

Harry Potter

Madam Pomfrey stood at the foot of Harry's bed with her arms folded and the expression of a woman who had been right about something and was tired of being right about it.

She did not yell.

She enumerated.

"The burn tissue along your dorsal region had reached sixty percent regeneration as of Thursday morning, when I cleared you for light activity." She held up one finger. "Light activity. Walking. Sitting. Attending classes. Eating meals at a table like a civilized person."

Harry looked at the ceiling.

"You competed in a full-contact dueling competition lasting approximately twenty minutes, during which you cast no fewer than fourteen high-output spells including three instances of concentrated fire magic, two sustained Transfigurations, and a warming charm powerful enough to alter the atmospheric conditions of an enclosed arena."

Harry continued looking at the ceiling. The ceiling was stone. It had cracks in it. One of the cracks looked like a dog.

"Your burn tissue is now at forty percent regeneration. You have lost three weeks of healing in a single afternoon." She paused. "I want you to sit with that number, Mr. Potter. Forty percent."

"I won, though," Harry said to the ceiling.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter. You defeated a fourteen-year-old girl and it only cost you three weeks of spinal recovery. At this rate, by the time you win the Tournament, I will need to regrow your entire skeleton. Shall I pencil that in for June."

"Ouch."

"That is precisely my point." She straightened the clipboard against her chest. "You will remain in this bed for four days. You will cast no magic. You will lift nothing heavier than a fork. And if I hear that you have so much as looked at your wand with intent, I will confiscate it and replace it with a wooden spoon."

"A wooden spoon."

"My grandmother swore by them."

"For healing?"

"For discipline."

Pomfrey turned and walked away.

Harry stared at the crack that looked like a dog.

Four days. He could survive four days. He had survived the cupboard under the stairs, and a basilisk, and a Hungarian Horntail, and an entire school calling him a cheat. Four days of lying still should be manageable. He shifted his weight and his back reminded him, that shifting his weight was on the banned list.

He stopped shifting.

The Hospital Wing was quiet. The other beds were empty. The light through the tall windows came in at a low angle and turned the stone floor the color of weak tea. The air smelled like clean linen and healing potions.

The door opened at half past ten.

Cedric came through first, carrying a covered dish. Behind him, Luna drifted in holding a book with a blank cover, no title, no author name, just made of brown leather.

"Brought you breakfast," Cedric said, setting the dish on Harry's bedside table. "Cinnamon rolls. Hufflepuff kitchens. Hannah's mum sent the recipe and the house-elves have been making them all week. They're spectacular."

"Pomfrey said I can only lift a fork."

"Lucky for you, cinnamon rolls are finger food." Cedric pulled the chair from the empty bed next to Harry's and sat down. He looked good. The arm that had been injured during the dragon was moving freely, the bandages gone. His hair was doing its usual thing where it looked effortlessly perfect.

Luna sat on the end of Harry's bed. She held up the blank book.

"This is very interesting," she said. "Though it may not be real."

"The book?"

"The content. The pages change every time I open them. This morning it was a recipe for unicorn-milk custard. Yesterday it was a poem about a lighthouse. The day before that, it was blank."

"So it's a book that can't decide what it wants to be."

"Most interesting things can't." Luna opened it and studied whatever page had presented itself today. "Oh. Today it's a list of everyone who's ever been afraid of the dark. Alphabetically. I'm on page seven."

Harry picked up a cinnamon roll. It was warm and soft and the icing on top was thick. He took a bite and the sweetness of it made his mouth water.

"These are incredible."

"I know." Cedric leaned back in his chair. "I've had four."

"It's ten thirty in the morning."

"And I've had four."

The door opened again. Susan Bones came through it more slowly than the other two, her bag over one shoulder, her Hufflepuff scarf still wrapped around her neck as though she'd come straight from outside. She stopped a few feet from Harry's bed and stood there for a moment, looking at him with an expression that was doing several things at once.

Then she sat in the other chair, the one on Harry's left side, and set her bag on the floor.

"How's your back?" she asked.

"Forty percent. Down from sixty."

"Pomfrey's furious."

"Pomfrey's always furious. I think it's part of her healing process. She gets angry enough and the anger radiates outward and fixes people through sheer force of disapproval."

Susan's mouth twitched. She looked at her hands for a second, then looked up.

"I know the duel wasn't entirely about me."

Harry started to say something. She held up a hand.

"I'm not naive about it. You had your own reasons. Tournament politics. The oath you made. The fact that Greengrass is genuinely good and you wanted to test yourself against her." Susan paused. "But you made a promise. In a classroom. Over stolen sandwiches and Luna's chocolate. And you kept it."

Harry reached for another cinnamon roll.

"My parents would have liked you."

The cinnamon roll stopped halfway to his mouth. He was not sure what to say. Susan rarely talked about her parents; that was one of the many things he had in common with her...dead parents. Yet, hearing her words.

He set the cinnamon roll down.

"Thank you," he said. "That's. Thank you, Susan."

"You're welcome."

Luna looked up from the book that changed its mind. "Today's page says that gratitude is best expressed through pastry. I think the book might be correct about this one."

Harry picked the cinnamon roll back up.

Cedric cleared his throat. "So. Am I going to get any credit for my duel, or is Harry's going to absorb all the oxygen in the room?"

Harry looked at him. "You were brilliant."

"That's more like it."

"The herding tactic. Using the terrain constraints instead of raw spell power. You didn't try to overpower Nott, you just made the platform smaller until she ran out of room." Harry gestured with the cinnamon roll. "That's the best tactical thinking I've seen from you."

Cedric's face did something complicated. Pleased and embarrassed at once. "It felt like playing chess while someone was throwing things at my head."

"That's basically what good dueling is."

"Is it."

"It is."

"Then I hate good dueling."

"No, you don't."

"I'm not sure whether to thank you for the training or blame you for making me enjoy something that terrifying."

"Both."

"Both."

Susan was watching them with the small smile she wore when she thought people were being ridiculous and wanted them to keep being ridiculous. Luna had returned to the book.

The door opened a third time.

Sirius Black came through in a dramatic way like he just walked into the most important room in the magical world. His dark hair was wilder than usual. His robes were wrinkled in a way that suggested he'd slept in them or possibly on them. His grey eyes found Harry immediately and

conducted the same damage assessment they always conducted, cataloguing visible injuries, checking for hidden ones, measuring the distance between "fine" and "actually fine."

Behind him, Nymphadora Tonks followed with her hair a shade of coral pink. Her pink today was very bright, which meant she was worried, but also relieved.

Sirius crossed to Harry's bed and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. His grip was careful, avoiding the area where he knew the burns were worst. "You're alive."

"I was alive yesterday when you tried to visit and Pomfrey chased you out."

"She did not chase me. She firmly suggested I leave and I chose to respect her medical authority."

Tonks coughed. "She chased him. He got to the second-floor landing before she stopped shouting."

"Nymphadora."

"Don't call me that."

"Don't tell people I got chased by a mediwitch."

"I'll stop telling people when you stop getting chased."

Sirius pulled up a chair. He sat down, leaned forward, and looked at Harry with the expression that meant the joking was temporarily suspended.

"How bad."

"Forty percent. Down from sixty."

"She gave me the numbers. I want your numbers."

Harry considered. "It hurts like someone's pressing a hot iron against my spine every time I move. But only when I move. If I lie perfectly still, it's a dull ache that I can mostly ignore. So. Maybe a five out of ten lying down, seven if I move, nine if I sneeze."

"Have you sneezed."

"Once. It was not a good moment."

Sirius seemed like he was about to tell him that he was being reckless, that he should have not taken so long to finish the fight, instead...

"You won, though," Sirius said finally.

"That's what I told Pomfrey."

"What did she say?"

"She threatened me with a wooden spoon."

Tonks barked a laugh from behind Sirius. She had perched on the windowsill with her legs dangling, which brought her roughly to eye level with everyone else. "Did you at least win impressively, or did you just barely scrape through?"

"I turned her own ice maze into glass and then turned the fog into a cloud of glass dust that cut through her shield charm."

Tonks blinked. "Okay. That's impressive."

"Thank you."

"Still not worth the damage."

"Debatable."

Sirius looked like he wanted to argue but instead reached over and took one of Cedric's cinnamon rolls. Cedric opened his mouth to object and then closed it, apparently deciding that challenging Sirius Black over a pastry was a fight he didn't need.

Luna looked up from her book. "The Wrackspurts around Sirius are very paternal today."

Sirius paused mid-bite. "I choose to take that as a compliment."

"It is one," Luna said. "Paternal Wrackspurts are the warmest variety. They only appear around people who genuinely care about someone's wellbeing, even when that someone is being foolish about it."

"Especially when," Sirius said, and took another bite.

For a few minutes, the conversation drifted. Cedric talked about the other duels. Tonks asked questions about specific spells. Luna read passages from her book that may or may not have existed. Susan listened and occasionally added a detail, her voice quiet but present.

It was warm in the Hospital Wing. The light had shifted from weak tea to something closer to honey.

Harry waited for a gap in the conversation. One came when Cedric paused to drink water and Tonks was laughing at something Luna had said about Wrackspurts having opinions about cinnamon.

"Susan."

She looked at him.

"There's something I need to tell you. About after the duel."

"After I won," Harry said, "after I gave Greengrass her wand back, she said something."

Susan waited.

"She said: 'Tell Bones she needs to harden her skin. Next time someone brings up her parents to hurt her, she should answer in kind. Not with tears. Not with happiness charms. She should make them regret opening their mouth.'"

Susan seemed confused at first, then something that might have been anger, then confusion again, deeper this time.

"And then she said something else." Harry paused. He wanted to get the words exactly right. "I asked her why she cared about you, and she said: 'I owe it to her.' Those were her exact words."

The Hospital Wing was very quiet.

"I don't understand," Susan said. "I've barely spoken to Daphne Greengrass. We've been in the same school for four years and I think we've exchanged maybe ten words, and half of those were excuse me in a corridor." She looked at Harry, then at Cedric, then back at Harry. "Why would she owe me anything?"

Sirius shrugged, reaching for another cinnamon roll. "Probably has something to do with Jole and her mother. Clara, right? Clara Greengrass." He said casually.

There was silence.

Harry looked at Sirius. Cedric looked at Sirius. Luna looked up from her book. Tonks, on the windowsill, went very still. Susan looked up at Sirius.

Susan said: "What?"

Sirius paused with the cinnamon roll halfway to his mouth. He looked at Susan's face and something in his expression changed, the casual confidence draining out of it the way color drains out of a face getting bad news.

"Your aunt told you about this," he said.

"Told me about what."

"About Jole. Your father. And Clara." Sirius set the cinnamon roll down. "About them being. You know."

Susan stared at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Sirius closed his eyes.

"Padfoot, you absolute fool," Sirius said under his breath.

Tonks, on the windowsill, pressed her lips together. Her hair shifted from coral pink to a deeper rose.

"Sirius," Harry said. "What about Susan's father and Clara Greengrass."

Sirius opened his eyes. He looked at Susan for a moment, then at Harry, then at the cinnamon roll sitting on the bedside table as if it might offer better answers than the ones he was about to give.

"I need to say first that what I know is incomplete," he said. "Some of it I saw myself. Some of it I heard from other people. And the heard part is years old and came through the kind of channels that are not exactly reliable."

"Sirius."

"Right." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I was in the same year at Hogwarts as Jole Bones."

Susan's whole body went still.

"Your father," Sirius said gently. "Jole was in Gryffindor. Good man. Quiet, mostly. Better at Herbology than anyone I'd ever seen. James used to copy his notes."

Susan's eyes had gone bright.

"Jole knew a girl from the very first year. She was in Slytherin. Smart, pretty, kept to herself mostly. What I do remember is that she and Jole were close." Sirius paused. "Very close. Some people said more than close, but I was seventeen and primarily concerned with Quidditch and following James around, so I didn't pay much attention to other people's arrangements unless they were funny or disastrous."

"And this girl," Harry said.

"This girl later married a man named William Greengrass. Clara Greengrass." Sirius looked at Susan. "Daphne's mother."

Susan seemed lost for words before finally saying. "My father and Daphne Greengrass's mother," Susan said slowly, "were close."

"Very close. For most of their time at Hogwarts, from what I could see. They studied together, ate meals together, were together most of the time. Like I said, some people thought it was more than friendship. I genuinely don't know whether it was."

"What happened?"

Sirius shrugged, the small uncomfortable kind. "In our later years, Clara started spending more time with her cousin. William Greengrass. I noticed because Jole seemed, I don't know, quieter for a while. But I was a self-absorbed teenager, and James was already chasing Lily around the castle, and I had my own problems, so I didn't dig into it."

He took a breath.

"A year after I finished my seventh year, I heard through the usual gossip that Clara had married William. I remember being mildly surprised because the last I knew, Jole had been the one she was always with. A few years after that, I heard that Jole had married a woman named Alys." He looked at Susan. "Your mother."

"And then?" Susan asked.

"And then I went to Azkaban," Sirius said, "and I stopped keeping track of anything for twelve years."

He spread his hands. "That's everything I know. Which is not very much. I can't tell you why Daphne Greengrass thinks she owes your family anything. The rest of it, what happened between Clara and Jole, whether Clara ever talked about him after she married, all of that is beyond what I ever knew. I just know they were close, and then things went different ways."

Susan sat very still in her chair. Her hands were in her lap. The Hufflepuff scarf was still wrapped around her neck, and she had one end of it between her fingers, rubbing the fabric.

"Why wouldn't Auntie tell me about this?"

Susan looked more confused than angry. Amelia Bones was the most direct person Susan knew. They lived together. Susan asked about her parents all the time, and Amelia always answered.

"Maybe she thought it wasn't her story to tell," Luna said gently. "Or maybe she didn't think it mattered anymore."

Susan looked at Luna. Then she said: "It matters to Daphne, apparently."

Nobody had an answer for that.

The silence stretched for several seconds. Tonks shifted on the windowsill. Cedric looked at his hands. Luna closed the book that changed its mind.

Harry thought about Daphne standing on the ruined platform with burns on her arm and glass cuts on her face, saying I owe it to her, and then walking away with her back straight and her mouth shut. Whatever connected Daphne Greengrass to Susan Bones, it ran through their parents, through a friendship or a romance that had ended before either of them was born. And Daphne carried it like a debt.

But a debt for what? Clara married someone else. Jole married someone else. People moved on. People always moved on. Unless something had happened that made moving on the wrong word for it.

The Hospital Wing clock struck noon.

Sirius stood first. He squeezed Harry's shoulder, carefully.

"You know, I survived Azkaban with a full head of black hair. Twelve years, not a single grey. Three months of being your godfather and I found two this morning." He tugged a strand near his temple. "Two, Harry. I'm thirty-five."

"You should try a Colour-Changing Charm. Tonks can teach you. She's very good at hair."

"I'm not changing my hair. I'm asking you to stop giving me reasons to."

"I can't promise that."

"I know you can't. That's the grey hair." Sirius looked at him for a moment, and the joke was still there in his mouth but his eyes had gone somewhere else. Somewhere that held twelve years of stone walls and cold and the faces of people he'd lost and the one face he'd gotten back. "Just. Keep coming back from these things. That's all I'm asking. Keep walking out of whatever stupid, dangerous, impossible situation you walk into. Can you do that."

"I've been doing that since I was eleven."

"I know. And it hasn't gotten any less terrifying from the outside." Sirius squeezed once more. "Get some rest. And if Pomfrey offers you a wooden spoon, take it. She means well."

He left. His footsteps echoed in the corridor for a few seconds and then the Hospital Wing was quieter.

Tonks hopped off the windowsill, crossed to Harry's bed, and gave him a fist bump. "Round three had better be worth the damage."

"It will be."

"It'd better." She ruffled his hair, which Harry suspected she did specifically because she knew it annoyed him, and followed Sirius out.

Cedric stood and stretched. He squeezed Harry's wrist, careful, avoiding the hand that had been gripping a wand for twenty minutes straight. "Get some sleep."

"I've been sleeping for two days."

"Get some more." He picked up the empty cinnamon roll dish. "I'll bring more tomorrow. Assuming Sirius doesn't intercept them."

"He'll intercept them."

"I'll bring extra."

Cedric left.

Susan stood last. She gathered her bag from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. At the door, she turned back.

"Whatever she owes me," Susan said. "I don't want her to be in pain over it."

Harry looked at her. He thought about Daphne's face when she said those words, the crack in the composure, the thing behind her eyes that surfaced and went under before anyone could reach it.

"She's already in pain over it," he said.

Susan nodded.

She left.

Luna was the last one at the door. She paused with her hand on the frame and looked back at Harry. The blank-covered book was tucked under her arm. Her radish earrings caught the light from the tall windows.

"You know," she said, "it's very rare that someone hurts you and then spends years being sorry about it. Most people just stop thinking about it."

She left before Harry could respond.

Harry lay in the Hospital Wing bed and stared at the ceiling. The crack that looked like a dog was still there. The light through the windows had shifted again, from honey to the thin grey of early afternoon. His back ached. His hands were sore. The taste of cinnamon still coated the inside of his mouth.

He thought about Jole Bones and Clara Greengrass, close enough that people talked about it, until one day they weren't close anymore and nobody told their daughters why.

He thought about Daphne, standing in her maze of ice, saying the world is not kind and meaning it with every cell in her body.

He thought about Susan, walking out the door with a new question she couldn't answer and a scarf she kept rubbing between her fingers.

One Week Later

The two seventh-years by the fire were arguing about Switching Spells again.

"The wrist rotation is clockwise, Marcus. It has always been clockwise. Scamander's Practical Guide, page four hundred and twelve."

"Scamander's Practical Guide was written by a man who couldn't switch a teacup with a saucer without setting both on fire. Counter-clockwise gives you better control on the release."

"Counter-clockwise gives you a nosebleed and everyone laughing at you."

They had been having this argument, in one form or another, since their fourth year. Harry had heard at least nine variations. The core disagreement was theological in nature and would outlast them both.

He sat in the window seat with Flitwick's class notes open on his lap, trying to catch up on the Protean Charm theory he had missed during his second stay in the Hospital Wing. Flitwick had left them on Harry's bedside table with a note that said "Do try to read these before term ends."

Harry had been staring at the same paragraph for twenty minutes.

Luna sat beside him with her legs tucked beneath her, reading the blank-covered book. Today it appeared to contain a very detailed map of somewhere that, based on the occasional frown Luna gave it, kept rearranging its geography mid-read.

"The mountains moved again," Luna said.

"That sounds inconvenient."

"It is. I was just getting to the capital city and now it's behind a volcano."

The common room was full; it was a cold December evening. Fire in the grate. Books on every horizontal surface. The smell of old parchment and warming charms and someone's owl treats that had been left in a pocket and forgotten. Third-years crowded around a table working on Astronomy charts. A cluster of fifth-years practiced wand movements for their upcoming practicals, their spells producing small puffs of colored smoke that drifted toward the ceiling and dissolved.

Two sharp knocks on the inside of the common room door.

The conversations died, everyone knew who knocked like that.

The door swung open and Flitwick stepped through, then up onto the small raised step beside the entrance that brought him to approximately the height of a standing third-year. He surveyed the room with the bright-eyed expression of someone who had news and was going to enjoy delivering it.

"Good evening, Ravenclaws. I have an announcement."

The common room gave him its full attention. Even the seventh-years stopped arguing about wrist rotation, which Harry considered a minor miracle.

"The Yule Ball will take place one week from this Saturday." Flitwick paused to let this register. "The facts are as follows. Champions and their partners will open the dance. Students fourth year and above may attend and are expected to bring a partner. Third-year students may attend only if invited by an older student."

A third-year near the Astronomy table made a small, distressed sound.

"Dress robes are required. The Ball begins at eight o'clock and concludes at midnight. Refreshments will be provided by the kitchens, who I am told are already quite excited about the menu. Decorations have been arranged jointly by Professor Sprout and myself." Flitwick's chest puffed out by roughly half an inch. "And I trust no one will need to ask which of us is responsible for the more elegant elements."

A ripple of laughter. Flitwick allowed himself a small smile.

"I encourage all of you to approach this event with the grace and maturity befitting Ravenclaw House. Ask your partners politely. Accept rejections with dignity. And for the love of Rowena, iron your dress robes. I will be inspecting."

He stepped down from the raised step, wished them goodnight, and left through the door, which swung shut behind him with a soft click.

The common room held its breath for approximately one and a half seconds.

Then it detonated.

The seventh-years abandoned the Switching Spell debate and turned to each other.

The fifth-years split into visible camps. Three of them immediately began whispering. Two others looked at each other, looked away, looked back, and then both started speaking at the same time.

Harry watched all of this from the window seat.

Luna closed the blank-covered book. The mountains, presumably, would have to wait.

She looked at Harry.

"Who are you going to invite?"

Harry opened his mouth.

He meant to say he hadn't thought about it. He meant to say there was plenty of time. He had at least seventeen different deflections available to him, ranging from the casual ("Haven't decided

yet") to the strategic ("Why, who are you going with?") to the absurd ("I was thinking of asking the Giant Squid"). Any of them would have worked. Any of them would have steered the conversation somewhere safer.

Instead his mind went to the Hospital Wing. Fleur's hand in his. Her voice thick with exhaustion and pain and potions, saying 'Arry before she knew she was saying it. Her eyes in the morning after, grey-blue, the color of the lake on a clear day, looking at him and saying *zank you, properly*.

He thought about her at breakfast with her melon and her fork, looking up when he spoke too loudly, giving him that smile. The one that felt like the first day all over again, before the Goblet and the accusations and the weeks of silence.

He thought about Cedric in the fourth-floor classroom, leaning against a desk, saying: *if you like her, and you do, don't even try to deny it, then you should actually talk to her*.

He thought about her on the platform, wand raised, eyes sparking with something between amusement and challenge: *We shall see, Monsieur Potter. We shall see*.

He had been sitting in silence for too long. Luna was still looking at him. The common room buzzed around them, a hundred and fifty students negotiating the sudden social crisis of who to ask and how to ask and what to wear, and Harry sat in the window seat thinking about a French girl with silver-blond hair who had called him a cheat and then caught a curse meant for his back and then thanked him for holding her hand.

Luna smiled.

"That's what I thought," she said, and opened her book again.

The fire popped. The seventh-years resumed their argument. Someone across the room asked someone else to the Ball and got a yes, and a small cheer went up from the corner.

Harry stared out the window at the dark grounds and the distant lake and the stars that were just starting to appear above the Forbidden Forest. The glass was cold against his shoulder. His reflection looked back at him, faint and translucent, a boy in a window who had just realized something he probably should have realized weeks ago.

He thought about Fleur.

But then he remembered...she had yet to apologize to him.

(Image Below)

