The Smurg

by Jessiy

Summary

After refusing to accept devastating losses in the war against Voldemort, Hermione goes back in time to change it all. A different sort of time travel - Hermione/Grindelwald

Notes

This fic will only be updated once a month until Establishing a Dynasty is complete. After that I will hopefully move to a once a week schedule. I already have several chapters completed.
Chapter 1

Chapter One

The war was finally over, and Hermione released a disgruntled sigh. She thought she would feel relieved or safe, but she didn't. The only thing she felt was an overwhelming numbness. Standing in the ruins of the final battle, she watched the few people who were still alive as they milled around, searching for their loved ones. No longer could she see the faces of the dead and her eyes skipped over scenes that had been pushing to the back of her head over the last several hours. Harry's lifeless body was slumped over top of Voldemort's scaly one, both perishing under each other's deadly wand. Ron's body lay mangled and partly masticated, his neck flayed open. Fenrir, lying face up next to him, had entrails spilling from the ravaged cavity, a spell of Hermione's own making. In a small alcove, partially hidden from the direct battle was Rabastian Lestrange's body lay over Luna's, his larger body nearly hiding the petite girl completely.

She was struck by the amount of death that surrounded her. After three years of fighting in the conflict after Dumbledore's death, both sides had suffered severe losses. But, none more catastrophic than at this battle. Even still, the soldiers on both sides were few, numbering in the thirties for either side. Guerrilla warfare left whole villages nothing but ashes in their wake. The blood of innocents running like rivers across the land.

Hermione violently startled as she heard shuffling nearby. Her head whipped in that direction nearly as quickly as her wand, which she now held at the ready. For a moment, it was pointed assuredly at Draco Malfoy as he ignored her presence completely. His mother lay dead at his feet and he knelt next to her, running his hands over her hair, smoothing the wisps away from her lifeless face. Hermione dropped her wand arm to her side. Narcissa had been the first casualty of the second wave. She died a traitor's death from Voldemort's own wand. It was painful and brutal, a flesh-eating spell that destroyed her from the inside out. It was her punishment, Voldemort had yelled, for the lie of Harry's death.

"It wasn't supposed to end like this." He whimpered, just loud enough for Hermione to hear. Hermione stood watching as Malfoy grieved for his mother, feeling neither compassion for his loss nor sorrow for her own.

She dragged her eyes off of Malfoy and looked around at the survivors noticing that most of them were scavengers, those that were too cowardly to take part in the actual battle. She continued to stand rooted to her spot, thinking about all of the things that could have been done, the things she could have changed that would have saved these people. Their deaths were on her hands.

She was the one who started this battle. Having been caught unaware Hermione battled for her life and before long, Harry and Ron, true to form, came to save her. She should never have left their encampment, even if they were starving.

She jumped once more as she felt a strong hand enclose hers, pulling her off the battlefield. Her wand was savagely thrust into the tender side of whoever it was who captured her. Softly murmured words filled her ears and she vaguely registered that Draco Malfoy was not her enemy and hasn't been for years. The Order had given him and his mother sanctuary after the disastrous battle of Hogwarts during that first year on the run. It took them a long time to stop hurling insults at each other, but Malfoy had saved their arses more than once and was firmly on the allies' side of the war. He was hunted just as much as Harry was. Had been. Hermione dropped her arm.

She scrunched her eyes shut refusing to accept that the costly win was any kind of victory at all.
Gently, Malfoy pulled her closer to his toned chest, wrapping his long arms around her body. The compression of apparition made her stomach heave and once they landed, Hermione took deep gulps of fresh air. Blinking rapidly against her watering eyes, she tried to focus on something else, anything else. He let her rest a moment before taking her hand again and she passively let herself be led. She didn't care anymore anyway. There was no reason why she should live while everyone else… She closed her eyes again battling another round of nausea and desperately tried to repress those thoughts that seemed to lurk just beneath the surface, just waiting for her to become vulnerable so that it could drown her. At last, she opened her eyes to look around at her new surroundings.

Draco squeezed her hand lightly, running his thumb over the back, and led her to a chateau that materialized far in the distance through a light veil of fog. She tensed and nearly panicked when she saw the large house in the distance, nearly unbelieving that he had brought her back to the scene of her torture, Malfoy Manor. After a moment, she realized that the chateau in the distance was as different from the Manor as night from day.

He tugged on their clasped hands to get her moving. It wasn't a pushy, demanding tug, it was the kind where he was asking her to trust him, to remember that he wouldn't hurt her. Her parents, dead. Harry, dead. All the Weasley's, dead. Everyone she knew from the Order, dead. Her classmates, dead. What was left? The wizarding world was in shambles. It was Pompeii after Vesuvius erupted. The wizarding world of Britain basically comprised of the two of them and a handful more. Draco Malfoy was all she had left in the world.

He pulled her through the sprawling mansion, leading her up the stairs and down richly carpeted hallways. She barely noticed the portraits on the walls and they were oddly mute, severe-looking witches and wizards flitting from frame to frame. Following them through the manse like a macabre parade.

Draco stopped in front of a large ivory and gilt door and let her hand go for the first time since the battlefield. Placing his hands on the ornate handles of the double doors, he pushed, unmoving from the threshold, staring into the room. Taking up her hand again, he led her into the soft pink and white room. It was plush and well cared for. The suite of rooms being as ornate as she supposed the rest of the house to be, and the bathroom alone was large enough to fit the entire first floor of her parents' house. Her family hadn't been ridiculously wealthy like his but they were upper scale. Her house had been spacious and well to do in an affluent neighborhood.

"I couldn't stay and look at them anymore, the dead bodies." He murmured, not meeting her eyes. "You and the Order protected my mother and me when we had nowhere else to hide. Things weren't always roses between us, Hermione, but we made our peace with each other, I think. You are my best friend and have been for a while now, and I even got close to..." He stopped, not daring to say the names of her dead. "I didn't know where else to go. The safehouses will all be empty, the Manor is not a good place for either of us, the burrow..." He stopped and cleared his throat, for the first time unsure of the decision he made to bring them to the Chateau. "You can have any room, but this is one of the nicest. I don't want you to feel like you are a guest staying in my home. I want you to feel like you belong here. We only have each other left."

"Okay." Hermione agreed, lifelessly. She could hear the death screams still, a Spector haunting her with her loved one's last moments.

"Okay?" he asked, uncertain if she knew what she was agreeing to. Dropping her hand, he turned to face her, his expression worried and a bit panicky.

The moment Malfoy let go of her hand and began talking, she tuned him out and a plan began to form. Was there any reason to stay in this world if everyone she loved was dead? No, she wasn't
suicidal, she was determined. Knowing that the time turners had been destroyed, and understanding their limitations to begin with, Hermione focused on one truth. If there was a will, there was a way. She would go back and change everything.

"Okay?" He repeated, snapping his fingers in front of her face, trying to get his attention. Immediately she focused on Malfoy's face and studied the exhaustion and fear still holding him enthralled. Hermione thought he must have been expecting a fight or had rehearsed a speech to convince her to stay but he didn't need to. Wherever he went, she too would go. And not only because he had one of the most expansive personal libraries at his fingertips but also because he was right, they were friends, and they were all each other had.

"Mmm." She acknowledged, turning her focus to the lovely room, trying to show him how grateful she was that he brought her here, away from the stench of death. She needed a shower, a good meal, and proper sleep. But she wouldn't begin her search until tomorrow. Turning back to her host, Hermione smiled at him and moving swiftly, before she could change her mind, leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek. There were many times over the course of the years that she had done the same with Harry. It was fondness and appreciation, nothing more. He looked shocked, a deer in headlights. "Okay, Draco Malfoy, the ball is in your court, what should we do first? Where would we find the best information about time travel?"

"Time travel?"

"Uh huh."

"I will have to think about that. I was thinking more along the lines of a bath and sleep."

"That sounds nice," Hermione said wistfully, glancing at the door to the bathroom longingly.

"I'll leave you to it. If you want or need anything, food included, just ask Winky." Draco reminded as he backed out of the room closing the door behind him, leaving her alone for the first time in ages. She briefly thought about asking Winky to bring her food but decided against it. Opting for a bath and sleep first.

Hermione peeled off her clothes as she made her way into the lovely bathroom and filled the Olympic sized marble bathtub with hot water and bubbles. Easing her tired body in, Hermione's mind began to whirl into action.

Even if she had a time turner it wouldn't be helpful. It could only go back 48 hours at the most. Maybe if she modified one… she shook her head. She would have to find the plans and build one. Her head snapped up as an idea overtook her mind. She had access to one of the most prestigious private libraries in the world, Malfoy's. If any time turner research survived, it would be in one of his properties. Not just because of the extensive collection but also because Lucius had been in Voldemort's inner circle. She would bet her wand hand that Tom Riddle had been searching for the very same thing she was. It was a place to start anyway. Malfoy library and Voldemort's personal effects. Now she would just have to put on her big girl knickers and forget that she needed to enter Malfoy Manor. Hermione was great at many things and one of them was compartmentalization. She wasn't finished with the war yet, there was no time to rest.

After bathing, she dragged her tired body to bed, not even taking the time to dress. She slid into the blankets with her towel still wrapped around her body and slid into the arms of Morpheus.

**HG**

Hermione woke bright and early, earlier than the dawn. She had meandered around the chateau...
hoping for a library, or even just an overflow room from the main branch. That was where Draco
found her, hours later wearing only sleeping shorts and a tank, sitting with her legs crisscrossed on
the floor with books scattered every which way. Her hair was a horror, a rat's nest of uncombed
curls, hastily pinned up with a single spell.

"Hermione? Everything okay?" Draco asked delicately as if she was a wild animal that he was trying
not to startle.

"Hmmmm?" she said distractedly, not hearing him at all. It was the response that Harry and Ron
always got when they bothered her in the library. Had it been them, they would have known
immediately to leave her be. But poor Draco didn't have such extensive experience. He wasn't used
to such behavior from anyone.

"Hermione?" He repeated louder and more insistently.

"What?" She snapped, glaring at him with two open books on her lap, her finger holding her place
on the page.

"I asked if you were okay! Benny was worried when he took your breakfast to your room and you
weren't there."

"Benny?"

"My house elf, and before you start lecturing me; I am not offering him clothes, pay, or vacation. I
think he would rise up and kill me just for the suggestion. He has served at the Chateau since before I
was born and I doubt he would ever leave."

Hermione scoffed, turning back to her books.

"Merlin, why are you so impossible to deal with today?" He muttered. "You aren't the only one who
lost family yesterday. Speaking of, we should go back and bury them."

"We didn't lose anyone, not yet, until I am forced to admit that traveling back in time is impossible I
will never consider them dead. You can't bury them because I will fix this. I will!" She set her jaw,
her eyes narrowed and fierce.

"We did lose them! Everyone we loved died yesterday and even if you save everyone's life by fixing
time, they still died and they deserve to be treated as if their lives and sacrifices matter. Even if you
change everything, they still died!" He argued just as passionately. "What if it takes us years to find a
way? Are you going to let their bodies rot where they lay?"

Hermione looked up into his face and stared open-mouthed. He was nothing like the boy she knew
from Hogwarts. This Malfoy cared about other people and he unabashedly showed it. Malfoy had
grown up, matured, and was a better person than she ever thought he would have been capable when
they attended Hogwarts together. Knowing that she really should stop comparing him to his younger
self, Hermione looked back at the book in her lap. He was right of course, those that fell during the
battle should be buried but she just couldn't do it. Not yet.

She felt a niggle of self-doubt and insecurity. What if she wasn't able to find a way to change
anything? What if she lived for the rest of her life, trapped in the Chateau with Draco, just the two of
them? She shuddered at the thought. She liked him well enough, not romantically, but in the same
way she liked Harry.

One week. That is what she would give herself to find a way to change the fate of the world. If she
couldn't go back in time by then, she would go with Draco and bury the dead. She wondered if the
House elves could preserve the battlefield for that long. It would be terrible to bury half-rotted corpses that no longer resembled who they were in life. She would call Winky later in the privacy of her room and ask if it was possible.

Hermione smiled grimly at Malfoy and cleared a spot next to her on the floor, patting it in silent invitation. It was Draco's turn to be confused as he slowly sank to the floor where she had indicated. She snorted, he probably didn't understand what an honor it was for her to invite anyone, let alone him to her study session. Harry and Ron would have been shocked. She only studied with them when they needed her help and that was a long time ago.

"I am trying to find all of the information I can on time travel, time turners, and anything else that could be used to manipulate time. But I don't want to go back a day or two. I want to go back seventeen years when Voldemort was destroyed the first time. If I take him out before he kills the Potters, everything will change."

"Focusing on changing time is the path that leads to madness, Granger. You know my father and grandfather had searched the whole world for what you are talking about and it can't be done."

"I won't stop until I make it possible."

"You will give up the rest of our life for this?" He asked incredulously.

"What have I to look forward to? Do you have something better to do with your life?" She challenged.

"Your friends wouldn't want you to waste your life on some impossible task. They would want you to find happiness."

"Harry had an impossible task that he successfully completed. If he could kill the darkest wizard of all time at the age of nineteen, I can do this. Even if I am eighty before I accomplish it."

"I will help you then." He whispered and twined his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. He seemed to draw comfort from holding her hand and she squeezed back, giving as much comfort as she took.

"You will?"

"I will have you know that my grades were right up next to yours." He said disdainfully. "Plus, it's not like I have anything better to do with my life. I doubt you would agree to replenish the wizarding world with my children."

"I tell you what, if we don't find anything by the time we are thirty, I will bear your children. Alright? Now that that is settled, we are searching for a way to send me seventeen years in the past."

"I agree to your terms. No children unless we are still stuck here at thirty." He grinned, no doubt amused at that way she completely brushed off the need to repopulate. "But, if we find a way, we will go together."

"If it is possible, fine."

"See, it's not so hard being my ally."

"When you aren't being your normal arrogant self."

"Hey!"
She chuckled at the insulted look on his face. They both broke down into giggles, their laughter was a little too high pitched to be merely mirth. It was slightly hysterical

"Well, if you want that research, we will have to go to the Manor."

"Yeah I figured but I was really hoping to avoid it."

"I'm sorry... I don't want to go either. I haven't been there since my father was ordered to murder mother and me." He looked down at their entwined hands and smoothed his thumb over her softer, smaller one. She sighed as he refused to meet her eyes. They both had scars.

"Benny," Malfoy summoned his personal elf and bid him pack them up and send everything to the Manor before joining them. "We will travel by floo and will stay there until we have thoroughly searched everywhere. Also, leave the breakfast on the table. We will eat now."

"Yes, Master." He bowed before popping out.

"After you." He murmured before standing and offering Hermione his hand. She looked at him curiously before taking it, allowing herself to be pulled up off the floor.

**HG**

Hermione was visibly trembling as she entered Malfoy Manor. It was surreal as if it wasn't actually happening. Draco was holding her, supporting her, as they walked slowly together through the place that held one of the most traumatizing things about the war for her and even more for Draco. His once safe-haven was defiled, filled with memories of him.

"What do you want to see first?" He asked her, not knowing whether she needed the rest or the busy work.

"The library." She choked out. Where else would she go to feel safe?

He nodded his head and together they wound through the many corridors and hallways that made up the labyrinthine path to the familial library. The pilgrimage seemed to take hours but in reality, it only took a few minutes. Forever, after all, could sometimes be just one moment.

As they approached, Draco, unwound his arms from around her body and stood before a set of huge double doors. With a small smile, he looked back at her over his shoulder, each hand on a curving handle.

"Close your eyes. No peeking!" He murmured, waiting until she complied before pushing the doors open in one sweeping movement. He grabbed her hand and pulled her through to stand in the center of the room. "Open your eyes."

Draco watched Hermione as her eyes went wide, awe forcing her jaw to land on the floor. Slowly she moved towards the shelves, running her fingers lightly over the exposed spines. She was radiant as she took in her surroundings, breathing deeply the smell of her personal ambrosia. Parchment in various stages of decay, ink, and leather were only some of the scents she knew she would smell in a batch of Armortentia. Her heart thudded rapidly, yearning and nostalgia seeping out of her every pore, memories of better times thrusting the images of her two best friends into the forefront of her mind. She nearly choked on it. Savagely, she pushed it away and focused only on Malfoy and his amazing library.

Hermione swirled on the balls of her feet quicker than he would have ever bet that she could move, and Draco's brows rose in question and surprise. She launched herself into his arms, wrapping them
around his neck and pressing an innocent kiss to his clean-shaven jaw. He smirked, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"See what you have been missing your whole life?" He joked both indicating the library and himself.

"This is amazing, Draco!" She breathed, ignoring his poor attempt at humor or flirting or whatever that was.

She was out of his arms as quick as she flung herself into them, leaving Draco dazed. She was like niffler who had caught sight of several pieces of treasure at once. Waving her wand, she summoned the books that she wanted to start with. Draco watched her for a moment longer before doing the same. They studied, side by side long into the night. Draco easily kept up with Hermione's intense study habits. Lucky for them, the house elves returned to the Manor to serve their new and kinder master. The food and drinks were replenished at regular intervals and both Hermione and Draco helped themselves, always with a grateful murmur to the listening elves.

**HG**

After two weeks of searching, they had to admit, that they had already seen everything that the library had to offer on the subject of time travel. Hermione grit her teeth as she decided to finally look through Voldemort's personal possessions, something that she had been putting off ever since Draco showed her the door to the room that Voldemort had used when they first arrived.

She stood in front of the door with a wrinkled nose, wishing that Draco would do this part but he had unequivocally refused. He said that if she wanted to look around, she would have to do it soon or he would torch the whole wing. There were too many bad memories concerning the evil bastard. Hermione had fewer personal memories of him and was therefore elected by Draco and the house elves to go through it. She was out-voted.

She slowly opened the door expecting any manner of unpleasant things to hit her but opened her eyes, one by one, as nothing happened. Her mouth dropped to the floor as she saw rare instruments, a first edition library of rare books, diagrams of complicated wand movements for creating spells, journals of all kinds, and surprisingly an old battered trunk with Slytherin's crest as a latch.

She slowly circled the room casting spells to reveal and dismantle deadly curses and enchantments that were woven into the objects he wished to protect. There was no doubt in Hermione's mind. Tom Riddle was truly brilliant, a gifted and powerful wizard. Too bad he was evil.

She searched the books first and was rewarded with several tomes full of in-depth theory about time travel. In fact, she found several journals that turned out to be step by step manuals on how to build and create time turners. If he had all of this at his fingertips, why wouldn't he employ their use? It's not like he would care about the consequences of traveling back in time.

It took her days more to scour the new resources before she stumbled upon the flaw in the theories. Apparently, there was a good reason why time turners could only go back twenty-four hours' tops. Time turners were only meant to relive moments without interacting with a person's past self. It causes a paradox, the time wizards called it time madness. It was a side effect of cerebral dislocation in time. A time turners' magic was what created the disease, not the time displacement. To go further back than that, caused wizards to revert mentally to the age they were at the point in time they traveled to. Any wizards that tried to travel beyond their conceptions died at the point of arrival, both present and future selves.

Hermione was sure she could improve the time turners to a point where this side effect would be non-existent, but only if she had several hundred years and a way to not die in the process of
experimentation. She frowned. She clearly would not be able to use this method.

With this in mind, Hermione began searching through Voldemort's private journals, positive that he had reached the same conclusion as she did. It surprised her that his personal thoughts drew her in like an obsession, forcing her to regret his life's choices and fully wish that she could have apprenticed under him.

It was this single-minded focus that allowed her to find exactly what she was looking for. It was in one of the journals from the time where he and his Knights of Walpurgis traveled the world.

**September 6th, 1947**

*We unintentionally stumbled into a village that treated us as if we carried the plague. They were clearly a primitive group of wizards living in the wilds of Africa. We had recently come down from an exquisite high as the last village we were in taught us how to fly. This village wasn't even on our radar or anyone's for that matter. They clearly don't want visitors. I have to know what they are hiding. A small group of elderly wizards brought us food. They wouldn't even allow us to wander around the huts. Their eyes followed us nervously. I am getting excited at the prospect of this challenge. There couldn't have been a better way to capture my attention than to try to keep me in the dark. I will have to have Abraxas create a distraction so that I can look around.*

**September 7th**

*The tribal elders have asked us to leave. Every attempt at subterfuge has come to naught. I don't know whether these wizards are just that good or my knights are incompetent. Their warriors surround our hut as we speak. I flattered and cajoled and yet they refuse to budge. They fear us more now than yesterday. It excites me.*

**September 8th**

*They watch me the most and they stopped feeding us. They want us to leave but we are good at what we do. They won't be able to outduel us. We dipped into the supplies that we always carry with us, enabling us to continue to eat like kings. I am determined to find out what they are keeping from us. The more they try to hide, the more I am intrigued. I burn with anticipation of discovery. Whatever they are hiding, I need to acquire it.*

**September 9th**

*I finally was able to search the village. What a disappointment. There is only one enclosure in the whole place that exudes magic. Whatever they are hiding must be in that hut. I hope to find out tomorrow.*

**September 10th**

*She goes by the name Smurg. She is an old woman with white hair and milky eyes that hosts a dormant magical parasite. In the crudest way, she is a seer but her most incredible function is even more fantastic. The parasite that had taken the woman, chooses a host from among the girls born the year its last host dies. It is an honor to be chosen, the girl is treated like a goddess. She is revered and for good reason. I walked into the hut alone and it was just the two of us as she stared at me with her blind eyes."

"You shouldn't have come." She said.

"I need to know, why are you so well protected?"
"They don't want me to be hunted. I am the last of my kind."

"What can you do that makes you so venerated?" My stomach clenched in anticipation.

"I can do many things but I am jealously guarded because nobody leaves my presence without either a seed or a date."

"What does that mean?"

"If I deem them worthy, I will give them a seed to sow in the world. It will help them in whatever endeavor that they chose. If they are not worthy, I give them the date of their death."

"What will you give me?"

"Two things. This advice; Remorse could save your life someday."

"And the other?"

"You will die on June 14th, 2000."

"I am not worthy in your eyes?"

"I have high standards."

"I am the standard in which all others are measured."

"For the world's sake, let's hope not."

It was clear that she was done talking to me. I was pronounced unworthy and dismissed. I couldn't see why they hid her. There is nothing of import here. Let them rot away in their tiny backwater village. Maybe I will come back when I take over the magical world. I wouldn't be unworthy then.

It took Hermione a while to absorb the entry and her mind whirled with the possibilities. Would it hurt anything to try? No, nothing could stop her at this point. She grabbed all of the maps and journals and luggered them to the dining room where Draco was eating lunch. She plopped them onto the table with a loud smack.

"What's this?" He asked, not pausing from eating his lunch.

"I have something but it may be a long shot. Also, I will have to travel to Africa."

"Okay. When do we leave?" He didn't even look up at her.

"As soon as we are packed."

"Benny!"

"Yes, Master?"

"Pack Hermione and I for an extended travel in Africa. I want to leave tonight."

"Yes, Master."

"You're not even going to ask me what I found?" Hermione asked him curiously as she sat in the chair next to him at the table. She pushed the journal and documents across the table, clearing a small space in which to eat. Winky popped in and set a plate in front of her and draped Hermione's napkin
across her lap, before popping out again.

"You can fill me in while you eat. You are hungry, aren't you?" He smirked. Raising his glass of water to his lips, he took a sip before turning his attention to her findings.

*Alice: How long is forever?

White Rabbit: Sometimes, just one second

- *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
Chapter Two

Africa was amazing. It was large and open, with so many different landscapes to see. The jungles and the savannah were her favorites. The people were colorful and kind, with cultures that were so different from everything she was used to. Magic was used in ways she never considered before. She could really see what the appeal of a world travel would be to a young powerful wizard. In a different world, perhaps it would have been something she would have done herself.

When they finally approached the village on foot after nearly a month of travel, Draco and Hermione were immensely excited albeit exhausted. They walked in the midst of their village and were immediately surrounded by warrior wizards. It was one of the possible scenarios they anticipated while on their journey. After she recounted Voldemort's experience, they had leaned towards the village casting first and asking questions later. Both were happily surprised they weren't killed on sight. Something that was also on their possibility of outcome list.

Hermione and Draco had agreed that their best chance of seeing The Smurg was by not occluding or acting suspicious or secretive in any way. With that in mind, they walked into the village, minds open and their wands safely tucked in their packs. Some would call that vulnerable or foolish, but Hermione needed to see the Smurg. If she couldn't, was there really any point in living?

Immediately, they were brought to a crude hut that could only boast the barest of walls and a thatched roof. It was not her idea of comfort, but she guessed that was the point. At least they anticipated on letting the two of them leave alive. If staying in a bare hut for a while was the price to pay to be there and try to convince the villagers that they were worthy enough to speak with the Smurg, then who was she to disparage their accommodations?

Hermione sat on the edge of a straw pallet and pulled her small beaded bag onto her lap. Draco sat heavily next to her, watching as she drew out the long thin box that they had brought as a gift to bribe their way into the Smurg's presence.

"When do you think would be a good time to give them the gift?" Hermione mused out loud. She couldn't have asked a better person for gift giving advice as Draco had an extensive etiquette upbringing enforced by his mother, the socialite and once debutante.

"Now, before they kill us. A gift, it may be, but don't forget this is a bribe." He smirked, looking so much like the old Draco Malfoy that Hermione was thrown back to their third year to the moment where her fist landed on his smarmy face and couldn't help but smirk in return as she remembered the way he collapsed like a card house after being disturbed by a gust of wind. Hermione focused once more on what was in front of her and rolled her eyes, knowing that though he learned etiquette from his mother, his bribery experience was completely his father's doing.

"I guess now is as good a time as any," She muttered and stood, turning to look at Draco as he laid out on the straw cot and closed his eyes. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"I think you can handle giving a gift all on your own,"

"They might kill me on sight just because of what it is."

"You are right," He said, sitting up and concern wrinkling his brow, "don't forget to ward the door on your way out," he laid back down, that infuriating smirk growing the longer she fumed silently,
hovering over his seemingly relaxed body. He was damn lucky that she was working on learning restraint in hexing her allies. Namely him.

Hermione pivoted on the balls of her feet and walked out of the hut. She had taken a mere three steps before she was immediately surrounded again.

"We have brought a gift for the Smurg," She said, holding up the small wooden box. When no one moved, she removed the lid and showed them the innocent length of wood that sat inside on a bed of velvet. A sudden intake of breath from the elders was her only indication that they recognized the unbroken and unaligned Elder Wand.

A ripple of unease swept through the villagers as the elders moved as if one to box her in against the small hut.

"How do you know about the Smurg?" a man of dark skin and shockingly white kinky hair muttered dangerously, never taking his eyes off of the deadly wand that she offered them.

"My best friend defeated Tom Riddle and our losses were incredibly high. It was he who won the allegiance of the wand and died of his injuries shortly after, leaving the wand without a master.

After the battle, there were few wizards living and I know given the chance, I could make things better for everyone. I began my research into time travel. After days of scouring through books, I was desperate and ended up going through Tom Riddle's personal items. He kept a journal of his travels as a young man and I read about his stop here. I was hoping the Smurg could help us."

"She isn't a fortune teller to fix your life. Her services are for the betterment of all."

"Would you ask her if she would see us? Please?" Hermione ignored his previous comment and remained dogged

"I can promise no more than that. If she does not wish to meet you, you both will leave."

"Alright." Hermione agreed and went back into the hut where Draco was already spread out on his straw cot snoring. She snorted. He wouldn't have lasted five minutes on the hunt for Horcruxes.

She laid down to wait, hoping that the Smurg would agree to meet them. Hermione really didn't know what she would do if they were turned away. And before she knew it, her lids weighed heavily and it was longer times between each time she blinked them open.

She was awoken by rough hands that shook her vigorously. She gasped as she reflexively reached for her wand and only hit a solid wall of muscle.

"She summons you." A deep voice murmured.

They walked as a group towards the center hut. Hermione could feel the shimmer of spells gliding over her skin as she passed through the doorway and there the warriors stayed standing guard just inside the wards. They silently pushed her through the doorway and shut the door behind her.

Hermione was left alone in the dead of night, in a dark and warded hut, in the center of the village with no way to defend herself. Fear coiled in her stomach as she wondered if Voldemort's journals were wrong. Perhaps the parasite needed new hosts to suck the life out of. Maybe it just told him something to make him go away. But the one thought that was niggling at the back of her mind was the date that the Smurg had given him as the date of his death was accurate.

"Come closer." A high girlish voice beckoned.
"I don't know the way. It's too dark." Hermione said.

A small ball of light appeared in the palm of the hand of a very young child. She was only five or six years old. Her long white hair hung loosely to her shoulder blades as her milky white eyes focused on Hermione's approaching form.

Hermione was horrified, and her hand covered her mouth.

"Do not mourn for me. I may not be a normal child, but I have the lives of a thousand Smurgs in my head. I have never just been a child. I have always been the chosen. I am blessed." The child said, voice devoid of emotion.

"I lost my childlike innocence early and I will always mourn the loss of the same in any other." Hermione stood in front of the girl who was seated on a throne made of a living tree that had been twisted as it grew into the shape of a grand and imposing living throne.

"I was told that you knew of me from a journal of Tom Riddle's."

"Yes."

"He was a blight on the world but even blights are needed to strengthen future crops and the will of man. I know why you are here. I don't think it would do any good to change this."

"If I had the chance, I could change things for the better."

"If you have the chance you may lose your hard-won victory."

"This was no victory."

"For the whole world, it was."

"Not for my world."

"No, I suppose it wasn't, but it could have been a lot worse. It almost was."

"What does that mean?"

"If your blond companion had embraced his familial role, Voldemort would have triumphed."

"Good thing he didn't then."

"The world is very fortunate."

"Tom's journal said that everyone leaves either with a curse or a blessing. What will I leave with?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If I send you back, can you put all of your prejudice aside?"

Hermione was indignant. She was not the prejudiced one, but after a second of reflection, she thought about it. If she went back in time, those horrible things wouldn't have happened yet. Could she set all of that aside and treat her enemies as if she was meeting them for the first time? Could she give them all a second chance?
"I would try very hard." Hermione finally said.

The Smurg smiled in approval.

"If you had said yes, you would have been unworthy because of your lie. If you would have said no, you would have been unworthy because of your inability to do the right thing. You are worthy of my blessing."

The Smurg smiled and reached out a fist. Hermione held her hand flat, palm up as the little girl dropped three seeds into Hermione's hand.

"Plant them in a magical garden and watch it grow. When the seedling glows blue, you must give it a blood sacrifice. If it accepts your offering, it will bear a single piece of fruit in three days. This first fruit will have the magic in it that you seek. The barren tree left behind will eventually produce a Smurg of its own. Once the tree has its blood sacrifice, it will not be able to be undone. Do you accept the price of your blessing?"

"The Smurg will select a host among the available women?"

"The Smurg will choose its host from the family that cares for the garden it resides in. A Smurg will always choose a child."

"What would happen if I don't offer the tree a blood sacrifice?"

"It would become an ever-bearing pomegranate tree that would sprout fruit in even the harshest winters."

"But it would never become a Smurg."

"Correct."

"Thank you for your blessing. I hope you achieve great longevity."

The little girl nodded her head with a smile and dropped the ball of light, a clear dismissal from the hut. Hermione turned and walked out blindly, heavily laden with moral conundrums. Would going back in time be a good enough reason to condemn a line of girls into hosting a powerful parasite? Hermione couldn't help thinking that it wasn't very much like a blessing at all.

Hermione gently wrapped the seeds in a silk scarf that she brought along and put it in her beaded bag. The warriors stood like sentinels around the hut only watching Hermione as she slowly made her way back to the hut that they village had given her and Draco. Once there, she crawled back onto the straw and fell asleep, hoping that her unconscious mind would give her an answer. On one hand, she could go back in time, on the other hand, she would be giving over the lives of countless girls to do it. If she went through with it, would she be any better than Voldemort?

When Hermione woke up the next morning, Draco was gone. She poked her head out of the hut and was greeted with bowls and dishes of various food, busy women and men going about their day, and children running about, freely playing together as good friends do.

Hermione joined the gathering with a smile and watched with interest, the employment of many of the people, noticing that they bowed their head and called her 'Muumba' as she passed. She smiled not knowing what it meant but taking social cues, she assumed it was something positive. She shrugged and moved on, hoping she would see Draco soon.

A little girl, the same age as the Smurg ran up to her and tugged on Hermione's shirt.
"They are waiting for you, Muumba."

"Who is?"

"Your companion and the Elders. Come."

"What does Muumba mean?" Hermione asked curiously.

"The one in the beginning, the creator."

Hermione sputtered in shock.

"Why are they calling me the creator?"

"You will create the new Smurg and ours will no longer be alone. They will be connected."

"In what way?"

"The seeds are of the tree and the trees are special. Once, long ago, there were whole forests of trees and they were all connected. Not anymore. Ours is the last." She said sadly.

"Then are all Smurg's connected?"

"Yes. The more there are, the stronger they are, the more they can do for the world."

"But one person has to give up her whole life for it. Why are the hosts always girls?"

"The chosen are gifted extremely long lives; the only sacrifice is their innocence. They grow knowing the best and worst of the world. Girls are the bearers of life, so are the Smurg's."

"Their only sacrifice…" Hermione spat. "Innocence should not be an acceptable sacrifice."

"She gains much and only one of us is chosen. The rest of us are blessed to protect her. She lives a satisfying life."

"But is she happy?"

"What is happiness? Happiness is not the same for everyone and is not the same thing throughout one's life."

"How did you become so wise in your young life?"

"We are taught the lessons of the tree. The Smurg sings the songs of a time where they were many. We learn from her."

They reached the small enclosure that the little girl gestured to, bidding Hermione to enter.

"Aren't you coming too?" Hermione asked the little girl.

"Only the blessed may enter here."

"And you are not blessed?"

"Not everyone can be worthy."

"But you protect her."
"We are still human, and we have our own fears and vices. Very few are actually worthy. We celebrate because two have come to us. The Muumba and the Mlinzi."

"What is the Mlinzi?"

"He is the protector."

"The protector of the Smurg? Will he be forced to stay?"

"He will sire daughters who will host the new Smurg. His tribe will protect her. He will protect the tree. The Smurg has already seen it."

"I don't believe in prophecy."

"Neither do we."

"What does that even mean?" Hermione asked, frustrated.

The little girl walked away with an enigmatic little smile. Hermione frowned as she watched the dark-skinned child rejoin her playmates before turning around and walking into the hut. Draco was sitting in a circle with five other people. Their ages varied from ancient to child. Draco smirked, enjoying Hermione's confusion. He patted the ground next to him in the same manner that she had that day in his library, his eyes danced with humor.

"Come in Granger, we were just about to begin."

"Begin what?"

"Breakfast."

"Right."

The moment she sat down, two women joined the group carrying bowls and flasks filled with food and drink.

Their day went by fast, the whole village was welcoming and celebratory. It wasn't often that they entertained guests and even less when those guests were blessed. It was a lovely day spent before they left in the morning.

Their trip back to Malfoy Manor was much quicker and easier. Since they had already visited several waypoints, they were able to apparate back to Wiltshire in four short bursts. Tanzania to Algeria, Algeria to Spain, Spain to France, and France to Wiltshire.

**HG**

Hermione and Draco were in the small sitting room off of the conservatory, each laying on a couch on opposite sides of each other.

"What did she tell you?" Hermione asked.

"She asked me if I had to do it all over again would I make the same decision to flee the Manor."

"What did you say?"

"I told her I wasn't sure. I don't think my father would have been forced to kill me. The Dark Lord was fond of forcing his followers into doing things they didn't want to do to test their loyalty. Often
"The Smurg likes indecisive people." She snorted.

"Mmm." He agreed.

"She gave me seeds but if I use them to go back in time, it will create a new Smurg. I don't think I can condemn innocent children to that fate."

"Did she tell you why she looks the way she does and why she is blind?"

"It's part of being the host for the Smurg, right?"

"No. She was born blind and the hair was an abnormality. She is actually the great niece of the previous Smurg. Did you know that the last Smurg wasn't born blind? They claimed she was one of the happiest people they had ever met."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to show you that you are as blind about the Smurg as you are about House-elves. You are pushing your thoughts and feelings onto them without considering what makes them happy. Your happiness is not the same as theirs."

Hermione stared at him in shock. That was basically what the little girl in the village had told her.

"So, you would be okay with having your daughter be the host of a new Smurg."

"Sure, it's a great honor."

"Did she give you seeds?"

"No, she told me who my future wife would be and that she would give me five children, three of them, girls."

"What's her name?"

"Ginevra Weasley."

Hermione drew in a great breath and held it, desperately trying to hold back a sob. With an angry release, she narrowed her gaze.

"Ginny would never in a million years choose you over Harry,"

"If you go back, things will change, she will marry me. That is what the Smurg said."

"If I go, Ginny lives to marry you?"

"Yes. I don't know how or why but that is what was promised."

"How did you take that, being told you would marry a Weasley?" Hermione snickered.

"Relieved and mildly intrigued."

They chuckled for a moment. Draco rolled onto his side, a hand under his head as a pillow.
"If you stay, this is what the rest of our life will look like. You're decent Granger but I would only marry you out of duress. We would be like siblings and would fight all the time. We would waste our lives searching for a way to go back in time without the severe consequences of the time turners. I don't think that is possible. So, tell me, is your life so great here with me that you can't let me go?"

"This is not about you, Malfoy. This is about your children and how they deserve a proper childhood."

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

"But we cannot forget the man for the crowd."

"I see we are at an impasse." He said flopping on his back.

"I don't even know if I can control the year. What if I end up in the founders' era?"

"I think it will take you where you can do the most good."

"You have a lot of faith in this. Why?"

"Do you know what the tree portion of the Smurg is called?"

She shook her head.

"It is an Ent. They used to be all over the world. My father used to tell me stories about the Ents when I was a kid. I don't know how accurate they are, but I used to love them."

"Don't Ent's walk?"

"The Smurg walks not the Ent. Ent's are rooted to the ground. They are trees for goodness sake. Merlin, Granger!" He huffed as if he had to explain something obvious that a two-year-old would know. She stayed quiet, lips thinning in silent disapproval thinking of all the Tolkienesque dreams that were now shattered. "What I am trying to say is that this doesn't seem so out of the ordinary for me. I grew up in a world of magic. It's all I've ever known, and magic is fluid and unpredictable. Not everything can be explained or reasoned out. Some things just are. Do you reason out the cause and effects of jumping into a lake? Your body oils could kill the ecosystem, but you go swimming anyway."

"I can either choose to jump or to stand still."

"Exactly."

"What would you do?"

"Me? I would jump."

**HGHG**

Hermione stood on a slight rise in the west gardens of Malfoy Manor. A unicorn watched from the field on the other side of the low hedge, a dazzling white among the sea of green. Hermione looked down at the silk cloth she clutched in her hand. It was time to make a decision. Was she going to sacrifice the lives of generations of Malfoy girls to come and go into the past, or was she going to plant a tree that will bear fruit year-round and stay to have Draco's children?

She unfolded the material and stared at the seeds. Guilt twisted in her stomach, her decision was made days ago when she talked to Malfoy about it in the conservatory. The only problem was that
she just wasn't prepared to knowingly sacrifice someone else so that she could go back in time. She would gladly lay down her own life for her friends but for her to offer up another's life? It was a hard pill to swallow.

Gritting her teeth, Hermione gently poked the seeds into the hole that Draco had dug for her and covered it before sitting on the ground to wait. Malfoy brought her a tray of sandwiches and a thermos of tea after the first hour.

"Thanks." She murmured, digging into the first sandwich.

They sat silently chewing and watching in bemusement as the seeds sprouted at an accelerated pace. The tiny seedling grew fast. It wasn't long before a sapling stood where before it was merely a covered hole.

It pulsed with a strong blue iridescence that shone from the very core of the tree. Hermione took a deep breath, this was it. She was going to do it.

"Diffindo," Hermione muttered, slicing her hand open before cupping the welling blood. The pulse seemed to feel her blood and small wispy tendrils reached out from its trunk. The delicate lines snaked around her wrist and writhed just above her exposed wound. It was as if it were waiting for her consent. Hermione rubbed the soft bark, coating it with her blood.

"I'm sorry, so sorry." She muttered. Not to the tree, to it, she was bestowing life, but to the hosts that haven't even been born yet.

Once the blue light faded she pulled her hand back and let the remaining drops of blood drip from her fingertips, splashing onto the grass.

Malfoy grabbed her hand, healed and cleaned it, before letting it drop back to her side.

"All we have to do now is wait." He said. She nodded. She had three days to get her shit together.

**HGHG**

The first thing that Malfoy insisted on was visiting Gringotts, but Hermione was understandably hesitant. She had stolen something from one of the vaults that they protected. She was expecting to be murdered the moment she crossed the threshold. He waved away her concerns with a ringing laugh.

"Look, Granger, I promise that they won't attack you."

In the end, he won, and Hermione was now standing in a back office of one of the head goblins, with Malfoy lounging arrogantly in one of the seats by the desk.

"We don't know what time she will arrive in, but she needs to have access to funds."

"Almost all of her assets were seized as a fine for her theft, as was quite a bit of the Potter wealth. Upon the death of Harry James Potter, Hermione Jean Granger acquired the remaining Potter and Black fortunes. The remaining totaling five million galleons, various jewels, and artifacts that are detailed in full on this list." The Goblin handed over a thick ream of paper.

Malfoy plucked it out of her hand and began studying her assets.

"What I am asking is, is it possible to make this available to her at any time? In any time?"
"Not these treasures in particular but we have ancient vaults with no living relatives to claim them. We would choose a familial vault that is worth the same as her current vault. We would only need to set the inclusion wards. Once that is done, it won't matter when she comes, just that she does first thing. The Goblins of the time will give you no trouble. We have policies in place."

"And the fee?"

"A Goblin-made artifact that would be signed over to me specifically." A greedy glint entered his eye.

"Only if everything is changed over first."

"Alright."

"I also wish to bequeath the contents of vault thirty-four to Miss Hermione Jean Granger."

Surprise colored the faces of the other two.

"It is my wish to see Granger well taken care of in her endeavor." Malfoy finished.

"Very well."

With little more discussion, the paperwork was signed, and Hermione was the proud owner of Vault Seven. The vault of the lost house of Slytherin.

They rode the deathtrap that the goblins affectionately called the cart to the lowest and oldest section of Gringotts. The minecart flipped and rolled and spun, going fast and slow at different intervals making Hermione quite ill. By the time they reached vault seven, Hermione was seriously considering kissing the ground.

Her eyes went wide as she looked at the large red chimera guarding the entrance. The goblin rang a tiny high-pitched bell that made the chimera cringe away from the trio.

Using his gnarled finger, the goblin turned over the vault to Hermione, her blood and magical signature now marking it as hers. The door melted away as she stood staring at a great amassment of treasure.

"Everything has been cataloged and put on a new list that I will send to you." The goblin said looking at Malfoy.

Malfoy nodded before turning to look into the newly opened vault.

He looked just as entranced as Hermione did as they studied rare tomes, wands, jewels the size of eggs, mounds and mounds of galleons, and other oddities.

"You are a very wealthy witch," Draco mumbled, running his fingers over the neglected leather spines of the books.

Hermione scooped up some of the galleons and retreated. She had to keep reminding herself that she was able to access this at any time.

Once they were back up to the main lobby, the Goblin stopped them and pulled Hermione close enough so that the other goblins wouldn't be able to hear what he said.

"You adopted the name Slytherin to get that vault. Do not forget that. It is a very powerful name with many advantages and consequences. Good luck Miss Slytherin and don't break into any more
Hermione stood in shock. It was a perverse kind of irony. Malfoy shook his head muttering unintelligibly under his breath.

"Well, you won't have to convince anyone of your blood status." He whispered to her as they stepped out onto the deserted street. Diagon Ally was a caricature of what it used to be. Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes stood abandoned, the bright purple paint starting to peel on the north face of the building.

Hermione spent the next day and a half packing, unpacking, and repacking everything she planned on taking with her. She exchanged the small beaded bag for a newer yet identical one that Malfoy found among his mother's possessions. She perfected the undetectable extension charm and with Malfoy's help, she turned the whole thing into organized chaos. By the time the small pomegranate from the tree was ready to be eaten, Hermione was overprepared.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being so patient with me! The move is complete and we are finally in the new house. It will be nice to get back to some normalcy.

Chapter Three

Hermione and Malfoy stood in front of the large tree that stood as a sentinel on the slight rise in the Malfoy gardens. She took a deep breath and plucked the sole pomegranate from the lower branches, letting the firm fruit roll between her hands.

"Wish me luck." She whispered.

"If anyone can save us all, it would be you, Hermione."

With a nod, she cracked open the fruit and gathered a small handful of the juice plumped seeds and brought them to her mouth and chewed, savoring the tart sweetness and hoping that she would travel to a time that would enable her to save everyone she loved. As she swallowed, a wave of dizziness engulfed her, and she fell to her knees, leaning her forehead against the smooth cool bark of the tree.

'This is a bad idea' she thought and turned, reaching out for Malfoy in a blind panic. Her desperate hands met air despite him reaching for her too. One minute he was there, just as panicked as she was and the next, he was gone, replaced by nothing and everything. Things that have been and things that one day would be. The life that she knew was gone. Only the unknown abyss of fluid time stood before her and threatened to drown her in its infinite weight.

As time flowed, Hermione watched as if she was the tree, knowledge poured into her, allowing her to understand what she was seeing. Thousands of scenes flashed past at lightning speed.

A much older Ginny caressed the trunk of the tree holding the hand of a little girl with grey eyes, red hair, and a knowing smile on the tiny rosy lips. Lucius as a boy, his back resting against her as he sketched the Manor. Abraxas Malfoy with his hands inside the robe of a pretty witch who was pressed against Hermione's tree-like body. Septimus Malfoy who stood still, staring open-mouthed at her, as she suddenly separated the tree, having been effectively spit out.

The abrupt way she was expelled from the tree made her even dizzier than she already was. How could it be possible that she merged with the conscious of the tree? She struggled to come back to herself, to separate from the living conscious of the tree, and reconcile to only being Hermione Granger, once more. If she had experienced even a tiny portion of what the Smurg experienced, she now thought of the beings with a greater respect. It was no easy thing to be connected to something so overwhelmingly powerful and inhuman.

"Who are you?" Septimus asked. He was shorter than Draco, but the hair was the same. She smirked because she couldn't imagine any Malfoy heir without it. His bright blue eyes surprised her though, having always associated the Malfoy blond with steel grey eyes. In fact, his eyes reminded her of Ron.
"Hermione Slytherin." She muttered trying to clear her head from the massive amount of sensory input the tree had forced on her. "What year is it?"

He looked at her like she was a dangerous beast about to spring and said, "1925."

"Merlin!" She gasped. So much for going back ten years. She was in the roaring twenties.

Hermione ignored Septimus and started to walk down the rise heading away from the Manor. Never did she plan on stepping a single foot in that monstrosity again and that would be too soon.

"Wait! Where are you going? My father is going to hear about this!" He screeched in a nasally, decidedly feminine voice. Hermione giggled, ridiculously pleased that not every Malfoy ancestor looked like a walking wet dream.

"Good. Have fun with that." She wiggled her fingers before apparating to Diagon Alley. With a swift flick of her wand, she transfigured her robe into something she had seen in Narcissa's vintage collection. A slim black timeless number that was entirely respectable and incredibly flattering. She could use all the allies she could get and clothing seemed to matter to the pureblooded faction. There was no reason to alienate anyone because of how she was dressed. She had come much too far for that. Plus, Malfoy didn't have to include the overwhelming snobbery of the old families in his crash course of what she needed to know. She learned that very early on.

Hermione felt exactly as she felt that first year that she shopped in Diagon Alley- awed and slightly out of place. Happy people milled around her, streaming in and out of busy stores. The shops were well stocked and hung with gleaming posters of smiling witches and wizards. Diagon Alley was brilliant, gleaming, and she looked around in astonishment. The Alley from her time looked dead in comparison. Every storefront was decked out. Every store full of patrons. Children still flocked to Fortescue's and the apothecary was so full the line wove down the lane. This was Diagon Alley in its heyday and Hermione was humbled that she was able to see it, the way it was meant to be. The wizarding shopping district without the influence of two civil wars.

Hermione strolled down the lane, making her way slowly but surely to Gringotts and tried to hide the fact that her heart was racing, and that she was starting to sweat. No one stopped her or attempted to converse, she was an outsider for now, but Draco had assured her that would only last as long as her trip to the bank where she would loudly proclaim her heritage. Once the Goblins accepted her, so too would the wizarding world. Wizards trusted Goblins in housing their gold and making sure that the proper bloodlines received their vaults after their demise. Goblins seemed to have an uncanny knack for inheritance laws.

Goblins stood on either side of the doorway into the bank and watched her with their black beady eyes. Did they know that she stole from these walls? Could they tell that she was one of four people that could successfully lay claim to that feat? Was there a way for past, present, and future goblins to correspond? Was she going to die a painful death after she walked through those silver inscribed doors, warning thieves away? Now that she didn't have Malfoy standing next to her, she wasn't so sure.

Refusing to break her stride, Hermione ignored the Goblins that stood sentry and stepped into the main atrium of the bank, a great marbled monstrosity that was overlaid with gold-leaf and treasures untold. She would find out soon enough if her mission was to end before it even began.

"How can I help you?" a very young Griphook asked from behind the first counter. Hermione smiled widely, glad to know someone, even if he didn't yet know her.

Slowly, she pulled a golden key from her robe pocket and in a clear voice that carried through the
room and echoed, she said, "I would like to access my family vault."

"And you are?"

"Hermione Slytherin." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw half-dozen men stop dead. The hunger nearly radiated off of them as they mentally conspired to trap her in matrimony to one relation or another. The Slytherin fortune was renowned, after all, and would make a sizeable addition to any of the pureblooded familial vaults.

It was exactly the reaction she was hoping for.

According to Draco, there was no better protection from the blood feudists than to be considered a part of the eligible prospects for marriage. She just hoped that Draco was over exaggerating the lengths to which he said the paterfamilias would descend to trap her. She had no interest in marriage or politics. She was here for one reason and one reason alone. Tom Marvolo Riddle. But, having the old families on her side would give her access to any resource she could possibly need.

Griphook's eyes narrowed as he took the key from her fingers.

"Right this way, Lady Slytherin."

She followed him out of the atrium and into the cart, holding on tight. Her jaw and eyelids clamped shut. Her stomach rolled and heaved with each twist and she was convinced that even if she did this every day for the rest of her life, she would never get used to it. The cart shuddered to a stop and Hermione climbed out, her face an unflattering shade of green. The chimera reared as they walked closer, caught between the desire to eat them and shrink away from the possibility of cruel biting whips held by unforgiving Goblins.

In the end, the chimera cowered against the solid rock of the vault face, far enough from the entrance to secure the safety of the owner of said vault. The moment Hermione's magic reached out to the vault door, it melted away, leaving the mound of treasure bared to their eyes.

"This has to be the work of a Goblin," Griphook whispered to himself.

Hermione chuckled and patted his shoulder before entering the vault and grabbing another bag of gold to add to her beaded bag. Briefly, she looked around at all the treasures that had been hidden in the sealed vault for hundreds of years and wished she had the time to go through it all. Once her mission was completed satisfactorily, she would spend days down there, cataloging the whole.

When she climbed back into the cart with Griphook, he was moving a large metal disk between his fingers, staring at it so hard, she thought it would combust from the intensity.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

Without looking at her, he slid it into his trouser pocket and said, "just a little oddity that was given to me for services rendered."

"Something from the Malfoy vaults that somehow still sits there today and yet is impossibly in your hands?" she asked slyly.

"Indeed, Lady Slytherin. Indeed."

The cart ride back to the atrium was just as horrid as she remembered and tried to hide how sick it made her, knowing that by now, there would be influential people waiting to catch a glimpse of the Slytherin heir. People that she may need in the future and people she had every intention of
befriending, such as the Black family. She owed it to Harry to make sure that Sirius when he was born, had a better life than the one he lived.

"A bit of advice," Griphook muttered to her before opening the doors to the lobby. Hermione turned to him and raised her brows. "Whatever you are doing here, in this time, you are the name you took. Forget who and what you used to be. Forget where you came from. Forget the future. This is your time now and you can never go back, especially if you came here the way I suspect you have. Live this life as if it is your first and last. You aren't changing the future. You are living in the present."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"If you don't, you'll go mad." They stared at each other for several minutes until Hermione nodded and Griphook led her back into the lobby. She smiled woodenly as she left, his advice rolling around her head. She could never in a million years forget where she came from or what that life was like. It molded her, shaped her into the person she was. That life is the entire reason she was here and nothing he could say would change it.

Whispers followed her back through the alley, but no one was brave enough to approach her, yet. And that suited her because she wasn't in the mood to make nice. She was alone and unsure and scared but not without resources. There were people she could and would reach out to, namely, Albus Dumbledore.

The Leaky Cauldron was as it ever will be, although perhaps a bit cleaner.

"Can I help ye?" The young barman asked. Hermione smiled at Tom, remembering how kind he always was to her as a girl.

"I need to let a room. Do you have one available?"

"Sure do! How long are ye stayin' wi' us?" He asked as he handed over an ancient looking iron skeleton key with the number 7 on the leather tag.

"I don't know yet."

"Not a problem! Take as long as ye need."

"Thank you," she smiled and walked up the stairs, heading for privacy at last.

Once she opened the door, she looked around and smiled. It was the same, exactly the same as it was when she last stayed at the inn, but the furniture was newer and cleaner. Quietly she shut the door and sat on the bed, letting everything catch up with her. She was in 1925. That was one year before Tom Riddle would be born. Why would the Smurg bring her here? What difference would one year make? Was she supposed to prevent Tom from being born?

Griphook's advice flooded her brain. Forget her old life. Her promise to the Smurg, to try and treat the people who hurt her better than they deserved. As if they never even met. Promises to Malfoy and Harry's dead body and everyone who took a curse for Harry or Ron or her. The promise to make a better world for those that she loved.

To try and treat her enemies as if they never even met.

That meant that she couldn't kill Tom. Not without provocation. Provocation in this time anyway. Griphook was right. Malfoy was right. She couldn't make things right for the people she loved by destroying their enemies on sight. She had promised to try. It was the only reason the Smurg had granted her request and she would do everything in her power to honor the spirit in which it was
given.

What would be the best thing to do? Should she put down roots and adopt Tom? Should she find Merope and help her now? Hermione needed an ally. Whatever she chose to do, she would need help and who better to be on her side then Albus Dumbledore?

Knowing that he was now a transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts, Hermione quickly pulled her beaded bag on her lap.

"Accio ink. Accio parchment." The moment they touched her hands she laid them out on the small table next to her bed and began to write.

Professor Dumbledore,

Allow me to introduce myself, I am Hermione Slytherin. It would be a pleasure to meet you in person and I imagine you would have many questions for me. Please let me know your earliest convenience.

Hermione J. G. Slytherin

Hermione left the room and walked to the owl order services and sent the letter via one of the mail owls for hire. At least this hadn't changed from what she knew.

She slowly walked back to the Leaky, smiling at everyone she passed. Everything reminded her of them, Harry and Ron. Bittersweet hope swirled around in her stomach. If she had any say, they would live great lives and never be exposed to the blood war that stole their childhoods and lives. They would just have to do it without her. She wasn't sure what the repercussions of time travel would be on her own young self, but she had a horrible suspicion that she would no longer exist in her normal time. But all of these sacrifices would be worth it in the end. What was her sacrifice compared to theirs? They all died. She was not dead, she was merely living another life. Surviving, was at times, its own hell.

Hermione walked into the Leaky and stopped dead in the doorway, causing an elder witch to bump into her and start complaining about the abhorrent youth of the day and their declining manners as if every generation prior to hers hadn't said the exact same thing.

"Sorry," Hermione mumbled distractedly before moving out of the way, skulking to the back of the pub to lean against the wooden wall and observe the group of six young men who clustered around a large table off to the side. The scene pulled her in and she was incapable of pulling herself away. Though they looked slightly different than their progeny, she could place them anywhere. Hermione desperately wished to join them.

"I'm telling you Charlus, her eyes were glued on you all night long. I've heard your arguments, but I think you are wrong. I swear on Merlin's saggy y fronts that Dorea Black was checking you out!" Allister Moody announced. He was just a boy, no scars or missing flesh in sight, but most disconcerting of all was the look of him with two natural blue eyes.

"Moody, you are out of your mind if you think a Slytherin girl is interested in a Gryffindor." Charlus Potter. It had to be. The resemblance to Harry and James was uncanny, except he had the most beautiful ocean green eyes she had ever seen. Their eyes met across the room, and he smirked at her. She immediately turned away, having been caught, moving around the room to a different location so as not to miss the conversation.

"Ha! Go say hello to her next time and I bet 5 galleons that she blushes no matter what you say to
her,” Moody said, oblivious to his friend's distraction.

"I second that bet!” Another young man said, raising his pint and clanking the tankard together against Moody's. Hermione's stomach twisted with longing. That could have been her and Harry and Ron without the war. Charlus got up muttering something about the loo but the conversation went on without him.

"He wasn't the only one attracting attention now was he Longbottom? That Ravenclaw girl has been dogging you for weeks now. What was her name? Augusta?” Moody laughed at the red face of the boy who had seconded the bet while teasing Potter who was now choking over his drink while another boy smacked his back with force.

"Lost?” a voice whispered in her ear. She knew that voice. It was a voice that she worked hard at never forgetting. Harry.

She whipped around and stared as if she were a deer caught in headlights.

"Why else would a lovely unknown woman eavesdrop of a group of mates out on the town?” he continued.

"I-I," she stammered.

"Yes?” he leaned closer, resting his forearm against the wall above her head.

"You look just like my brother. He…” Harry was as good as her brother and no one would catch her in her lie anyway. "he died six months ago."

"Oh,” He said, dropping his arm and stepping back a bit. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I didn't mean to intrude. I just…"

"No, it's okay. I'm Charlus Potter and you are?"

"Hermione. Hermione Slytherin."

"Slytherin as in the founder of Hogwarts?"

"Yeah,"

"Wow,"

"Yeah."

"Don't you have some family code that prevents you from mingling with Gryffindor's?"

"That would be stupid."

He smiled, putting his arm back up on the wall. "Yeah. It would be. Join us."

"I can't," She said obviously disappointed in her own choice. "I'm waiting for an important post."

"Maybe next time then.” He smirked, just like Sirius used to, and her heart pounded in the remembered crush she had had fifth year on the flirtatious Marauder. "If you change your mind, you know where we will be."

"Thanks,” She muttered before fleeing. Half of her desperately wanted to take him up on the offer
and pretend that he was really Harry. The other half of her couldn’t stomach the thought of being so close and yet…

She flew up the stairs and slammed the door closed behind her, leaning heavily against it. Tears were welling in her eyes and she covered her face with her trembling hands. She was falling apart, and she couldn’t afford that. She was here for Tom. Changing Toms life was all that mattered.

Hermione slid into bed and was well on her way to falling asleep when she finally heard a light tapping on the window. Her eyes flew wide and a relieved chuckle dropped from her lips as she walked to the window. She knew he wouldn’t be able to resist that note. Thank Merlin!

"Hi pretty owl," She said stroking the barn owl’s lovely feathers before untwisting the tightly rolled scroll.

Ms. Slytherin,

_I am skeptical that you are who you say you are. The Slytherin name died out several centuries ago. I am intrigued by what you think I would want to ask you about. I am free tomorrow at 7 pm. I am unable to leave Hogwarts at this time but if you are not too inconvenienced, I will have someone wait for you at the gates._

Prof. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Hermione flipped the scroll over and scribbled a quick agreement and sent it back. Once the window was closed, she did a little dance. She had him. All she needed was some mystery and a bit of courage. She hadn’t been sorted into Gryffindor for no reason. If there were two things she had, it would be intelligence and nerve.

She slid back into the bed with a happy sigh. She wouldn’t waste this chance to change things. She only had this one chance. She couldn’t afford to muck it up.

**HG**

Hermione was fidgeting. The robes were uncomfortable, her hair was a bushy mess, and worst of all she had been proposed to twice on the way to the apparition point in Diagon Ally. Her appearance in Gringotts had quickly and eagerly ignited a firestorm of gossip, acknowledging that she was a Slytherin and had the familial vaults to prove it. As a result, she was forced to tell the elderly Lord Selwyn that she was not going to marry his grandson. She even had to hex Lord Potter, Charlus’ father, when he got handsy with her. No sir, I don’t want to be Harry Potter’s Great-step-grandmother, thank you very much. She rolled her eyes. It was unbelievable, the lengths that these pureblooded families went to obtain wealth, power, and beauty.

She released a sigh of relief as she made it to Hogwarts gates. She looked up at the old castle, feeling the comforting wards brush against her familiarly.

"You Miss Slytherin?" Asked a rough deep voice.

"Yes."

"Follow me."

The gates creaked open almost ominously. Hermione squeezed the tiny opening in order to follow the gruff man to the castle. Hermione looked around curiously as they began to pass the current students. Everyone was friendly, flashing smiles at her as she went. Their robes were longer, less tailored and made of wool. Hermione did not envy this generation.
The gruff man knocked on a door that she assumed was Dumbledore's office. He didn't even wait to be sure Dumbledore was in. He left her there standing in the hall, shifting from foot to foot awkwardly. She was starting to believe he wasn't in his office at all.

"You must be Miss Slytherin," Dumbledore said from behind her. He twinkled as he opened the door and gestured for her to precede him. She smiled her thanks before sitting in one of the offered chairs.

"Thank you," Hermione said politely. She was slightly enjoying having the drop on him.

"What can I help you with?" Albus asked curiously as he settled behind his desk. "Lemon drop?"

"No thank you, Professor." She smiled. "I have no idea where to begin or even how much to tell you." She muttered.

"I think if you start at the beginning," He said patiently.

"I expect discretion, Sir."

"Of course,"

"I am a time traveler."

"Extraordinary!" He twinkled and leaned forward in his seat.

"I meant to go back only a decade to stop a war from decimating wizarding Britain, but I ended up here. Seventy-four years in the past. I'm not really sure where to start. I figured that if anyone could help me, it would be you."

"Am I to assume you are a Hogwarts graduate?"

"No. I completed up to my sixth year. That's what happens when you search Britain for Horcruxes."

"Merlin! Horcruxes? As in more than one? Who would do that?"

"Someone that isn't born yet."

He narrowed his eyes at her evasive answer.

"I am under the impression that the Slytherin familial line died out." Dumbledore changed the course of the conversation at lightning speed. Hermione blinked for a moment in surprise.

"I needed access to my wealth no matter what time period I landed in. The goblins and I worked out a deal. In the end, I was adopted into the Slytherin family and their vaults were released to me and my magical signature was used in the warding."

"What price did you have to pay for that?"

"I didn't. I was fortunate enough to have a sponsor."

"And that was?"

"The Malfoy family."

"Curious."
"Indeed."

"So how did you time travel? There are no current means."

"That you know of," Hermione mumbled. Dumbledore perked up curiously having heard her utterance.

"Well?"

"I will talk about the future, I will tell you things, but I will not tell you this. Please leave it."

Dumbledore looked at her and Hermione strengthened her occlumency shields as she felt his mind probe hers. Her stomach sunk. He wasn't even subtle about it.

"If you don't withdraw from my mind right now, I will not hesitate to protect myself by any means necessary," Hermione warned as she glared at him.

His eyebrows rose. He withdrew fast, not gently either, causing Hermione to wince at the blunt retreat.

"I've killed." She whispered in shame. "I've concluded that you and I aren't so very different, Professor. Both of our deepest desires revolve around the wish to see our loved ones stay alive and we will do anything, commit any atrocity to make sure that happens. That is why it must be you. Out of anyone in the world, you are probably the only person capable of understanding my decisions."

"That may have been true once."

"You can lie to yourself all that you want, Albus Dumbledore, but you cannot lie to me. Not about this."

"How did you come back?" He persisted. She stared at him for a moment. This was not the Dumbledore that she knew. This Albus Dumbledore only had the potential to be that man she knew. She doubted very much that he would be able to help her very much at this point. The Dumbledore she knew may have manipulated, callously used others, but he never buried his head in the sand. Not to himself anyway. She needed the help of the man who defeated Grindelwald, who put Harry in a subpar home, kept Sirius locked up in Grimmauld and Azkaban without a trial, who hired Lockhart, and avoided Harry for an entire year. The man who looked the other way when the trio fought Voldemort and his servants each and every year. The man who gave Dobby a job, and hired a werewolf and a former repentant Death Eater. The man who liked woolen socks and knitting because Ariana liked them and would spend her time knitting them for Albus before she died. Why was Dumbledore so different? So unprepared? It came to her like a hammer to the head. He would only be ready for the war with Voldemort because of his victory against Grindelwald.

"I am blessed." She said simply. She was no different than he would someday be. Hermione sacrificed generations of Malfoy girls to come back. One could even say that she did it, 'for the greater good.' Her lips twisted in derision and self-disgust. "If I had another option, any other method, I wouldn't have chosen this."

"You paid that great a price?"

"Me? No. I volunteered others to shoulder that burden. See, we are the same." The disgust practically oozed out of her.

"I wouldn't make someone else pay for my choices."
"Lies, Professor. You will someday become a general of a brutal war. You will use child soldiers, manipulate us all like the chess pieces we are to you, and exploit another until he becomes the hardened spy that he needs to be. Don't lie to me." She exploded, telling him more than she intended to.

"Why are you here?"

"I need to find someone."

"Who?"

"Marvolo Gaunt."

"Last I knew, he lived with his children in Little Hangleton but none of his children ever attended Hogwarts. He is a nasty piece of work. Always in the Daily profit for some Muggle baiting or another."

"Thank you,"

"What do you need from me?"

"An ally, a focus point, an anchor."

He took a great shaking breath and covered his face, his auburn beard peeking out beneath.

"You don't seem to be that concerned about Gellert." He muttered.

"He was defeated in my time. I'm not sure exactly how to handle this. I learned about his rise and fall in History of Magic."

"How powerful are you?" He asked suddenly.

"I was hailed as the most brilliant witch of my age." She said with more self-loathing.

"Duel me."

" Seriously?" Hermione asked. She suddenly began bouncing with excitement, her whole body vibrating with anticipation. If she could take her focus off of the weight that was on her shoulders for only a moment, she would take it. She was going to duel with the great Albus Dumbledore. She knew he was talented even as a student and quivered with the thought of learning from him.

"Yes." He smiled at her child-like exuberance. "Saturday at one on the Quidditch pitch."

"Awesome!" She squeaked.

"Also, I will set up the N.E.W.T.s for you to take. I will give you the date the next time I see you."

She jumped out of her chair and grasped the handle of the door.

"Oh, and Miss Slytherin, what house were you in when you attended?"

"Gryffindor, Sir." Hermione laughed at his surprise and let herself out of his office, the castle, and Hogsmeade before apparating back to the Leaky Cauldron.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I always imagined Grindelwald to look like a boyish charmer like Matt Czuchry and I will not be convinced otherwise! lol.

I am posting this ridiculously early because you guys are the best! You have stuck with me through this last year of craziness and unpredictable posting schedule and your reviews have meant the world to me. Thank you!

Chapter Four

The next day, Hermione walked along the lane in Little Hangleton dreading what she would find at the Gaunts. Dumbledore wasn't the only one who said that they were nasty pieces of work.

As she turned into the hidden walk that led to their home, she froze. The shack was dilapidated, an air of neglect suffocated the whole property that gave the shrubbery a wildness that resembled her hair during third year. But the thing that shocked her the most was the snake nailed to the rough-hewn door.

She quickly ducked behind the hedges as she heard the pebbles crunch under a newcomer's foot out on the lane that passed by the shack.

At the same time, a window slid open overhead and Hermione saw a faded girl with clumped dirty hair and dark eyes. She was hanging out the window, a desperate longing contorting her face. It was obvious that she was watching whoever it was on the road. Hermione would bet everything she owned that Merope was watching Tom Riddle Sr.

There was a loud resounding bang from inside the house and all Hermione could make out was hissing. Parseltongue. She shivered. This must be where it all started.

With a crackle of power, she watched as Morfin knocked Merope out from in front of the window before casting a jinx at the passerby. Pushing through the hedge she saw a tall, darkly handsome man break out in large painful patches of hives. Tom began to scratch brutally before picking up the pace and heading home at a near trot. Merope was sobbing but stopped suddenly as a fleshy smack filled the air.

Hermione saw red. Perhaps if she had waited and sorted out the situation and went to the door calmly, things would have been different. But she didn't. She blasted the door off the hinges, startling a bad-tempered grizzly man that she assumed was Marvolo Gaunt. A father that was ignoring the abuse happening from above. It made her sick.

"What do you want?" He demanded, wand pointed at her, ready to fling curses.

"Get the hell out of my way." She snarled, nonverbally disarming and freezing him as she went. Not one twinge of unease soured her stomach as he left him there, frozen, his wand in her pocket.

She flew through the house, vengeance, and justice on her mind. When finally, she flung open the
door to the room where the siblings were, Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"Stupify," Hermione yelled, casting the spell unnecessarily strong. The man, Morfin no doubt, was knocked into the wall behind him, sliding down the sheetrock in a crumpled heap.

She walked over to a cowering Merope and gentled her fierce expression. Merope was dirty. Her eyes were divergent strabismus and the effect of her eyes looking in opposite ways was extremely off-putting. Hermione reached out to touch Merope's shoulder but was taken aback when the young woman flinched. Withdrawing her hand, she squatted so that Merope could see her. Or so she hoped.

"I am not here to hurt you. In fact, I want you to come with me. I wouldn't feel right about leaving you here with them." Hermione smiled sadly, voice tempered to the soothing tones Jean Granger had used on her when she was at her most capricious as a child.

"I don't want to," Merope said in a terrified whisper. It broke Hermione's heart.

"Why not?"

"They are my blood."

"So what? You will be Merope Gaunt no matter where you are. You deserve to be treated better than this."

"No." Her voice shook, tears squeezing out of her newly clenched eyes.

"What is the real reason?"

"I love him."

"I am going to go out on a limb here and assume you are talking about Tom Riddle and not that trash." Hermione gestured to the unconscious man against the wall. "If you are that serious about him, I will help you try and catch his attention. Trust me, I have done harder things than that."

"You don't think I am a blood traitor?" She gasped. Hermione could see her wide eyes silently begging her to be honest. Tears making dirty tracks down her face.

"No, I don't think you are a blood traitor. I don't know what you like about Riddle, but I won't judge you for it. Will you come with me?"

Merope nodded her head emphatically.

"Gather your things. We are going to the Leaky." Hermione said with an encouraging smile.

"Mobilicorpus," Hermione muttered at Morfin's unconscious body and moved him from his position crumpled against the wall. She got a sick sense of justice as she watched his head bang into the newel post and each baluster on the way down the stairs. She laid his unconscious body next to the door at his father's feet. In a complete turn of events, Bob Ogdon stared at her, shocked, from the doorway at the four occupants in open-mouthed confusion. Hermione spotted him and turned the full force of her smile on his unsuspecting ministerial mind.

"I am Hermione Slytherin and if you wish for a witness to testify against Morfin for using magic on a Muggle, I would be more than happy." She smiled.

Merope stood off to the side uncomfortably and watched as Hermione took the ring off of Marvolo's finger and thrust it at his daughter. Hermione unfroze the man and twirled his wand in her fingers as
the ministry employee watched from the doorway.

"I promise to take amazing care of your daughter, Sir, and in return, she will take care of the family heirlooms. If you try to fight me on this I will decimate you. If you need to find us, don't." She glared coldly at Marvolo before taking Merope's arm, smiled sweetly at Bob Ogdon, and apparated the two of them away.

Hermione took them to Diagon Ally where she immediately took Merope up to the room Hermione had let. She handed her a towel and a flannel.

"All the soap is already in the bathroom. Take as long as you want. I always enjoy a nice soak at the end of a stressful day." Hermione encouraged the shy woman. Imagine that, Merope Gaunt, shy. Hermione shook her head. Perhaps she should think about buying a small house for them to live in? Shaking her head, she decided to wait. After all, if history repeated its self, Merope would be married to Tom within the next six months.

Once Merope was out of the bath, Hermione ordered them both supper and they sat down at the small table that graced the room.

"What do you like to do with your life now that you are free?" Hermione asked.

"I like potions." Merope blushed.

"I do too! If you could do anything what would It be?"

"Marry Tom," Merope whispered, her pale face flushed with embarrassment.

"You are not going to dose him with a love potion, are you?"

"Just long enough so that he would see me."

"No Merope, you can't just use a love potion. For Merlin's sake, try the Imperius first."

"That is an Unforgivable!" She whispered scandalized.

"I won't tell if you don't. Plus, it's only short term, right? Much better than a love potion."

"I'm better at potions."

"And what happens if you get pregnant while he is dosed? What are the side effects?"

"There are none."

"How about this. We try the old-school method."

"Kidnapping?"

Hermione looked at Merope with a shocked sort of concern, despite already suggesting an unforgivable herself.

"No," Hermione said slowly. "Let's try and get him attracted to you. I can fix your appearance and your manners. Let's start with that."

"Oh," Merope said worriedly. "I'm not going to make him fall in love with me that way,"

"I think you would be surprised. Would you give me two weeks?"
"Alright," Merope said.

"Oculos sanaret." Hermione suddenly pointed her wand at the started Merope. Her dark eyes centered and her vision cleared, intelligence burned within.

Merope gasped and ran into the bathroom, shrieking out her amazement at Hermione's spell. Hermione smiled ruefully. That spell wouldn't be invented for another fifty years and even then, it rarely would be used by anyone who wasn't a master of eye care. Too many things could go wrong. Hermione had studied the theory once, thinking she could heal Harry's eyes but was quickly dissuaded. The world couldn't abide a blind Harry Potter. She was just lucky that her first attempt turned out so well. Not that Merope ever needed to know how close she came to being blinded instead.

In this case, she decided to bite the bullet. If Merope ended up blind, then she did her job. Merope wouldn't be able to make a love potion if she were blind. Hermione sat back in her chair and gave herself a mental pat on the back. The smug look didn't leave her face for the rest of the night.

**HGHG**

Hermione was excited. It was finally Saturday and she was looking forward to the duel with Dumbledore. She was going to learn so much from him, she just knew it. She smiled.

The entire week had dragged by at a glacial and painful pace. Hermione was never a big one for girly stuff, but she needed to help Merope gain confidence and to do that, she found herself mimicking the very things Parvati and Lavender used to do in the girl's dorms. They shopped, pampered themselves, and did all manner of girly things. It was enough to make Hermione hide in the bathroom feigning stomach problems for longer than strictly necessary. And if there was a book in there that kept her busy while pretending to be sick, she would claim it a coincidence.

Surprisingly, once the dirt and grime had been washed off of Merope, she turned out to be quite beautiful. Not the stop-all-traffic-and-cause-accidents kind, but she had an unusual face that lit up when she talked about the things that she was passionate about. Hermione was pleasantly surprised to notice that Merope was of unusually high intelligence. Hermione surmised that Voldemort had to get it from somewhere.

They walked to the gates of Hogwarts while Merope danced around the curly-haired witch with glee. She had been homeschooled and was ecstatic to finally see Hogwarts for herself. Hermione smiled indulgently at her. In the few days that they had spent together, Hermione had become increasingly aware of an uncomfortable truth. Regardless of their closeness in age, Merope treated Hermione like an older sister or a surrogate mother. This was an unexpected consequence, but she decided to shoulder the burden. Would that make her Voldemort's Aunt? Quasi Grandmother? What an unsettling thought.

Hermione approached the quidditch pitch with mounting apprehension as the noise of hundreds began to reach her. When she turned the final bend and caught sight of the Quidditch pitch, a deep well of anger rose within her. The stands were completely full. It seemed as if the whole school and more turned out for the unusual event. Hermione glared daggers at Dumbledore who was standing in the middle of the pitch twirling his wand agitatedly. Slowly, Hermione walked toward him, leaving Merope to find a seat among the crowd alone.

"I didn't know you would tell the whole school." Hermione accused him, her hair whipped around her face.

"It was the damn nosy portraits." He mumbled, his cheeks flushing a cherry red.
Hermione looked around and for the first time noticed that it wasn't only students who packed the spectators' boxes.

"The Ministry? Really? What the bloody hell, Dumbledore?!"

"This isn't my fault," he insisted.

"We will lay blame later. Right now, I am interested to see how I fare against you. Might as well get this party started."

"Shouldn't I be the one to see how I fare against you?" Dumbledore twinkled. Hermione chuckled. She pushed her anger down with a steel will as anticipation took its place. She was going to duel Dumbledore in his heyday, a mere twenty years before he rises to defeat Grindelwald.

They turned their backs on each other and paced out the required steps. A hush went over the crowd as they watched the beginnings of history in the making. At two-hundred paces, the duo turned and faced each other, bowing at the waist.

Hermione smothered a giggle as Dumbledore dropped into a ridiculously flamboyant dueling stance. Was he screwing with her? She widened her stance minutely, preparing herself to move. Maybe this was his way of throwing her off guard. If it was, it was working.

Hermione, being the battle-worn veteran that she was, waited until he made his first move, watching to see the fluidity of his casting. She frowned as he sent his first spell, nonverbally. A simple stunner that she easily deflected. Maybe he was just warming up.

He had looked smug, as he sent the next three spells in rapid succession. The last clearly meant to be the one that took her down. It wasn't. She barely even moved. One step back and the spell hit the grass at her feet. She hadn't even cast yet.

Hermione was thinking furiously. This was not her Albus Dumbledore. This Dumbledore was powerful, that was easy to tell, however; it was like he had little actual experience. It seemed as if he was a man who had little chance to defend his life or the life of another. She surmised that the only real duel he had been in so far was the one against Grindelwald when Arianna died. Perhaps against someone who hadn't spent the last few years engaged in fierce battle, he would have won easily. Hermione knew he dueled in a multi-nation tourney several times over the course of his life. She just couldn't remember exactly when they took place.

She deflected every spell he sent her way, her face falling openly into disappointment. He watched her with a perplexed frown and began casting stronger, harder spells. He quickly lost the light, teasing disposition in lieu of something more serious.

A pit in Hermione's stomach opened up and the vast distance between the skills Dumbledore had and those he needed to learn threatened to choke her. It was this that pushed her over the edge as anger and betrayal poured out of her. Hermione made her first move.

"Expelliarmus. Stupify. " She cast rapidly. She watched as he flicked them away and smiled as she next unleashed a torrent of borderline dark spells, courtesy of one, Severus Snape. Spells that had yet to be invented. Of course, had she not been so upset at Dumbledore, she wouldn't have taken so much pleasure in watching him struggle to stay on his feet. As it was, severing charms had nicked him in a few places and his blood stained his silk robes.

Then she began to move, casting nonverbal spells in increasingly difficult patterns. She began forcing him to respond in the way she wanted him to. She was teaching Albus Dumbledore how to
duel as if his life depended on it. Because one day, it could save his life. It could save all of their lives.

She pushed him around the pitch easily, almost toying with him and her casting got steadily nastier which took more work on his part to deflect. His body jerked, unused to the exercise, but she was happy to see the arrogance fall from his face and his eyes narrowed. Determination made him strong, and that would be to the benefit of all wizardkind.

Hermione smirked, he was surely going to be sore later. Dumbledore had tiny rivulets of sweat and blood streaming down his face, forcing him to use valuable time that he could be casting to wipe it. Casting and deflecting wasn't his biggest problem, Hermione decided. It was the fact that she moved around, forcing him to do the same, and he wasn't as able. Then again, she fought in a war that pitted grown and powerful witches and wizards against school-aged children. She couldn't really blame him for his inadequacies. It wasn't his fault that he grew up without war.

Hermione clenched her teeth as a few of his spells landed, opening wounds of her own. He was getting better. Maybe at another time, they could train together, work on dueling, and have fun doing it. They were peers now, after all.

She decided to end it, knowing there wasn't much more that could be done here until Dumbledore was trained. Ropes shot from the tip of her wand. She followed that by transfiguring her bracelet into a set of magical retardant manacles that Azkaban frequently used on its more illustrious patrons.

Albus avoided the ropes only to be caught with the manacles, stopping his casting in its tracks. He struggled in vain as Hermione began wrapping him in a grey mist that solidified into an iron cage. He struggled against his bonds, trying to force his way out. An incredulous look on his face.

"I have never seen anyone duel like that." He said. His voice echoed in the stands, their audience had gone silent as soon as Hermione began to move. Hermione moved so that they were mere feet apart and lowered her voice, wanting to keep their conversation private. The spectators went even quieter as they strained to hear the conversation that was happening in front of them.

"That is obvious. I duel this way because I fought in a war and came out the conquering hero. In the end, I suppose I won by default since I was one of the last combatants standing. I learned to aim for the kill, to completely disable my opponent. If I allowed my enemies a second chance to fight, someone I love could die. I learned that the hard way too. Loss to me means death; either mine or someone that I needed to protect and failed. I have come too far, fought for too long, to die now. I took it easy on you. I did not aim to kill. You aimed to impress but Albus, I am not impressed."

"What happened to you? You can't be any older than twenty-five." He was horrified as he realized that her bitterness stemmed from war.

"I'll be twenty-one soon."

"Merlin! So, young." He whispered, aghast. "You looked disappointed in my skills. Why?"
Hermione could tell that he was embarrassed and extremely impressed with her.

"Because I expected so much more from you."

"I am the undefeated world dueling champion." He said not understanding that the title meant nothing if it didn't translate to competency on the battlefield, where it really mattered.

"I guess you could say that I am undefeated as well. But the difference is, your arena is exactly this, easy and non-threatening, and mine… mine is the bloody graves of everyone I have ever loved. I'll
see you next time, Albus." Hermione walked off the field, releasing Dumbledore from his iron prison and manacles, letting them revert back to her bracelet. Hundreds of eyes followed her as she left the Quidditch pitch, head held high. Her bracelet in Dumbledore's white-knuckled grasp.

**HGHG**

Merope caught up with her quickly, neither one spoke as Hermione took Merope's hand and apparated them back to Diagon Alley. Merope watched as Hermione busied herself in their room, a worried frown on her face. She had heard every word of the conversation between the two duelists at Hogwarts. So, what if she had put a bug in Hermione's robes before they left. She didn't want to miss anything.

The moment they entered their shared room, Merope turned on Hermione, finger pointed accusingly at her.

"Why did you save me?" She asked Hermione suddenly.

Hermione considered her answer before slowly shutting the door, turning to face Merope with a grimace, still ignoring the finger pointed at her.

"You were being abused."

"I know that! But how did you know that? Why were you at my father's house in the first place?"

"I," Hermione started, gulping before clearing her throat and continuing. "I know things that haven't happened yet."

"You want me to believe you are a seer? Don't make me laugh! I think I know you better than that by now. You are from the future. It is the only thing that makes sense. And if that is true, then why save me? What is so important about me?" Her eyes widened as something suddenly occurred to her. "No Merope, you can't just use a love potion. For Merlin's sake, try the Imperius first." She quoted back the exact words that Hermione had said to her only days earlier. "What if you conceive? You don't know what the side effects could be. You know something! What side effect is there?"

"I don't," Hermione began, avoiding Merope's eyes. Hermione thought quickly trying to imagine what could possibly get her out of this conversation.

"Don't lie to me!" Merope yelled, her face flushed with anger. Hermione finally looked at her and saw the same expression that twisted Tom Riddle's face right at the end. Derision, confidence, and fury. It was this expression that decided her. She would be honest with Merope.

"Your son will not be able to give nor receive love. It's a side effect of being conceived under the effects of Amortentia. As a result, he does terrible things. He will start the bloodiest war in history. He will murder, brutalize, torture, twist, and degrade the entire wizarding community. He is the reason why I am so good at dueling. He is the reason I watched everyone I loved die. If I can change this one thing, maybe, just maybe, I won't have to watch as my friends are killed in the most horrific ways."

"Why didn't I do anything about it?"

"You died giving birth to him."

"But I didn't have you then."

"Exactly."
"Well Hermione, let's see if we have to resort to using the Imperius curse." She winked before retreating to the bathroom. Hermione stood bemused and a little shell-shocked. Merope could change her moods at the drop of a hat. She was beginning to realize that Merope Gaunt was one heck of an ally. Maybe Hermione didn't need Dumbledore after all. For the first time since she arrived in the twenties, Hermione felt overwhelming hope and relief. Maybe, just maybe everything would turn out alright.

A light tapping on the window disturbed Hermione from her thoughts. Looking suspiciously at the owl, she let it in and untied the scroll that was bound to the owls' leg. Once she unfurled it fully and saw Dumbledore's signature at the bottom, she snorted, her eyes flicking back to the top. She noticed the owl stayed, probably expecting a speedy reply and possibly a treat. She dug one out of her pocket and handed it to the grateful bird.

My Dearest Hermione,

I have something of the gravest importance to discuss with you. Please consider meeting me at the Hogshead inn, Hogsmeade Village at your earliest convenience. I am eagerly awaiting your response.

Prof. Albus Dumbledore

Hermione blinked rapidly. Dearest? What the hell was going on? She turned the parchment over and hastily scribbled her response, too curious to turn him down.

6 pm. Tonight. Make sure there are no spectators this time or I leave.

-HS

Hermione quickly attached the note to the owl and watched as it soared through the open window. She was still in equal parts furious and flabbergasted at Dumbledore's temerity. She didn't tell anyone except Merope about their upcoming duel and yet the whole place was packed. That was on him and she would not make it easy on him either. Someone needed to teach him what he would need to know to survive against Grindelwald, she supposed she was as good as any candidate. She needed to make him think and consider his each and every move. She intended on making him into the general that he would need to be in case her plans didn't pan out, and Tom was born a monster despite her efforts.

"Okay, Hermione. Are you ready to go? Let's see if I can catch a man!" Merope winked at her again.

"Why not." Hermione shrugged, starting to get used to being bossed around by Merope and blindsided by her abrupt mood changes. How Harry and Ron would laugh at the contradiction if they knew. She found someone bossier than she. They would never let her live it down.

"You're not wearing that, are you?" Merope sneered at Hermione's dress, just as Hermione reached for the doorknob.

Hermione looked down at the knee length loose grey dress that she was wearing. It was not the black number that she wore on her arrival, but it was rather flattering. What was she supposed to wear instead?

"What's wrong with this? I am not the one who needs to catch his eye." Hermione grumbled as Merope pushed her in the bathroom, and handed her a white and gold flapper dress on the hanger.

"Try this," Merope said. In the time that they were living together, it became apparent to anyone who saw them where the fashion sense of the two came from. It wasn't Hermione. Hermione still took her
inspiration from the clothes she had seen in Narcissa Malfoy's closet when she lived with Malfoy at his Manor. Which was fine but there was something about it that didn't quite fit the time. Merope, on the other hand, was like a blossoming flower. With confidence and care, she had come into her own, taking to the fashion world with a zeal that was nearly infectious. Nearly.

"I am not wearing this!" Hermione screeched from the bathroom.

"Oh, yes you are! Come out here so I can fix your hair."

"I don't want to. I look like Lavender Brown."

"I don't know who that is. Even if I did, I wouldn't care. Come out."

Merope smiled as Hermione's bitchy face proceeded her body from the bathroom.

"You look gorgeous, Darling!" Merope gushed.

Hermione looked down and ran her hands over the elaborate beading that covered the entire thing. The dress was stunning, but it just made Hermione uncomfortable. It really was not her cup of tea. She would rather something in a darker color and a little less revealing. Merope ignored her protests and pushed her down into the chair. With a tap of her wand on Hermione's head, a low chignon formed at the back of her neck. Hermione sighed in resignation. Merope could be really bossy sometimes.

"Perfect!" Merope exclaimed before looking in the mirror and patting her own hair one last time before threading her arm through Hermione's and pulling her out the door. Hermione barely had enough time to grab the beaded bag that she carried everywhere.

Merope kept a tight grip on Hermione's arm and glared at anyone who dared approach them. Something about the ferocity of the glare made Garret Prewitt take a step back. When the girls stepped out of the Leaky, it was obvious he was praising his good fortune. Now, he was happy to let them alone, for now. He watched from afar with the rest of the nobility that was held at bay.

Once they reached the apparition point, the girls turned with a low crack, landing in a hedge just outside of the Riddle property. The family was hosting a gala that night with friends and acquaintances milling around as they waited for the dancing to begin. This allowed the two young women to slip in without the use of magic unnoticed. Hermione uncharacteristically giggled, the unexpected rush from gate crashing making her giddy.

They didn't go unnoticed for long, for as soon as they entered the ballroom, Hermione bumped into Tom.

"I'm sorry." She said automatically.

"Not at all, Miss?"

"Granger." They were in the muggle world, so it would be better to use her real name, right?

"I don't remember you being on the list." He said quietly, his eyebrows raised imperiously. In all honesty, he kind of reminded her of Percy Weasley.

"My sister and I heard about this party and we wanted to meet you." Hermione vaguely wondered if flattering him would make him forget that they may not have been invited. He smirked at her and lazily leaned against the mantle of the fireplace.
"You didn't have to go to such lengths to procure admittance. I would have immediately issued an invitation to such a lovely woman and her sister."

Hermione's eyes went wide. Was he flirting with her? She looked around quickly and spotted Merope and pulled her to her side.

"This is my sister, Merope."

"That's an unusual name, Miss Granger." He said as he kissed Merope's knuckles, making her blush. Merope gave Hermione major side eye but rolled with the new surname.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." She said.

"The pleasure is all mine." He had a glint in his eyes that Hermione didn't quite like but kept her own counsel. He had flirted with her, that was true, but once he met Merope, it was obvious which one of them he preferred. It wasn't that Hermione was upset at that development. Quite the opposite. She was starting to think Tom was creepy. A creepy womanizer. Hermione sighed. At least they probably wouldn't have to use the Imperius curse on him, as long as Merope didn't mind having a one-night stand. She cradled the drink she pulled off of a passing tray and wondered why Merope liked him. The only thing going for him was his looks and that didn't rate very high in Hermione's books.

After an hour of watching the two of them dance and flirt outrageously, Hermione pulled Merope aside.

"I have to meet Albus in ten minutes. Let's go." Hermione implored.

"I'll be fine here, you go. I'll meet you at the Leaky."

"No! Merope that is a terrible idea."

"I will be fine."

"Don't use magic on him," Hermione whispered frantically as Merope walked away, back into Tom Riddle's arms on the dance floor. Hermione was not happy with the development and decided that if Merope wasn't back at the Leaky by the time she was done with her meeting, she would come back and drag the girl away by any means necessary.

With a last look of regret, Hermione walked out of the house and into the graveyard below. This is where Cedric died. Or would die, maybe, if Hermione didn't change things. Steeling herself, she apparated to Hogsmeade and made her way to the Hogshead. It didn't even occur to her to change her clothes beforehand, but she soon regretted not thinking about it as the Pureblooded wizards she passed were nearly salivating at the sight of Hermione in her finery. She thought boys were annoying when she wasn't deemed an appropriate match, but this was bordering on ridiculous. She wished she could embrace her muggle-born heritage and scare them all away, but that would be counterproductive to her aims. She would just have to get used to the attention from the men of highest social circles. She grimaced with distaste.

She pushed through the door of the inn, easily recognizing Albus' worried frown at a table in the corner. It was not a usual occurrence that a woman would enter into a man's domain and the most unsavory characters of the wizarding world leered at her from their shadowy booths, taking in her elegantly swathed body. She ignored them all and slid into the chair across from Dumbledore.

"Bee in your bonnet?" She asked. He visibly started as she spoke, making her raise a brow in question. He chuckled to himself before meeting her eyes.
"Just thinking."

"Anything I should be worried about?"

"I would like to proposition you."

Hermione looked shocked and blinked rapidly. She may or may not have puked a little in her mouth.

"Sir, I am very flattered, but I am not sure that is ."

"No, you misunderstand," He chuckled. "You know about Grindelwald and how he is gaining ground and followers, starting a war that he positively should never have started. I am being pressured into meeting him in combat. I don't know how much longer I can hold out before I am painted in the same light as him. Already the Prophet calls me immoral and reprehensible."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to hunt him down."

"That would irrefutably change the timeline."

"Isn't that your goal?"

"I suppose, but I can't. Like I said, I have a mission here that does not involve Grindelwald."

"Name your terms."

"You have got to be kidding me! You were a Gryffindor, and Gryffindor's don't run from a fight out of cowardice." Hermione stated.

"Not all Gryffindor's are equally brave."

"True, but you can do this. I have lived in a world in which you won! You don't need me,"

"I don't want to have re-live certain events. The very worst days of my entire life would be front and center with him. Can you not understand?" He implored. She could. She knew exactly why he was avoiding this, but she was too kind to say.

"Here is the thing, I have to ensure that Merope's son has a good life, that he isn't conceived under a love potion even if that means implementing the use of the Imperius curse. Her son has the potential to destroy everything that I love. He is my mission. It is more important than your feelings. I'm sorry but I can't help you."

"I will do it."

"Do what?" she asked, exasperated.

"I will make sure he has a good life. I swear it. I will do everything possible, even marry the girl if needs be. I will be an amazing father to the boy, if only you agree to hunt Grindelwald. Honestly, I don't think it will be that hard. You are smart, beautiful, connected, wealthy, and most of all powerful. You are his holy grail. You will find that he will approach you whether you like it or not."

"Let me get this straight, you want to play house while I chase a power-hungry German psychopath? I don't see what is in it for me."

"How very Slytherin, Miss Slytherin." He deadpanned, his lips thinned in disapproval.
"You don't get it. My only reason for coming back to this time is Tom. I cannot-will not- abandon that. Grindelwald is your problem, not mine."

"I will make the boy my heir."

"Excuse me?"

"The boy. I will make him a Dumbledore. I will make an unbreakable vow if only you will say yes."

"I can't because in the end, Merope will be his mother and I will not barter her away for any price. Her life is her own to live." She said.

"The offer still stands until I am forced into action. Please consider carefully." He fled the inn, a single gold galleon left spinning on the table in his wake. Hermione was shocked at his emotional and hasty departure. It seemed that either one or the other is always leaving in a hurry. Hermione couldn't believe it. Was Dumbledore that afraid to duel Grindelwald? Hermione hit her forehead on the wood surface, groaning at the impossible situation. If Dumbledore adopted Tom, everything would change. Hermione shook her head. Her curls danced on the table.

Merope wasn't even pregnant yet for goodness sake, let alone the outcome of any possible relationships, although, she didn't have many hopes in that area. Tom Riddle was a flirt and if her hunch was right, he really liked to love them and leave them. She didn't want Merope to get hurt, but the girl would find out in her own time if Tom was worth it. Nodding her head in acceptance, Hermione made her way out of the pub, still attracting attention in her ornate dress.

She was walking slowly through the winding streets of Hogsmeade thinking about Albus Dumbledore and his proposal. Was meeting Grindelwald so traumatic for him that he would make an offer for a woman he didn't know, that he has never met, to father her bastard child? Who does that? Hermione was dragged out of her reverie when someone slammed into her, causing her to fall to her bum.

"I am so sorry, Miss…"

Hermione looked up at the hand extended to her. She followed the sleeve up the line of his body and met bright blue eyes. Her heart stopped. She didn't think it was fate, nor an accident that Gellert Grindelwald bumped into her, especially so close to the place her meeting with Dumbledore was held. His eyebrows raised as he waited for her to take his hand. She couldn't tear her eyes from his striking features.

Slowly, she reached up to him and he pulled her to her feet. With a wave of her wand, she cleaned the dress that Merope had forced her to wear, not wanting to hear Merope scold her for ruining the thing. She could tell that he was waiting for her to give him her name, but she kept silent not knowing how she should approach things.

"I am Gellert and you are?" He said, good humor suffusing his face.

"Hermione." If he wasn't going to give her his last name, neither was she. "Aren't you a wanted man, Gellert?"

"Ah, Hermione, such lovely name." He murmured as he flipped the hand he still had in his grasp and planted a kiss on the pulse point on her wrist, ignoring her jibe at being hunted by the Ministries of every country.

Her heart began to beat furiously, and her breath came a little too fast. She had heard that he had
been charismatic once, but she was wholly unprepared for how that would affect her. She wasn't one who usually concentrated on the way a person looked, but she couldn't stop herself from staring. She watched as the corners of his eyes crinkled. Coming back to her senses, Hermione pulled her hand out of his and looked away, blushing fiercely.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Gellert, but I'm in a bit of a hurry." Hermione lied and turned to leave but was stopped by his hand on her arm. He had reached for her the moment she had turned away. This was not her circus, not her monkeys. She kept repeating the phrase as if it were her new mantra.

"Have a drink with me." He said. "Please?"

"I can't." She said as she pulled out of his grasp and hurried down the lane. She looked back to see Gellert watching her with a half-smile on his lips and a predatory look in his eyes. She turned back around and once she decided she had gone far enough away, Hermione apparated back to the Riddle grounds, hoping that Merope was still there and that she hadn't gotten into any trouble.

She took a moment to relax. It was unsettling that of all people she could have possibly met, Grindelwald had been there and had made sure that she met him. Straightening her shoulders, she walked back to the Riddle mansion, leaving her 'chance' encounter with a certain handsome revolutionary behind her.

The party was still going strong and Hermione slipped in unnoticed. She walked from room to room but still couldn't find Merope or Riddle. She paused at the foot of the winding staircase and debated whether she should resume her search above. To do so would run the risk of seeing something that she really didn't want to see. It also could be that Merope wasn't up there. Perhaps she went home to wait for Hermione to get back from her meeting with Dumbledore. But maybe she was up there in his room, with Riddle. Hermione's stomach sank and set her left foot on the bottommost stair.

"Can I help you?" a high pitched feminine voice asked from over her shoulder, so close that Hermione could feel the disapproval as if it were a sharp knife pressed into her back.

"I am looking for my sister," Hermione slowly turned around, shoving the uncomfortable feelings of being caught in the act of doing something she wasn't supposed to, despite knowing she had done nothing wrong other than search for Merope and attempt to go up the stairs.

"And who, might I ask, is your sister?" The woman said with a sneer. Her lips curled back in true Snape fashion and Hermione was momentarily taken aback.

"Her name is Merope. She has brown hair and brown eyes. About this tall," Hermione gestured to a height slightly above her own.

The longer she talked, the more narrowed the eyes of the woman got. Hermione was starting to suspect that she was Tom Riddle's mother and it didn't take long for her to trail off into silence.

"I do not know of anyone with that description that was invited," the woman said derisively. "perhaps you should leave."

"Fine," Hermione's eyes flashed, the snippy scorn that so easily dripped from this woman's demeanor was making her see red. All of the awkward guilt that had filled her at being caught, left. She was sick and tired of being treated like a second-rate citizen. First, because she was Muggle-born and now because she wasn't high enough on the muggle social ladder. She was over it.

"If something has happened to her while she was here, I am going to hold this entire family
responsible." Hermione hissed, leaving the rude woman behind and walking out the door. She barely made it to the dark hedges on the lane before apparating to the Leaky. She was so mad, she could feel herself gearing up for a tirade.

She stomped up the stairs, flung open the door to the room and stopped in her tracks. Merope and Tom were on the bed, presumably naked but covered by a single sheet, both fast asleep. Hermione backed out of the room and shut the door quietly. She stood staring at the wood grain of the closed door and wondered if maybe she was in over her head. Suddenly all of their planning felt like a horrible idea. Hermione walked back down to the innkeeper and requested a second room, mumbling about being unable to share the bathroom for a moment longer. It was time to start looking for a place, regardless of whether Merope would be there with her in the future or not.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentines Day!

Chapter Five

Hermione and Merope stood inside the entryway for the third house tour that day. Like the others, it was large and impressively built. It wasn't the size of any of the Malfoy mansions by any means, but it was definitely bigger than the respectable home Hermione had grown up in. There were several acres of land and a beautiful flower garden that was impressive in its own right. With six bedrooms and a large modern kitchen, it definitely made the cut. Even the asking price was decent.

Their realtor had dropped them off in the entryway as she received an urgent owl that called her away. After letting the two women into the house to look around, Annie, the realtor, apparated to wherever it was that she was needed, leaving the two women to wander through the house at their own pace.

Slowly, Merope and Hermione moved through the house making comments about the things they would change if they purchased it. Some things they would definitely keep, such as the fabulous kitchen, and other things, like the wallpaper, would definitely have to go. They had only been there for ten minutes when Annie came back, another client in tow.

"I hope you don't mind but I have another client interested in these same properties. I invited him to tour the rest of the houses with us."

Hermione had turned around and looked in astonishment at Gellert Grindelwald, even as Merope moved on through the house. She narrowed her eyes with suspicion. What were the odds that Grindelwald was interested in buying property in Britain? Or want to look at the very ones that Hermione and Merope were looking at? Not bloody likely. Hermione looked away and into the pleading eyes of Annie. She shrugged her shoulders. Grindelwald wasn't her problem. If she said it often enough, maybe she would even start to believe it.

Annie clapped her hands with happiness and Hermione caught the curious tilt of Gellert's head. She surmised that he was trying to figure out her motives or maybe he was wondering if she even remembered who he was. Not that it mattered. She came back in time to change Tom Riddle's life not to meddle with Dumbledore's victory over Grindelwald. She could care less what Grindelwald wanted.

"Hermione, look at this amazing bathroom!" Merope exclaimed in excitement. "The bathtub is so large, both of us could swim in it at the same time!"

Hermione moved into the bathroom and snorted. It was a large replica of the prefect's bathroom at Hogwarts. The only downside in her mind was the green and silver motif with the inlaid snake insignia. Hermione shook her head as Merope crooned in delight. Annie moved quickly into the room to happily point out all of its features to her excited client.

Hermione felt a gust of warm breath on her neck that forced goose pimples to raise in its wake.
Grindelwald had moved close behind her and his body heat bled through her thin spring robe.
Forcefully shutting down her body’s reaction, Hermione stiffened with warning, waiting for his next
move and clenched the wand in her hand tightly.

"It is very nicely done, wouldn't you say?" Gellert murmured into her ear. Hermione could feel the
beat of his heart, steady and strong on her back. He was lightly pressed against her; his fingers were
trapped between them and his body warmth like a furnace. His fingers lightly danced on her spine
even as he blew cold air onto her neck.

"Back up," Hermione muttered dangerously. She refused to admit that her whole body itched to melt
into his, a raging need to feel his fingers all over. It had been so long since she felt like this;
excitement for the chase bubbled up inside her even as she tried to tamp it down and feeling sexy
because deep in her gut, she knew he was there because of her.

She took a step forward, unwilling to wait for him to do as she bid. Never had arousal pounded so
fiercely through her body, enticing her to let go of her inhibitions. Without her famous iron will,
perhaps she would have given in to the impulse to lean into him and let him tease her with his
whispered breaths and featherlight touches. Even as she moved forward, Gellert moved with her,
refusing to take her warning seriously.

"Don't you think, Hermione?" Merope asked and turned for the first time since walking into the
bathroom. Her eyes widened comically as she watched Gellert plant a light kiss on Hermione's neck.
It was obvious that Hermione had not heard anything Merope had said for a good few minutes.

Hermione stopped breathing, unable to stop the shudder that ran through her as the feel of him
invaded her senses. The silence was awkward and stilted but before Annie could turn around to
investigate the reason Hermione had not answered, Gellert had moved back a good three feet to lean
against the doorframe, nonchalantly.

"We will take it." Hermione choked out, refusing to meet Gellert's amused and teasing smile. Merope
clapped happily, though the questions danced across her face.

"Brilliant!" Annie said, her smile reached from ear to ear. "There are just a few bits of paperwork
and it's all yours,"

"We want to move in today." She said, firmly. Annie's wide smile shook for a moment before
solidifying.

"I will have to contact the seller. If they are agreeable, we can have it all finalized in a few hours.
Why don't the three of you go to lunch and give me some time."

Hermione was shaking her head, despite the predatorial smile that bloomed on Gellert's lips. Merope
was looking between the two as if she anticipated all of their secrets would be found by observation.
Annie missed all of it as she started on the paperwork that would make the house theirs.

"Mr. Peverell, if you are still of a mind to tour houses today, I will be finished here in a few hours,"
Annie said over her shoulder to Gellert, who was obviously using an alias. How Annie didn't realize
who he was, was beyond Hermione. He looked exactly like his wanted poster that was hung in all
the major magical pubs in Britain and the world, most likely.

"Absolutely! It would hardly be a hardship to escort these wonderful women to lunch. It would be
my pleasure." He purred the last bit to Hermione as if he meant the pleasure would be more than just
her company or the food.
"We would hate to impose on you in such a way." Hermione ground out between her clenched teeth. His gaze was like a physical caress on her face and she blushed and looked away. Annie was staring at her as if she were shocked by Hermione's rude dismissal of Gellert's gallant gesture. Hermione was starting to suspect that Annie was either a Grindelwald supporter or she was just not very bright.

"It would only be lunch, surely you could stomach my company for such a short repast." Gellert affected a wounded expression and watched the moment that Merope and Annie turned unimpressed eyes to Hermione. With bad grace, Hermione accepted defeat. They were going to lunch with Gellert Grindelwald.

Annie gestured for Hermione to sit at the table and go over some of the paperwork. Hermione watched as Merope moved out into the front garden with Gellert, both admiring the overgrown climbing rose growth on the brick building. Hermione was on edge, only able to see the two of them through a closed window. It made her twitchy, as she couldn't hear what they were talking about.

"Once both parties sign, the money will be taken from your account and deposited into the account of the seller. The money will be held in escrow for one week to give both parties a chance to back out of the contract. I added, as requested, another condition of purchase; the premises be made available immediately. I will present this offer to the seller while you and your sister are at lunch. Hopefully, by the time you are finished, you will be the new owner!" Annie smiled as she slid the contract in front of her. With a flick of her wand, all of the lines that Hermione needed to sign were highlighted in bright yellow.

With one last look out of the window, Hermione bent to work, reading over the contract and signing or making changes as she went. By the time Annie had finished with Hermione, she was irritable and hungry. She walked out of the house to find Merope and Gellert sitting on a bench laughing together as if they were old friends.

Merope jumped up guiltily as Hermione stared at her grumpily. Gellert took much longer to get up, his sinuous grace a personal affront to the aggrieved woman. With a heart-stopping smile, he reached out a hand to Hermione, a challenge if ever there was one. Hermione ignored the hand and grabbed Merope's instead, tugging her into motion and out of the garden, leaving Gellert to follow on his own. A quiet chuckle was the only indication that he was indeed still behind them.

"I like him," Merope whispered to Hermione.

"No," Hermione said.

"What do you mean no? That is not a proper response to my opinion."

"No!" Hermione whispered fiercely.

"Harrumph!" Merope intoned, clearly put out. "I think you need someone charming like him in your life." She said a little louder. Hermione could hear the crunch of his shoes getting closer to them.

"You don't even know who he is." Hermione hissed.

"He appears to be a handsome stranger bent on seducing you."

"I don't want to be seduced!" Hermione whispered louder than she intended.

"Oh, but I could make it so enjoyable," Gellert added, his voice lowering, the deep smooth baritone swirled hedonistically around them. Hermione continued on down the lane, ignoring Gellert and headed towards the local chippy. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Merope throw him a commiserating look. They were ganging up on her, were they? She would have to nip this in the
The bell hung on the door tinkled as she pushed it open. A pleasant looking witch greeted them with a smile and sat them right away. There was nothing that earned Hermione's gratitude more than a competent wait staff.

The moment the hostess handed her a menu, she lifted it high and used it as a physical shield between them. Merope sat next to her and rolled her eyes, taking just a few moments to peruse the menu. It wasn't necessary, she would get the same thing she chose last time. They really did have the best fish batter. After the food had been ordered, Merope turned to Gellert.

"So why are you house hunting? Any reason in particular?"

"I like to see what comes available."

"Yeah, for your evil lair." Hermione murmured, taking another unnecessarily large gulp of her tea.

"What was that?" Merope asked her sweetly, pretending not to have heard her.

"Nothing," Merope said. "Mumbled Hermione. Gellert was grinning, his amusement palpable. Interest grew in his eyes as he must have realized that she knew exactly who he was. Bully for him.

"Mr. Peverell, what brings you to England?" Merope asked conversationally.

"Please, call me Gellert." His eyes twinkled with mischief. "I used to stay with an aunt here when I was a boy. I made some of my best acquaintances here. I was thinking I would move back and rekindle my alliances."

"That's a funny way of talking about your friends," Merope said. As if she had anyone other than Hermione to base her experience on.

"You see, I would love to address them as old friends. Alas, I am sure they no longer think of me that way."

"Why?"

"They are afraid of me." Gellert shrugged nonchalantly.

"Afraid of you? You are one of the most affable men I have ever met."

"Your scale for judgment is minuscule and broken," Hermione mumbled.

"You are walking on thin ice. Don't be rude." Merope snipped, her teeth clenched and she plastered a smile determinedly on her face. Hermione watched as Merope's cheeks flushed in embarrassment, and felt bad almost immediately.

"Sorry," Hermione murmured. She looked away guiltily and caught Gellert's eyes. He was studying her, as though staring hard enough at her would crack her wide open for him to examine.

"Who are you?" Gellert whispered intensely. Merope used the moment to excuse herself to go to the powder room, leaving Hermione alone with Gellert.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean. Where did you come from? No one had heard of you until you
showed up out of nowhere one day, just walking into Gringotts as if you had been there many times before. You are a mystery."

"I am perfectly ordinary."

"If that were true, you would not have defeated Albus so easily in a duel."

"What is it that you want from me?"

"I don't know yet, but I do know that you fascinate me. I am held completely spellbound and at your mercy, oh Gaia, and I need to slake my burning desire to know all of you. What secrets do you hold? I yearn to peel back each layer and revel in the discovery. A powerful woman like you, Hermione, is a challenge that I simply cannot bring myself to ignore."

"Oh, that was good," Hermione said amused, leaning forward, arching her brow. "very eloquent, Gellert. What next? Am I to be your goddess divine? The Venus of your heart? The goddess Hera of your life?" She rolled her eyes. His burning gaze unsettled her, and she tried very hard to mask the reactions of her body. She was drawn to him as improbable as it sounded, maybe almost as much as he was drawn to her.

"You asked me what I wanted from you and that was my answer. I don't know what draws me to you so forcefully, but I have every intention of finding out."

The moment was charged as they stared at each other, both too stubborn to back down first. With sheer force of will, she broke eye contact, only to drop them to his red lips. The lips that had tasted her skin not even an hour prior. Her body ached for his touch. It was nonsensical and unquestionably a bad idea, worse even than Merope with Riddle, but she couldn't help the way her body reacted. Never had any man affected her so profoundly.

Hermione pulled her gaze away from him and back down at her plate, grateful for something to do whilst not looking at the man seated opposite her. Hermione nearly groaned with relief when Merope finally returned.

"My father is here," Merope muttered out of the corner of her mouth. She was blushing with embarrassment and Hermione could tell that she hoped their new 'friend' would stay unaware of the possible drama. However, it was not to be as Marvolo wound his way through the tables of the chippy and stopped right in front of the place they were seated. Marvolo didn't even glance at Grindelwald and that suited Hermione just fine. She refused to be the catalyst of Marvolo becoming a zealot.

"Are you ready to admit to your foolishness, Girl? Repent and seek my forgiveness and I will have you back home where you belong."

"I am very happy staying with Hermione, Father. But if you care to visit me -"

"Which I don't" He sneered.

"Good!" Hermione said angrily. "You are not welcome at my house, Sir, and it would show poor decision-making skills on your part to ignore my continued warnings."

"Stay out of our family affairs."

"It would be impossible since I am family and all." Hermione bluffed. She was as good as, and she had no intention of ever letting Tom near Marvolo Gaunt.
"In what world would I consider you as my family?"

"Father! I am staying with Hermione and that is final. You can come for Yule only if you behave yourself. Other than that, you should keep your distance."

Merope gathered her things and tugged Hermione out of the booth and through the restaurant before going onto the streets. Grindelwald followed behind them at a slower pace. Hermione turned back to look at him and saw that he leaned in closer to Marvolo, his hand tight around the older man's bicep, talking to him in a low voice. The older man's head snapped back and turned white as a sheet. Standing in the same position as he was left, he watched as Gellert followed Hermione and Merope from the chippy. The older man was unsettled, and Hermione burned to know what Gellert had said to the man. However, she would hardly give Gellert the satisfaction of seeming interested.

The three of them were silent as they walked back to the property that Hermione was in the process of buying. Gellert kept his focus on Hermione. Hermione avoided him and his attentions. Merope tried valiantly to shrug off the encounter with her father and winked at Gellert, trying to position Hermione discretely between them in a bid to get Hermione some male companionship.

Hermione was resolute in denying him even the pleasure of walking near her and by the time they reached the house all three of them were frustrated and trying to hide it from the others. Annie must have seen them approach because she was on the front lawn with a huge smile on her face and the signed documents clasped in her manicured grip.

"They agreed to everything you asked for! The house is now yours. It was a pleasure and if ever you need to purchase another house or sell your property, give me the chance to work with you."

Annie pushed the stack of parchments into Hermione's left hand and the keys in the other. With a congratulatory smile and a pat on the shoulder, Annie had moved on to Gellert, escorting him off the property. Hermione watched as he walked closer to Annie and couldn't quite stifle the jealousy that rose in her. He was talking to Annie, pouring his charm on her and it bothered Hermione that he did that after making such pretty speeches about Hermione not that long ago. She turned back around towards the door, agitated that she cared at all, only to meet Merope's amused gaze.

"He is very charming."

"Shut up," Hermione growled.

Merope mimed zipping her lips before throwing away the key, her eyes sparkling with delighted mischief.

**HGHG**

The first week in the new house was a flurry of activity. Having little more than two suitcases between them, the first order of business was to procure the contents of a household. Hermione and Merope toured shops and vintage stores searching for the perfect furniture. Merope was in a constant whirl of happiness and Hermione surmised that the reason for her lift in mood was the creepy and weird, Tom Riddle.

Since they moved in and the bedrooms were furnished, she had caught the sleaze-ball there no less than twelve times, all in a state of nakedness. The more Hermione knew the man, the more she just couldn't understand Merope's fixation. The only thing she could say in his favor was that he was very nice looking, but then again so was Draco and Hermione never had the inclination to screw him all over the house.

Finally, things started to settle down around Christmas time and Hermione and Merope could often be found in the room they designated the library. Merope was sitting on a chair by the fireplace.
flipping through Witch Weekly while Hermione was researching the best baby care spells. It was
never too early to learn what she needed to know to give Tom the best chance of not becoming a
psychotic killer.

It was dark out and a snowstorm was rolling in, fat snowflakes fell in lazy clumps, giving the
surrounding area an unusual stillness. Every once in a while, Hermione would stop and practice a
wand movement or switch to a different book to expound on one spell or another when a knock
sounded at the door. Merope ignored it, knowing that Tom was out of town for the next week. With
that knowledge, she knew that whoever at the door wasn't for her and left it for Hermione who was
annoyed by the interruption and Merope's lack of interest in going to the door.

Hermione grumbled and pulled it open with a scowl. A wizened house elf stood on the stoop looking
ancient and somehow pretentious.

"I is Jesper, the last living elf bound to the Slytherin line." He said with a bow.

Hermione moved back from the door and invited the elderly elf in. She had a sinking feeling that she
wasn't going to like what was about to happen. Jesper was a proud elf who reminded her of the
stuffy butlers of the Manors of the Muggle Lords.

"Can I get you anything?" Hermione asked kindly, not sure how to act or what to do in this situation.
He looked at her down the length of his nose, even as he looked up at her and she just knew, that this
elf was going to take over.

"Yes! You can re-bond me then bond the rest."

"The rest of what?"

"The rest of the elves. Their parents served the proud line of Slytherin."

"Wouldn't you rather be paid, to have vacation? I would gladly hire all of you." She said. Anything
she would have further added immediately died on her tongue. Jesper was not amused.

"Mistress insults us," He sneered, sounding so much like Professor Snape that year her teeth grew to
beaver proportions.

She shook her head with eyes widened comically. She could face down Death, Death Eaters,
Voldemort, unknown horrors, condemning innocent girls to carry a parasite, time travel, losing
everyone she had ever loved, but still she could only stutter apologies at the old elf in front of her.

"I didn't mean…" She began before she was cut off.

"We is doing the binding now. Yes?" He nodded his head decisively and snapped his fingers,
instantly summoning three other full-grown house elves to the room.

"Okay," Hermione said defeated. There was no arguing with house elves, she knew this from
experience.

All five stood in a circle and stared, waiting for something to happen, before Jesper cleared his throat
and looked at her expectantly.

"You is having to do the binding, Mistress."

"What am I supposed to do?"
With another roll of his bulbous eyes, he produced a thin book from somewhere in his pressed tunic. He opened it to a page and placed the leather book in Hermione's hands.

"I, Hermione Slytherin, swear to provide the elves in my service with sufficient work and allow them to care for all things related to the familial Slytherin line. Furthermore, I swear to uphold the laws and spirit of the duties of a house elf, taking all in my charge under my protection. By the name Slytherin, I bind you."

"Jesper," The old house elf said in conclusion of the odd ritual followed quickly by a middle-aged female named Ellie, a young female Kinder, obviously mated to the last young male elf Nod.

"Give us orders, Mistress," Jesper said, snatching back the thin book of house elf law, wanting to keep it safe from her obviously incompetent hands. She couldn't help but be mildly insulted. As if she would deface a book… As if she would deface most books, she amended.

"Er, what do you want to do?"

Jesper smacked his forehead and the sneer was back even more pronounced than before.

"I run the staff and anything else you require. Ellie runs the house, Kinder runs the kitchen, and Nod runs the garden. There will be several more that arrive over the next week or so. They will be called by the Slytherin pledge. You do not need to do anything more. If I choose to accept them into the household, I will let you know. Now, Mistress, give us our orders."

"Um, my orders are exactly what he said."

"Good enough," He grumbled and pushed the elves into the kitchen.

"I have several rooms, you can pick what you need."

Jesper looked at her in horror.

"Elves will take care of their own homes, you is not needing to concern yourself." He was cold and formal, in dismissal and yet he waited as if he was waiting on her dismissal. It was Hermione's turn to look at him in horror as she realized that was exactly what she expected.

"You may go now," She whispered, still uncomfortable with owning not one but four house elves. If only her younger, S.P.E.W. obsessed self could see her now. Hermione heard a snort of laughter from the couch and narrowed her eyes at the young woman with her hand clamped over her mouth. Removing the hand, Merope smirked.

"Only you would be horrified at finding out that you inherited a few house elves."

Christmas was a quiet affair. Tom was still out of the country or Hermione suspected was unavailable because he was with another woman, but not being able to prove it, kept her mouth firmly shut. The two of them laughed and opened presents, playing silly games and pulling crackers. By the end of the night, several bottles of wine lay empty on the floor, the cheap hats were perched on their heads and they were giggling. Kinder was an amazing cook as it turned out and Hermione and Merope constantly were lavishing the tiny elf with praise. Hermione wasn't even sure that Molly Weasley made better food.

The Christmas season passed in a blur, and months flew by as the two women settled into their new home. Tom soon became a constant fixture in their lives as he and Merope continued on with their affair. Hermione was constantly hiding in her library with a strong silencing spell on the walls and ceiling. She had no desire to hear them. The times Hermione did run into Tom and Merope wasn't
there, he hit on her and tried very hard to get into her knickers. Needless to say, Merope was often beseeched to find someone else, not a cheating bastard but Merope was in love and blind to a fault. It was not long until the news Hermione had been waiting for, came to light.

"Hermione?" Merope asked, knocking on her bedroom one morning mid-April.

"Come in," Hermione called. She was lying in bed, reading a book on transfiguration that Dumbledore had sent over to her. Their relationship was odd. He constantly asked for Merope's hand in marriage in return for Hermione defeating Grindelwald. He kept sending her gifts, hoping to sweeten the deal. After the first few, she stopped sending them back. He, after all, had wonderful taste in magical texts.

Merope walked in and sat on the bed, wringing her hands. She took a deep breath and grabbed Hermione's book, careful to keep her page marked.

"I'm pregnant,"

"Congratulations,"

"Hermione, I'm serious!"

"So am I!"

"But I am not married!"

"Then get married!"

"Tom refused. Said it was my own fault."

"That slimy bastard. Do you want me to cast the imperious for you?"

"No, he said he didn't love me. He never loved me. He said I was an easy shag!"

"This is not the end of the world,"

"This child will be ostracized from the magical community."

"Yes, because we are so involved in it now, and your family never was. So, why do you even care?" Hermione said sarcastically.

"That's exactly why I care! I know what it is like to be left out."

"What do you want me to do then?"

"I don't know! For the sake of this child, I need to get married and soon. But who would do that? Who?!" Merope moaned the last word in despair. She was scared and frustrated.

Hermione tried again to reason with the distraught, hormonal witch.

"We can raise the baby together."

"This baby needs a father!" She said firmly and Hermione grimaced. "I need your help. I should have listened to you when you said Tom wasn't right for me."

"Let me talk to Tom," Hermione began, a dangerous glint in her eye.
"No! Not, Tom. This was the last straw."

"What do you want me to do?"

"As my sister and as a Slytherin, can you not pull some strings and find me a husband?"

"You are bound and determined in this?"

"Yes."

"I am going to regret this, I am sure, but I have had one offer for your hand in marriage."

"Who is that?"

"Albus Dumbledore."

"Why does he want to marry me?"

"He wants me to do something for him and he knows that you and your son are my priority."

"I'll do it."

"He will be delighted," Hermione said with a grimace.
I am sorry for my continued slow updates. Getting back into things is much harder than
I anticipated.

Chapter Six

GRINDELWALD FINALLY CAPTURED!

MACUSA'S MIRACLE CATCH!

GRINDELWALD INCARCERATED!

Hermione threw another copy of the Daily Prophet onto the table and sighed. She knew that this
wasn't over. It was still early in the game, in fact, she knew they were over twenty years away from
the end of this war. If they stuck to the original timeline that was.

She rolled her shoulders and considered her next step. Merope was set on marrying Albus
Dumbledore and had been badgering Hermione to liaison with him for over a week now. She used
her many and varied skills, tried her hand at persuasion and manipulation, hoping that one of the
other available men would do.

The problem turned out to be that Merope happened to like Albus. She felt as if they were
Hermione's first line of defense, that they were her only allies in the time she found herself in. If Tom
the Slag was out of the picture, and it seemed he was, then only Albus would do. It frustrated
Hermione to no end.

She took a sip of her coffee and closed her eyes.

"You don't have to look so constipated," Merope said as she sat across the table and smiled at Jesper
who placed her breakfast in front of her. "Isn't it a good thing Grindelwald has been captured?"

"They can't hold him. He will be out soon." Hermione murmured into her coffee.

"Oh," Merope said, spearing a grape from her fruit bowl.

"Why does it have to be Albus? There are so many available wizards who would be very happy to
have your pedigree and I would be very willing to provide that dowry we were talking about."

"Do know why I'm so stuck on Albus Dumbledore?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask," Hermione grumbled.

"He doesn't want me for money or my family. What he wants… Why should he have to be the one
to go against Grindelwald?"

"If not him, then me? Why should I have to do it?"
"You are the most equipped person to do it,"

"Maybe I just want a quiet life in the countryside, breeding kneazles and spending time with my nephew!"

Merope lifted a single sardonic brow. "And I'm Merlin himself," she deadpanned.

Hermione sighed again.

"Think about this, Hermione. Hypothetical situation. You, me, and the baby are living quietly here as we raise him. We keep to ourselves and you breed your damn kneazles. Then my son is old enough to go to Hogwarts and let's say he gets sorted into Slytherin or Gryffindor. He hears about the war going on, about the wizards trying to kill muggles. We both know he is going to be smart and powerful, let's imagine that he gets recruited and he joins Grindelwald. How does that accomplish what you came back for? Maybe he won't become a dark lord in his own right, maybe he joins up with the revolutionaries instead. Now, what better ally could you and I have if not Albus Dumbledore? While you are off doing your thing, protecting my son, we will have a family. A strong and powerful one. Is there anyone who would dare come against my son with Albus Dumbledore on his side? Will Albus ever let my son be swayed to the dark?"

"Ugh, I hate that you make sense…" Hermione scowled bitterly into her cup, wishing the answer really did sit at the bottom with the dregs, even if the practice was typically for tea leaves. Maybe she really should have paid more attention to Divination. "I'll send him a message today,"

"Thank you,"

"Yeah, yeah…"

Merope smiled and speared another grape, leaving all the strawberry chunks behind.

"Jesper?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

"Bring me a parchment, ink, and quill."

"Right away, Mistress,"

Within moments, he was back laying the asked for things next to Hermione's empty plate.

Albus,

I wish to discuss something with you. Hogshead, Saturday next, 10 pm.

Discretion is of the utmost import!

HS

**HGHG**

Hermione sat at the table in the Hogshead across from Dumbledore, a joyful twinkling in his eye.

"It would be my honor to marry your sister, Merope." He said, leaning forward eagerly, barely suppressing his delight in the way things have turned out. "Her child shall be my own and I will hold her in the highest esteem. I promise! The only dowry I require of course is the one matter we have previously discussed. I have no need of your wealth as I will be able to care for her and our children
"And I will begin the hunt as soon as you are married." Hermione stifled her grimace, the only indication that she would rather be anywhere else than sitting in the pub with Dumbledore. Hermione tried not to grind her teeth as she reflected on Merope's choice. She had spent several days trying to convince the pregnant woman that the two of them would give Tom all the love and care he could possibly need but Merope had held firm. Hermione apparently just didn't understand the stigma against children born out of wedlock. It rankled her that the nineteen twenties were still so harsh against single woman and their children. She could not wait until the wizarding world reached equality for woman's suffrage. She chose to ignore completely the other reasons Merope had for choosing this match.

Dumbledore held out his wand hand, waving over Aberforth with his other, bringing Hermione back to the distasteful topic at hand. Merope marrying Dumbledore on the condition that Hermione finds and take down Grindelwald. Privately she thought it might not be too hard. He had a tendency to show up where she was anyway. And at the most random times too.

"Will you be our binder?" Albus asked his brother. Aberforth nodded and held his wand aloft, waiting for them to begin.

"I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, vow to marry Merope Gaunt if she so chooses, providing for her and any children she will bear for the entirety of my life."

"I, Hermione Jean Granger Slytherin, vow to stop Gellert Grindelwald in his plan of wizard domination and any other nefarious plans he has concocted to the best of my ability as long as the first vow has been met."

Two golden ribbons curled around their clasped hands and flashed white before going invisible. Dumbledore smiled and pulled out the chair next to him, bidding his brother sit.

"Since we are all to be family, let's have a drink together."

"If there is any justice in the world, she will back out," Hermione grumbled, causing Aberforth to laugh loudly at his brother's expense, even Dumbledore's good mood couldn't be dampened. He had been dreading the confrontation with Grindelwald for years, Hermione knew, and now that the burden was lifted from his shoulders, he was a new man.

Aberforth had poured two fingers of his finest Firewhiskey in each of their glasses and the trio toasted Albus' fortunes. Hermione just pounded hers back and wondered what she had done to earn a life saturated with never-ending battles. She only switched out one Dark Lord for another. And this time it was worse because this Dark Lord wanted to get in her knickers.

After Hermione emptied her drink, she left the brothers behind to celebrate on their own. She needed to get out of there, to think, to come to terms with what she just agreed to. Deciding to do something was one thing. To vow magically to do it, was quite another.

The moment she cleared the entryway, Hermione twisted on the balls of her feet and apparated away. Seconds later, she reappeared on the banks of a beautiful lake that was more marsh than an actual lake in the Forest of Dean.

Tears welled in her eyes as the nostalgia hit her with the force of an oncoming train. This was where Ron came back to them, where they destroyed the locket, where they fixed the ravages of their friendship.
Doubling over, Hermione cradled her stomach as the first wave of gut-wrenching grief hit her. It had been so long since she let herself mourn. Or if she was intending on being honest with herself, it was the first and only time she allowed herself to grieve.

She missed them with an all-consuming grief. For years they were her life, her only family, and in one day, they were gone. Dead. Destroyed.

Years passed by in her memories of the bickering, the kindness, nagging the boys to study harder. Harry's smile. Ron's arm flung across her shoulders. The three of them in and out of dangerous situations since their first year. Together. Always together.

Desperately, she gulped the air into her lungs. She couldn't breathe. Closing her eyes tight against the pain, she felt tears run over her cheeks and drip onto the ground at her feet.

They would live, she told herself over and over. Their futures would not include any of the misfortune that they had experienced. There would be no war. Harry would have his parents, Ron would never be forced into camping in the wild, eating only mushrooms and berries. And she? She would be able to concentrate on her school work. Perhaps she would still be their friend. Perhaps not. They might not even be in the same house.

But they would live.

And that was the whole entire reason she was in 1926.

Hermione wiped the wetness from her face and took several more lungsful of air to steady herself. Her future may not include Harry and Ron but theirs may include her and that thought was enough encouragement to stop her tears and get back to the task at hand. Operation Happy Childhood.

It was the most and least she could do.

Once steady, she disapparated again, this time to a place she had only ever seen in pictures.

She landed on a small rise that overlooked a beautiful valley. The future site of the most secure prison in the world. Nurmengard.

A tent city sat off to the left, just outside the budding trees. They were grey and average, and Hermione wondered which tent was likely to house the blueprints.

"I knew you couldn't stay away," his husky voice murmured against her hair.

"I knew they couldn't hold you,"

"You've come to join me?"

"Ha! In your dreams,"

"Mmm. True." He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her. She could hear his breathing, feel the rise and fall of his chest. "If you aren't here to join my noble cause, why are you here?"

"Could I convince you that this is madness? Could I convince you to stop this war?"

"Why ever would I stop?" he asked, amusement heavily laced in his voice.

"Because there will be many casualties. Because I'm asking you to. Take your pick." Hermione shivered as a cool wind swept around them.
Grindelwald pulled her body back into his, bringing her closer, and giving her his warmth. "It's not right that we have to live in secrecy and that the Muggles get to live freely and ignorantly. So many things could be better if only we were the ones in charge."

"One thing I have learned is that Magic just makes things worse sometimes. We govern our own and they govern themselves. It works."

"Not always," he mumbled in her hair as he buried his face in her wild curls.

"This is the last chance, Grindelwald. Please," Hermione took a shuddering breath. "please, stop."

"The last chance for what?" He asked in a harsh voice while pulling away from her warm body.

"I made a vow today, a magical vow,"

"Oh?"

"I vowed that I would hunt you down and stop you."

"Why?" he whispered sadly.

"Because what I got in return was too much for me to give up."

"So, we are enemies?"

"It doesn't have to be that way,"

"Oh sweetheart, it does. It does." He stepped away from her, putting several feet between them.

Hermione shook from the renewed cold of the spring wind. She brought her arms up and tried to keep her teeth from chattering. Behind her, she heard rustling and knew that this little safe interlude was about to end.

"We could have been amazing, you and me," he said as he settled his warm cloak around her shoulders, enveloping her in his scent.

"Stop this and maybe we could see where we go…"

"No, my darling, it is too late for both of us to stop our courses now. You should go,"

"Next time I see you-"

"I know,"

Hermione turned around and looked up into his sweet face, too boyish and charming to be a dark lord.

"One kiss?" he asked, raising his hand to cup her cheek.

Adrenalin raged through her veins and her lips tingled. She wanted to know what it would be like with him but why, why would she do it? If she hated it, it was a wasted kiss. If she loved it, she would have to deny herself. Either way, it was better not to know. That is what her head tried to tell her traitorous heart.

"I can't," she said, and she watched him nod and drop his hand from her face.
"As you wish,"

Taking a step back, she looked at his regretful face, turned on the balls of her feet, and apparated.

Emotionally wrung out, Hermione walked into the house that she shared with Merope and was bombarded as soon as she crossed the threshold. Her talk with Dumbledore felt like a lifetime ago.

"What did Albus say?" Merope breathed, her whole demeanor strung tightly with stress and nerves, despite being told by Hermione earlier that she had already been approached by Dumbledore for this exact thing. No reassurances were acceptable without an ironclad deal. Was Dumbledore serious in his offer? She couldn't be sure until the ring was on her finger and this was the first obstacle.

"What do you think he said?" Hermione rolled her eyes and pushed past Merope to go to her room to change out of the robes. Carefully, she hung the dark grey wool of Grindelwald's cloak inside her armoire, lightly brushing the soft material before shutting them away. She wanted a glass of wine and sweatpants. That was all.

No such luck though as Merope followed her into her room, wringing her hands. Hermione ignored her for a few minutes while she changed, ignoring the fact that Merope was watching her. She had an unusual concept of privacy, Merope.

"Albus laughed at you, didn't he? He wasn't actually serious," She worried, her once hopeful gaze was now crestfallen and dejected. "Tom won't even speak to me now…"

"You don't need Tom. Your life would be so much the worse for having him in it. Merope, you are so much better than he is. I have no idea what you actually like about him but…" Hermione trailed off mid-rant, feeling bad at the look of disgruntled pain on Merope's face. This was an argument that they had had several times. Each time Merope had defended her sleazy lover, claiming he was just a misunderstood man in a sea of cookie cutter clones. It was a point of contention in which they could and would never agree. "Dumbledore, of course, said yes. It was something he had been begging me for, for months, Merope. I wish you would reconsider. He doesn't love you. He doesn't even know you. The only reason he wants to marry you at all is that he wants something from me. For you, I would do this, but we can raise your baby together. You don't need to be married!"

"Hermione, I love you as a sister. You are the bravest, most kind, brilliant, powerful witch anyone could ask for, but you are from the future. And I suspect things for women are much different in that time. I probably could weather whatever horrible things and situations that society could throw at me, but I'm not worried about what would happen to me. Can you just imagine what it would be like for my baby? When he goes to Hogwarts he will be treated as something less, not only because he is a half-blood but also because he was born to an unmarried woman. That is two strikes against him even before he steps foot in school. If I can make his life better by getting married. I will do so. You said you were here to make sure my son had a good and meaningful life. This is how I need to do it."

Hermione blew out a heavy breath and nodded. "That is why I entered into an agreement. Everything I do, I do for Tom. The reason I am here, the reason you are with me, the reason I agreed to Dumbledore's crazy schemes is all for Tom. He is too important to me to let anything happen to him. I have come to care very much for you, Merope. You are like family to me and I am glad that in all this craziness, I have been able to spend time with you. Tom truly missed out when you died in my past."

Merope nodded. "What did you have to agree to for Dumbledore to consent to marriage with me and accept my child as his own?"

"I have to hunt down Grindelwald in Dumbledore's place. I don't think it will be too hard, after all,
he keeps stalking me." Hermione averted her gaze. She didn't want to talk about their latest meeting.  
"Grindelwald is stalking you?"

"Who do you think that man really was that went house hunting when we did?"

"That was a charming, handsome man. He was interested in you. Is that the only basis you have in determining who is an evil dictator or not?" Merope snorted, rolling her hip into the door jam and putting her hand on the opposite. She was clearly amused.

"You don't believe that Mr. Peverell was actually Gellert Grindelwald?"

"No way! Grindelwald is scary and hulking. Mr. Peverell was wonderful."

Hermione was looking at her as if she had lost her damn mind.

"I am afraid for Tom. Both you and Dumbledore want to bury your head in the sand. Good thing he has me as an Auntie! At least he will have one sane ally."

Merope shook her head with a bemused smile. "Go ahead and be paranoid, I have a wedding to plan!"

"Don't remind me," Hermione grumbled.

The next month flew by as Merope planned for the wedding of the year and Hermione was stuck in a Hell of ivory silk and lace.

Merope was inside the house with the woman commissioned to make the dresses- hers and Hermione's- while Hermione took the rare opportunity to take a break from it all and hid outside.

Dumbledore flew up the path, a huge frown on his face; a frown that grew even unhappier as he saw her. Out of an inner pocket of his lurid venom green robe, he pulled a newspaper. A foreign one from New York City. The caption read:

**GRINDELWALD'S REIGN OF TERROR CONTINUES**

"What do you want me to do with this?" She asked. She never did tell anyone about her last visit with Grindelwald.

"I have an inside source that believes Grindelwald will be captured soon. We are both off the hook!" Dumbledore said.

Hermione grabbed him by the lapels of his terrible, flashy robe and pulled him close until he was a mere three inches from her face. "If you think you can back out from marrying Merope now, just because of this, think again," She growled, her voice barely above a whisper. "whatever you and your 'source' have planned will not be enough and if you jump ship now, I swear to you I will make your life a living hell! I will not hunt for Grindelwald, I will not do anything at all that may or may not help you with his capture or defeat. If you hurt my sister by backing out now, I will ruin you!"

Dumbledore raised his hands and placed them lightly on her shoulders. "I'm not backing out of this wedding. I already promised I would marry Merope and I am not a cruel man that would commit to something only to dash the girl's hopes. Over this past month, I have grown very fond of her. I only meant that if Grindelwald will be caught soon then neither one of us need to worry about him. That is all,"
"Oh," She murmured, highly embarrassed, smoothing the now wrinkled robes absently where she had grabbed on and hauled him close. "right,"

Dumbledore snorted, his bright blue eyes twinkling away. "Just because you are the one trying to catch him now, doesn't mean I don't intend on helping you. With that in mind, why don't you go after the wedding tomorrow and take a trip down to that site in Germany that Grindelwald's followers are amassing at? Find out what is going on."

"I already know what is going on. They are building a magical prison to house anyone who goes against their regime."

"Then you know exactly what to look for,"

"Blueprints. But it's not going to be that easy,"

"Why not?"

"I won't be able to walk into their camp and stop the nearest person and ask for directions to the tent where they are keeping the plans. To be honest, Grindelwald is there and I bet with every fiber of my being that everyone is on the lookout for people trying to infiltrate the camp."

"I wouldn't recommend just walking in without a plan. There are ways to go in unseen,"

Hermione sighed. He was right, but damn if she didn't hate him for it.

"It's not like there will be anyone here for you anyway, with Merope and I going to France for the next month, unless you have taken up with Magnus Prince."

"What would make you think that?" Hermione asked, thrown completely off from their prior subject to stare stupidly at the man.

"Merlin," Hermione winced. "Why are they so bloody persistent?"

"You are rich and pretty and powerful and a Slytherin. If you didn't want to be chased, you shouldn't have come back as such a tempting target."

"Those things were to help me change Tom's life. I didn't do it to be tempting," her lips twisted derisively.

"Alas, and yet... I suppose it is just another cross for you to bear."

Hermione grit her teeth, grinding them, baring down on them, hard. "Why can't they just take the fucking hint that I am not interested and would never, ever be?"

"Because men like that don't take no for an answer,"

Hermione groaned and followed Dumbledore into the house and winced as Merope screeched about superstitions and dresses. Albus raised his brows at Hermione, turned back the way he had come and shouted over his shoulder, "Until tomorrow, Dearest," before fleeing the house leaving Hermione to deal with an overwrought Merope on the eve of her wedding. It did not help matters that Merope's pregnancy hormones were making life rather interesting.

The next day dawned brightly, the birds were chirping loudly, and an expectant silence settled over their home. In the recesses of the kitchen, Hermione could barely make out the noise of the House-
elves as they went about their work, busier than usual. Today was the day that Albus Dumbledore and Merope Gaunt were to be married.

Hermione sat up and rubbed her face. A few days prior, Merope told her that she had sent an invitation to Marvolo and Morfin, hoping that for once in their lives they could support her. Albus Dumbledore was a good match that all but the staunchest of blood purists would be happy with. They hadn't heard anything from either of them and Hermione didn't really expect to. If it were up to her, she would have cut them out and never looked back.

She hoped for everyone's sake that the Gaunts stayed home and stayed out of Merope and Tom's life. She would have to have a chat with Albus. Tom was his responsibility now but much like the fight with Grindelwald, she planned on helping him. She knew the pitfalls and by Merlin, he would be prepared.

All of a sudden Merope barged in, crying, holding the strings of her corset, Kinder trailing behind.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, trying to smooth down her wild hair.

"My dress doesn't fit!" She wailed.

Hermione's brows drew together. "How is that possible. It fit fine yesterday,"

"I am severely bloated," Came the answering wail.

"Kinder?"

"Mistress?"

"Can you help her?"

"Not without hurting the baby, Mistress, I's don't wants to squeeze her."

"Can you resize the dress?"

"I can try…"

"NO!" Merope yelled. "You will undo all the spells the seamstress put into it."

"Okay, okay, don't panic. We will figure this out," Hermione said. She pulled her hair up and hit the whole thing with a sticking charm, satisfied when the mass stayed in place on the top of her head.

Hermione left her bedroom and entered the extra room that they dedicated to the making of the trousseau that had been made for Merope. The wedding dress was on the mannequin in the center of the room; a swirl of beautiful ivory silk, pearls, and delicate Irish lace.

"Hold still," Hermione murmured taking the strings of the corset in hand. She pulled the laces as tight as she dared, leaving Merope plenty of room to breathe, wrapping the long laces once, then twice around Merope's thickening waist.

With a flick of Hermione's wand, the dress rose in the air and settled over Merope's body. With several tiny alterations that Hermione wove around the seamstress's spells, the dress finally sat perfectly on Merope's body. It had only taken an hour. Which in Hermione's mind wasn't bad at all.

"How much time do we have left?" Hermione muttered quietly to Kinder.

"An hour, Mistress. I will help you dress,"
"Thank you," Hermione said before turning back to Merope who stood standing where she was left, wringing her hands, a faraway look in her eyes. "Merope, have you eaten yet?"

"What?" Merope asked, white as a sheet.

"I asked if you have eaten anything."

"I was going to, but I wanted to try the dress on first. I forgot after that."

"Ellie," Hermione called.

"Yes, Mistress?" Ellie said as she popped in, bowing slightly at the waist.

"Take Miss Merope to the kitchen and feed her something. Make it easy on the stomach. We don't need anything else to go wrong this morning."

"Yes, Mistress." Ellie slid her hand into Merope's and within the space of a breath, they were gone.

"Well, Kinder lets see what we can do with this," She gestured to her hair with a deeply amused chuckle.
Chapter Seven

The garden had been transformed into a wonderland. Soft pink peonies and white roses covered every inch of the arbor that had been erected for the sole purpose of Merope and Albus' wedding, woven by Aberforth who felt the whole thing was a complete waste of time. Why did weddings always have to turn out to be these big, drawn out, over the top things? He was heard grumbling. Albus grinned through the entire two hours as if it secretly pleased him that his brother was arranging flowers, ignoring the fact that he himself was also arranging flowers.

Hermione looked out of the window from the breakfast room and took another long draw from her coffee. Behind her, Merope was practically being spoon fed by Kinder, her hands shaking so much that not much food made it to her mouth using her own hand.

"Maybe this was a mistake," Merope said suddenly, and Hermione perked up hoping that Merope intended to back out.

"You want me to shut this down?" Hermione asked, a manic gleam in her eye. "because I will. I'll do it right now,"

Merope shook her head, then nodded, then shook it again. "I don't know,"

"Maybe we should wait until you do know. I know this whole thing happened so fast."

Merope shook her head frantically.

"Tom needs a father,"

"Tom needs a mother who loves him and strong family ties. Both of which he would have between the both of us."

"But having Albus as his father would change everything. Give him the entire package. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I consider this a win already," Hermione said between sips of coffee. "He was conceived under much different circumstances this time. I don't think he will be as fervent in his desire for eternal life. He will have love and connections and a solid foundation with or without a father."

"Trying to talk her out of marrying me already, are we?" Dumbledore asked, twinkling as Merope fled the room, Kinder, at her heels, yelling about last minute touch-ups. Hermione suspected she was just very, very nervous and didn't want him to see her that way.

"I've been trying to talk her out of it before I ever accepted the betrothal on her behalf," Hermione
"I will make a fantastic brother-in-law," Albus said with a smile. He sat down in one of the chairs and made happy noises as Jesper placed a full English breakfast on the table in front of him.

"I worry, Albus, that this will harm Tom more in the long run. I know that she doesn't love you and I know that you don't love her. I need Tom to be happy and part of making him happy will be treating his mother with love and respect. Can you do that? For as long as you live? Because I would hold you to the letter of the vow. Wouldn't you rather man up and hunt Grindelwald yourself. Being a father to Tom means so much more than teaching him how to ride a broom."

"You don't think I am up for the job?"

"Frankly, you make a piss poor father substitute in the future. So yes, I'm worried. I regret ever telling Merope of your offer."

"Hermione," Albus said as he rose from the table, breakfast forgotten. He rounded the heavy furniture and put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I understand how serious this is to you. In fact, I've been reading up on the care and feeding of children. I understand that this will be the hardest thing I've ever will do but it may also be the best thing in my life. Grindelwald is something from my past that I fear, and I know it sounds cowardly, but I would rather do anything else than finding out certain things about that night."

"I think you would be better off facing the whole thing. Nothing that you could possibly find out would bring her back to life again. So, does it really matter fault? I doubt either answer will give you the peace of mind you are searching for."

"So, you know it. All of it. I should have known," Albus said as he dropped his hand and his twinkle. He looked out of the window over Hermione's shoulder but didn't see any of the scenery, one particular moment replaying in his head.

"In the beginning when I first arrived in this time, I came to you first out of every other possible alliance I could have made." Hermione said softly. "I could have gone to any one of the sacred twenty-eight and they would have welcomed me with open arms and a binding betrothal contract. They would have let me take in Tom and I could have raised him as my own. Maybe I would have found love, respect, or even happiness. I didn't need you. I didn't need to interfere with Merope and her plans for Tom's father. Do you know why? Why out of all the things I could have done, I choose this? I wanted to prove that had Tom grown up under different circumstances, he would never have turned out the way he did. I wanted to prove, that the magical world failed him and everyone else by proxy. I am not a good person," Hermione held her hand up to stall Albus from disagreeing. "I used to be. I was a bright shiny example of why the purist's beliefs were complete twaddle. I reveled in it. I was prideful and arrogant as I had always accused Malfoy of being.

Years of being on the run, desperately trying to do this impossible task of just staying alive while trying to complete the other impossible task of destroying the evil wizard who had put a price on all of our heads changed that. It changed everything. It showed me that there was no line that I wouldn't cross, no law I wouldn't break despite any personal repercussions for myself to ensure the safety and prosperity and happiness of my family. That is when I finally understood you. Every decision you made, all the callous choices, it all became clear.

When you lose someone that you are responsible for protecting because of a foolish mistake, it changes you. It casts a pall over every single aspect of your life and it never leaves you. Not ever. Time doesn't dull the pain or ease the guilt. It is always there sucking at you. It shapes you, makes you darker, harder.
That is also why I did as Merope asked and accepted your betrothal on her behalf. I know you will not be so careless with his life as you were with Arianna's in the same way I was with the lives of my friends too. I still don't like that you are marrying her. I feel like everything is slipping out of my control and that scares the bloody hell out of me. I am here in this time for one reason, and one reason alone, and that reason is Tom. To not have direct control over his upbringing terrifies me. On top of that, I have made a vow to search for the current dark wizard so that you can play house with the little boy who could grow up to be the evilest dark wizard in history. That frightens me even more. You are not the man I would have picked for the job."

"If you could choose anyone in the entire world, who would you have chosen as a father for Tom?" Albus asked curiously yet quietly, accepting the somber nature of their talk.

"If I could choose anyone- past, present, or future to be Tom's father, I would choose my own dad. He would have been proud of Tom and what he could do. He would brag to anyone who would listen of Tom's brilliance. My dad would have loved him, would have done anything for him, as he did with me."

"Even your father was human, Hermione. He would have eventually seen Tom for what he was," Albus said.

"Yeah," she nodded, agreeing sadly. "But Tom would have been loved."

"And you don't think I can love him?"

"I think you would love him as much as you are capable despite the grieving and guilt from your past. But I watched you manipulate Harry his entire life and I believe that you loved him as much as you could love anyone. Tom needs better than that."

"You aren't going to disappear just because you aren't his mother, Hermione. You will still make a great impact on his life, more so than the rest of us, I think. He will be fascinated with you, his interesting Aunt. You will shape him into a man far more than you realize. Kids need love just as much as they need food and shelter, but they also need the freedom to explore their own capabilities. You nor Merope nor I will always be at his side to make sure his decisions are not detrimental. The best you can do is help us raise him to be a good man and hope."

"Can I trust you with him?" Hermione turned and asked Albus seriously, looking him straight in the eye.

"I will become an outstanding father, please trust me in this."

Albus went back to the table and tucked his napkin into the neck of his dress robes, smiling as he set to work, eating the breakfast Jesper prepared for him. Hermione downed the rest of her coffee and with a click of her heels, exited the room, wand flicking as she went, making last-minute fixes on her way to Merope's room as the guests started to arrive.

"Are you ready?" Hermione smiled at Merope who had visibly calmed in the few minutes that she was alone.

"I heard you and Albus,"

"Of course you did, you have no sense of privacy," Hermione snorted then asked curiously, "What did you think?"

"I think that you don't give Albus enough credit. I don't know exactly what you both were talking about with his past, but I do know this, I've been around enough dark and abusive wizards to know
that he isn't one. Albus will treat me and any children well. I think I could fall in love with him. I'm just scared he will think about this, truly think about who I am and run, despite the agreement you both have come to. Look who my family is, look at the father of my child. He would be stupid not to jump ship. If I were a better person, I wouldn't marry him. But I need him, for Tom. For myself. Please, Hermione, I need your support in this."

Hermione sat hard, blinking rapidly in shock. "You think you could love him?"

"I do,"

"That changes everything," Hermione said smiling at Merope as she stood and lifted the intricate lace veil and settled it perfectly on the bride's head. "I wish you both every happiness,"

Merope grabbed her hand and squeezed it, letting the fear show on her face.

"Any sensible man wouldn't be able to ignore someone so beautiful and interesting. Don't sell yourself short. You are smart and funny and loyal. He is so very lucky to have you. Besides, Tom is one of the most brilliant wizards. Ever. He had to have gotten it from somewhere, and after meeting his father, I'm pretty confident it wasn't him."

Merope laughed and pulled Hermione in for a hug. "It's time I become a married woman,"

Hermione led Merope through the house, stopping in front of the French doors that led to the beautiful gardens.

"Wow," Merope breathed as the wind whipped the sheer white curtains around them. Albus stood in front of the bower, hands clasped in front of him, smiling nervously at something that Aberforth whispered in his ear.

"Do you want me to walk you down the aisle?" Hermione asked.

"No matter how much you try, you are not actually Merope's family," a gruff voice said from behind them and they turned, shocked as Marvolo stood uncomfortably in handsome black dress robes. "I will be walking my daughter down the aisle to her husband."

"Father?" Merope asked. It wasn't that long ago he was threatening, abusive, and allowed others to abuse her. Hermione narrowed her eyes in suspicion. Why was he playing nice all of a sudden?

"You didn't think I would miss your wedding, did you?" Marvolo muttered, offering his arm.

Merope had stars in her eyes and was glowing.

"Is this what you want?" Hermione whispered to Merope and watched helplessly as Merope slid her hand into the crook of her father's arm while nodding.

As the string quartet began the wedding march, they took their first steps out onto the silk runner that led to Albus. Step by step, they closed the distance to the bower. Merope was twinkling, shining, glowing and she held tight to Marvolo's arm. Hermione felt a lump in her throat and her eyes began to prickle.

A deep gratitude towards the Smurg welled in her and she knew for certain that this was just another step in setting Tom's life on a better path. Guilt twisted in her stomach as she thought of Draco and his daughters. Perhaps she shouldn't be so quick to vilify Albus's inability to move past his guilt. She wasn't sure she would ever forgive herself for what she did to get there. Did that make her a bad candidate to influence Tom too? Merope was right. She was not giving Albus enough credit.
"Weddings always make me tear up," a husky voice murmured into Hermione's hair, long fingers slid over the silk of her hips until his palms rested on her abdomen. Gellert Grindelwald pulled her back into him, setting his chin in the cradle between her neck and shoulder.

"Grindelwald," She said by way of greeting. Her whole body tingled as if she just stepped out of a hot spring into cold winter air and she marveled at how well they fit together, how his hard body wrapped around hers. All firm muscle and teasing lips.

"I brought an extra handkerchief just for you," he pressed his smiling lips onto her skin and reached into his robe pocket before holding the handkerchief in front of her face.

"Aren't you just the consummate gentleman," she said as she took the silk square from his hand and balled it up tightly in her fist.

"I am,"

They both fell silent as Marvolo handed Merope over to Albus and sat in the front row seat that had been reserved for Hermione. It didn't bother her overly much. She didn't mind watching from the house.

"Why are you here?"

"Your beloved sister is getting married. I thought you might need a shoulder to commiserate on."

"And you thought that shoulder ought to be yours?"

"I did think I was the most qualified,"

"Qualified?"

"I am devilishly handsome. I hear that it is all the rage, strong beautiful women crying on the shoulders of handsome men,"

"If that is the only prerequisite, I am sure I would be quite well attended," Hermione said even as she grimaced as she glanced at Magnus Prince as he turned in his seat to pin her with his black stare.

"Replaced me already have you?" Gellert said as Prince turned back around, having been prodded rather viciously by his elderly mother.

"It's hard to replace someone who was never there in the first place,"

"Ouch! You go straight for the family jewels, don't you?"

"Don't pretend like you are hurt. There is nothing between us, and you know it,"

"I know no such thing, Hermione. Every time I'm near you, your body thrums with energy and desire. Don't bother to lie, I can smell it on you," His nose skimmed her neck and she felt the rush through her body, just like he predicted.

"You and I are on opposite sides of this conflict. It could never work,"

"You could join me,"

"Except for the vow," Hermione snarked.

"If there is anyone who has a reason why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold
your peace," The officiant said, holding his wand aloft, readying for the bonding magic that would take place next.

"I have a reason," Marvolo said as he stood.

A gasp washed over the crowd and Hermione's rage flared.

"Never a dull moment around here," Gellert muttered as Hermione stormed down the aisle and brandished her wand, forcing Marvolo immobile and silent as Merope stood frozen, hands in Albus' with tears in her eyes.

"Nothing to see here," Hermione said airily as she marched down the aisle as if she was Marvolo's attendant at a mental facility and had just found her missing charge. "Ignore him. He is confused. I'll take him inside and get him some water," She nodded at each person as she passed while continuing to mutter, "I'll help him right to his grave,"

Aberforth smiled wide having heard the last and left Albus' side. "Great idea, Hermione, let me help you,"

He grabbed the back of Marvolo's robes and dragged him down the aisle. Magnus Prince stood and followed them back to the house.

Gellert took over the second they cleared the threshold and flicked his wand in complicated patterns, binding the man to a chair and silencing the room, obviously anticipating an interrogation while simultaneously blocking Prince from entering the house behind Hermione.

"You did that on purpose," Hermione whispered to him gesturing to Prince who was trying to tear down the wards that kept him outside.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" Aberforth interrupted, staring furiously at Gellert.

"Hell, if I know," Hermione muttered as she lifted the silencing charm on Marvolo.

"Unhand me!"

"Instead of acting like an adult, you have to humiliate Merope in front of everyone. Why?"

"Bride price! It was never discussed! Pureblood etiquette still has to be followed even if he is a filthy half-breed!"

"Bride price has already been discussed and agreed upon. You need not worry about providing your daughter with a dowry. I have already done so." Hermione sneered.

"What did Albus ask for?" Aberforth and Gellert asked together.

Hermione looked at Aberforth as if he sprouted another head. "You were there! You were our bonder,"

"Oh…."

"Merlin, is anyone going to fill me in?" Gellert said annoyed.

"She vowed to hunt you down," Aberforth said with quite a bit of smugness.

"Oh that," Gellert said, losing interest. Aberforth's smug smile dropped immediately.
"That is what he bargained for when he asked for my daughter?" Marvolo yelled.

"Albus Dumbledore is wealthy enough that he need never work again, though he will. Merope and their children will never want for anything. He wanted something from me as the bride price. And it wasn't something small either. You make it sound like its an easy thing to ask for,"

"How is it not easy? Grindelwald is standing right there," He gestured with a nod of his head at the revolutionary leader. "In. Your. Fucking. House!"

"I've not been caught," Gellert said cheerfully. "I'm here to be her date."

Aberforth raised a single brow at her and Marvolo glared mutinously.

"That is a damned lie," she hissed. "he wasn't even invited."

"And yet I'm here. I aim to please,"

"You are not helping,"

"Now who is lying? I'm the one who bound him to the chair. That's me, Mr. Helpful,"

"Merlin's fucking balls," Hermione growled in frustration. She turned towards Marvolo and asked in the calmest voice she could muster, "What is it that you want, Marvolo?"

"The Gaunt ring. Once she is married she has no claim to it. I want it returned!"

"I will pass along the message, but you humiliated her. I rather think your odds are slim,"

"I will disown her!" Marvolo threatened.

"Yes, I'm sure that after everything you have done to her over the years, this will be a big surprise," Hermione said dryly.

"You have no right!" Marvolo yelled, fury turning his face red, spittle flying from his mouth.

"I have every right," Hermione said coolly, leaning closer with a dangerous glint in her eyes, all humor gone. "No one, not even the Ministry could stop me from doing what I am tasked to do. I would burn this world to the ground before I let anyone, including you, cock it all up. You want fairness? You want a patriarchal world? You want to do what you want without consequences? Fuck off, Marvolo Gaunt! Go back to your hovel and live like a hermit. Be glad that you will walk away from this with your life and take heart in knowing that your line will live on, connected to Albus Dumbledore. It is quite literally the best-case scenario."

"It is quite reassuring to hear that because I could have sworn you said the exact opposite this morning," Albus said as the newly wedded couple walked through Grindelwald's wards as if they were nothing. Hermione turned to raise a brow at Gellert only to find empty space. Perhaps it wasn't only Dumbledore who feared a meeting.

"Yes, well," Hermione sniffed disdainfully. "I still have my reservations."

Merope smiled wide, trying to hide the tears welling in her eyes as she looked anywhere but at her father. She kept her arm looped with Albus and squeezed as if his arm was a flotation device that was the only thing that kept her from drowning. "What does he want?"

"The ring,"
"How about I give it to my first-born son. If Morfin doesn't marry, and I doubt he will, it will be my son's birthright."

"You are forgetting one major detail, girl," Marvolo spat. "No half-blood brat will ever wear the proud Gaunt family ring!"

"The name may once have been proud, but there is no pride left to the name," Hermione said coldly. "Look at you. You hold no properties except the one you currently reside. You are poor and no longer are allowed your seat on the Wizengamot. You no longer hold the respect of your peers. There is nothing left to the name Gaunt. Merope brings respectability back to the name by marrying Albus."

"But at least we were still pure," He said scathingly.

"Inbred, you mean," Hermione sneered. "Give it a rest, Marvolo, there is nothing else for you here. Just go. Pretend Merope is off somewhere on a great adventure if this is how it is always going to be with you."

"Release me!" He demanded.

"Father," Merope said. "Is there a way we can work past this? It doesn't have to be like this."

"You married well below your status,"

"And who else was I going to marry? The Malfoy Heir?" she snorted. "We were so much less in their eyes, all of their eyes. No one that you would have deemed worthy would have deigned to marry me. We may have been pure, but we were from the dregs of the society. There would be no advantage for any of those men to marry someone like me. I don't even have to tell you our circumstances that you never made better. You didn't provide any way for me or Morfin to marry where you would have approved, especially after mother's death. Rather suspicious it was. And no one in their right mind would have entrusted a daughter to our family."

"I didn't harm a hair on your mothers' head."

"True, because that was really all that was left, wasn't it? For Polyjuice."

"You ungrateful whore!"

Albus pulled his wand and aimed it at Marvolo calmly. "You need to leave, and I would appreciate it if you didn't come back. No one speaks to my wife that way. No one."

Marvolo bared his teeth, snarling, unable to string together a slur bad enough to lay at Albus' door. With a wave of his wand, Marvolo was free and still apoplectic, made his way to the door. At the last second before leaving the way he had come, he turned and snarled at Merope, "This is not over,"

Albus clenched his teeth and a muscle worked continuously in his jaw, his wand still primed for battle.

"That was well done Albus," Hermione said. "I guess my fears have been unfounded."

"I told you that I would never hurt her, that I would protect her. You were judging me for things that I have not done and probably will never do. I am not the Dumbledore that you remember. But, I would like to believe that there is no reality that I do not fiercely protect my own family, my own wife, from anyone. Even her father."
Hermione nodded and smiled. "Alright, Albus. You've made me a believer. Take care of them for me."

"Where are you going?"

"I have a Dark Lord to stop,"

"He was here just a few minutes ago, wasn't he?" Aberforth interjected irritably.

"Grindelwald was here?" Albus said.

"Merope was getting married. He came to bait me because he knew I wouldn't do anything to interrupt Merope's wedding. Plus, he was very helpful while restraining Marvolo."

Merope smiled, clearly trying to shake off her father and his hurtful ways. "I knew you liked him!"

"You have a skewed perception of things."

She smiled wider and bumped Albus with her elbow and said, "How much do you want to bet that Grindelwald gives it all up just to be with our darling Hermione?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If only it were that easy,"

"I bet fifty galleons that Grindelwald cannot nor will ever stop in his conquest of subjugating the muggles," Albus said.

"I'll take that bet," Merope said smugly.

"I'll add another fifty if he turns himself into the Aurors," Aberforth said.

"I hate you all so much right now," Hermione said before stomping away.

Merope laughed and called to her, "Jesper will kill you if you miss the cake,"

Hermione narrowed her eyes but stopped all the same. The struggle was readily apparent within her whole body. Respect the wishes of the head house elf that refuses to accept any form of payment or stomp off to cool down somewhere else? Merope smiled smugly as Jesper's wishes won out.

"Fine," Hermione said dramatically, still shooting glares at Merope who was pretending to be unaware but was also smiling happily at her victory. "You definitely would have been in Slytherin," she mumbled in poor grace as they walked back outside.

The chairs had been moved and a large wooden platform took center stage as the couple walked back outside. Small tables surrounded the cleared wood floor and Hermione and Aberforth unanimously and nonverbally sat together at the same table. Magnus Prince was once again sitting next to his mother, anger like burning coals smoldered in his eyes. Hermione doubted anyone ever said no to him or avoided him or did anything other than beg for his attention.

She rolled her eyes and turned her focus back to Merope. Once again, the bride was shining, a bubbling smile lit her face and her unannounced pregnancy made her glow. She was beautiful, and Hermione knew that Tom Riddle would be the luckiest boy in the entire world with a mother like her.

Thankfulness nearly drowned her. Without the Smurg, without Draco and his willing acceptance, without her own tenacious spirit, she wouldn't have had the pleasure of meeting Merope. The only thing that could make this whole thing better, would be the knowledge that in the end, it was worth
it. That she did the right thing, that all the sacrifices she made for herself and others were worth it. She wished she could see in the future and know she was doing right by Tom. She wished that the Smurg had told her exactly what steps she needed to take for Tom to turn out better. She wished it was easier, knowing what the right thing was.

Hermione was brought back to the present as Merope's laughter floated over to her where she sat next to Aberforth while the bride and groom fed each other bits of cake. The great thing about Aberforth was that he didn't need to fill long silences with pleasantries.

"I've been trying to get to you all day," said a low voice in her ear, a voice that sent chills up and down her spine. The fear of failing a potion or being ridiculed for waving her hand in the air stole over her. She whipped around nearly convinced that Snape was indeed standing right behind her. But it wasn't Snape. It was his better-looking relative. Magnus Prince.

"I've been busy,"

"Yes, with your charity case," he sneered.

"Merope is like a sister to me. It would be a mistake to treat her otherwise,"

"And with such a promising match, she is now a useful connection. But Dumbledore isn't the only powerful connection to have." He continued, then sat beside her.

Aberforth stood at the same time, leaving her to defend against Prince alone. Hermione grabbed at Aberforth's arm and for several seconds they scuffled- her desperately trying to prevent him leaving and him desperately trying to get away from the undoubtedly awkward scene. With one last yank, Aberforth was free and with a speed that Hermione couldn't believe possible, left her alone with her suitor, however unwanted.

She slowly turned in her chair to face Prince. "I have many connections,"

"I have no doubt of that, Miss Slytherin. Do you know how much the Goblins had been bribed over the course of the last several hundred years for the privilege of that vault that was considered unclaimed? It was widely believed that there were no longer any living relatives to claim the vault, but to the last, the Goblins refused. And then you come along and open the Slytherin family vault. All the while touting the name itself. For the Goblins to acknowledge you as heir to the vault but also to the name, you have to be the real deal. You are the most desirable woman alive and it doesn't hurt anything that you are powerful and beautiful to boot. I could be a good husband to you, a good connection." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "I would be the most attentive lover,"

"How… considerate," said another, less amused voice. Hermione looked up with the deepest gratitude at Gellert Grindelwald.

"I thought you left," Hermione said.

"I had need of the loo," he said averting his eyes and Hermione smirked. She didn't believe him at all but at this moment, but she could have kissed him anyway.

"And who are you?" Magnus Prince asked in his best Pureblood 'I am better than you' voice.

"I am her fiancé. Do you mind?" He gestured to the seat that Prince was sitting in. "Thank you for keeping her entertained for me," his mouth said thank you, his eyes and tone said fuck off.

With supreme grace, Prince rose and as he left, bumped his shoulder into Gellerts.
"It's not really a great idea to antagonize someone who could make your life difficult if he found out who you were."

"What? You aren't going to yell at me for publicly claiming you?"

"I would have gone along with anything if it meant getting rid of him,"

"He's not as bad as all that, surely,"

"He reminds me of someone,"

"Someone you don't like?"

"Yes and no," she said shrugging, trying to hide her grimace. "It's complicated." It didn't matter that in the end Snape had turned out to be on their side. It didn't matter that he spent his whole life loving Lily Potter. She would never get over the years of verbal abuse and the horrendous treatment of Harry. A grown ass adult shouldn't ever treat a child the way he treated Harry, despite his parents. She possibly could forgive him his treatment of her, but it was the treatment of her friends that solidified his place in her mind. Yes, he deserved respect as a potions master, their professor, and their spy but that is where her respect ended.

"Well, do you know what that means?"

"What?" Hermione asked confused.

"Tonight, you are mine,"

"Until Albus comes over, then you will have to seek out the loo again." she surmised. He pretended not to hear. "Are we just going to pretend that you don't know that we are on opposite sides of this war? That I will be actively trying to stop you?"

"Tonight, you are not Hermione Slytherin, Dark Lord Hunter and I am not Gellert Grindelwald the most wanted wizard alive," he winked at her. "Tonight, I am your fiancé and you are mine."

"You are too charming for our own good," Hermione added.

"I'll take that as consent," Gellert said happily. "Dance with me,"

"Ugh. Fine" She smiled and slipped her hand into his waiting one.

He led her to the middle of the dance floor with the other couples and pulled her into a waltz, expertly leading her around the floor.

"I didn't know you could dance like this," she said breathlessly and wracked her brain for all the details she ever learned about Grindelwald. Even with all the books she had studied, never was there anything about this. What else did he excel at that wasn't in the books?

"You, my dear, have never asked," he sniffed with fake disdain, teasing her.

"Hmm…" she voiced even as he spun them around the dance floor.

"That is not something I often tell people, it will have to be our little secret," he said.

"Another secret…" Hermione muttered rolling her eyes. "And apparently, the best kept one too."

"What was that my lovely wife to be?" he asked loudly, drawing the attention of several of the
dancers.

"Is that…," Hermione trailed off looking over his shoulder. "is that Albus?"

He quickly turned her around and scanned the crowd where Hermione had been looking and stopped only as Hermione began laughing. He pursed his lips.

"That was not funny," he deadpanned. Hermione just laughed harder, drawing even more attention to them.

When the music died down, Gellert led her off the dance floor and back over to the table, bent over her hand in a formal, stately bow, and kissed her knuckles. "Until next time, Dear Heart."

"Are you leaving?"

"Duty awaits,"

Hermione's hand clenched his, refusing to let go, her face held not a trace of the pleasant humor she had been in all night. "You mean Nurmengard?"

"That is only but one small fraction of my plans,"

"I can't let you leave knowing you are going off to do Merlin knows what,"

"And how, my dear, are you going to stop me?"

Hermione let go of his hand and his face flushed with his triumph until Hermione reached up and slid her fingers into the hair on the nape of his neck and tugged his mouth down to hers. He tasted incredible, exactly how she imagined. All soft pliant flesh meeting, caressing, sucking. She leaned into him, letting his hard, lean body support her, letting his hands smooth over her waist, down to the small of her back. Kissing him because she wanted to- needed to- despite telling herself it was to keep him there, to keep him away from his illegal activities.

She wasn't sure who was more surprised, him, her, or Merope who squeaked the moment their lips met.

"I knew it!" Merope breathed.

Gellert jerked back, staring at Hermione, studying her face. This changed everything. That kiss that she didn't want to know about, that kiss she had refused to give him at Nurmengard, was exactly the kind of kiss she always dreamed about when she thought of such things. It was all fireworks and magic.

"Merope?" Albus' voice carried to them as the groom struggled to reach them through the dancing couples.

Gellert pulled Hermione close again and kissed her in a swift but sweeping fashion and turned away, melting into the crowd, leaving Hermione dazed. She could still taste him on her, smell the spicy scent of him on her robes.

"Everything alright? I heard you yell," Albus said as he finally reached them. Hermione vigorously shook her head and hoped that Merope would get the message. If she didn't understand by Hermione's obvious overtures, perhaps, her overly large wild eyes would have done it.

"I was just surprised, all. Hermione is all alone. I wanted to meet the dashing man who had
convinced her to dance."

"Yes, who was that?" He asked her curiously. "We didn't get a good look."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth over and over like a fish, still mentally reeling from their kiss.

"It looked like the same man who keeps running into us, yes?" Merope saved her, her eyes twinkling in a very Dumbledorian-esque manner. Which suited since she was now a Dumbledore, and so Tom would be. For a moment that in itself blew her mind. Tom Dumbledore. Wow.

"Someone has been habitually running into you?" Albus asked, worried.

"Yup," Merope popped the 'p' on yup and chuckled to herself when Hermione narrowed her eyes. "But don't worry, if he was dangerous, I doubt Hermione would kiss him,"
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I am sorry for the long wait (across all my stories) I've battled writer's block, water line breaks, my washer dying midweek, and many other things but I won't bore you anymore with that. Again, sorry.

Chapter Eight

Hermione felt badass in her black ninja outfit as she cased the perimeter of the camp at Nurmengard. She blew an errant curl out of her eyes, frustrated. The wards had recently been strengthened and even with her prodigious knowledge of wards, it was not enough to break through without alerting Grindelwald's followers.

"Damn," she whispered, chewing on her bottom lip, scouring her brain for any sort of idea. She had already cased the perimeter, hoping to find even one chink in the magic. "I guess there is only one more thing to try."

Hermione took a step back and closed her eyes trying desperately to remember the years of sharing a dorm with the two most self-important teenage witches she knew. Parvati and Lavender. Both who spent their sixth year studying the intricate art of beauty spells. Something that never interested Hermione greatly. She learned all the basic hygiene spells along with the householding spells that came in handy while they were on the run, but there were always more important things to take up her time, like keeping Harry alive.

For this, she needed to smooth and define her wild curls, give her face a natural and yet contoured face, and a dress to kill.

With a twirl of her wand, reminiscent of Cinderella's fairy godmother, her black ninja clothes turned into a classy black number that she had remembered her mother wearing once. A classic Versace or some such thing. The makeup spell was easy enough as she remembered watching with annoyance as Lavender took an extra five minutes to apply it, hogging the toilet and mirror every morning before class.

It was her hair- always the hair- that gave her troubles and no matter how she racked her brain, there was no help for it. It would smooth and curl beautifully for seven seconds before frizzing back as if she were still in potions class, hunched over a steaming cauldron.

Finally, she nodded her defeat and made do with a messy chignon, hoping it would be classy enough to be believable. With another nod to herself, she apparated back to the edge of the clearing where the makeshift apparition point was placed.

"Oh," she stumbled breathlessly, falling into the arms of one of Grindelwald's lieutenants. She looked up at the stunned man through her eyelashes and smiled. "Thank you."

She stood up and looked down, trying to force a blush onto her face before looking back up.

The soldier was young, even younger than her- barely of legal age, she guessed.
"Are you okay, Miss?"

"Clumsy me. It's not so easy to apparate in these shoes and especially since I've been in them for quite some time. I am afraid I've been stood up." She tittered nervously, mentally berating herself. She sounded hideous. It would surprise the hell out of her if he believed her weak story.

"And you are here because?" the soldier asked.

Hermione drew her brows together and bit her bottom lip. "My brother is in camp and I need a friendly face right now,"

"Who is your brother?"

She narrowed her eyes, mentally cursing her bad luck at finding a soldier who was not derelict in his duties. Perhaps it was only Voldemort's regime that was lackadaisical.

"It's fine, Lieutenant Vogel, she is with me," a deeply amused female voice said from behind Hermione. Hermione turned, planting a smile on her lips to thank the woman and came face to face with Vinda Rosier, the witch who seduced and spied and led countless Aurors to their deaths during Grindelwald's revolution.

Hermione's left eye twitched with anxiety, remembering the exact book that recited this woman's war crimes. Espionage, seducing their enemies for information, murder with her silk sheets. She was rumored to be Grindelwald's concubine, sent into the enemy camp. Hermione swallowed. The photograph that was included in the book did no justice to this woman what so ever. As beautiful as Helen of Troy was purported to be, Vinda Rosier was her equal.

Vinda slid her arms across her shoulders and pulled Hermione in as if they were the very best of friends. An enigmatic smile slid over her features and her scarlet lips rested a whisper from Hermione's ear.

"You are exceptionally bold, Hermione. To show up here at his base of operations while the man himself presides from his tent. He said you would come. He also said you would walk right in through the front door. What can you mean showing up here, dressed like that?"

Hermione stiffed under the other woman and hissed, "You know who I am, and I know who you are. Leave me here. Let me go about my own business. While you still have a chance."

"He said you were a firecracker," Vinda chuckled.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be? His bed perhaps?" Hermione tried to pull away, tried to get to her wand all the while cursing herself. She should have had a palm on it the whole time. Did years and years of war teach her nothing? Where was the constant vigilance now?

Vinda threw her head back and laughed, dragging Hermione along with her. "My sweet temptress, I am more likely to be in your bed than his."

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Shocked?"

"Yes," Hermione said honestly.

"Why?"
"Because you sleep with men to gather intelligence for Grindelwald,"

Vinda pulled them both to a halt a look of incredulous rage sufficing her face. "Where would you get such an idea from?"

Hermione's mouth snapped shut, wondering how she could be so stupid. The books said that Vinda was one of the best spies, so good in fact that they never got any definitive evidence, only circumstantial. It led to her execution in the end anyway but there was always that doubt. This was something that was not common knowledge of this time. Not for either side. It was very likely that the only people who knew for sure what she was, were Grindelwald and herself. So how could Hermione explain her knowledge away?

"A woman does not look like that, dress like that, and join a rebellion with only the calling of the foot soldier in her blood. You look like a spy. And you look like you could be a damn good one too. It would be foolishness to underestimate you just because you are a woman."

"I like you," she said forcing Hermione back into a walk. "I can see your allure. He will not be able to resist that… je ne sais quoi. There is just something about you that makes me want to taste your fire."

They strolled through camp, seemingly unnoticed, and stopped before an unremarkable medium sized tent. Vinda snorted, amused at something Hermione could only guess at and pushed Hermione inside ahead of her.

Grindelwald looked up from his desk where he was writing, wearing only a pair of grey sleep trousers and an open black silk robe, leaving his muscular but not cut figure bare to Hermione's gaze.

"Thank you Vinda. Leave us,"

Vinda nodded and Hermione watched as she left the tent. Vinda glanced back at Hermione only once, a longing look in her eye. Or maybe she was looking at Grindelwald. It was hard to say.

Once they were alone, Grindelwald leisurely rolled the parchment he had been writing on and sealed it with the tap of his wand.

"I knew you would come," he said, his attention on his desk as he worked to clear it. Hermione tried to take a glimpse at the content but failed as everything just seemed blurry. It was like muffliato but for the eyes. She blinked several times to clear her vision, but it only cleared after she looked away.

"Vinda said you were expecting me. How did you know I would come?"

"Dumbledore took his bride on a honeymoon leaving you free to carry out the terms of your vow. Of course, you would come to me. You would never shirk any promise or duty."

"You think you know me so well?"

"I know you better than you think and still less than I would like," He said rounding his desk to stand toe to toe with her at the entrance. "There is something about you that makes me believe that you harbor the greatest of secrets. A secret that could unequivocally change this war in my favor."

"Are you afraid because you think you are not winning?"

"The whole world is against me now," he said almost bitterly. "It is a true tragedy that they cannot see that everything I do, I do for the betterment of wizardkind."
"Perhaps it is your methods they oppose," Hermione murmured.

"If that were all, they would have begun negotiating new terms,"

"Maybe they don't want to negotiate methods with a man willing to commit any atrocity in the name of wizards. For the greater good,"

"You are talented… changing the subject so subtly but I will not forget that you have this air about you. A mysterious existence. Where are you from? Why has no one heard of you? Why are you close to Albus Dumbledore when he has never let another get so close to his personal life? What role does Merope Gaunt play in all of this and why for the love of Merlin have the goblins of Gringotts taken your side? The last is the most perplexing. Albus and I did extensive research on the Hogwarts founders when we were but lads and I know for a fact that the Slytherin name if not the line died out hundreds of years ago. So how did you come by the name? And most importantly, why have the goblins acquiesced to give you that vault when no one else has been able to claim it?" He ran the pads of his fingers lightly over the bare skin of her arm, watching with satisfaction as goosebumps raised in their wake.

"What? Do you expect me to answer your questions?" she snorted, ignoring how near he was and how underdressed. "You can keep wondering if there is or isn't something about me. I don't care."

"Really…" he smirked.

"Really." She said and took a step forward and turned around, walking backward until her bum hit the desk. She slid back on it and crossed her legs, watching his eyes as they followed the line of her exposed legs.

"Tell me something about you that I don't know," he licked his lips, eyes still trained on her legs.

"Why should I?"

"Quid pro quo."

"Not interested, thanks."

"Why not? I am an unforgettable man,"

"Everything that I need to know about you, I already do,"

"Albus has a big mouth."

Hermione shrugged. Let Dumbledore take the fall for her knowledge. It was better than admitting the truth. That she was a time traveler from a future where he was a three-week course study in Binns History of Magic class.

"What would it take to learn of one of the many secrets of Hermione Slytherin?"

"Stop the war,"

He chuckled. "You think your secrets are that valuable?"

"The goblins thought so,"

"You've got to give me something…"

"For nothing? I think not. It's obvious you won't stop."
"Not for nothing. Make me an offer,"

"The plans for Nurmengard,"

"For such a lofty prize," He said as he sinuously walked across the tent to his desk and Hermione. "I will need something much more than just a secret,"

"I thought that is what you were trading in, my secrets."

"You are too clever by half. If I bargain for secrets alone, I will end up the loser in our negotiations."

"What do you want?"

He placed his palms on the desk face, either side of her body and leaned over her, lips inches from lips. "You know what I want," he whispered.

"Neither one of us trusts the other enough to follow through on such deals. Why strike a bargain at all?"

"Why did you make the vow with Albus?" he asked, ignoring her last comment.

"Why are you so set on this war?" she countered.

"You are a cruel woman,"

"And you are a criminal. A renegade wizard bent on the destruction of life as we know it using any means that come to you."

"Perhaps that is why we have so much chemistry, you and I. I was always attracted by the mysterious. The puzzle. The power..."

"The Deathly Hallows,"

He scowled. "Albus really has let you into his confidence. How... curious," Gellert pursed his lips, thinking. Their eyes met and Hermione's body heated in response to the darkly aroused look in his. "Stay the night with me,"

"That might kill me,"

"Now who is being dramatic?" he sighed and pushed off the desk, turning around so that his back was to Hermione.

"You don't know the exact terms of my vow. You don't know what would and wouldn't kill me,"

"Accio," he whispered as a tiny scroll shot from the piles of papers on his desk into his hand. He unrolled it with his thumb and forefingers, reading as he went. "I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, vow to marry Merope Gaunt if she so chooses, providing for her and any children she will bear for the entirety of my life. I, Hermione Jean Granger Slytherin, vow to stop Gellert Grindelwald in his plan of wizard domination and any other nefarious plans he has concocted to the best of my ability as long as the first vow has been met. Sound familiar?"

He let the scroll roll in on itself and banished it back to where it had come from, zooming under the piles of parchment.

"You have very good spies," Hermione said.
'Why is Merope Gaunt important to you? So important that you would agree to hunt me down when all others have failed?'

"She is like a sister to me,"

"She wasn't always. When you first arrived in London you were alone. It wasn't until later that you pulled Merope from that hellhole of her father's."

Hermione sat there, stone-faced, refusing to give anything away.

"No? Not going to answer that either? What could you possibly offer me that would tempt me to give up Nurmengard?"

"I know where all the Deathly Hallows are,"

He whipped around, and for the first time, he was drowning in uncertainty. "And you would tell me?"

"I would tell you two out of three. The Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone."

"Why not the Cloak?"

"That is a different secret,"

"Two out of three Hallows for the blueprints?"

"Not just the blueprints but an unbreakable vow that you will never even build Nurmengard."

"It's not enough. You would only be giving me one Hallow,"

"Because you already have the wand."

"Yes." He said with a little smile, not surprised in the least that she knew he had it. How she knew… well, that was something he was dying to know.

"I still cannot give you information about the cloak."

"Then I will be here, pouring over my blueprints, waiting to break ground on this incredible prison."

Hermione shrugged and hopped down, pulling her skirt down her thighs, smoothing the fabric over her hips. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as his own gaze was preoccupied at the path of her hands.

"You are just going to leave? Didn't you come here to bargain?" he dragged his stare off of her and down to his own body. He shrugged out of the silk robe and hung it on a rack off to the side, pulling on a white button down. It was agonizing watching him do up the buttons. When he went to push down his sleep pants, she turned around blushing hard as he laughed at her expense.

"You want something I can't give you. Albus is the only one I trust with my secrets. You, I don't trust, and I don't expect that to change," she answered.

Gellert slapped his hand against a small table that he was near, fury pouring off him in waves. "Albus Dumbledore is the last man you should trust,"

"I know," she said evenly, turning back around, glad and yet mildly disappointed that he already had black trousers on. She shook her head infinitesimally. What lewd thoughts was she thinking!?
"You are infuriating," he shouted, stalking her across his tent. She wondered if she had gone too far in baiting him with Albus and backed up until she was flush against the wooden post of his bed and could retreat no further. "At least I am honest about what I want and what I believe. I fight for things that I want to change. He is a coward, a manipulative bastard who only cares for himself… And you married your sister to him."

"Don't you dare!" Hermione said in a low voice finger pointing in his face. "Don't presume to tell me about my choices."

"Why do you have so much faith in him? What does he have over you?"

"I know him! I already knew him before I came to London. I have known him for most of my life!" she shouted back, chest heaving.

"And yet, he didn't know anything about you until after you showed up in London," he challenged. Hermione paled. Had she given too much away? What did he think he knew?

"Answer my next question, stay the night with me, and I will give you Nurmengard."

"What is your question?"

"What is the importance of Merope Gaunt?"

"I can't answer that."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Won't,"

"I see,"

"As long as you are Grindelwald, leader of this war, I can never trust you. You and I are enemies."

"So you keep saying and yet, here you are, inches from my bed, trying to make deals,"

"If I give you tonight," she began hesitantly. "I want Nurmengard."

"And the Hallow. Tonight and the Hallow, and Nurmengard is yours."

Hermione nodded. Gellert grinned and leaned in whispered against her lips, "Thank you,"

"The blueprints?"

"Not until you have delivered on your end of the deal."

"The Resurrection stone is with Dumbledore, but he does not know it. I have planted it there for its protection. I know he seeks them as well, but he won't recognize it for what it truly is."

"You, naughty girl, teasing me with information and now I have no way of getting it. Bad form, Darling." He said disapprovingly. "I will put the blueprints under a time release spell that once your obligations have been filled will be yours."

With a flick of the elder wand, a parchment tube sailed through the air and attached itself to the canvas of the side of the tent. It was surrounded by a twinkling blue orb that would disappear once Grindelwald felt terms had been met.
Hermione knew she couldn't weasel out of the night as she planned, hoping to claim that staying the night was the only thing required. But she could see that Grindelwald was just as clever as Albus and there would be no twisting of words to avoid carrying out the promises.

He reached for her again and cupped her cheek, smirking as if he knew something she didn't.

This time she didn't pull away.

He brought his lips to hers, savoring how soft she was beneath him.

"Come," he said pulling back from her and taking her hand within his own, tugging her out through the front flap of the tent. Hermione was understandably confused. Sex could be had anywhere, so why was he tugging her through his camp?

From the front of the tent, one of the guards followed them but with a small head gesture from Gellert, he backed off, falling back to his post at the tent.

"Here we go," Gellert said as he pulled Hermione in close to his chest. Hermione buried her face in his robes and closed her eyes. Side along apparition had never been her favorite mode of travel.

"Where are we going?" she gasped the moment her feet touched the ground and her insides settled back to their proper places.

"I want you to see something,"

Gellert brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, keeping their hands twined for the short walk.

The moon was full, lighting their way to a small cottage on the edge of a village near the forest. The yellow clapboard was pristine, the white shutters closed for the night, flowers spilled from the immaculately kept beds. It was a well-loved home.

Gellert paused at the door and knocked lightly, waiting for the occupants to awaken and answer his summons.

The door swung open on well-oiled hinges and a woman in her early twenties with braided dirty blond hair stood in the doorway, blocking their entrance.

"You can't just show up here anytime you want. It's not good for us!" the woman hissed, not noticing Hermione at his side.

"Who pays all of your bills? Who keeps you safe? Who protected you and your brother when you had no one? I will come when I damn well please!"

"Maybe we should just go," Hermione said, unsure.

"You brought a woman to this house?!" the woman screeched. "We are not an attraction at the Zoo!"

"Ingrid, just let us in and I will explain."

"I can't really stop you, can I?" Ingrid moved back, wryly gesturing them into the lovingly decorated living room.

"What's wrong, Ingrid?" A little blond boy asked from the stairs.

"Go back to sleep, Leon," Ingrid said softly.
"You can come down, Leon," Gellert said over Ingrid. It brought a scowl to her face.

Gellert and Hermione sat down on the comfortable couch and Gellert motioned for the boy to come closer.

"Leon, Ingrid, this is Hermione. She doesn't understand the necessity for this war. It is imperative that she understands."

Leon nodded and dragged his nightshirt over his head, leaving him standing in his underpants. The second that his skin was exposed, Hermione gasped.

On his back was hundreds of tiny circular burn marks.

"What happened?" Hermione whispered horrified.

"His Muggle father burned him every time he exhibited magic. Keep in mind, he is still not of age to attend a magical school. Leon is only ten."

"Merlin,"

"If it weren't for Ingrid, I would have died. She isn't magic, but she has loads more burns than me. She would hide me, protect me, take the punishment father intended for me. I don't know what I would have done if my sister hadn't protected me." Leon said in a light voice, recounting as if it had happened to someone else.

"And you think she would be more grateful that I killed the man and gave them a safe place to stay," Gellert grumbled.

Hermione turned to him, brow arched. "Did it ever occur to you that vengeance was theirs to exact. Getting them away would have been sufficient, yeah?"

"I walked in on him *branding* them with a hot iron! Clemency was the last thought on my mind." Gellert said incredulously.

"I admit, I would find it hard not to retaliate as well. Let me ask you this, is this the only reason you believe muggles should be subjugated? I don't want to downplay their tragedy but not all muggles are abusive towards magical children."

"And you know this for a fact?"

"I do," She said firmly, and he studied her obviously trying to figure her out.

"There are thousands of stories like Leon's. Hundreds of children that are worse off. Children who develop severe trauma to their magic. Do they not need to be saved?"

"You are right that the wizarding world needs to change. But can't you see that the way you are going about it is all wrong? You force people to choose between extremes when most people would rather put blinders on," Hermione exhaled loudly. "You have turned nearly the entire world against you, Gellert. What good can you do now?"

Ingrid's face relaxed a tiny bit as she reappraised the woman that had been brought to them in the middle of the night.

Hermione gently took Leon's nightshirt out of his hands and helped him tug it down over his head. "Thank you for showing me, Leon,"
He smiled at her and was promptly shooed up to his bed by his sister.

"Are you satisfied?" Ingrid demanded of Gellert.

"I've not convinced you," Gellert murmured to Hermione, chagrined.

"It's your methods in which we will never see eye to eye," Hermione answered.

Gellert stood, nodding his goodbyes before stalking out the door, leaving Hermione to trail him at her own pace.

"I'm sorry we intruded," Hermione said to Ingrid.

"My father was a good man once. He didn't deserve to die the way he did. I wished for many horrible things to happen but not that. When I imagined justice, I imagined my father having to watch Leon and me from afar as we thrived and flourished without him. I wanted to show Leon that the world was not as ugly as it seemed to be."

"He is lucky to have you,"

"Thank you,"

Hermione smiled and walked outside. Gellert stood in the garden facing away from her staring at the moon. He was bathed in its silvery light and he stood there rigid, anger rolling off of him.

"What will it take for you to see my side?" he demanded.

"I get why. I even agree with it to a certain extent. Not subjugation of the nonmagical population but that things need to change. But like I said… I don't like your methods. You will never ever bring me on board."

"Is there no chance for this… us?"

"Not while you are the most hunted wizard alive,"

"You don't know what you ask of me. I can't just stop. Not only am I in it up to my neck, I truly believe that what I am trying to do is right. Without extreme action, nothing will ever change."

Hermione swallowed and took a deep breath. "Where to next,"

"You want my blueprints that badly?" he sneered, disgusted.

"Yes,"

He shook his head, his nostrils flaring. "No. The deal is off!"

"That is not how things work, Grindelwald," Hermione walked to him until they were a foot apart. "I've already told you about the Hallow,"

"Don't make me laugh. You told me nothing!"

"You are acting like a child who didn't get his way! Did you think it would be that easy to convince me? I made a vow to stop you! I am personally invested in stopping you. Did you think I would just say fuck it at the first sob story? Yes, it was sad. Yes, I felt for them. That does not mean things between us would change!"
"I see things so much clearer now. Thank you for opening my eyes," He glared at her. "I'm sure you can find your own way home," he took three steps back from her and with a quick twist on the balls of his feet, he was gone.

"Oh no, you don't!" Hermione said between clenched teeth and followed, apparating directly to the apparition point at Nurmengard. She didn't see him, but that didn't stop her from stomping her way through camp with a single-minded focus. They had bartered and came to an agreement. There was no way in hell she was leaving without those blueprints.

The guards standing at attention raised their brows but didn't stop her from entering the tent. Hermione looked around and noticed that she was all alone and for several seconds pondered where the hell Gellert apparated to. Gritting her teeth, she turned back to the side of the tent where the blueprints still sat innocently enclosed by a magical ward.

She raised her wand and painstakingly undid his wards. Admittedly it took her longer than she anticipated but even with all that time, Gellert was still absent.

The second she had the rolled blueprints in her hands, she stalked from the tent. She had absolutely no intention of being there when he returned.
Two days after my last update for Lies, my computer decided to freak out and it is thanks to Hubby that I am back up and running! I did lose half of what I had already written for this chapter and it took me longer than expected to rewrite it.

Chapter Nine

Hermione ran her fingertips over the bolded blue lines of Nurmengard's walls. There was a certain aesthetic about them that drew her eye. Nurmengard was strangely beautiful and well thought out. Master builders of magical architecture from all over the world had a hand in creating the prison. It truly was a work of art. There was no doubt in Hermione's mind that this set of blueprints would be highly coveted by nearly every government in the world. And not just because it would give them access to him.

The blueprints laid flat and unfurled on her massive desk, each corner held down by a different magical artifact as she poured over the document. She had very little experience with building magical dwellings but that didn't prevent her from being in awe over what she was looking at. Every room had a purpose, every line, every curve, every single bit of material.

"Mistress, Jesper brings lunch," the straight-laced and bossy head elf announced, startling her out of her reverie.

"Thank you, Jesper, leave it over there by the chair." She gestured to the set of wingbacks and table near the fire. Jesper narrowed his eyes and pinched his lips, running his disapproving eyes along the line of Hermione's body.

Clothing that she had gone to bed in was wrinkled horribly. Stains from various projects covered the sparse tank and her small shorts had several small and frayed holes near her right thigh. Her hair was wild and untamed. Curls stuck out haphazardly here and there, giving her a slightly mad appearance. At some point in the morning, she had gathered her curls into a crude bun on top of her head, but the hair had obviously protested as it was threatening to abort mission, one curl at a time. To make the look complete, she wore no shoes, opting instead to walk around barefoot.

Jesper could barely conceal his horror. What if someone came to call? She wouldn't answer the summons dressed like that, would she? But the compounding dread in his stomach told him otherwise. She probably wouldn't even think about what she was wearing. Even if it was the Minister of Magic at the door.

Jesper slid the lunch tray on the small table that she had gestured to, grumbling and vowing to make sure that Kinder dressed her properly every morning before the Mistress was allowed to leave her bedroom. He would raise the wards to stop her himself. To think the noble line of Slytherin had to depend on such a woman to continue their prideful reputation. Jesper shuddered. He would make sure that no one, no one, would have reason to sneer at his mistress.

Hermione was still studying the blueprints and had missed every single muttered word.
A scratching at the window startled her again and she smiled as she saw an owl prettily waiting for her permission to enter. Quickly, Hermione strode to the window and let the bird inside to glide to perch on the back of her desk chair. Hermione followed with a smile on her face, reaching into the glass jar that held the owl treats.

After the owl devoured her offerings, Hermione untied the rolled missive attached to the owl's leg.

*Miss Hermione Slytherin,*

_You have been cordially invited to attend the 200th Annual Prince Charity Ball. A fundraiser for the Hogwarts Underprivileged Student Fund. This year's theme is Masquerade. Please save the date, Saturday, September 25th. Dinner will be served at seven._

_Jacqueline Nott_

_Coordinator_

Hermione snorted and tossed the invitation to the side. It was highly unlikely that she would go. And Merope would have her hands full between her pregnancy and her husband, therefore it was unlikely that she would be forced to go by _her_. Leaving her desk, Hermione sat before her lunch and began appreciatively murmuring how lovely it all was, not even noticing Jesper, the sneaky elf, who slid the invitation into his palm, making a mental note to accept on her behalf. His mistress was of the old family. The Slytherins. And though she didn't like mingling with her equals, he knew that to miss the event would be social suicide. He knew his Mistress wanted Missy Merope's child to be well received by his peers and one day, he knew that she would thank him for accepting the invitation on her behalf.

**HGHG**

Two days later found Hermione sitting in Merope and Albus' Godric's Hollow house where they situated themselves after spending nearly a month on the continent. Even though a month didn't seem that long to Hermione, Merope's belly seemed to really pop. She was now four and a half months along and the happy glow of a contented woman stared back at her.

Merope was showing Hermione parcel after parcel of shopping- clothes for her, the baby, and even for Hermione. Because as Merope cheerfully said, Hermione didn't have a fashionable bone in her body. Hermione, of course, took issue with that but smiled all the same. Merope was happy and Albus surprisingly was incredibly doting on his pregnant wife. If she didn't know better, she would have thought them a supremely happy family, deep in love with each other and their unborn child.

Hermione didn't think it was an act, per se, but she didn't feel like it was an accurate representation of what things were truly like in the Dumbledore household. There was just something not quite right, and she couldn't put her finger on it.

"So how was your honeymoon?" Hermione asked while sipping tea, interrupting Merope's monologue about fashion in Paris vs fashion in the States, despite never having shopped in the latter.

"Just marvelous," Merope said. Her eyes lit up with acute pleasure, happy reminiscence stealing her away from the moment. She was stroking blue bunting, smiling a secret and intimate smile. "He is a much more attentive lover than Tom ever was," she whispered.

Hermione immediately threw up her hands to cover her ears, choking down the bile that rose in her throat. This is where she drew the line. She did not want to know what kind of lover Albus Dumbledore was. After several seconds, she took a finger out of her ear to Merope's uncontrolled
laughter, clearly having a go at the uncomfortable witch.

"That isn't funny!" Hermione said with a grimace.

"Aw, Hermione, lighten up! If it makes you that unhappy I won't tell you what Albus is like in bed." Merope laughed even harder at Hermione's expense. It was one of the downsides to having a sister. Boundaries were non-existent, and no topic was taboo.

"So, Hermione, now that we covered what I have been up to, tell me about your adventures. To be honest, I thought you would have taken Grindelwald to heel by now."

"He is a slippery one," Hermione mumbled.

"and charming and handsome," Merope finished.

"and a liar," Hermione continued as if Merope hadn't said a word

"in love with you," Merope said.

Hermione talked over Merope, intentionally ignoring her input. "and a terrible flirt,"

"and in love with you,"

"Completely frustrating,"

"thinks the sun and moon revolve around you,"

"a bigot,"

"Did I say that he was in love with you? No? He's in love with you,"

"Lust is not love, Merope," Hermione finally turned her derisive gaze on her sister.

"If I were merely talking about lust, he would have tried a lot harder to get into your knickers…" Merope said with a smirk.

"I think he has tried and found it impossible,"

"So, you are telling me that you would never consider taking him as a lover? Never thought about what it would be like to be touched by such a man? You, Hermione Slytherin, are a filthy liar! I bet under the right conditions, you would drape yourself in silk and lace and artfully lay yourself out on a bed to entice him. You are a woman and you are also attracted to Grindelwald. Not to mention, you blush every time he gets near to you. I am pretty sure that your arguments together are a form of foreplay."

"I may have offered a night with him for his blueprints," Hermione mumbled under her breath.

"You didn't!" Merope gasped. She clapped her hands and moved closer, eyes shining like stars.

Hermione groaned. "That made me sound like a whore,"

"I understand what you were trying to do. You would have slept with him anyway but thought you might as well further your goal. I won't hold it against you,"

Hermione groaned again and covered her face with her hands. Embarrassment was the least uncomfortable feeling she felt at the moment.
"You would only be a whore if you were doing it for money. Like I said, I have no doubt that you were willing with or without the exchange."

"I didn't really trade sex for the blueprints. I thought that's what he wanted when he asked for the night, but he took me to a house to talk to this family about how they were mistreated by their muggle father. He left me there after I refused to join his cause. Even if I didn't have the vow to hold me, I still wouldn't join his cause. That's when I broke back into his camp and stole the blueprints. If he wasn't going to hold up his end, neither was I."

Merope snorted. "Admit it, you wanted him to jump you,"

Hermione groaned again and shook her head then nodded, then shook her head again. She sighed and dropped her hands, looking away from Merope who was wagging her eyebrows.

"Why does he have to be so damn charming?" Hermione muttered, disgruntled, lifting her teacup back to her lips.

Merope smirked and took a sip of her tea, eyes glittering with barely repressed mirth.

**HGHG**

"Fancy meeting you here," Grindelwald's silky seductive voice whispered into her ear as she perused the shelves of a small bookshop off Diagon Alley.

"Grindelwald," Hermione muttered as she turned around and stepped back into the shelving, away from him, trying to calm her traitorous heart. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" he asked with an amused smirk and tilt of the head. "Aren't we coy today…"

Hermione sighed loudly and attempted to duck under his arm. He leaned into her on that side and she smacked her face on his chest. She looked up, rubbing her nose, absolutely furious. Staying silent, she waited.

"You haven't forgotten stealing my blueprints, now have you?" Grindelwald stepped closer and ran a single finger up her arm, smiling as she shivered.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she said disdainfully, despite her twin rouge cheeks. With a casual flick of her fingers, the book she was leafing through sailed back to its spot on the shelf and Hermione spun, turning her back to Gellert.

She could feel him there, at her back, following closely behind her as she strode the winding stacks and shelving of the bookstore. It was at the last turn where Hermione knew she had made a grievous error. The pathway had led to a private reading nook which would have been quaint if it were not also a dead end, not the front door as she had hoped. She was trapped and his deeply amused chuckle from behind her let her know that he knew it too.

"Only you could have taken those blueprints, Love, don't try to take me for a fool," he said, and Hermione grimaced before turning around to face him.

"Okay, so what if I did? It's not like you were going to keep your end of the deal, while I had every intention of holding up my end."

"Who said I wouldn't have kept my end of the deal. You know, I may have apparated out in anger, but I was right back to that house within moments. By then, you were already gone. Who deserted who?" his smug look irritated Hermione to no end. And she didn't know what she wanted to do
"You just left me in an unfamiliar place. You told me the deal was off! We didn't part well at all. What would make you believe that I would have stayed in that place one moment longer than necessary? You were an arse and I was not going to hang around Ingrid's home in the middle of the night, wondering when you would deign to come back. If you wanted a sycophant, you've chosen the wrong woman."

"I was gone for only the amount of time it took me to apparate away and then back. I wasn't gone but a moment. You do me a great disservice!" Gellert declared, the fire in his eyes burning hot and furious at the injustice of her statement.

"I'm not going to argue with you about this anymore. The truth is that you left me, told me the deal was off, and I took matters into my own hands. By my reckoning, I had fulfilled my end of the bargain. I was only claiming what was rightfully mine."

"Nurmengard will always be mine," Gellert growled. "And I would take her back,"

"Over my dead body," Hermione challenged.

"So be it," Gellert said before he swept her into his arms and crushed his lips against her, bruising her tender flesh.

Fire raced through her body, making every single nerve ending flare to life, desire pulsing and aching in her core. It was obvious that he wanted her just as much as he wanted Nurmengard, and that was a dizzying feeling. A powerful feeling. Because she knew exactly what Nurmengard represented.

Inhaling sharply, she realized her second mistake. She should never have given him the opportunity to touch her because she was putty in his very exciting, capable hands. He smelled glorious; all man and leather and woods. Not quite like his usual spicy scent, but it was as if he spent the last week traveling in the most basic of situations. Then again, he was an actively hunted criminal wanted for war crimes in every major country with a magical presence. He couldn't just apparate into the country without consequences. Which means he probably had traveled in less than ideal conditions. How did he continuously get into the country anyway?

It was embarrassing really, how long it took Hermione to return to her senses and to stop kissing him. Things couldn't continue. She was bound and he... he was determined. Kisses would only make her job more difficult than they needed to be. She pushed against his chest and turned her head away.

The first thing she needed to do was burn Nurmengard's blueprints.

"I can't," Hermione panted as she squeezed her eyes shut. She needed space and perspective.

"You can," he murmured burying his face in her neck, his arms tightening around her.

Silence fell between them where she fiercely denied him, and he refused to let her go. They stood there together, just like that, for much too long.

Slowly, Hermione pulled out her wand and let her arm fall to her side with knuckles white and pale as she clenched the wooden handle. He sighed and nuzzled closer, tensing. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Why was he just standing there, waiting for her to strike?

She lifted her wand and clenched her teeth before taking a deep breath. "Why aren't you running?"

"I'll never run from you,"
"I will capture you,"

"I will escape."

"Why are you doing this?" she whispered in agony.

"You need to fulfill your vow, right? Then you will be mine."

"Capturing you will not satisfy the vow,"

"I can't stop fighting, and I can't have you. What would you have me do?"

"I would have you stop this war,"

"You know I can't do that,"

"What if I told you…" Hermione stopped abruptly. She couldn't believe that she nearly told him that in the normal timeline he would have been stopped in twenty years from now and would spend the rest of his life in his own prison only to be killed by the next up-and-coming Dark Lord.

"Keep going," He encouraged, still molding her softer, more pliant body against his. She could feel him, his heavy erection against her belly. It was distracting and made her want things that she had no right to want.

She pushed against his chest again but this time he allowed his arms to drop from around her body. She felt bereft, alone, and she wanted nothing more than a good cry.

"Magieis Vinculum," she whispered and iron manacles with magical suppressants enveloped his wrists.

"Hermione," Gellert sounded as if he was just as unhappy as she was. But she could feel it, the throbbing excitement in her bond with Dumbledore that the villain had been caught at last.

Hermione stepped into his personal space and slid her hand around his neck until she was cupping his nape and pulled him closer until their lips met. This had to be the last time that she kissed him. This blurring of lines was unacceptable, and it was time to grow up, time to follow through with her responsibilities. Time to let go of whatever this was between them.

If she married, not assuming it would be with Grindelwald, but anyone she married would be in Tom's life. Would Grindelwald be a good man to be exposed to? She already knew the answer to that. There was too much at stake to just follow her feelings. She didn't have such luxury. What about everyone she left behind? What about Draco and his daughters? What about the promises she made in her life and along the way to get her to this point?

The truth was that Gellert Grindelwald, as he was now, was not a good enough man to be allowed access to Tom. Letting go of the possibilities of what she had with Gellert was difficult. To let go of Harry, Ron, her parents, Draco, McGonagall, and everyone who died on the battlefield would be impossible. She couldn't have both and if she had to choose, she wouldn't choose Gellert.

There was too much at stake.

As she pulled away, she could see the sadness echoed in his eyes. He knew it was over, whatever this was, as well as she. The only difference was that he didn't know why. And she wouldn't tell him. That would be much too dangerous.
"What will you do with me now?" he asked.

Hermione threaded her arm through his and apparated. They stumbled a bit upon landing, but Hermione quickly steadied her charge. Grindelwald looked grimly across the cold and angry sea, his stare focused upon one of the harshest magical prisons in the world. Azkaban.

Seconds later an old wizened man pushed off the island in a small rowboat. So small that it would only probably hold two or three grown wizards at a time. One to row, one to guard, and one prisoner. For safety purposes, Hermione supposed.

The old wizard let the boat bump the shore and beckoned wordlessly to the two of them. Gellert may have been surprised that someone was waiting for them as if she had planned him coming to her on the exact date but she knew this had more to do with Dumbledore's foresight than her own. Someone was always waiting. Just in case.

Through the whole thing, Gellert stood there, stoically, waiting, not putting up a fight and it made Hermione exceedingly nervous. What was he planning?

Hermione pulled Gellert into the boat and watched as he sat down, hands still empty, even though she hadn't yet disarmed him. That was another mistake. One that she would rectify immediately.

Once she sat in the boat next to Gellert, she reached into his pocket and pulled out the Elder Wand. Hermione studied it, never actually having seen the wand up close before. Lightly, she ran her fingers over the worn elder wood. For such an innocent looking thing, it had seen its fair share of death. The wand felt warm in her hands, comforting as if the wand had been waiting for her to take ownership. To be honest, the wand felt similar to Harry. Powerful, misunderstood, persevering. Hermione smiled.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Gellert asked as he watched her as she studied the most powerful wand in existence.

"Tempting for those who should not have it, terrifying for those that should. This wand should be broken."

Fear filled his eyes and she could tell that he wanted to snatch the instrument out of her fingers and stow it safely back in his robe pocket. She had never been more tempted than in that moment for anything. Not that very first Hogwarts dessert spread when she was eleven, not her first kiss with Krum, not even her Hogwarts letter vindicating her as a witch. Keeping it for herself never crossed her mind. Not once. Only its destruction tempted her.

Hermione wrapped a hand over each end and tested its springiness.

"Don't," Gellert begged quietly.

"You don't need this," Hermione said. "No one should have this."

"That wand is as old as the sea. It's legacy, though bloody, is a rich one. Take it. Make it yours. Hide it. Just please, don't break it."

Hermione slid the wand into one of the hidden inner pockets of her robe. Breaking something like this deserved thought and understanding of consequence. She may yet break the bloody thing, but for now, she would capitulate to his request. Although she wasn't daft enough to believe that he wouldn't try and get it back. He wanted the blueprints and now the wand too.

She would have to lay down some of the most extreme protective wards. Blood wards. The Fidelius.
Whatever it would take to keep it out of undeserving hands that would use it to subjugate. There was no other way.

When the boat bumped into the shore of Azkaban Island, she pulled Gellert out behind her and made her way to the citadel, knocking three times on the huge stone door. Several rough looking guards pushed open the heavy doors and stood there struck dumb at the sight of a young woman of slight build with a bound and pliant Gellert Grindelwald.

One of the guards gestured for them to enter first and she rose her chin a notch. She would not be cowed by Azkaban. They didn't venture far into the fortress before they were led into a small office of the Warden.

"Gellert Grindelwald," the warden said as he stood from behind his parchment cluttered desk.

"The one and only," Grindelwald smirked.

"Thank you, Miss Slytherin, we will take it from here."

Hermione nodded and turned to leave but before she could take more than a few steps, Gellert had reached out to her with his bound hands, grabbing her at the elbow. "This isn't over, Love. I'm coming. You better prepare. I have now gone to prison for you, to help you fulfill the vow."

"The vow will only be fulfilled when you stop your wicked deeds and stop trying to take over the world or you die or are defeated permanently. You already told me you were planning to escape the Dementors and this island. Good luck with that. But that doesn't sound as if I have stopped you." Hermione said.

"Is there a problem here?" the warden asked suspiciously, looking between the two of them as if he knew they were plotting together against him.

"Not at all," Gellert said without tearing his gaze from Hermione's. "Not at all."

Hermione yanked her arm out of his grip and was through the doors and back in the boat in record time.

"Tempus," she muttered with a flick of her wand. It was just past five thirty in the evening. She wondered how long it would take him to break out. Probably she had twenty-four hours at best. He did look most confident.

The first line of business was to secure the two things she had taken from him and the second she had a foot on solid ground, she apparated away, back to her house to gather the blueprints. She knew the perfect spot to hide them.
Chapter Ten

Despite having the belief that Grindelwald would break out of Azkaban within the day, things were quiet for much longer than Hermione ever expected. It had been the end of May when she took Grindelwald to Azkaban but now it was the middle of September, mere months away from Merope's due date. The leaves had changed, the air cooled, and she missed him. Not that she would admit that to anyone.

Had Azkaban really been that hard for him to escape from? Sirius had done it, but of course, Sirius was an unregistered Animagus, something that Grindelwald wasn't. Neither did he have a grieving and dying mother to take his place. But he had been so sure of his ability to break out. Hermione didn't know what to think.

Either way, she had her hands full with her family. Dumbledore was back to his Transfiguration post and Merope was staying in her old bedroom at Hermione's so that she would have help when the time came. The vow thrummed in happiness as Albus and Merope seemed to fall farther and deeper in love each day. Merope's contentment settled around Hermione and kept her from totally sinking into depression. What was there to be depressed about when Tom was soon to be born?

Gellert Grindelwald's charming face flashed in her mind and she savagely thrust it back behind walls so high, they could reach the moon. That door was firmly closed to her. There was no point in playing what if.

"Hermione!" Merope yelled from another room, and Hermione hightailed it out of her office and into the sitting room where Merope was being fed grapes by Jesper, her feet propped up on a green velvet pillow on the chaise.

"What's wrong?"

"Come here! The baby is kicking!"

Hermione smiled in relief and indulgence and approached, reaching out. Merope took her hand and guided it exactly to where Tom was kicking. Together they cooed in amazement to the active fetus, watching as a foot repeatedly kicked Merope's belly.

"We've settled on a name," Merope said, hand still over Hermione's and Hermione looked up in interest. It never occurred to her that he may be named anything other than Tom. "Albus and I both think we should use the name, Tom, after the baby's father but mostly because you told me that was his name in the future, Marvolo after mine, and Dumbledore for his surname. Obviously. It wouldn't do anyone any good to know this child was conceived out of wedlock."

Hermione nodded. That was the whole reason why Hermione vowed to take Dumbledore's place in
"People are going to ask; Why Tom? Why not something else?"

"And I will tell them that we named him so because of you. You can tell them whatever you like."

"Tom- the Tom I grew up fearing- dictated everything about my life. There was no greater influence, that is true. Even if it wasn't a positive influence."

"See… too much information. Just tell people that Tom was a beloved relation and leave it at that."

"You want me to lie?"

"What? Do you want to tell the truth?"

"No," Hermione mumbled.

"Then it is settled. To the public, Tom is named in honor of you,"

"Fabulous…" Hermione muttered sarcastically.

Merope laughed at Hermione's expense and drew her attention back to her moving belly. A tapping came from the window and Jesper left his post to let the owl in. A pretty owl swooped in and alighted on the back of the chaise, sticking her leg out, waiting patiently to be relieved of her burden.

"What a beautiful owl," Merope crooned, and Hermione let her take the scroll off the bird's leg while she still massaged Merope's stomach every time Tom moved.

Everything was quiet for several minutes as Merope read the missive before exploding, startling Hermione badly. "Oh shit!"

Hermione's hand lay over her thundering heart as she gasped wide-eyed, trying to get her body back under control. "What the hell, Merope?"

"You didn't tell me that you are going to a ball! It's only a little over a week away! Have you already picked out your costume? Do you need help? What am I saying, of course, you need help! Jesper grab my jacket and shoes," Merope said in a flurry, clapping her hands in excitement, jumping to her feet while cradling her belly. "We are going shopping!"

"I am not going to a ball, settle down,"

"Oh yes, you are. This says that you have already R.S.V.P.'d. They are expecting you and it's much too late to back out now!"

"I didn't reply to any invitations," Hermione frowned.

"You didn't say you would go to the Prince Charity Ball?" Merope asked doubtfully, glancing back at the reminder in her hands.

"No, I didn't. And I am not going,"

"Oh yes, you are! I don't know exactly where the mistake occurred but if you don't go, we will be pariahs!"

"You are being overly dramatic," Hermione said laying back on the chaise.
"Do you want Tom to be ostracized by his peers? Because this is a good way to do it,"

Hermione closed her eyes and groaned. Merope was going to make her go to the stupid thing, and she would go, for Tom. Always for Tom. Everything for Tom... No that wasn't quite right. Everything was for Harry and Ron which meant, in this life, everything for Tom. Hermione rolled her eyes up at the ceiling as if the horsehair plaster held the answer of a way to get out of going.

"Fine," Hermione said, giving in with bad grace. She would just be hounded until she agreed anyway.

Part of the problem was that Merope was bored. Albus was at Hogwarts and the only thing that kept Merope occupied was Tom and decorating and anything else she could think of baby related. She sewed bunting, crocheted small blankets, knitted booties, met with other expectant mothers and poked her nose into Hermione's business. Well, only the juicy bits that revolved around her nonexistent love life.

Hermione watched helplessly as Jesper helped Merope into her shoes and jacket, shrugging on her own outer robes in the process. She just prayed that Merope would be satisfied rather quickly and begged silently to find a suitable costume at the first shop.

"Alright, Hermione, let's go!" Merope said happily, making her way to the floo. Hermione trudged slowly behind her, threw in the floo powder, and stepped through, knowing she just wasn't going to win against Merope. That didn't mean she intended to actually go to the event but telling Merope that would be less successful than if she had told the rocks or the flowers in the garden. Merope had the most intense selective hearing imaginable when it suited her.

The moment she appeared at the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione was hailed by all those she had met over the long months. She had made it her business to be well regarded and thought of kindly, much like Rhett Butler had in *Gone with the Wind* when he and Scarlett lived in Atlanta with Bonnie. And Merope was among them, receiving their congratulations on the upcoming new addition to the Dumbledore clan with grace and exuberance. She was nothing like the self-conscious, ignorant, abused girl that was pulled out of Gaunt Shack.

Before long, Merope made her way to Hermione and grabbed her hand, excitedly tugging her to the brick arch at the back of the leaky, tapping in the required sequence.

Diagon Alley opened to her in the same way it had when she was eleven and it still took her breath away. The hustle and bustle though were way more significant before two civil wars ravaged the magical shopping district. It was beautiful and resplendent, and dare she think magical? There was nothing quite like seeing magic promoted in such a flagrant, unabashed way.

Merope strode through the milling crowds confidently, cradling her belly while still gripping Hermione's hand, probably -correctly- thinking that she would try to escape when finally, they reached their destination. Madame Lauraud's, the precursor to Twilfit and Tatting's.

The bell on the door rung as they entered the shop.

"How can I be of service today, Ladies?" a young, willowy woman in a tight green wrap dress that daringly bared her calves with a peek of the knee.

"My sister is expected at the Prince Charity Ball and as of yet has been unable to find the perfect costume."

"Cutting it a little close, aren't we," the woman sneered.
"When we find something worth wearing, it won't matter. We are rather choosy but if you feel like your little shop isn't up for such a daunting challenge of pleasing the Lady Slytherin, we completely understand and would be more than happy to direct our search elsewhere." Merope countered, a little twinkle of determination hardening her gaze. The young woman looked as if slapped and yet tried to hide it. It was clear she didn't dare turn them away now, especially such affluent patronage.

"I am sure we can accommodate even the most demanding of customers. Right this way ladies." The woman gestured for them to follow her to an exclusive alcove they have reserved for such high-profile clientele as Merope and Hermione were, for their privacy and comfort, of course. "You can call me Tilde."

"Thank you, Tilde," Merope said with a charming smile.

"We have a few different styles here that I think will suit Miss Slytherin very nicely."

"Excellent," Merope smiled. Tilde gestured to a comfortable looking chair for Merope before flicking her wand at a rack near the back. Something reserved for their special customers.

"We are very lucky to have been sent a few designs from the new up in coming talent, Alyssa Travers. She has even been featured in Flitterbill's Fashion Magazine this past summer." As Tilde spoke, she grabbed several options off of the rack in a variety of colors and styles, eyeballing Hermione's figure as she did so.

She bustled into one of the back rooms, pulling out a large garment bag and adding it to the pile in her arms before gesturing to Hermione that she ought to step into the lavish dressing room. Tilde followed her in and hung the dresses on a hook, leaving without another word.

Hermione sighed as she glanced at her reflection in the mirror and smoothed her hair away from her face, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. This ball would achieve at least one of her goals. If she was present in society, Tom had a better chance of blending in. A better, easier chance to obtain the power he desperately sought the first time. Safely. Or as safely as politicking can be.

Meanwhile, Merope sat on the divan, staring at Tilde until Tilde fidgeted under her gaze.

"Can I help you further, Mrs. Dumbledore?"

"Now that you ask," Merope began, a slow sly smile spreading on her lips. "I wonder what else you have stored in that back room, and I wager, that the very best of costume to be had is back there. And I would hazard a guess that you would be willing to discreetly let down another patron for the right price. My sister needs the very best, as I said earlier. And I am willing to pay a hefty price to get it. I owe her much. So, if you cannot or will not disappoint one of your other customers, we will have no choice but to visit another shop. Hermione Slytherin will be watched, and I promise that whoever dresses her, will also become highly coveted. She cannot show up to such a prestigious social event, the first she is to attend in our country, with a subpar costume."

Tilde froze at the first utterance and by the end, she was clearly teetering in between doing as she had promised and basking in the fame and fortune that would follow Hermione wearing her shop's clothes.

"The only question that remains is whether or not you are going to benefit from our patronage. That is completely in your own hands."

A disgusted sound came from the vicinity of the dressing room and Merope had to bite her lip from...
keeping laughing. Even without knowing it, Hermione was helping her convince the taciturn, snobbish woman.

Tilde stood and nodded at Merope and said, "it would be my pleasure to dress Miss Hermione Slytherin for the biggest social function of the year. Now that I am thinking of it, I do have something in the back. I had set it aside for one of my other customers in the hopes they would be interested, but I can see that costume was fated to be worn by your sister. Let me go retrieve it now."

Merope clapped in happiness a deeply satisfied look on her face. If Hermione is willing to go through so much—time traveling, magical vows, moving among a society that she had little care for—all for Merope's son, nothing would stand in her way to ease Hermione's burden. Her upbringing may have been tragic, but she learned a lot more from her mother than she ever realized. Her confidence had grown as large as the distance between her and her father.

Merope was nothing like the sad pathetic wretch that Hermione dragged out of the Gaunt hovel that day. She likened herself to a phoenix, reborn from the ashes of her former life. Everything she had, every new adventure, every layer of self-confidence was all because of Hermione. There would be no repaying her, not ever. What she had done for them transcended every acceptable repayment. There was no amount of money that would do it. No amount of favors. There was only lifelong loyalty and devotion. They were bound together in more than blood. Sometimes, a family was more than just DNA. Sometimes family was bonded through a series of hardship and circumstance. And she would never take that for granted.

Thank Merlin that Hermione had come into her life, even if it was because of the horror her son turned into. Merope felt blessed.

"Come on out and show me at least one of them, Hermione," Merope called after shaking herself out of her self-reflection.

"These are not going to work, Merope," Hermione said, a tinge of despair in her voice. She was hoping they would find something suitable on the first try. The disappointment was hard to swallow.

"Give Tilde a moment, Dear, I believe she found something more suitable."

Tilde nodded and handed in a garment bag that was much finer than even half the dresses she had already tried on. And that was only the bag.

From inside the dressing room, a loud gasp was heard quickly followed by a string of crooning words. Hermione quickly changed and walked out, showcasing the lovely costume.

"I love it," Hermione said, running her hands over the blue silk.

"It absolutely suits!" Tilde exclaimed, finally having gotten into the spirit of their costume hunt.

"I daresay, every other woman won't be able to compete," said another voice from the doorway.

The newcomer was tall with dark curly hair, intelligent eyes, and red cupid bow lips. Beautiful in a familiar way. Familiar because he looked so much like Sirius Black. There was mischief in her eyes that showed anyone who bothered to look that his disposition was entirely inherited because in some way, this woman, had to be related to Marauder.

"Mrs. Black," Tilde breathed, dropping into a rather lopsided curtsy. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I saw Miss Slytherin admiring this costume as I passed by and thought to drop in and see if you had
anything else so flattering. If the Slytherin family shops here, it must be a good place to shop."

"You flatter," Tilde said, still breathless.

"I'm Melania Black." She said as she turned her gaze onto the two other women in the shop.

"This is Hermione and I am Merope," Merope said, and Hermione nodded and extended the usual greetings.

"Yes… Merope Dumbledore… I heard he had married into the Gaunt family. I was always told that the Gaunts were wastrels, little more than squibs. That is obviously not the case. I fear you have been neglected."

Merope shrugged. No matter how poorly she was treated by her own family she still hesitated in condemning them. After all, she still had pride.

Melania turned her grey eyes onto Hermione and studied the way she looked. "I have a feeling we will meet again, Miss Slytherin. Make sure to greet me and my husband at the Masquerade. There are several close friends that are dying for an introduction."

And before another word, Melania was back out the door, despite claiming an interest in the clothes. Tilde in the meantime was fanning herself, looking at Hermione and Merope with a sort of hero worship. They had brought the influential Mrs. Black into the shop. That alone would be enough to have the masses flocking.

"I'll take it," Hermione said softly stroking the gown with a smile. It was probably the most luxurious dress she had ever owned, let alone wore.

Merope smirked and watched Hermione retreat back to the dressing room. "The mask too, Tilde,"

"Of course,"

**HGHG**

The temperature had started to drop and Hermione was grateful her costume was long sleeved because the wind seemed to bite through her warming charms. Her stomach was full of flutters. She really hoped she wouldn't fail at making a powerful impression over the pureblooded society.

Hermione reached up and traced the elaborate iridescent white lace of her three-quarter mask. It hid her identity decently well, surprisingly enough, although it could have been the hours Merope spent curling her hair into smooth ringlets that gathered at the nape of her neck, held in place by a beautiful silver comb.

The apparition point had been set a small walkway from the main house and Hermione was glad. It gave her time to settle her nerves. Suddenly she felt as if Draco's instructions just hadn't been enough. Smaller altercations, arrogant hellos, were something she could easily do. Attending a ball? What the hell had she been thinking?!

All too soon, she was walking up the marble steps, following the rest of the guests in a steady stream to the welcoming hosts. Everyone was resplendent in the very best costumes, one of which was a knight in solid gold armor. Hermione shook her head at the fanciful display.

"I knew you would come,"

Again, a voice that mimicked Professor Snape's caressed her ears as the man himself reached out to
take her hands between his own. How could he even tell who was who?

"I was invited,"

"Indeed," He murmured. "Where is your intended? Mother and I were shocked when your acceptance was for one. Ditch him, did you?"

For a moment, Hermione was tempted to say that he was merely detained by other matters and was unable to attend but if she lied now, she would be labeled as taken. How could she move on with her life and start her own family if she was still spoken for? The perks of not having Prince stalk her all evening nearly made her choose the former. But alas, she had to keep herself open. Tom needed family and normalcy. She wasn't going to lie to herself and say she also didn't crave those very things. Nothing had been normal or right since her fourth year.

"He and I didn't want the same things in the end," Hermione said quietly, already regretting it as his black eyes sparkled from behind his black silk mask. To break the tension, she asked the first thing that came to mind. "Who are you supposed to be?"

His lips curled upward. "Death who bestowed gifts upon the three brothers who dared cheat him."

"Ahh," Hermione said weakly, wishing the couple in front of her would move on so that she could greet the next person in line.

"I like your costume too. I never would have thought anyone could make a peacock costume look so alluring."

"Mmm… thanks… a Madame Laraude's creation."

"Remind me to send my compliments,"

Hermione tried to smile but it came out as more of a grimace than anything else. She tugged her hand trying to escape his long-fingered clutched to no avail. The moment she tried to pull away, he tightened his hold and he drew her entire body closer. Her face flared with an extreme blush. She couldn't even meet the eyes of the snickering man behind her, waiting for his turn to greet the Prince heir.

Leaning over, he placed his lips to her ear, whispering, "Save a dance for me,"

Things were starting to get awkward as she kept silent, really not wanting to dance with him. But although persistent, he wasn't really all that bad. Hermione winced. He could be prince charming and it wouldn't matter, her mind was stuffed full of indecent flirtation, boyish features, and dangerous liaisons.

"Alright," she agreed. He pulled back immediately, and she saw that his entire face had lit up in happy expectation. His elderly mother reached out to take her hands, obviously pleased and aware of what she had just agreed.

The rest of the line was a blur of influential people that commented on her costume, family, or prospects. How could they possibly know who she was under all the layers of finery and the large mask that was molded by magic to her face?

Great silver servers were piled with hors-d'oeuvres and crystal flutes of champagne. Both were incredible. She lost herself in the crush, stopping here and there to talk to someone who hailed her.

"Brilliant! I wondered if you weren't actually coming," Melania Black exclaimed from behind her.
Hermione twisted around with a smile firmly planted on her face, relieved to see someone she had at least met before.

"How could you possibly know if I showed or not. I can barely move!" Hermione replied.

"I know. Despite having done this for hundreds of years, the Prince's just cannot seem to get it right. Don't worry though, we will be moved to the ballroom soon, where all the dancing will take place."

"Lovely," Hermione said dryly.

Melania laughed. "It's not so bad. You get used to it. There is rarely someone new though. What a novelty you are. The talk of the ton! By the way, this is my husband Arcturus Black. Arcturus, this is Hermione Slytherin."

"Charmed," He said taking her hand in his and leaning over to kiss her knuckles lightly. He was kind, obviously full of life and good humor. She always just assumed he would have been just as evil and snobby as Bellatrix. Hermione smiled back gratefully. At least there was one man she could count on being nice and not try to maneuver her into a marriage. She hoped there were no other Black men in the wings waiting to pounce.

"Anytime now," Melania muttered, standing on tiptoe trying to see over their heads.

And as if her words were magic, the great doors at the north end of the hall were opened and the throng flowed into the larger ballroom that took up the entire second floor of Prince Manor. Finally, she could breathe and was glad for the cooler weather that kept the stifling temps in the ballroom to a minimum.

The quartet jumped right into the first movement, drawing a crowd of couples onto the dancefloor.

"I heard you were engaged. Where is your fiancé?" Melania asked.

"I am not engaged,"

"Oh? I knew it!" Melania crowed elbowing her husband. "You owe me a thousand galleons!"

"You will get yours at home," he said suggestively, playfully to his wife. She tittered and smacked his arm lightly, blushing under her mask.

"I believe you promised me a dance," Magnus Prince said to Hermione as he joined their group.

"Evening Black, Melania,"

Neither of the Black's smiled at their host but nodded with respect instead. Interesting, Hermione thought. She would have to find out about that later.

She sighed in defeat and let Prince lead her onto the dance floor. Dancing was something that she loved. It reminded her of her parents, who were known to spend an evening waltzing here and there. Her father had taken it upon himself to teach her how and she treasured each and every memory.

Surprisingly, Prince kept his hand appropriately placed on her waist, even if he did use the leverage to pull her in and keep her close.

"I've been hoping for a moment just like this," he smiled down at her.

"Why?" she couldn't help but ask.

"I think we could be great together," he murmured, obviously amused. "You could bolster our
declining family and I could shower you with love and affection, children, and a foothold in our political world. Isn't that why you are here in England?"

Though she didn't care to have power for herself, she did need a foothold for Tom, an outlet for his more ambitious nature. Hermione bit her lower lip and looked down. He took it as a confirmation that he did have what she sought. However, she just wanted to avoid answering in the affirmative.

"Let me court you. Let me show you who I am. Give me a chance to win your favor,"

Hermione looked to the side of the dancefloor where the non-dancers waited for their turn, deep in thought. What would it hurt to say yes? And she could have sworn ice blue eyes shot daggers at her from the sidelines. But that was impossible. Gellert Grindelwald was still in Azkaban, wasn't he?
Hermione gasped as Prince moved them into a turn, trying to crane her neck around and verify that those angry eyes were indeed, Azkaban's most notorious. But with a dancefloor brimming with full skirts he slipped away. And she was pretty sure it was Grindelwald.

Her heart pounded, and blood flooded her veins, pumping each tube full of adrenalin. She was alert and hopeful for the first time since she took him to prison. Cursing her traitorous body, she nodded her way through the rest of the conversation, barely concealing her intense need to search among the crowd.

She was so focused on scanning the masks and eyes of the onlookers, she completely missed a new suiter, tapping his way in on her partner's shoulder.

"May I cut in?" his familiar voice asked, and she snapped her head around to stare at him and his angry pressed lips. His eyes full of fire and fury.

Prince bowed out in annoyance, even as Hermione stood there thrumming with excitement.

"Lucky I came tonight, my bride would have eloped with the first available prick in the receiving line,"

"I am not your bride," Hermione said, trying to still her racing heart by taking even breaths. And yet utterly failing.

He slid his open palm around her waist to her back pulling her into the intense body heat that rolled off him, leaving only inches between them. With his other, he captured her hand and held it gently, caressing the skin under his fingers. "I told you I would come for you,"

"How did you escape?" she asked quietly. They were not going to rehash everything right there in the middle of a crowded ballroom surrounded by people who would delight in anything and everything scandalous.

"Spoilers,"* he said with a self-deprecating smirk.

"Why are you here?"

"I had to see you,"

"But why?"

"Because you are the key to everything. My beautiful time traveler,"

Hermione froze right there on the dancefloor giving him all the confirmation he needed if he needed any at all.

They were nearly run over and several couples complained at their abrupt stop but Hermione felt dread like a lead weight in the pit of her stomach.

"No," she whispered before turning on the balls of her feet. She needed to get out of there. She needed to leave. She needed to strangle someone. Dumbledore? Merope? The only two who knew
and one of them betrayed her to the man she was supposed to hunt in return for Dumbledore claiming Tom.

She was three steps into the garden when he caught her elbow and forced her to a stop.

"I won't tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me,"

She whirled around landing her open palm on his cheek, leaving a red print outline of her hand.

"How dare you!" she whispered. "Let me go!"

"No,"

Hermione drew her wand out with her stinging hand and pressed the tip against his tender stomach, running through the gamut of nasty spells she had learned over the course of her life in her head.

"How?" she asked. "No. Never mind. I want to know who told you,"

"Does it matter?"

"You bet your arse it does,"

"You aren't going to like it,"

"No shit,"

"Albus and I have an agreement…"

"What sort of agreement,"

"I leave the U.K. relatively untouched, avoid him, and never talk about our past. In return, he will tell me things. At first, it was just about Hermione Slytherin. Then it was about the fantastic duel. Before long I was snowballing, enraptured by you. Then the fucking vow. I thought I was going to kill him. I wrote him, called off our agreement, threatened to go public. I wanted him to release you from the vow…You see… Instead, he dropped that bombshell on me. My Hermione was a time traveler. My messages to him were frantic. Were you from the past or the future? But Albus is a sly bastard and it was enough information to keep our bargain. So here I am, unable to stay away."

"Albus Dumbledore-" She should have fucking known.

"He has his hand in so many honey jars, you never really know what he is going to do. Like I said in my tent before you stole my blueprints… You can't trust Albus Dumbledore,"

It was like a punch to the gut. Utter betrayal. And perhaps this was merely a taste of what he had done to Snape. No wonder the man was so bitter. She was on a fast track down bitter lane herself. How dare he!

No matter the fury or fear that threatened to drown her, she was still aware that this was entirely her own fault.

"You and he are just different sides of the same coin," Hermione choked out and tried to rip her arm out of his grip.

"But you made a bargain with him too," Gellert whispered softly, still holding onto her arm.

"But I am not destroying the world, tearing it all to hell. I'm not the man murdering people in the
name of the 'Greater Good'!

"I am not a monster!" he snapped angrily. "I am not out there hurting innocent people!"

"Oh? They are just acceptable casualties?"

His face hardened. "Okay, time traveler, why are you here? To stop me? But wait…. Your focus was always on Merope. Or should I say her half breed bastard?"

"You…"

"No," he cut her off. "Let's talk about this. The likelihood that you are from the past is so remote it's almost laughable. And then there was poor raving Septimus Malfoy who has been telling anyone who listens that a girl just appeared out of nowhere on his family property. So if you are from the future and you are not here to stop me and you trusted Dumbledore enough to tell him details of your travel…. I must not be a threat in your time, although you are not shy about opposing me. So, I must reach the conclusion that something happens to me and my movement. Tell me, Hermione. If you weren't here, changing things, when would I be taken down?"

"Do you really want to know?" She laughed humorlessly. "Fine! What does keeping the secret matter now?"

"Good then! Tell me!"

"You have less than ten years of terror before Dumbledore was set to stop you and even less because I am here. Where I am from, you die old, lonely, impotent in your own fucking prison. And it is Merope's son that does it. You will be a blip in history overshadowed by a boy not yet even born and he will be dubbed the most dangerous wizard of all time. You were a six-week course in my fourth year and you never even made it onto the final test."

He froze. Not a thought or feeling passed over his face. Not a single finger twitch. He stared at her, searching her eyes as if he could catch her in a lie. But even he could see the open, honest malice between them.

"Do I make any difference at all?"

"You make that boy's path to power easier. When you were taken down there was a power vacuum allowing him to rise and succeed where you had fallen."

"There was never a chance for us then. I thought you were here to change things. I was certain of it. And you were. But I was mistaken too. I thought you were here to change me."

"Would it have mattered if I was? You, Gellert Grindelwald, will never change."

He reeled back as if she had hit him again. "Well, if I only have ten years, I better make the most of them!"

"I'm here now and I won't let this go on for another ten years."

"You will kill me then? Or wait until I have built my own prison. But wait, didn't you steal the blueprints? How am I supposed to build my own coffin now?"

"You are right. I should have let you build it."

He nodded as if deciding something. "I don't need those blueprints. I've never needed them," he
leaned in, angrier than she ever saw him. "I have created a far better prison than the one you possess and this time, I will build it in a way so that I draw power from it so that I cannot be held in it. Good luck fulfilling your vow now, Hermione. And one more thing," he sneered inches from her own gloriously livid face. "Are you even a Slytherin?"

Her face twisted with a terrible violence, wrenched her arm from his grasp, and apparated away. Right in front of his eyes.

Hermione landed with a pop, standing directly outside of the gates of Hogwarts.

"Can I help 'ee?" the caretaker asked.

"I'm here for Albus Dumbledore,"

"You may leave, Eustace, I felt her at the gates." Albus casually dismissed the caretaker with only an additional nod.

"Of course, deputy headmaster,"

Once the caretaker was far enough away to give them privacy, Dumbledore's mild tempered face turned furious. "What is the meaning of this Hermione. This is a school!"

"You fucking liar! You told Gellert! I should skin you alive!"

"I had no choice,"

"Don't talk to me about bloody choices!"

"I see you are very angry right now. Go home. Calm down. And I will see you this weekend when I come to visit my wife."

"Release me from my vow,"

"No."

"You would see me slowly waste away and die from the unfulfillment of it?"

"I am holding up my end of the bargain as should you,"

"Don't make me laugh! I could tell for months that something wasn't right!" Hermione stopped and gripped the iron bars of the gate, clenching them until her knuckles turned white. "Merope knows, doesn't she? She found out and ever since then you have been fighting but she didn't want to worry me…. Of course, you bloody bastard!"

"Now see here!"

Hermione took out her wand and held it aloft. "If you don't release me from this vow, I will cut you off at the knees. I know just as much about Ariana's death as you or Gellert. I know about everything."

"Keeping your secret was never part of our bargain and so help me I will cut you off from Tom if you even think about going public with it," Dumbledore warned.

"Right," Hermione said woodenly. This was not the end. She was done. Done with him. Done with everything.
Slowly she retreated from the gate and the moment she cleared the wards, she was gone.

Hermione's nostrils flared like a raging beast as she veritably stormed her way into the house.

"What's wrong? Did something happen at the ball?" Merope asked when Hermione slammed the door behind her.

"You knew Albus was sending Grindelwald messages and you didn't tell me," Hermione said, hurt and angry enough to explode like an erumpent horn.

Merope pinched her lips together and dropped all façade. "I caught him at it one night in Paris. Seemed to think I should be fine with it. That I should be obedient and keep his secrets. Don't get me wrong. He is a wonderful husband. He dotes on me, is excited about Tom. Gives me anything I ask for. But his treatment of you broke my faith in him."

"Why didn't you say anything? You knew how hard I tried to honor the vow. To honor the promise that I made to create a better world. Why?"

"Because there was nothing I could do to stop him. And I didn't want to see you like this. The only reason I didn't tell you is that Albus assured me he would never give Grindelwald information that would affect the reason you came back."

"Family does not keep secrets!"

"Grow up Hermione! Everyone keeps secrets of some sort! I was trying to protect you! You are one of the most important people in my life. I couldn't bear it if you let me alone because you hated my husband. A wizard's marriage, as you know, has very few loopholes."

"Well, Albus told Gellert everything he could ever want to know. He told him that I am a time traveler,"

Merope's hands flew up to cover her mouth, her eyes wide and filled with tears. "No,"

Hermione sighed and all the fight left her, collapsing into the nearest chair. "I tried to get him to let me out of the vow. He refused."

"Hermione," she said, kneeling down next to her and taking her hands in between her own, rubbing them as if they lacked warmth. Perhaps they did. Hermione was too numb to notice.

"I don't even know how to move forward from this," Hermione whispered, bone weary and depressed.

"We will figure it out,"

"I saved Tom," Hermione rambled, ignoring Merope. "I have already done what I set out to do. I am not God. I am not all knowing. I do not see this new and hopefully improved future. Fate will carry out the rest. I just can't anymore."

"Jesper!" Merope called and for the first time, she was afraid. Afraid at the utter defeat in Hermione's voice. Something that she had never heard before.

"Mistress Dumbledore?" Jesper said with a bow, eyeing his mistress with an overwhelming concern.

Merope gestured wildly at Hermione, clearly lost for words. Jesper nodded and using elf magic, took her upstairs and put her to bed.
The next day Hermione woke slowly, blinking away the morning sunshine. She sighed and turned her head the opposite way, remembering the betrayals she had endured the night before. Why she didn't see Dumbledore's betrayal coming a mile away, she never knew. It wasn't like he was the moral upstanding pillar of light he was purported to be. And she knew that. She knew that.

What was she going to do now? How was she going to move forward with this? First of all, though Merope's knowing stung worse than any of it, she would forgive Merope. At least in her case, the deception was with a good heart. Merope was a good sort and Hermione fully believed in the strength of their sisterhood.

Dumbledore though... he was going to meet the business end of her wand. Maybe not this day, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not even next year but she would be waiting for the moment to strike. She had no doubt now that he would let her down and let Tom down by extension. And she would be ready.

Now to the biggest, hairiest part of the betrayal. Grindelwald now knew that she was a time traveler, that she was future born. He apparently had known ever since she had started hunting him after Merope got married. It would make sense why he grilled her in his tent about Merope and Hermione's activities that started only after she walked into Gringotts. He wasn't wrong. But she had credited him with a superior intellect. He may be smart, but he wouldn't have even suspected she was a time traveler without Dumbledore leaking the information. After all, the simplest explanation is usually correct. And it was easy to credit her as a witch who lived and was schooled abroad.

Either way, she didn't know what her best course of action was. Did she continue to follow through with the vow and hunt Grindelwald until he was stopped? Or should she resist as a show to Dumbledore that she would not be manhandled and manipulated? He would not use Tom against her as a means to control her.

Part of her wanted to continue the hunt but a bigger part of her worried that if she didn't curtail Dumbledore as soon as possible, she would regret it in the long run. It would be a devastating strike if he successfully blocked her from Tom's life.

In the end, it was Merope who made up her mind.

Merope knocked on her door and peeked inside, unsure of her welcome. "Are you awake?" Merope murmured.

"Yeah, come in," Hermione sat up on the bed and rubbed her face and running her fingers through the tangle of her curls.

"Are you okay?"

"Not really," Hermione said as she patted the bed next to her and Merope visibly relaxed.

"Anything I can do?"

"When I threatened Albus with exposure, he threatened my access to Tom. So now I am wondering if I should continue to follow through with the vow or curtail your husband,"

"He did, did he?" Merope said dangerously.

"Um hmm," Hermione said. "I really am not sure what the best move would be,"

"Well as long as I am alive, you will have access to Tom. You are his family. My sister. Maybe not by blood but you have done more for us than anyone and I claim you. You are my family. And not
even Albus could stop it. And if something were to happen to me, your vow would be nullified."

"But he would still be Tom's father,"

"And you can better believe that I will make my wishes known. After I found out about what Albus had done, I contacted a solicitor in London to look after the interests of any children I may bear, with or without Albus. I have set into motion that he will not be able to cut you off from them barring reasonable and documented proof of abuse."

Hermione closed her eyes and a tear escaped, cascading down her cheek. She had been protected by Merope so much more than she ever anticipated. "How did you do that?"

"By legally binding you to me as my sister," she smiled and clasped Hermione's hand.

Hermione snorted. "How is that even possible?"

"My father and I came to an understanding. Though you are keeping your name, we have adopted you into the Gaunt family."

"How the hell did you get him to agree to that?"

"I gave him back the ring,"

"Merope…"

"This was more important to me than any heirloom. Besides, I still have the locket," Merope lifted the heavy necklace out of her robes to show Hermione the proof of her words.

"If anything happens to both Albus and I, would you take care of the children? I was going to ask you on Saturday at the family luncheon, but I think now is the perfect time to talk about it."

"I would be honored," Hermione said.

"So, you forgive me?"

"I had already forgiven you, Merope. I may be furious at Albus but that will not change our relationship!"

"Thank Merlin," Merope breathed and flung her pregnant self at Hermione, wrapping her in a hug. And just like that, Merope protected Hermione from her own husband freeing Hermione up once more for the hunt.

"Now onto other business… Can you please explain to me why Magnus Prince is in our parlor, waiting for you as if he were courting you?"

"Oh hell," Hermione mumbled as Merope pulled away and smoothed her belly as Tom flipped inside. "I think I may have agreed. I had seen Gellert in the crowd and I think I just nodded along to everything after that. I completely lost my head! What do I do?"

"Why don't you go out with him? What would be the worst that could happen?"

Hermione laughed. Almost all of her feelings and thoughts about the man were because he resembled and sounded so much like her former Potions Professor. Magnus Prince seemed to be self-serving and arrogant, but he was no more stalking her than Gellert was. Perhaps, she should give him a chance. After all, he did act the gentleman at the ball. And to be fair, she didn't really know him.
"Alright, alright, I guess one date wouldn't hurt anything." She said this even though she knew it probably wouldn't work out. Her skin didn't leap at his touch or her blood pound at his nearness nor did she get excited the way she did with Gellert. But if she didn't try to get over Gellert, she never would. One small step in the right direction was still a step, after all.

Merope beamed and stood, nearly running to Hermione's wardrobe. She pulled out robe after robe that was much too flashy for usual day wear and tossed them aside on the bed before landing on something she approved of. It was a simple gown that wrapped around her body and draped down in the back, baring her shoulder blades.

"This should do," Merope sang hanging it on the outside of the wardrobe. "Now, hop in the shower and I will keep your suitor occupied until you are ready,"

"Thanks," Hermione mumbled, rolling her eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione walked down the stairs to a smirking Merope and two angry men. Magnus Prince and Gellert Grindelwald. Jesper stood quietly disapproving behind them all.

Hermione paused at the landing. She couldn't fucking believe it.

And why was Gellert even in her house after the hate filled words they shouted at each other at the ball? Didn't he have grand plans to build a better, less coffin-like Nurmengard?

"You have another visitor," Merope said, struggling to keep her humor in check.

"Yeah…" Hermione said. "Thanks."

Prince looked up at her with glittering confidence, but she only had eyes for him, and he for her. Tangible anger rolled off him and it made him seem more menacing than Hermione had ever seen him.

Hermione nodded at Prince all the while keeping her gaze on Grindelwald. Merope, the wonderful sister she was, grabbed onto Prince's arm and pulled him into the other room. Leaving Grindelwald and Hermione alone.

"What are you doing here? I thought you intended on making a better prison than the one I have the blueprints for."

"Is what that bloody arse true? Did you say yes to his suit?"

"What do you care?"

He took a step onto the first stair, then the next, and the next until they were eye level. "Don't choose him,"

Hermione closed her eyes and set her jaw, clenching her teeth together in an unhealthy way. "Why. Do. You. Care?"

"You know why," He murmured, reaching out for her. She smacked his hands away.

"We can never be anything, Gellert. And you already know why. But while we are here… your anger seems to have cooled quite fast,"

Gellert smiled, showing his boundless charm. "That's how I am, Love, Quick to anger, quick to cool," He looked down at their feet and dropped the smile, shifting from one foot to the next. "I
meant it you know. Last night. I won't say a word to anyone."

"How very... gallant,"

The smile was back on his lips and her heart beat just a little bit faster.

"Indeed,"

"Did you want to say anything else?"

"I just wanted you to know that I listened when you told me of my future and the future of my movement,"

"And?"

"I'm thinking about things?"

"Really?" she said skeptically.

He chuckled and lifted her knuckles to his lips. "Yes, really."

*'Spoilers' is something that River Song often said to the main characters of Dr. Who ranging from the 10th doctor to the 13th in various episodes.
Sorry for falling back off the radar! Due to ongoing personal issues, this is just how it needs to be for a while. I will update when I can.

Chapter Twelve

Previously:

"I just wanted you to know that I listened when you told me of my future and the future of my movement,"

"And?"

"I'm thinking about things,"

"Really..." she said skeptically.

He chuckled and lifted her knuckles to his lips. "Yes, really."

**HGHG**

Hermione rolled her eyes and pulled her hand out of his charming grasp. "I will believe it when I see it,"

"Such a cynic," Gellert chuckled.

Hermione shrugged. "You have already told me that you cannot and will not stop fighting in this war you created. Why should I believe you?"

"I've never lied to you,"

"Well," Hermione began. "Whether you lied to me or not is not what matters here. I have things to do, if you don't mind," Hermione gestured to the door, dismissing him. A hurt look briefly passed over his face. She had never just dismissed him out of hand before.

"You want me to leave for what? For him?" Gesturing to Prince from the other room.

"Let me ask you this then, Gellert," Hermione sighed. "Will you turn yourself in, stop all war activities, and accept and serve your sentence without escaping?"

"I don't know," he said quietly.

"Then there is nothing more to talk about, is there?"

"Are you ready to go, Miss Slytherin," Magnus Prince asked from the doorway to the sitting room. His dark hungry eyes were focused on her. Her every move. Her every word.

"Sure," Hermione said. She swallowed hard, trying to tamp down her rising hope that Gellert really
was thinking things over—really was debating whether or not to give it all up. There was nothing to do now but continue on with her life despite the vow chaffing against her rebellion.

She swept past Gellert on the stairs and it nearly killed her. Her heart broke more at that moment than it ever had before. She wanted to let herself fall. To say fuck it. Let him sweep her into his arms and devour her lips. She wanted him to be a better man. But it didn't matter what she wanted. They could never escape who and what he really was. Gellert Grindelwald, Dark Wizard, War General, Destroyer of Worlds.

Hermione slid her hand into the crook of Prince's arm and tried to extinguish the dread that settled in the pit of her stomach. He led her out the front door with such a look of triumph that Hermione knew... knew that he wasn't the one for her either.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked curiously.

Magnus merely smirked at her and pulled her closer before murmuring, "Hold tight,"

He apparated them to the edge of a bustling field. Canvas tents littered the site. Men wore kilts. Women wore dresses and ribbons. Children were running, weaving en mass through the crowd. To the right of them, men were throwing what looked to be poles or trees stripped of all branches and foliage. To the left, a woman was attempting to toss a weight over a pole high in the air.

Behind them stood a tent village where delectable food smells wafted from various vendors that catered to the swirling mass of people watching the events.

"A highland festival?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

"Um hmm," Prince hummed happily.

"Oh," she breathed. A smile slowly spread on her face. She had always wanted to attend.

"Come with me," he said, wrapping his hand around hers and tugging her into motion.

"Oi, Magnus!" a loud bawdy male voice yelled from the crowd. Magnus grinned and waved to the unknown voice.

Hermione glanced at his face. He was happy, relaxed. His smile took over his face, making little crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Looking back at her, he smiled impossibly wider and moved them expertly through the crowd.

"It's Magnus!" a great cheer went up from the nearest ale tent before the original speaker continued. "And look at the lass he has with him,"

An even greater cheer rose. Magnus turned bright red, his smile still so impossibly happy. Hermione couldn't help but smile too. It was infectious; the happiness, the spirit of fun. Something her life had sorely lacked for the longest time.

Magnus leaned in to whisper in her ear and another great cheer engulfed them. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

He pulled back enough to see her face and she searched his eyes. This was unexpected. There seemed to be more than the sneering, arrogant bastard he was in front of his peers. She liked this side of him much, much better.

"A drink would be lovely," she yelled.
Magnus smiled, nodded, and left her there to head to the queue. A large beefy arm encircled her shoulders the moment she was alone and she followed the line of the heavy limb to the face of its owner. He had ginger hair, bright green eyes, an alcohol flush, and an easy grin.

"So, this is the wee lass tha' has Magnus in such a dither,"

"A dither?"

"Aye, lass. The only lass to catch 'is attention,"

"You know him well then?"

"Aye, he's my cousin. I am Fergus, by the way,"

"Hermione,"

"Lovely to finally meet ya, lass,"

"Do you spend a lot of time together?"

"No' so much anymore. We grew up together. His mother couldn't be arsed to pay him any attention after his da passed,"

"She seems like a piece of work."

"You are far too kind," Prince said acerbically from behind them and both Hermione and Fergus turned around. Magnus was frowning at Fergus, warning and death and embarrassment each taking its turn crossing his face.

"Now don' be so angry, Magnus, I just wanted to meet the lass who caught yer attention,"

"Fergus," Magnus said quietly in warning from between his clenched teeth. Carefully, he handed Hermione a pint of Scotch Ale.

"Wha'?" Fergus asked innocently. A look that was belied by the devilment in his eyes.

Magnus slid his hand into Hermione's and pulled her out of the tent to the deafening cheers of his mates. He looked stoic, but his ears and cheeks were tinged with a deepening pink flush.

"Don' leave Magnus!" Fergus yelled good-naturedly. "I was only teasin' ya! I promise to behave this time,"

Magnus scowled back at his cousin and the cheering and laughter grew at their expense.

"I'm sorry about that," Magnus said once they cleared the hectic crowd of the beer tent.

"It's fine," she said with a teasing smirk and a scarly Dumbledorian twinkle. He groaned.

"Hungry?" he asked trying to save face.

Hermione stopped them both with a gentle hand on his arm. "Prince, why are you trying so hard to court me? Why would you care about me? Why bring me here?"

He bit his lower lip, furrowing his brow in a way so reminiscent of Severus Snape it was uncanny. He sighed deeply and dropped her hand before running his long fingers through his thick black hair.
"It's not a simple thing for men like me… Courting that is. I can't just find someone I like and woo her. There is proper protocol. Standards. It's all rather stifling. From a really young age, I had already met my entire pool of candidates. Families typically form alliances based on the chemistry of children. I got along with nearly a half dozen of my peers. Can you imagine growing up surrounded by the only choices I had for a life partner? Six girls that I had known my whole life. Sure, we shared well as toddlers but once they grew, we had significantly less in common. Increasingly less as time ticked on. They are vapid, spoiled, and groomed to be trophy wives. I want more than that. I always have."

"So why me?"

"What wouldn't draw me to you? Brilliant, powerful, a mystery…"

"I could be a heinous bitch,"

"No matter how 'heinous' you declare yourself, you would still be preferable to the six idiots I am able to choose from,"

"Or… here is another, completely foreign thought. You could tell your mom to fuck off and do what you want,"

"That is a lovely option if I want to be disowned,"

"Would it really be so bad?"

"Living on the outskirts of society, without a Knut to my name? How would I survive?"

"I am going to assume that you are proficient in something and encourage you to find a job,"

"Only to live like the rabble?"

Hermione snorted. "You could provide for yourself well enough, I am sure. Maybe you will have to forego throwing lavish balls, but you don't seem to really like them anyway. Wouldn't you rather be happy?"

"That is why I approached you. The answer to all of my troubles."

Hermione sighed and quickly thought things out. Did she see herself ever falling in love with him? No. She was too wrapped up in Gellert Grindelwald and suspected she always would be. Could she be happy in a marriage where love wasn't the glue and foundation? She doubted it.

It was time to be honest. With him. With herself.

"Magnus," she started and looked at him from beneath her lashes. He winced but stood stoically despite guessing what she was going to say.

"Yes?"

"I like this side of you. The side where Fergus gets all up in your business. I feel like we could be the best of friends someday. But I don't think I will ever fall in love with you. And I don't think you will fall in love with me either. I am your answer, your way out. You don't like the options you have been given and then I appear out of nowhere and I am at least interesting. I want to be more than just interesting to my husband. I want fire, passion, love, and sacrifice on both our parts. I want to have the type of love that people write about, that young girls dream about. I am not willing to settle. I will have that kind of love, or I will be alone. I'm sorry." If she felt she could have settled, she would
have stayed in her own time and married Draco. She was here for a better world, a better life. Nothing less would be acceptable.

"Who is he?"

"Excuse me?"

"You have felt it. If you haven't you wouldn't be so sure that what we have couldn't grow into something more. So, who is he? Your ex-fiancé?"

"He has nothing to do with this," Hermione protested, perhaps a bit too vehemently.

"Is that the lie that you are telling yourself?"

"I…"

"It's okay. I get it. You already chose, and it wasn't me. But it wasn't him either. Poor bloke. What does a man have to do to get you to say yes?" he wasn't nasty per se, but he wasn't being understanding and kind either. Hermione had to close her eyes to stop them from rolling. She had tried really hard to let him down in a way that wouldn't hurt his feelings but apparently, it was his pride she should have girded against.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Why not say yes to me? Become my wife. Let me shower you in affection for the rest of your life. Why does it have to be a red-hot passion that would probably cool off and die one day."

"I'm not like you. I can't do what you are doing. Burying my head in the sand to appease mummy!"

"The Slytherin name has much more demands on your life than the name Prince does mine and you can't understand where I am coming from? Maybe you won't marry your other bloke because he doesn't measure up to the prestigious Slytherin name!"

"I am the last- the very last of my name! I can and will marry where I wish. If the name dies out, so what? Until I came along, everyone thought it was dead. I lose nothing by keeping to my own wishes!"

"Why are you even here? Am I just a way to make him jealous?"

"No, I wouldn't do that to you!"

"I saw his face as we left. You might as well have Avada'd the poor guy. He was devastated. I thought I at least left triumphant! Oh, how mistaken I was. How foolish."

"It wasn't like that,"

"No?"

"No."

"Well, there is no use in prolonging this agony! Let me take you home. You know where to find me when you come to your senses!"

Hermione was fuming, her nostrils flaring like a raging bull.

"No need," she ground out. And disapparated, leaving him all alone in the middle of a highland
festival that neither of them got to enjoy.

Hermione appeared on the west side of the gardens and trudged in the cold into the house. She was depressed, despondent. Tired, oh, so tired. She hadn't meant to hurt Prince. Looking back, she couldn't believe how stupid she was to go anywhere with him. She knew she really wasn't that interested. She knew it couldn't have ended well. Why did she go? Why?

"What happened?" His husky voice asked from the doorway to the sitting room and Hermione looked up sharply, more than surprised that Gellert Grindelwald was still in her home, waiting for her, despite the way she left him earlier. "I have to admit, I thought your date would last a lot longer than this,"

"Why are you still here, Gellert?" she asked, not bothering to put up a front.

His lips curled at the corners, his eyes glowed softly, tenderly. "I know guys like him. I wanted to make sure you got home safely,"

"You are not my father,"

"No, that's true," Gellert said as he uncrossed his arms and pushed off from the door jamb and began walking across the hall to where she was still standing. "I can't just turn off my feelings for you. And I have tried, believe me, I have tried,"

"Nothing has changed,"

"Last night after the ball, I met with Dumbledore,"

"Bully for you,"

He ignored her sarcasm. "It was a huge deal. It was the first time we had been in the same room together since Arianna."

Hermione's eyes lifted and met his.

"We discussed terms,"

"Terms?" she said stupidly.

"Terms of surrender,"

"You plan to give yourself up?" she asked incredulously.

"Perhaps,"

Hermione shook her head, unbelieving. "Why? Not that I wouldn't be happy, but you told me you were in too deep. That you felt duty-bound to your cause. I asked you mere hours ago if you could give it up. You said, and I quote, 'I don't know'. Why? What changed?"

He reached out to her, trapping a single curl between his finger and thumb, caressing the springy tresses. "Why else?"

"You found out there is no way for you to win the war? Because you found out that you would be stopped, and relatively soon too?" Hermione said wryly.

Gellert's lips twitched. "I will not deny that that information had something to do with it, but it wasn't the entire reason."
"Oh?"

"Are you going to make me spell it out for you?" he murmured, moving even closer to Hermione, leaning in closer and closer until his lips were hovering over hers. "If I had to choose between spending the rest of my life in Nurmengard as its sole prisoner or giving up the cause, I choose to give it up. Especially if I have a better chance of seeing what we could have together."

"Please don't lie to me," Hermione whispered.

His arms caged her in as he cupped her face with both of his large hands. "It would be worth it, I think, to give it all up for this," He closed the distance between them and wrapped his silky soft lips around hers. Her breath caught. Her adrenaline spiked. Nipples hardened as his forearms brushed them. She yearned. She wanted this- him- so badly.

A moan slipped between her lips as he lightly sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, caressing the plump flesh with his velvet tongue and teeth. Hermione leaned into him, drinking in the warmth and desire like a water-starved cactus in the desert.

She licked the corner of his mouth, tasting him. Giving back as good as she got. He was like an addiction she couldn't quit no matter what her brain warned. And he groaned in response, exploring her mouth with more fervor. He was ravenous and so was she.

Hermione pulled away first and desperately tried to clear her head. Her brain was swimming with what if's and maybe's and impossible dreams…

"You stayed to look for the Elder wand, didn't you?" she said, coming to the realization that Gellert Grindelwald would never rest until the unbeatable wand was back in his possession. What better time to search than when he knew she wouldn't be there. She wondered what happened to Merope. Surely, she had more sense than to let this madman have the run of the house without supervision.

"Fuck Hermione, you know how to kill a moment!" He whispered vehemently.

She raised her eyebrows and gave him a look.

Gellert ran his hand through his hair and turned his face away, looking so much like a child who had just gotten caught by his Mum while stealing cookies from the kitchen right before dinner.

"Poor Grindelwald… It must be hard to come to terms that I am more than just an equal. You can't just do whatever you want."

He chuckled and turned back around cupping her jaw in his right hand. "Maybe that is why I like you so much. You do whatever the hell you want despite what I say or out of spite maybe. Everyone else can be cowed, controlled. The Ministries of Magic around the world are so predictable. It's not even fun to break out of their prisons anymore."

"Yes, I can see how getting caught and breaking out of secure prisons would become a bore,"

"Where is it?"

"Merlin himself would have to rise from the dead before I give that wand back to you,"

"Then you are forcing my hand,"

"Oh?"
"Shall I hunt for it?"

"You could try,"

"You believe so much in your capabilities?"

"Let's call this one a team effort but I am the only one who remembers," Hermione smiled. It had been a stroke of brilliance to use the very cave that Lord Voldemort used to hide and protect his Locket Horcrux. Well, minus the Inferi and everything else. Naturally, none of the magic Tom cast would be there now.

She had bastardized some of the intricate wards and charms that the trio used while on the run from Voldemort, combined with some impressive things she learned from the Black family library before it was purged. Spells she never thought she would use. Never thought she would willingly cross that line into borderline dark magic. Killing Horcruxes didn't count. That was necessary.

Dumbledore also unknowingly contributed as did Professor Snape… even Tom Riddle was an inspiration to some extent. Hermione was quite secure believing that Gellert would never find the Elder wand and Blueprints. Not that he was interested in the latter anymore, not with those 'better and power-fueling' Nurmengard blueprints he referenced at the Prince Ball.

Gellert threw back his head and laughed. "It's not that they don't remember but that they haven't done their part yet. Is it? You must drive Albus up the fucking wall,”

"One of my many talents,”

"Ah, Love, I swear it will so good between us." His hand slid off of her face, his thumb taking a slow and tender detour to run across her kiss roughened lips.

"Yeah…” she agreed and the shock on his face was comical. "I can see it. The two of us. The magic, the quest for knowledge, the intense desire. I have had dreams where you were here, with me, sharing my life and bed. It has ruined me, I think." Hermione moved in close, lifting her face to his, inches away from his body. "If you ever truly mean to give yourself up to a tribunal and serve your time…”

She left the unspoken offer hanging in the charged air between them.

"I didn't search for it, you know. I was here with your sister, the entire time. I even felt her baby move.”

"You didn't?" she didn't believe him. Not for a moment. Although, he did seem very sincere.

"No."

"So, when are you going to turn yourself in?"

"Marry me,”

"Excuse me!"

"Agree to marry me, wear my ring, wait for me… and I will go today. Right now."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hermione said angrily. She was more than angry. She was furious. How dare he use this against her. How dare he!

How Albus and Gellert weren't better friends…. she would never understand. Two peas in a pod.
"Say yes and I will go,"

"Do you really mean that?"

"I do,"

"If I said yes, you would leave here and turn yourself in?"

"Well, I would have to go back to Nurmengard, dismantle camp, make sure Ingrid and Leon are provided for…"

"Once you are done dismantling your organization, getting your affairs in order, and ready to turn yourself over to the authorities, then I will say yes. But only if I am not already otherwise committed to someone else."

"Prince was that compelling eh?" Gellert smirked.

"I'm not going to tie myself to a man for a maybe,"

"Alright," Gellert said, smiling widely, a new exuberance flowing out of him. He began walking backward toward the front door, never taking his eyes of Hermione for even a moment. "I will hold you to it,"

Hermione stood there, at the bottom of the stairs, watching as Gellert left. And she stood there staring at the door long after he disapparated. It wasn't until Merope came to find her that she snapped out of it.

"What's wrong, Sugar?" Merope asked.

Hermione sighed. "Why can't anything just be easy for once?"

Merope chuckled. "If there is no pain, no confusion, no fear, then you aren't doing it right,"

Hermione laughed and nodded. "Touché,"

The next morning, Hermione woke to hushed voices outside of her door. It sounded as if there were a whole Quidditch team on the other side. Though they were whispering, they weren't exactly quiet.

Hermione stalked across the room and swung open the door, catching the miscreants in the act of fighting over a letter. Jesper held one corner, Merope another, and Albus the last. Kinder stood trembling off to the side, not daring to walk through the fight.

"What in the hell is going on here?" she asked.

Merope pursed her lips but let go of the letter. In a surprisingly vicious move, Jesper yanked the letter out of Albus' hands and bowed triumphantly to Hermione, presenting her the letter.

There was no return address, but Hermione broke the seal and scanned the contents, looking increasingly perplexed.

Hermione Darling,

I can't help but feel betrayed that you were able and willing to seduce our leader into abandoning our cause! After all, I did make it possible for you to enter our camp at the building site. If I knew then what I know now, I should never have aided you!
I send this letter as a courtesy because I am fond of you.

Gellert Grindelwald has been taken underground where you will not be able to find him. Try if you must, but we have no fear that you would actually find him. We can't just let our leader destroy everything we have worked for. It was his idea after all. Until the time comes that he has finally gotten his head on straight, he will be held.

However long that will be…

Love,

Vinda Rosier

"I don't fucking think so," Hermione said as she crumpled the letter in her fist.
Chapter Thirteen

Moments seemed to fly by as Hermione ran from one end of the room to the other, collecting everything she could ever need. How dare Rosier block her from Grindelwald? She thought of the many different ways that Rosier could have used to detain him and her face darkened. She and her cohorts would have had to use some seriously dark methods. Grindelwald was known for escaping captivity on top of being the most powerful wizard in the world. A wizard who had no compunction about using dark magic of his own.

The more she thought about things, the more furious she became. It was obvious that Vinda Rosier's letter was nothing more than a severe taunting. Whether done with the sole purpose to lure her out or really just to give her warning, she couldn't say. At this point, she really didn't care. Her anger was red hot and she struggled to keep her magic in check.

Merope followed her like a twittering bird, wringing her hands and chattering worriedly before being suddenly and rudely interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"I'm coming with you," Albus said, watching it all unfold from his place just outside Hermione's bedroom door.

"Like Hell," Hermione mumbled angrily. She might turn the force of her terrible magic on Dumbledore if he thought about pursuing that line of thought. His job was to stay and take care of his family. Hers was to hunt down the son of a bitch who promised the world and didn't deliver. Hermione was in such a state that she refused to acknowledge the fact that Grindelwald was not to blame, hopefully, for the new situation she found herself in.

On one hand, she was tempted to drop in on her hiding spot and arm herself with the unbeatable wand. The temptation was strong, almost too strong, and she fought with her desire to go in with that wand blazing. If she wanted to use it now, for this purpose, it was probably not a good sign. She needed to cast out the temptation of it. If she was being honest with herself, she should have snapped it in the tiny boat on the way to Azkaban. It would have saved her peace of mind.

Showing Dumbledore that wand, showing him the cave, would be absolute madness. Of course, there was no question that he would follow her. She had no compunctions about that. Not at all. She knew he was a wily bastard and once decided on a course, rarely turned from it.

"I could be of great assistance," Dumbledore persisted.

"Oh? Now that you braved your fears and met with the man, you are now willing to go up against him and his movement just to save him or take him down or whatever? I think not, Albus. Get your head out of your arse! There is no way I would let you put yourself into such a situation. What if something happened to you and you died? That would defeat the entire purpose of our vows. Then we would be in the exact same boat as if you never married Merope!"

"Not true. If I were to die, which I am not convinced of, she would still be considered my widow, and the child would still belong to the Dumbledore line."

"Did you miss the part where Merope insisted on him having a father in his life?"

"Many children grow up without fathers,"
"And they are more likely to become megalomaniac's that turn into Dark Lords and start massive holocausts just to gain power. I don't need another damn thing to worry about!"

"That sounds rather extreme,"

"Does it?" Hermione said oddly calm. She stilled and turned the full force of her attention on him.

"Yes."

"I suppose it would be coming from anyone else. However, from me, it should serve as a warning. You know very well that I am from the future. You should be more concerned about the things that I fear. For there is a very good reason for it. Unless you want to release me from our vow, you will stay here and I… I will go and recapture Grindelwald."

"Recapture," Albus scoffed. "As if you ever had him in the first place. We both know that you would have never gotten him to Azkaban without his acquiescence."

"You know what Albus, here it is, flat out… Stay or go, I don't care. But there is a consequence to both. If you stay, you keep our vow intact. If you go, I will consider the vow dissolved. It is up to you. Do you want me to continue the manhunt, so as to keep you out of the limelight? Or will you free me?"

Silence pervaded the room. It wasn't like a normal absence of talking. There were no movements. No rustling of clothes or bags being packed. There was simply a void as Albus and Hermione stared each other down. Even Merope was standing nervously off to the side locked in a wide-eyed stare with the floor.

"Well?" Hermione prompted.

Dumbledore closed his eyes; a pained look crossed his face. It was obvious that he didn't like the choices available to him. But that was too bad. Because for once, Hermione had the upper hand and there was no way she was backing down now. Either way, Tom's fate had already been changed. So much so that even the way he was conceived was different. Her goals were already accomplished. Dumbledore would just have to fall in line or hang himself by his own rope.

"I'll stay…" he mumbled reluctantly.

Hermione smiled and added a little jauntiness to her step. She loved winning, especially against Albus. It just made her feel as if all those years Harry and Ron struggled through trial after trial with her wasn't a waste.

It reminded her how ruthless this man could be if left unchecked.

Kinder moved from one end of the room to the other, resuming packing where Hermione had paused in her fight of wills against Dumbledore. Hermione once again focused and gathered all of the things that she would need for an extended stay in the frigid German countryside. As Hermione filled the bag, Kinder would pull each article back out of the miracle bag to refold it to her exacting standards before replacing it.

Hermione looked on in bemusement, still high on her victory. Albus sulked near the door, not ready to officially concede by leaving them alone but also not willing to help get Hermione ready for her journey.

In record time, Hermione was pressing her lips against Merope's temple then belly, telling Tom how much she was going to miss him while she was gone. With one last warning glare at Albus, she quit.
the house and disapparated the moment that she was outside her wards.

Germany was under a thick blanket of snow and ice, and the tent city that sprawled impressively beneath the foothill that she apparated to was covered in the same crisp snow. Icicles hung from the eves of the canvas, and the world was silent. No movement bustled through camp, in fact, none of the snow had been disturbed at all. That could mean one of two things. Either the camp was hunkered down inside their tents and waiting for the frigid air to warm, even if just marginally. Or, Hermione thought with a grimace, they had all left in such a flurry that they didn't even take the time to down the tents.

She really hoped that it wasn't the latter.

Hermione elongated her boots into something that greatly resembled ski's, taking small branches off the trees around her and turning them into the long poles that would help her direct her path. There was no way she would make it to the tent village by nightfall if she had to dig her way out of several feet of snow. Yes, magic could make things easier, but in this case, skiing down would be most expedient. Plus, it was fun.

Wind whipped against her face; biting her cheeks and giving them a rosy glow. A smile stretched across her face, breathing in deeply the crisp air of the foothills of the alps.

At the bottom, snow rose in a wave as she turned to come to a stop, spraying the nearest tent. She frowned. Not one tingle of wards hindered her progress. There was only one reasonable conclusion. No one was there. They must have had to leave quickly before the snow hit, abandoning their base camp. But why?

Did Gellert come back and announce that he was through, that if they wanted to continue their fight, they would have to do so without him? Or did Vinda head him off before he had a chance to disband his revolutionaries?

Hermione kicked one of the icy canvas sides, muttering dire threats to the soon to be luckless Vinda Rosier. Damn those Rosiers, always a pain in her arse. First in her own time in the form of a Death Eater, then in this time, in the form of a wizarding Mata Hari.

Damn them all.

She went from tent to tent, leaving none untouched in the hopes of finding out anything that may answer her question as to the reason that the tent city that had been bursting at the seams only months ago was suddenly a ghost town.

It was only until she got to command that she was in luck. Gellert's tent was bursting with his personal effects, even the warming charms were still functioning. The smell was hard to forget, and Hermione closed her eyes and breathed deep, enjoying the masculinity that surrounded her. She missed him, and her heart ached with the strength of it. Hermione ran her fingers over the scrolls, books, and robes strewn haphazardly around the room. Plans that never made it to fruition, old drawings of Nurmengard, new ones, correspondence from his field generals on the front lines... It was all exactly the same as she would expect it to be if she were merely waiting for Gellert's return.

Why was his tent the only one that hadn't been stripped of possessions?

Something in the center of his huge bed caught her eyes, drawing them to a beautifully carved wooden box inlaid with jewels and pearls. She cradled the small box and traced the intricate and skillfully made design. Turning it this way and that, she searched for a way to open the box, only to come up empty. The box seemed solid. Lifting her wand, Hermione cast every spell she could dream
of, trying to get the box to reveal it's opening.

After nearly an hour of casting spell after spell, Hermione dropped the box into her beaded bag. She would have better luck breaking the mysteries in her own home where her resources were much more abundant.

Quickly she finished examining the rest of the tents and found them to be just as empty as all the rest before. Once she made her assessment that there wasn't much else to do, Hermione packed up every single belonging of Grindelwald and directed the contents into her magically expanded bag. She would sift through it all later, at home. Or at least somewhere more comfortable.

Hermione didn't want to go home just yet, admitting defeat so quickly. So, she dropped in on the tiny cottage that had housed Ingrid and Leon. But that too was empty. The hearth was just as cold as the sinking stone in her gut.

Rummaging around in her bag, she grabbed the newest set of Nurmengard's plans and studied them, hoping that she would draw inspiration from the bold magical lines. Just because she knew the site of the original Nurmengard, didn't mean that was where he would build his new and more powerful prison.

As she thought about it, she knew that he wasn't stupid enough to build Nurmengard where he originally planned. Not with all the information that Hermione had in her head about his regime and movement. The very first thing he would have done was change it all. She would bet anything that she would find all of his workers there, at the new site. The only problem was, she had no idea where he would have moved it to.

Grimly, she stuffed the new plans into her bag and pulled out a map. This map was muggle, not wizarding, and she wondered absently if she was making a huge mistake by not consulting the magical one instead. After all, he did have ideas about muggle separation and Wizard domination.

Still, she felt that pull in her, that sense of deep rightness as she looked at the physical map of Germany. She didn't often make decisions with her gut the way Harry did, but her current situation wasn't typical either. She would find him, and when she did, hell would break loose. Everyone who stood in her way, everyone who threatened the idyllic picture that Grindelwald painted for her, every second they kept him apart from her would only solidify their punishments. The longer it took, the more furious, the more creative she would be. Only Merlin could help Vinda Rosier now.

With a flick of her wand, she shaped a huge ball of snow into a long table and spread the map out on its icy face, weighing down each corner carefully with solid ice sculptures. Replicas of all the people she loved in her life. She even created one of Rosier, melting and reforming it on a continuous loop as she continued to think of where Gellert Grindelwald could possibly be.

After night fell, Hermione knew that she would have to make camp and internally cringed when she thought of sleeping in a tent. Again. But she kind of wished that she had stayed in the abandoned tent city. At least then she might feel less alone. Then there would be the slight possibility that someone would stumble upon her. Then again, did she really want to leave herself so vulnerable?

Heaving a heavy sigh, Hermione pulled out Grindelwald's massive tent and with a flick of her wrist, had it set up in moments, surrounding the whole in a litany of spells that would warn and hide her in turn.

Entering the tent, Hermione was overwhelmed with his smell. It pervaded the very canvas that enclosed the space. And she ached. She yearned for Gellert and their bantering and seduction. His attention. The way he looked at her as if she were the most riveting conundrum. She desperately
wanted him to just appear like he usually did, finding her in the most absurd places.

Smiling, she approached the bed and smoothed her hands over the warm luxurious blankets, admiring the plush feel of them. For a moment she could imagine what it would be like, being in his bed… with him. Her skin tingled as she imagined where he would run his fingers. A coil of desire began winding in her core. His lips, covered in a day's growth of stubble would rasp against her neck, tickling her. Making her melt.

Hermione closed her eyes, breath hitching in her throat. She had almost had him. He was finally willing to admit that what he was doing wasn't right, or at least he wasn't willing to continue on. That she was more important to him than the cause. He had even approached Dumbledore for the first time in countless years. The bitterness of losing him now, when she was so close to stopping this madness was a bitter pill to swallow. For once, she had allowed herself the luxury of wanting him, of letting herself fall. For it all to be snatched away at the very last moment, by Vinda Rosier of all people…

Fury burned like white-hot steel through her, and the longer she thought about things, the more and more furious she became. She had been so close. So fucking close. She could almost taste it.

Rosier would pay.

A nearly unidentifiable sound scratched at the fabric of the tent, making Hermione tense up immediately. Nothing should be able to touch the tent. Not a stray tree branch, not a wild animal, and certainly not one of her enemies.

"Homenum Revelio," Hermione whispered, watching as the ghostly specter settled around a prone form on the frozen ground inches from the exterior of Grindelwald's tent.

Hermione thrust back the tent flaps and was mid-cast when she saw who had breached the wards. Young Leon lay broken and battered on his stomach, tear tracks cutting through the large splashes of blood that coated his face.

"Leon!" Hermione murmured in alarm, running to the boy and flipping him over so that he lay face up.

"Her…my…" He whispered before losing consciousness.

Hermione flicked her wand, lifting the boy, and directed him to float along behind her, bringing him into the tent.

She laid him down on the bed and ran diagnostic after diagnostic, hoping and praying that whatever reason he was in that state wasn't fatal. She may not have approved of Grindelwald using him and his sister as a means to convert Hermione to his cause, but she didn't dislike the boy. In fact, she had felt protective of him. He was a Muggleborn, like her. The only difference between them was the singular fact that she had wonderful parents and Leon, did not.

She rummaged around in her bag and pulled out potions one after the other. Blood replenisher, pain reducer, Skele-gro, and dittany. Slipping one arm under his head, she coaxed each potion in his mouth, drop by drop. He was still unconscious when she finished, and she looked on with worry.

Knowing that to watch him would be like watching water boil, Hermione turned away and drew the maps back out of her bag, combing them for any ideas on where Grindelwald could be. Closing her eyes, she tried to remember everything Binns had taught them about Grindelwald's movements.

"…It wasn't until '25 when his first major appearance occurred. And for the first time was captured
by the MACUSA in the wake of a failed attempt to capture a matured Obscurial." Binn's droned on from the high podium in the front of the room. "Although it wasn't the first time he was under Auror protection, it was the first time he was held in a high-security prison. After that, his tactics changed, and he became single-minded in his endeavor to become the King of the Magical community and by extension the Muggles as well. Plans were made for a palace to be built but he decided to subjugate the world first and the plans were set aside. Presumably for a later date had Grindelwald not fallen twenty years later."

"How come he was unable to have it built in those twenty years?" Padma Patil, the Ravenclaw twin asked. Shocking Professor Binns right out of his monologue.

"Well, Miss Patil, his architects and workers were busy building the most secure prison the world had ever seen. I doubt he wanted to slow down that project. It was his only means to capture the wizards in the world who were powerful enough to make a move against him. He probably reasoned that it was more important to solidify his regime than it was to recreate Versailles."

"But where would he build such a place?" Hermione had asked, riveted. "It wasn't like Germany was central enough to the rest of the Wizarding community. He might as well build a castle and rule out of Siberia."

"Our best information indicated that he was planning to build a castle on the ley lines. They converge in only three places. America, Japan, and England. Japan, though sympathetic to his goals, were severely against letting foreigners in their country. They didn't want to dilute their heritage by allowing foreigners free access. So, his two remaining choices were England and America. Both had significant pitfalls. America was also a bit isolated from all the European wizards and England was protected by the mere presence of the esteemed, Albus Dumbledore, a rival he dared not taunt."

Hermione looked around Grindelwald's tent, taking measure of the man she knew, compared to the monster they had learned about in History of Magic. Would he be foolish enough to change the building site of Nurmengaurd from Germany to England?

Somehow, she didn't think so. Not only was Dumbledore there, but Hermione was also there as well. Grindelwald was too smart to make such a devastating mistake.

But if not England, then where?

Leon groaned from the bed and Hermione hurried over to check on him, lightly pressing her cool hand against his brow.

"Hermione?" he whispered.

"I'm here,"

"Where is Gellert?"

"I don't know,"

"But you are here, in his tent."

"Yes, well, I sort of took it over."

Leon weakly snickered. "You couldn't have taken it if he didn't intend for you to. The only reason I can get in here is that he allowed me through the wards."
"He has been kidnapped by that Rosier woman and when I arrived at tent city, it was deserted and empty. All except for Gellert's tent."

"Gellert was way too powerful for Vinda to overtake."

"What do you think happened?"

"Not what, who."

"Okay, who then?"

"There has only ever been one other, other than you, that is."

"You mean the other person he was afraid of?"

"Albus Dumbledore."

"That is impossible," Hermione said firmly, frowning, and despite her vehement denial, began running through the final day before she left on the merry chase.

The letter stating that Grindelwald had been captured… Dumbledore was there. In her house. Why hadn't he been at the school? Why was he so gung-ho about finally picking up the mantel to hunt the Dark Wizard?

Fucking Dumbledore. Again.

How many times would she be fooled by the man before she finally learned her lesson? She hadn't even tried to get in touch with Gellert before she left. She just ran off, pell-mell, infuriated by Vinda Rosier's apparent intrusion just when Hermione thought she had won. That wasn't like her. That was Harry, not thinking first.

Hermione nodded to herself. This time, she would go slowly, meticulously plan out each and every move and when she returned, whoever was the mastermind behind this debacle- Dumbledore or Rosier- would feel her wrath.

Cold realization stopped her in her furious tracks. Dumbledore had been willing to come yes, but from the mouths of both Dumbledore and Gellert, they met, and terms of surrender were laid out. Why would Dumbledore bother to do this?

Suspicion colored her assessment of the boy on the bed.

"How come you came here? Where is Ingrid?" Hermione asked gently. "I went to your house, but it was empty."

"Ingrid is staying with some friends. I overheard something, and I wanted to tell Gellert."

"What did you want to tell him?"

"The muggles. A war broke out and they are killing each other by the thousands."

"World War I," Hermione murmured. They were quiet for several minutes only their breathing disturbing the silence. "Where is everyone else from tent city?"

"How would I know?" Leon asked, bemused.

"How did you get like this?" she gestured to his bruised face.
"Got caught up in a skirmish," he looked away and Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I could really use a drink," Leon said licking his lips, nervously.

Without taking her eyes off the boy, Hermione conjured a cup and filled it with cold water, leaning in to help him sip.

"Could I have tea?" he asked.

"Water is best for a healing body," There was no way she was taking her eyes off of him for a single minute.

"That isn't what Ingrid says," He said with a lopsided smile. A smile that was broadening and changing. Hair that was receding, growing coarse, and darkening. Leon was not Leon but a polyjuiced version.

Her wand was out and at the newly unveiled wizard's neck within moments.

"We can do this the easy way or the fun way," Hermione said with narrowed eyes and furiously pinched lips.

"This isn't what it looks like," Magnus Prince said.

"Really?" Hermione asked dangerously. "Then explain it. And if I were you, I would start talking. Fast."

"I hate him," Prince said passionately, spittle flying from his mouth. "I have never wanted anything in my life so badly as I wanted to marry you. He took you from me! Every chance of my possible happiness in ruins, because he was charming and attentive and dangerous. I can be dangerous too!"

"I didn't have feelings for you. That is why I rejected you." Hermione said bluntly.

"But in time that would have changed! I wanted him to feel my pain. I wanted to take away something he wanted more than his own life. It wasn't even that hard to find his followers. All I had to do was drop hints in the ears of the right people and I was invited into their midst. Hours later I brought in the Aurors and they emptied out everything. And then the letter. But I didn't send it until I knew Dumbledore was going to be at your home. He would give the fear legitimacy and urgency." He pushed off the bed and stood to his full height, towering over Hermione seemingly uncaring that she held a wand to his throat.

"You used Albus Dumbledore to get back at me for rejecting your proposal?" She asked incredulously.

"It wasn't a faked letter you know. Vinda Rosier was only too happy to write it. She knows you will ruin their movement."

"And Leon? What did you do to him?"

"The boy is safe at the Manor. I am not a monster, you know," Hermione gritted her teeth obviously disagreeing.

"You don't have to worry about Grindelwald now. He is going to pay for his crimes and you will be free to be Lady Prince, my wife."

"You are crazy," Hermione growled. "Did you really think that doing this would endear me to your
suit?"

His hand wrapped around her wrist that clenched her wand so tightly. She tried to yank her arm free, tried to cast a stunner, but he was faster. A hole burned through the canvas of the tent behind his head. He yanked her wand out of her hand and her magic reacted violently, sparks leaping from curl to curl, looking so much like a halo of electricity framing her head.

He jerked her forward into his chest, only wincing as the electric sparks whipped his face. "There are ways," He said menacingly. "Ways to keep you. You will come to accept me, adore me, and realize that I am doing this for us. For our happiness."

"Let me go," Hermione said furiously, kicking him in the shin. He clenched his teeth and pushed her backward until she was pressed against the wooden armoire, chest to toes.

"Never," He whispered vehemently.

From his inner jacket, he pulled out a knife. A cursed knife, a knife that once left a scar on her neck. The Blacks had owned it in her time, but maybe they were related to the Princes and when Eileen was disinherited, the family fortunes went to others. Regardless of the how’s, Hermione eyed that knife with no small amount of hate.

"It doesn't take much to marry using blood rites."

"I. Do. Not. Consent," Hermione growled, renewing her struggles against him. Magically she was a force to be reckoned with but disarmed, she was still a small woman and he was a much larger man.

"Lucky for me, you don't need to," Prince said drawing a cut on her wrist before moving to his own.

"And lucky for me," a smooth velvet voice purred behind Prince, a new wand held at his throat. "I wasn't the only lucky bastard to have heard the entire confession."

Hermione looked up, wide-eyed, relieved and pleased to see Gellert whole and hearty. Dark and dangerous.

"Drop the knife," Gellert said.

With a twist of lips, Prince sliced his wrist, pressing his opened flesh to hers with a yell of triumph. His happiness so turned into confusion as there was no great light of bonding, no physical manifestation of their marriage.

Aurors took over from there and bound Prince, pulling him away from Hermione. Hermione marveled at the unblemished wrist that had been cut open moments ago, before looking up into the face of Albus Dumbledore who was sweating profusely, gripping his wand still pointed in the place where Hermione's wrist was moments ago.

"I would never hear the end of it from Merope if I let you get married without her being in attendance," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Illness, to oneself, is devastating in so many ways, but when it is a spouse or your child… it changes everything. When I was ill, I wrote more while I was healing. I had the time. But when the one who is sick is not myself, I did next to no writing. For many reasons.

The last year has been hard for us but the last three months were some of the worst I've been through.

I hope you all understand, are forgiving of my absence, and keep us in your thoughts.

Thank you to all my wonderful dedicated readers who have been nothing but supportive and understanding. I truly could not ask for a better group of people.

Chapter Fourteen

Previously:

*The Aurors took over from there and bound Prince, pulling him away from Hermione, twisting his arms behind his back. Hermione marveled at her unblemished wrist and ran her shaking finger over the nonexistent line. She looked up at Albus Dumbledore who was sweating profusely, gripping his wand which was still pointed at the place where Hermione's bleeding wrist had been only moments ago.*

"I would never hear the end of it from Merope if I let you get married without her being in attendance," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

**HGHG**

"Albus?" Hermione asked confusion and relief warring on her face. For the moment, she ignored that Gellert was there in front of her, safe and sound, and not at the mercy of Vinda Rosier. Albus' intervention seemed more significant somehow. As if he was changing from the slightly immoral man he was, into something much better. A man whom she could see herself respecting one day if he continued on this path. An Albus Dumbledore that she could be friends with.

"The moment you left, I sent a note round to Grindelwald. He had given me his residence as a measure of faith and his complete intention of surrendering. It was a far-flung hope that he was there… I was relieved and yet terrified to find out that he was and that was much less than Merope's feelings on the matter. She was there you see when Gellert came flying in the sitting room in a panic. It took no small amount of persuasion to get her to stay home with Kinder and the other elves. She is much too close to her due date to be apparating all over Europe. Anything less than our full cooperation on the execution of her plans would have been ignored.

"Once she gave us our marching orders, we dared do nothing but execute it. My wife has a brilliant mind and a terrifying temper. I don't think my plan would have worked quite so well as hers. However, I will have to tell her how close we were to losing you. Can't imagine I would have
walked away unscathed if we had."

"Or with the family jewels," Grindelwald said knowingly, moving just behind Hermione.

"Don't be so amused. You would have enjoyed the same unlucky fate," Dumbledore grumbled as Grindelwald grimaced.

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed. Why had she been so stupid? Stupid enough to believe everything that was told to her. If she had just waited, not run off half-cocked… she swallowed hard pushing the hot shame that welled up from her stomach. So much for being the most brilliant witch in a century.

If Harry had done what she had done, she would have tried to talk him out of it. It was the Department of Mysteries all over again.

As easy as it was to block out the bustle of the Aurors securing and transporting Prince, it was just as hard pretending she wasn't hyper-aware of the blond man who stepped closer, running the tips of his fingers over the back of her arm. She assumed that he needed the assurance that she was indeed there, alive, in front of him. She could hear his quickened breath, feel it in the fluttering of the curls on the side of her face, and the heat pulsing from his body enveloping hers.

A man in severe Auror robes approached them, his face twinned with uncompromising severity and pride in his own accomplishment. "Grindelwald. Our agreement?"

Hermione could hear Gellert swallow hard, a swift intake of breath, the slight tightening of his fingers on her arm.

"Very well," He said.

"Wait," Hermione whispered barely audible, but it was enough to stop the man behind her from leaving.

"Yes," He questioned hopefully just as quiet as she. His hand snaked around her waist, stopping to rest on her belly. Reminiscent of Merope's wedding where he had watched her sister get married from the safety of the house with her, his arm wound around her waist, his chest pressed to her back.

Dumbledore pulled the Auror away, murmuring about something he would like an opinion on, leaving Hermione and Gellert alone, if only for the moment.

"What does this mean? For us?" Hermione asked in a breathy whisper.

Gellert pulled her body snugly into his, wrapping his larger one around hers until his lips were at the shell of her ear. His heartbeat was strong and steady against her back, picking up pace the longer she stayed in his arms. "I am yours, always yours. The world could burn, and I would still be yours. The only thing this means is that I must stand trial and take my punishment laid down by the world. And when I am free, I will find you. Isn't that what you wanted? What you demanded of me?"

"What makes you think I will wait?" she said breathless, ignoring the way he threw her own words back in her face.

"Tom," Gellert said with absolute certainty.

"Tom?" Hermione whirled around, still in the circle of his arms, confusion marring her delicate features. "What does Tom have to do with this?"
"Only the greatest of passion and love would tempt you away from that boy. If this isn't love… then there is no such thing."

"I will never leave Tom,"

"I know," he smiled, sliding his arms all the way around her and tucking his face into the cradle of her shoulder. "and I would never ask it of you."

"You may never be free of Azkaban,"

"I know,"

"There may never be a great love affair between us,"

"Oh, ye of little faith," he chuckled. "do you not believe that I may yet have an ace up my sleeve?"

"You promised you would pay for your crimes, face justice,"

"But you never said I couldn't bargain for the best possible outcome,"

"Are they here to take you into custody?" She nodded toward the Aurors.

"Mmmm," he hummed in the affirmative.

"What did you agree to, to be here?"

"When this is all over, Love, I will answer your every question. Until then…"

Hermione felt Gellert stiffen before the authoritative voice of the Auror ruined their shortened moment. "Gellert Grindelwald, you are under the arrest for war crimes spanning the globe and are to be brought before the Wizengamot, the MACUSA, and the Nurmengard Trial council."

Gellert squeezed her tight for a moment and dropped a kiss on her neck before whispering in her ear,

"I love you,"

If the world could have shattered it would have done so in that very moment. Her breath caught, and her face went numb. It wasn't just the words that he said, it was the way he said it. How great was his yearning? How deep had she unintentionally buried herself in his heart?

How deep was he in her own heart?

His hands dropped from around her body and she felt the bone-chilling loss. It didn't matter that for months she had mercilessly chased him, confronted him, took him to Azkaban, threatened him. She wished to the depths of her core that he was not Gellert Grindelwald, the Darkest Dark Lord to reign before Voldemort rose.

How could she have fallen in love with such a man as this?

But she saw it, the remorse, the redemption and it was only possible because she, Hermione Granger Slytherin, traveled to the past. Curtailing not one but two Dark Lords.

Gratitude for the Smurg rose in her stomach, spreading outward until she felt the tingling in her very fingertips. This is not something Hermione could have accomplished on her own. And for the first time since she traveled back to the past, she was at peace with the sacrifices she made for herself and others.
Limitless possibilities danced in front of her eyes as those who died or were never born paraded across her mind. The world she left would never be. She saw peace, reform, justice. She saw Harry and Neville on the Platform hugging their Mums and Dads goodbye. The halls and dorms would overflow with classmates that never existed before. Her own children perhaps.

When she first landed in this time, she wondered why. Why was she left in this time where Tom wasn't even born? Now she knew. The Smurg used her to save countless lives and in return, brought Hermione to where he was. Gellert Grindelwald, a love that should never exist. A love that would inspire the world. Once in a thousand years kind of love. He was her reward.

He was hers.

And she was his.

And if his complete surrender didn't prove that he was capable of being a better man, she didn't know what would.

Hermione watched as Gellert stood tall and proud as the Auror bound him and took his wand. A small contingent of Aurors circled him and began moving him outside of the tent and Hermione's well-laid wards.

Their eyes met briefly once more, his signature flirtatious grin flashing before they managed to pull him out of the tent. With a small pop, she knew they were gone, to Azkaban or the Ministry, she didn't know. Leaving Dumbledore as her only company.

"Why are you like this?" Hermione asked petulantly, using magic to pack up the contents of the tent.

"Like what?" Dumbledore asked, twinkling.

"Hot and cold! One minute I am convinced you are worse than any dark lord and then you do something which makes me question, which makes me hesitate to write you off. Sometimes I full on hate you, Albus. And other times,"

Dumbledore interrupted with his obnoxious twinkle. "you adore me?"

"And other times," she began while ignoring his interruption. "I can almost tolerate you,"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean,"

Hermione's lips thinned to a barely perceptible line. "You save me from being bound forever to a man by force but then you are like this! It really makes me wonder. What kind of man are you?"

"The best kind,"

"The most aggravating kind,"

"Isn't most family aggravating at times?"

Hermione walked out of the tent, happy that each item fit neatly in her bag before she turned around and stripped the now empty tent of wards. Slowly, that too broke down and after a moment of maneuvering, laid it nicely in her bag.

"That bag is quite impressive. I wonder which department did it for you." Dumbledore said with great humor as if he were waiting for the punchline.

"I am quite capable without help for such things,"
"Oh, it has nothing to do with being capable or not. It is illegal to cast an undetectable extension charm without a permit." Dumbledore was now smiling. Twinkling and smiling. What has the world come to that she would be mercilessly teased by Albus Dumbledore? Hermione groaned as he continued, "Not that I would turn you in mind. But if it was something you wanted to keep to yourself, you might mention how wonderful and helpful I have been to my wife,"

"It almost sounds like you respect her opinion,"

"I respect her very quick dueling reflexes,"

"At least she doesn't let you bully her,"

"I wouldn't bully her! That's my wife, not a class adversary that you are talking about,"

"Exactly! And don't forget it, either!"

**HGHG**

Hermione followed Albus into the house, tired and ashamed. Merope was there, trembling with her deep and unstable emotions, hands over her bulging belly.

Tom.

Her reason for being.

Her everything.

And because of him she now had Merope in her life. He was the best and worst part of her life and he wasn't even born yet.

"You're home," Merope said, tears shining in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left," Hermione said slowly walking forward. Her stomach was a mess of heavy stones and guilt. Leaving had put them in danger. So much danger. What if it wasn't a machination of a jilted almost lover. What if someone wanted to get both Hermione and Albus out of the way. A clear path to Merope and her son. A son who would be half-blood. Not that many people knew that, but a few did or might suspect. And that was enough. Enough to paint a target on the child's head. It would have worked too. Dumbledore had followed her, protected her, leaving Merope vulnerable. And that was all on Hermione.

She ran cold at the sudden thought. She would have to be more careful from here on out.

"It was an impossible situation. You are struggling to juggle all of your roles. All of the information you have. Your agenda is long and complicated. We understand." Merope said compassionately, giving her forgiveness that she didn't deserve.

"That is no excuse. I let my emotions, my feelings overtake my sense. I was enraged that someone would block me from Gellert. I wasn't focusing where I should. Even if I do nothing with Gellert, he will still be defeated."

"You took a vow," Merope chuckled. "What exactly could you have done?"

"This vow wouldn't break me. The compulsion is fierce, true, but I've lived through worse. It wouldn't kill me. I'm sure of it."

Albus cleared his throat, "Perhaps it was unfair of me, asking for something like that. But he has
surrendered with the intention of living out his sentence. You are free."

"I don't want it assumed, Albus. I want you to release her from the vow!" Merope glared at her husband who was now, rubbing circle onto her back with one hand and her belly with the other.

Dumbledore dropped his head on her shoulder, releasing a big pent up breath. "If that is what you want."

"I do," she said forcefully, looking Hermione in the eye as she said it. Hermione bit her lip and closed her eyes against the tears welling. No one had stuck up for her more than Merope, not even Harry. It was usually the other way around with her other friends. With Merope it was… more. Deeper.

Wordlessly, Hermione reached out and took Merope's hand in hers, squeezing it a little.

"Sisters have to stick together," Merope whispered through her tears.

"Thank you," Hermione said through her own tears.

Albus started to back up and leave, slowly, one step at a time.

"Don't think you are getting out of this, Albus," Merope said harshly without turning. "You are the reason that Hermione was in Germany, to begin with. Has Gellert met all of your demands?"

"Yes…"

"Well then? What are you waiting for?"

He mumbled something intelligible.

"Albus!"

"Fine! Hermione, I, Albus Brian Wulfric Dumbledore, release you from our vow, although I will uphold my end until my dying day."

Golden thread snapped like fireworks in the air between them, rebinding only Albus to his word, severing the bonds that held Hermione so fiercely.

Merope clapped as Hermione tried to blink away the bright lights that blinded her.

"This calls for a celebration! A true celebration! We are finally a true family, one bound to each other by each other's want, not beholden because of unbreakable vows and promises that have nothing to do with being a family."

Merope bustled away into the kitchen, her excited voice rousing the elves into making a veritable feast. Leaving Albus and Hermione alone in the awkward silence.

"I can't stay. I have to return to Hogwarts tonight." Albus said, smiling at the place where Merope had disappeared.

"So? Eat and go,"

"I can't," Albus said regretfully.

"Alright…," Hermione said. She bit her lip and shifted from foot to foot until she had the courage to meet his eyes. "Thank you. For saving me from Prince. I don't know how to repay you for that,"
"You already have," Albus said with a lopsided smile, making his small beard hitch on the one side.

"In what way?"

"You stopped Gellert and I did not have to do anything. I am forever in your debt."

Hermione chuckled. "I guess we will just have to call it an even exchange."

Albus nodded, twinkling. "I guess we will."

They looked at each other with mutual understanding, equals, for the first time ever. And it wasn't terrible.

"Good night, Hermione,"

"Night, Albus,"

Albus nodded, still smiling, and walked out of the room, headed toward the busy kitchen to say goodbye to his busy wife.

Hermione trudged up the stairs more tired than she thought she was, grasping the railing tightly with each step. Loneliness crashed over her as she heard Merope's tinkling laugh float up from the kitchen. But that was okay because everything she set out to do in coming to the past had been completed. Now she just had to wait and enjoy the fruits of her labor.

**HGHG**

Months passed as Hermione waited for news of Gellert's trial date. Stacks of the Daily Prophet sat undisturbed next to her chair in the sitting room, next to the fire. They were all the same in content, even if the pictures and dates changed.

*Grindelwald Captured! For Good This Time!*

But not one word of anything else. No talks of settlement or of deals. No talks of even where he was being held. Nothing.

Merope walked into the room, Kinder following behind with a tray of warm milk. A frown marred her usually serene face, both clenched fists digging into her lower back.

"Hermione," Merope said with sweat beading on her forehead.

"Yeah?" Hermione looked at her in worry before nearly bursting out in laughter. December Thirtieth. Tom's birthday. Of course!

"Call Albus. He should be here," Merope sat on the couch where Kinder had spread a water resisting blanket. Once she was settled, Kinder handed her the saucer full of warm milk.

Hermione smiled, rose, and reached for the floo powder, admiring the emerald flames as she tossed it among the logs, stating clearly her destination, before stepping through. "Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Castle,"

"Hermione," Albus said with a great deal of surprise from behind his desk in the Transfiguration Professor's office.

"Merope is in labor." Short and sweet. To the point.
"Now?" He asked wide-eyed and breathless. More afraid than she had ever seen before.

"Now," she affirmed with a smile. It was quite nice seeing Dumbledore so off-kilter.

He abruptly stood from his desk, looking all around the room before helplessly back to her. Hermione looked around with raised eyebrows.

"Is there something the matter?" she asked.

"What do I bring?"

Hermione frowned and looked at him as if he completely lost his faculties. "Bring?"

"What do I bring for the boy?" he began to panic. "What do fathers bring!"

"Yourself," she said, not quite following. "She wants you to be there and I dare say that is the greatest gift any parent can give their child. Their time."

"Just me?"

"Just you."

He nodded. "Great. I can do that,"

He stood behind his desk unmoving, staring off into nothing.

"Everything alright?" She asked slowly, a smile growing as excitement began taking over. "Tom is going to be born!"


"Our Tom,"

He rounded the desk quickly, grabbing a handful of floo powder and barely waited for the flames to change colors before stepping in.

Hermione walked to his desk and left a note in case anyone came looking for him. Following him back through to the sitting room of her home which she shared with Merope.

He was already kneeling next to her, enveloping her hand in his much larger one, murmuring comforting words in her ear. Hermione smiled, glad of their affection. Merope's anger had lingered as one week bled into the next. Not a day went by when there wasn't some kind of delivery for Merope. Flowers, gifts, chocolates, whatever she craved, whatever she wanted. He would go to the ends of the earth to provide it.

In the end, she capitulated, with a small nudge from Hermione and forgave her husband. He doubtless learned his lesson.

With a cry from Merope, Hermione rushed to her side, taking up her other hand. "What should I do, Kinder?" Hermione asked.

"Mistress must take Missy Merope to her room and get a healer. The baby is breech," Kinder squeaked.

Things happened very quickly after that. Hermione ran back to the floo, Dumbledore stood and gathered Merope in his arms, and strode out of the room as if she weighed no more than a farthing.
Once again, the fire turned green and Hermione stepped through to the emergency ward of St. Mungo’s. People milled around the entrance, talking to even-tempered nurses behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" a pleasant and soothing voice asked.

Hermione turned and smiled. "My sister went into labor, but the baby is breech,"

"Where is she?" the nurse asked puzzled, looking over Hermione's shoulder as if she expected Merope to walk through the fire.

"She wants a homebirth," Hermione began but was cut off.

"Oh," the nurse's nose rose to the air. "She is one of those,"

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked indignant, nose flaring.

"You will want the midwifery in Godric's Hollow," The nurse had already begun walking away, uninterested, unhelpful.

"Bitch," Hermione muttered under her breath.

Again, she tossed powder into the floo and stepped into the tidy cottage in Harry's hometown.

"Hello Dear," a soft voice murmured. The witch was old, decrepit but had clearly been a beauty when she was young. In fact, she was still handsome, albeit older.

"My sister is in labor, but the baby is breech," Hermione said in a rush. Merope needed a healer and she needed one quickly.

"Poppy!" The witch called over her shoulder, chuckling as a young blond slid into the room, a healer bag draped over her shoulder. The girl couldn't have been more than fourteen.

"Nana?"

"We are needed," the witch said to the girl then turned back to Hermione. "My name is Elba Pomfrey and this is my granddaughter, Poppy."

"Hello, I'm Hermione Slytherin," Hermione said, realizing exactly why the young fourteen-year-old looked so familiar. She was a healer in training, apparently from the cradle, and would grow up to be one of the most respected Matrons of Hogwarts. Poppy Pomfrey. Elba looked at her with a small knowing smile, as if Hermione's every secret was laid bare.

Elba was a no-nonsense kind of woman and bustled the three of them to the floo, only pausing long enough to ask direction. Moments later, they were all standing in Hermione's sitting room where Merope's moans floated down.

"This way," Hermione said, leading them up the stairs and into the Master where Merope had taken residence.

Merope laid on the bed, eyes clenched shut, Albus daubing away the sweat from her brow. Kinder was replacing towels and hot water every few minutes, running hither and thither, all with an air of calm helpfulness. Her expertise in childbirth was one of the reasons why Hermione wanted Kinder to look after Merope in the first place.

"Excellent, you have a birthing elf. Rare that is," Elba said, looking at Kinder approvingly. Without a second's delay, she rolled up her sleeves and approached the bed.
"I'm Elba, Love, and this is Poppy. We are going to help you bring this babe into the world," Elba put her hand on Merope's ankle and waited until Merope was through her latest contraction.

"Thank you," Merope said as she relaxed back onto the bed.

Elba pulled her wand out and cast a spell that showed a ghost of the child in the womb, showing that he was indeed feet first and that it was much too late to turn him. His feet had already dropped into the birth canal.

"Not impossible, just more finicky," Elba muttered, shoving her wand back into her pocket. She folded Merope's sheet to the tops of her thighs and pushed her legs up so that both feet were planted on the bed.

"The child is coming," Poppy said, handing Elba an uncorked soft pink potion. Elba covered her hands with it and massaged Merope, preparing her for the difficult delivery.

Merope grunted with the next contraction.

"Don't push," Elba said.

"What do you mean don't push. I don't think there is a choice," Merope snapped.

"The cord could be wrapped around the baby's neck. If you push too hard, too fast, it could strangle."

"Fucking A…" Merope cursed, trying with all her might not to push.

"Alright," Elba said. "Dumbledore you take one leg, Hermione the other, like this," Elba showed him exactly how she wanted him to hold her left leg and Hermione the right. "Normally, you would do this squatting but I have experience with breech births and this is the best was for the best chance of survival for both Mum and babe."

Merope was glaring, clearly straining against pushing, hating Elba a little bit more with each contraction.

Poppy joined Elba and covered her hands in more of the pink potion and laid a pair of scissors and a small blanket to the side.

"Now, Love, push!" Elba said. And Merope bore down clenching her teeth, raising thick veins in her neck. "Great job! Now another." Merope took a breath and once again pushed, only releasing her breath when Elba allowed. "Again."

"You did it," Poppy said, a smile in her voice. "It's a boy!"

"Not done yet. Now's the tricky part. This push needs to be nice and slow. If the cord is wrapped around his neck the sooner we know it, the better. If I tell you to stop pushing, do it. I may mean life or death. Now, Push."

Moments later Tom's wailing cry filled the room and Merope broke out in happy tears.

"The cord wasn't wrapped around his neck?" Albus asked.

"No, lucky lad. But Your wife is having some intrauterine hemorrhaging that could become fatal if we are not careful. Poppy will care for your son, she has assisted me many, many times over these last few years and is more than capable of seeing to his care. Merope needs my full attention."
Albus nodded and held Merope's leg still since he wasn't given permission to do otherwise.

Elba's brow wrinkled and she pulled her wand back out, heedless of the blood that coated her hands and arms. She murmured spell after spell even as the blood turned the bedding under Merope black. After several tense moments, Elba relaxed and a smell of burning flesh rose in the air.

"She had a tear it was small enough to hide but big enough to have killed her. I cauterized the wound and if she is stable after a half hour, we can be confident that I got everything."

"Thank Merlin," Hermione murmured, petting Merope's hair. Elba motioned for Hermione and Albus to set Merope's legs back down, letting the tired woman rest in comfort.

"Merlin had nothing to do with it," Elba said with a cackle as she cleaned Merope and herself. "Poppy? The boy."

"What's his name?" Poppy asked as she laid the squirming baby on Merope's breast.

Merope smiled and ran a finger on his cheek. "Tom. His name is Tom."
Thank you for all the thoughts and prayers. We recently had some promising news and are hopeful that the new treatment will work.

Chapter Fifteen

"What would you do if I stopped?" Gellert whispered leaning against the doorframe to her home. Hermione paused, one hand on the doorknob, the other laid flat on the center of the sun-heated wood. "I could give it all up, stop the war, give up my most trusted generals and I would do it in a heartbeat if it meant that you could love me in return and be with me. To marry me,"

"Don't you think it's a little too late for that now?" Hermione said, more devastated than she let on. She wanted what he offered. She wanted it so very badly, but she had to be strong. Ever since the very first moment, she had asked him to give it all up and he hadn't.

"Don't say that," He begged, reaching out for her. His hand paused a fingers length away and he curled his fingers in on themselves, making a white-knuckled fist. Gellert let his arm drop back to his side. "Don't tell me I am too late."

"I don't believe that you can stop and even if you did, you should pay for the crimes you committed in the name of the greater good. You will be imprisoned for the rest of your life. There can never be a future between us, not now, not ever. Even..." words failed her for a moment, and she swallowed down her wants and desires, choking back the tears that threatened to spill. "Even if I wanted one." She finished in a small quiet voice.

"And if I didn't end up in prison? What if I came to you a free man?"

"If you came to me a free man, already having faced justice, I would be an old woman. Possibly married to someone else."

"What if I came to you in six months? What would you say to me then?"

"You tease me! I'm in agony. You weren't the only one who fell in love, Gellert! You are not the only person suffering. I just respect myself too much to take the breadcrumbs you are offering."

"Just give me six months. If I let you down or disappoint you, I will never ask it of you again. Just please, give me time to clean house, and I will come to you again, heart in hand as a free man."

"I will believe it, when I see it," Hermione said, pushing open the door and hurried through, shutting the heavy wood in his face. Hermione leaned against the door and finally let the tears fall. How dare he tempt her! How dare he! Hermione covered her face with his hands and sobbed, glad for once that Merope and Tom were with Albus.

Hermione woke up in a cold sweat, breathing heavily. A sob caught in her throat as she tried to shake off the overwhelming feeling of heartbreak. It wasn't real. None of that was real even if some of the words were. But that didn't stop the anger she felt for Grindelwald, the fear of hearing not one
piece of news in over five months.

It wasn't very often that the feelings she experienced in a dream bled over into her waking life, but it did happen occasionally. And this dream seemed to be one of those occasions.

She could have choked on the need that swamped her. Desperately she wanted to know something, anything about what was going on with Grindelwald but despite all of her efforts to find out information, nothing. Not one scrap of news.

Albus had also tried to find something out and she had a sneaking suspicion that he knew more than he was telling her. He would give her a look sometimes. A pitying look that she ignored and definitely did not appreciate.

Breakfast was one of Hermione's favorite times of the day. For two hours, Tom would be in her care, allowing Merope to catch up on sleep or bathe or just have a moment to herself. And it allowed Hermione to cuddle and adore Tom.

Tom was the most charming baby.

He would gurgle up to her as if they were having a conversation, his big blue eyes focused on her lips as she talked to him. And he was fascinated by her, always touching her hair and face as if memorizing her. He rarely cried and for a newborn was oddly content. Hermione was just as fascinated with him as he was of her.

She couldn't help but fall in love with him.

Today was no different. Hermione walked into the breakfast room and Merope happily handed off her son, fleeing the room almost as if she were afraid Hermione would cancel on her. Not that she ever had or would.

Tom babbled in her arms happily as Hermione sat at the table. Jesper had her breakfast, hot and ready for her. She wasn't quite sure how he did it. She never saw him pop into the room, nor did she see the food appear on her plate like at Hogwarts. It was always right there, magic free, waiting. Perfect. Each and every morning.

She took a bite of her toast, slathered in raspberry preserves and chuckled as Tom reached out to grab it.

"You can't have this yet, silly boy," she cooed, holding the food out of his reach.

His outreached fingers opened and closed into and out of fists, brow crinkled in concentration. It did happen from time to time, that the child would grow annoyed, that being denied something made him petulant but so far, no magical outburst happened. But it would. And Hermione had no doubt that it would happen soon.

"You know what we are going to do today Tom?" Hermione said smiling down at the infant. "I talked to your mummy last night. I am going to take you to the neighborhood I grew up in. Let's explore together and see if what kind of changes there are."

Tom babbled in response and shoved his baby fingers in Hermione's mouth. Hermione pretended to eat them, giggling to herself.

"Morning, Hermione," Albus said walking in.

"Morning," Hermione chirped.
He dropped a kiss to Tom's baby soft black hair and sat next to Hermione.

"Does Merope know you are here yet?" Hermione asked between bites of toast.

"No. She was sleeping when I flooed in. I didn't have the heart to wake her,"

"Or the balls," Hermione said in a high smiling voice to Tom.

"Anyway," Albus plowed on. "I wanted to talk to you and see if you would have Tom for the whole day and night. I have a surprise for Merope."

She leaned in conspiratorially. "Do I get to be in on the surprise?"

He leaned in too, whispering. "Only if you can keep a secret,"

"I'm very good at secrets,"

"I booked us a reservation at Fromage, the new wizarding spa in Paris. I could always send her with you if you would rather not have the baby all day and into the night. But I had hoped to make this special for us."

"Why, Albus," Hermione said grinning. "It looks like you just might be a romantic,"

"Of course, I am. Romance does not just depict a woman's heart. All men should know how to keep their women happy. That means giving loving attention even when the passion recedes."

"Has the passion receded?"

"No, but someday it will. And I want to set a damn good example for Tom. Show him what it means to be married. The commitment is not just words. Not just sharing a life. It is about constantly giving your spouse a reason to keep saying yes. In fifty years, if I drop down on one knee to propose again, I want her immediate answer to be yes. Always yes. Today, tomorrow, and forever."

"That is a rather unrealistic view of marriage. There are always hard times, times when divorce seems like the only option,"

"And I want her to always think that no matter how bad it gets, I will always be in her corner. I won't give up on her or walk away. We will fight. We will regret our words. There will be apologies and forgiveness. There will always be love."

"You love her?" Hermione asked, softness creeping into her questioning gaze.

"For some time now," He replied.

"I am so happy for the both of you," Hermione said sincerely. "You were right, Love can grow in the darkest of places."

"I don't recall saying that,"

"You haven't. Not yet. But you will."

He laughed loud and fully, throwing his head back. After some time, his boisterous laugh settled into a content chuckling. "You know, Hermione. I can go days- no, weeks forgetting that you are from the future. You fit in so well here with us. It's hard to remember all that you have been through."

"Don't be an arse. You of all people would never forget such a juicy piece of blackmail."
"And yet I do. You know me better than even Aberforth and I consider you my sister-in-law, close as I imagine I would have been to my sister had things…"

"Been different?" she finished for him, knowing Ariana's attack at six had changed everything for the Dumbledore family.

"Exactly! This is like my second chance," he said quietly as if she wasn't meant to hear the last part of his statement.

She let that pass without comment, thinking of the broken man who Harry had told her about that drank the potion in the cave. She had no doubt that his greatest regret was that night, the night Ariana died.

"I'll gladly take him for as long as you need. Spend the weekend if she can bear to be away. Just make sure she leaves enough milk with the House Elfs. Lord knows I wouldn't want to apparate in the middle of your sexy time."

Dumbledore smirked. "I will see to it and let you know our choice."

Hermione nodded and awkwardly dabbed at the corner of her mouth while still holding Tom, trying to clean herself of breakfast. "Leave a note with Kinder. Tom and I are going on a field trip. Tell Merope I love her and to have a good time!"

Dumbledore nodded and turned his attention back to his breakfast, his single most favorite meal of the day.

"Let's get ready, my Love," Hermione cooed to Tom.

Tom merely blinked at her, his lids taking longer and longer to open between each moment. His pink lips opened wide in a little mewl of a yawn.

Hermione set Tom in the middle of her bed, making a square blockade out of pillows so he couldn't inadvertently roll off the bed and hurt himself. Then she set to work, dressing and packing a small bag of necessities.

"We are going to have so much fun, Tom," Hermione said in a cheerful voice. "I am going to show you all the places my dad took me to as a little girl. They are probably not the same or not even built, but that's okay. Then I am going to take you to Wool's. The orphanage you grew up in, the first time. And we are going to make it a yearly visit, bringing those muggle children a little hope and light in such dark and desperate times. In your name, I will provide an education to any and all children who are wards of the place. Might as well start today!

"Then, after that, we are going to Godric's Hollow. I am going to show you Harry's house, the one that changed your life and his, in my timeline. Then we are going to find you some friends. By Merlin's nose, you will need them. Even if you are a Dumbledore this time around."

She looked back at Tom who was busy kicking and sticking out his tongue. And smiled.

"You know, I didn't think I would be able to love you, even as a baby. But I really can't help it. You are such a happy baby, so contented. It makes me wonder if it was changing the way you were conceived and born or if it the way you are being cared for. There is so much love for you Tom. So much. And I think out of everyone past, present, and future, Harry would be the happiest to see it. He never did want to be in the limelight or your enemy. He just wanted a family who loved him. And he would want that for you too."
Tom gurgled and flipped to his stomach. Hermione clapped, laughing happily. He looked so pleased with himself. He lifted his head just high enough to peek at her over the pillow blockade and smiled. Her heart melted all over again.

Once she was done gathering everything they would need for the day, she changed Tom's nappy then wrapped him against her in a wide sturdy cotton cloth. She didn't know if it was strictly the fashion of the time, but it was something that had been done for hundreds of years. Maybe it would be revived as women saw her doing it. Or maybe they would turn up their noses or throw tomatoes. She would find out.

She draped a smaller cotton cloth over his head and stepped into the floo, tossing the emerald powder into the grate.

"Fulgrim Emporium," She said wistfully. It was the nearest magical shop to the home she grew up in and since it had been in business for over five hundred years, she knew that it would be there in her current time. It also had a back room that was original to the building that had never been used. She asked about it once, and the owner had implied it was a point for time travelers to pop in and out of. A singular constant in a fast-changing world.

She had rolled her eyes then.

Funny how things changed.

"Can I help you, Mrs.?” A high nasally voice asked, eyeballing both her bare ring finger and the baby strapped to her breast.

"Hermione Slytherin and my nephew, Tom Dumbledore. We are on a very exciting adventure and I had been told that this is the closest I could floo to our destination. I was also told we could purchase a picnic basket. Is that true?” She pulled the protective cover off Tom's head and stuffed the scrap into her bag.

"What would you like in it?” the man asked, waving Hermione to follow behind him into the main shop.

"Hmmm. Surprise me!"

"For how many?"

"Just me. Tom here is too young yet."

"Right," the proprietor said as if he could care less. Several minutes later he placed a small wicker basket on top of the counter. "That will be seven sickles and three knuts,"

Hermione counted out the proper change and shrank the basket, gingerly placing her purchase at the top of a very sketchy pile of books that may or may not topple before they reached the park her parents used to picnic at.

"Thank you," she said over her shoulder, but the man had already left the counter, nowhere in sight. She sighed. Was kindness dead? Sometimes she thought some people would rather die than be civil.

She stepped out of the shop and saw a familiar sight. The old post office sat on the corner, obviously a recently added addition to her hometown. She had been in and out of that building more times than she could count.

"When I was a little girl," she said to Tom. "My mum would take me to the post office to buy stamps
for all the invoices she sent out once a month. It was old then, crumbling, and in some serious need of repair. It's quite novel to see it so shiny and new."

Hermione began strolling down the main street of the small town. The trees that lined the sidewalk were still fairly young and slightly dense, a throwback to Victorian England. In her time, the trees would be thinned and trimmed. This looked almost wild in an orderly way.

Nostalgia settled in her gut.

The weather was unseasonably warm for March. The warm wind blew tendrils of Hermione's hair around her face and the combination of the air and Hermione walking lulled Tom to sleep. Every once in a while, Hermione would stroke his fluffy black hair.

When she reached the end of the block, she turned left and followed the street until she was about halfway. An old Victorian row house sat across from her, dilapidated. It was empty and condemned. Someday a mega-company would come in and level the building, making way for the suburban homes they would build to attract higher middle-class families, bringing life into the dying town.

"My parents bought our home when they were just newlyweds. It was the only home we had ever lived in. I scraped my knees on the sidewalk. Carved my name into the tree in the back yard after I saw my older cousin do it at Nana's house. My dad would lay out blankets on the lush grass and the three of us would lay down and watch the stars, mum pointing out the constellations. Dad swore he could see them but when mum wasn't looking, he would ask me to point them out to him again. This is the house I grew up in. My shelter from mean muggle children. My refuge from difficult years at Hogwarts. My greatest pain when I erased it all. I desperately hope you will never know the pain that I had to go through, but even more important, I hope you never cause it." She finished softly to the sleeping Tom's head.

"Excuse me," A familiar yet imposing voice said from just behind her. A little too close, making Hermione jump at the sudden and unexpected intrusion. She turned around, wand in her hand, eyes narrowed ready to fight and die if needed.

It was the same Auror that had arrested Grindelwald. The severe, cocky one. But now his hands were in the air, his eyes slightly panicked. Not having expected her to move so fast.

"What do you want?" Hermione asked pursing her lips. He may have done what she had wanted in arresting Gellert, but she couldn't quell the resentment in his interrupting their moment.

He smiled nervously and lowered his hands, keeping a keen eye on her wand, which she did not lower. Not even an inch.

She supposed fighting against the Ministry was so ingrained now…

"Hermione Slytherin?" He asked.

"Yes,"

He reached into his robes and pulled out a huge manila envelope, thick and heavy and handed it to her. "You have been served,"

With a twist, he was gone, only the echoing off the ruined brick homes marked his disapperation. Hermione clenched her teeth and looked down at the parcel, wondering what Gellert Grindelwald did. Because surely whatever was in the package was his fault.

"Got to be kidding me," She grumbled flipping the thing over and ripping it open at the flap.
She pulled out a thick pile of documents with a fluorescent pink sticky note attached.

*Review and sign*

*Love, Gellert*

If fire could have exploded out of her ears in a physical manifestation of her fury, it would have.

Her eye began to twitch, and she began clenching and unclenching her teeth, a sign betrayed only by the flexing muscle in her jaw.

After staring at the bundle with far too much anger for far too long, Hermione shoved it all back in the envelope and put it in her bag. The first official Tom and Hermione outing was ruined. Deciding to cut her losses, she hightailed it back the way she had come. At least Merope had a day full of indulgence ahead of her. Tom and Hermione would just have to spend their day in the sitting room, reading and playing. Hermione supposed that wasn’t such a hardship.

"Well, Tom, I guess we ought to go and untangle this mess Uncle Gellert put us in," She murmured absentmindedly as she smiled and waved to the lady leaving the old post office. "And if we are lucky, maybe I can talk your mummy into letting me take you to Wool's tomorrow."

No one was in the Emporium when she returned. Shrugging, she moved through the store and back through the floo, landing in her sitting room a lot earlier than she ever anticipated.

Unwrapping Tom was easier said than done. She cradled his body and picked at the knot holding him with her other hand, thinking how unfair it was that wrapping him may be a one-person job but unwrapping him was definitely for two. For several moments, she considered never unwrapping him or at least until Merope and Albus arrived back home. But the unpleasant image of a teenaged Tom strapped to her breast made her intensify her efforts. As irrational as such a thought was.

Despite the jostling, murmured curses, and frustrated threats at the knot, Tom didn't wake from his snooze. It was an unintentionally added bonus.

And if it took her nearly ten minutes to free herself, she would never admit to it. Especially when she remembered that she was a witch and had a wand in her pocket.

Finally, she laid Tom on the blanket she had spread on the floor and set a few interesting things on the perimeter in case he woke. Groaning, Hermione plucked at her shirt where he had drooled, leaving a rather large wet mark in a very unfortunate place.

With a shrug, she dismissed it and sat down with a relieved sigh on the couch, pulling her beaded bag on her lap. First, she pulled out the uneaten picnic and set it on the side table. Then she pulled out the papers she had been served and set them on the cushion next to her.

One by one she pulled out the contents of the basket, happy exclamations leaving her lips. There was a small meat pie, a fruit salad, assorted cheeses, scones, jams, and several tiny Victoria sponges. Shrewdly, she realized that there was way too much for only one person and wondered suspiciously if the wizard of the Emporium thought she had lied to him. There was enough for two and she wrinkled her nose as she pulled out a bottle of white wine and two glasses. He had packed her enough for an assignation. She didn’t know whether to praise him for his discretion or be bitter that he imagined her love life to be better than it actually was.

Thinking of love life, she gave the stack of papers side-eye, wondering once again what she was in for. It couldn't have been good. If it had, they would have talked to her or brought her into the Ministry. But they hadn't. They had served her in a very legal manner. It made her nervous to see the
Ministry actually following the letter of the law.

Corrupt officials she could handle. Aurors fastidiously doing their job… it threw her off balance.

She packaged the bottle of wine back into the basket and stowed the lot in her bag. She would have that later, when she was alone, and not in charge of Tom. She picked up a small cube of cheddar and popped it into her mouth, savoring the sharp creaminess. Cheese had always been something of a weakness.

Wiping her hands on one of the napkins provided, she picked up the papers and began to read. And the more she read, the more confused she became. Then she hit page three, fourth paragraph, line seventy-two.

*And all of the Informant's intelligence has been utilized to full and satisfying effect, allowing us, henceforth called 'The Ministry', to capture and dismantle all dark dealings that revolved around the movement henceforth called 'The Revolution'. In the course of the disbandment, other illegal and hunted operations and organized criminals have been captured and moved to the most guarded parts of Azkaban Prison.*

As agreed in section ten, the informant, henceforth known as 'Gellert Grindelwald', will be released into the willing custody of one, Hermione Slytherin, and shall be housebound for a term of no less than five consecutive years with the exception of extreme circumstances that shall be approved at the discretion of his probation officer, which will be assigned to him by the Wizengamot.

As previously agreed, all nations and councils shall abide by the final ruling of 'The Ministry' disallowing appeals of all listed war crimes. See page fifty-two.

"Well shit," Hermione said to the silent room, mind whirling. He said he had an ace up his sleeve, but she never imagined he would escape having to do any time in prison. Then again, the Ministry must know that holding him in a cell was futile. She imagined that they gave him what he wanted to get what they wanted.

And all she had to do was sign on the dotted line.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16

Kinder walked into the sitting room, a tightly rolled scroll in one hand and a warmed bottle in the other. "Mistress, this is being left for you."

Hermione looked up from her perusal of the paperwork, smiling as she reached out for both. "Thanks, Kinder,"

"Would Mistress like a snack?"

"No. I'm working through the lunch that I picked up, but I would appreciate a glass of water."

Kinder nodded and left. Hermione unfurled the scroll and quickly read it. It wasn't the message she thought Albus had left for her. It was a message for her from Marvolo Gaunt.

*Because of you, my Daughter is sending my letters back unopened.*

*An outsider, bringing down the mighty house of Gaunt? Shameful!*

*Tell that ungrateful girl to bring Morfin's heir. Healers say that my days are numbered. I want to see my grandson at least once before I pass.*

*Don't come with her.*

-Marvolo Gaunt

Hermione nearly choked on the piece of cheese. Tom was considered Morfin's heir? Dear Merlin! That would not be a good idea. Tom looked so much like his biological father, it was uncanny. They had to prevent that meeting. Hopefully, Merope would feel the same but Hermione had a suspicion that she wouldn't. Merope continued to have a soft spot for Marvolo despite everything.

Hermione covered her eyes with her hand, trying to think of the right thing to do. Should she tell Merope about her dying father? Or should she pretend she had no idea? Hermione groaned. She couldn't make that sort of decision for Merope.

"Honey, we are home," Albus yelled from the hallway and Hermione rolled her eyes, unable to help the smile that tugged up her lips.

"In here!" Hermione called back, shuffling all of Grindelwald's papers into one stack before setting the picnic basket on top. She would tell them in her own time. But for now, she didn't want to have to deal with Albus and whatever his reaction would be.

Albus opened the door and held it for his wife. Merope glided in, face glowing and happy.

"Did you have fun?" Hermione asked, rising to take Merope's hands and kiss each cheek lightly in welcome.

"Oh, it was lovely," Merope said dreamily. "I had the most wonderful time. It started with a massage and then I soaked in a mineral bath. My skin is so soft..." she trailed off, running her own fingers over the skin on her arm. "Then Albus took me to this restaurant. I will never forget it for as long as I live! It was only us. Flowers and candles, everywhere. We danced in the moonlight of Paris. It was
"Sounds amazing!" Hermione said sending a nod to Albus. He was blushing, looking at the ceiling. Hermione smirked.

"He asked if I wanted to stay the night, but I just couldn't leave Tom." She looked over to where Tom had fallen asleep on the floor, love pouring from her eyes.

"Completely understandable. He was a wonderful companion,"

"Did you get to go to your hometown?"

"Yes," Hermione sighed. "It's barely recognizable."

Merope nodded in commiseration and squeezed Hermione's hand. "Albus, why don't you take Tom to bed. There is something I wish to talk to Hermione about,"

"Of course," Albus said. He scooped up the child and laid kisses on the tiny hands, murmuring to him as they left the room. He did make a good father…

"What's wrong?" Hermione said the moment the door closed behind Albus.

"Nothing," Merope said but she looked away, uncomfortable.

"Whatever it is Merope, we can handle it."

Merope took a breath, gathering her courage and met Hermione's worried stare. "I think it is time for Albus and me to take Tom home… to Godric's Hollow."

Hermione smiled sadly. She wasn't naive enough to think that Merope and Tom would live with her forever. "I'm so happy for you, Merope. So, so happy,"

"I know."

"I'm going to miss you guys being around all the time,"

"I'm going to miss having a two-hour break right after breakfast," Merope laughed.

"You will be begging me to come back but I will stand firm!" Hermione giggled.

"You will get so sick of the begging," Merope's laugh faded before she turned serious. "I know that the whole reason why you are here in this time in Tom. I know that the way he lives and is brought up is everything to you. I will not let you down. I promise."

"You are a wonderful mother, Merope. Never doubt that. And if I had to trust anyone to help me, it would be you. I am grateful that I met you. Thank you for being you and becoming a part of my family when I had no one."

"Neither of us had anyone," Merope reminded her. "You gave me this life. A life that I never would have had without your interference. I doubt I would have been able to marry Albus any other way. Oh, what Tom and I would have missed out on,"

"This isn't goodbye forever. Come around often and I will come see you too. Talk to Albus and maybe your family can come for dinner weekly?"

"We would love that!"
"We can always make it once a month if Albus gets too frustrated with me," Both women laughed. Merope patted Hermione's arm and turned to leave.

"Wait," Hermione said, still unsure if she was doing the right thing. She walked back to the place where she had been sitting and pulled out the scroll Kinder brought her and handed it to Merope.

Merope unfurled the scroll and scowled. "Sometimes I just want to…" she trailed off in frustration.

"Do you want to go?"

"I don't really want to take Tom but I doubt he will see me if I don't bring him."

"He will know right away that Tom is not Albus' son. Everyone else will say he looks like Kendra, his grandmother. But Marvolo and Morfin will know the truth."

"I know."

"What do you think would happen if they knew? Would they pretend not to know? Would they write you out of their will? Will they try to kill you?"

"No, not the last. The may not like half-bloods but they don't go out of their way to harm them either. They reserve that for the muggles."

Hermione breathed easier and nodded.

"I wouldn't let them hurt Tom,"

"I know,"

"I don't know what I want."

"If you want to try and go without Tom, I would gladly watch him for you. If you want me to go despite his direct order, I'll do that too. Whatever you want."

Merope nodded. "I think I might take Albus. I'll let you know,"

"Okay,"

"Goodnight,"

"Night."

Once Merope left Hermione alone, Hermione stared at the stack of papers weighed down under the basket.

It was providence that Gellert's release conditions coincided with her newly emptied house. She wondered how much of a hand Albus had in that. Probably a lot. She wouldn't hold it against him though. He had the right to take his family and build a home together, without her. It wouldn't surprise her that he helped push the Wizengamot into accepting this deal with Grindelwald. Albus was a meddler. And she wouldn't be surprised if he was trying to orchestrate the whole thing.

She grabbed the paperwork and quickly cleared her mess, intending on reading the rest in bed.

Next morning over breakfast, Merope settled uneasily into her chair, not yet touching a bite of food.

"I've decided to take Tom and visit my father today."
"I don't think that is a good idea, sweetheart," Albus said slowly, carefully. "Don't you remember what happened at our wedding?"

"I believe that everyone deserves a chance to redeem themselves,"

"Aren't you usually the big one for giving second chances?" Hermione asked Albus curiously.

"You approve of this mad scheme?" He asked, flabbergasted.

"I wasn't talking about that per se, I was more in shock that you of all people aren't on the giving-second-chances train,"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"In my time, it is something of a thing with you, giving second chances,"

"Really?" Albus stroked his beard, thinking.

Hermione nodded and took a bite of eggs then panned her eyes to Merope who looked very upset.

"I thought that both of you would support me in this," Merope said.

"Whatever gave you the idea that I would smirkingly let you walk out the door knowing you were going there!?" Albus demanded.

"If you are so distraught by her going, why don't you go with her," Hermione said, nonchalantly taking a sip of her tea. Merope shot her a thankful glance.

Albus looked at her as if she had lost the last of her facilities. She ignored him.

"Well," Albus began uncomfortably. "We could do that."

"Wonderful!" Merope said happily as if she had hoped for this outcome all along. Tom babbled from his tiny bassinet and Merope reached in the basket to run her fingers over his hair.

"We will leave when you are ready," Albus said reluctantly. It was apparent that he regretted offering up his services or agreeing that she and Tom should go in the first place.

"What are your plans for the day, Hermione?" Merope asked ignoring Albus' pouting.

"I'm expected by the Wizengamot at noon to discuss the agreement Gellert has struck with them," She took another sip of her tea as Merope whipped back around and Albus spat his tea all over the table.

Hermione looked at Albus with raised brows. "You look surprised,"

"Surprise doesn't even cover it,"

"I thought you had your hand in this," Hermione frowned.

"I only mentioned to a few of the chair holders that you should be consulted about any deal they strike. I didn't think you would be integral."

"You have no idea…" Hermione said darkly.

"What happened?" Merope asked, face lighting up with excitement. "What deal do they want to
discuss with you?"

"wanttoreleasehimintomycustody," Hermione mumbled into her teacup.

"A little bit louder dear," Merope said with a cheerful smile.

"They want him to serve five years of probation in my custody," Albus leaned back as if he was bludgeoned over the head. "I had no idea…"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. She couldn't decide if this was a genuine reaction, but she was leaning toward believing that he did not know the exact terms that had been delivered to her.

"Neither did I," Hermione said wryly.

"I want to hear everything when you get back," Merope said lifting Tom out of his bassinet.

"And vice versa," Hermione said glancing between Merope and Albus significantly. Merope smiled and winked, leaving the room in a flurry of sweetly laid kisses to Tom's face. Albus shoved the last bit of toast in his mouth, wiped his lips, and followed Merope out of the room at a much more hesitant pace.

"Keep them safe," Hermione said just as he reached the doorway.

"You do not need to keep reminding me to protect my family. I will never let them come to harm. Someday, you will trust me in this."

Hermione smiled as he left. She was so happy and settled with the way Dumbledore treated Tom and Merope. It was hard for her to let go of that control, to begin finally trusting. Loneliness grew as she finished up breakfast alone and she brushed a single tear off her cheek.

Letting them go was harder than coming to the past.

"Kinder has laid out Mistress's good robes."

"Thank you, Kinder."

Kinder smiled before popping out of the room.

"You is good for us Mistress," Jesper said suddenly patting her shoulder in an unusual show of affection. "You is a better Mistress than we is hoping for."

Hermione nodded and quit the room. She couldn't take much more heart to hearts that early in the morning. Not if they didn't want to scrape her gooey-self off the floor with a putty knife.

She chuckled to herself as she changed. Things could have been worse, so much worse than they were.

Noon found her waiting outside of the Wizengamot chambers. The courtroom had filled and Gellert had been brought in surrounded by Aurors bound with thick magical chains.

She had only been able to see the top of his blond head before they closed the doors behind them. Nerves buzzed throughout her body and she wondered what they wanted from her. Surely, she could have signed the papers and sent them back. Why the big show?

"Hermione Slytherin?" A dour old witch asked from the doors that opened just enough for one body
"Yes?"

"They will see you now,"

Hermione stood and ran her hands down the folds of her robes, smoothing them out of nervous habit, before following the witch into a large chamber that reminded her of the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries.

Her heels clicked on the flagstone, loud in the silence. She raised her chin and met every stare thrown her way. A low chuckle rumbled through the chamber and her eyes met Gellert's as he craned his neck to see her, despite being bound to the chair. At his reaction brows rose, lips pursed, disapproval rained down on her from the Wizengamot's lofty perches.

"You know why you are here?" Minister Fawley asked.

"I assume it has to do with this," Hermione said, pulling out the huge pile of papers she was served with the day prior. "You don't really give a person any time to prepare. Were you trying to catch me off guard?" she asked, hostily.

"Excuse me?" the Minister sputtered.

"This should have gone to my solicitor, reviewed by my legal team. That was impossible since I received this at the same time as my summons for today. Merlin only knows what you have tried to slip in here."

"It's clean, Love," Gellert spoke up. "My second cousin is one of the best solicitors in Bulgaria. He was eager to take the case. Did a great job of it too,"

"Depends on which side you sit on," the Minister grumbled. Hermione looked up and was shocked to see amusement on the faces of many Lords who had held sympathetic leanings towards Grindelwald's cause.

"I also read through it," Hermione said.

"You may submit the document for his probationary release."

"Oh, but I haven't signed it yet," Hermione said. She glanced at Gellert and he didn't look amused, just slightly worried.

"Why not?" Lord Nott asked, leaning forward, face suffused with curiosity.

"What is in this for me?"

"For you?"

"Yes. Why should I do the job that not even Azkaban prison could do?"

"You will be well compensated if that is what you are worried about," the Minister said.

"I have plenty of gold, Minister," Hermione said.

"What is it that you want?" Lord Nott asked, cutting off the Minister.

Hermione smiled for the first time since entering the chamber. "I want a seat on the Wizengamot. I
want to enable change in our stagnant laws."

"Impossible," The Minister said immediately.

"Oh," Hermione said with mock surprise. "Then I suppose this too is impossible…"

Hermione held up the document that would bind Grindelwald into her care for the duration of five years and made as if to tear it in half.

"Wait," Lord Nott said, scowling heavily at the Minister. "The Minister traditionally does not hold a seat while he serves. It was given to you, Minister, only because the house of Marchbanks died out in the male line. I believe it was you who denied Lydia Marchbanks the seat when Veris died, even though her husband legally changed their names to Marchbanks. I believe you said that it would be immoral to pass it on to a woman."

"And? Miss Slytherin is a woman. That ruling should be upheld!"

"But she is the last of a very old, very powerful bloodline. Any children she would have would also be powerful. I for one would rather welcome them in our ranks, then try to chase them down later."

Hermione looked up at Lord Nott and nodded. He smiled at her and nodded back. Allies.

"None of us liked the way you ignored the rise of Grindelwald's movement. Nor did we appreciate the way that you keep trying to force out the old families." Arcturus Black said. The masquerade felt like a million years ago, but she couldn't help but feel as if she truly did have allies in the room. He met her gaze and smirked.

"Then the Wizengamot will vote. All who agree?" Minister Fawley said with bad grace.

Aye's filled the chamber and the Minister looked seconds from storming out.

"Now that that is settled," Lord Nott began. "is there anything else?"

"One more thing," Hermione said. "There is a strange clause in here. Page sixty-six first paragraph. Let me read it aloud:

*And after the binding, Grindelwald will be taken to his new residence under Auror protection while the Magical ward department, sets up the parameters of his house arrest.*" Hermione paused and looked up then and eyed some of the more fidgety members. "What binding is this referring to?"

Not one person sitting on the Wizengamot would meet her eyes. Gellert, on the other hand, cleared his throat, drawing her attention and smiled his heart-wrenching smile. "I did have grander plans than to do it this way, but..." Gellert stood from his shackled throne and moved closer to her before dropping down heavily on one knee.

"Don't you fucking dare," Hermione whispered to him, glancing at the Wizengamot. He wagged his brows, his big blue eyes dancing with mirth. Lifting up the small box in his hand, Hermione watched incredulously as the hinges creaked open.

Silence pervaded the room before Hermione threw back her head and laughed and laughed and laughed. He wasn't proposing marriage. Not yet anyway. He was gifting her the control of the governor that would be cast on him once the proceedings were over. In essence, she controlled his shock collar.
Hermione shook her head, and took the box, sharing an amused intimacy with Gellert.

"I knew you would love it," He whispered, smirk lopsided.

She nodded her head and leaned over the small table beside her, grabbing the contract, and dipping a quill into the ink pot on the corner. With one last look at Gellert, she signed her name with a flourish.

For the next five years, he was all hers.

The chains fell away from his body and his smile became infectious. Aurors that had stood at attention in the back of the room converged, raising wands in a duet of casting, binding him to his word. Five years of probation.

Hermione smiled as they retreated and the magic faded, took his hand, and towed him out of the room, pocketing his amusing gift. The controller that would allow him to leave his confinement in the case of an emergency. Or punish him for infractions.

She paused in the hall as soon as she cleared the doors and waited. Gellert wasn't as impressed with this tactic. It was obvious he didn't want to be there any longer than he needed to be.

Wizengamot members filed out past her and still, she waited, nodding and smiling at everyone who initiated the same.

"Melina will be so happy to hear that you took a seat in the Wizengamot," Arcturus said jovially. "Although, she is rather put out that you never stopped over for a visit. Bound and determined that woman is. She dropped in on your home twice and took tea with Merope. Better not keep the woman waiting much longer." He said with a wink.

"Tell her I am so sorry. I've been so neglectful of my friends! Let her know that I plan to come around half past two next Wednesday."

"She will be delighted," Arcturus said and turned a sharper gaze to Grindelwald. "I will be keeping an eye on you, Mr. Grindelwald."

"Arcturus," Grindelwald said with a smirk. "Lovely to see you again. Married, now are you? Good on you!"

"Yes…"

"Perhaps you and your wife should visit Hermione and me sometime. I foresee plenty of time in our future,"

Hermione closed her eyes and prayed for patience.

"If I didn't know you as well as I do, Gellert, I would think you are trying to stake your claim. But I remember vividly as boys you declared yourself never to marry."

"Ah, but what do young men know of the world?" Gellert said as both men stared at each other stony-faced before they both broke out in laughter.

"Good to see you've decided to right your wrongs, Gellert. Melina and I will see you soon,"

Gellert waved, smiling.

"Are you done?" Hermione asked, one brow imperiously raised.
"Never," he replied. "I am only just beginning,"

Hermione rolled her eyes as she led him out of the bowels of the Ministry and as a nearly free man through the Atrium. The Daily Prophet was there to get its pound of flesh and people of various backgrounds hurled insults or well wishes as they passed.

Taking a handful of powder, they flooed together right into her sitting room, looking exactly as it had before she left for the day. As if everything hadn't changed.

Merope, Tom, and Albus were gone. First on Merope's insane mission to visit her father then on to their own home in Godric's Hollow.

"What shall we do first?" Gellert said as she stepped out of the fireplace and planted his hands on Hermione's hips.

Hermione waved her wand and siphoned the soot from their clothes. "First you can bathe. Jesper will take you to your room,"

"You mean our room?" he wagged his brows.

"You thought I would be that easy?"

"Never," he said with a smile. Tenderly he encircled her waist and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you,"

"For agreeing to let you stay in my home?"

"For everything,"

"It's almost unbelievable, your one-eighty." She said into his shoulder.

"I'm a pragmatic man. If a person drops out of the sky professing to be from the future, telling me of my demise, my failed revolution… a man must sit up and pay attention."

"Who was professing to be from the future?" she said haughtily.

"HA! You are like a thunderstorm- wild, powerful, beautiful. Only a foolish man wouldn't listen to someone such as this."

"You are a shameless flatterer,"

"Is it working?" He chuckled.

"Maybe…"

"Admit it, you are putty in my hands," He pulled back from her and cupped her face with his large hands.

Hermione couldn't help but snort.

"Especially when I do this," he whispered as he leaned in and captured her lips.

Fireworks danced behind her eyes as his smooth lips caressed her own, molding around them, claiming them. There was just something about Gellert Grindelwald that made her whole body quiver. Desire swirled in her belly as one of his hands traveled to her back to pull her even closer.
Hermione raised on her tiptoes and opened her lips, letting her tongue trace the seam of his lips. She could feel him smirk, complying instantly, stroking her tongue with his. He took a swift breath in through his nose and she felt the heady feeling of being desired too. Leaning her body into his, she felt his bulge graze her mons through their clothes.

He broke the kiss and stepped back.

Unable to catch a breath, her chest heaved. His passion darkened eyes focused intently on her breast's movements. He was hungry for her and she watched as he tried to keep control over his fingers that obviously itched to grab her, caress her, explore her.

"I will gladly take you up on bathing. Once I am clean and fed, prepare yourself because I'm coming for you," Gellert said and for the first time, Hermione noticed Jesper standing at the door. She couldn't help the blush that rose on her neck and face.

He twisted on the balls of his feet and flew out of the room as if the hounds of hell were stalking him. Jesper merely raised a brow and followed.

"Right this way, Master Gellert," Hermione heard Jesper say from the hallway.

Covering her face, Hermione sank to the floor, reliving the glorious kiss over and over and over. He knew exactly what to do to make her melt into him. Always had.

The floo flared and Albus' head floated amongst the grate.

"Hermione, we have a problem,"

"What happened?"

"Marvolo reacted poorly to seeing Tom. I'm afraid this isn't going to be so simple a solution as cutting him off or increasing the power of our wards. I think you need to see the memory."

"Slow down! Did he hurt Merope or Tom?"

"No. But Marvolo and Morfin are batshit crazy. Completely unstable. I have no idea what they will do now."

"Give me a moment and I will come through," Hermione said before calling for Kinder.

"Kinder, please let Gellert know that I had to leave, and I will be back as soon as I can,"

"Yes, Mistress," Kinder said as Hermione walked into the fireplace, throwing floo powder as she went.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the well wishes and prayers for my family.

While things have been relatively good this last month, I have decided to try and push other writing, reading, and hobbies to the side until this story is finished.

I think there will be between twenty-one and twenty-four chapters total for this story, so now we are getting close to the ending. My goal is to at least put out a chapter a week. You all have been so patient, so understanding of my glacial update schedule this past year (Was it longer than a year?) and I want you all to finally get the rest of this story.

I think this is the chapter so many of you were waiting for. Finally, some hot and heavy G&H!

Warning: This chapter contains smut. This is the last warning of this kind. From here on out, smut is fair game. Be prepared.

Chapter Seventeen

Albus was waiting for her the moment she stepped through the floo, hovering over a rather large stone pensieve that Hermione knew for a fact was supposed to be in the Headmaster’s office in Hogwarts. He was frowning, not in displeasure but more as if he was trying to work out a very difficult puzzle.

“Show me,” Hermione said. Albus looked up at her and pressed the tip of his wand against his temple, then pulling it away with a thick and long strand of silvery memory. As he laid the memory into the pensieve, both watched as the silver swirled as if of its own accord.

Hermione took a breath, a habit, from all those swimming lessons she took as a child and sunk her face into the pensieve. Joined by Albus himself.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “I thought it best if we looked at this together. With your knowledge and mine, perhaps we can make some sense of what happened.

The world around them stopped swirling, the memory coalescing into a tangible reality, bright and vivid as the real world.

*Albus walked slightly behind Merope, enjoying the way her hips swayed in the Parisian style robes she had purchased the day before when the front door of a dilapidated shack opened abruptly before them.*

“*Morfin,*” Merope said stiffly as if they were mere acquaintances with bad blood between them instead of siblings.

“*Good, you brought the boy,*” he hissed. *Not even taking the time to acknowledge Albus.*

“*Let’s not pretend that you actually care about my son. I came to see my father before he dies* and I
knew without Tom, I would never have gotten past the front door. Now, take me to see father and we will leave after that.”

“Tom, is it?” Morfin sneered, this time glowering at Albus as if he were the root cause of everything that was wrong with his life. “Liked the muggle so much, you would name your first-born child after him?”

“What Albus and I named our son, is none of your business,” she hissed back. Albus was busy looking around the room, distaste pinching his lips together.

Morfin reached out a gnarly finger, intent on stroking the soft skin of Tom’s face. Albus moved quick, capturing Morfin’s wrist in a steel grip, warning with a mere glance.

Morfin yanked his hand out of Albus’ grip and glared at him. Lip curling, baring his teeth as he turned away.

“Just lead us to father,” Merope said, eyes hard and unforgiving.

Morfin turned around and led them to a small room off the first floor, where a bed had been set up for Marvolo. In what used to be in the small pantry, where Merope had gone in and out of many, many times a day. Once upon a time.

Marvolo’s rattling breath was the only sound in the room. It was such an eerie sound that sent uncontrollable shivers up Albus’ spine.

“Let me see the boy,” Marvolo rasped from his death bed.

Merope met Albus’s eyes and together, they moved toward the bed, only sparing a glance behind them when Morfin fled the room, slamming the front door as he exited the shack.

Rheumy eyes studied Tom, completely uninterested in greeting his daughter or her husband. Tom merely sat in his mother’s arms rolling his tongue from one cheek to another and pinching the skin on Merope’s arm. His eyes were wide and curious, looking this way and that, finding nothing but grimy darkness in which to center on.

“Why do you care so much about seeing him?” Merope finally asked.

Marvolo closed his eyes and turned his head to the wall. “I doubt Morfin will ever marry. The match I had set up for him was…”

He trailed off as if he couldn’t bear to speak of it.

“You set up a match for him?” Merope asked doubtingly. If there was ever such a thing, she had never heard of it.

"She eloped with a thrice-damned muggle," Marvolo growled through gritted teeth.

Merope’s brows rose to her hairline and she whipped her gaze to Albus’. Albus was deeply amused but did not show it, winking at his wife.

“She was smart then to stay out of this necrotic family,” Merope said brutally.

Marvolo’s upper lip curled but kept facing the wall. After several minutes of conscientious breathing and gnashing of teeth, Marvolo turned back to the room.

“Even if my grandson is half a Dumbledore, he is still our blood. There are magical perks in being
“in the direct line of succession. A power that few could hope to wield. There are many who would relish stripping us of it and watching as the House of Gaunt died. But as long as our blood runs, the power will never be lost.”

“What power?” Merope scoffed.

“This,” Marvolo hissed shoving his fist, which was adorned with the Gaunt family ring.

Albus sucked in a deep, surprised breath as he drank in the ancient artifact. The stone. The resurrection stone. The very ring Hermione and Merope had kept him from seeing the day of his wedding. When they had talked about the artifact, he had no idea its true value. Thoughts danced in his mind. Thoughts of apologizing to Ariana.

“It will work for anyone, yes,” Marvolo began, “But not as well for someone not born of the line.”

“What does this have to do with actually bringing Tom here?” Albus asked shrewdly, barely controlling his need to take the ring right then and there. There would be time enough when Marvolo died, where he could use it. Just the once. “This is something that could just be inherited.”

“Tom, eh?” Marvolo snickered, looking at Merope as if he was searching for something. He cut his gaze back to Tom, spending more time on his deep blue eyes and black hair. “Tom should be raised in the way of the Gaunts.”

Merope tightened her grip slightly on Tom, making the baby gurgle. “What are you trying to say?”

“Tom should be raised here, with his kin.”

“You are dying! And I am his mother. There is no question who will raise him. There never was.”

“If Morfin wants to inherit, he will raise the boy.”

“Over my dead body.”

Marvolo chuckled.

“You wouldn’t want him anyway,” Merope started bitterly before Marvolo cut her off.

“Why? Because his father was a muggle? What do I care about that? Society believes him to be a Dumbledore. So, he is.”

“You will not have my son,” Merope snarled, rising with Tom in her arms.

“Mark my words, Merope, I will have the boy. In the end, he will be a Gaunt.”

Merope hurried out of the room, grasping her wand for dear life as she exited the shack. Morfin stood in the shadows merely watching, calculating eyes darted from Merope’s back to the hedge that hid Riddle House from his view.

“What do you care if he is raised here. You will breed your own spawn off her. What use do you have for a son who can’t inherit?” Marvolo said snidely to Albus.

Albus turned on the sick man, wand at his throat. “Tom is mine, by marriage if not by blood. And I always protect what is mine.”

“You can run,” Marvolo laughed. “but you will never be able to hide. Not when I have the old laws on my side.”
Dumbledore grabbed Hermione’s arm as his memory-self strode from the property leaving both Gaunts to stew in their own wickedness. All at once they were both standing in Dumbledore’s home in Godric Hollow.

“What the hell was that? I thought he reacted poorly to seeing Tom. I thought he was trying to murder him. What the fuck?”

“He wants to take him and raise him under the Gaunt banner! That is a poor reaction! If Tom was biologically mine, he never would have made the request.”

“If you can call that a request!” Hermione said. “He will die soon enough. Ignore him.”

“You do not seem to understand that he is right when he said the old laws are on his side. When a house is dying out, it was fairly common to adopt male heirs from the female line. There is a precedent for it. If he convinces the Wizengamot that he is not my son biologically, he will have legal rights to take him. Just like in your case, your second son would be given the titles and lands of the Slytherins. These laws were created to protect the old families and their estates.”

“That is not going to happen with Tom.”

“If Marvolo moves fast enough, we can do nothing to stop it.”

“Merope is his mother. They cannot take an infant from his mother.”

“They can, they have, and they will.”

“Marvolo will never use Tom’s muggle heritage to take him.”

“Not openly. It serves his purpose to let people believe that Tom is a Dumbledore,”

“What are you saying?”

“If Tom is taken into Marvolo’s care before he dies, there is a huge chance that Tom would be legally in Morfin’s care after his death.”

“You think Marvolo wants to kidnap Tom?”

“Yes.”

“And all we need to do to nip this threat in the bud is to keep Tom safe until Marvolo dies?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Albus, that is exactly what we will do.”

“Are you thinking what I am thinking?” Albus asked and Hermione smiled conspiratorially.

**HGHG**

The floo flared green as Hermione stepped through, jumping a bit as she spotted a scrubbed Grindelwald on the sofa. His arms were spread wide over the back, one leg hitched over the other. His hair was damp and curling around his face, sapphire eyes filled with jealousy.

“Making late night visits to Albus when I am newly arrived? Should I be worried?”

Gellert rose from his seat, unfolding his lithe body and moving gracefully across the room, crowding her space.

“Well?” he asked, looking back and forth between her lips and her eyes.

“Well, what?” Hermione asked, leaning toward his body.

“Do I have anything to worry about regarding Albus?”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Hermione laughed unbelievingly. “He is married. To Merope.”

“And you have yet to answer the question,”

“Are you jealous?”

“Terribly.”

Hermione smirked and placed her hands on his chest, pressing her lips against his in a soft slow kiss. She pulled away before saying, “you don’t need to worry about anyone. You should trust me better than that.”

He chuckled and brought his lips back to hers for a quick kiss. “Trust does not come easily to me but that is not your fault. It is just a part of me,”

Hermione hummed in agreement, raking her nails lightly over his shirt clad chest all the way down to his waist.

“You tried to rescue me,” he slid his hands down Hermione’s arms, watching as she popped the buttons on his shirt.

Hermione leaned in and kissed the newly revealed flesh of his chest in reply.

“I love that about you.” He gasped as she nipped at his skin.

Hermione couldn’t help but smirk into his skin as he lost his train of thought. Darting her tongue out to taste the puckered skin of his nipple, she relished the shiver she caused.

Gellert sucked in air with a hiss, desire darkened eyes focused intently on the wonderful things that she was doing with her mouth. He shrugged impatiently out of his shirt the moment it was unbuttoned, and desire raced through him as her sly fingers dipped under the waistband of his trousers, unclasping them in the same unhurried manner.

“Hermione,” He murmured. He didn’t know if he was pleading with her to keep going, or to stop, or even just to do more but he did know that he didn’t want to have her for the first time on the floor or, Merlin forbid, the sofa in the sitting room, where just about anyone could floo in and see them.

With this in mind, Gellert cupped her face and captured her lips before reaching down and literally sweeping her off her feet. Hermione giggled at the weightless feeling of falling, before settling comfortably in his arms, circling his neck. His spicy scent swirled around her, swamping her with the heady smell that brought the memories of every time he invaded her space.

“Which room is yours?” He grunted as he carried her out of the sitting room, up the stairs, and down the hall.

"The last door on the left," Hermione whispered before sucking his earlobe into her mouth.
Gellert pushed the door open with his shoulder, glad that the door had been slightly ajar, and kicked it shut once they cleared the threshold.

The moment her toes touched the ground, Hermione twirled out of his grasp. He reached for her, smiling, grabbing only air.

She looked at him from over her shoulder and watched his reaction as she let her robes pool on the ground at her feet. He was breathing heavily as her dress was unfastened next, a silk waterfall gliding down her supple curves, touching places on her body that he had dreamed of tasting. In the end, she was standing in her black lace knickers, knickers she had chosen to wear, knowing she was going to his trial, knowing he would likely be set into her care that very day. He swallowed hard, saliva concentrating in his mouth as he remained rooted to the spot.

Hermione’s pulse raced and desire pooled at her center. The way he was looking at her, the way he touched her, the way he wanted her fanned the flames of her need. Never had she been so hot for anyone before, so desperate for his touch. Love poured from him. From the way he carried her to her room, to the way he touched her as if her being here with him was necessary for his survival.

She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth and Gellert groaned again, reaching out for her, running the pads of his fingers over her skin, dropping kisses in the cradle of her neck. Hermione reached back to unclasp her bra, but he stopped her, sliding the hooks out of the eyes, and pushing the lace down her arms himself. Neither watching as the lingerie dropped, forgotten, to the floor.

Gellert reached around her and cupped her breasts, thumbs flicking her hardened nipples, admiring the dusky peaks between kisses trailing up her neck. Hermione laid her head back against him, drowning in the pleasurable sensations of having her body strummed like a fine-tuned instrument.

Slowly, his hands trailed from her breasts to her hips, hooking his thumbs under the lace of her knickers. Kissing his way down her back, his fingers skimmed her thighs, pushing her knickers past her ankles, lifting one foot then the other before flinging the elastic lace across the room.

It wasn’t until she felt his tongue on the back of her left knee that her breath became ragged. Soft, slow strokes pressed against her skin and pleasure rose so hotly within her that she thought she would combust from it. The sensations completely overwhelmed her.

“Ah,” Hermione sighed, bringing her hands up to glide them over her breasts, tweaking her nipples in time to his licks.

On his knees, he turned her around, bringing her close to kiss her belly, dark eyes on her hands and their manipulations.

“I want to touch you,” Hermione gasped. Smirking lips and mischievous eyes taunted her as he kissed his way down to her mons and beyond, making Hermione choke on her own spit as his tongue danced across and away from her engorged clit.

Sharp pleasure raced up her spine and she let go of her nipples in favor of sinking her fingers into his long blond locks. She was enraptured by the sight of his pink tongue darting into her folds, swirling around her straining bud. She tried to force his face to go where she so desperately needed, but he fought against her, punishing her need for control by using his thumb instead. Barely brushing her.

“More! I need more,”

“Then more it shall be,” he murmured sucking her clit between his teasing lips.

“Oh my God,” Hermione gasped, throwing her head back. Her legs began to shake, and she knew
she wouldn’t be able to stand there on her own for much longer.

For the second time that night, Gellert swept her into his arms and walked over to the bed, laying her down gently before shucking his own trousers and pants. Hermione admired his hard cock, red and glistening at the tip, weeping with his desire.

Fisting the steel flesh, he watched her watch him as he lazily stroked himself from base to tip and back before crawling on the bed, covering her body with his larger one.

She could feel his cock heavy against her inner thigh as he laid over her, sliding a hand in her hair and tilting her head to achieve a better angle to kiss her. He swept his tongue in her mouth, exploring, wanting to sink in her and Hermione moaned. He tasted musky with her arousal and she couldn’t explain it, but it turned her on even more.

Hermione spread her thighs and sighed breathily as he settled there, cock nudging at her entrance. Gellert was unhurried as he explored her, capturing her wrists and holding them down to either side of her body.

Hermione strained against his grip, fingers stretched out, desperate to feel him the same way he was with her.

“Gellert,” she whined. He pulled back from her, his hair framing them in a private world of their own, breath mingling. A slow smile spread across his face as he tightened his grip on her wrists minutely and leaned down to take one of her nipples in his mouth.

Sucking and nibbling the tight bud sent Hermione to thrash her head back and forth, almost overwhelmed, quivering, as if she were a lone leaf left on a branch in the fall.

Finally, he let her wrists free, sliding one hand between them, grabbing his erection and using the tip to tease her clit. Rubbing himself in her heat, her natural lubrication.

Her nails dug into his shoulders. “I’m coming,” she whispered.

Waves threatened to suffocate her as stars danced behind her eyes. Her breath came out in a rush and she pulled him closer, mumbling her praises. Her orgasm swept over her, leaving her drained as he rolled them so that she was straddling his hips, his still stiff cock nestled between them.

She rolled her hips experimentally, dragging moans from both of them. With one hand he reached between them holding himself, his other hand guiding her on her hip, helping her settle over him, tip prodding at her center. Slowly she sank down on him, inch by maddening inch.

He moved his hands to either side of her hips, grip becoming tighter and tighter as he fought the need to thrust up into her.

"So pretty. So good. My girl." He mumbled sweat beading at his brow.

When she was fully seated on him, he held her there, close, straining against the desire to flip her and ride her until both of their lust was slaked.

Hermione began to wiggle, admiring the way he felt inside of her, clenching her inner muscles rhythmically to the sound of his tortured breaths.

“If you don’t move you may be hunted down for murder, Love,”

“I would,” Hermione teased. “but you won’t let me,” brushing her fingers over one of his hands that
held her hips in a bruising grip.

He exhaled harshly, letting her remove his hands and capture them above his head, the way he had done. Lust raged in his eyes as Hermione lifted herself, hips rolling, before sinking back down on him. Over and over and over until his eyes were rolled to the back of his head. Her breasts bounced in his face and he strained forward to catch one of the teasing nipples with his mouth, surprising her with the force of the pleasure that was quickly rising within her again.

It took her by surprise, the cresting of her pleasure, and she couldn’t help but stop moving as she spasmed around his thick cock.

With a growl, he flipped them and grabbed the back of one of her thighs, picking up speed as he thrust into her. Her wild hair cascaded over the pillows, her eyes closed as she rode out the waves of oblivion. Bliss.

His head was thrown back, his Adam's apple quivering as his breath came out harsh and irregular. The tendons in his neck were taut and straining. Hermione watched him through half-lidded adoring eyes, admiring the Adonis before her. He was breathtaking.

He shuddered and stilled, hot ropes of his seed spurting into her body. He thrust lazily a few more times, before hanging his head limply to his chest, catching his breath.

“That was amazing,” Hermione said tiredly.

He chuckled and swiped the hair out of his face, studying her dishabille with supreme satisfaction. “Better than I ever imagined,”

Hermione smiled as he pulled out of her, flopping unceremoniously on the bed next to her. He gathered her in his arms and pulled the blankets until they were covered, laying kisses on her temples, her hair, her face… wherever his lips could reach.

“I love you,” he breathed as she struggled not to fall asleep.

“I love you too,” She snuggled into his warmth, and breathed his scent in, falling asleep in his arms.

The next morning, Jesper woke them by rudely opening the curtains, blasting them with the morning light. The elf looked annoyed, spearing Gellert’s naked body with critical derision. Breakfast had been brought and laid on the small table. Hermione struggled against her sleeping body, trying to force herself awake.

“Your elf doesn’t like me much,” Gellert said with an amused snort.

“I is liking you better if you is Jesper's master,” Jesper said from somewhere just out of sight, making Hermione wince.

“See? Even your elf agrees with me. You should just marry me.” He joked thinking she would put him off, say 'sometime’ after he had served his time.

"Okay,” she said instead, surprising him.

He couldn’t believe it. The shock was written across his face. “Really?”

“Really.” She confirmed, eyes searching his with affection.

“Today?”
“If you want,” she said, amused.

Gellert rose naked from the bed and let out a loud whoop. “Jesper, is it? Contact Albus! He will marry us! Wake him!”

With a crack, Jesper was gone and Hermione laughed, happy and satisfied. Gellert looked down at her, still snuggled under the blankets, glowing. His. All his. His Hermione.

He would make sure this was a decision that she would never regret.

Hermione reached out for him, calling him back to bed. But he danced out of reach of her seeking fingers, grabbing a bowl full of fruit from the breakfast tray, popping a cherry in his mouth.

“I’ve finally caught you,” he whispered as he placed a cherry against her lips, leaning over her as if he intended to make her morning especially pleasurable.

“Or is it I who caught you?”

“Ha! I’ve been chasing you for a year, woman. Don’t downplay my victory!”

They laughed and she opened her mouth to accept the fruit, eyes glittering with happiness.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This chapter looks so innocuous, so innocent but this was one beast of a chapter to write. I should probably divulge that I had deviated from my outline so spectacularly, that from chapter eleven on, the entirety of the outline had to be tossed. (I kept all the dates listed, down to Merope's last menstrual period when she got pregnant. If interested, you can check out a pic of the first page of the second outline on my Tumblr, Jessiyl) In my defense, I thought this was a much better progression. Plus, in my original draft, I killed off a beloved character, something I felt no longer inclined to do. I wonder if you all can guess who the unlucky character was slated to be…

Chapter Eighteen

Their peaceful repose was rudely interrupted by the sound of an owl at the window, pecking the glass to gain entry. With an exaggerated sigh, Gellert set the bowl of cherries on the nightstand and turned to open the window, huffing with annoyance when the bird clipped him with a wing as he glided past the naked man and over to the bed. The owl landed with an easy grace and a slight ruffling of feathers.

"What have we here," Hermione crooned to the owl as she reached toward the string that held the waiting letter bound to its leg.

"Who is it from?" Gellert asked, walking to the bed, having left the window wide open so that the owl could leave the moment it wanted. Apparently, it was going to wait for a reply.

"I don't know," Hermione said as she kept unfurling a massive letter, at least four feet long, before finally uncurling the last inch, revealing who the message was from. "Marvolo," she answered, then with a furrowed brow, went straight back to the top. Gellert leaned over her, shooing the bird to the far side of the bed, and read over her shoulder.

My Dearest Daughter Hermione, it began, and Hermione snorted. In his last letter, he had called her 'you’ if he referred to her at all. He also had told her that she wasn't invited to his home and that he didn't like the influence that she had over Merope. Accusing her of trying to bring the Gaunt name to ruins. HA! As if he needed any help in that arena. And yet, here he was writing to his dearest daughter. If it wasn't so amusing, she would have choked on the indignation. She continued reading.

It has come to my attention that you have invited into your home a noble and yet undeserving revolutionary. As you are a single woman, living entirely alone, I have contacted you to exhibit caution. No daughter of mine should be so blasé about the rules of society and you as the last Heir of an illustrious family, should be more conscientious about your standing. Poor Tom is going to suffer the indignity of being the adopted relative of such a scarlet woman.

We shall all bear the shame of it.

As your father, it is my duty to correct any such behaviors and protect your (and our) good name.

Hermione snorted here as well. As if Marvolo Gaunt still had a good name. And why did he believe
that he had any right to dictate anything? She was adopted into the Gaunt family to protect Tom from being only in Albus's grasp should Merope pass. Marvolo thought he had a say in her life? Hell no! Over her dead body! Fuming, she continued to read.

As such, I have contracted you into a proper pure-blooded marriage.

The floor shook and Hermione was startled out of her own fury and looked up in surprise at Gellert who sat on the bed, hands fisted, magic striking the wood with tiny lightning bolts at an alarming rate, causing the whole house to shake. He was beyond rage; he was a man who was completely lost to all reason as sparks shot like shrapnel from his fists. Hermione's brows rose and she turned back to the letter, guessing it was Marvolo's high handed contract of marriage that had set him off. But it wasn't. It was what followed.

Prince has agreed to take you despite the deplorable gaff you have made. He has even generously offered to pay for the entire thing. Lucky for you, since I am sure no other respectable family could be cajoled into taking you now.

Hermione dropped her hand into her lap and looked up at the ceiling. Rolling laughter bubbled out of her- her whole body shaking with mirth. She struggled to drag in gasping breaths in between bouts of laughter. She fell over, head landing in Gellert's lap. He watched her with a bemused sort of bewitchery. Enchanting, was the only word he could think to attribute to the woman he had hopelessly fallen in love with.

Gellert swept the hair out of her red face and smiled adoringly at her. "Want me to kill him? I could make it look like an accident," which must have been the wrong thing to say because as hard as Hermione was laughing, she was now practically dying.

"I'm…sure…you…could," she gasped out, now holding her stomach and rolling slightly from side to side. It wouldn't have been half as funny if the sentiment hadn't first been running through her own mind. She was just as capable as Gellert to rid herself of enemies.

"What would you have me do? I'll do it!"

After a few more moments, Hermione was able to get herself back under control, giggling only every few seconds.

"Better?" he asked her.

"Yeah," Hermione looked up at Gellert, reaching up with one of her hands at the same time to cradle his face. "You know you can't leave the property, right?"

He grunted, not dignifying that with an answer. Instead, he caught the letter out of her hand and cleared his throat as if he was going to make a huge production over reading the rest.

"No," Hermione said grabbing the letter. She sat up and held it between them at eye level. Her brow wrinkled and she stared hard at the paper. The next several seconds were awkward for Gellert as he waited to see what she was going to do, when all of a sudden, the parchment caught fire, and Hermione's smile turned luminous once more.

"Whoa," Gellert said jumping from the bed.

The fire didn't take long to settle though, clearly, Hermione was in complete control of it.

"Fire is kind of my thing," She shrugged nonchalantly, thinking of the time she set Snape on fire fondly.
"I would say so," Gellert muttered. "But don't you think you should have read the entire letter? Just in case he slipped something else unpleasant in there?"

"I know something that he doesn't know about the Paterfamilias laws. No matter what he wrote, it still wouldn't change anything."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. In my time, Malfoy and I had thought that this may one day be an actual issue for me. He gifted me a very specific vault and at the time, I was speechless from his generosity, only later to find out that that vault is used for Malfoy daughters as dowry. By giving the vault in entirety, he claimed me as his sister. It is why I snubbed everything to do with the Malfoys ever since I arrived in this time. That way they couldn't revoke the magic linking me to them. Officially, I share Slytherin and Malfoy lines. The Malfoys have a very special protection on them that no other magical family can usurp. Malfoy blood always takes precedent. So, as long as the Malfoys don't think of me at all, with either love nor hate, I should be fine. Only they can truly claim me here since the Slytherin family is extinct. In this case, Merope bargained to have me adopted into the Gaunt line for the express rights of care for Tom and any children she will bear. There is nothing magical that binds me to the Gaunts, just in a legal-on-paper kind of thing."

"That is ingenious," Gellert said before continuing jealously. "And who is this Malfoy fellow from your time?"

"I would have definitely been bound by Marvolo if it weren't for Draco," Hermione began.

"Draco now is it," he darkly murmured.

Hermione cracked a smile, unable to avoid enjoying his jealousies and needling him a bit more. "Draco would have gone into politics had things been different, I think. He always knew the ins and outs of pureblood society. I always thought maybe it should have been him who came back. He would have been so much better suited for it. Then again, he has that unmistakable Malfoy hair…"

Gellert growled and tackled her, pinning her to the bed by her hands, hovering inches away. His enigmatic blue eyes traced the contours of her face, darting back to her lips hungrily.

"He couldn't make you feel like this," Gellert whispered running his nose along the column of her neck.

"Maybe he could. We never tried." She said breathlessly, arching her neck to give him better access. "He did ask me to give him children once,"

Gellert froze. Hermione could feel his jaw working as he ground his teeth together. "Would you have if you didn't come back in time?"

"I don't know. We were friends for sure, but we spent most of our childhood hating each other."

Gellert sat back on his heels, now straddling her, her wrists still in the prison of his hands. "How did you get from hating each other to him asking you to bear little Malfoy children?"

"You seem to forget what I left behind. It was a war. And it was devastating. At the end of it, there was only Malfoy and me, left. Everyone I knew and loved was dead. He was good to me. Took me somewhere safe. Fed me. Held me when I was in shock despite his own crippling grief. Without one word or inane questions, he followed me, supported me. Do you think I would be here changing everything without him? Without Draco Malfoy's help, I would have turned into a wraith who haunted the graves of the dead."
For a moment, they stared at each other, Gellert's jealous face softening into something that resembled gratefulness.

Hermione sighed and pushed against him, sitting up when he let her go easily. "Perhaps it is time to tell you everything."

"There is more?"

"So much more," She said, bringing her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around them. "I was born to parents that couldn't do magic. You would call me a Muggleborn, or more likely, Mudblood. They were amazing parents."

Gellert made to interrupt but she held up her hand to stop him. "Let me finish,"

He nodded and with a frown settled back against the headboard.

"I got my Hogwarts letter when I was eleven just like every other witch or wizard in the U.K. A professor came to my home and sat with me and my parents explaining that I was a witch and that I was accepted to a school that would teach me to use the gifts I had been given. They weren't as convinced as I was about going, but they never, not once, stood in my way. Then I met my best friends. I seem to turn enemies into friends because Harry and Ron," she paused fighting the rising lump in her throat at the mention of her boys. "they didn't like me when we first met. It was only after we faced an adult troll alone that friendship formed. For the next seven years, we battled together growing stronger, learning magic no one our age should have been able to fling in the heat of battle. I've killed men my father's age. I've killed someone my age. I've used every single unforgivable on others. I've used dark magic. I've created gruesome magic spells that make a person's entrails explode like shrapnel."

Gellert was a mix of shock and lust. He always got excited over powerful magic, even if it did cross into the darker side of things.

"My friends and I broke into Gringotts and successfully stole from their vaults,"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa… and they let you walk back in."

"When you are a Horcrux hunter that was integral to killing off an evil wizard bent on wizarding dominion, yes, they let you back in. The only thing they ever said to me was not to do it again. A light sentence if you ask me. But they were suffering untenable losses in the war too. The Goblins were grateful."

"Horcruxes," Gellert croaked, shocked into silence, shaking his head. "foolish… Who could be so foolish?"

"Tom," Hermione said quietly.

"What?"

"Merope's son, Tom. He became the monster who made seven Horcruxes. He was the man who slaughtered, decimated an entire magical community."

"Tom? The baby you adore?" he clarified.

"Yes."

"How can you pour such love on him?"
"He is a sweet baby."

"He will become a monster!"

"Not this time."

"You seem certain,"

"I am,"

"How can you be so sure?"

"In my past, Tom was born unloved in a muggle orphanage. You see, Merope hemorrhaged while giving birth. Maybe I should go back a little farther… She had kept Tom's biological father under Amortentia for years. He married and impregnated her. She wanted it to be real and hoping that he would accept her and their son, she stopped giving him the potion. That is not what happened. He despised her. Abandoned both. Her family was in and out of Azkaban but even if they had been in a position to help her, they wouldn't have. There weren't very many memories of him as a child by the time Harry, Ron, and I began collecting memories and information. The few we did get a hold of were bleak. He wasn't treated well, and his cruelty flourished under the negligent care. By the time he was old enough to attend Hogwarts, his cruelty was well established. He was a master at hiding it though, always the model student. He successfully bamboozled nearly everyone for years and years."

"Nearly everyone?"

"Tom couldn't fool Albus. I'm not surprised but Albus had a habit of merely observing, never stepping in to change circumstances except the ones he wanted to." She shook her head.

"Ah, sounds about right," Gellert nodded and ran his hands over her overlapping ones, threading their fingers together.

"Anyway, Tom grew to be manipulative and extraordinarily powerful- the last living descendant of Salazar Slytherin. He amassed followers. Those who wanted change and glory. Those that wanted power. Those that wanted to be able to be cruel without consequences. He made his first Horcrux at sixteen right there in the castle, killing another student who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And he wasn't caught?"

"He was smart, our Tom, he knew of another student who was raising an Acromantula in the castle and blamed the death of the girl on them, earning himself a plaque for special services to the school."

"Damn…"

"The world grew darker after he graduated where he and his knights toured the world, learning impressive magic that would help them wage war. They wanted to kill all Muggleborns you know. They wanted magic to be only in magical families. I was treated less than filth by the old families. I was actively hunted for the entirety of my teenaged life. They accused Muggle-borns of stealing their magic from a 'proper' witch or wizard. It was horrible." Hermione stopped for a moment, glancing up at the canopy of bed curtains.

"But you weren't caught, obviously," he prompted, now fully engaged in her story.

Hermione smirked. "No. But the boys and I fell on some hard times. We starved for much of the two
years we were on the run. It was one such a time that the final battle was prompted. We hadn't eaten
for three days and had resorted to filching crops from where they grew. Food we took and could not
pay for. Luckily it was June and such foods were plentiful. The problem wasn't that food was or
wasn't to be had. The problem was that Tom's men were paying close attention to every farm and
orchard, every market- muggle and wizarding alike. It's how they found me, in the middle of a sugar
beet field in the south west of England."

"But you didn't die,"

"No. The boys and I had a system, a way of sending messages instantaneously, that allowed me to
call for back up. Even so, I spent a solid ten minutes struggling to survive. It was five grown men
against just me. If the boys hadn't come when they did, I don't think I would have lived through the
battle."

The owl began hopping from foot to foot, trying to gain the attention of the people, obviously
annoyed he had been forgotten. He was waiting for a response, and a response he would take.
Hermione and Gellert ignored the bird, for now.

"They sound more like family than friends," Gellert said.

"They were! I had never had any siblings but once I had Harry and Ron as my friends, I felt as if I
had. You have no idea how many nights I spent nagging them into doing their homework or staying
up late to help them fix what they did do," she ducked her head in embarrassment. "or even doing it
for them. I shouldn't have done, but it is what it is."

Gellert chuckled imagining a young Hermione browbeating two young boys into doing their
homework.

"I spent a lot of time with Malfoy too, after the Order helped him and his mother escape Tom's
tyranny. His information was invaluable. He grew up surrounded by magic and luxuries that very
few could boast of. It led to the finding and destruction of two Horcruxes. And I will say, one was
easier to destroy than the other."

"Why?"

"One was Hufflepuff's cup from the Lestrange family vaults. Without Draco's help, I probably would
have had a devil of a time getting out. He was the one who prepared us for the traps that Goblins lay.
Of course, we also had a Goblin who was helping us, but Goblins have their own sense of honor that
doesn't always align to a witch or wizards. The other was not that we couldn't easily get it, it was
just... Harry. Harry had this scar, right here on his forehead," she said raising her hand and moving
her hair out of the way so he could see where Harry's scar might have been. "We knew he was
connected to Tom. He would feel Tom's emotions, see things through Tom's eyes. He always knew
when Tom was near or powerful. We should have known from the beginning that that scar was more
than just a magical scar. A part of Tom's already fractioned soul latched on to Harry the night he tried
to murder him as an infant. An unintentional Horcrux. Our dilemma was how to get rid of it without
killing Harry in the process."

"But he died?"

"He did. He died facing Tom at the final battle. He took Tom with him though."

"You were lucky you had destroyed all the other Horcruxes when his men found you in that field."

"Don't I know it. I was told, whilst looking into coming back in time, that the battle's outcome was a
great triumph for wizarding kind and if I tried to make changes, I could undo that very tenuous victory."

"But you don't think so?"

"I am confident that Tom will be different. However, I am not so naïve to believe that his personality had nothing to do with his rise to power. He will be the embodiment of what Slytherin stands for—cunning, ambitious, ruthless… But perhaps Tom will channel that iron will into something incredible. When I read through Tom's private journals, I had grieved that such a magical mind was lost to us. He could have been the change our world needed. If Tom still grows into the monster I knew as a child, I will take him down myself."

"And what, my Dear, will be the tipping point for you? When would you deem him monster enough to take out?"

"A Horcrux or a murder."

Gellert nodded. "So, I am not yet on your takedown list either?"

"Are you trying to convince me that you had not murdered anyone? Don't you remember telling me about Ingrid and Leon's father?"

"That was different. He was abusing the boy! And I did what I had to do not just with him but for anything that stood in the way of changing the world. Injustice like that needs to be fought against!"

"You could justify just about anything with the right mindset, Gellert." Hermione began. "Do you think it was easy for me to let Tom be born? To give him a second chance at life? Who the hell do you think you are that you can pick and choose whose lives matter?"

"Look at the cauldron calling the kettle black," he said drily.

"I gave my word that I would try to shed my biases against the families who tried their damnedest to kill me and mine. And except for Albus, who had rightfully earned my ire in the past, I feel as if I had lived up to the spirit of the promise. You, on the other hand, see people as a means to an end. Can they help you in achieving your goal? If so, how?"

"You wound me," he said grasping his side as if she had plunged a dagger into the tender flesh to the hilt.

"We both know that isn't true," Hermione rolled her eyes as he flashed her his killer smile.

"We tackle our problems differently, you and I." He said. "You move politically, while I find force is more effective,"

"I'm not going to talk in circles with you," Hermione said. The owl, finally ready to flip his shit, bounced onto Hermione's knee, gripping tightly enough for her to feel how sharp his talons were. She hissed in pain, drawing her attention to the impatient owl.

"He seems to be waiting for an answer," Gellert said with amusement.

Hermione sighed and pulled a small piece of parchment, ink, and quill from the side table drawer.

*Marvolo Gaunt,*

*Go to Hell and take your marriage proposal with you.*
Signed,

The-Girl-Who-Apparently-Destroy-Ancient-Houses

P.s. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones…

She quickly rolled the paper and tied it to the owl's leg, smiling as if a weight had been lifted off of her shoulders.

"Is there anything else I should know about before I bind my poor innocent soul to yours?" Gellert asked fingering a lock of her curly hair.

Hermione snorted. "Well, there could be, but I don't remember at the moment. How about you? Any jilted lovers that I should be aware of?"

"None that would care about my current life and activities."

"But there are a few? What about Vinda?"

"What about her?"

"I was under the impression that the two of you were lovers,"

"What gave you that impression,"

"After you were imprisoned in Nurmengard in my original timeline, your generals were rounded up and tried for war crimes. Vinda was tried as a spy and your sometimes lover."

"I didn't know that being my lover was a crime. Anyway, you are more her type than I," he chuckled.

"So she said, but the evidence was damning,"

"It always is when the mob is out for blood. Facts and reason fly right out the window."

Hermione chuckled. "In your case, they have both,"

"I am a law-abiding man who has mended his ways and is currently on day two of living out the sentence laid on him from the highest courts of law."

"You haven't even been here twenty-four hours yet,"

"Your point?"

Hermione sighed and shook her head. Sometimes he was impossible to win against. His thinking was so convoluted, so wily, he would have been a Slytherin had he attended Hogwarts. He could twist around any Ravenclaw to make any point, just for the sake of argument.

Hermione got up from the bed and made to go into the loo, throwing a saucy smolder over her shoulder. Gellert was on his feet in seconds, letting the door slam shut behind him as he reached out and grabbed Hermione around her waist, pulling her back into his naked body.

"Always the tease," he grinned into her shoulder, laying kisses here and there.

Turning in the circle of his arms, Hermione encircled his neck with her arms and pulled her body flush, reaching up on tiptoe to kiss his lips. "You like it," she murmured.
"That I do," he replied, running his hands up and down her body, memorizing her as if he were blind.
Chapter Nineteen

Previously:

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**HGHG**

With a quick twist of her wrist, Hermione turned on the taps, watching the water turn steamy, fogging up the whole room before she turned to him. He was staring at her, his pupils blown wide. His gaze roved over her naked body, stopping every so often to study her longer.

Lifting a single hand, he gently cupped her right breast, testing its heftiness with a quick bounce. A slow, lupine smile graced his lips and he looked positively debauched. Then he leaned down and took her nipple in his mouth.

Desire flooded Hermione's core as if he were a fiddle master and she, his instrument of choice. She could feel the rasp of his morning growth on her tender skin as he sucked and licked his way from one nipple to the next, glorying in the unbelievable sensations.

After he sucked her nipples into elongated red peaks, his lips brushed over her clavicle, dropping sucking kisses up and up and up until he was just under her ear, purring with masculine satisfaction. Hermione gasped and threw her head back, fingers buried in the skin of his shoulders. She was probably leaving marks, but she was too lost to sensation to care, groaning as his fingers slid between her folds.

She was wet, positively soaked, and it drew a chuckle from him, mouthing endearments against her skin. Unable to take another second of waiting, Hermione pulled Gellert into the shower, promises dancing in her eyes. Wicked promises that had him hard and needy in moments.

"Yesss…" he breathed, stepping under the hot spray, her hands in his as she followed. She turned around and for a moment stared, as the water cascaded over his muscles before running her fingers from shoulder to groin, following the path of his treasure trail, stopping only when she felt the wiry hair that surrounded his cock. She felt his length bob against her roaming fingers, brushing against him before running her fingers back to his chest. His breathing was heavy when he took her
shoulders in hand and pushed her back against the chilly tile surround.

His lips crashed against her mouth, sucking at her bottom lip and battling with her tongue. Blood pounded through her body to a savage tempo. And she wanted more, more, more!

His hair fell forward tickling her cheek, and Hermione reached up and gathered the blond locks, fisting it with one hand. With one last peck on the lips, he was on his knees in front of her, urging her to lift her leg and set it over his shoulder. Obligingly, Hermione did as he asked and pressed her back against the wall and moaned. He had used his thumbs to spread her open like a feast.

A small sliver of cool air ran over her heated core and he chuckled as she shuddered, whimpering. Everything felt so… intense, like a live wire had attached to her skin. Every movement, every groan, every taste, she felt it deep within her bones.

When his tongue met her naked lips, she tried to use what leverage she had with his hair in her hands. But she couldn't have accounted for his stubbornness as he continued to evade her pulsating nub.

"Please," was her murmured litany. "Please, Gellert?"

After he tasted her lips, he took a long slow lick. She rode his tongue like she was riding a bronco and needed only a few more seconds to win the buckle. Sucking her into his mouth, he flicked the tiny bead with his tongue, letting her grind on his face.

"More," she murmured hand clenched on his hair, the other, fisted against her thigh. She was shaking, totally absorbed in her ecstasy, as he brought her closer and closer to the precipice. And with the insertion of two long fingers into her greedy quim, he fairly threw her off the face of the cliff, forcing her into earth-shattering bliss.

Lights exploded behind her eyes and she stood there gasping for breath. Then she was in his arms, back pressed against the tiles even harder than before. With a second of shifting, he sheathed himself all the way to the hilt.

Hermione nibbled at her lower lip; the flesh held captive by a perfect row of even white teeth. He was a man possessed, thrusting into her faster and faster, tendons of his neck strained and bulging. She panted as her body clenched around his hard pounding cock, taking his rigid cock over and over and over.

"Touch your clit, Love." His husky voice rumbled. And like a good girl, she did exactly as he told her, slipping her small hand between them. With each motion, she could feel her fingers graze his length. And every time they made contact, he grunted.

Her breath caught as she felt her climax approach, her clenching muscles strangling his cock until she was gone, mind lost once again to her orgasm. She abandoned her clit and held onto his shoulders, rolling into him as much as possible, delighting in her sensitivity as he seemed to grow impossibly thicker inside of her body.

"Fuck!" he said as he buried himself balls deep and exploded inside of her, ropes of thick seed coating her greedy quim. Lazily he kept thrusting pressing deeper and deeper into her body. Their breathing was harsh as he gently let her legs down, both wearing matching satiated smiles.

Hermione smiled at him, letting the wall hold her up. "That was amazing,"

He chuckled and skimmed his hands over the outline of her body, moving closer, needing to feel her against his skin.
"Ready for round two?" she asked skimming her fingers over his wet chest. He looked at her as if she was completely nutters, rolling his eyes as she laughed. "Old man,"

"Old men don't fuck pretty witches against the wall in the shower," he said before pulling her back under the spray to worship her body for a second time.

**HGHG**

A scream pierced the air as the couple was drying off. Hermione grabbed her wand and with a flick, she was fully clothed, running pell-mell out into the hallway. Merope was on the floor, hands over her face, screaming bloody terror.

"Merope?" Hermione asked trying to pull her hands away from her face when the inconsolable woman started babbling. "Merope? I can't understand you! What happened?"

"He's gone!"

"Gone? Who's gone? Albus?"

"Albus, Tom, gone, gone, gone," she cried.

"What's happening?" Gellert said.

"Something about Albus and Tom," Hermione said over her shoulder.

"He, he… Oh, Merlin!" Merope broke down into more tears.

"What honey?" Hermione said in a slow even tone. She couldn't do anything unless she knew what to fight against.

"Albus… he was there with me in bed! But then he was gone! One-minute touching me, the next? And Oooooooh I thought it was suspicious. I went to look. But where would he go? To Tom? And so, I nipped up. Tom is gone!" she finished on a wail.

"Did Albus take Tom?" Hermione asked bewildered.

"I don't know!" Merope screamed. "Gone, both gone!"

Gellert slipped an arm under Merope's knees and the other under her neck, lifting her as if she weighed nothing. He frowned as he turned toward Hermione. "Love, why don't you go find Albus, I'll stay here with Merope."

Hermione nodded and took the stairs two at a time, calling for Jesper as she ran.

"Jesper."

"Mistress?"

"What happened here?"

"I is not knowing? No one is come or gone since young master is brought."

"Albus and Tom are both gone!"

The elf closed his eyes and around him came the unmistakable sound of elves apparating in. Every single one of the family elves arrived in a loose circle.
"He is here," Jesper said. The noise of the murmuring elves was like a beehive, Hermione their center, their queen. They buzzed in agitation and magic crackled in the air.

Ellie, the House Elf that ran the housekeeping, stepped forward. "I feels it… something…"

The other elves hummed even louder, leaning into the matron elf as if the contact was needed for whatever magic they were casting.

"I thinks they is here, Mistress." She shook her head as she continued, ears flopping. A tearful and clearly remorseful Kinder moved behind the elder elf and supported her with her own body.

"Where?" Hermione breathed. Once Tom and Albus were safe, she would take the young elf aside, and tell her that this was not her fault. Unless she had betrayed them. But that wasn't likely at all. However, Dobby was able to do it once, and against his master's wishes to warn Harry Potter. The kernel of doubt was there but her faith in the elf was strong. Kinder loved Tom just as much as she did.

"I is taking you, Mistress," Nod, the gardening elf said. "They is not in the house, me thinks,"

Hermione reached out her hand and slid it gently into his long-fingered grasp moments before elf magic took them where he thought Tom might be.

Elf apparition was as different from wizard apparition as hummingbirds were from Beluga whales. One minute they were in the foyer, the next they were in a dank cellar of some kind. It was dark and putrid as if many, many things went there to routinely die.

"Where is this?" Hermione asked but Nod shook his head, his whole body trembling, and ears flapping in fear. "Nod?"

The tiny elf squeaked, "Black trade,"

"You can go back, Nod. Thank you." She shivered. She had heard the term, just once, another lifetime ago. She had forgotten all about the tunnels because, in her time, they were collapsed. They were a catacomb of a significant number of interconnecting tunnels that presumably went the length and breadth of Hogsmeade. It was one of the ways she had thought they might get into Hogwarts, during the time on the run with Harry and Ron. If she hadn't been so terrified something would happen to Tom, she would be in her element, studying the old tunnels in which the magical community used to do trade. Back before they had a central wizard only town.

"Thank you, Mistress," Nod breathily said before he was gone.

"Lumos," she murmured, glad she had had her wand when Nod had offered to take her.

Tom was crying in the distance, a high pitch baby wail that reverberated off the walls, all around her. Something which was very unhelpful when trying to choose which tunnels would lead her to her nephew. Tom Riddle, the boy who stole her heart.

"Stop right there," a guttural voice demanded from behind her.

She froze. That voice, she knew that voice. Nostrils flared as she caught a whiff of a strange odor. Blood but not blood, well, not human blood anyway. That is one smell that she would never, ever forget. Not as long as she lived.

Her insides ran cold and she tried to slyly hide her wand in her pocket, hoping he wouldn't notice. Out of sight, out of mind, right?
"Marvolo," she growled.

"Ah, yes, Merope's brilliant sister," He sneered moving close enough to shove the tip of his wand into her back. She winced but stayed still. "I should have known it would be you and not that useless daughter of mine,"

"You…"

"Ah, ah, ah," he said condescendingly. She could feel his wagging finger near her shoulder, brushing her curls. "You don't get to speak. Incarcerous,"

A surprised breath left her as she felt tight ropes spring around her, tightening until she struggled to even breathe.

"Shhhh," he crooned in her ear gleefully, chuckling as he made her walk backward, the way he had come.

She stumbled over unevenly packed earth, gritting her teeth against his rough handling. At one point, he abandoned the ropes in favor of sinking his cruel hands into her hair, remarking that she was so much better behaved that way.

Hermione fought the tears that sprung to her eyes from the pain. It was nearly then that she drew her wand, cutting him down in a haze of rage but at the last minute reminded herself that she had had so much trouble on her own trying to figure out where the baby cries had originated. It would be to everyone's benefit if he led her right to Tom.

The light blinded her as he flung her into what could best be described as a room, with packed earth all around, only a few old and weak supports throughout. Hermione landed on her front, dirt shoved up her nose and scrapes newly opened on her chin and knees.

Again, his hand was in her hair pulling her face away from the ground. Marvolo sneered, "You ain't the first to come,"

Hermione's eyes widened in horror as a bound, Albus Dumbledore met her gaze. He was trussed like a hog for slaughter, his mouth filled with a red… no, a grey shirt that had blood stains on it. His hair was a complete mess and his nose had been broken- a trickling macabre river flowed over his lips. He looked rough but he didn't look to be in danger of dying right in front of her. Mentally she sighed in relief. Albus would be okay. Funny how after everything they became friends in the end.

"Looks terrible, doesn't he," Marvolo said in a pleased singsong. Hermione scrambled to her knees to take some of the pressure off of her burning scalp, tender curls still clutched between his unforgiving fingers. With a strength she didn't know he possessed, he crab-walked her over to the far wall, Albus and her on opposite sides.

"What are we doing here, Marvolo?" Hermione asked.

"Funny you should ask. It really is a thrilling tale and since the three of us have nothing better to do and at least one of you is going to die, I don't see any reason not to indulge you," his grin was filled with malice as he settled against the dirt wall. "It all started after your infamous duel when the first stirrings of a rumor began making the rounds. I don't often care about such things but this one hit awfully close to home. A time traveler had come with the intention of changing everything."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. He laughed, pleased that he seemed to know something that she did not.
"It was one of my oldest, dearest friends, one of Grindelwald's own generals for the cause in fact. Usually, he wasn't one to tattle on his leader but Gellis Fawley has such a convincing mouth… or so I hear. From that moment the news spread and since the only newcomer was you, Hermione, the world became hypervigilant. When the next day, you beat Albus Dumbledore in a duel by such a large margin, no one could believe it. You were the talk of the ton! Most of the notable families vowed to take you and bind you to them. You are, after all, the last of the Slytherin line.

But you could have cared less for the company of your peers, opting instead to pull my dear wretch of a daughter from the hovel we call home. Why would you do that? Everyone speculated wildly. What was the significance of Merope Gaunt? In the end, no one really cared who you befriended as long as your cunt and womb stayed pure.

Then the fight was on! Which house would win the right to court you? Turned out to be Prince. Where all other houses backed off, he stepped in, wooing you, charming you. That is until you dismissed him as if he were less than a spider under your boot. The great House of Prince, disgraced. He wouldn't tolerate that, could not. His peers laughed behind their hands and made pointed references to his new, lesser status. Everything his family worked for, every bit of support they had drawn over the years, gone in less time than it took you to tell him to fuck off. The politics of the powerful and wealthy are formidable, but you have to play the game to win. And he wasn't going to back down.

He pursued you in the best way he knew how. With a ton of gold, manipulation, and threats, he contrived a way to get you by force. Calling in favor after favor. Except he didn't count on the loyalty that you had apparently earned from Dumbledore. Also not accounting for Grindelwald's talent of slipping out of the tightest spots. Even his scheming came to naught. I can't imagine that'd felt pretty. Not with the promises he made to marry your children off into their lineages.

Since he didn't manage to bind you to him and was taken to Azkaban with a whole host of charges, his peers began to call in what they termed as risky debt. Drained the Prince family coffers nearly overnight. Though Prince was freed easily enough, and the time he spent among the Dementors focused him on his very real problem of how to forcefully bind you into a marriage bond allowing him to reclaim his rightful inheritance back from the lechers who took advantage of his minor setback. That is when he came to me. For it wasn't a secret that I had adopted you into the Gaunt clan. Imagine our surprise when the adoption which appeared to be magically binding was just a fucking document archived in the vaults that keep track of magical families and birth. Our plans derailed again, and both of us retreated to lick our wounds, biding our time.

This time it was me who approached him. I need Tom to carry on the Gaunt name, to bring glory back to our noble house. To do that, he would need to be raised by me! I tried to tug the idiotic heartstrings of Merope by pretending to be at death's door but with Dumbledore there to support her decisions and you as her powerful backer, she didn't dance to my tune. It was clear I had to take the boy by force. But how? He was so well protected. Three of the most magically formidable people in the world were at their side.

So then, I decided. Dumbledore would need to go first. His disappearance would undoubtedly set off a chain reaction of such that would have you all play right into our hands. So far, I would say I was right. The moment I lured Dumbledore out of the house, I knew we were golden." He murmured taking a moment to take a drink from a clear bottle. It looked like water, but one couldn't be sure. Not down here. Not in this light.

Hermione subtly began trying to shift the ropes, struggling to inch her fingers in one of the deep pockets of her robe. The one that housed her wand. She needed to distract him and she had a few questions she was burning to ask. "How did you get through my wards?"
"The wards were the easy part," he said. "You would be able to keep out most everyone, but you used blood wards, claiming both Merope and Tom as family. Helpful for me, since it is my blood that runs through both of their veins."

"Where is Tom?" Hermione asked, her cold rage echoed eerily throughout the small chamber. The fact that he wasn’t in the room scared her, but neither was Prince and the bastard had to be skulking about somewhere. Especially if what Marvolo said was true, that he wanted to marry her. He wouldn’t dare hurt Tom, at least not until she was bound to him tighter than a Chinese maiden’s foot.

"Tom is perfectly fine and sleeping peacefully. Prince is keeping him company. You look shocked. What? Do you have no faith in your betrothed?" he chuckled. Hermione merely curled her lip in disgust. "No matter, I am sure he will bend your indomitable will to his soon enough. We are waiting for Merope to join the party before we meet again. You see, I want her here, watching as I tear meddling Dumbledore limb from fucking limb. She will be as malleable to my wishes as a suckling babe after that. She will come home, and the boy will be mine to shape as I please. You will be married and Grindelwald at some point will break his oath and probation by leaving the property. And the second he crosses the border, the Aurors will pounce. They will not give him a second chance at freedom. Ingenious, is it not?"

Dumbledore's muffled yells seemed to amuse Marvolo, brandishing his wand as if imagining where he was going to lay the first severing curse. It was at times like this where she really believed that the inbreeding finally broke down the credibility of the line. Marvolo never checked her for her wand, never thought about how she would have gotten to the tunnels without one. He never tried to disarm her or summon the thin length of wood. And it baffled her. Was he just that arrogant or was he truly just so lost in his plan that he forgot to account for it?

Finally, her wiggling fingers made contact with the butt of the wand and with her two longest fingers attempted to shimmy the thing out of her pocket and into her hand. It was slow going but after several tries, she managed it, more than a little elated. She clenched her hand around the handle and began the movement for disarming when a red stinging jinx hit her wrists, causing her to drop it. She hissed and looked toward the door where Magnus Prince had walked in, baby in one arm, wand in the other. Tom was sleeping and thankfully seemed unharmed. However, both Dumbledore and she found themselves wandless. Hermione felt so entirely stupid to not have looked around before showing her wand. For all the mocking she had done to Albus during their duel, she had gotten complacent, no longer the battle-hardened warrior. She swallowed hard, bitter at the irony. She would go down fighting and would die, if necessary, to ensure that Tom would never, ever be raised by either man who controlled the room.

"My little Hell Cat," Prince crooned, catching her wand mid-air as it sailed toward him.

Marvolo strode across the small room and took Tom in his arms, waking him. He wasn't cruel or anything but there was just something about the detachment on his face that worried Hermione. There was no doubt in her mind that Tom would be abused if left in his Grandfather's care.

"Why are you here?" Marvolo hissed at his partner in crime. Prince looked unamused and stayed silent. As if he didn't answer to anyone for any reason.

"Magnus, is what he said true? Are you trying to force me into marriage? Is it because I am a time traveler like he says?" Hermione said, thinking fast. She had to do something before Merope arrived, and preferably before Marvolo started amputating Albus' extremities.

"I'm not going to lie, dear, the thought of where you came from is very heady to the family pride. But you know why I would marry you. I never lied when I said that my pool of choosing was extremely small and you were just so exciting from the very first. I, of course, would prefer you willing but I
will do what I need to, to make you mine. You will accept in time that I chose what was right for us. And, you would even be able to visit Merope and Tom from time to time. I will be such a wonderful husband. What a lucky woman you are!"

Hermione stared at him, calculating how best to outmaneuver him. She was coached by a Slytherin, Draco Malfoy, on avoiding exactly these pitfalls. She even carried the name Slytherin, for Merlin’s sake. And Hermione Granger wasn’t without her own brand of cunning. All of a sudden inspiration struck. What did he want most? And how close to giving it to him would she have to go? First, they were still on her property, the wards on lockdown by elves and Aurors alike. Secondly, neither Merope nor Gellert were prisoners. And she highly doubted that Gellert wouldn’t move heaven and earth to protect her. Facts acknowledged, she made her decision and turned her body towards Prince. "What can I say to you to free Albus and Tom?"

"I have made deals that cannot be broken, My Dear,"

"What if I agree to marry you? Free will and all that. Will that change your mind?"

Marvolo growled, clutching the baby to his side. Tom was uncomfortable and confused and started to whimper. Hermione’s heart leaped into her throat, and by the terrified look in Albus' eyes, he felt the exact same way.

"If I let Dumbledore go, he will just hunt me down on your behalf and try to take you away from me."

"What if I make an unbreakable vow? Will you help me then?"

"All you want is for Tom to grow up with his mother and father, untethered to Gaunt house?" He asked, clarifying, clearly trying to figure out a way that she could be tricking him.

Hermione was pleading with every known and unknown god that Gellert would find her when she most needed him. She was counting on his protective instincts. He had saved her once; he could save her again.

"Yes," she said.

Prince smiled and turned both his wand and Hermione's wand on Marvolo Gaunt, heedless of the baby wiggling in his arms. Marvolo slashed the air with his wand, a cut intended for Prince's double-crossing throat. But Prince was quick, throwing up a protective shield before letting loose a stunner. Marvolo was spryer than anyone knew and had twisted out of the way. The red stunner hit the dirt packed wall, inches above Dumbledore's head, spraying the man in a liberal coating of dirt.

Hermione struggled to get her feet underneath her and was ecstatic when her shaky legs held her. Lights blurred as the two men dueled and Hermione knew true terror. It was agony knowing that at any moment, Tom would be the one to suffer.

After several tense seconds, Marvolo stumbled, barely staying upright and Hermione knew that this time, they would be hit by the stunner that Prince would no doubt flick in their direction. Hermione knew it was time to move. A memory came to her, floating up into the forefront of her mind just as she made the conscious choice to intervene.

"...and if you ever find yourself in a position without your wand," Draco said, moving close behind her, grabbing her arm, and bent it in just the right way. "elbow to the throat. I'm telling you no one ever expects to get elbowed in the throat,"

"I will keep that in mind," she said as she pretended to do just that to Draco.
"Funny," he deadpanned. "As vicious as you are, I'm sure I would never survive,"

"Poor baby," she cooed before elbowing him in the gut.

He bent over double, growling before he pounced on her, knocking her to the ground. "You are going to get it now, Granger."

They ended up in a tangle of arms and legs on the floor, both laughing as they wrestled with each other.

Hermione felt if the memory replayed instantly as she coiled her body as she ran towards the dueling pair. First shouldering Marvolo out of range, then throwing an elbow that caught Prince perfectly under his chin, causing him to choke. A stunner flew from the tip of his wand, catching her squarely in the chest. But before she went down, she saw the most glorious unintentional magic flow out of Dumbledore as he stood, breaking his bonds. Tom was in his arms and Marvolo at his feet before the spell took her, sending her into sweet unconsciousness.

Two days later she woke up in her bed, a healer on the chair near the fireplace, Albus holding Tom while standing and staring out the window, Merope on the bed next to her, and Gellert on a chair next to the bed, holding her hand while he slept.

"What happened?" she asked wincing against the pain in her head.

Albus turned to her and smiled, Tom cradled in his arms. "When you began to run to them, I knew you would take the stunner meant for my son and I just couldn't watch it. Listening to my death, your death, and Marvolo's sick plans for my family was nothing compared to the fear I felt as I watched them duel, Tom, my son, in that mad man's arms. I was quite beyond myself. I managed to free myself, take back my son, and bury us all in those Merlin forsaken tunnels. Luckily, I was able to protect us all in a cocoon barrier, knocking out both Prince and Marvolo with the magic and once I realized we were trapped, I called for Jesper. He has never, ever come when I called, but this time… this time he did. I owe that elf a great debt for getting us all out of there."

"Merope and Gellert, they were looking for you and Tom. What happened?"

"Merope had Nod bring her to the entrance of the tunnels while Gellert got help from the Aurors. It was their quick field medic that saved your life. You weren't hit with a stunner, Hermione, Prince hit you with something much, much darker."

"How did Gellert get the Aurors here so quick?" she asked half afraid of the answer.

"I walked to the boundary and stuck my foot on the other side. Never saw an Auror move so fast," Gellert said as he studied her face, reaching a shaking hand out to stroke the soft contours. "I thought I was going to lose you,"

"I'm made of much stronger stuff than that," she said smiling.

"I told you ages ago that he was your perfect match," Merope mumbled sleepily from the pillow next to Hermione's. Merope had climbed in at some point while she was out, wrapping around her as if she were a descendant of Devil's Snare.

Gellert arched his brow and smirked, leaning in. "You were made for me, Love, it was clear from the very first time I laid eyes on you."

"Don't make me laugh. You are a terrible flirt to anyone of the female persuasion."
"Was," he modified.

"Fine," she rolled her eyes. "You used to be a terrible flirt. Happy?"

"Delirious," he said wryly. When the teasing abated and his cocky smirk dropped, his face softened into something much more tender. "It may not have been the first time I saw you that you captured my heart but there is no doubt that you always interested me. Our chemistry is unlike anything I've ever come across before. I doubt I would ever find it with anyone else."

Hermione blushed and pressed her face in her pillow as Gellert leaned in, cradled her face between his large gentle hands, and captured her lips.

"I supposed the healer here should take one last look at you, Hermione, then we will be off," Albus said smacking the sleeping healer lightly on his shoulder, waking the man up with a grunt.

"Yes, yes," the man muttered gaining his feet.

Merope chuckled and pulled Hermione closer, arms wrapped around her middle, burying her face in the crook of her neck. Gellert was not the only person who had been terrified of losing her and it humbled Hermione to see how many people grew to care for her since her arrival. Merope was the sister she never had and Gellert was the love of her life. The man who had given up his goal of world domination. Though she didn't believe for one second that it was for her that he had done so. She was under the impression that it was the knowledge that he ultimately wouldn't win that changed his mind.

And she quietly wondered as the healer's diagnostics hovered above her if Gellert would one day rise up, taking another opportunity to battle against those who didn't have magic. But she rather thought that maybe, just maybe, his feelings for her would be just strong enough to stop him.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you to all my readers! To all the people who loved this story, to all that continued to read it even after months of silence, to every single encouraging note or comment. I cannot express to you all how grateful I am that you took time out of your day to read and comment. Writing a story for the HP fandom is one of the most incredible experiences. You readers are the real MVP.

Epilogue

65 years later- September 1, 1991

With a hand on her hip, Hermione looked around the large open space of the Wizarding Museum she had created. It had taken her sixty-five years to finalize her dream of keeping wizarding artifacts safe and available for the entire wizarding world to enjoy but she did it.

The original concept had come to her the first time she had stepped into the Slytherin vault after arriving in this time. Seeing all of those priceless artifacts rot in the darkness of Gringotts had felt like a waste and all she could imagine was the thought that the muggle world would have these things inside of a museum, where anyone could come and look.

She realized it would be much more difficult because the things she wanted to showcase, were highly coveted heirlooms that had not been seen in living memory. The first thing she did was reach out to the magical community and searched for retired Aurors, those with meritorious service, and offered them more Galleons than they could turn down. Not one of them said no, each and every one of them excited by the conservatorship she wanted to create.

News of her project began to reach her peers and one by one they came to her, offering their own heirlooms for a rotational loan. And her search didn't end there. An entire wing was dedicated to the Hogwarts founders. Arcturus and Melania Black had been first, offering up anything that she thought might be interesting to the public, opening their home to her perusal. Merope had approached her with the locket in hand days later. After that, Hermione had gone to Albania and spent months searching for the diadem. In the end, she found it, right where the Grey Lady said it would be, in the hollow of a tree.

Hepzibah Smith was a much harder nut to crack. She had no intention of letting the cup out of her sight, but after much negotiating and a new ironclad contract, Smith allowed the cup to be on loan to the museum for one year with an option to extend at the end of it. Knowing that she wasn't anywhere near to opening, Hermione had asked that another clause be added. In the case of Hepzibah's death before the opening, the next owner would be obligated to follow through with the terms. And so it was.

The only house she did not have a true artifact for was Gryffindor, but she had a replica made from her memories. The craftsman who made the replica was fantastic. She wasn't sure how he did it, but the steel even had a bit of green shine to it when the sun hit it in just such a way, reminding her of the basilisk venom it had imbued in her second year. She would bet that the actual sword didn't look like that in this time, but that would just be her little secret.
The most difficult part of the museum, other than security, was deciding whether or not to add the Deathly Hallows. In the end, she decided that at least for opening weekend, they should be included despite Albus and Gellert both warning her not to. The hunt for them was worldwide, almost like the holy grail, and the temptation of one place housing them all would be too much, according to them.

Charlus Potter had easily agreed to the loan of his invisibility cloak, especially since James was such good friends with Rista, Hermione and Gellert's first granddaughter.

Surprisingly, Morfin had reached out the year after Marvolo died from complications of the tunnel collapse. Even though Albus had cocooned them with a magical barrier, something had gone wrong with his heart, killing him five days later in St Mungos. Morfin became a respected member of the community by identifying and breaking curses off of ancient family artifacts. Which was super handy in her endeavor because he was one of her most trusted allies when it came to the museum. He had given her the ring the moment she brought it up, saying that he had no good memories of it and that the museum could have it.

That was generous, of course, but Hermione convinced him the ring would be far safer being in hands of a family and that the loan would have a clear time of borrowing. Albus and Gellert were not wrong when they said it would be a temptation to any who sought the supposed power of being master of all three.

The wand had been brought out of hiding as well as the Nurmengard Blueprints. Even if the prison was never built, it was a thing of beauty, a magical architectural feat.

All of this brought her to this day, the day her dreams would be realized, and she was terrified. It was like another child to her, a lifelong ambition that finally found fruit.

With a wave of her wand, she dimmed the lights and walked out, nodding at the Security Aurors that surrounded the place, wards shimmering as she passed.

At eighty-six years old, she still felt as young as she had in her fifties, with the odd creak and protest of muscle and bones. The weather had turned lovely, green leaves only starting to give way to the riotous fall colors and she decided that she would walk up to the castle instead of flooing to Albus's office.

It wasn't a usual occurrence that a witch or wizard not on Hogwarts teaching staff be invited to the welcoming feast in the Great Hall, but for Hermione, Albus made an exception. This year, more than any year before, meant something much greater to her.

Filch met her at the gate and walked with her up to the castle, bemoaning the lack of thumbscrew use in the more difficult of rulebreakers, namely the Weasley twins. She listened to the outraged account of their antics and hid a smile, glad the dark her the tears welling in her eyes.

The Great Hall was filled with students, more than she had ever seen before. The tables had been elongated to accommodate the influx. No one seemed to mind Hermione as she walked up a row and joined the Hogwarts staff at the head table. She had just settled into her seat between Tom and Flitwick when the side door opened.

The first years walked into the Hall, following Deputy McGonagall like a row of ducklings into the water for the first time. They looked around, in awe of the sights, smiling at everything and everyone. They had a sense of wonder, even those who hailed from magical families. It was a thing of beauty.

Hermione's sharp eyes focused immediately on the boys who were once the most important aspects
of her life. Ron Weasley and Harry Potter. Hermione noted with quite a bit of satisfaction that
Harry's forehead remained unblemished, unmarked, and unscarred. He was as normal as anyone else
and not in the least famous.

She set her hand over her heart, desperately trying not to tear up as her heart clenched as her gaze
moved to the two next people dear to her heart. Hermione Granger, the child, was deep in discussion
with Draco Malfoy. Platinum blond was as close to curly brown as they could get. Hermione's lip
quivered and a handkerchief was thrust in front of her face.

"Are you okay, Aunt Hermione?" Tom Dumbledore said as he sat just to her left. He had taken up
the defense post many years prior and became one of the best in his field.

Hermione nodded her head, unable to speak, watching as each child was sorted. Faces she had so
dearly loved for her entire life and they didn't even know it. People that had died, and people she had
sacrificed everything for.

The most incredible revelation was the night she found out that she had been born in this timeline,
exactly as she had before. September 19, 1979. That night, Merope had come over and the two of
them got so drunk, they spent days sleeping off their hangover. It was a celebration and it was a
funeral. Happy that she would continue on and hopefully live a better life but heart-achingly sad for
what this other Hermione would miss out on. Not every aspect of being the famous Harry Potter's
friend was bad.

"Vellux Gaunt," McGonagall called. Hermione smiled and watched Morfin's grandson sit on the
stool. He was a mousy, timid little thing, but sweet as pie when talking about magical creatures.
Which he was wont to do every time she had seen him. Hermione just knew that Hagrid was going
to absolutely love him in class. "RAVENCLAW!"

Hermione's brows rose to her hair. Surprised was an understatement but she clapped just the same,
proud of the boy. His family had done a lot in the way of fixing their reputations.

"Hermione Granger," McGonagall called, and Hermione snapped her attention to the chair,
wondering what might become of her this time around. "Better be, GRYFFINDOR," the hat yelled.
Hermione cut her eyes over to Albus whose eyes were suspiciously twinkling.

Tom snorted next to her. "Figured,"

"Oh?" she said.

"For a descendant of Slytherin, you have always been Gryffindor-ish. This just proves my point,"

"I'll have you know, that I was always a Gryffindor, even the first time around," Hermione said with
her nose in the air and she gave a disdainful sniff. "And you know very well the name was adopted."

"Draco Malfoy," McGonagall called. Draco stepped up to the hat confidently but kept looking over
at his new friend. It wasn't hard to tell that he thought they would be in separate houses. The hat
barely slid over his ears when the hat yelled, "SLYTHERIN!"

Hermione looked amused and clapped. As intimately as she had known him from her own time, she
knew there was truly only one house for him. But the encouraging thing was that this time around,
the house rivalries were more fun and games than the terrible division of hate it once was.

His ears turned red as he made his way to the Slytherin table, smiling as his new housemates clapped
him on the shoulder.
"Miles Ollivander," McGonagall called. Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes, watching as one of her great-grandchildren swaggered up to the stool. He was the most like Gellert out of all their descendants, not just in looks but also in personality. It was uncanny. "GRYFFINDOR!"

"Harry Potter," McGonagall called. The hat was on his head for exactly three seconds before it called, "GRYFFINDOR."

Time was a funny thing, or maybe it was fate because so many things she knew and loved from her own childhood were the same and yet so much was different. Harry still had his parents. The Malfoys, though powerful, were more tolerant of bloodlines. Though they still tried to keep their own line mostly pure. But the most telling thing of all were the hundreds of faces she had never seen before. Thousands over the course of her life had been born that wouldn't have without her interference.

"Ron Weasley," McGonagall called. Awkward Ron, in his slightly used robes, sat on the small stool nervously as the hat was placed on his head. And to Hermione's surprise, he took the longest to sort out of the whole lot. But just as all the others were sorted, so was he. "GRYFFINDOR!" the hat yelled.

He had looked relieved and sheepish as he made his way to his new housemates, already on his way to being best friends with Harry. But it was clear from the grimace on both the young Hermione and Ron's faces that they were not yet friends. Hermione wondered if they would become friends at all without all of the adversity that had pulled them together the first time. But as the young girl glanced across house tables, her gaze met and held Draco's. Friendship from the very first.

Harry pulled her attention back to the table, saying something that made her laugh. Hermione rather thought that Harry would always be Harry, no matter when, where, or how. She dabbed at her eyes and nose with Tom's handkerchief and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug.

"Don't cry, Auntie, they aren't dead,"

"No, they are not."

"So everything you did, everything you changed, it mattered. You did the unthinkable. And, you get to have such an amazing nephew like me in your life!"

Hermione sniggered behind her hands. "Always modest, aren't you?"

"I can't help it if I am wonderful."

"You weren't the first time around," she eyed him significantly.

He rolled his eyes. "Well obviously I just needed you in my life," He leaned in with a lady-killer smile and a wink. "If you ever wanna ditch Uncle Gellert, you know where I will be,"

Hermione snickered again and smacked his arm. "Your mother would appreciate it if you used your charm in gaining a wife. She told me just yesterday how she longed for grandchildren,"

He backed away and shuddered. "My mother is a lunatic. She has grandchildren, five of them, including seven great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild. She is being too greedy! Rhys may have been her second born but he was more than happy to marry and settle right out of school. Plus, I don't think I am cut out for one woman. My brother has contributed more than enough,"

Albus who sat on Tom's other side leaned in. "Don't let your mother hear that. She will have you
married faster than you can say woolen socks,"

"You say that like she hasn't already been trying," Tom grumbled, feeling completely ganged up on and focused his attention on his food, pushing around the bits of beans 'round and 'round the gravy. Albus met Hermione's eyes and winked, ridiculously chuffed. Once they were merely Headmaster and student then became allies, to enemies, to friends, to family. Other than Tom, Albus was her greatest change.

**HGHG**

Hermione flooed home, tired after the long day, emotionally and physically wrung out only to freeze in horror.

"What do you think?" Gellert asked a great grin transformed his face, standing in front of her with arms wide.

Hermione's jaw dropped and she studied the man standing in front of her. His long white hair was pulled together in a queue at the back of his neck like usual. The rest of him, however, was not the usual.

Gellert was sporting a long white beard tied with several silver bobbles that gathered and hung in his beard, tinkling with each movement. His robes were the most violent purple, sporting neon yellow stars embroidered over the entirety. The worst part was the burnt orange crushed velvet of a hat, twice as tall and pointy as she had ever seen. The effect was hideous but so very familiar, in a nostalgic way. The last time she had seen this look, she was a student at Hogwarts.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips, and put her hands on her hips. "Gellert Grindelwald have you been sneaking a peek inside my pensive?"

His happy smile faltered, and he opened his eyes wide, shaking his head as innocently as possible. She didn't buy it, not for one second.

"Well," he said. "I just wanted to see what I looked like in your time,"

"So you decided to copy Albus' look from when he was my Headmaster?"

"It _was_ Albus…” he muttered to himself. "Makes more sense. Never did like the look of yellow on me, makes my skin look sallow,"

"I don't think the yellow is your only problem."

"True. Never liked wearing hats. The purple though," he said, a smile creeping back in, "I could do purple,"

Hermione sighed and turned away, a little smile of her own on her face. "I'm sure that your dressing up like Albus had absolutely nothing to do with your youthful romance,"

"I can't say I have any idea what you are talking about," He said with a smirk. "I was curious, is all."

"You knew in my time you were locked away in Nurmengard. The only reason you would have to look and see about anyone was Albus. You know, I'm fine and not jealous, right?"

"Nothing came of it. It was something, once, but after I met you those feelings paled in comparison to what I felt for you,"
"But he was your first love, and there is always something special about a first love," Hermione sighed, thinking of her own feelings she had had for Viktor Krum. He may not have been the first person she had a crush on, but he was the first boy to illicit in-depth feelings. There would always be a tender spot in her heart for him, no matter how much she loved Gellert. And she knew the same would hold true with him and Albus. They were innocent memories that should be cherished.

"Oh, Love, wait! Something came by owl for you," He grabbed the small letter off the side table and handed it over with a flourish, a mischievous little smile dancing around the corners.

"Bollocks," she murmured, flipping the letter over with thin narrow slits for eyes.

"This look is glorious on you, you know."

"What look?"

"Unrepentant grudge,"

Hermione snorted. "He did try to marry me by force,"

"And the poor bloke has tried many times to apologize since,"

"You wouldn't think this was so funny if he wasn't still in Azkaban,"

"That is a bald-faced lie! The hilarity would absolutely extend past his death. Watch, Love, how much you want to bet he comes back as a ghost, just for you," he snickered. She pointed at him and looked as if she would rip him a new one before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Once she was calmer, she tossed the unopened letter into the fire. She hadn't read a single letter past the first three all those years ago and like hell would she restart now. Forgiveness may be a thing of beauty, but she just couldn't do it for Prince.

She was able to let go of her grudges long enough to forgive even Tom Riddle, the worst offender of horrors in her life. But Prince was a no go. Even if he hadn't assaulted an Auror as he was taken away that day the tunnels collapsed and spent a significantly shorter sentence in Azkaban, things would have still turned out this way. But with no friends, no money, and no social standing, he had no recourse but to stay locked away and made an example of.

"Why is it that you can love Tom like your own and still not be able to forgive Prince?" Gellert asked as he fiddled with the cuff of his Oxford, having ditched all the rest of the horrid clothing over the back of the chair.

Hermione sat on the settee next to him and leaned in, enjoying as his arm wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her in, dropping a tender kiss to her hair. "Probably because I nearly said yes to him once. Because at the time I could envision a life with him. I turned him down because I had feelings for you. Had you not been in the picture…" she trailed off and shuddered. Likely if she had married him, she would have been in for a rude awakening.

Gellert grinned his cocky arrogant smile. "I knew you wouldn't say no to me. Not after you had a taste of my lips,"

"Oh really? I seem to remember things differently,"

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Gellert said stubbornly, eye twinkling merrily. Just like Albus. Hermione shook her head. Those two spent entirely too much time together. Even if they both denied it vehemently, they were as close friends as she was to Merope.
The floo flared suddenly and the vision of Johanna, their daughter floated amongst the logs.

"Mum?"

"What is it, Dear?" Hermione asked, getting off the couch and sinking slowly onto the carpet in front of the fireplace.

"Violet had the baby!"

"And?"

"A little girl! Elizabeth Felicity Shacklebolt! They waited so long for her and they never thought they would have another after Rowan since he is nearly thirteen. A beautiful baby girl! Is Dad there?"

"Right here, Princess,"

"She has your eyes, or she will. She is the sweetest thing. Gets most of her coloring from her father, but we anticipated that, being a Shacklebolt and all, but her eyes! Merlin, she is so precious. My youngest granddaughter and probably the last that any of my children will give me. But oh, I have so longed for her. Violet told me to tell you that she will invite you over to the Grange, Saturday next. With all the kids at Hogwarts, it will be quieter, and you and Dad will have plenty of time to catch up and see the baby."

"Tell, Violet we will be there," Gellert said smiling. "I have just the gift for the baby!"

Johanna snorted. "I bet you do. They will be looking forward to it. I'm going to go back in and stay with Violet for a while. Love ya!"

"Love you too, Sweetie," Hermione said as Johanna vanished from the fireplace.

"How many great-grandchildren does that make now?" Gellert asked pulling Hermione to her feet.

"Ten. Lucky number ten."

"Dear Merlin," He grumbled wondering exactly how two children turned into five grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren. "Even Merope and Albus only have seven great-grandchildren."

"I guess we just got lucky," she said.

"Yeah, we did," He grumbled, pretending not to be as chuffed as he was. Hermione bit back a smile, even if he pretended that he didn't know how many great-grandchildren he had, he knew each and every one of them by name. Also, he was the one on the floor giving pony rides to any child who wanted one at all the family gatherings. He is as he always was, the life of the party.

"Just think," Hermione said. "Without the life I lived through before I traveled in time, I would have never come back, and we would have never met."

"Never did finish building Nurmengard," Gellert said as he stroked his beard minus the silver dangly things.

"What would you even do with it if you did?"

"I've always meant to have a significant portion of the building dedicated to research,"

"Yes," Hermione deadpanned. "Can't imagine anything would go wrong having a research facility attached to a working prison."
Gellert snorted. "I only wanted to keep Albus there. Besides he would have loved to stick his nose in research."

"Is that how you planned on keeping him locked up there? No high-powered wards, no beefy Aurors gone rogue, but research?"

He laughed. "None of those things would hold Albus. Come on, Woman! The only thing worth exploring as a means to keep him there was the research."

Hermione shook her head. Even after sixty-five years of marriage, she was still surprised by this man. And as she looked at him, studying the laugh lines etched into his face, she realized that out of all the lives she could have lived, all the men she could have married, she couldn't imagine being happier than he had made her. Sixty-five years down, she smiled, and many more to go.

"You are the love of my life," he murmured, dropping a sweet kiss to her lips.

"And you are mine,"

**HGHG**

It was a warm autumn day when Hermione apparated to the front gates of Malfoy Manor, met by Lucius and Abraxas Malfoy who was waiting for her as they have every year for the last five.

"Good Morning, Hermione!" Abraxas welcomed jovially. He looked exactly as he had in a portrait that she had seen of him, once, in Malfoy Manor when she was just a girl.

"Morning, Dear. How is Draco doing at school?" Hermione asked.

Lucius wrinkled his nose. "He loves it, is attentive in class, and is doing very well in the rankings. However, he seems to be infatuated with a Gryffindor girl."

"Oh?"

"Her name is Hermione too," Abraxas said in a tone that seemed to be insinuating something. She ignored him.

"That is lovely," Hermione said.

Lucius held out his arm and helped Hermione wrap her arm around it. "She is Muggleborn,"

Hermione sighed. "You know Lucius, there are worse things in the world than one's birth. I seem to remember your mother wondering if you were a squib, it took so long for you to manifest. And look how you turned out. Bright, powerful, and loving."

"Oh, Merlin!" Lucius looked utterly betrayed. There weren't many people who knew about it, but Adelaide had come to her when Lucius turned ten and still hadn't presented. Most people knew she had a knack for complicated magic. But there wasn't anything she could do for the family except tell Adelaide that she was one hundred percent positive that Lucius was a wizard. Hermione's word had been enough to stop the worrying and a year later, weeks before his Hogwarts letter would come, he finally blasted out six windows in the Longbottom Greenhouses by accident. No one was happier to make the repairs than Adelaide.

"Anyway, he won't marry young Hermione, Dear," Hermione assured him.

"How do you know?" he looked away and rolled his eyes. Abraxas on the other side looked curious.
All talking stopped for a moment while the trio climbed a hill, a lone tree pulsating at the top with magic. Once she was only a few steps away, she let go of Lucius and walked the distance alone. She closed her eyes tightly and caressed the tree, feeling the familiar pull of magic that had once melded her with its magic. Though muted, it was still there, dormant and waiting for the day it would meld with its host.

"It never flowers or produces fruit. I don't know what you like about it so much." Lucius grumbled.

"This is not just any tree, Lucius. This tree is only one of two in the whole entire world and I am the one who planted it here. It is not mature yet, but it will be soon. You asked me how I knew that Draco wouldn't marry Hermione Granger, and this is my answer. I am a time traveler and this tree is the mode in which brought me here. Your son, Draco, and I made a pact with this being. The truth is that Draco will marry Ginny Weasley, and their daughter will become the first Smurg of this tree. I have seen it. And every year I come to visit and I let it know that I was able to do what I set out to do, that I am grateful for the opportunity, that I am sorry to the Malfoy girls who will become Smurg. As long as I live, I will protect the tree and the Malfoy family from ruin."

"But you have only been coming the last five," Abraxas said.

"No, you have only accompanied me the last five. I've come on my own without Malfoy knowledge for the last sixty-five years." She said. Then she mumbled as if in afterthought to Abraxas, "couldn't stand your rat bastard of a father,"

"How did you get past the wards?"

"Easy, I am Malfoy too."

"This is what you choose to ask? Out of all the information she just gave us?" Lucius stared incredulously at his father.

Abraxas shrugged. "Tom Dumbledore confided in me most of this information. I am not surprised,"

"Tom talked to you about this?" Hermione asked in astonishment.

"After he graduated Hogwarts you brought him here, a pensieve in hand, and told him everything. You have no idea how much that knowledge affected him and since we are good mates…"

Hermione nodded. She had wondered if he had talked to anyone about the memories that he saw in the pensieve, and now she knew that he did, she was glad. It would have horrified anyone to see that, that future could have been theirs.

"You knew about this?" Lucius said clearly unable to cope.

"What would you like to know, Lucius?" Hermione asked, still stroking the tree trunk.

"First of all, if you are a time traveler and you knew Draco, are you the Hermione Granger he has been talking about in school?"

"Yes."

"But you were a Slytherin before you married Grindelwald, and how the hell are the Malfoy wards keyed to you?"

"I was a Muggleborn, born as Hermione Granger. After the blood-wars, there was just Draco and I left. Everyone else, including you, had died. That was not a world I wanted to live in. Because of the
inheritances from my best friend, Harry Potter, and Draco also gifting me the bridal vault, I was wealthy enough to convince the Goblins to release a vault I could access in another time. But to claim it, I had to be adopted by the name. That name was Slytherin. To protect me in the past, Draco adopted me because of the protections on the Malfoy name. That is why young Hermione who is still in Hogwarts cannot marry Draco. They are magically siblings and she would be able to walk through your blood wards without invitation, just as I have done in the past." Hermione said as she began stroking the leaves. Abraxas was nodding along as if this was just a recap for him, but Lucius looked upset.

"He will be crushed! I'm pretty sure he loves her."

"Already?" Hermione snickered, thinking it more likely that Draco would like to have a go at her. Feelings, if there were any, would have grown over several years. Not in a matter of weeks. What was Lucius reading these days? Love at first sight romance novels? She could barely contain her laugh as she imagined a proud and slightly pompous Lucius Malfoy reading the naughty bits with a huge prudish blush. "You need to discourage this, obviously."

"Discouragement will not be enough," He insisted.

"Then why don't you pay a visit to her parents and tell them she has been adopted into your family and that she and they are welcome at the Manor any time for any reason. Then tell the young ones. This way they can grow their friendship without the thought of anything more. Do it now, while they are still reasonably young."

"That is a wonderful idea!" Abraxas said. "I always wanted a granddaughter, and what better granddaughter would there be other than the great Hermione Grindelwald, herself?"

Lucius rolled his eyes. "So, Cissy and I are supposed to, what? Treat her like our daughter?"

"If you are comfortable with that," she said. It wasn't a bad idea, but it would have to be their decision. Perhaps, she should take the young Hermione aside and do for her what she had done for Tom. Then again, she didn't want to burden the young girl. Hermione Granger should have a normal childhood. She doubted Lucius wouldn't act on the information she had given him anyway. In fact, she would eat her wand if Lucius didn't write to his son straight away after returning to the Manor.

"A Malfoy in Gryffindor? Preposterous!" He made a choking sound before turning and fairly fleeing the mound, leaving Hermione and Abraxas alone chuckling.

"He will calm down in time," Hermione said. "They always do,"

"He is probably disappointed now that he knows Hermione Granger is you and that she can't actually marry Draco," Abraxas said, hands clasped behind his back. "After all, I would be,"

"Pish posh," she said sniffing the leaves.

Hermione took a small dagger out of her beaded bag and pierced the skin of her finger, rubbing the life-giving liquid on the bark in the same way she had done in order to time travel. She didn't know if it made a difference, but what if it did? Either way, she was grateful and remorseful.

Once her blood was spread out on the tree that would one day become an Ent, she bowed her head and tried to communicate all the positive things that had happened because of her journey.

First and foremost was Lily and James Potter and their two children, Harry and Genevieve, that lived in the Potter Cottage of Godric's Hollow. James was still an Auror in this time, though his specialty was event planning. He was the one responsible for the security that surrounded quidditch matches,
concert halls, and anything else that called for a large magical population to gather. Lily stayed home for the children, but once Genevieve went off to Hogwarts, she fully intended on joining Hermione in the museum.

Sirius and Regulus both ended up in Gryffindor this time around. Sirius was still single and planned on playing the field until he dropped dead, she supposed, which suited the now middle-aged Auror. Regulus, on the other hand, had married Marian Lovegood, Xenophilius' sister- A sister that he hadn't had in Hermione's time- and had three boys. Two of which were still at Hogwarts.

Remus Lupin was never bitten by Fenrir as a child. That had truly shocked her. Instead, he became a healer at St Mungos. The werewolf reforms that Hermione helped put in place when she first joined the Wizengamot enabled a more informed public, as a result, Fenrir didn't have that deep hatred and resentment of wizard-kind. Though he was a werewolf, he worked on a conservatorship in Russia, assisting the Potion Masters with the continued development of the Wolfsbane Potion. Peter never betrayed his friends and went on to become one of the Minister of Magic's junior assistants. He was often seen with his mates, James, Sirius, and Remus. Some friendships were just meant to be.

As a result of the Death Eaters never being created, the very small faction of blood purists left were fading away in the onslaught of Hermione's reforms. The only ones who still fought against her in the Wizengamot were the older generation. The benefits of equality far outweighed the need for purism, and it wasn't so hard on the pockets either.

Severus Snape was another surprise. Without the horrendous hate between houses, Snape enjoyed a continuing friendship with Lily Potter. In the first war, he had reached the level of Potions Master by receiving a sponsorship from Voldemort. This time around, Hermione was his sponsor. The moment Snape showed an interest in becoming a Potion's Master, she was quick to offer a scholarship. He was one of the very few to have sponsorship after only completing his O.W.L.s and she assumed it helped him feel accepted. He was as gifted as he was in her past but this time, he was not a professor at Hogwarts, nor did he have any desire to become one. She fully supported that.

Hermione was pulled out of her silent recount by Abraxas' light cough.

"I do have one question though," he said.

"Hm?"

"What is a Smurg?"

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