

Natural Law

by Squibstress

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Written for the 2011 [HP_Beholder](#) Fest on LiveJournal.

"Agnes Crouch is dead."

"What?"

"Says here in the *Prophet*. Agnes died yesterday."

The soft, wrinkly witch in grey handed the paper to the sharp, pointed one in green, who scanned it briefly before handing it back to the other one.

When she heard her Mistress' witch-name, Winky had looked up briefly, confused.

My Mistress is dying three months ago, she wanted to tell the two witches, but of course, she didn't. Master had forbidden her to say anything about any member of the Crouch family to anyone.

The young house-elf prided herself on precision, accuracy, and correctness in her work. She had learned the importance of these attributes at her mother's breast as an elfling born into service of the Crouch family. Master valued these things above all else, Winky's mother had said, and Winky had observed it to be true. Rule-breaking and wrongness were not tolerated in the Crouch household; even Mistress and Young Master were not exempt from Master's firm discipline and sharp tongue where infractions were concerned.

Winky curbed her impulse to respectfully correct the witches; she was unsure whether she should punish herself for it. The Master's command took precedence over all other imperatives, but Master had also instructed his house-elves to be helpful to the witches and wizards he worked with...after gaining permission to speak, of course...whenever possible. As an elfling, Winky had been given the task of helping Young Master with his studies: holding textbooks and providing correct answers when Young Master erred. Surely supplying her Mistress' correct date of death would be helpful to the grey one and the green one? But she held her tongue. Blumber, the kitchen-elf, had gotten in a new supply of dragonfire spice just yesterday; Winky decided she would ask for some when she returned to the Crouch home, to coat her tongue. Just in case.

She continued her search for Master's ceremonial robe, saying nothing to the two witches who were taking their tea in the Ministry's staff lounge.

"Very sad," remarked the sharp witch. (*Madam Minerva*, Winky recalled; Master had called her "Minerva".) "I suspected she wasn't well when I saw her at the trials. I hadn't

seen her for years, of course, but I was shocked by her appearance. She was a few years younger than me."

"Mmm. Always a shock when someone your age passes," remarked the wrinkly one, whose name Winky didn't know. "Happens a lot more as you get older...and nobody's older than I am...but the feeling is the same . . ."

"Griselda."

"Hmmm?"

"Griselda's older than you are."

"After what we've been through lately, I daresay I feel as old as Griselda. Older."

Winky saw Madam Minerva cross to where the wrinkly one was sitting. She averted her eyes when she saw her caress the wrinkly one's cheek, and saw The Master's cloak sitting there, right where her eyes had landed. She Summoned it silently, so as not to disturb the witches and smiled to herself at the soft words she couldn't help overhearing. She'd been privy to precious few of those recently.

"This has been especially hard on you, my dear."

"Hard on us all."

"Yes, but you have to face it every day. I wish I could take some of the burden from you."

"Will you stay tonight?"

Winky heard the pause and Apparated away before she could hear the answer.

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"Winky!" came Master's voice, ringing, as it always did, in her head.

"Yes, Master?" she asked when she appeared in his study.

"Professor McGonagall will be here in a few minutes. We will require tea," said Master as he shuffled through several pieces of important-looking parchment, dropping several sheets on the Demiguise-hair rug.

Winky almost picked them up to return them to Master, but quickly reminded herself, *Mustn't touch Master's parchment*. Her brother had made that mistake once, and very nearly got himself a set of breeches for it, she recalled with an involuntary shudder.

"Yes, Master. Is Madam Professor McGonagall preferring the Small Red Robe or the Happy Valley Darjeeling?"

"You may serve the Darjeeling. Make sure the pot is properly warmed."

"Yes, Master."

"And Winky, make sure The Convict is well secured."

"Yes, Master."

When Winky went down into the basement to see how Master Barty was, she found him agitated and snarling. When she tried to empty the chamber pot, he lurched at her and knocked it out of her hands, spewing foul-smelling urine and faeces across the floor and all over Winky's crested tea towel.

Oh, dear.

With a few snaps of her fingers, Winky cleaned up the mess.

I is best telling Master. He is needing to . . . but Winky couldn't even think the word to herself.

'Tis Unforgiveable.

House-elf though she was, Winky was well acquainted with the law, thank you very much. Any elf in the employ of Bartemius Æthelbert Crouch, Sr. would be, given that it was the main topic of any discussion likely to be had in his home.

The two small families of house-elves in the Crouch household...the ap-Heilyns, of which Winky was one, and the ap-Dilwyns...were very proud of the current Master's accomplishments in law. Winky's mother, Bilyd, told many fond stories of helping then-Young Master Bartemius with his language studies. A prodigy, he was, she told Winky, and so good with the tongues of others!

"So proud, we was," Bilyd had said, "when Young-Master-that-was went off to Ludwig-Maximilians-Weishaupt-Universität to learn laws of all nations!" Winky felt proud then, too. She served a Master who was so learned as to go to a school with three names!

"Master Barty, you is being calm, now, *please!* The Master is having a guest, and if she hears you, you is surely going back to that bad place, and your father is going with you!" Winky pleaded with her charge.

The admonition seemed to calm him for a minute, and Winky Apparated back to the study to report to her Master.

When he ordered her to accompany him to the basement to see to The Convict (as Master always called the Young Master; Winky knew it was because that was the correct term under the law, and Master insisted on correctness at all times), Winky wanted to demur. She wouldn't, of course, and she would later pluck her whiskers out in punishment for the disobedient impulse, but it disturbed her to see the Master do that spell.

In truth, it more than disturbed her; it turned her world upside-down. She felt nauseated, just like the time bad-elf Grimble had charmed her ears to stick to Young Master's broom and sent her zooming, terrified and gulping for air, up the chimney and over the roof of the manor, just to try to get Winky in trouble. A bad elf Grimble, was, no doubt about it. There was good-elves and bad-elves, just like Good and Bad wizards and witches. This last Winky had learned only recently, with the Troubles, and the trials that accompanied the end of them, and the talk that she heard.

For instance, Young Master Barty, he had turned out to be a Bad wizard. Winky had a hard time believing it at first, but when she thought about it, she realised that his behaviour over the past year or so had been worrisome. Very worrisome. There were fights, not only between Master and Young Master, but between Young Master and Mistress, and even between Master and Mistress themselves. The fight-words had included "unnatural" and "Dark magic", the latter of which gave Winky nightmares for a week the first time she heard it used in connection with her beloved Young Master. And she had seen for herself the kinds of wizards and witches Young Master invited into Master and Mistress' house when they was away. She might only be an elf, and not worthy to judge witches and wizards, but Winky could tell Good from Bad, and what sort of wizard was which.

Master was a Good wizard. He learned the laws and kept them, and he was fair to his elves. Even when an elf was bad, like Grimby, Master usually let the elves take care of their own punishments. Not like some Winky could name. Her friend Dobby served a Master who beat his elves himself when they was bad, and sometimes when they wasn't.

Except now everything was all topsy-turvy. Master...who told the elves and Mistress and Young Master to always tell the truth...now told Winky to . . . to . . . lie! To wizards! It went against everything Winky had learned at her mother's knee, and indeed, everything she felt at the core of her very being.

When Master's friends came to visit after the funeral for the empty box, she was nearly ill herself when Master told her what to say on the off chance somebody asked her about the Mistress' not-illness and wrong-day death. Winky was proud to be the elf Master trusted with his secret, make no mistake, but she hated lying to her fellow-elves, and even more, she was terrified of the idea of lying to wizards.

Luckily, the wizards and witches who came to visit paid no attention to the elves, with their enormous, grief-rimmed eyes and black tea-towels. The elves had held their own memorial for the beloved Mistress late that night, making her favourite foods, cleaning her robes and polishing her shoes, while telling stories of the late Mistress' fine deeds. That night had been Winky's first taste of butterbeer, and she couldn't decide if she liked the muzzy head it gave her or not. But she did like how it made her forget her mounting troubles for a time.

Winky squeezed her eyes shut, but didn't dare stop her ears (not that her hands were big enough to do the job anyway) when Master pointed his wand at Master Barty and spoke the spell. When she opened them, the Young Master was sitting quietly on his rickety cot in the corner.

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Winky had delivered the second pot of tea and laid out some nibbles and was standing under the small tea-table in the corner of the study, as she did when she was asked to serve. Professor-not-Madam McGonagall...who turned out to be the hard witch Winky had seen in the Ministry staff room...had already been talking with the Master for more than an hour! Winky couldn't begin to imagine talking for so long, but then wizards and elves was different, she reminded herself. Wizards and witches liked to talk, while most elves used their words sparingly. (Except Winky's friend Dobby; he loved to say lots of words, but then, Dobby was an odd elf in lots of ways.) Winky said lots of words, too, but only in her head. Once words was out of a mouth, they was gone. Head-words you could take out again, and change around, and that was much better.

Poor wizards, thought Winky. Always letting their words go.

"Minerva, I still don't see what the point of it would be," Master was saying.

"The point, Barty, is that it is the right thing to do," Professor McGonagall said.

Winky's ears perked up. *Right thing.* Master would surely have something to say on that subject.

The professor continued: "Despite our government's mulish insistence on keeping us mired in the last century, other countries have recognised it as a basic human right for years. To refuse to recognise marriages that are considered perfectly valid elsewhere makes us look backward and foolish."

Master said, "Perhaps, but other countries don't have the same problems we do. You know as well as anyone that our birth-rate has been plummeting since the turn of the last century. Our leading families' dashed mania for pure bloodlines has come closer to wiping us out than even the Dragon Pox epidemic of 1832."

"What does our birth rate have to do with gender restriction in marriage?"

"If we start recognising same-gender marriages validated in other countries, you know perfectly well that the pressure to recognise them among our own will mount considerably."

"I'm still not following you, Barty."

"For Merlin's sake, Minerva, if we start letting wizards marry one another willy-nilly, what do you suppose will happen to our birth rate?"

"I imagine it would stay relatively constant."

Master was looking at Professor McGonagall as if she had eaten a Snargaluff pod, Winky thought.

"Oh, Barty, you can't say you think homosexuals are getting married and having babies as a substitute for state-recognised marriage with one another!"

"How do you know they're not?"

"Are you asking me to prove a negative, Barty?"

Winky filled the long silence that followed with head-words. Here was another thing she would never understand about witches and wizards: they seemed to worry and say a lot of words about who put their happy bits with whose. She had only recently come to understand that the relationship between Mistress and Master was considered the only "normal" kind among wizards. She had long understood about "marriage": it was a law-idea about owning things. That made sense to Winky; wizards and witches owned things and they had to work out how to share them because it didn't come naturally to them. So they invented "marriage" to make sure everybody understood who owned what things and who was allowed to use them. Elves didn't own things, so they didn't need something like "marriage". Winky felt sorry for wizards and witches, always having to think about the things they owned, or wanted to.

"Why don't you tell me what your real objection is?" Professor McGonagall said.

"What do you mean?"

"In all the years I've known you, you've never been prone to logical fallacies before. This 'birth-rate' idea is not at all the kind of argument I'd expect from you."

Master sighed. He was strict, Winky knew, but nevertheless, he didn't like arguing. At least, not with someone who argued back.

"It isn't natural, Minerva."

"What isn't?"

"You know. Wizards with other wizards, witches and witches."

"I see. And how do you determine what is 'natural'?"

Winky wondered that, too. It was clear to her that some things was natural for some folk and not for others, but she couldn't figure out why it mattered. "Natural" was elflings coming with four toes instead of six. "Natural" was putting babies with four toes to the teat and loving them just like babies with six. "Natural" was elflings getting sick with the blue-shite disease and dying in their mothers' arms, and "natural" was mothers and fathers wailing when it happened. As far as Winky could see, "natural" was just a way of saying things happen, and sometimes they's good, and sometimes they's bad, and we leaves it to each one to figure out which is which.

"There are natural laws, Minerva. Surely you know this. Wizard and witch were made to be together for the procreation of children. Our laws are based on it."

"And what of marriages that produce no children, or can produce no children? Are they unnatural?"

"That is beside the point."

"I think it is very much to the point, if you intend to use procreation as an argument against recognizing homosexual unions."

Winky knew from the silence that Master was thinking about it. Winky was thinking about it, too. Master and the late Mistress had only the one child, Young Master Barty. When the Troubles started, and then Master Barty was sent to the bad place, Winky had wondered if Master and Mistress would have another child. It wasn't the way of house-elves to try to get another elfling when one of theirs died or went to another family, but children was important to wizards in different ways, Winky knew. Like marriage, wizard children was part of owning things, and wizards liked to have children who would own their things when they themselves died. Winky shuddered to remember the arguments Master and Young Master had about it before the troubles.

Master said, "Homosexual unions do nothing to serve society. Why should society offer them the benefits of marriage?"

"Each individual in a homosexual union is capable of contributing to society. We pay our taxes, support our institutions. When we undertake the same responsibilities, why should we not enjoy the same rights. Besides, Barty, permitting homosexuals to enjoy the benefits of legal marriage contributes to the stability of our society as much as heterosexual unions do."

Master didn't say anything for a few moments, and Winky wished she could see his face and not just his legs, but she didn't dare peek out from her post under the table.

"Minerva," Master said, "are you trying to tell me that you . . . you are . . .?"

"Yes, it's all right Barty, you can say it: I'm homosexual. It isn't a dirty word, you know."

Madam Professor McGonagall sounded almost as if she were smiling.

"No, no . . . it's just that I didn't have any idea."

"Why would you? I don't make a show of my personal relationships. And of course, I cannot marry my beloved. At least not in my own country." After a moment, she asked, "Does it make a difference? Between us, I mean?"

My beloved. Winky thought that was a nice term. Much more descriptive than "husband" or "wife". But then, it didn't mean anything about owning things.

Master answered, "No, it's just a bit of a shock is all. I've known you . . . how long is it now, Minerva?"

"More than forty years."

"And, have you been . . . like you are . . . all that time?"

"Yes, I imagine so."

Just a few years ago, Winky would have been perplexed by Master's surprise. She knew what "homosexual" was. It was a word used to describe wizards who loved other wizards or witches who loved witches. It had come up in arguments between Master and Young Master in the terrible year before Young Master had left them for good (or so everyone had thought). Winky had been distressed by those fights. She served Master of course, but she loved Young Master Barty, too. It was natural; after all, they had spent their childhoods in tandem. When she was being completely honest with herself, she could admit that she was happy that her service would eventually shift to Young Master alone when Master passed away. She would be old then, probably, but still able to serve. In her most secret dreams, she and Young Master Barty (who would be just "Master" then) would grow old together in comfortable companionship, the way some elves and their masters did, unbothered by the fights and arguments that plagued the days during Young Master's last months in the household. Whether this dream was natural or unnatural, Winky couldn't say, but it hurt nobody, so she didn't worry about it.

What Winky couldn't figure out about "homosexual" was why it was important for wizards to name one another according to who loved whom. Same-gender relationships existed among house elves...of course they did...but there wasn't separate names for male elves who went with male elves or females who did the same. But Winky, who was a logical young elf if ever there was one, figured that it had to be related to the wizard-notions of "marriage" and "ownership."

Master was saying, "Do you have a . . . friend?"

"Yes. And I have been with her for more than a decade."

"That's very nice, Minerva. I'm happy to know you aren't alone."

"But you still find it 'unnatural'."

"What would you have me say, Minerva? It is what I feel."

"I could say the same to you, Barty. In any event, this discussion of my personal life isn't getting us any closer to our goal. Although I suspect it's why I was selected to work on the issue analysis with you."

"It seems unfair to ask you to do it. You can hardly be expected to remain impartial to an issue that affects you personally."

"I'm not impartial, no. Not any more than you are. But it doesn't affect me personally. Even if the Ministry started marrying same-sex couples tomorrow, I wouldn't marry Amelia."

"Amelia . . . it's . . . she's . . ."

"Yes, *that* Amelia. And her position in the Ministry and mine at the school would prevent us from marrying, even if we wanted to. Laws may be slow to change, but attitudes can be even slower. But the Wizengamot is aware of it, and I imagine they thought I could provide a particular perspective on the matter."

"So you think they are hoping we'll recommend recognition?"

"I think they think it will make things easier for us in the international community. But that is your area of expertise. What is your opinion?"

Winky didn't get to hear Master's opinion. She had been Summoned back to the kitchen to fetch a fresh pot of tea and fresh scones.

"They sure is meeting a long time," said Blumber as he plopped the steaming pastries into a basket. "Grimbly says the visitor witch looks like she needs fattening up."

Winky rolled her eyes when Blumber turned away. Grimbly was always making mean comments about other witches and wizards...not the ones in the Crouch house, never them...but everyone else was a fair target for his mean-spirited humour. And of course, Blumber took him seriously. A sweet-natured elf and an excellent cook, but dear Blumber was not the brightest elf in the world.

Winky took the fresh tea and the scones and re-Apparated to the study, placing the food on the table with a slightly louder "clink" than she would normally permit, to alert Master and the Professor that it was there.

However, they were too engaged in whatever they were doing to notice, so Winky took up her station under the table once again. As she did so, she was shocked to note that Master was seated on the settee, and that Professor Madam McGonagall was sitting beside him, a hand on his shoulder.

"Unforgivable," Master was saying miserably. "I'm sorry Minerva."

"You've been through a great deal lately. It's perfectly understandable," she said, handing him a conjured handkerchief.

Had master been weeping? Winky had never seen such a thing, although Young Master Barty had cried often when he fought with his father, at least until the last year or so. Then he had seemed not to care anymore, which upset Winky far more than the crying had. Winky couldn't work out how the idea of Master weeping made her feel. It was unsettling for its oddness, but it was also somehow comforting that he could cry like everyone else.

"And as for being your fault . . . well, I don't know how much was your fault and how much was just the way of things. He was...his...your son, yes, but he is also an individual, capable of making his own choices. And yours was not the only influence on him."

"Yes, but..."

"No, listen to me, Barty. I may not have a natural child of my own, but I think I know just a little of what you're feeling. Young Barty may not have been in my House, but I was his teacher for seven years. I saw the kinds of people he was associating with. As his teachers, we all bear a bit of responsibility when we let a child slip into the abyss. I know Horace feels it; I'm sure that's why he's retiring."

Winky had to strain her ears to hear what Madam Professor McGonagall said next.

"And besides, Barty, the worst of them was one of mine."

"Black."

"Yes. He wasn't my son, but he was my responsibility; especially after his family disowned him. And he fooled me as completely as he fooled everyone else. I ask myself every day, 'Did I miss something? If a man is capable of, essentially, killing his best friends, shouldn't there have been some sign of his madness?' I imagine I'll be asking myself that for the rest of my days. And the only answer I can find is that I'm human, and it's human not to see what you don't want to see."

"It's human, but is it forgivable?"

"I don't know, Barty. I don't know. But I think we all need to try to forgive ourselves and one another, don't you? If we don't . . . well, that way madness lies."

Winky decided she liked this Madam Professor McGonagall. She was hard, but she was kind. She was kind to Master, anyway, and to Winky, that was kind enough.

Just then, the antique, Muggle-style grandfather clock rang the hour, and Winky remembered with a start that it was time to bring Master Barty his dinner. When he got too hungry, he became agitated, and Winky truly didn't want Master to have to perform that spell on him again today.

Winky wondered what Professor Madam McGonagall would say if she knew about Master Barty or the terrible spell Master had to use to keep them safe. Would she forgive Master?

Winky was relieved when she heard Master say, "Perhaps we had best continue this another time. It's getting late, and I'm feeling . . . not quite myself this afternoon."

"Of course, Barty. I'll owl you to set up a time for our next meeting."

"Thank you, Minerva. Winky, will you please see Professor McGonagall out?"

Winky was delighted to do so, not only because she was anxious to see to Master Barty's needs, but because she secretly wanted to observe this clever, kind, hard witch a little longer. She missed the Mistress, and would have liked a new Mistress to serve. Taking care of Young Master Barty, and Master was an honour, of course, but in truth, it made her sad. So much unhappiness and anger in the house. It would be nice to have a bit of kindness in the house again.

As she held the door open just a touch longer than strictly necessary, she watched as the witch turned into a tabby cat and padded elegantly away from the house. She wondered if maybe, just maybe, Madam Professor McGonagall might become the new Mistress. But no. She remembered that the witch already had a Mistress herself. A "beloved". And even if they wasn't "married", Winky couldn't imagine Professor Madam McGonagall leaving someone she called her "beloved". Winky had only seen the witch a few times, but it was plain to the elf that it wasn't in her nature.

Winky shut the door reluctantly and went to see to her Young Master, imprisoned in his father's basement.

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