed her right hand, cramped from note-taking, and dissected their teacher with Soo-jin and Joe. They were all doing the same Biochemistry degree though Joe was an exchange student from Massachusetts. He had studied with Hepworth when the Professor was on sabbatical at Boston University.

“He’s good. You know, solid on everything and gives clear answers but hell on slackers.” Joe switched from a blue pen to a green one as he made revisions on his notes. “Do not ask for an extension. You won't get one and he'll never forget you asked.”

“Good to know.” Hermione jotted that down, ready to start on her study plan. If she needed to do any remedial work she wanted to know about it well before the first round of assignments were due. “I hope all the units aren’t this intense.”

They relaxed into chatting and went to their next lecture together. Hermione saw them both again the next day, falling into an easy routine with Soo-jin and Joe, and then with Naeem, Bethany and Leon. Their study group seemed to accrete and migrate naturally to the Cup Runneth Over, a nook café just off campus.

She asked Ron to meet her there then had to fiddle around with which day when he ran late on one of his reports and had to work through his lunch hour. He finally rushed in on Friday, gave the small group a cursory wave before almost dragging Hermione out of the café

“Quick, can't stay long. We need to talk.” Ron hustled her into a side street. “The Harpies are playing the Magpies this weekend. Ginny's finally got her chance and I want you to warn that bloody Flint to keep away from her.” He paused to take a breath. “You're looking nice. Is that a new sweater?”

“I thought you didn't want me to talk to Marcus.” Hermione shook her arm out of his grasp. “And Ginny won't thank you for babying her.”
“I don't want you to have anything to do with that tosser, but you do. I know you went out to dinner with him. Audrey saw you.” He tried to wave away that complication to concentrate on his sister being able to make a good showing on her first professional game. Ron was certain Flint would target her specifically.

“Who's Audrey?” She made the effort to not sound irritated at this verbal barrage.

“Oh, some girl Percy is sort-of-seeing. She's a Muggle-born.” Ron shrugged. His brother had duly presented Audrey for maternal inspection at Saturday brunch but she hadn't made much of an impression on Ron. “Tell him to lay off or there'll be consequences. Harry and I will be there so we'll know if he tries anything.” He glanced at his pocket watch. “Sorry, have to go. Proudfoot'll have my hide if she finds out I snuck out. Thanks, Hermione.”

With that, he Disapparated.

Hermione stared at the space where he had been. Well. She took a deep breath. Her first thought was to make an excuse for Ron. He had been told to work through lunch until he finished his report. She knew his supervisor was strict and as a newly qualified Auror he was expected to be pin sharp. He had shown up even though he had to sneak out.

To ask her to do a favour for his sister, who wasn't talking to her.

She didn't want to be angry with him. She didn't want to feel obliged to help him when she also felt she was an unequal partner. Ginny would not thank her. Ginny would not thank Ron either but he wouldn't be ostracised even more for it. Hermione stamped her foot, chided herself for behaving like a four year old then went back to her study group.

The encounter was still bothering her that evening. She had invited Marcus over for dinner as a reciprocal for the Italian meal. That is what she told herself she was doing when she sent the owl. Afterwards she had stared out her window reconsidering her actions, telling herself she didn't have to do Ron a favour just because it was Ron then telling herself she did because it was Ron. Then she went to the kitchen and started on a meal she was rapidly considering conniving.

Marcus was a friend. He'd been very helpful during the legal appeal and had shown himself as generally a decent guy, off the Quidditch pitch. But this was Quidditch. And she had already imposed upon him for two favours for her best friends. Which he had obliged. Was she going to ask for a third, so far unreciprocated favour, for a witch who had banned her from Harry's wedding?

No, she wasn't.

Hermione considered sending an owl to cancel the invitation then discarded the idea. That would be worse manners than asking a friend for yet another favour for people he didn't like. She thumped her frying pan on her stove-top then thumped it again just for the satisfying clang. Damn Ron just Apparating away. Damn damn damn.

“I think it is subdued, Hermione.” Marcus paused just outside the hearth, dusting Floo powder off his hands. The metallic noises in the kitchen stopped as Hermione stuck her head out the door to see him in her living room, in a ratty sweater and slacks.

“You were in the middle of something?” The witch recognised his workaday clothes.

“Flying.” He answered tersely, not wanting to discuss it. Marcus followed her gaze to his knuckles, which were raw. She walked up to him and took his hand for a better look then cast a healing charm.

“What happened?” Hermione asked nonchalantly, recalling the stilted conversation they’d had in the
Hogwarts library after Harry and George had hexed him into a wall. Asking him not to press charges had been favour number one.

“Father found something sharp.” Marcus answered unwillingly. “I don't know where. The elves are always very careful.”

“He attacked you?” She had not pushed him for information about his father. Knowing Octavius Flint had been to Azkaban and seeing the Manor kitchen completely devoid of anything with an edge told her all she needed to know. Hermione had once or twice tried to suggest treatment options but she didn't know Marcus well enough to insist.

“Attacked the portraits. Only went for me when I tried to stop him.” He rubbed his fingers. His former wife had a dab touch with charms. “I took him to St. Mungo's.”

Hermione hugged him. Their marriage had been purely paper and their friendship was only a few months old, but some things were important. It was important right now that he did not feel that he was alone, although he was. Slytherins knew a lot of people. They did not have many friends.

Marcus hugged her back. She tucked neatly under his chin, short enough he could put his arms around her without feeling like they were wrestling. Her hair smelled faintly of coffee and he smoothed a hand through it before planting a kiss on her forehead. The wizard stepped back, knowing what he wanted was inappropriate at this time.

“I was going to make beef stroganoff. It's one of my comfort foods. But if you need to get back to the hospital, I can make you a sandwich or something.” Hermione offered, dropping her arms and feeling awkward. Hugging Marcus was like cuddling a wall. He was tense and unyielding. She wanted to press him to talk about what had happened but hesitated because of why she had asked him over. Bloody Ginny, managing to wind her up even by proxy.

“The Healers gave him Dreamless Sleep. I will take him home on Monday. They would not release him any earlier.” Marcus bit the words, angry at the interference. “They want to put him in the Janus Thickey Ward. He hates it there. Just stares at the walls. At home at least he is more himself.”

“Could you hire a carer for him?” Hermione had a thought and found the notebook she had used during the Marriage legislation appeal. “When we were hunting heirs for the Wizengamot seats, we tracked down a lot of Squibs. There's bound to be someone who has medical training. A mental health nurse would be ideal. St Mungo's is fine for injuries but I can't say I'm impressed by their long term care results.”

“I have tried.” He did not snap at her. Instead, he stepped closer to look at the little bound book filled with her neat writing. The letters still blurred together but the thin lines of the Muggle pen made it somewhat easier to read. “No one I asked years ago wanted to mind a Death Eater.”

“You said yourself he was only a sympathiser.” It seemed a long time ago that Marcus had shown up at her door with a Ministry command to marry her. “I think he has paid, and if I can say that then no one else gets to stick their nose in their air at him.”

“Would you find someone for him?” Marcus asked, hiding a smile at her militant tone. He greatly admired when she was campaigning; it seemed her natural calling.

“Of course. Happy to.” Hermione's hands tightened on her notebook. “I'd do it anyway, without trading favours.” She began, to clarify what she was about to say. They were friends and friends did not bargain. “Ron finally showed up at the café today. Briefly.” The witch heard her own irritation in her voice. “He asked me to ask you to go easy on Ginny.”
“Go easy on his sister, the Harpy’s quick new Chaser, who has been wasted on their bench.” He liked to keep an eye on the up and coming talent, not least because he owed the female Weasley for making his wife cry. A few broken bones should do.

“Yes.” She let out a long, exasperated sigh. “He dashed in, hauled me to an alley, tried a little emotional blackmail then Apparated away.” Hermione looked up into Marcus's eyes, wanting him to see she wasn’t trying the same tactic. “I don’t expect you to.”

“Good, because I am in no position to do so.” Marcus smirked. “McLeod pulled me from the team for the game against the Harpies. He said he needed to give the Reserve Chasers some broom-time against a decent side.” His smirk grew into a shark’s grin. “He usually lies better than that. He knows I have a grudge against the bitch.”

“I believe the term for a female weasel is a jill or a doe.” Hermione remarked, trying not to smirk too. Marcus laughed.

“Miss Granger, you are wicked.” He felt better than he had when he had arrived. Her company often cheered him. “Spend the weekend with me. Tell Weasley it was the only way to get me to leave his sister alone. Higgs has opened his family’s lodge for the autumn fishing.”

“I’m not much of an angler.” She temporised, debating with herself.

“Neither is Terence. He goes mostly to paint, but his parents are so keen on the outdoors that he needs an excuse. Having the chaps over to chase trout suffices.” Marcus went more for the hiking than standing hip deep in cold water. He hesitated then reminded himself she was a Gryffindor. “Tag along to keep me from brooding about my father. I hate when he is in hospital.”

“Of course.” Hermione agreed instantly, all qualms banished once it was evident Marcus wasn’t planning a romantic weekend. “Do you think I could bring Crookshanks?”
“Now this time, I did this to myself, Crooks.” Hermione admitted as she set her familiar and her overnight bag on the blanket box at the foot of the four poster bed. When Marcus had said 'lodge' she had expected a posh cabin in the Highlands or the Brecon Beacons. She had asked no questions thus it was her own fault that she found herself in a chalet in Austria.

Her first impression of the guest room was 'gingerbread', a legacy from childhood exposure to Hansel and Gretel. The dark woodwork, white-washed walls and heavy roof beams coupled with the cut glass leaded windows suggested she was in a fairytale cottage. Though the Higgs' hunting lodge was more a wooden castle than a shack in the woods.

Crookshanks marched onto the coverlet, stropping his claws on the trapunto quilt. When she told him off he gave her a supercilious look and curled up in the middle of the bed. Hermione unpacked, investigated her suite, marvelled at the cedar bath then spent a moment feeling guilty she had agreed to come.

Ron was going to be unhappy about this little holiday. On the other hand, he was getting what he wanted. No reprisals on Ginny would surely outweigh her spending time with Marcus and miscellaneous other aristocrats. Hermione looked at herself in the iron framed mirror. She had agreed because her nose was out of joint, be honest, she told the witch in the looking glass.

Hermione found it difficult to judge the age of the building as she navigated her way to the drawing room. Whoever had decorated had resisted the urge to line the walls with mounted trophies but there was a preponderance of hide rugs and furs. Some very nice panelling and several lovely paintings too. She stopped to admire a delicate watercolour of wildflowers.

“I should say something terribly bohemian.” The quiet voice interrupted her contemplation.

Hermione turned to face an amiable looking young man she did not immediately recognise. “Are you interest in art, Madam Flint?”

“It's Ms Granger again, or it will be shortly.” Hermione corrected affably. “And yes, I am. No talent for it but I like looking at it. Terence Higgs, I presume?” She asked outright to avoid embarrassing herself. The witch hoped her host, if this were her host, would think it reasonable she did not know him. Two years ahead of her and in Slytherin, they had hardly spoken.

“You presume correctly.” Terence smiled slightly, relieved the introduction was going well. His former team Captain had told him with his usual terseness that he was bringing someone without clarifying whom, only that his friend would like her. “I am rather off pace with the society news. I saw you at Lucian's birthday party but did not have a chance to offer my felicitations.”

“What a night that was.” Pansy Parkinson had gone to Azkaban, Marcus woke up in St. Mungo's, and she had ended owing another favour, this time to keep Ron out of trouble. “I hope you enjoyed the cake. Marcus was rather miffed he missed out on it.”

“It was delicious.” The wizard's tentative smile firmed a little. This was going well. His first real conversation with a Gryffindor and a Muggle-born. “I like cake.” Terence blinked as idiocy came out of his mouth. He paused, expecting mockery but Miss Granger was looking at his painting again. “I do not entertain much. I hope you find the lodge comfortable.”

“Why are you nervous?” Hermione had decided at first sight of the turrets of the Gothic chalet that she was not going to fit in and so was determined to be herself. And to ask questions, particularly
when a wealthy, pure-blood wizard seemed intimidated by her presence. She had expected disdain not anxiety.

“I do not entertain much.” Terence said then stopped. “I said that already.” He bit his lip. Right, first stumble. “I am not very good at this.”

“Marcus said you paint.” She was strongly reminded of a young Neville Longbottom and threw him a conversational rope. “Only watercolours?”

“Oh, no.” He took a breath. “I make my own pigments. I was quite good in Potions, you see. The alchemical side. Quite a few of the suspension liquids work well as paint media. I have just made a madder red that is not fugitive.” Terence paused but was encouraged by her nod of comprehension. “Rubia tinctorum responds well to the same base as the Invigoration Draught.”

“That's probably due to the alum. Muggles use it as a mordant in dye-making.” Hermione gave him an encouraging smile, conscious of keeping her body-language open. He wasn't stammering or sweating but Higgs gave the impression of a mouse poised to flee. “There's an exhibition coming up at the National Gallery on Art Nouveau. Tabia Shafiq has tickets for the Opening.”

“I am not at my best in crowds.” Terence had done some stealthy research into Muggle art, as one might delve into niche pornography, so he knew of Art Nouveau. The glorious colours and sinuous forms inspired him. But even for Klimt, he could not endure so many unknown people.

“I am sure she could arrange a private viewing. That woman lives to make people do what she wants.” Every time she spoke with the charming and urbane Madam Shafiq, Hermione was conscious of being manipulated. Not precisely how or to what purpose but it was there. Like she was being nudged towards something. “I think she wants me to go into politics.”

“Marcus said you were studying Muggle alchemy. That was how he explained it to me.” He apologised for the paraphrasing. The two wizards trying to understand Muggle science had got as far as 'like Potions taught by Binns' then had ceded the field.

“Bio-chemistry. It's how Muggles understand the humours and chakras of organic substances.” Hermione elucidated. “Much more than alchemy, down to a very, very small scale. If I finish this degree, I will be able to apply it to a huge range of things. Finding out how magic truly effects the body of its subject.”

“If?” Terence had caught her hesitation.

“Being at Oxford is like being a first year again.” She grumbled, thinking of Professor Hepworth. “My schooling's been vastly different than everyone else's there. I'm hoping I can bluff my way through but the Muggle world changes quickly. I didn't even know Big Brother was on the telly. I thought they were talking about government surveillance.”

“I thought Muggles had a Queen.” He supposed a monarch could be considered a government, as they did govern. Perhaps there was also a Wizengamot to advise the Queen. Terence had never taken Muggle Studies so had only a vague understanding of the mundane world. There were a great many portraits of royalty in the art books he had read though.

“The British have a Queen. So do the Canadians and the Australians. Same Queen, actually.” Hermione blithely glossed over the complexities of the Commonwealth. “But we're a constitutional monarchy. We have elected representatives as well as a House of Lords, which is like the Wizengamot though compared to wizards, the Lords are a bastion of contemporary innovation.”
“Bitter memories of the uncomfortable Chamber seats?” Marcus asked, having gone questing for his witch and his friend when they had not appeared for pre-dinner drinks. He strode up to them to insert himself into the conversation but gave neither more than a nod. Terence did not like being touched and Hermione was still convinced she wanted the Weasel.

“They were bloody awful. I got cramps down my legs no matter which way I sat, and I had to sit for hours.” One of the big disincentives to a career in politics was the potential to cripple herself on the furniture. Hermione was in no hurry to do that to herself again. “No wonder the speeches droned on. You got to stand when you were talking.”

“Are we late for drinks?” Terence asked, visibly worried. His parents had bellowed into him the duties of a gentleman. Leaving one's guests loitering waiting for libations was a significant transgression. Marcus answered with more than his usual briskness.

“Warrington was crass enough to help himself. He gave everyone a round to cover his arse. Swan in with Hermione on your arm and look down your nose at him. No one will say a damn thing.” It was an order not a suggestion.

Hermione would have protested except Terence straightened, gave Marcus a nod and offered her his arm. She took it. They strolled down the hallway to a large room hung with tapestries. The formerly shy wizard swept in with his house-mate in his wake and gave a cold glance to a Brunet with artfully dishevelled robes. Warrington had the decency to look abashed as he tried to hide his Firewhiskey behind him.

There were eight people variously lounging in the drawing room. Hermione recognised Lucian Bole, Cassius Warrington and Millicent Bulstrode but could not place the other witch or the rest of the wizards. She was spared a round of introductions by the rapid advance of the tall blonde woman, who kissed her on both cheeks then clasped her hands.

“You cannot know what you have done for me, madame.” There was only a hint of a French accent but years of puzzling out Fleur's speech had given Hermione a good ear for a Francophone. “You saved me from a life of inconsolable misery. I am to be united with my love in the spring. You must attend.” The willowy witch made an imperious gesture at Marcus. “You, lout, you will bring my saviour to my wedding.”

“Hermione is a free woman, Blishwyck.” He accepted a drink from Terence and shook his head at the delivery request. “I do not bring her anywhere she does not wish to go.”

“Good for nothing, toujours.” The witch jeered, tossing her flaxen hair at him. There was something very sleek about her with everything smoothly polished in place. She returned her gaze to Hermione to implore. “Please, madame, it would be an honour. I was to be wed to some English pig-dog. I nearly died. I was denied my Amaury until you vanquished that silly law.”

“It was a team effort.” Hermione gave her usual reply, trying to be polite. Insulting her friends was not a good way to win her favour. Marcus looked taciturn not offended so she kept on with the courtesy. “Thank you for the invitation. Pending scheduling commitments, I would love to go.”

“Of course you will love it. My wedding is the event of the season.” Miss Blishwyck's confidence was cast iron. She kissed Hermione again then sauntered over to a lean man in natty wool robes. There was a great deal of simpering between them. Hermione looked to Marcus with a raised eyebrow. He handed her a drink.

“Eulalie Blishwyck, of the Parisian branch of the family. Her intended is Amaury von Holzknecht.” He informed her as though reciting the names from a chart. “Terence's mother was a von...
Holzknecht. They breed Abraxans.” Marcus smirked at his Firewhiskey. “Eulalie's parents are both British despite pretending to be French. Pompous arses.”

“She doesn't like you.” Hermione sipped then blinked. She wasn't much of a whiskey aficionado but she could at least tell the good stuff, and the alcohol in her glass was very saintly indeed. “What did you do?”

“I am stung you assume it was me.” His smirk grew at her expression. “He challenged me to a duel. Only thing I learned from Lockhart. Don't ponce about. While Eustace was waving his arms and posing, I got him with a jinx. Then I closed the distance, punched him and took his wand.”

“Unorthodox but legal.” She chuckled, aware Marcus had a limited repertoire of spells. He was very good with the ones he could cast but dyslexia and magic did not mesh well. “So she thinks you are a thug.” Hermione looked up at the much taller wizard. “Are you going to make me ask why he challenged you to a duel?”

“You are supposed to mingle, cousin.” Millicent Bulstrode marched up to them, edging closer to Marcus so she could turn her back on Warrington. Her squared stance showed the family resemblance. Both she and the Flint heir looked carved from stone. “Not ignore everyone to flirt with Granger. Salazar, is he looking at me?”

“He's pouring himself another Firewhiskey.” Hermione glanced with practised nonchalance in Cassius Warrington's direction then at one of the tapestries. “You didn't have any trouble warning people off in school. If he's bothering you, put him in a headlock.”

“That was second year.” The stocky witch almost snarled, glaring at her school-mate. “I thought you were all chummy with us now.”

“He’s coming over. Would you like to start an argument with me as a diversion?” The Muggle-born inquired, guessing this was a pure-blood issue, and dialling back the snark to try to help. Millicent gave her a wisp of a grateful look then threw her cocktail in Hermione's face. She stormed out of the living room giving the oak door a good slam as she went.
Millicent did not come down for dinner. Warrington did not seem particularly distressed by her absence. He drank steadily and ended up quarrelling with the rangy wizard introduced to her as Cadmus Haut-Leby. Hermione steered clear of them after they started transfiguring each other's cutlery.

After dinner, she, Terence and Ophion Haut-Leby, the younger twin of the bellicose Cadmus, went to the observatory Terence had built on a rise above the lodge. It was just far enough from the main house to be screened from view by trees, with a suggestion of 'put it where we can't see it' architecture. Hermione didn't know enough about Terence's relationship with his parents but the plain little hut with the beautiful telescope suggested his hobbies were not theirs.

"Vulpecula's nebula is particularly nice on nights like this before the frosts." Terence chatted now he was comfortable with her presence. "Tamsin sent me a filter that helps with the ice crystal distortion but I still prefer to sky-watch without it."

"How is Miss Applebee?" Ophion asked, pulling books out of his pockets. He had a heavy tome of star charts as well as a French translation of the Zij al-Sindhind, which Hermione envied as she had yet to find a comprehensive English translation. The Belgian wizard noticed her interest and handed her the book with a bow, while Terence fiddled with his telescope.

"Miss Applebee is well." Their host replied airily. "Tamsin is in Hawaii with her father. Her Muggle father." He added with emphasis. "Mister Applebee does not like receiving owls at the Observatory."

"But you send them anyway." Hermione smiled, guessing Tamsin Applebee was the same Applebee who had been on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Terence's continued determined interest in adjusting elevation and focus suggested she was correct. Ophion mirrored her smile then patted his friend on the shoulder.

"You can bring her to the estate for Samhain. Maman will not mind. She and Cadmus are still shouting, of course, but she has moved to the dower house." He seemed to recall Hermione had never met his family prior to today and made an effort to include her. "Maman was widowed young. She had control of the estate until Cadmus came of age. She is rather accustomed to doing as she likes. Now she likes to argue with my brother."

"Turning the spoons to snakes?" The witch asked, trying to be funny and not offensive. Making jokes with new acquaintances was never easy but she did not want the wizards to be formal around her. That pure-blood reticence made her feel assessed and judged. Thus far, no one had been too classist. Milicent's cocktail had probably been sheer nerves.

"Oh yes." Ophion rolled his hazel eyes expressively. "Maman does not like being thwarted. She makes a big noise and shares her affront." He chuckled indulgently. "But Cadmus deliberately annoys her. He is doing the same to Cassius because he is, as the English say, cocking a snook."

"Why is he being so creepy to Bulstrode?" Hermione noticed she had put her fists on her hips when Terence shied away from her. She relaxed her posture, which was easier than damping her outrage. "Sorry. Millicent and I aren't friends but I've never seen her this rattled."

"His parents made an offer for her, and her parents are considering it. Many families are ruffled because of that Marriage Law. If the Ministry tried something like that once, they may try again. Millie's a half-blood but the Bulstrodes are Sacred Twenty-Eight. A good catch." Terence shrugged,
aware his parents had a list of potential wives for him. “But Cassius doesn't want to marry her. He thinks by scaring her off, he will get his way.”

“And simply refusing himself hasn't occurred to him?” She inquired tartly.

“His parents made the offer. He consented. If he retracts, the Warringtons will seem shabby.” Ophion was polite enough to not look surprised she did not know that. “They want him married before he does something more to embarrass them. He has already spent most of what his grandfather left him.”

“Alright, why doesn't Millicent refuse the marriage?” Hermione asked her second reasonable question. “She's a legal adult.”

“Not for inheritance.” Terence frowned and Ophion failed to hide a grimace. “Even after you turn seventeen, you are beholden to the head of your House though any legacies held in trust come to you at twenty-nine. Prior to that, you can be cut off without a knut.”

“I need to advocate for more wizards to register with the British government. We have social services. It isn't flash but you won't be begging in the street.” The Muggle-born witch set her mouth in a firm line. Politics, again. “I'll have a word with Theo and see how the land lies. We built up a lot of favours we didn't need to use to rescind the Marriage legislation.”

“I will apologise in advance for being crass, and doubly ungrateful, but do you not ever get tired of Harry Potter saving the day?” Very conscious of being Slytherin, Terence spoke diffidently. He sincerely wanted to know, though. Standing next to so bright a light must blind one eventually. His tact was insufficient to ward off a sharp look from Marcus's witch.

“Harry's done great things for the wizarding world. He's a hero.” Hermione said loyally then was ambushed by her own inherent honestly. “I wish he did not have to keep being that hero. Like he's a living veto. The Wizengamot fell over themselves to repeal the law when he asked. They shouldn't have.”

“Bad precedent.” Ophion agreed, thinking uncomfortably of his late father, who had blindly followed a charismatic leader to his death. “It will happen again. A weakness of magic. We can just wave our wands to indulge ourselves.”

“I could make a really rude comment right now, but I won't.” She smirked at the two young men, who laughed. They left earthly concerns behind to turn their attention to the stars and Vulpecula's nebula.

The trio were in the midst of a lively discussion on the merits of Dumbbell versus Apple Core versus Messier 27 when Marcus and Lucian Bole knocked on the door of the observatory. They were both soaking wet with the self-satisfied look of men who had been up to no good and got away with it. Bole held up a fish.

“I told you I could.” The tawny haired wizard waved his catch triumphantly at Terence. “You said I never would.”

“I said you should not try, that it would never been a sensible or dignified way of fishing.” Terence corrected mildly. “I stand by that.”

“But I caught one.” Lucian asserted, almost preening. “My fish.”

“I saw him do it.” Marcus testified. He met Hermione's quizzical gaze. “Long standing wager. Lucian bet Terence he could catch a fish in his animagus form. Which he did.” He grinned, brushing
his dripping hair off his face. “I give my oath as witness.”

“What’s your animal form?” Hermione asked, privately guessing. There was something about the way Bole radiated smugness that was almost feline. Entrusting his prize to Marcus, Lucian shook himself then dropped to all fours. His body twisted and shrank but not as much as she had expected. Instead of a domestic cat, a lynx sat on his tawny and spotted haunches before them. Marcus gave him his fish and Lucian trotted away on his comical bumble-paws.

“I am amazed he did not drown.” Fond as he was of his friend, Terence would have been the first to concede Lucian leaped before he looked. The bet had resulted from him trying to warn the animagus not to take risks not to goad him into the attempt.

“Angelina often said she was stunned he could find his way to the Quidditch pitch.” The witch ventured, uncertain whether the new camaraderie would evaporate with the reminder she was not one of their peers. Better to find out now than trip over a snub later.

“Derrick never got lost. It was astounding. He could not tie his own shoelaces but could always find where he needed to go.” Terence merely nodded at Hermione’s remark. He had overheard Johnson saying much the same thing. “He was never quite sure what he was supposed to do when he got there, unfortunately.”

“That is why I paired him with Bole, who can only do one thing at a time but does it well. Gave him the Quidditch schedule. They never missed a match.” While he had been team Captain, Marcus had to work around many of the best Slytherin players being pulled out of Hogwarts. Dumbledore’s partisan politics, war rumours and surreptitious hints from people in the know had spurred many pure-blood families to get their heirs out of the country before the trouble started.

“No Quidditch talk, for the love of Vivien.” Ophion beseeched with a sweep of his hands as though banishing the conversation. “Please, no. It is enough that I suffer thinking of Lucian eating that creature raw or leaving it somewhere to rot. I despise fish almost as much as I despise that foolish game with the brooms. Have mercy.”

“You said Terence opened the lodge for the fishing.” Hermione eyed Marcus suspiciously. She flicked her wand out of her sleeve and cast a Hot-Air Charm. The sodden wizard began to steam gently. “How much angling is actually going to be done?”

“I intend to eat trout. I might even carry Millicent’s catch.” Marcus confessed with a grin, looking diabolic in the midst of his mist. “Blishwyck will prance about in tweed.”

“It is really only Ophion and I who skive off to skulk indoors.” Terence defended his friend, uncertain how annoyed the witch was with him. “There are some lovely walks or climbing trails if you prefer. Mostly I use the lodge to get away from people who think I am not good enough.”

“I can commiserate.” She said fervently.
Amity

Morning happened like a gigolo. A slow seduction of light caressing her face, the barest kiss of noise. Hermione rolled over in the warm embrace of the huge bed and grinned into her pillow. Perfect. She stretched, idly considered rolling over again to go back to sleep then decided that she felt so damned well-rested it would be a pity to waste it. So she padded to the bathroom, filled the cedar tub, added bath salts lavishly and steeped herself until she was wrinkly.

Ridiculous self-indulgence done, Hermione got dressed in jeans and a sweater, vaguely planning to go hiking after breakfast. Finding the room with the food was easier than finding the drawing room as she spotted Crookshanks in the corridor and followed him. Her familiar led her unerringly to an airy parlour with a refectory style table and a buffet.

The quiet man she had not spoken with last night was the only one there. He was reading the Times while eating toast with marmalade and looked so ordinarily British that it took her a moment to realise he was reading a Muggle newspaper. He said good morning as she made a plate for herself and for Crookshanks before returning his attention to the editorial.

“I'm Hermione. I think we missed introductions.” The witch ventured once she had sat.

“Zavier Higgs.” He put his newspaper down to offer her his hand, which she shook. “Terence is my cousin. Mind the kedgeree. It's quite spicy.”

“Thanks.” She tucked into her breakfast as he seemed to want to go back to his paper. Hermione ate, got up for a refill of her milk because Zavier was right about the kedgeree, and was idly buttering toast when he spoke again.

“When Terence said Flint was bringing someone, I had quite a different picture in my head.” He remarked, frankly looking her over. “He's never brought a guest before so I assumed he had finally succumbed to the materteral nagging and found a nice pure-blood witch.”

“Which I am not.” Hermione grinned, recalling the quote that well-behaved women seldom made history. “Never any guests? I'd assumed he had girlfriends or something. International Quidditch star and so forth.”

“I doubt Terence would be happy about anyone bringing their 'or something' to the lodge. A girlfriend might pass muster but only if she were a previous acquaintance.” Zavier shrugged, untroubled by the restrictive social mores. “Marcus is just as hidebound. Many of the sole heirs are. They get the full dose of the lares et penates.”

“The Roman household gods?” She understood the words but not the reference.

“Yes, of course, you're Muggle-born. I'd forgotten.” He made a chiding noise to himself as though he had misplaced his car keys. Hermione made an incredulous face. Zavier sighed. “I'm a Squib. My parents fostered me out when it became obvious I was not magical. I was informed of the events of the war but only so I knew to keep my head down.”

“I'm sorry. I'm so used to being pointed out on the street that I assume everyone knows who I am. Oxford's been great. No one gives a damn I saved the world.” Hermione was looking forward to years of peaceful anonymity.

“I went to Balliol.” Zavier named one of Oxford's constituent colleges with pride. “What are you reading?”
“Bio-chemistry, at Magdalen College.” Her own pride was audible to them both. “I worried I wouldn't get in, and then when I did, I worry that someone will notice I apparently went to school on the moon. All the little things I should know that I don't about my own culture.”

“I received a First Class degree in Economics and I still convert Pounds into Galleons.” He admitted wryly then jumped suddenly when there was a hiss under the table. Both Zavier and Hermione pushed their chairs back to look. A small brindled feline was attempting to purloin Crookshanks's scrambled eggs.

“Who's a pretty girl?” Hermione cooed, crouching to extend a hand to the little animal. Crookshanks gave her a wounded look. “You are my handsome boy, Crooks.” She reminded him, which mollified the half-kneazle enough to ignore the smaller female when she approached his witch.

“That's Bole's kneazle.” Zavier eyed the black and white speckled thing with her absurdly tufted ears and pom-pom tail. He was a dog person himself. “I believe her name is Estelle.”

“Because your fur is full of stars, isn't it?” The witch coaxed the kneazle out from under the table, picking her up to cuddle her. “Have you had breakfast?” Estelle began to purr, her silver eyes blinking contentedly as Hermione took her to the buffet.

“I am certain she's had several breakfasts. Bole is absurdly indulgent towards his pets.” Sitting down again, Zavier resumed his reading assuming he would not get any further sensible conversation from his breakfast companion until she finished fussing over the furry prima donnas.

“Ignore the cranky economist, Estelle.” Hermione crooned, filling a plate at the kneazle's request. “He's just jealous you're getting the last of the bacon.” There was a protesting yowl from Crookshanks. “And you can have the kippers, clever boy.” She did not need to turn around to know her familiar had hopped onto one of the chairs to sit at the table, eyeballing Zavier.

“My Alsatians are loyal and obedient, they keep away ne'er-do-wells, and they have to eat in the kitchen.” He told the ginger tabby and was ignored at in the way only cats had. Zavier glanced at Hermione scraping out the last of the buffet then checked his watch. “It's nearly eleven. Miss Bulstrode hasn't been down yet.”

“I'll go check on her. She probably won't be thrilled to see me but if she's being bullied into getting married, she might appreciate someone to talk to.” While she knew it was not her place to interfere, Hermione didn't want to ignore the issue. If Milicent told her to go to Hell, well at least she had made an attempt.

“It's kind of you to take an interest in Flint's family after he cast you aside.” Zavier had no particular liking for the overgrown game-cock but Terence doted on him.

“I was the one who wanted the divorce. I think Marcus would've been happy enough to stay married.” Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about that. She was always very comfortable in Marcus's presence but he wasn't Ron. She didn't know whether that was his problem or hers. “He accepts the idea of an arranged marriage. I don't. Can't. When I get married, I want to be the one who chooses.”

“My apologies. Flint's so taciturn I can't say I've spoken more than a dozen sentences with him, and I've known him almost since birth.” Granted, after he had been palmed off at ten to a childless Squib couple, he had not seen much of his wizarding relatives until Terence had turned seventeen and invited him back into the fold. Marcus's only comment had been admiration for his Bentley.

“He talks to me just fine.” She said defensively, unsure why.
Zavier Higgs merely shrugged and returned to the Times. Hermione opted to check on Milicent rather than continue the conversation. The female guests all had suites at the back of the lodge overlooking the small garden and a grove of aspens now golden in the autumn. She was not sure which one was Eulalie's and which Milicent's so she knocked on the first and waited. No response. She knocked on the second door and received a firm reply.

“Fuck off, Warrington!”

“It's Hermione.” The Muggle-born thought about security precautions and added. “In sixth year in DADA, you cast a non-verbal Full-Body Bind at me, which rebounded off my shield and hit Ron.”

“And you laughed, because he was mooning over that blonde tart.” Milicent said from the other side of the door then opened it. She looked more stony-faced than composed but she invited Hermione in, gesturing at one of the armchairs in front of the fire. The sturdy witch resumed her seat and her knitting. “Did Marcus send you? He came by earlier.”

“Zavier said you hadn't been down for breakfast.” Hermione watched her school-mate stab the yarn with her needles. “Are you going to marry Warrington?”

“My parents want me to and eligible wizards are not falling from the sky.” She purled with some force. “I was affianced to an Avery but he died in the war. Compared to him, Warrington's not so bad.”

“You sound so enthused.” The Muggle-born witch lined up the usual comments she could make about pure-blood matrimonial customs, ran through the mental list and picked one that might apply. “Is defying your parents so bad?”

“When my step-mother failed to have an heir, my father found a Muggle woman and paid her to have me. He Obliviated her afterwards.” Milicent was not surprised by Hermione's consternation. “It's been done before. The Bulstrodes have been using that arrangement for generations. The half-bloods marry pure-bloods from other minor families then their children marry back into the Bulstrodes.”

“And their kids are pure-bloods because no Muggle grandparents. They're still marrying cousins, though.” Hermione did not roll her eyes or smirk or sigh or even swear. The Bulstrode arrangement kept just enough new blood coming in to avoid the worst of the inbreeding while at the same time keeping the family as a whole pristine enough to be Sacred Twenty-Eight. What was it she had said to Marcus? Unorthodox but legal.

“It wouldn't be so bad except Warrington is being a shit. It's not my fault he didn't end up with a willowy blonde like Daphne.” Her needles clacked, scraping against each other as though she was trying to hone them.

“Is that what he's pissy about? That you're not a supermodel?” At Milicent's shrug, Hermione sat back in her chair and brooded. “Look, you shouldn't have to put up with that nonsense. I could have a word with him. You're in the same boat as he is. It's not fair he's trying to pressure you into taking the blame for breaking it off.”

“You really can't help yourself, can you?” Milicent's bark of laughter brought the other witch up short. “Gryffindors. Always looking for a crusade.”

“Force of habit.” Hermione conceded. “But you're hiding up here attacking yarn and girding yourself to be a sacrificed at the altar. If you've made up your mind to go through with the marriage, which is your right, then you could try to make your situation a bit better.”
“That's what I'm doing. If I avoid Warrington and keep my mouth shut, he'll either have to call it off himself or bow down.” Looking at her knitting and the sweater panel that could be used as chain-mail, Milicent frowned. “Marcus offered to 'have a word' with him. Are you sure you're not conspiring with my cousin?”

“I haven't seen him all morning.” She asserted, not liking the allegation of collusion. It suggested coercion. “I'm here for me. I didn't like what I saw of Warrington's behaviour last night and as a member of the liberal underclass I don't have to bite my tongue and like it.”

“I'm not saying it's what I would have chosen.” That sounded too pathetically Hufflepuff for Milicent's self-respect. “I did well enough in my NEWTs. I want to be a Healer, but I also want to get married and doing either cut off from my father's support is impossible. I won't martyr myself.”

“I can see your point.” Hermione did not add 'how Slytherin of you' as she had to admit the pragmatism of the decision had some merit. The pure-bloods were hopelessly naive to the world outside their incestuous little milieu. “Alright. I won't try to scare him off but I will ask him to stop harassing you. Maybe there's a way to get his head out of his arse.”
Chivalry

Hermione did a quick search of the lodge before heading down the gravel path to the trout stream in the valley. It was a lovely walk, the undergrowth still verdant but the trees in warm colours. She caught an orange leaf drifting on the pine breeze and twirled it in her fingers as she strolled. For the first time in months, she felt her life was in order. Hermione was contemplating that feeling when just beyond a switchback curve, she heard men talking.

“I do not fucking care how put upon you feel.” Marcus's voice, low and wrathful, made her pause. “You will treat Millie with respect.”

“You can't turn a bloody teacup into a tortoise, what the shite do you think you'll do to me?” Warrington slurred, his voice the worse for drink. There was a thumping sound then a groan.

“I thought I'd start with breaking your fucking jaw so my cousin doesn't have to listen to your filth.” The threat was delivered with a low growl that lived up to Marcus's nickname of the Montrose Menace. “She's family. No one hurts my kin.”

“Don't go fucking feudal on me. All the heifer has to do is cry off. I asked her to but she dribbled nonsense then got stubborn.” The wizard was definitely drunk but it was his casual insult to Milicent's build that prompted Hermione to intrude.

Striding around the curve in the path, she saw Marcus rubbing his fists while Warrington propped himself up against a yellow-leaved linden. Neither man appeared to have much damage so they hadn't got as far as duelling or throwing punches. A fishing rod and a wicker basket lay unregarded on the path where they had been dropped when their owner had been grabbed and slammed into a tree.

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“Suck my dick, mudblood.” Warrington spat, barely looking at her.

Quite a few things happened at once. Marcus took a sharp step backwards away from his former team-mate and folded his arms deliberately across his chest. Hermione noticed that in the same abstract way that she noticed the other Slytherin did not have his wand out. Half a dozen songbirds made of azure flame appeared, fluttering and flickering around Warrington's head.

“These are my bluebirds of happiness. And you want them to stay happy, believe me.” Hermione said conversationally. “I had a splendid morning. I am feeling so chipper I might go for a nice ramble before lunch.” She smiled pleasantly. “I know for a fact I can sustain this spell for hours, at several miles radius. We used them for signalling. They explode, vigorously.” She added that bit with a martial look at Warrington. “I don't want to hurt you. I don't want Marcus to hurt you, and Milicent probably doesn't either. So why don't you tell us nicely why it has to be her who breaks off the engagement?”

“I made an Unbreakable Vow.” He watched the birds circling him like tiny blue phoenixes, just close enough for him to feel the heat radiating from them. Granger had said 'vigorously' but he heard 'violently'. Everyone knew about what happened to Vincent. Magical fire of any sort was hungry. “I owed some people money and my parents paid off my debts. They made me promise to marry who they picked out for me.”
“You've been fucking betting again.” Marcus stayed a pace away, kept his arms crossed, didn't even shout much but Warrington still flinched. “I warned you.”

“That was at Hogwarts, and you can’t drop me from the team or have the Prefects spy on me any more.” Warrington said resentfully. Sullen wounded pride at having to crawl to his father for financial rescue beset him again. “You keep your bloody nose out of it, Flint. Your milch cow can sod off too.”

“Right.” Hermione took a calming breath just like in yoga class. Inhale through the nose, hold and exhale through the mouth. Rejoice in the cleansing air. “So it's the size of the dowry not the size of the bride that really bothers you.”

“The Bulstrodes always give their girls blood-warded vaults, so Millie or her children could access her money but not her husband.” Though he was glowering at Warrington, Marcus's explanation to Hermione was temperate.

“Muggles have programs to help people with addictions. Many of them are anonymous. You can solve your problem.” She offered the sulking wizard, wondering how much he owed if he was this desperate. Or whether it was shame and he was trying to hide his gambling from his family.

“I don't have a problem!” Warrington angrily drew his wand and Apparated away.

“Fuck.” Marcus groaned. “He'll Splinch himself.”

“Does he have a Trace on him? Would his parents trust him to behave?” Hermione held out her hand towards the blue birds. They flew to her, spiralling around her before popping out of existence in dazzling flashes. At Marcus's raised eyebrow, the witch looked prim. “I can make them much more vivid. At close range he would have been dazed. I had no intention of blowing his head off.”

“Tempting, though.” They shared a grimace. They couldn't just leave Warrington to sink in his own cess. “I will send his father an owl. I will also tell the Bulstrodes that he is gambling to excess. They might accept a self-indulgent playboy but not a self-destructive one.”

“You kept an eye out for him in school.” She stated more than asked. Marcus shrugged.

“I was the Captain. It was my responsibility to look after my team.” He did not like telling on a friend but discretion ran a poor second to family. Milicent deserved better than someone who would resent her for not letting him piss away her money too.

“Is that why Terence did what you told him when you said to march into the drawing room? I noticed he was a lot more, well, ballysy.” Hermione picked up Warrington's fishing rod and basket, which from weight she guessed was empty. He'd had his mind on other things than trout.

“Terence is shy, and his parents have no patience for meekness. They wanted an athlete and they got an artist.” Marcus smirked. “Madam Higgs tried to bribe me to put him on the Quidditch team. I made him try out. He's quick on a broom but his heart's not in it. Potter showed him what a real Seeker should be. When Draco wanted on the team, Terence was happy enough to step down. The new brooms mollified his parents. They assumed Malfoy offered a better price.”

“You took the bribe?”

“Of course.” He grinned at her affront. His lioness liked everyone to play fair. “I gave it to Terence and he bought a damn telescope with it. My nett profit was looking obliging.”

“Slytherins.” Hermione sighed. “You know that Oliver Wood would've burnt his broom rather than
“Which was why his team were flying on those broken down besoms.” Marcus chuckled, remembering the rush of his Nimbus 2001. That feeling had been the only thing good about his sixth year. He had left the broom at school as it was more team property than a personal gift. A custom Nimbus had been made for him when he joined the Magpies but he had never forgotten his first taste of real speed.

“Integrity is important.” She prodded him with the fishing rod. He caught the shaft and turned it, seeing the Higgs crest on the handle. Marcus spoke the command to transfigure it, leaving Hermione with a silver baton incised with a fish scale pattern. Much easier to transport through a Floo than a full-sized fly-fishing pole.

“Some things are more important. By playing along with his parents’ scheme, Terence got years of peace from their sporting ambitions for him. I got a friend who trusts me enough to invite me to his quiet place.” There he was talking about private stuff with her again. It was so easy. “Quidditch is just a game.”

“Says the professional Quidditch player.” Hermione teased, aware of the undercurrents of their conversation.

“I play because I enjoy it, not because I weirdly get off on it like Wood.” Marcus would not have been surprised to learn the former Gryffindor Captain wanked to pictures of quaffles. He looked along the path towards the lodge. He needed to get those letters sent and organise a search party for Warrington. “Thank you for your help.”

“No trouble. I'm glad I'm Muggle-born, though. I don't have to deal with any of this dynastic nonsense” The witch bit her lip in thought. “Do you think you could persuade Milicent's parents to let her train as a Healer before she gets married?”

“Could do.” He nodded, previously unaware his cousin had any particular career plans. Pure-blood wives did not have to do much unless the whim took them, other than produce an heir. “They do not care what Millie does so long as it does not disgrace them. Her father is still trying for a son.”

“Yes, she told me about that.” Hermione frowned. If it had been in her power to do so, she would have made that sort of surrogacy illegal but policing the use of Obliviate was difficult. No memory meant no testimony. “Did your family ever do anything like that? Is it a common thing?”

“Not that common. You need enough heirs that you can spare one to make half-bloods and most old families are too thin now.” Marcus mentally sorted the dirty laundry of his peers. There was no shortage of it. “The Flints never did. We have no trouble starting babies. Just keeping them alive after they're born. Both my siblings died young.”

“I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I never would've asked.” She hurriedly apologised, blind-sided by the revelation.

“There is nothing for you to apologise over. I told you because we are friends and you asked.” He rubbed her arm in a reassuring gesture. “Most pure-blood families have a burden like ours. The Flints are lucky. The Blacks are unstable and the Travers are sickly. When we survive, we are big and healthy and sane.”

“It just shouldn't have to be this way. There has to be something someone can do.” Hermione said, frustrated by the calm acceptance of genetic ailments. People with magic should not just shrug when bad things happened.
“You are studying science. I think you are the someone doing the something.” Marcus patted her shoulder then started up the path back to the lodge. Hermione fell into step with him trying to pretend she wasn't preening. It'd be a slog but she would get her degree and fix the big problems and everyone would see her, the Mudblood, do it.
Absence of Mind

The rest of the weekend was an idyll. Hermione felt slightly guilty about how little work she was doing. She hiked the trails that wound through the forest that hid the lodge from Muggles and picked mushrooms with Marcus and the Haut-Leby twins. Early Sunday morning she went with the anglers down to the trout stream, reading a book while Milicent, Amaury, Lucian and Zavier waded happily.

Sunday afternoon was spent mucking about in the kitchen as Eulalie and Terence argued about amandine and gremolata. She showed them how to flambé mushrooms without magic. They ate a very good dinner, chatted in French and stargazed late. Hermione thought as she tucked herself into the sybaritic bed that she had seldom had a more pleasant few days. And only once, when Lucian had dropped a pot, had she instinctively reached for her wand.

A weekend like this could convince her the war really was over.

Monday saw herself, Marcus and Zavier packing to Portkey back to England. Everyone else was staying longer to enjoy the fishing or lounging about. They arrived on the grounds of the Higgs estate in Gloucester. Zavier collected his Bentley while Marcus and Hermione Apparated to St Mungo's.

Marcus had not asked her to accompany him but neither had he refused when she had offered. He had not said much all morning, the witch reflected as they waited for Octavius Flint to be discharged into his son's care. The elder Mister Flint was in his early seventies, which was no age at all for a wizard, but he looked more Inferi than human. He was thin and pale with deeply sunken eyes. He stared blankly, seemingly dulled to all sensation.

The Medi-witch who had brought the old wizard to them practically dusted her hands she was so keen to be rid of him. Hermione glared, biting her lip to keep from saying anything. If Marcus was going to do this mute then she would not cause a scene. They took the Floo to Flint Manor without a word.

“I do not like it there.” Octavius mumbled quietly as he stumbled out of the hearth. Marcus caught his arm and the old man patted his hand absently.

“You're home now.” Hermione reassured, noting a brief look of pain on her friend's face before it went stony. “Would you like something to eat?”

“Yes.” The elder Flint nodded, smiling neutrally at her as though he could not quite place her. His dark eyes flickered from her to his son. He straightened a little. “So kind. Let the elves know I would like a tray in my room. I am sorry but I do not feel up to a family dinner.”

“That's alright, Mister Flint. We understand.” She smiled and shared a nod with Marcus. He escorted his father upstairs to his suite while she went to the kitchen. Hermione found several of the Flint elves there, pacing about and polishing things already mirror bright. When she asked them to make some breakfast they rushed to do so.

Whatever she had expected of the bedroom of a pure-blood contemporary of Tom Riddle, Octavius's room wasn't it. There was some green but only in the velvet curtains and a few Quidditch pennants. A faded Persian carpet, scuffed but solid wardrobes, a roll-top desk and a single bed heaped with quilts gave the impression of a genteel B&B.

Octavius sat propped up by a generous stack of pillows. He had changed into a clean pair of pyjamas
and looked a little more alert. Marcus was opening the windows let in the crisp autumn breeze. The old wizard took a deep, gasping breath at the first gust of fresh air then settled consoled.

“Thank you, my dear.” Octavius accepted the tray from her and glanced at her left hand with a confused frown. “You are not wearing your ring. You really must. The wards, you know.”

“Marcus gave me a pass-token.” Hermione hooked a necklace out from under her shirt to show a flint bead engraved with the family crest. Seeing the old man’s distress, she temporised. “I work in a lab most days. I didn’t want to damage a ring.”

“Oh.” He stared at her, blinking. His gazed tracked to Marcus as he approached then returned to Hermione as his son put his arm around her. The affectionate gesture evidently soothed him. “Well, not in my day but I suppose if that is what you wish to do.”

“We thought while I am still touring, Hermione would complete her Potion Mastership.” Marcus lied fluently, well aware his father could not tell bio-chemistry from biography. He weathered the paternal grumbling.

“You should be here, running the estate, not flitting about grabbing the wood between your legs.” Octavius spread apricot jam on his toast with a shaky hand. “Why your mother lets you play about, I do not know.” He looked towards the door, toast halfway to his mouth. “Where is she? Still in a huff about the north lawn? I told her we needed more space for the green houses.”

“Still in a huff.” Marcus said through his teeth, his fingers digging into Hermione's hip.

“I'm sure we can smooth things over.” The witch said brightly. “And I will see to it that the estate books are in order. Don't worry about a thing.”

“I said you needed to find yourself a clever girl, son. Good job you did.” He began to slowly eat his breakfast, shooing them away with a feeble jerk of his hand.

In the hallway, with the oak door firmly closed, Marcus put his back against the wall and glared at the ceiling as he clenched and unclenched his hands. He breathed deeply, working hard to steady himself. When Hermione put her arms around him, he forgot his tactical reserve and hugged her tightly.

They stood there in silence until Marcus was confident he had composed himself. He eased his grip on his witch but did not release her. It felt right to have her there and he was not ready to give that up yet.

“He is good, most days. Almost keeps up. I do not know how much of that is old habit of hiding weakness but I do know he is better at home. The Manor knows him.” He rolled his shoulders, feeling some of the tension ebb. Slytherin or not, he hated lying to his father.

“That room’s his childhood one, isn’t it?” Hermione asked. Marcus nodded.

“After Mother died, he could not bear being in their room without her. I used to find him sleeping in the hallway. I thought his old room would help.” He gritted his teeth against the curses he wanted to spit. “Familiar things steady him. Change throws him right off balance. He would be catatonic if I put him in St Mungo’s permanently.”

“You won't have to. I'll find a nurse who can assist him.” She would do some more research on rehabilitation after Azkaban too. Harry had asked her to look into it for Sirius but she had put her reading on that topic in abeyance after the Department of Mysteries.
“I am sorry you had to lie about the ring. I told him I was getting married but I had not got around to telling him about the divorce.” Marcus wanted to clarify that point to absolve himself of conspiracy.

“Don't tell him.” Hermione said after a moment's consideration. “Not until it's official anyway and he's more stable.” It seemed a white lie, temporary enough. “It won't do any harm, at least not until you want to get married to someone else.”

“Explaining why my wife is marrying a Weasley might also be tricky.” He smirked, restraining a grin when Hermione laughed nervously.

“That isn't going to happen in a hurry. Right now Ron's inability to do paperwork in a timely fashion means we can't even get together for coffee.” She groused, still unhappy about the request to smooth the way for Ginny. “I wonder how that stupid game went. I hope the Harpies lost.”

“Fancy a Montrose scarf?” Marcus asked like it was innuendo.

“You're terrible.” Hermione pushed him, which did not do much as he was leaning against the wall and twice her size. “Thank you, no, I do not want a scarf Ron's likely to strangle me with. The only way I could aggravate him more is by burning his precious Chuddley regalia.”

“I could think of others ways.” He smiled down at her but relaxed his hold completely so she could easily step out of his embrace.

“So could I.” She sighed and shifted away. “You've been great about this. I don't want to jerk you around. Ron was, is, my only really serious boyfriend. My only boyfriend of any sort, actually.” Hermione thought that a bit pathetic. She had never been good with people. Her rapport with Viktor Krum had been more mutual sympathetic awkwardness. To her discomfort, she noticed at that moment how similar Marcus and Viktor were in appearance. Tall, muscular, dark haired and respectful.

“Send him an owl. Try to arrange that coffee with him. He will want to tell you everything about his sister's game.” Marcus straightened his sweater, mentally girding himself to go to Montrose. “I have to do much the same with Maconne and the rest of the team. Hopefully our Reserve players handled themselves well. Hexes will fly if they did not.”

“I'll drop him a note after class. I have a late tutorial this evening and I'd bet quite a bit Ron hasn't got his report done yet. So there's no hurry.” Hermione pulled out her wand and checked she had everything she needed to Apparate directly to Magdalen College. “Will your dad be alright here by himself?”

“The elves mind him well enough. One of them will fetch me if anything happens. Father spends most of his time asleep.” He could accept it without liking it, just as he had the grey years of his childhood. “Do you have any plans for your birthday?”

“I have lectures all day and an early lab on Wednesday. I'll organise something this weekend. With luck, the Harpies will be playing away so I'll be able to see Harry without having to skulk by the dustbins.” She rolled her eyes. “There's no point putting you and the boys in the same room but if you don't have anything on, would you like to go out? I still owe you a dinner.”

“I would. Let me know when you are available. I have a Friday night game and morning training but my evenings are free.” Marcus was casual as she was casual, and bade her farewell with no more than a nod. But once she had Disapparated, he grinned. She was hardly rushing back to the Weasel.
Hermione went directly from her last lecture to the Higgs estate to collect Crookshanks. She would have returned him to her flat that morning but her familiar had seen her packing and had hidden himself. Terence had promised to find him. He telephoned his success, having been initiated into the technological mysteries by his cousin Zavier, then Portkeyed to his home.

Hermione arrived on the lawn with its tiny white flowers, orientating herself with the distinctive statue of Cernunnos. The Higgs’ anticipated many guests so they had designed an area easy to picture and hold in the mind.

Terence was there in a dinner jacket arguing with a very cross wicker basket. The witch laughed when one orange paw poked out of the withies trying to swat the wizard, who wisely kept well out of reach.

“I am not popular with your cat.” Terence cautiously levitated the basket to Hermione. “When I found him he was enjoying a nice fish supper in the kitchen. Amaury’s prize perch, I regret.”

“Naughty Crooks!” She scolded. The basket went quiet. “Was Amaury particularly miffed?”

“Not overly. Eulalie had accused him of neglecting her so he had an opportunity to show how little he cared for anything but her companionship.” He put a hand to his forehead and mimed a swoon. “All the Blishwycks are inclined towards amateur dramatics.”

“Thanks for finding him. I don’t know why he took off like he did. He usually doesn't mind travelling.” Hermione peered into the basket but all she saw was marmalade fur.

“I can guess. Crookshanks was not dining alone. Estelle was also tucking into stolen perch.” Terence smiled wistfully.

“Your friend Tamsin, does she visit often?” It was not hard to guess the cause of his yearning. “Or is this a parental difficulty and I should mind my own business?”

“It is, though not in the way you expect. My parents do not mind me courting a half-blood. Tamsin is an athlete, just the sort of jolly girl they like.” The artistic wizard was thankful for that, having grown up expecting to be affianced to Millicent, who was like a sister to him. “Her father does not like wizards.”

“His daughter's a witch.”

“Witches are fine, unless they are his former wife. Who ran off with a wizard when Tamsin was six. Mister Applebee wants her to marry a Muggle.” Terence shrugged, unable to blame his inamorata's father for his caution. “He knows enough about the war to be right off the idea of a Slytherin son-in-law.”

“What's Tamsin's opinion?” Hermione asked, seeing again there was a need for a counselling and advisory service for the parents of Muggle-borns. The Wizengamot would probably wring their hands and hide behind the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy but there needed to be more than one letter on an eleventh birthday then years of half-truths.

“She is hopeful she can talk him around. He is a physicist so exploring esoteric realms is not so foreign to him, apparently.” There was a wry twist to his mouth. “Tamsin tried to explain physics. I got as far as charming quarks then begged for mercy.”
“If he works at Mauna Kea, Mister Applebee would be interested in stars. Maybe share with him some of your Astronomy texts. Particularly the observational documentation.” She suggested. Her dad had been delighted with a birthday gift of a wizarding account of medieval London. “Muggles lost a lot of their early data when the Mongols sacked Baghdad.”

“I had an ancestor there. Higgs was originally Hijazi. That is when my paternal line moved to England, as far as he could get from the horde.” His father had stressed the adventurous nature of their forefather but Terence treasured more the idea of a scholar saving what he could from barbarians.

“I have no idea who my ancestors were in the seventeenth century far less the thirteenth.” Hermione laughed because Terence looked abashed as though he thought he had offended her. “It's fine, really. Non-magical documents just don't survive that long unless they are very carefully preserved.”

“We do not have much about him, only that he arrived on a carpet loaded with books and that he bought our estate from a king.” He cavilled, not wanting to annoy Marcus by snubbing his witch or alienate a new friend who knew the difference between Limax and Lumbricus.

“William, William, Henry, Stephen and Matilda.” Hermione muttered under her breath as she recited monarchs of England. “Henry, Richard, John, Henry. Bloody Henrys are as bad as the Edwards. Right, that king would've been Henry the Third, first of the Plantagenets.”

“Can you recite all the Muggle monarchs? There are records that old?” Terence asked and winced when he again sounded snobbish. He knew Muggles were not semi-literate unwashed savages but Zavier found it easier to gloss over history in favour of shiny gadgets. According to his cousin, anything before the invention of the steam engine was the Dark Ages.

“All the monarchs of England and Britain, yes. I get a bit vague on France but they're pretty much Louis, Charles or Philip interchangeably so I can guess.” The witch smiled recalling quiz nights with her parents. They romped it in unless there were a lot of questions about sports, which had not been a Granger strength. “There're always records about kings. It's the common people who vanish into the mists.”

“Draco could recite his antecedents almost back to Merlin. Frankish magi trump a refugee with a Persian rug.” He was a pure-blood but not Sacred Twenty-Eight, and in Slytherin the distinction was important.

“Sure they go back that far, but his family is more a trellis than a tree. It isn't hard to remember names when you only have two great-great grandparents.” That was probably an exaggeration but given Draco looked like a clone of Lucius, who apparently was the spit and image of Abraxas, there wasn't a lot of admixture.

Terence laughed so hard Crookshanks started to yowl in his basket. Hermione took her leave, Disapparating to the sound of the wizard sniggering 'trellis'.

One of the little tricks she had learned to avoid Muggle interest was to go into doors as many times as she had come out of them. Having Portkeyed to the Higgs' lodge, she Apparated directly into her flat. Being seen leaving rooms you hadn't entered caused low grade suspicion that was difficult to overcome.

Hermione had installed a concealed owl roost at one of her living room windows. It was charmed to be invisible to Muggles so her landlord would not kick up a fuss. It was also full right now of disgruntled birds.
She liberated Crookshanks, who stalked off to properly ignore her on the spare bed, then opened the window. The owls dropped off their letters, hooted their rebukes and departed in a flurry of feathers.

Putting the kettle on, Hermione sorted the envelopes by best guess of chronology. She always put a time and date on her letters when using owl post as delivery times varied. However much the British complained about the Royal Mail, at least it didn’t stop to eat voles en route.

Ron had sent a quick note after the game on Saturday. The Harpies had won, Ginny had scored three goals and he was grateful. The next one, rather more illegible, was an invitation to celebratory drinks.

The witch groaned after reading a hasty missive from Ron and a much longer one from Harry. Evidently the alcohol had loosened Ron's tongue enough to confess to Ginny what he had asked Hermione to do. Just as she had predicted, Mrs Potter had not thanked her brother. There had been quite a row at the pub.

Monday's literary offerings were a worried note from Ron wondering why she hadn't replied, a reproachful one from Molly telling her not to interfere in Weasley family business, and an apologetic letter from Harry about his mother-in-law's message. Hermione Floo called the trainee Aurors' flat, hoping to catch Ron there as he hadn't yet found a place of his own.

She left a message with Dennis Creevey, newly admitted into the Auror training program. He tried not to gush and promised to tell Ron as soon as he came home. Hermione Floo called Grimmauld Place but found to no surprise she was blocked. She tried Harry's mobile phone with similar results. Resolving to pop into the Ministry between classes tomorrow, she curled up on the sofa with her textbooks.

Loud banging woke her with a start. Hermione jumped up with wand in hand, ready to Apparate as soon as she saw Death Eaters. Blinking away the sleep fog, she saw only Crookshanks napping on her overnight bag. The noise was someone knocking firmly.

“What?” Hermione demanded after opening her front door with her wand concealed behind her. Ron stood in the hall while the tenant in the other upstairs flat peeked out her door with the chain still on. Hermione waved to her, signalling all way well, as she let Ron inside.

“Where the Hell have you been?” He shouted, scanning the room as though he expected someone else to be there.

“What time is it?” She glanced at the clock in the kitchen. A quarter to six in the morning. “God, Ron, I left a message with Dennis as soon as I got in.”

“I was at the Burrow.” Ron moderated his voice now he could see she was safe and there weren’t any snakes infesting the place. “Where were you? When you didn't answer, Harry and I got worried.”

“You could've called. I gave Harry a phone for his birthday.” Hermione scrubbed a sleeve across her face, nearly poking herself in the eye with her wand. She put it away. “I'm going to make some breakfast.”

“Ginny found it and blew it up. She guessed it must've come from you.” His sister was simply not telling bygones be bygones. She was guarding Harry as jealously as a dragon guarded her eggs. “The game was great.”

“So you said.” Putting bread in the toaster, Hermione debated whether she had any inclination towards cooking. She didn’t. But she had time for a nice lunch now she didn't need to visit the
Ministry. “Marcus invited me to Terence Higgs's lodge for the weekend.”

“You went away with him?” Ron asked carefully and when she nodded confirmation, he exploded. “I asked you to speak to him, not to go on a dirty weekend!”

“It wasn't! There was a house full of people. Conservative wizarding people! The women were in a separate wing, with privacy wards.” Hermione explained firmly, conceding to herself that Ron had the right to be suspicious “I give you my word that nothing happened.”

“And I'm just supposed to accept that?” He mocked. “Nothing happened, I just snuck off without telling anyone to a Slytherin's house to spend a few days with another Slytherin who I've already shagged.”

“Are you quite finished?” Deliberately keeping her voice even, she asked after his rant had ended. “Yes, yes, I think I am.” Ron turned on his heel and stormed out the door.
Hermione gave Ron his space with reasonable composure until her birthday. She focussed on her lectures and tried not to think about anything else. Yoga helped, as did her study group united in their mutual dismay over Professor Hepworth's abstruse essay topics for their first assignment.

When she woke on the morning of the nineteenth, Hermione was delighted to find a parliament of owls in the roost, all with birthday messages. Dumbledore's Army and Order of the Phoenix members, and people she'd met during the legal appeal against the Marriage legislation had all sent felicitations for her twenty-first birthday.

One of the dour Flint owls held an ordinary envelope containing a Muggle birthday card with a kitten on it. Hermione smiled at the mundane bit of stationary Marcus had braved a foreign world to purchase.

Harry had sent a wizarding card via a Ministry owl. His message included a number for the mobile phone he had bought in defiance of Ginny as well as the Harpies' playing schedule so they could meet discreetly.

Nothing from any Weasley.

Hermione put the cards on the mantle, fed Crookshanks then went to university. She had a good day and bought dinner from a Greek delicatessen, opting for baklava rather than cake for her party of one.

When she returned to her building Hermione found at the front door Eliot, D. Wright, the man in the other downstairs flat, and S. Hughes, the woman who shared her floor. They were all smiling as though they were in on a good joke.

None of the three would tell her the source of their amusement but assured her she would find out when she got to her flat. She did. Someone had filled the hall with bouquets of red and yellow flowers; roses, lilies, chrysanthemums, tulips, irises and more she couldn't name.

Afterwards, once she had read the note, Hermione chided herself for the little skip her heart had done. A good and kind friend had done this for her. He had made this lavish gesture because he cared and because he knew she would miss her parents as he had missed his on special days like this.

“Either someone loves you or they've done something really, really stupid.” Eliot observed as he and their neighbours climbed the stairs to admire the floral extravaganza.

“It's my birthday.” Hermione said simply. “And Neville wanted to cheer me up.”

“And Neville isn't that loud ginger chap, is he?” Ms. Hughes asked with a significant look at Eliot. They met for chai tea and gossip at least once a week. They had not been impressed at being woken so early by boyfriend drama.

“That's Ron. I don't expect he will be coming around again.” The witch spoke with an airiness that fooled no one, regretfully not even herself. Hermione would have liked a little self-delusion right now. “Neville is a friend from school.”

“Is he as built as that other 'friend' from school?” Eliot moved his hands to convey how tall, how broad and how not bad that particular friend was.
“They're cousins.” Hermione reckoned that if she was going to have good relations with the people in her building she was going to have to put up with them grinning at her That Way. “They do look fairly similar, yes.”

“I wish I'd gone to your school.” Ms. Hughes hadn't seen Ms. Granger move in but Eliot had described her friends in detail later. Particularly how good the dark haired one looked in jeans going upstairs.

“It was very dull.” The Muggle-born war hero said with a carefully bland face.

Eliot, Daniel and Sarah helped her carry the flowers into her flat. She shared Marcus's divorce champagne with them and they toasted her coming of age before going back to their various apartments.

Hermione sat on her shabby chic sofa, rubbing her feet against the soft cushions. She acknowledged to herself she was unhappy Ron hadn't sent or done anything for her birthday. It wasn't childish or maudlin to be disappointed. She was allowed to be upset.

But it would not happen again.

Transfiguring a highlighter into a glass bird, Hermione set it on her coffee table. She'd use it as a paperweight and every time she looked at the yellow ornament she would remember the Oppugno Jinx she had used on Ron in sixth year. Just because he kept leaving didn't mean she had to keep taking him back.

She didn't actually have to do anything. Hermione stretched out on her sofa and stared at her white ceiling. The war was over. Hogwarts was over. Her adolescence was over. She didn't have to protect or help or fight for anyone any more.

She still wanted to, which was fine. It was good to give a damn. But she got to choose her battles now. And her next fight was going to be getting a degree. A proper MBiochem that she could take pride in, and that would help her revolutionise the frankly medieval approach to magical research.

Which was not going to happen if she moped. So she sat up and did some reading on peptides to see if short chain amino acid monomers could be her friends. At first meeting, they didn't seem amiable. Hermione went to bed at midnight and dreamed of molecules dancing a slow rumba of chemical reactions.

On Wednesday between lectures, Hermione Apparated to Diagon Alley to buy an owl. She had always had access to either Hogwarts or Burrow owls, or had borrowed a Flint bird while she was staying at Marcus's great-uncle's pied a terre. Now she needed one of her own.

Having done some research on indigenous owl species in the United Kingdom, Hermione hoped to find a Long-Eared Owl as she thought their elongated ear tufts made them look attentive. Asio otis also had the benefit of being reclusive and generally silent, so she hoped it would go unremarked in Oxford.

Hedwig had been a lovely animal but Snowy owls were not a native species and were thus far more noticeable. Hermione conceded she might be being paranoid as most people didn't know one owl from another. However birdwatching was a popular hobby in Oxfordshire and she would feel better for having the right bird for the right environment.

Eeylops Owl Emporium did not have much of a selection left after the back-to-school rush. Hermione refused outright to buy a screech owl as they were a New World species. The sales
assistant offered her an elf owl with the assertion that it was too small for Muggles to notice. He did not understand when she asked whether the shop would also provide the poor thing an overcoat.

She left without an owl, bustling out of the Emporium debating with herself whether she should Apparate to one of the other Eeylops stores. Hermione was distracted trying to remember if she had been to Leeds or Glasgow.

They had definitely camped in Yorkshire during the Horcrux hunt. But had it been Bradford or Leeds where she had tried to shop only to spot Snatchers? Those miserable days blurred together so much she couldn't be sure. Lost in thought, Hermione walked into someone. She stepped back to apologise then smiled.

“Neville!” The witch hugged her friend. “Thank you for the lovely flowers. My flat smells like paradise.”

“I'm glad you like them. I tried to think of a book to get you that you didn't have or something intellectual or alcoholic. What do apprentice scientists drink?” Neville was relieved he hadn't been excessive. Once he had started looking for Gryffindor coloured blooms, he had just kept going.

“Right now, tea. Do you have time to join me?” Hermione scanned the Alley and spotted a café she had not tried. “What's brought you into London?”

“I have time.” He strolled with her into the chintzy tea-rooms and tucked his long legs under their spindly table. Hermione grimaced at the doilies. “I need a few seeds and a silver trowel. I'm trialling some new planting methods.”

“Synchronising with the lunar cycles?” She asked as she waved to the waitress. Neville nodded and made a quick choice between a cream tea and a plate of sandwiches. They ordered then sat back to talk shop. Hermione was halfway through her petit-fours when she noticed him shift uncomfortably.

“What?”

“I spoke with Ron yesterday.” Neville did not want to broach the topic. “He and Harry are arguing, about a Quidditch game. And you.” He sighed. “Hannah said I should keep out of it. She nearly got hexed by Ginny when she asked if you were having a birthday party.”

“I'm not, having a party, I mean. I thought about it but I think I'd much rather just get on with Uni and let things cool down.” Hermione speared a blameless piece of sponge cake with her fork. “I thought we'd made a fresh start but old things keep bubbling up and I'm tired of it.”

“Hannah's planning a Samhain do. She'd like you to come. Everyone might be a bit more even-tempered by then.” He cast a Muffliato Charm. “From what I heard, the Aurors are being run ragged chasing unregistered wands.” He had excused a lot of Harry's and Ron's snappishness when Dean had let him in on the hush-hush. “Someone got at the Ministry stockpile of wands confiscated from Muggle-borns during the war and is selling them.”

“I thought the wands were returned. They should've been.” She said militantly. “How sub rosa is the wand thing? I might be able to ask Theo to make inquiries. His dad was one of the inner circle of the Death Eaters. Someone on their side might've kept accounts, and I doubt he'll open up to the Aurors.”

“Dean said they tried to keep it quiet but it's an open secret at the Ministry now. The Prophet has been gagged, though I wouldn't put a Knut on that lasting.” Neville finished his last sandwich and drummed his fingers on the table. “I thought about asking Flint myself but I think you'll have a better chance with the Slytherins. This is a hold-over from the war. We need to help.”
“Okay, I'll speak with Theo. Leota and Alun might know something, or know someone who knows something. No harm in asking. And no one wants untraceable wands flooding Britain.” Hermione checked her watch. If she left now, she'd have time for a very fast trip to the Wizengamot.
Recompense

Theodore was still in the Wizengamot chamber sitting for the House of Nott when Hermione hurried into his Rooms. The suite was as nice as the one she'd had when she had sat for the House of Flint as Marcus's proxy. She remarked as much to Leota Yaxley, Theo's assistant.

"You should make note of the window." The apprentice advocate advised, indicating the solitary Gothic arch that looked out onto a magical landscape. "There is a subtle hierarchy. The Notts post-date Salazar Slytherin, migrating from what is now Germany in the twelfth century."

"The Flints are Saxon." Hermione recalled the Flint Rooms had two large windows in the 'reception area' and a smaller decorative one in the little office. "So the older the family, the more quietly ostentatious the windows to nowhere?"

"As you say." Leota confirmed, making a rude phallic gesture with one pinky. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence?"

Hermione reiterated her conversation with Neville and requested an appointment with Theo so she could ask him potentially awkward questions. Miss Yaxley merely nodded. She could guess the sort of queries involved, and when she in turn asked the former Madam Flint if the answers would be on record, Leota took Hermione at her word they would not be.

Apparating back to a stairwell in the basement of the New Library, Hermione arrived at her class just as the lecturer was checking her watch to begin. She got a look but no comment. Hermione sat through thermodynamics and energetics in cells trying to simultaneously take notes and structure questions for Theo.

She walked home mostly to be seen walking by Naeem and Joe, who were trawling through the takeaways near the college. They waved from across the busy street, pointing to a kebab place. Hermione waved back and pointed to her watch, hurrying on.

There was time for Crookshanks to be served dinner and for her to start something for herself before Theo and Leota stepped through the Floo. They looked around the small white flat with careful expressions, waiting for her social cues to give them context to the quality of her accommodations.

"It's nice but not fancy, in a good location." Hermione provided and received compliments on her interior decoration. Both pure-bloods appeared uncomfortable and Theo seemed weary. "You look knackered." She said frankly, offering drinks then making tea as requested. "What are those pompous windbags doing now?"

"Debating allocations of the reparations." Theo suppressed a groan as he sat gingerly on the suede chaise. He had spent all day springing to his feet to contest motions to extract yet more money out of the families of Death Eaters. His knees loathed him. "The Wizengamot is negotiating with the goblins the return of artefacts in exchange for opening blood-warded vaults."

"They can do that?" Hermione asked, more for the legality than the ritual. It was possibly to dismantle a ward entirely but it was a complex undertaking. If Gringotts was considering it, then someone must have a shrewd idea of what was inside those private hoards.

"They can make the attempt." Leota gave a lawyer's answer

"A great many very old grudges are being settled." The lanky wizard sank a little deeper into the cushions. "The king-makers are manoeuvring legislation to their advantage. It went putrid like this
after the first war.”

“I'm also going to make your day a little less pleasant.” Hermione warned when she brought the tea tray to the coffee table. “This is going to sound like a game of Chinese Whispers, but I spoke with Neville who spoke with Dean, who's new Auror.” She paused for them to catch up with the pedigree of her gossip.

“You want to know who had custody of the wands during the Dark Lord's reign.” Theo accepted a cup from his hostess, letting the silence lengthen. Leota had briefed him, and the news explained the renewed interest in the Death Eaters' estates. “No one was particularly organised.”

“That doesn't surprise me. Everyone would've been too busy covering their own arse or keeping their head down.” She conjured an chair rather than crowd her guests on the sofa. “If you had to guess?”

“I told Potter, Proudfoot, and that pillock in the trenchcoat I had no idea.” That protest was a matter of form and they all knew it. They drank tea, giving Theo time to think. “There was a shortage of wands during the war. I believe it was a point of honour not to use a lesser's wand.”

“That's something to be thankful for.” Hermione did not expound on that thought. She did not feel it necessary to hammer home to a Nott and a Yaxley exactly why she was glad she hadn't faced wizards armed to the teeth with stolen wands.

“It is just not done.” Leota licked her lips, conscious of being overdressed in this quiet, compact sanctuary. Had Miss Granger chosen it for the unimpeded sight-lines and the defensible layout? She rather expected she had. “Using someone else's wand is like sex. If you do it casually you are left feeling dirty.”

“How sure are you of that? I'll say it as fact to Harry if you're certain. We need to find these people.” Looking from pure-blood wizard to pure-blood witch, Hermione wanted to convey her sincerity without sounding melodramatic. They did not look happy.

“I think it's someone in the Ministry. Still in the Ministry, if you take my point.” Theo busied his hands with milk and sugar. The Notts had not prospered by taking risks, his father being a regrettable exception.

“So, one of mine, not one of yours.”

“Yes.” The wizard answered simply.

“It would be possible for someone disenchanted with the speed of reconstruction or with their own compensation justifying it to themselves.” Leota hypothesised. “A half-blood perhaps who did not personally suffer, who could see the confiscated wands as a resource being wasted.”

“No shortage of people who sat on their hands.” Hermione's own bitterness made her uncomfortable. She did not want to compare scars with anyone. “The Order let Mundungus Fletcher join. We weren't exactly swamped by volunteers.”

“Will Potter believe you?” Theo asked the nearly blasphemous question because it was common gossip the Golden Trio were not speaking.

“He will.” She spoke with utter confidence. However rocky their friendship was at the moment, it was unthinkable Harry would doubt her. “Whether he wants to admit to himself he can't lay all our problems at the feet of Death Eaters, that's different.”
“I will ask Draco if he can recall anyone mentioning confiscated wands. The Aurors rummaged through Malfoy Manor again. He will appreciate knowing why.” He had taken to packing random boxes of trinkets just to hear the triumphant cries of the enforcers when they thought they had found contraband. Their disappointment always improved his mood.

“Do they do that a lot? Just let themselves in to poke through your belongings?” One of her mother's secret vices had been a love for police procedurals. The Bill had featured significantly as part of her understanding of criminal law. Hermione liked and respected the police force. But Theo's grim nod reminded her Aurors were not cops.

So much of magic depended on force of will, in personal focus and determination, that attitude influenced every aspect of wizarding society. Officers of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had every right to kick in your door at their whim.

“That's not something we'll be able to change in a hurry.” Hermione mused. Leota's restrained nod was a fanfare.

“Our plan to revitalise the abeyant Wizengamot Seats need not be done in a rush.” Theo was more at ease with this sort of conspiracy; subtle changes tidily enacted.

“If we get Squibs and Muggle-borns into the Wizengamot, they'll be on board with all sorts of reform.” She looked significantly at Leota. “Australia's ambassador to Denmark is gay. His partner is officially recognised. I believe he was presented to Queen Margrethe.”

“Reforming inheritance laws would go a long way to making things easier. In many cases, unmarried sons and daughters are considered legal minors.” The advocate had a long list of codicils and addenda and amendments she wanted changed, mostly so her forty year old girlfriend could not be barred from leaving her father's home like an unruly child.

There was no hurrah, no raucous call to arms. Hermione, Leota and Theo quietly agreed a plan of campaign, scheduled a few meetings then shook hands. She saw the two of them out then had dinner. The witch smiled, feeling much more in control. She was good at this.
Falling

Autumn was the season of completion, of harvests and ripeness. And meetings. By the end of October, Hermione had her schedule perfected. She had also mapped out every nook, alcove and unregarded byway on the Magdalen College campus so she could Apparate without being observed or recorded on camera.

Hermione was particularly conscious of security cameras after only just noticing one as she was about to Disapparate in full view of it. She bought one herself and tested charms on it until she had something that would confound electronic surveillance.

Harry was impressed with her spell when she taught it to him. Muggle recording devices were always a problem and as they became more sophisticated, tracking down the security leaks became harder for the Obliviators. He was less impressed with the information she had got from Theo.

Auror Potter simply did not trust Slytherins, particularly those from their school years. Their harassment had left an ingrown dislike that Harry was disinclined to overcome. But he promised he would look into the Ministry angle, and he did.

Her best friend was so involved with the investigation she saw him only once between that chat and Samhain. But they exchanged text messages often, which went a long way to patching things up between them.

Hermione's mobile only stopped chiming when she turned it off for lectures. She talked to expatriate Squibs, the relatives of Muggle-borns aware of the magical world, her own college friends, and anyone else who regarded an owl as a Halloween decoration.

She could have given out her home number but that made her address easier to trace and she wanted to keep her privacy. Particularly after the Prophet published a two page spread on her and Marcus in Muggle London. The newspaper called it a 'secret rendezvous' and had not held itself back in speculating salaciously what they had been doing.

The actual reason for their trip had been to interview health care workers. There were a lot of Squibs in medical professions. Often the last thing their magical family did for them was to pay for their education.

Her plan to hire an experienced nurse for Octavius had been unnecessarily multi-stage in Hermione's opinion. The Strategy Committee had done a lot of the work in compiling a list of Squibs and many of them had been contacted. Quite a few wanted nothing to do with the wizarding world.

Those who were willing to re-establish communication were visited by Theo, Leota, Hermione or Justin Finch-Fletchley. The former Hufflepuff was enthusiastically supportive of reintegration and stepped up to be the social coordinator of their Squib network.

Of the willing, Hermione asked any who had nursing, psychiatric or social work qualifications if they were in need of employment. Most had full-time jobs. Regardless of the wealth or idleness of their magical families, the Squibs had to work.

But they did not have to work for an old pure-blood family. Two of the people she arranged to interview refused the position outright when they learned it was for the Flints. One woman, a Belby, angrily told Marcus that it was his own fault he had to come crawling for help and that she hoped all the snobs inbred themselves out of existence.
Hermione had suggested taking a break after that but Marcus had been expecting such a reaction from his previous attempts to find his father help. So they soldiered on. Their perseverance got them Vespera Shaw neé Starkey, a registered nurse who had worked in Nightingale Hospital before her marriage.

Mrs Shaw wanted a part-time job during school hours and was prepared to have a Flint elf Apparate her to and from the Manor. This suited Marcus as he didn't want a stranger living-in. Hermione had checked the pay rates of NHS nurses and negotiated a reasonable salary with Vespera.

The final step was organising the banking. Gringotts required anyone exchanging currency to do so in person. As she did not have a wand, there was no way for Mrs Shaw to access a vault. Marcus had no Muggle identification so could not open a bank account. Having sacks of gold coins in a house with three children under ten was a non-starter.

They solved the problem by Marcus giving Hermione a large payment of Galleons, which she converted at a favourable rate at Gringotts. Hermione then deposited the money in her parents' business account. A Dental practice paying a nurse regularly would attract no suspicion from the bank or HM Revenue and Customs.

Octavius alternately ignored or protested the presence of a nurse, which Mrs Shaw said was typical. She would do a general health assessment then suggest a treatment program. There would be no miracles but there was every chance of improvement.

In thanks for her efforts on his behalf, Marcus bought Hermione an owl. The first the witch knew of this was when the bird arrived at her roost and presented her with a letter of introduction. His name was Augustus, he was a Long-Eared owl born at Flint Manor and his favourite food was other people's lamb chops.

“Lamb chops?” Neville asked, laughing as Hermione related what she had been doing with herself since they had last met. The witch nodded and adjusted her chiton as the draped garment tried to slide off her shoulder.

Hannah's Samhain party was in full swing in a large field outside the Abbott family home in Godric's Hollow. To camouflage any magic from the local Muggles, Hannah had asked everyone to wear Halloween costumes or traditional robes. Hermione had chosen an Ancient Greek ensemble in keeping with her namesake.

“He thinks other people's food is tastier. He tried to steal some of Crookshanks's dinner. I had ginger fur and ginger feathers all over the kitchen.” Since then the owl and the half-kneazle had ostentatiously avoided each other, but she had caught them playing with a toy mouse together.

“Flint gave you an owl?” Hannah had heard snatches of the conversation as she circulated with a tray of sweets. She convinced herself she wasn't eavesdropping but after the photos in the Prophet, she was keen to know if there was a budding romance.

“Marcus knew I was looking for one.” Hermione shrugged it off, ignoring Hannah's quirked eyebrows as she inspected the very orange dainties. If it could be make with pumpkin, Hannah had made it.

“You know he would've been welcome here if you wanted to bring him.” She said expansively, entrusting the tray to Neville as she saw a couple of new arrivals and rushed off to greet them.

“Hannah loves parties.” Neville's half-apology was fond.
“It was nice of her to offer. Marcus had some formal thing at the Greengrasses'. He asked me but I'd already told Hannah I was coming.” Hermione bit into a miniature pumpkin pie then frowned at her friend. “What?”

“My cousin invited you to the Greengrass rite?” He was so stunned he sounded calm. His friend made an affirmative noise and finished her pastry. “Hermione, remember how I warned you on Palau that Flint had plans?”

“The saving of his House, yes, I recall.” She dusted crumbs off her hands and fixed him with an attentive stare.

“The Greengrasses are very serious about the seasonal rituals. Obsessive.” Neville edged closer to the cultural gulf then jumped in for the sake of his friend. “You feast for your dead kin at Samhain. It's a very family time.”

“Then why is Marcus going to the Greengrasses? He's not particularly related to them.” Hermione knew quite a bit about the pure-blood pedigrees courtesy of the hunt for Wizengamot heirs. She wished she knew as much about her own ancestors.

“They have always had an affinity for the Aos Si.” He used the Gaelic for 'the People of the Mounds' to avoid attracting the attention of the fey on a liminal night. “When a Greengrass knocks on a door to the Other World, it opens.”

“Unnecessarily ominous but I follow.” She prompted, willing to hear him out.

“I expect he goes because of his mother.” Neville had never met his aunt. His Gran would not allow it. “You don't take 'just a friend' along for that. It's private. If he wanted you there, it's because he wants you as family.”

“Or because my parents died ten months ago and he thought it might be appropriate that I go to a rite to honour them.” Hermione was proud that her voice was mostly even. She didn't want to lash out at Neville. “Marcus isn't a bad guy. Talk to him. Really talk. His dad didn't have anything to do with the attack on your parents.”

“Death Eater.” He said the two words crisply but did not shout because it was Hermione.

“He wasn't.” She kept her voice low. This was not a conversation for anyone else. “Marcus said his dad had a breakdown after he found out about his sister-in-law. Marcus remembers your mum visiting his mum. She gave him sweets.”

“My mum's in St Mungo's.” Neville's fists clenched.

“The Healers want to put Mr Flint in the same ward.” Hermione reached out and put a hand on one of his. “Your grandmother wanted to keep you safe. She wanted someone to blame. I understand that. But Marcus was seven when your parents were cursed. He didn't hurt them.”

“You like him?” The question came after a long silence.

“I like him.” Hermione confirmed. “He puts up a hard front. Underneath, though, he cares. He's good at Herbology, you have a lot in common there. And Crookshanks likes him too.”

“He was a bastard at school.” Neville let his breath out in a long, shaky sigh.

“His mum was dying. She passed away in his sixth year. If that had happened to me, I'd have lashed out too.” Slytherins did not get much sympathy from the students in the other Houses. For a teenage
boy, bottling up his feelings was a survival strategy.

“Alright.” He agreed reluctantly. “I will talk to him. But not at Flint Manor. Maybe we can meet for a drink somewhere. Hopefully it won't end up like the Prismatic Dragon. I was picking broken glass out of my hair for days.”
Hermione was writing an essay. She was not staring at the screen of her father's computer then staring out the window expectantly. When she had noticed she had done just that for the third time in ten minutes, the witch got up and made herself some tea.

It was early evening on a November Wednesday and Neville and Marcus were having their chat. Hermione had been upfront with both wizards. They knew she would like them to resolve their differences, if not to friendship than at least to neutrality.

That neither of them had yet let her know the result suggested it had gone well. Or they were both unconscious. Or arrested. Or they had transfigured each other into teacups. Hermione shook her head at herself and with lapsang souchong went back to her essay.

She had hammered out another five hundred words, a feat more of persistence than literary endeavour, when the ward on her Floo pinged. There wasn't much of a delay between alarm and arrival but it was enough for her to Stupefy Muggle guests before they saw someone step out of the fireplace.

More than enough time for her to save her document and go with her wand to the kitchen to look casual. To look as though she hadn't been checking the clock all afternoon. Hermione was a realist and was aware she didn't lie well. But if she seemed composed enough no one would think to ask if she had been fretting over this reunion.

Marcus was in formal dark grey robes. He looked austere and dusted off the soot with abrupt sweeps of his hands. He didn't say anything, just gave her a nod before striding over to the sofa. Crookshanks looked up from his place sprawled in the middle of the cushions, his tail flicking. The wizard sat on the coffee table.

“He's cross with you because of Augustus.” Hermione poured them both a glass of wine. She had bought it to make boeuf bourguignon but she judged this was not a moment for tea and biscuits. “Where's Neville?”

“Gone to speak with his witch.” Marcus said crisply, offering a hand to Crookshanks. The half-kneazle sniffed then turned away. “I apologise for inflicting an owl upon you. I grovel for your forgiveness.”

Hermione watched her familiar give her friend a slow blink. The marmalade stretched and turned his back on Marcus, his bottlebrush tail still swatting. But there was now a space free on the sofa so perhaps the wizard had been somewhat forgiven.

“How'd it go?” She handed him a glass as he shifted to the seat allowed him by the cat. Hermione picked up Crookshanks then sat down, settling him on her lap.

“Fucking awful.” Marcus took a long gulp of the Muggle red then licked his lips. Tannic but not a bad vintage. “His grandmother is a bloody harpy.”

“She wasn't there, was she?” Hermione sipped to hide her grimace. The Longbottoms collectively had a lot to answer for Neville's childhood. Their efforts to confirm he wasn't a Squib bordered on abusive.

“Not physically.” He undid the front of his robe and loosened his collar, letting himself unwind. “But there were echoes. She told my cousin the Gamps, his mother's family, were not interested in him.
She did not say she did not allow anyone with a better fosterage claim to meet the boy.”

“Mrs Longbottom was Frank’s mother. Wouldn't she be the natural one to have custody of her grandson?” She asked a bland question to give him a chance to vent.

“She's only a Longbottom by marriage. She acts the doyenne but her family is nothing much.” Marcus restrained himself from saying worse. “Aunt Alice became an Auror because of her husband. It is his fault she is the way she is. Mother said her little sister wanted to be a teacher.”

“The Lestranges and Crouch Junior attacked the Longbottoms. It's their fault.” Hermione spoke gently. If she had been talking with Ron or Harry, the shouting would have started now. But Marcus just nodded grimly.

“I know. And with Father in Azkaban, Mother would never have been named Neville's guardian. But my maternal grandparents were alive. The Gamps would have taken Neville in. They would have been better for him than a bitter shrewish widow.” He opted for ‘widow’ over epithets far worse.

“So, the get-together actually went well?” She ventured, looking at him over her wineglass. Marcus glared at the wall for a little while then a smirk slowly curled his mouth.

“Once we started talking about gardening, yes.” He had met his cousin socially because Hermione had asked him to do so. He had not expected much. That he had actually found something in common with Longbottom was a pleasant revelation. “Bloody Gryffindors.”

“We're terrible people.” Hermione agreed with a grin. He leaned across and quite naturally kissed her on the cheek. She blinked.

“The worst.” Marcus concurred and kissed her on the mouth. The kiss was slow and warm, more statement than persuasion. Hermione felt her breath leave her body in a dizzying rush. She put a hand on his shoulder, uncertain whether she wanted to push him away or pull him closer. It was the wizard who decided to sit back.

“Neville warned me about you.” The witch spoke when she had found some air. Hermione licked her lips.

“He is surprisingly sensible.” Marcus remarked as he sipped his wine and waited to see whether he had advanced too quickly. His plan of campaign was simple; he wanted her in as many ways as he could have her. As many was as she would allow him.

“We are getting a divorce.” Hermione stated in case he had forgotten. Marcus nodded. He knew. “And you still want to kiss me?” His wicked grin made her hit him with a cushion. “Slytherins.”

“We're terrible people.” He used her words and she laughed.

“I have things I want to do. Big things like University and reforms and general social engineering.” Her life was not going to be domestic bliss. What had Tabia Shafiq said? She would have to fight all her life for what she wanted. Well, that was what she would do.

“You think I want you to sit at home and knit?” Marcus picked up one of her textbooks. There was a picture of a bumpy twisted ladder on it. “I have no idea what this is but you do. I like that. If I wanted a compliant domestic wife I could get one with a flick of my wand.”

“Why haven't you?” From his years ahead of her in Hogwarts, Hermione knew Marcus was twenty-five or so, which was old for a pure-blood to be unmarried. He'd talked about the gold-diggers that
followed all professional Quidditch players but nothing specific about his own relationships.

“Partly timing.” If anyone else had asked him that question, he would have told them to bugger off. Marcus did not want to discuss it now, not with his nerves raw from meeting his cousin. But if he blew her off with flippancy, she would shut him out. “Mostly circumstance. You saw Millicent’s situation.”

“Did the Warringtons' find Cassius?” Hermione tucked her feet under her. Crookshanks stropped a claw on her knee but did not leave her lap.

“They did. In Liechtenstein. Less hurt than he deserved to be.” He eased himself into the sofa. It was seductively comfortable. Marcus rubbed a hand over the worn suede. “The Bulstrodes refused his suit outright. Decorum gives Millie at least a season before another suitor. Considering too many offers too quickly looks mercenary.”

“I expect she'll be relieved. What's the protocol on a broken betrothal? Would I look gauche if I sent a box of chocolates?” She tried a little levity instead of launching into a rant. Just sending Warrington packing didn't get him any help for his addiction.

“Chocolates would be acceptable but not in a flashy box. We are supposed to be collectively disappointed on her behalf.” As soon as he had heard, Marcus had sent his cousin a sombrelly wrapped bottle of French perfume. Millicent had a weakness for fragrances.

“Because getting married is the most important thing anyone could ever do?” Hermione rolled her eyes. Jane Austen would've loved the wizarding world.


“How many kids do you want?” It was a sensible question for any possibly, maybe potential boyfriend. Hermione felt she had not asked Ron enough of the serious relationship questions outright.

“More than the Malfoys, fewer than the Weasleys.” He had grown up with the assumption that he would have children, he would lose most and would argue with the survivors. That had been the Flint tradition for generations. And one of the reasons why he had put off finding a wife. He did not want that life.

“That's not unreasonable.” Growing up as an only child had left her with a vague longing for a sibling, which meeting Petunia Dursley had dissipated. As a Muggle-born, it was unlikely her brother or sister would've also been magical. The Creeveys were remarkable for having two wizards in the family.

“I strive to be not unreasonable.” Marcus could say that with a straight face because he had survived eight years in Slytherin. Hermione gave him a cynical look.

“I think you'll have to work a little harder on that.” She checked at her watch, considered her stomach and the kiss. Kisses. No need to rush into anything. “Shed your robe and let me take you to dinner.”
“Part of the rite to establish a vault is a bond between the wizarding and goblin lineages involved. Each witch or wizard of the blood is twinned with a goblin at birth. One or other of the doppelgangers can access the vault but not both.” Leota read her notes to the small group in Theo Nott's study.

The apprentice advocate had dug up everything she could find on warded vaults. Her search had been extensive. Unfortunately her results were not.

“That's it?” Hermione passed a parchment of neatly copied runes to Luna Lovegood, who reversed it and held it up to the thin winter sunlight. In an effort to be welcoming, Theo had overcompensated and had opened every curtain, filled every vase and shrouded every portrait. The effect in dour Nott Manor was of a rather jolly wake.

“Goblins guard their magic closely. There are doubtless similarities between the rite and consanguinity charms used by older families.” Leota hesitated only a fraction on 'older'. She did not even glance at Neville, Luna or Hermione.

“You can say pure-blood, we don't mind.” Luna said absently. Leota had no reply for the other witch's insouciance.

“Presumably, if the goblins wanted to cut off someone from their vault, they could switch the access from the wizard or witch to their goblin counterpart.” Hastening to fill the lacuna left by the awkward silence, Hermione smoothed out the scroll she had received from Harry and handed it to Theo.

“He gave you a list of the vaults the Ministry wants to seize?” He scanned the roster with a tightening frown. His own vault was not listed but his late mother's dower vault was as well as all those belonging to his father. And the Notts had got off lightly. He gave the list to Alun Rosier.

“I asked nicely.” Hermione was not prepared to admit that she had got the list solely because Harry had traded it for her promise to talk to Ron. Their friend's Auror career was fast imploding, which Harry put down to his emotional state. She was dubious but she had agreed.

“Merlin's hairy balls!” Alun swore when he reached his family's pending forfeitures. He recovered himself. “Apologies for my language, ladies.”

Hermione, Leota, Luna and Millicent regarded him with varying degrees of tolerance. The four witches shared a look then collectively opted not to make an issue of either his exclamation or his assumption they were shocked by it.

“Hit right in the suave, Rosier?” Leota made a gesture for the scroll and Alun nearly threw it at her.

“This will beggar the English Rosiers. If there's a vault left in our name not on that list, I do not know about it.” He accepted the tumbler Theo passed him. “The Ministry cannot touch our accounts in France but that income will not be enough to maintain the estate.”

“Gringotts hasn't agreed to give the Wizengamot access yet, can you transfer everything out?” Hermione was not particularly sympathetic to the woes of the idle rich but every Rosier who could be convicted of wrongdoing was already in Azkaban. Penalising the rest was not just.

“Most of the vaults are trusts. We can borrow against them but cannot withdraw from them. My grandfather and uncle had control of all the active British vaults. When they were sent to Azkaban,
“Yes, that’s absolutely true.” Alun tossed back his drink and held his glass out for another.

“Is that a common situation?” Hermione asked Theo curiously.

“It depends on bequests but it is fairly widespread. I know the Carrows are living off Flora's and Hestia's legacies. They only have those because the girls were under age during the war.” Once he had taken the Nott seat, people came to him for help he could not give.

“No orange blossom for them.” Luna sighed dreamily.

“Not a chance.” Neville agreed. No one who had endured the Carrows' reign, not even the Slytherins, would want to marry the twins. Hestia and Flora would either have to find foreign husbands with no connection to Hogwarts, or remain single. Their family was effectively extinct in Britain.

“Half their luck.” Millicent muttered. She wasn't comfortable in the presence of Lovegood and Longbottom, who she was sure thought her as bad as Pansy. “Theo, you asked me here because my family does the blood vault rite often. I don't know what I can tell you. I only met my obvert once. I had to show her my wand.”

“Did you do that just before you started school?” Leota had not found any requirements for the pairs to meet. She picked up her quill to transcribe the reply to her question, hopeful it would give them some insight.

“No. It was later.” The dark haired witch shifted self-consciously as everyone turned to look at her. She set her mouth in a firm line. “After my first visit from Selene.”

The wizards looked embarrassed as though they had intruded on a feminine mystery. Leota took notes, Luna made a soft humming sound of assent and Hermione frowned. Millicent glared at her, squaring her shoulders for a comment on how Muggles did it better.

“Quite a few of the confiscated wands were taken from prepubescent children. First years and second years.” Hermione mused, biting her lip as she assessed her sudden notion. “Would that make it easier for someone else to use them? To imprint on them?”

The consensus was yes, probably. The group waited for the 'Brightest Witch of Her Age' to get to her point. Theo poured a round of drinks feeling as the host he should do something to entertain his guests while one of them stared at her own wand.

“I think the vault seizures and the missing wands are connected. Someone in the Ministry is very anxious to get their hands on a lot of money.” Hermione looked up to see six pairs of eyes riveted to her. “Leota, how prevalent is embezzlement in the wizarding world? Do you think during the chaos of the war, someone could have helped themselves to the treasury?”

“Quite possibly.” Leota put her quill away. This was not the sort of allegation you wrote down until you had a dragon's weight in proof.

“They would be doing well enough in hiding the theft while all the reparations were rolling in.” Theo had a pang of jealousy, just a flash, that Marcus was going to get this very clever witch. As he did not relish being beaten to a pulp by his House-mate, he resolved to keep that twinge to himself.

“It'd explain why the Aurors have been Apparating around so much they've almost met themselves.” Neville shook his head. “Shite. I knew I smelled something off when Dean told me about the wands.”
“I'm sure some are going to the black market but I think the immature wands, if that's the right term, are being used for something else.” Hermione retrieved the runic inscription from Luna. “Riddle killed goblins, quite a few. If you could figure out if an obvert died, you could turn the rite around on itself.”

“You spin a coin on its edge.” Luna remarked. No one thought that comment odd.

It was Neville who spoke to Harry. He could chat with his friend quite openly with no one remarking on it and no outraged spouse making a scene. They had lunch together the day after the meeting at Nott Manor.

Hermione took herself to university and thought relentlessly Muggle thoughts all day. She managed to keep her mind on reactions in sugar metabolism until dinner. Then she chopped the daylights out of potatoes, zucchini and carrots to make a casserole. She was still wielding the knife when Harry and Neville stepped out of her Floo.

“I said I would bring him as soon as he could leave discreetly.” Neville made a show of raising his hands like varmints in the cowboy movies Hannah's granddad liked. “Easy there, I’m reaching for the sun.”

“Reach for the sky.” Hermione corrected automatically. “Though I expect none of them ever said that.” She put the knife down. “What happened at the Ministry?”

“I went to Proudfoot.” Harry shrugged off the trenchcoat that had become the de facto Auror uniform. Underneath he wore a Weasley sweater and jeans. “She had her own suspicions. People kept tripping over too many leads like someone was scattering clues. Too clever by half was how she described it.”

“That's wonderful.” She was tired of warning the Ministry and having them stick their fingers in their ears. “Does she have any suspects?”

“Not that she told me.” He scowled. Having brought the information to his supervisor, he wanted to be in on the investigation. “Proudfoot said I would be there when she told Kingsley. We have to wait for him to get back from a conference in Bahrain.”

“It's a start.” Neville eyed the vegetable massacre. He was about to ask what she was making when the Floo alarm pinged. They turned to look at the hearth, casually palming wands. Harry was tempted to use his when Marcus Flint stepped into the room.

“Potter. Neville.” Marcus smirked as he raised his hands slowly to show they were empty.

“What are you doing here?” Harry demanded.

“He's going to have dinner.” Hermione interjected before the testosterone got too thick. “I invited him.”

“You said you'd talk to Ron. You promised.” He reminded her sharply, eyeing Flint as he made himself comfortable on the sofa.

“And I will, just as soon as he answers my letters. I've written to him four times. To the Burrow and the trainee house. I got a note back from Dennis saying he thought Ron was in Ireland.” She was stung Harry thought she'd wriggle out of their agreement.

“Ron isn't going to like him hanging around.” Harry was too keyed up with the investigation into Ministry corruption to bother with subtlety.
“Well then Ron can join the rest of the Weasleys in despising me.” The witch said acidly. “I am done apologising, Harry. I'm not going to live my life in a hair-shirt thanking Ron for allowing me to do his paperwork.”
“That went well.” Marcus stated after Harry had pointedly left. Neville had gone too as he had a standing date with Hannah and pot roast. Hermione joined him on the sofa after putting the casserole in the oven. She could have cooked it with magic but it never tasted quite right.

“It did, actually.” The witch sat close to the arm on her side, hands tidily in her lap. “If he’d been really cross, Harry would've shouted more.”

“Good to know.” He stretched an arm along the back of the sofa. From where he lounged, he could just reach her. He tapped her shoulder lightly. “I showered after training however if I smell, you have but to say.”

“You're fine.” Hermione shifted a little away from her chaperoning armrest. “I'm not particularly good at this. I usually just babble or fidget or hit people.”

“How did your tutorial presentation go? Did your tutor approve your amino acids project?” Marcus asked to break the ice.

“You remembered.” She said with unflattering surprise.

“I am good at remembering. Hopeless at writing things down.” He slid a hand along her arm, tugging her towards him. Hermione shifted until she was sitting knee to knee, sighing as he put his arm around her.

“It went well. I'll need to finish the precis and submit it but I'm sure I will get a tick there too.” Leaning back, she rested her head against him. “I was a bit worried when Soo-jin put in a similar proposal but she's more interested in the non-proteinogenic amino acids.”

“Producing or generating protein.” Marcus puzzled out what she was talking about. Snape would have found that 'Acceptable'. “Do they do that often?”

“Oh yes.” Hermione chuckled, rubbing her neck.

“Tense?” He brushed his fingertips down her nape and she shivered.

“If you are offering a back rub, I'll take it.” If there was going to be any moves made, she wanted to make them. Marcus was always patient with her as though he expected her to suddenly turn on him and kick him out. She shrugged off her cardigan.

“As my lady wishes.” The wizard put his hands on her shoulders and began working out the knots. She shifted her arms a little as he massaged his way down her back. Marcus dug his fingers into the muscles along her scapula and she arched against him, her unbuttoned blouse slipping off her shoulders.

“Easier without it, don't you think?” Hermione said coolly, not turning to look at him. She shivered again when he kissed the back of her neck and eased off her shirt. He continued to rub, kneading until she was rolling her shoulders almost purring.

“Leave this on?” Marcus asked, sliding his fingers under the strap of her brassiere. He was hard and more than happy to take her right there on the sofa. All the witches he had fucked had expected him to be the aggressor. That got old, and more that once slightly unnerving.
“Easier without.” She reached behind and unhooked the clasp. Hermione slid off her bra, crossing her arms over her breasts. She would've preferred to go braless as she wasn't so busty that was a problem but she never felt fully dressed without one.

“This is a test.” He kissed his way down her spine, smirking against her skin.

“Oh yes.” Her affirmative was more of a sigh than the smug assent she had planned. “I want to be in control.”

“All the time?” Marcus walked his fingers slowly around her waist, rubbing his erection against the curve of her bum. He continued to massage, moving his thumbs in lazy circles.

“Not all the time.” Hermione breathed out slowly. “Just right now.”

“Then what does my lady command?” He murmured, his lips brushing her earlobe.

“You may touch me.” She said haughtily and tried not to grin or giggle. Hermione felt Marcus's mouth curve in a smile as he trailed kisses along her collar bone. Her flat was cool enough that she could tell herself her nipples were pebbling taut because of the temperature. Totally in control. Not panting at all.

Marcus massaged until her skin on her back was pink and she was lying bonelessly against him. Only then did he smooth his hands across her chest, cupping her breasts. Hermione closed her eyes but her hands slid down to her crux to rub herself through her jeans.

When one of his hands joined hers, she unbuttoned her fly allowing him to slip his fingers into her knickers. Nice thick fingers with clipped short nails and callouses that rubbed rough in exactly the right way.

She was already moaning when Marcus kissed her on the mouth, cradling her against him as she kicked off her jeans and underwear. Hermione gasped, shivering as the sensation seemed to race through her nerves.

Then the buzzer on the oven went off.

“Shut up!” The witch hissed, groping for a wand. Hers was in her back pocket somewhere on the floor. Hermione grabbed Marcus's from where he wore it on his belt. “Silencio!”

“Now that you have your hand on my cherry wood.” The wizard grinned. She sat up in a rush, straddling him and tapping him on the nose with the tip of his aforementioned wand.

“You are so smug.” Hermione huffed, snuggling against him. She felt wonderful, warm and free of worry. He felt like rock against her, unsated arousal tightening every muscle. “You stay right here while I rescue the casserole.”

Marcus gritted his teeth as she climbed off him, padding into the kitchen mother-naked to pull dinner out of the oven. He had never seen something so artlessly erotic.

Hermione set the baking dish on stove top and hurried back before she lost that unfettered feeling. She could over-think this and second guess herself after she'd seen to Marcus.
Kneeling in front of him, meeting his diabolic smile with a smirk of her own, Hermione unbuckled his belt. He reached for her to bring her up onto his lap but she swatted his hands.

“You have to be a gentleman and sit politely.” The witch instructed as she tugged down his trousers and briefs.

“I am not that chivalrous.” Marcus breathed in sharply as her fingers encircled his stiffness but he did as ordered and kept his hands to himself. He gripped the cushions tightly as she stroked him, tickling just behind his sack.

Hermione didn't hurry. He had taken his time with her so she did the same. She experimented a little to see what made him moan and what made him sigh. Ron hadn't usually lasted long. They hadn't ever really had time to relax or savour it. Now she could.

When she put her tongue on him, Marcus gave up any pretence of sang-froid and groaned aloud. Through slitted eyes he saw her cat with cream grin as she licked him like an ice lolly. He didn't last long after that.

Afterwards, Scourgified and sated, they stretched out on the sofa together. Marcus played with her hair. It was fluffy soft, curling around his fingers almost with a life of its own. Had he mocked her for it at Hogwarts? Possibly. He certainly had jeered at her for her blood and her brains. His sixteen year old self had been a fool.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Hermione asked idly, contemplating doing something ordinary. There was bound to be a festival on somewhere.

“Quidditch.” Marcus laughed when she made an exasperated noise. “League Finals.”

“Already?” She grumbled. There would be no coherent conversation from any of her wizarding friends until after the Championship. Marcus had the decency to keep his work at work. “Are you going to win?”

“Yes.” He said with utter confidence. “We drew well. We will probably face Puddlemere, though Holyhead might beat them. They trounced Ballycastle.”

“Will McLeod let you play if you’re up against the Harpies?” Hermione shifted slightly so she could look him in the eyes. “He sidelined you last time because of Ginny.”

“Because of you, I believe.” Marcus was candid now she was less likely to spurn him for Weasel-baiting. “Our glorious Manager wants to keep you sweet. I think he has designs on you. Thus I was forbidden from giving Madam Potter the beating she deserves.”

“Designs on me? We've met twice.” She studied his face. “Why?”

“Gryffindor Golden Girl, war hero, Order of Merlin First Class and champion of social justice. Plus you have nice tits.” He kissed her before she could chastise him for the ogling. “McLeod has an eye for influence. He likes being seen on the Society Pages.”

“I'm no one's arm candy.” Hermione sat up, swinging a leg over him to avoid kneeing him in the balls or falling onto the floor. “And I don't want you benched because of Ginny bloody Weasley. If Montrose has to play the Harpies, I'm going to be there in white and black. And McLeod can kiss my First Class.”

“Should I count that as permission to settle accounts with Madam Potter?” Marcus bared his teeth. He was not a fanatic about family honour like so many of the Durmstrang boys but he owed little
Ginevra a reckoning.

“God, what a time to have moral qualms.” She grimaced at herself. “I would like to say yes and have that bitch knocked off her broom but she's Harry's wife.” Ginny's shrill voice from the Howler wishing her dead like her parents echoed in her memory. “You do not need my permission, Marcus. I trust you to do what you think appropriate. Several times, if possible.”

“Nimue save me.” He smiled wryly as his body reacted to the fire in her eyes. Hermione felt him stir and shifted, looking behind her to see him at half-mast.

“Seriously? Again?”

“It has been a while.” Marcus confessed, trying to think anaphrodisiac thoughts.

“You didn't?” Hermione's voice was low. “I mean, you didn't see someone?” She could give him a hand-job unblushingly but confronted with his fidelity she was going red.

“I was married.” His voice was flat, uncompromising. “I was not chaste. I am a grown man with a pulse, I wanked when necessary.” He shrugged. “I was hardly going to knock on your door cock in hand demanding my marital due.”

“I just assumed you had someone discreet.” She wished she wasn't blushing. Since the end of the legal appeal, she had been trying to rebuild her relationship with Ron. While she had been physically faithful during their paper marriage, she had not been so emotionally. “I didn’t realise. I’m sorry if you were put in an awkward position.”

“It was my choice. I made a vow.” Marcus rubbed her arms soothingly. “I did have a few professional women I visited before the Ministry's daftness. I could have gone to them. You did not make me an eunuch. I simply did not want a mistress.”

“I wish you'd said something. We could've hurried the divorce or pulled some strings.” Hermione slid off him, gathering her clothes. “I don't want you to think I kept you as a spare in case Ron didn't work out.”

“A Reserve tonker for emergencies?” He smirked.

“Muggles have those.” She glared, buttoning up her blouse. “They take batteries. And they don't make smart remarks.”
Reciprocity

The Holyhead Harpies beat Puddlemere United by ten points to face Montrose in the British and Irish Quidditch League Championship. Hermione was as good as her word, leaving her flat rugged up in black and white. She made a point of lingering as she went so her neighbours saw her after Sarah had remarked on her odd hours.

It was Daniel Wright who noted her scarf and beanie as they crossed paths on the doorstep. He shook his head slowly at her, ostentatiously straightening the red Manchester United scarf knotted around his neck.

“Who’s colours are those, Ms. Granger?” The accountant asked in a theatrically disappointed tone of voice. “I thought you were a decent sort.”

“Notts County.” Hermione replied promptly, having checked the Football League for teams with black and white colours. “Oldest professional team in the world still playing.”

“Relegated.” Daniel coughed as he clutched his hip and mimed hobbling arthriticly away. She laughed and he wished her luck. Hermione chuckled at the coincidence of team names, or nicknames in the case of Notts County. She had managed not to lie in either fact or omission. She was after all going to watch the Magpies.

Hermione used her Portkey in a wheelie bin alcove down a laneway a few blocks from her building. She arrived in a much more appealing courtyard among a throng of Montrose supporters. Although Marcus could have easily got her into a private box, she had opted for the High Stands instead to avoid Cormack McLeod.

She had been prepared to go into bat for Marcus if he had been again cut from the team but the Magpies management were intent on victory. Montrose stood a much better chance with their menacing Chaser, and Ginny Potter was only a Reserve. There was a reasonable possibility she wouldn’t even play.

The High Stands had the best view and were partially sheltered from the biting wind. Hermione had still packed blankets and hot drinks. And a few books, if she were completely honest. Attending the game had been a matter of principle. Enduring it was a matter of practicality.

“Hermione!” Neville stood up and waved, indicating the empty seats beside him. Hannah and Luna had happily accepted tickets too, though they were in Harpies’ green. She joined them, smiling at Neville's Montrose scarf. “Well, family and so forth.”

“I'm glad the two of you are okay.” That seemed all that was necessary to say. Hermione settled down alongside her friends. She felt the absence of Ron and Harry, both of whom she presumed were in the Holyhead box.

“I made sweets.” Hannah had a covered basket on her knee. From it she produced Princess cakes jaunty with marzipan and neenish tarts iced in Magpie colours. “I made rather a lot.”

Rather a lot was more than enough for the former DA members, Leota Yaxley and her girlfriend Finella, and the contingent of Slytherins Marcus had invited. Theo Nott sat in front of Hermione then traded venison pies for Hannah’s pastries while Terence Higgs just waved and huddled nervously in his heavy cloak.

No one chatted much between the House lines while they waited for the game to start. The awkward
division remained until the second Montrose goal, scored by Chaser Flint. Marcus did a victory loop in front of the High Stands then grinned when Hermione called him a show off. He zoomed away in pursuit of the quaffle, leaving the witch to mutter about the egos of Quidditch players.

“But they are so good with their hands.” Millicent quipped to Hermione, who went red.

“Flying creatures often engage in elaborate courtship displays.” Luna observed, possibly coincidentally licking mock cream off her lips.

“That's my cousin you're talking about.” Neville came to Hermione's defence as she hid her face behind her scarf.

“Mine too.” Miss Bulstrode was not the least deterred.

“Estelle is pregnant.” Lucian Bole had a rush of gallantry and tried to change the subject.

“Crookshanks is the sire.”

“When's she due?” Hermione asked hastily, and settled down happily to talk about kneazles while the Harpies found their pace and scored four times in a row. Their point run was stopped by Cabot, one of the Magpies' Beaters, Bludgering Valmai Morgan right off her broom.

The collective Holyhead roar of outrage drowned out the referee's whistle. Morgan was stretchered off the pitch and replaced by Chaser Potter.

Marcus started off subtly. Hermione didn't see the first incident of cobbing though the referee did. The Harpies missed that penalty goal due to the strong winds, but they got the second penalty after Marcus blatched into Ginny, sending her spinning away wildly as she tried to right her broom.

He left her alone for a little while after that as Montrose overtook Holyhead. Once the Magpies were in the lead, and all eyes were on the Seekers accelerating upwards nearly vertically, Marcus got his revenge.

Liang threw him the quaffle and he headed at speed towards the Holyhead goal. Ginny flew towards him obliquely, angry and fast. He didn't waver. She zipped across his broom, aiming a kick at his shoulder to dislodge the ball.

Marcus made no attempt to slow down or defend the quaffle. He dropped it, arm swinging wide to clothesline Ginny as she sped past him. Her momentum swept her off her Firebolt and Marcus's single-minded charge towards the goal sent them both crashing forcefully into the tallest post. They ended in a broken heap on the ground.

Both Chasers were substituted off. Hermione left the High Stands to run down to the infirmary. She didn't really expect to be let in to see Marcus but she was going to argue about it. From her seat, the crunch of impact had been wincingly audible.

There was no one at the infirmary door to stop her walking in. The stewards who would have done that duty were already inside, trying to escort a horde of Weasleys out. The Weasleys were not cooperating.

Ginny and Marcus lay unconscious as respective team Healers worked to mend them. A Medi-witch, custodian of the infirmary itself and tie-breaker in matters of dispute, loud restated that all fouls were the concern of the referees.

“He did it deliberately!” Molly shouted, flushed with outrage. “He was trying to kill her. He should be locked up!” She noticed Hermione then and rounded on her. “This is all your fault!”
“I didn't make Ginny play Quidditch.” Any more than I made her send me a Howler or keep Harry from meeting me, the witch added in the privacy of her own head. “And flying them both into a post is hardly the best way to kill someone.”

She was reasonably confident that Marcus's intention had been plausible deniability for grievous bodily harm. If he had meant anything more serious, he would have ensured a better alibi. He was a Slytherin.

“How you can stand there all smarmy and look me in the eye after what you did, I don't know!” Mrs Weasley accused, prevented from drawing her wand by her husband's hand on her arm.

“I slept with Marcus, once, after my parents' funeral. Is that the 'what' you mean?” Hermione asked coolly. “Or is it being banned from my best friend's wedding? Or maybe it was your daughter wishing me dead like my mum and dad? Please specify exactly why you think you can reproach me.”

“You broke Ron's heart.” Molly shook off Arthur's restraining touch and pointed her wand at the unrepentant little slut.

“Yes, I did, and when I went to apologise to him and ask for his forgiveness, he slipped veritaserum into my drink.” She had an epiphany. “Which I think you knew. As a trainee Auror, he might've been able to get some but it's far more likely as a mother of seven, you had some stashed in the house.”

“That is a very serious allegation.” Percy interrupted his mother before she could hex Hermione in front of witnesses. Witnesses moreover who would not be easily swayed to take the side of people who they had been trying to eject moments before.

“No, it isn't.” Hermione countered. “No complaint has been made, therefore no allegation.” She looked straight at Percy, certain he would understand exactly what she meant. If they said nothing, neither would she. But if the Weasleys escalated this, then Ron would face the consequences of using a controlled substance on an unwilling person.

Percy was not slow on the uptake. Neither was Arthur. Between them they marched Molly out of the infirmary. George left in their wake, shaking his head at Hermione. Bill lingered. He looked her over as though he had just noticed something had changed.

The Medi-witch took her opportunity in the attenuating silence to announce Ginny would be transferred to St Mungo's. The Holyhead medical team prepped to Apparate with their patient. They looked at the scarred redhead then at the door, cueing him to leave.

“You never really forgave him for leaving you and Harry.” The Curse Breaker was sure. Whatever had been between his brother and Hermione had died then. They had stoked and fanned embers but the fire was gone.

“I suppose not, no.” She admitted dejectedly. “I tried to. I thought I had, but every time Ron expected me to apologise again, to make it up to him again, I remembered him not being there when I needed him most.”

“Flint won't be there for you either. The Snakes are all selfish ratbags.” Bill felt it only decent, as some sort of armistice or leave-taking that he warn her. “You'll be alone.”

“I'm alone now. I'm an orphan. Everything from here on is up.” Hermione held out her hand. She almost withdrew it he took so long to decide. But they shook and Bill left.
“Well.” The Medi-witch huffed. “Now that is done, I expect you will want to know that your young
man has the luck of the Devil.” She told Hermione not only that Marcus was not as badly hurt as
Ginny but also she was a Muggle-born and read the Prophet. There was a distinct undertone of
vicarious glee.

“May I sit with him?” She was polite despite an inner wince. Hermione did not want to be a
celebrity, and dreaded seeing an account of the confrontation with Molly in the newspapers.

“He'll be awake shortly.” One of the Montrose Healers jerked an elbow at a chair beside the bed as
he poured a potion down Marcus's throat. “He's out of the game for the day, League rules as he
knocked himself silly.”

Hermione nodded and sat down, the adrenalin spike that had made the world crystal ebbing
suddenly. She had blackmailed Harry's in-laws. There would be Hell to pay when her best friend
found out his wife was in the hospital and she had defended the man who had put Ginny there.

The witch jumped when a hand touched hers. Rousing, Marcus had reached for her then drifted
away again. Hermione squeezed his fingers gently. She had made her choice.
Settling Down

Marcus opened his eyes on a familiar ceiling. The diagonal smudge near a flaked bit of plaster told him he was lying in the third bed in the stadium infirmary. He reached up to rub his head, finding a lump on the left side.

“I should be cross with you but I’m not that much of a hypocrite.” Hermione helped him sit up and gave him a potion. He knocked it back without question, knowing from the scent it was for bruising. It tasted like stewed sawdust.

“Damage?” Marcus breathed in long and slow. No broken ribs. That was always pleasant.

“You hit your head when you landed and broke your ulna as well as quite a few of the little bones in your left wrist.” She handed him a glass of water then signalled the Healer who was treating Keeper Brun's lacerated spleen. He twitched a hand in reply and continued casting charms on the disgruntled player.

“They are going to ache all bloody winter.” Grumbling, Marcus sipped the water and waited for his wits to fall back into their accustomed order. He felt alright. Must not have been out long. He had the quaffle, that was clear. Then what? A gloating sneer grew as he recalled who had tried to take the ball from him.

“She's in hospital. Multiple fractures and a dislocated shoulder. She cushioned your impact on both the goal post and the ground.” Hermione had asked the Healers, who were happy enough to chat in between patients. The stewards had suggested she wait outside, until she pointed out that unless all the Weasleys had gone to St Mungo’s, it would be less disruptive for her to stay quietly in the infirmary.

“That is sorted, then.” Marcus sat back, well pleased. The ginger bitch would probably come at him in another game but there were plenty of players with grudges against him. He could deal with their aggression as and when it happened. “Pity I did not get her jaw. Teach her to keep her mouth shut.”

“It's done, Marcus. It's settled.” She had sent a text to Harry, which he would get whenever the magical interference thinned enough to allow transmission. Hermione had considered sending him an owl but there was no way to avoid the coming storm. The Weasleys would ensure he heard all about the incident.

“It is.” He agreed. Unless the shrew sent another Howler or had Hermione in tears again, he would leave off specifically fouling Mrs Potter. Casually fouling the opposing team was part of his job, and the Harpies gave as good as they got. Brun could attest to that.

“McLeod came by to check on you. The game's still going. It's kite weather.” Hermione saw his non-comprehension and was concerned he was not as coherent as she had thought. “Do you know who McLeod is?”

“Team Manager. We are playing Holyhead. Championship game.” Marcus supplied, leaning over cautiously to kiss her. “What do birds of prey have to do with the weather?”

“Fabric and string kites, not avian kites.” She stepped out of the cultural pothole. “I mean it's very windy.”

“Good for us. We are heavier. Steadier on the broom. Not so good for the Seekers.” He rubbed his head, checking for tender spots. Just the one lump. High winds made for a longer game. He might
get a chance to rejoin the match.

Once the Healer had sent Brun back, he looked over Marcus and gave him the all-clear to leave the infirmary after drawing a rune on the Chaser's hand. It would fade in twenty-four hours. Until then, if Marcus went onto the pitch it would glow brightly to alert the referees he was violating a medical suspension.

They went up to the High Stands, where Chaser Flint was greeted loudly by the ranked fans. He kept his left arm around Hermione to shield it and her from the crowd as he shouldered forward. The protective gesture caused some whistling and suggestive comments but the presence of his witch got them through to their seats without being mobbed.

Neville, Hannah and Luna shuffled over to fit a fifth. Terence handed up a flask of tea and Lucian a packet of water biscuits. They knew what Marcus would be able to keep down after his healing. Hannah did not offer any of her baked sweets, but probably not because the pastries were too rich.

“Gwenog Jones is keeping the Bludgers moving.” Theo spoke when neither of the Gryffindors or the Ravenclaw or the Hufflepuff seemed inclined to say anything. “But the Harpies are not making much headway. Your new chap, the younger Campbell, is showing well.”

“Angus was wasted at Caerphilly.” Marcus shifted his sore arm onto his lap so it did not get jostled. The damage was already mended but his body remembered and would continue to react to the injury for a few hours.

“He's too brash. He never stuck to the plays.” Hannah, a Catapults fan, said pugnaciously. Her tone garnered attention from all the Slytherins and they visibly closed ranks. Marcus said nothing, shifting as Hermione fussed with the blankets, pulling more out of a small beaded bag.

“Pack the whole shop, Granger?” Millicent watched the witch produce a bolster and pass it to Longbottom, who was perched between two of the wooden seats. He shoved the pillow between the gap with thanks.

“When you spend a year in the woods, you learn it's better to have and not need than not have.” Hermione retorted, sweeping an appraising look across the hacking Snakes. “Can't we just watch the game together peacefully? I had to deal with Molly Weasley, I'd rather not revisit the schoolyard too.”

“Flint rammed Ginny into the post on purpose. I expect the Weasleys were furious.” Neville held Hannah's hand in solidarity. They had been dismayed to see such bad sportsmanship.

“We are back to Flint, are we, Longbottom?” Marcus inquired, his face like his surname.

“You sent a friend of mine to the hospital, cousin.” The wizards glared at each other. “Harry and Ron are going to put that on Hermione.”

“Let me deal with Harry and Ron.” Hermione intruded before the fragile détente between Neville and Marcus fell apart. “I've plenty of practise. And for the record, I'm not sorry Ginny got hurt. She's been quite happy to hurt me for months.”

“She's angry about you breaking up with Ron.” Hannah knew she was putting her oar in. She knew she should mind her own business. But you had to speak up when you saw something wrong. Her mother had taught her that.

“She's going to stay angry in that case. I'm dating Marcus.” Her tone was even, controlled. The simple statement had everyone looking at her in surprise, speculation or smugness.
“For fuck's sake, I am not that ugly.” Marcus snapped when their combined attention turned to him. “And no extortion was involved.”

“Except by the Ministry.” Theo and Neville said almost simultaneously.

“We're still getting a divorce. I don't want that damn law interfering in any part of my life.” Hermione clarified, with a conspiratorial look at Leota and Theo. “The Wizengamot hasn't heard the last about that. They're dragging their feet on the annulments.”

“Will you be knitting?” Luna asked mildly, eyes bright with curiosity

“Metaphorically.” Her efforts with S.P.E.W had not been a tremendous success, Dobby had ended up with more badly made bobble hats than anyone would ever need, but Hermione had not given up. “We have a lot of work to do.”

The roaring cheer from the crowd was coincidental. It did provide a distraction, letting the diverse group settle back into watching Quidditch in a fair impression of peaceful. Marcus held Hermione's hand under the blanket. Regardless of the outcome of the match, he felt he had already won the game.
Safe Harbour

Montrose and Holyhead were still playing at 9pm when Hermione opted to have dinner at Flint Manor. Her motives were many-fold; she'd had enough Quidditch, she was hungry and she could tell Marcus was flagging.

The witches Apparated to Edinburgh to replenish supplies while the wizards remained to keep their seats. More and more people were showing up as the game progressed, with tickets being used on rotation and the standing bleachers packed to capacity.

“I don't know how you stand it as a job.” Hermione rubbed her ears as the silence of the old house seemed to thrum after the cacophony of the stadium.

“I play because I like the game. Employment is an excuse.” Marcus managed a one armed shrug as he tucked into elf-made steak and kidney pie. They ate in the kitchen, neither inclined towards formality.

“How long do you plan to play professionally?” She asked when they had cleared their plates.

“Much after forty and it gets too hard to keep to a proper flying weight.” Marcus braced his foot against the heavy oak bench to fumble with the lacing on his boot.

“Most Muggle athletes retire before they're thirty-five. Due to injuries, usually.” Hermione walked around the table to help him undo his knee guards.

“The damage does accrete. Healing magic takes longer, everything aches more.” He rubbed his wrist as she pulled off his boots. “I plan to quit once I have children. I do not want them visiting me in hospital.”

“Once you have children.” Hermione smirked, gesturing for him to give her his right arm so she could undo his bracer. “You'd look radiant pregnant, I'm sure.”

“I think you would look better.” Marcus smiled crookedly, imagining her round with their child. She would look very fine indeed.

“Do you want a Muggle-born so you can have an easier time of having kids?” She asked bluntly. Slytherin or not, he had always given her a straight answer to a straight question.

“I want you because you are clever and stubborn and honest.” He answered candidly. “When I look at you I see a woman who stood when everyone else ran. I would be proud if my clever daughters stood.”

“I'm not even going to think about having a baby before I finish my degree. That's four years. Longer, if I go for my Ph.D immediately.” Hermione hadn't made up her mind if she would do her thesis right after graduation. She might want a break after twenty years of schooling.

“Fine with me. Gives me longer to play.” Marcus would not mind a baby right now but he expected they would have to try for a while before being blessed. “Ogreish looks aside, I am not going to drag you into my cave to be my bride.”

“I'd hex your bollocks off.” She said confidently.

“I do not doubt it.” His dark eyes got that wicked look. “Fancy my bollocks this evening?”
“Suave, and you say you have groupies chasing you.” Hermione shook her head. “You've been hurt then healed and you're tired. I think your ambition is over-reaching itself.”

“You may well be right.” Marcus conceded. As much as he would like to ravish her, it was not lust making him ache. “Sleep with me? Bring Crookshanks over as a chaperone if you like.”

The witch returned with her familiar, an overnight bag, and a flannel nightie. Hermione changed then tucked herself into Marcus's huge bed, claiming one of the pillows before Crookshanks decided they all belonged to him.

Marcus, in equally prosaic pyjamas, smiled at the flannel, kissed her then went out like a snuffed candle. Hermione watched her cat pad across the quilt until he found the exact right spot before he curled up. She closed her eyes, feeling a little guilty for not feeling a lot guilty about Ginny, and expected to lie awake worrying.

She didn't. The witch woke to the smell of bacon and the sound of determined crunching. Hermione opened one eye to confirm what she suspected. Marcus was sitting up in bed with a breakfast tray feeding himself and Crookshanks.

“You'll get crumbs everywhere.” She grumbled, pulling the covers around her.

“I may not be the most adept wizard but I can clean up after myself.” Marcus spoke with the blasé assurance of someone with house elves.

“You're spoiling my cat.” Crookshanks was polishing off scrambled egg on a porcelain saucer.

The wizard, chewing enthusiastically, nodded. He shared some more egg with the half-kneazle. It looked good. It smelled good. Hermione shoved the pillows behind her, propping herself up so she could join in the feast.

They ate companionably until she was full then Hermione had a shower while a ravenous Marcus ordered another tray. Crookshanks sauntered out of the room when a house elf brought in second breakfast, intent on claiming the Manor as his. Or at least all the most comfortable chairs.

Hermione took her time in the shower, thinking about her assignments due before the end of term. And Harry. They were going to argue. She regretted that. But the exchange with Molly Weasley had made it clear to her she would always be an outsider at the Burrow. They might have tolerated her for Ron's sake, but only as an adjunct to their son.

She rinsed and dried herself, padding out of the bathroom in a faded red fluffy robe with a Gryffindor badge. Magical or not, Flint Manor was a stone house built without central heating. It was draughty.

“Have they finished playing yet?” Hermione noticed the Montrose logo on a scroll Marcus was reading. He had a mouth full of toast and shook his head, handing her the letter as he finished eating. She read it, marvelled at the tally of fouls then hunted through her overnight bag for clean underwear.

She was foiled in her search by Marcus getting out of bed and putting his arms around her. Hermione straightened, his interest confirming her impression he was feeling much better after a good night's sleep.

“If you're cadging for a reward for defending my honour or some other antiquated rot, you won't get anything.” She said sternly, aware of her own freshly shaven limbs and the contraceptive charm she had cast in the bathroom. Hermione enjoyed sex, but not as a currency.
“My revenge was for me.” Marcus slipped his hands inside her bathrobe, caressing her breasts. “If she had apologised and you asked me not to hurt her, then I would have found another way. But Flints pay their debts.”

“What would you have done?” She was interested in his answer, and he had a quiet house with no one shouting downstairs or running through the hallways or banging on the door. Hermione was coming to realise how arousing peace could be.

“Have her kicked off the team. Reserves are not on seasonal contracts. They have to be sharp every game. A few favours here and there, and she starts looking bad.” His fingers made slow circles around her nipples as he nuzzled her. “I can be patient and the Harpies' Captain is relentlessly competitive. She would cut a lacklustre player regardless of their reputation.”

“All down to Quidditch.” Hermione sighed, somewhat disappointed with his lack of a Machiavellian plan. Marcus bit her neck lightly, sucking at her skin to leave a mark.

“She has too many relatives for me to go for her family, and if I went for Potter you would never forgive it.” He had thought about it and weighed his options. “Mrs Potter wants to have everything. She grew up poor, having to choose this or that never both. Now she can do whatever she wants, she wants it all. Take even a little of that away from her...”

“And she'll throw a tantrum.” Send Howlers, decapitate flowers and start a vendetta while looking like the villain. And along the way sabotage her own happiness. Hermione nodded slowly, untying the belt to let her bathrobe drop to the floor. “Cunning.”

“I had to survive in a pit of vipers.” Marcus nudged her towards the bed. She pushed the covers aside and spread her legs, because she did not have to be in control all the time. He smiled and climbed on top, taking his time. Because they had all the time they needed.
Montrose won after almost four days of Quidditch in a game that had most of wizarding Britain in the stadium. Marcus finished the match with two cracked ribs and a personal best three hundred and seventy-eight different fouls.

Harry refused to speak to Hermione after the Championship, until the Harpies' played Chuddley and Ginny collided with a Cannons Chaser. She returned to the game with a suspected concussion despite her husband's pleas for her to go to St. Mungo's for a check up.

That first reunion was acrimonious. Harry and Hermione argued the next time they met as well but they kept meeting and eventually ironed out their differences. They went to Australia together, to her parents' graves so Harry could pay his respects.

Marcus and Hermione spent Yule together with Octavius, who seemed much more settled on the medication and counselling program Mrs Shaw had recommended. He was well enough by April for a weekend away at the Higgs' lodge, where he spent his time playing with Estelle's kittens and painting.

Marcus and Harry stood as groomsmen at Neville's wedding to Hannah, with Hermione and Susan Bones as bridesmaids. Ginny was invited but refused to go, though Bill, Charlie and George Weasley and their wives did attend making a reasonable show of getting along with everyone.

Hermione and Marcus did not attend Harry's twenty-first birthday. Ginny threatened to leave him if he invited them and Molly insisted the Weasleys show their loyalty to Ron by supporting Ginny's stance.

For his part, Ron demanded to be left out of the feud. He quit his job as an Auror after a third sanction from Everild Proudfoot over unfinished paperwork. He spent a few months travelling around North America, living it up as a bachelor before returning home. He accepted a position at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and headed back to the United States to expand the business there.

Harry was Ron's Best Man when he married an American witch but by then his relationship with Ginny was on the rocks. They separated late in 2002, with Ginny leaving the country to unsuccessfully tour with the English National Quidditch team.

Throwing himself into his work, Harry not only closed down the black market in stolen wands but brought four Wizengamot members in on corruption charges. He was promoted to Deputy Head of the Auror Department and found himself working closely with Hermione and Theo Nott on better oversight protocols for the Ministry.

Hermione Jean Granger graduated from Oxford with a Master's degree in Biochemistry. She deferred her plans to undertake a Doctorate in Neuropharmacology after she became Madam Flint again, as a nostalgic honeymoon in Palau left her and Marcus with a surprise.

Livia Evelyn Flint was born on the 11th of June after a long but pleasant delivery. Hermione Flint, Brightest Witch of her Age, ensured both she and her daughter had every spell or potion to make labour as comfortable as possible. Marcus, true to his word, resigned from the Magpies the next day.

Hermione resumed the Flint Seat in the Wizengamot. The first thing she did was replace the chairs with more ergonomic seating. The second thing she did was fill the new seating with representatives for the old abeyant Seats. Squibs long denied their birthrights and Muggle-borns with previously
unknown connections to magical families took their places in the wizarding government.

Terence Higgs married Tamsin Applebee on a beach in Oahu in a Muggle ceremony to please her father, then married again in the Tyrolean mountains to please his. They spent their honeymoon in the Atacama Desert entirely alone watching the stars.

After an unconventional courtship, Luna Lovegood and Lucian Bole married in a barrow mound in Shropshire, and spent their honeymoon happily hopelessly lost in the Yucatan until Marcus and Hermione flew in with Peregrine Derrick to find them.

Millicent Bulstrode cut ties with her parents after they arranged a marriage for her with a pure-blood wizard twenty years her senior. The Flints supported her while she undertook a Healers' apprenticeship, which she more than repaid in Hermione's eyes when she saved Harry's life after an Auror raid gone wrong.

Marcus was less pleased when his cousin and the Chosen One began dating. He did manage to toast Millicent and Harry at their engagement party without smirking. The Bulstrodes graciously acquiesced to their daughter becoming Mrs Potter, but were not invited to the private hand-fasting ceremony in Godric's Hollow.

Septimus Ian Flint was born on the seventh day of the seventh month of 2007, arriving a little early but very loudly. Theo Nott and his wife Padma were his godparents. Photographs of the new arrival were taken but not printed by the Daily Prophet after privacy laws were passed in the Wizengamot.

Ginevra Weasley was the second person, after Rita Skeeter, who was charged under new libel laws after she published a tell-all book about her marriage to Harry Potter. Bankrupt after a failed Quidditch career, she was unable to pay the court mandated fines and spent two years in Azkaban. After being released, she migrated to Romania.

Octavian Martin Flint arrived nine months after his mother defended her doctoral thesis. He suffered the childhood nickname of 'Doc Ock' after his brother was introduced to Spiderman by his cousin Frank Longbottom and his friend James Potter.

Leota Yaxley and Finella Rhys wed in London the day after the Muggle United Kingdom passed marriage equality legislation. They started their own advocacy firm to assist wizarding folk appealing against archaic inheritance laws.

Marina Alexandra Flint was still small enough for Marcus to carry her on his back in a Muggle baby harness when he marched his children onto the train platform for Livia's first trip to Hogwarts.

Hermione held her daughter's hand as they walked, reviewing what they had packed and reassuring the serious girl that they had everything. Including one of Crookshanks's and Estelle's children riding smugly on the luggage trolley.

End Notes

Australian English and grammar usage throughout.

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