Lollies and Loki

by cheshire_carroll

Summary

Hermione Granger is seven years old when she kneels in front of an altar she's made herself with an offering of the best sweets her pocket money could buy and prays to a Trickster God.

Gabriel hears.
Once upon a time, in one particular universe or dimension or whatever you choose to call it, Hermione Jane Granger was not born an only child, but in fact had an older sister.

Clytemnestra Jill Granger was nine years older then Hermione, but just as quiet and bookish and clever. The two girls were remarkably similar in appearance, with the same untameable hair and slightly too-long front teeth, though Ness– as Clytemnestra preferred to be called, having being saddled with an even more obscure, unpronounceable Greek name then her younger sister– had their father's darker hair, closer to mahogany then Hermione's chestnut curls.

Despite the age difference between the girls, Ness loved her baby sister (as she persistently called Hermione, despite the maturity the younger girl's extremely high IQ lent her) and Hermione practically worshipped her sister. Hermione was a lonely child; she had no friends and she was bullied almost relentlessly by her peers. Ness was everything to her– absolutely everything.

But if Hermione was bullied by her schoolmates, then Ness could be considered downright tortured by hers. She was a gentle, soft-spoken girl by nature who'd had the misfortune of developing earlier then her classmates, leaving her with the sort of eye-catching curves that most teenage girls would literally sell their souls for. And she was tormented for it by her peers, with boys constantly making lewd comments and gestures. And the girls were even worse, as hard as that could be to believe– her homework, lunch and belongings would be stolen and thrown into dumpsters or flushed in the loos, the locker-room was hellish as her bra would be ripped from her hands, and sometimes the girls would even go so far as to gang up on her and physically hit, scratch and kick her. More then once she’d had to hide in the bathrooms for hours on end.

Ness was so isolated and so tormented that when she reached her breaking point, intellectually Hermione couldn't even be surprised. A terrible 'prank' had gone horrifically wrong. Ness had been cornered by a group of bullies after school, forcibly stripped bare and tied to one of the football poles. One of the bullies had then rung Richard and Helen Granger and told them that Ness was spending the night at her place. When a hysterical Hermione had tried to convince her parents otherwise, knowing deep down that her sister wasn't safe, Richard and Helen had been too excited about their eldest finally making friends to see Hermione's desperate pleas as anything other then a little girl being afraid to lose her sister as her best friend.

Hermione didn't sleep a wink and Ness spent the entire night tied to that pole, as bare as the day she'd been born. It was a freezing London night and Ness almost died. She was unconscious when the school's groundskeeper had arrived and found her, a small mercy. The school nurse rang an ambulance and Ness was treated in hospital for severe hypothermia. She was discharged after only a few days with a clean bill of health, but something had been damaged irreparably inside her. She never named the bullies responsible for her ordeal, never fully disclosed to anyone the horrors she had suffered that night, and instead seemed to fade into herself more and more every day, until the horrific evening when Hermione was seized with the sudden, paralysing knowledge that something was terribly, terribly wrong.
Determined not to fail her beloved sister again, Hermione followed the pull in her chest to the upstairs bathroom. She banged her small fists desperately against the locked door until something inside her seemed to explode out, reducing part of the door to splinters. But even as she half-fell inside the bathroom, it was already clear that she was too late.

The water of the bath was a deep, murky red and Ness was as white as the crimson-splattered tiles on the floor, the kitchen knife she'd used to carve into her own wrists dropped on the floor beside the tub.

Hermione's memory of what happened next was blurred. The only thing that really stuck out was when she'd fallen into the tub while desperately trying to pull Ness out and, in the confusion of Richard trying to get both girls out of the bath, she ended up getting her head pushed under.

The lukewarm bathwater tasted of rust and copper and death, and no amount of brushing her teeth or chugging mouthwash would rinse it away.

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After the funeral, Helen and Richard decide to move away from the area. It was while helping to pack Ness's room into boxes that Hermione came across Ness's collection of Ancient Greek legends. Ness had loved those old legends—both sisters had been named after characters from them, after all; Hermione for the daughter of Helen of Troy, and Ness for Clytemnestra, sister of Helen of Troy. After a moment of hesitation, Hermione decided to pack the books in her own bag, instead of boxing them away with the rest of things to be kept in storage.

Hermione wasn't expected to start attending her new school straight away after the move, and instead she sat down with Ness's books and devoured them with a single-minded focus that frightened her parents, but she didn't even notice. Once she finished the ones she already had, she started collecting more, reading every single story or poem or play related to Ancient Greek legends that she could get her hands on.

Out of all of them, the story of Clytemnestra would always be her favourite. Maybe (most definitely) she was biased, but Hermione couldn't help but adore the legend of the Queen from Ancient Greece. When Clytemnestra's husband Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter in order to get a fair wind to Troy, did she sit quietly by? No, of course she didn't! She took over his throne, found herself a new lover and when the scum finally returned home a decade later, she murdered him in his bathtub with an axe.

The thought of blood diluted water made her feel sick, made her eyes sting with tears, but Hermione decided then and there that she would be as clever, determined, tough as nails and ruthless as the tragic heroine Clytemnestra was—both the one from Ancient Greek legend and her own dearly beloved sister.

Eventually, for she wouldn't be Hermione if she didn't, she got curious about the mythology behind the characters and started researching Ancient Greek mythology in the local library. The Olympian gods and goddesses were, of course, a huge part of the Ancient Greek mythology and when she stumbled upon Hermes, well, he was instantly one of her favorites. At first because of his name (she was only seven) but the more she read about him, the more interested she became. Because it was reading about Hermes that Hermione first came across the term 'Trickster God'.

Hermes was labeled as a Trickster in several myths and Trickster gods were, in her humble opinion, simply brilliant.

There was a part of Hermione, a part she tried to muffle with the literature she immersed herself in
every waking hour of the day (much to the ongoing concern of her parents) that was stuck in an unending scream of rage and loss that echoed around in the back of her skull, half-ignored and half-drowned out by the knowledge she desperately consumed to make it stop hurting please stop hurting.

Her sorrow was a flayed wound to her heart, to her very soul, that had yet to stop bleeding. And when she was forced to bed by her mother or father each evening, left without any way to distract herself, she was so angry, filled with such a helpless, raging hatred, that she felt paralyzed, her bitter, grief-filled tears soaking her pillow right through, night after night.

She knew, deep in her heart, that she would never fully get over the loss of her sister. It would always hurt, always, but one day she would at least find a measure of peace with the fact Ness was gone and she wasn't ever coming back. What Hermione could never get over, that had her rage burning just as hot and bright inside her as the day she'd broken a door and found her sister dead in their bathroom, was the fact that the awful, horrible, wretched filth of the earth that hurt her sister so badly, that drove her to the point where she took her own life to escape them and the suffering they'd caused her, were never punished.

Tricksters, according to all the mythology she had uncovered about them, punished those who had done wrong—usually with a certain sense of humor about it, like deadly pranks.

Pranks... that word stoked the rage inside her like nothing else. People had called tying her sister to that football pole a prank. Ness had almost died. Those bullies had almost killed her. And even though it had been Ness's own hand that took her life, Hermione knew exactly who was really responsible. Ness had never gotten her justice, never, and it was killing Hermione inside.

Hermione spent three weeks barely sleeping, barely eating, devouring every single book she could find that even so much as mentioned tricksters, not limiting herself to just Greek mythology. She found the name of every trickster even so much as vaguely alluded to in a text, then researched everything about them possible. She actually passed out three times from a combination of lack of food, water and sleep, and her parents start whispering to each other about sending her to live with relatives, or perhaps scheduling a visit to a child psychologist. Hermione ignored all of that, though, because she'd finally found her candidate.

Because the thing was, Hermione believed. She knew Santa wasn't real, nor the tooth fairy or the Easter bunny or any of those silly, childish traditions her parents had never participated in. But Hermione believed in something that science couldn't explain, because the tug in her chest that had warned her when Ness was in danger, that rush of something that had flooded her body that horrible night had let her reduce part of the door blocking her from Ness to splinters, and that? That couldn't be explained by the laws of science. And if that was true, then why couldn't Tricksters exist, when there was such a rich history, such a wealth of information going back over a thousand years, on them?

And maybe (very, very likely) a large portion of her belief came from her sheer, utter desperation to right the terrible wrong that had been delivered upon her sister. It was also very possible her belief was contributed to by her young age and the turmoil of both her discovery of science defying abilities and the death of the person closest to her in the entire world, but belief born from desperation, from the innocence of youth and from despair, was still belief. Hermione believed and belief had power.

Out of all the beings she had researched for this, the Trickster Hermione had chosen to petition to was Loki. Not only was he one of the most interesting, but he also seemed to be one of the most powerful and one that was (hopefully) less likely to turn on her afterward.
By this point she could recite several different rituals entreatings to Tricksters by heart in several different languages, she knew how to create an altar (in theory, at least) and how to supply an offering. Hermione was ready to put her knowledge to action.

She found a candle in a drawer in the kitchen cabinet, a big, fat white one that she thought might have been a present to her mother at some point. She emptied her moneybox and spent all thirty-two pounds buying the most expensive chocolate she could. She laid a lock of her sister's hair and a photograph of Ness next to the candle, beside the offering. There'd been a small obituary for Ness in the local paper and she'd carefully cut out a copy of it to lay with the photograph, as well as the neatly folded nightie she'd been wearing that horrid night. Hermione had hidden it from her parents as it was stained by the now-dried blood that had soaked through the material to her skin when she had fallen into the bath on top of Ness as she desperately tried to get her big sister to please wake up please don't leave me please be okay don't die don't die please I love you don't leave me alone—

Hermione was seven years old and it had been two months since her sister had died when she lit the candle on her homemade altar, knelt down in front of it, bowed her head and prayed to Loki. And he heard.
Chapter 2

Gabriel did not receive many prayers these days. Well, not to Loki; there was always a steady stream of prayers to the Messenger of God, humans being clueless to the fact he'd basically done the angelic-equivalent of running away from home ages ago. But it wasn't like he actually listened to any of those prayers. Mostly. There was the occasional truly desperate prayer that he'd answer but those were more the type where Loki could deliver some just desserts, so they probably didn't count (being an angel was boring anyway—pagans had so much more fun).

Most of the prayers directed to Loki these days were from eccentric Wiccans, the odd hunter every now and then, an occasional demon-witch (they tended to end up very dead when he got a look at their disgusting souls), the rare demon (who he disliked even more then demon-witches and so ended up even deader), rebellious teenagers wanting vengeance rained down upon their classmates or parents or siblings, one of his fellow gods or goddesses or—very, very, very rarely—someone who was desperate enough for the delivery of justice or punishment that they either actually managed to convince themselves Tricksters could exist to deliver it or they just had nothing else left to believe in.

The prayer he was receiving, the one aimed at Loki, was definitely from a human yet it was startlingly strong in both its absolute conviction in the belief that he existed— a hunter, maybe?—and bizarrely pure, despite the grief-rage-hatred-hatred burning through the words.

It was an old ritual that took him a moment to recognize— the pronunciation of old Norse was very nearly flawless which made him wonder if it was some sort of academic studying Norse pantheons, one who had perhaps stumbled across some evidence during their studies that made them believe 'Loki' was more than just a myth.

Well, there was no point in wondering when he could just go straight to the source, he decided cheerfully. Focusing on where he could feel the altar (he had to commend the thoroughness of his possible future disciple) he transported himself to it, careful to make himself invisible to the room's occupants and to scan first for any sort of trap— he couldn't see any— before turning to his maybe-new worshipper. And then he almost became visible again in pure shock.

A tiny slip of a girl, probably not even fifty pounds soaking wet, was kneeling before a small, homemade altar. She had a head of the craziest curls he'd ever seen— they were literally pure chaos and the part of him that thrived on chaos wanted to tangle his fingers in them, but that was probably bordering on the Bad Touch zone, because had he mentioned that the kid looked like she was in preschool?

Wide-eyed, Gabriel scanned the room again. It was a child's bedroom, very bereft of toys but absolutely cluttered with mythology books seemingly piled on every surface and the floors, as well as a large selection of Greek tragedies that he was pretty sure she was supposed to be too young to actually understand.

Crossing over to the small, child-sized desk he quietly flipped open the spiral notebook sitting on top of one of the book stacks and came across a very long list of Tricksters that Gabriel doubted even he could have named off the top of his head, it was just that thorough. Continuing to flick through the notebook, his disbelief grew with each new page that revealed detailed, handwritten entries on each of the Tricksters, including their strengths, weaknesses, references to particular myths, legends and plays they were present in, references to academic papers written about said myths, legends and plays and her own shockingly detailed character analysis on each of them.
It... it was almost a bit disturbing, actually, but Gabriel was impressed (something not easy to achieve) by the sheer level of effort and detail the girl had put into her research; she certainly hadn't gone summoning him all half-cocked like most rebellious teenagers seeking some sort of lame vengeance for some petty perceived wrong did. Also, Gabriel found himself experiencing a great deal of smugness that out of pretty much all the Tricksters out there, she had chosen him.

Putting the notebook back in its place, Gabriel walked over to the homemade altar and crouched beside the girl whose head was still bowed. She wasn't praying anymore, but she seemed comfortable kneeling in front of the altar she had created.

Curious as to what had driven the little girl to the extreme measures she'd taken, Gabriel shed his Trickster disguise just enough to let out a smidgen of the Archangel he really was peek through to allow him to see the souls of those around him. His eyes then widened again in surprise at the newly revealed soul before him.

If a soul could cry then this soul would be weeping a never-ending ocean of tears. Hermione Jane Granger, like most young children, had a Pure soul, but where most kids had souls that were still whole and largely undamaged by their life experiences, Hermione's had been marred by her overwhelming grief and rage. There would likely always be a scar across her soul's brilliance, but Gabriel personally thought it would look all the better for it.

Perfection was just so boring and he'd always had a thing for the pretty, broken ones, the survivors (and he meant that in a very not-creepy way– he had a thing for jack russels too and that didn't mean he wanted to do sick things to them either).

Turning away from the beautiful, wounded soul of Hermione Granger, Gabriel focused his attention, at last, to the altar. A plain white candle burned steadily and to one side of it there was a stack of surprisingly good quality chocolate– he definitely approved of the offering– and on the other side... the reason she was praying to him, the reason that she was petitioning to a Trickster god.

Gabriel only had to open his mind, to tune into the pagan powers he'd crafted around himself and brush his invisible fingers against the items provided to let the information flow in. He then had to bite back the urge to start smiting things as the tragic tale of Clytemnestra "Ness" Jill Granger unfolded, playing out in his mind. The photo, the hair, the newspaper clipping... and a child's nightgown, light purple with silver bows, the soft fabric now permanently stained rust-red.

As Gabriel touched the nightgown he saw through Hermione's eyes the night that the young girl found her sister's body. He saw how she made part of the door explode under her frantic fists, how she fell into red soaked water while trying to pull her sister out of the tub, how she tangled her limbs with Clytemnestra's so desperately that her face ended up under the water's surface as her father tried pulling his two daughters out and she ended up with a mouthful of her dead sister's blood.

Gabriel yanked his hand back, reeling. Despite not needing to breathe, his lungs felt bizarrely tight. It was hardly the most awful thing he'd seen– far from it, actually; World War II in particular had showed him just how despicably, disgustingly cruel humans could be to each other– but something about it was resonating with him, rattling through him. Perhaps it was witnessing it so viscerally through Hermione's eyes that had affected him?

Oh, he realised, and was hit with the sudden urge to face-palm. Right. He was an idiot, wasn't he? Of course he'd feel it so strongly– this little girl, this beautiful, broken little soul, was one of his. Hermione Granger had pledged herself to him, had vowed her servitude in exchange for him doing what he did best– delivering Just Desserts. It had been centuries since he'd had a true disciple, the

Well, he didn't intend to disappoint.

Gabriel knelt beside the girl again and gently touched her forehead with the tip of his finger. Sleep he urged, catching the small child as her eyes closed and she bonelessly slumped forwards. He could have transported her to her bed with a click of his fingers but instead he lifted her up and held her in his arms, carrying her over to the bed. She was one of his now, or she would be when he fulfilled her petition, and Gabriel took care of what was his. He carefully tucked her in, allowing himself to pet her chaotic curls as he did so, and used just enough grace on the child to ensure she would have nothing but sweet dreams.

Turning back to the altar, Gabriel clicked his fingers, making the chocolate vanish back to his current house and replacing the candle with one that was identical but with wax that wouldn't melt and accidentally burn down her house. He hesitated over the four items she'd provided and ended up only taking the obituary, wanting to leave his little worshipper with the kinder of her mementos. After another moment of hesitation, he removed all the blood from the nightgown and used a brief flare of grace to purify it.

He was about to depart when he realised he'd almost forgot to leave his signature behind and clicked his fingers, making a scatter of colourful Hershey wrappers appear beside the altar, as well as creating a small pile of lollies to leave on her pillow.

Satisfied (for now, at least– he hadn't forgotten the exploding door), Gabriel stretched his six wings and prepared to go weed out every person responsible for the suffering of Clytemnestra Granger and make them pay.

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Hermione woke up confused and disorientated. She was still in her clothes but she was somehow lying down horizontal on her bed, despite the last thing she remembered was kneeling by the altar and feeling oddly at peace for the first time since that night... and were those lollies on her pillow, close enough to her face they were almost touching her nose?

She sat bolt upright, staring wide-eyed at the colorful candy piled neatly next to where her head had been, somehow all of them still in their precarious position despite the jolting of the mattress that her movements had caused. Still wide-eyed, Hermione turned to her altar and almost fell out of her bed in her shock.

The chocolate offerings were gone! They were actually gone! And there were candy wrappers left behind– and the newspaper clipping had had vanished– and– and– and– her heart stuttered a little as she saw her nightie had not only been cleaned of the dried blood but looked just as it had when her mother had first bought it for her.

Her legs felt too shaky to hold her up so Hermione remained sitting on the bed, her heart swelling with more emotions then she could name. Tears blurred her vision and she hiccupped back sobs as she brought her hands together, bowing over in the direction of her altar.

'Thank you, Loki'
Chapter 3

Local High School Rocked By Series Of Scandals!

Community Left Shocked and Appalled!

High School Football Team Drug Scheme Exposed!

'High School Hookers; Pimping for Pocket-money'

Underage Teenage Schoolgirls Arrested For Prostitution!

Hermione smoothed her small fingers over the latest neatly cut out newspaper article she had glued to a page of her new notebook. It was the most recent of a series of articles that had been appearing randomly over her room throughout the past week, always accompanied by a lolly of some sort and an American chocolate called a 'Hershey Bar'.

From the articles it was clear that Loki had been very busy the past week and the thought brought a small but genuine smile of fierce satisfaction to her face.

Personally, her favourite "prank" so far had been the school-wide food poisoning that had afflicted both students and teachers alike when the lunch the cafeteria served up was 'mysteriously' tainted. Countless people had suffered from sudden explosive diarrhoea in the school hallways as they desperately tried and failed to make it to the already over-occupied bathrooms.

Flicking through the scrapbook she'd made out of the articles detailing the suffering of her sister's tormenters and all those who'd just watched on and done nothing was very satisfying. It didn't lessen her grief; that pain still felt as fresh and agonising as a blunt knife forcing its way between her ribs and jamming into her heart, but it was a balm to her soul to know that justice was being served.

It just hurt that for Ness justice had come too late.

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Gabriel was curious. It was probably a flaw of his— that, and his impatience— but it didn't bother him. He was a creature of hedonistic impulses and he was more then fine with that. He'd had a long time to come to terms with who he was (literal eons).

So yes, he was curious. The odd, precocious little girl with the pretty, broken soul was still making offerings to him but she hadn't made another request. Just regular offerings and the odd prayer of thanks when he delivered another newspaper article to her room to keep her up to date on how he'd been dealing with the bullies that had driven her older sister, little Hermione's best— and only— friend, to suicide.

It was downright bewildering to him.

In the past, especially with younger worshippers, when he actually answered their prayers and they realised he was 'really real', they'd start making more and more requests, all the same sort of things; get so-and-so to fall in love with me, let me win the lottery, let me get that promotion, etc. It always annoyed him, which was why he rarely responded to prayers the past century or so. Humans had had so much more respect for their gods back in the old days; they'd never have even dreamed of bothering him with such petty demands. So far Hermione Granger hadn't bothered him
with a single petty demand either. And it made him curious.

Well, that and the fact that despite her appearing to be fully human, she possessed a degree of supernatural power. Some sort of precognition, he assumed, from the panicked way she'd run for the bathroom in the memory; there had been no outward indication of danger, yet Hermione had been utterly desperate even before she'd encountered the locked door— which she'd then proceeded to explode a good chunk of to get into the bathroom.

Her parents had blamed it on shoddy workmanship— the way adults were determined to turn a blind eye to the supernatural, to justify what they saw and explain it away, was always so disappointing. And, he would admit, amusing. The creativity and imagination involved in making a mundane explanation for a supernatural occurrence was surprisingly high. But Gabriel knew that the workmanship of the bathroom door had had nothing to do with the way the wood splintered and gave way under Hermione's desperate hands.

So, precognition and a form of telekinesis perhaps? He'd have thought she might be one of the so-called 'special' children chosen by Azazel to conceal which one was Lucifer's vessel; the only child who was, in fact, really special. Except Hermione was about six and a half years too old for that, all the 'special' children were Americans who couldn't even sit up by themselves yet, and he'd looked at her soul long enough to say with complete confidence that there was no trace of any demon– or Fallen angel– blood in her.

Her abilities, though... something about them was familiar. He was certain he'd seen something similar centuries ago, somewhere around 900 AD. There'd been a small group of humans back then who'd followed what they'd called the 'Old Religion', a religion that had worshipped Hecate, though she'd gone by something else around then. In return for their worship, Hecate had gifted her followers with the limited ability to channel and shape the magic bound to the very fabric of the world.

Like most religions back then, the Old Religion had involved a number of human sacrifices. He'd never liked that, so he'd have probably ignored them if a group of their High Priests and Priestesses hadn't once managed to not only summon but control a monster from Purgatory. Raphael had actually come down from Heaven for the first time since zir had searched the Earth when Gabriel had disappeared to deal with the monster. Gabriel had considered smiting all the followers after but he hadn't wanted to draw attention to himself in case there were angels assigned to watch them in order to prevent Purgatory been breached again.

Other then that, he personally hadn't had too much to do with them— they'd worshipped Hecate and that particular goddess had always been a touch too knowing around him, especially when in her crone form, and it made him uneasy to be in the same vicinity as her–but about eighty or so years after the Purgatory incident he'd thought to check in on them again. He'd been both bored and curious enough to actually make contact that time and had created some very fun memories with one of the High Priestesses for his troubles; she'd been beautiful and cunning, all dark curls, clever eyes, sensuous curves and red-painted lips always curved into a wicked, wicked smirk.

Her skill with magic had been impressive for a human, he remembered fondly; she'd possessed precognition, telekinesis and a number of psychic abilities. If she hadn't been so devout in her worship of Hecate, she might have been elevated to godhood herself. Morgana's name had become legend, after all, along with that of her lover. Now there was another one who'd been fun; Merlin had been excellent in bed, if a tad skinnier then what Gabriel usually went for. He'd been a bit of a beanstalk, that one. And hopelessly in love with that oblivious king of his, too. He pitied the kid; love truly was a terrible burden, something Gabriel knew quite well– love had never brought him anything but pain, crushing disappointment and heartbreak.
Forcibly removing himself from the sudden depressing turn his musings had taken, Gabriel turned his concentration back to the matter at hand. Hermione wasn't one of Hecate's— or at least she didn't worship Hecate. Not only was there no shrine to the goddess anywhere, but he wouldn't have been able to claim her as Loki's if she did.

He supposed she might be the very distant descendant of one of Hecate's old worshippers. The idea of that being the case, he would admit, annoyed him. Deeply. He wasn't the sharing type and he'd never been the sort of god that had a large following. Gabriel hadn't cared about that, as unlike other pagan gods and goddesses he hadn't needed the power that the worship of their followers gave them. It did mean, however, that the few true worshippers that were his he did not share.

'Sharing' was a human concept, not one understood by the gods or by archangels— what was his was his alone, and Hermione was his; he had laid his claim over her when he accepted her offerings and she prayed at his altar. That claim had been sealed he'd fulfilled the petition she'd made to him and she had, in return, pledged her worship. She was his, and he would not share her with Hecate.

Gabriel frowned, thinking. If he didn't want Hecate to get her grubby paws on his little disciple he supposed he could always supply the child with the materials she'd need to learn magic himself. Of course, he'd actually need to know how her magic worked to do that.

If he could confirm that she was a descendant of Hecate's gifted lot, he could always go ask Morgana help. It had been a long time since he'd done any time travelling and going a thousand years back was certainly pushing it but he was an archangel and he'd manage. He hadn't been doing anything too taxing when it came to his grace for the past decade or so— delivering just desserts to assholes was fun but unless he was being especially creative it didn't require much except imagination. Dealing with the latest lot certainly hadn't been strenuous— ruining the lives of several horrible teenagers and punishing all the others who'd turned a blind eye to Clytemnestra's suffering had taken the equivalent of about a teaspoon's worth out of his ocean of grace.

He'd have to stay and recharge a bit after he arrived, but spending time with Morgana and Merlin— and even that idiot Arthur— hadn't been a hardship back then. And this was where he'd usually crack a joke about other things certainly being hard, but he was a bit too preoccupied sulking about the fact Hecate might have some sort of prior claim over his only worthwhile worshipper in the last forty-something years. He blamed those comic books printed in the 1930's— they were annoyingly popular and had turned him into a villain.

If he really had been Loki, and needed the worship to power himself like the other pagan gods whose powers had been losing more and more strength as centuries passed, he'd have been very frustrated about this— as it was, he was still fairly annoyed by Marvel. Not enough to kill those responsible for the Loki character that had pretty much ruined his reputation, but at one point the authors and illustrators involved had suffered a string of what appeared to be inexplicably bad luck— he never claimed not to be petty. Just not unreasonably so.

There was still the odd human who prayed to Loki, even some who set out offerings, but most did it because it was a fad going on at the time, not because they really believed. Those who did were rare, and Hermione was one of them. She'd believed in him before he'd even accepted the offerings she'd laid out. It could be because she was a child, and they believed in bizarre things like rabbits who hid chocolates shaped like chicken eggs in their yard, but he remembered the notebook he'd flipped through. She'd done research into him and the other Tricksters, real research. She truly believed in him, in them all, and judging by all the mythology books about her room she had been unbelievably thorough about investigating them.
...actually, come to think of it, he hoped she hadn't been too thorough; there was some very embarrassing stuff in some of those myths. Oh Dad, the horse! Did humans still talk about the horse? Fuck, he hoped not. And it was so unfair, really—nobody seemed to give Zeus shit for turning into animals to go get laid. He does it one time and suddenly it's all anyone can think about. Gabriel's pretty sure his Father had something to do with that. Probably punishment for running away from home and becoming a pagan (and fucking a horse, though to be fair he was also a horse at the time).

Flying the now-familiar route to Hermione's house, Gabriel cloaked himself in invisibility before appearing in her bedroom. It was past midnight and he'd expected her to be asleep, but she was still wide-awake, sitting at her desk, sock-clad feet up on the chair and her skinny knees tucked under her chin. There was a notebook in front of her, different to the one filled with information on Tricksters. Peering over her shoulder he almost started laughing when he realised she'd glued the newspaper articles he'd been leaving for her in it. A scrapbook of Just Desserts. Maybe he should start making his own, for some of his more creative punishments? Could be fun when he needed a laugh.

Gabriel didn't feel much like laughing, however, when he got a good look at the ghostly-pale child. Her wild, curly, chaotic hair was frizzy and unkempt, her cheeks had a hollowness to them and lavender bruises painted shadows under eyes that were pink and puffy from tears. Her bony shoulders were drooped in an exhausted slump but she didn't seem like she was about to head to bed any time soon. Nightmares, he guessed— it would explain the recent crying and perusal of the revenge articles.

Her sister's death had hit her hard and if anyone could understand that it was him. Gabriel had felt the pain of the loss of his siblings right through to his very grace and he still ached for those he'd left behind when he'd abandoned Heaven.

And he knew, he knew, he wasn't supposed to have favorites, not really, but he had had favourites (and still did)— three very specific favorites, to be exact. The four of them had existed together from the very beginning— he, Raphael, Lucifer and Michael; they were the pillars of Heaven, those who stood first in His presence, and Lucifer's Fall had ripped them apart.

Sighing softly, Gabriel let his grace reach out and brush against the small girl. As she immediately slumped in place, fast asleep, he lifted her and carried her to her bed once more. After tucking her under her thick blanket, Gabriel let his grace reach out again, this time to soothe her and protect her from nightmares. When Hermione dreamed tonight, she'd dream only of peace.

Even fast asleep, Gabriel could see her relax and he felt something warm inside him. He knew he wasn't good. He was so far removed from who he should be that he was surprised that he hadn't Fallen yet. He wasn't a kind being; he was powerful and terrifying and even though he'd never asked for it, terrible things had been done in his name. Beyond that, he was cruel and selfish and hedonistic, and most of the time he enjoyed it.

Gabriel wasn't sure he even knew how to be an angel anymore. Worse then that, even more utterly unthinkable, was that it didn't even bother him.

Lucifer had Fallen for less, but the difference between them, between himself and his bright, beautiful, shining older sibling, were the moments like this. Gabriel had done the one thing Lucifer had Fallen because he refused to do; love humanity.

And looking at the small, sleeping child before him, Gabriel knew instinctively, deep down in the grace he mostly kept buried away inside him, that for as long as he continued to love these strange but impressive creatures, he would not Fall.
Gently laying his palm against Hermione's forehead, his fingers curving over the top of her scalp, Gabriel concentrated, searching for the feel of Hecate's power; he might not have liked the goddess, but the time he'd spent with Morgana and Merlin meant he'd certainly gotten familiar enough with what her power felt like. It only took a moment to isolate and he scowled as his suspicions were confirmed. It was a lot weaker then Morgana and Merlin's had been, diluted over the past thousand years, but there was definitely a taste of Hecate's brand of power in her. It was very irritating. His first real worshipper in nearly half a century and another pagan already had a potential prior claim over her.

That, Gabriel decided, would not do. Removing Hecate's power from Hermione wouldn't be too difficult– it was diluted, its hold on her weak. It wouldn't be able to stand up against his power, and it would cause Hermione very little, if any, discomfort to remove it.

It didn't feel right, though, to do that to her. The magic was part of Hermione; she'd grown up with it and she'd surely notice its absence. He supposed it couldn't be that hard to replace Hecate's power with his own, to copy what the pagan goddess had done all those years ago to her devotees. Well, for 'Loki', sure, it would probably be difficult, if not downright impossible. But while he might have run away from home, Gabriel was still an archangel with all of Heaven's might at his disposal. He could count the number of beings in this universe more powerful then he was on one hand. Well, on one human hand– things became infinitely more complicated once he started talking True Forms.

Gabriel was now even more inclined then before to travel back in time to visit Merlin and Morgana, to study the blessing Hecate had woven over them. They were both powerful enough that the goddess had likely been personally involved, instead of their magic being something that had been passed down to them. Once he'd untangled exactly how the goddess had done it, he'd remove her power from Hermione and replace it with his own.

Pleased with his plan, Gabriel clicked his fingers, conjuring a large pile of jellybeans to leave on Hermione's pillow. He then flew to the site of the birth of Jesus Christ– cute kid that one, and Mary had had a nice right hook to her; she hadn't been impressed at all by him showing up out of nowhere to tell her she was up the duff.

While Gabriel knew he had enough 'mojo' to make the trip, he'd rather not end up completely wiped out once he reached his destination and he didn't want to have to tap into Heaven for back up. The holy ground would give him the extra boost he needed to avoid that unpleasantness.

He'd have preferred leaving his vessel behind, as taking it with him would be an extra hassle, but being in his True Form would be yet another way to light up a giant flashing beacon to announce his presence. The first few centuries after ditching Heaven he hadn't even dared use his wings, and he'd still be using more grace then he was strictly comfortable with for this little trip.

It was with a fair amount of reluctance that Gabriel released enough of his tightly reigned in grace that the limitations of human- and pagan god- perception no longer distorted his vision. It only took him a moment to adjust to being able to perceive every molecule that made up the planet his vessel was standing on. Locating the unending stream of time amongst the many realms and planes of existence now visible to him, all layered on top of each other like a collage, was now simple; everything in existence was connected and, ultimately, time was the only true measure of existence– time was everywhere and everything, a never ending infinity.

Gabriel let himself move from the earthly plane of existence he was currently occupying and into the next, using grace to keep all the individual molecules that made up his vessel from destabilizing to the point of disintegration, and let himself step into the infinitely moving
continuum of time where he spread open his three pairs of wings and flew.
Chapter 4

Reuniting with Morgana on the Enchanted Isle- the island the woman practically ruled, populated as it was with disciples of the Old Religion- had been, much as Gabriel had anticipated, a true delight. The High Priestess had welcomed him warmly and hours later, once she had fallen into an exhausted slumber following said warm welcoming– one of the many, many benefits to phenomenal cosmic powers was no refractory period– Gabriel used his grace to keep her asleep while he studied just how Hecate had gifted her with her magic until he was confident he could replicate the effect.

Needing time to recharge before travelling through time again, and not in a hurry because he would be returning to the exact point that he left, Gabriel stayed with Morgana on the Enchanted Isle for a few days. On one of the few occasions when they weren't making good use of her bed, Gabriel explained to Morgana the situation with his little disciple– well, he explained a highly edited version of the situation to her that didn't include either time travel or the fact he planned on removing Hecate's magic from Hermione and replacing it with his own.

Morgana was visibly startled and her surprise wasn't unwarranted. The Gabriel of this time had been very firmly entrenched in his role as Loki; like most of the pagan gods and goddesses, he'd had little to no interest in the individual lives of his followers with his own pleasure being the priority. Humans had been sacrificed in his name and he'd done nothing about it, too busy fucking and getting wasted on Asgardian mead in an effort to erase his pain, loneliness and heartbreak to care. He'd been entirely more Loki then Gabriel at this point of his life, so it was only Loki who Morgana was familiar with.

Loki had liked the clever, sly woman, even with Hecate's power tangled around her soul, and he'd never hurt her. He hadn't been particularly kind either, but Morgana wasn't the sort of woman who wanted to be pandered to; she was all teeth and nails and fight. Men had to earn their place in her bed; she liked to submit but she didn't give her submission to just anyone– they had to be powerful enough to hold her down and take her the way she wanted to be taken, and if they couldn't do that then they were all out of luck.

Really, it wasn't surprising that Merlin was her only other male lover; he was the only man who wasn't a pagan god or a humanoid supernatural creature powerful enough to overcome her.

Morgana also happened to be very amoral, which meant she'd never judged any of his past actions. Of course, this was a time where the gods and goddesses were above reproach so even Merlin with his overdeveloped sense of morality hadn't had a problem with Loki.

It had taken him over a thousand years, but Gabriel had eventually found enough of his faith in his Father again that he moved on from the person– well, archangel/pagan god– he'd been at this point in time.

(A hundred or so of those years he'd spent tied to a rock with little to do other then reflect on his choices since leaving Heaven, but he did not think about that specific period of time. Ever.)

The only time he'd come close to losing his faith in his Father again and reverting back to Loki had been in the early 1900's when two devastating wars had rocked the entire planet and shocked every single being in existence. Gabriel had been shaken to his core in a way that he hadn't been since Michael had cast Lucifer into the Cage. Poor Hel had been inconsolable, in tears for the first time since she'd cried in his arms after he'd escaped that fucking rock; every reaper, god or goddess involved with the dead had been worked to the bone and yet had still struggled to keep up with the
influx of souls.

He'd questioned how his Father could have ever let something as horrific as what humans had dubbed "World War I and II" happen, how if He really loved humanity He could just let them destroy each other. It had taken Gabriel a long time to look past all the death and the suffering to see the breathtaking examples of humanity that shone through the darkness and brutality of war; to see the bravery of a little girl who hid in a wall with her faith unshaken. The kindness of a Nazi who smuggled a blanket to a dying young man in a death camp. The valor of soldiers who sacrificed their own lives to save complete strangers. The selflessness of the doctors and nurses braving the frontlines to stitch the wounded and dying back together. The gentleness of an old woman who smiled and forgave the young soldier who cried as he took her life. The courage of a child determined not to hate those forcing her to march to her own death and instead be at peace with the world as she left one life for the next. The enemy combatants who, on Christmas Eve, laid down their weapons and for one night shared their food and cigarettes and sang. All of the humans who stood tall and proud for what they believed in, for their faith and for what was right.

Gabriel looked and he saw and finally, finally he understood just why his Father loved humanity, because that was the moment when he fell in love with them too.

But the Loki now didn't love humans, not the way Gabriel did. He would never have cared about one small child, one little human girl too young for any of his usual fleeting interactions with humanity. He supposed it shouldn't have been a surprise when Morgana offered to take Hermione off his hands. The High Priestess even said she'd train her personally, which anyone who knew of Morgana and her reputation would know was a great honor. Hermione must be something special if she'd caught Loki's attention, Morgana had said, with a smile that was softer then her usual ones as she promised to make the girl extraordinary.

If Morgana and Hermione didn't exist a thousand years apart, Gabriel would likely have accepted the offer. Except they did exist a thousand years apart, so that was out of the question.

He couldn't have told Morgana that either, because while pagan gods had a decent amount of power time-travel was definitely beyond them. Instead he'd politely but firmly told the High Priestess that Hermione was one of his and would not be following the Old Religion. Rather then be offended, like he half feared she might– especially on the behalf of her "Triple Goddess"– Morgana had instead gone all thoughtful and told him about Merlin's latest little project, assisting a group of sorcerers and sorceresses with a novel idea they'd thought up.

With the increase in numbers of those with magic, there had been more and more untrained young sorcerers and sorceresses then there were trained ones to take them on as apprentices. Over in Scotland, two sorcerers and two sorceresses had had the idea of creating a school for witchcraft and wizardry. The idea was that instead of a master or mistress taking on a single apprentice to teach all the fields of magic, a trained sorcerer or sorceress would teach a group of students the one specific skillset they excelled in, while another would teach the students their speciality, and so on.

While schools were an everyday occurrence in the time Gabriel had just left, at this point they were far from the norm. Intrigued by what he was hearing, Gabriel expressed his interest to Morgana who gave him the location of the school as well as several books she said might be useful for Hermione.

Bidding the High Priestess a fond farewell, Gabriel left the Enchanted Isle, not bothering to fly, instead using pagan magic to disappear and reappear at the location Morgana had given him, which turned out to be a... castle? Right in the middle of freaking nowhere? Well, right in the middle of the Scottish Highlands, but at this point of time it may as well be the middle of nowhere.
Well, Gabriel mused as he looked at the large castle that was absolutely saturated in Merlin's magic, he had always been a big supporter of the whole 'go big or go home' adage. There was no point in doing something half-assed, after all.

Merlin greeted him with a similar enthusiasm as Morgana– Gabriel did pride himself on being unforgettable, even when he'd been going through his asshole phase. The sorcerer– or 'wizard' as sorcerers were apparently called here, with the females being referred to as 'witches' (and Gabriel was already imagining all the ways that was going to go wrong, what with those who made deals with demons in exchange for powers being referred to as 'witches' too), then introduced him to the four responsible for the school idea.

Helga, Rowena, Salazar and Godric were a good bunch. They were a bit wary– none of them had met a pagan god before, not that that was surprising– but all seemed welcoming enough. Youthful, bright-eyed and idealistic, but with their hearts in the right place. And even better, they didn't worship the Old Religion. If this 'Hogwarts' was still around, a thousand years into the future, Gabriel might even get Hermione enrolled.

He'd definitely come to the right place for advice on the training of a young witch, too– Rowena and Salazar, the more academically inclined of the four, had provided him with a number of duplicates of books they had around on different branches of magic. Once Hermione had decided on which field of magic she'd specialize in they promised to supply even more.

Pleased with their thoroughness and explanations, Gabriel had assisted them in creating wards to protect the castle. With the amount of magic humming through every single stone of the place, he wouldn't be surprised if the castle gained a degree sentience one day.

Once the wards were complete, the magic was tied to what Merlin had called a "wardstone" but Gabriel knew was actually just a bit of rock. He'd noticed Merlin picking it up earlier from a pile of rubble, which gave him the amusing impression that the adorable beanstalk was trying to seem mysteriously powerful and knowledgeable in the eyes of the four younger witches and wizards. The "wardstone" was then hidden in a secret room in the depths of the school that was protected by an extremely complicated, multifaceted and potent spell that meant only Helga, Rowena, Godric, Salazar and whoever they chose to be Headmaster or Headmistress when they retired would be able to access it.

It was, Rowena had explained, an immensely complex charm involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a living soul, a spell that she herself had created. The place with its location protected by the charm was then invisible, intangible, unplottable and soundproof, hidden until the Secret Keeper chose to divulge it.

Even Gabriel, who was powerful enough to bend and shape reality according to his own wishes, was unable to remember the location of the "wardstone". Souls were, after all, one of the most powerful things to exist. They were a gift from his Father given only to humanity and the idea of clever little Rowena being able to tap into their power, even as minutely as she had, was a sobering one. Some things should be left alone. Even demons, who made deals for souls, couldn't tap into their true power-- it was beyond them, as it should be beyond any being.

He would have to keep an eye on this.

After the day of magic, Gabriel was happy to retire with Merlin to the quarters the wizard was staying in. After spending the night getting reacquainted with him in the biblical sense of the word– literally– Gabriel left Hogwarts the next morning with a good-bye and good-luck, flying to the son of Christ's birth site, ready to head back to his time-- or, in this case, to head forwards.
Gabriel's grace was exhausted by the time he'd returned to the present so he flew to one of his houses, this one nice and secluded, and took a nap. Well, it wasn't a nap, not by human standards, more of a meditative state that allowed him to recharge his batteries.

After his two day not-nap, he conjured himself up a feast of pancakes and waffles and enough whipped cream to drown several elephants. Rejuvenated, he made himself invisible then flew over to the house of the little girl he'd actually done all this for with a quick stop at a bookstore along the way to purchase a book on Arthurian legends.

There was no one in the bedroom when he arrived so he placed the book he'd just bought on Hermione's pillow, clicking his fingers to make a bright pink sticky note that said 'Read Me!' appear on it, and then stacked the actual spell books from 990AD on her desk. Some of the books Morgana, Salazar and Rowena had given him were written in Gaelic, Old English or Archaic Latin, so he thoughtfully snapped up a dictionary translator for each language to leave beside the stack on the desk. He could have translated the books himself and left her the translated copies, but he had a feeling that Hermione would appreciate the challenge. Also, her learning those languages, or at least gaining a familiarity with them, could only ever be useful to her in the future.

Satisfied with his good deed for the century, Gabriel snapped up some lollies and a Hershey bar to leave on her pillow next to the Arthurian legends book and flew off to go and find some asshole to serve a good ol' dose of just desserts.
Chapter 5

Gabriel was annoyed. Very annoyed, in fact. The sort of annoyed that had reshaped a small part of the Sahara Desert. The reason for this annoyance was that, after spending an enjoyable few days punishing an orderly working in an adolescent psychiatric ward who was molesting his vulnerable, severely mentally ill patients by driving him crazy—literally—he'd decided to go visit the site where Hogwarts had been, to see how the school was going. And he assumed it was going well, but the problem was he could only assume. Because at some point in the last thousand years the castle had been warded against angels!

The wards were good too— not good enough to keep an archangel out permanently, but good enough that he couldn't break them without making his presence known to Heaven.

The only consolation to the sheer annoyance he was feeling was that at some point a small village had been built near the castle—a village that was populated only by witches and wizards. He'd spent a delightful hour in a sweet shop called Honeydukes where he bought several of everything, then headed off to the local bookshop to purchase some history books.

Gabriel had never been interested in history— why would he, when he'd actually lived it? These wizard folk, however, were a bit of a mystery to him and he wanted to find out more. One of the books he purchased was 'Hogwarts: A History' and he was a bit disheartened to learn about Salazar leaving the others. The young wizard had never seemed particularly anti-muggle, more fiercely devoted to both learning magic and his young family, so he couldn't understand why everyone apparently seemed so convinced he'd hated them.

The rest of the books weren't quite so interesting, though once he'd read about Gellert Grindelwald in 'Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts' and the suspected role the Dark wizard had played in World War II he'd been more then just a tad murderously enraged. Even more so when he learnt the bastard was still alive. Figuring out the location of the prison where Grindelwald was locked up had taken a few days but it had been well worth the effort when he did find 'Nurmengard'. He'd then dumped Grindelwald out of the flow of time and left the wizard to relive in his mind the pain and suffering of the final moments of every single person who'd been killed in the Second World War. He'd return in a few years, by which time the wizard would probably be a vegetable.

Much calmer after working out a good deal of his frustration, Gabriel paid Hermione a visit. The little girl was sitting at her desk, bent over one of the Gaelic books with her fingers smudged with ink as she appeared to be painstakingly translating the text in a notebook, the dictionary translator laying open next to the spell-book.

Pleased that she appeared appropriately appreciative of his gifts—the pile of chocolate on her little altar was even bigger then it had been after he'd delivered the first newspaper article—he placed the new books on her bed, a little bit of pagan magic ensuring she wouldn't notice their presence until after he'd left. He then collected the offerings—he was very pleased by the quality of the chocolate provided, especially considering her age and lack of funds—and gave the girl a fond look before returning back to Hogsmeade, wanting to visit Honeydukes again.

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Hermione found more solace in her new faith then she'd ever have believed. Her grief was like a bubble that had closed around her, it made her feel as if she was no longer part of the world around her. Everything was muffled; she could hear conversations, but the words had no true meaning. Nothing could reach her, nobody could see her. Her entire world had stopped and she couldn't
understand why everyone else's was still going on. She felt isolated and alone and like she was suffocating, dying just a little bit more everyday, and the only bit of happiness in her life was Loki. He accepted her offerings and in return left candy and chocolates that, when she ate them, left a warmth in her chest that lasted hours.

She'd never expected him to keep visiting her after he dealt out the vengeance she'd petitioned for, but he had. He had, and it was the only thing that made her want to get out of bed in the mornings.

And the nights when she'd fall asleep at her desk and wake up in her bed, having dreamed of a peacefulness that wrapped itself around her like the softest of blankets, instead of drowning while choking on her sister's blood... Hermione just knew, deep in her heart, that it was Loki who was responsible. She didn't know why he seemed to like her—nobody else did, nobody except Ness and her parents, and her parents didn't count because they had to like her.

And then the books appeared. Strange, wonderful books about spells and potions and a whole, new hidden world. Some of the books were in English, others in Gaelic and Latin and Olde English. She'd read the English ones first, devouring the knowledge like she was starving. She barely slept, hardly ate and rarely left her room. Her parents had to physically remove the books from her hands and force her to bed.

She hated sleeping. Some nights were peaceful, but most of her dreams were filled with horror. She dreamed of white splashed with red, of tepid water stained murky and clouded, of weeping wounds carved into pale limbs. She dreamed she was drowning in blood and she woke up screaming with the taste of coppery-rust in her mouth, and no matter how many times she brushed her teeth, no matter how much mouthwash she used, the taste of blood, of death, would not go away.

Then more books appeared, all in English this time, detailing the history of the society called the "Wizarding world". She took a break from her translating to read them, one in particular standing out to her from the others—it was called 'Hogwarts: A History' and she hoped that one day she might be a student there, that she might walk in those sacred halls of learning and find acceptance in a House of her very own.

With how busy the books were keeping her, Hermione hadn't noticed the way her parents had grown more and more concerned. She did notice when they tried to bring up returning to school, but the very thought chilled her blood and she hid from them in her closet, hugging her knees to her chest and praying to her god for strength, for courage, for the trembling in her hands to stopstopstop.

Sometimes she'd take the worn journal that Ness had used as a diary and cradle it over her heart, inhaling the soft scent of paper and the sweet vanilla perfume that Ness had worn. She'd never read the journal, had only found it after her sister was already dead, hidden among the mythology books, but she hadn't shown it to her parents either. It was a piece of her sister she never had to give up, a piece of Ness that nobody could ever take away from her.

She should have known that she wouldn't be allowed to live like she had forever, reading and translating in her room all day every day with only forced breaks to eat and sleep. Drowning herself in knowledge was the only way she could survive, but her parents only became more and more worried as time passed and Hermione showed no signs of returning to her routines from before Ness's death. Hermione would have scoffed at the thought had she known—when Ness had died her world had ended. There was nothing for her to return to. The books Loki had given her offered a new world and they were everything to her, they were her new world.

Helen and Richard sat her down two and a half months after Ness's death and gave her an ultimatum. One of them couldn't stay at home with her any longer, their new dental practice was
opening for business in less than a week. Hermione could either start at the new school they'd enrolled her in after first moving, or she could go live with her Aunt Iona. It would be a temporary move, but Aunt Iona homeschooled her children and she had offered to homeschool Hermione too.

In the end, it wasn't much of a choice at all.

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Iona Macleod was Helen Granger's sister. Both girls had grown up, along with their five brothers, in Fraserburgh; a small fishing town in Scotland with a population of around twelve and a half thousand. Their father was an inshore fisherman and their mother ran the house the same way her husband and brothers ran their boats. While Helen had studied hard in order to get into university and moved away as soon as she was accepted by one, Iona had married a fisherman like their mother and grandmother before them and had seven children of her own.

There wasn't bad blood, per-say, between the sisters, or between Helen and her brothers and parents, but visits to Fraserburgh were rare and none of Helen's family had ever hidden their disdain for Richard, with his soft hands and neatly-pressed suits.

Hermione had to catch a plane to Scotland and then ride on a train and two different buses to reach Peterhead, the town closest to Fraserburgh. Her Uncle Arran, Aunt Iona's husband, was waiting for her. He was a big man, with reddish-copper hair, wind-chafed skin, heavy arms and kind eyes the colour of the ocean. His moustache reminded her a bit of a walrus and he was wearing a plaid shirt and worn trousers that she'd never have seen her father in, not in a million years.

Hermione stayed quiet as her uncle drove them to her temporary new home. The scenery as they got closer to Fraserburgh grew only more and more beautiful, with high rolling hills and the ocean, when it came into view, an ever-changing mosaic of deep blue, emerald green and all the shades in between, clouds trailing above it all like white ribbons in the sky. Seagulls flew above the fishing boats, colourful spots bobbing on the water, and the wooden houses were all painted with different bright colors, so unlike the uniformity of the neighbourhood she'd just left.

Aunt Iona was there to greet her when the car pulled up, clucking disapprovingly under her tongue and muttering about needing a good meal or ten and plenty of sunlight. She then pulled Hermione into a tight hug and Hermione leaned into the comfort of her Auntie's arms.

Iona Macleod was surprisingly short with skin just as wind-chafed as her husband's, she had a head of thick, heavy curls, the same ones that Hermione (and Ness) had inherited from their grandmother, Iona's mother, and an energetic, commanding air about her. She wore a checkered apron over faded denim jeans tucked into wellington boots and an old, button-up shirt, had the same chocolate-brown eyes as Hermione and Helen and a strength to her of someone who rose with the sun and worked until it set, feeding and clothing her family of seven, keeping the house in order, raising broods of hens and ducks and home-schooling her children. She spoke briskly and was clearly a strict, disciplined woman, but she had a big heart.

Hermione found herself being shepherded by Iona inside a small but spotless house and into an old-fashioned kitchen heated by a wood-and-coal burning stove, behind which sat a box of kindling and a coal scuttle. A long wooden table stood in the middle of the floor, with mismatched homemade chairs set around it, a lone couch sat across from the stove and the walls were covered with pinned up maritime maps covered in messy scrawls of ink; arrows, stars and barely legible writing. There was only a single window but it was large and overlooked the ocean.

It was a room unlike any in either house Hermione had lived in before and she let her Auntie steer her over to one of the seats while at the same time loudly ordering several of Hermione's many
All the belongings she'd brought had been packed in a trunk. Her mother had been the one to pack the clothes while Hermione had tried to fit in as many of her books as possible in the space left over. Ness's journal and the Greek tragedy with Clytemnestra's story she had packed out of sheer nostalgia, wanting to keep them close. She'd also needed to pack the three translator dictionaries and in the limited space that remained had tried to fit as many of the texts that Loki had given her as she could.

She also made sure to pack the candle with the wax that never melted so she could set up a small altar that she'd be able to pack away once she'd finished her prayers. Her parents had thought the altar in her room had been a tribute to Ness, which in a roundabout way it had been; she wasn't sure what her aunt would think of it, though, and she didn't want to find out.

Iona slammed a plate in front of her that was heaped with fish, potatoes and an assortment of greens and a ceramic mug with a chip along the rim that she'd filled with water. "I expect this plate all but licked clean." She ordered, sternly. Meekly, Hermione shrank in the wooden chair and tried to do as she was told. She knew her appetite was terrible and that she'd lost weight she really shouldn't be losing, but the lead weight of her shattered heart weighing down on her stomach had all but erased her appetite, turning her arms and legs to matchsticks, hollowing her cheeks and creating sharp divots below her collarbone. In the shower she could count every rib and her wrists looked as frail as a baby bird's.

Hermione could barely manage half of the plate before she thought she'd be sick but Iona just sighed, picking it up and patting her head. "You'll do better tomorrow." She said, before muttering under her breath about her 'fool sister'. Hermione was exhausted and for once ready to sleep at this point and Iona seemed to realise that. Already, Hermione thought in the privacy of her own mind, Iona had proven to be a more attentive parent then Dr.'s Helen and Richard.

"I'll introduce you to everyone then one of the girls will show you to your room," Iona told her and Hermione nodded, relieved, before flinching slightly as her aunt shouted for the children.

There were seven of them, the youngest being seven years old like her, while the oldest was nearly eighteen. Only one son and one daughter had inherited Iona's chestnut-brown hair, the same as Hermione's, while the rest had their father's reddish-copper.

The three girls were Leana, Jeanie and Ina, and they were nine, twelve and fifteen. The boys were Angus, Andrew, Alex and Arran Junior; Angus being the cousin her age, and Arran Junior the oldest at nearly eighteen. Iona assured her that she wasn't expected to remember all the names yet, but Hermione knew she would. Her memory had always been good.

All the children were brown from the sun, their skin freckled and wind-chafed. Their clothes were old and worn, but still neat, clean and well-fitting. They also all looked very curious and Hermione could feel herself shrinking down under the weight of their stares.

She was grateful to escape their scrutiny, friendly as it was, when Iona instructed Leana to show her to the room she'd be staying in. It was the room the three girls shared, small but tidy with two bunk beds standing opposite to each other, each up against a wall. There was a window in this room too but it faced away from the ocean, overlooking the yard instead.

The room across from them was the boys' room, Leana explained. It also had two bunk beds. The only other bedroom was Iona and Arran's. The whole family shared the one bathroom, but it was rarely a problem with everyone's schedules being so different. Leana offered for her to choose the top or bottom bunk on the right wall, saying she'd changed the sheets that morning so they were
both clean. Hermione chose the bottom, thinking it would be easier to sneak out of at night to make offerings and pray.

The boys had already brought her trunk into the room and Leana helped her find her pyjamas. She changed into the warm flannelettes and gladly slipped under the heavy blankets of the bed. The bunk was smaller then her bed back home and the mattress wasn't as soft, but the sheets were clean and smelled of lavender soap and Hermione sank into the warmth and fell asleep almost at once.

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Iona gave Hermione a few days to settle in following the move, not asking anything of her other then to keep things tidy and wash her dishes. She did insist that Hermione eat every meal and that she spend time outside, even if it was to read.

On the Sunday after her arrival, her Uncle Arran invited her out to the family's fishing boat. Fishing was how their family made their living and the boat was their most important possession. Jeanie and Leana, who had been sitting with her, the pair of them trying to pull Hermione into conversation, immediately jumped up and all but dragged her along.

The wharf was just over a half mile from the house and at a glance Hermione couldn't even count the number of boats docked there in the sparkling water of the deep blue harbor. The boat Uncle Arran owned with three of his brothers was named Robina, after the eldest brother's wife. The Robina wasn't the biggest boat at the wharf, far from it, but she was one of the nicest looking ones, having been painted a warm coral-pink and a bright sunshine-yellow with her name in robin's egg blue on each of her sides. It smelt strongly of salt and fish, the same smell that clung to Uncle Arran, but it was obviously well cared for.

There were two seats built into the boat, one for the driver and one for a single passenger, and her cousins kindly let Hermione have the passenger's seat as Uncle Arran drove the Robina in a circle around the harbor. The movements of the boat did not agree with her stomach and her legs were so unsteady beneath her that a chuckling Arran had to lift Hermione off the boat and up onto the dock.

That night Hermione found her candle and borrowed a match from the kitchen to light it. She kneeled in front of the fat, white candle and prayed. She apologized that she didn't have any offerings this time but gave her god her thanks for this new chance, conveyed her continued gratefulness for the books and asked for strength and courage for her new life with the Macleods. After, she blew out the candle and packed it back in her trunk once the wax had dried. She didn't dream that night, just felt blanketed by the peace she always associated with Loki.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hermione's days quickly settled into a routine. Mornings would be spent with Aunt Iona and her three daughters cleaning the house, darning clothes, fixing any broken fishing equipment and baking bread. The two younger boys would collect kindling, work in the garden, feed the hens and ducks and run errands on the wharf. The older two boys worked on the fishing boat with Uncle Arran and two of his brothers, along with their older sons. After lunch, the three girls, the two younger boys and Hermione would spend several hours on homeschooling. After the lessons, Aunt Iona would send them out of the house for the rest of the afternoon and her cousins would take Hermione with them to the wharf where it seemed all the children of Fraserburgh gathered.

At the wharf the children would all play tag and hide-and-seek in and about the piled traps and tubs of trawl, have competitions skipping rocks across the surface of the ocean and make games out of jumping in and out of any docked boats bobbing along the wharf. When the sea was still and clear as glass, they'd jump into the water fully clothed, splashing and swimming and diving down to the pale sand to scoop up rocks and seashells and even scallops and prawns if they could find any dropped by the fishermen the day before. Iona would fry up any brought back to the house in butter and the sweet, salty morsels would be served up to the ones who had found them, or divided among all the children if there were enough.

It didn't take long for Hermione to tan dark and brown like her cousins, her skin becoming wind-chafed and her hair lightening from the hours spent outdoors, lacing the chestnut with chunks of honey brown that drank in the sun and shone. Jeanie, who had inherited the same near-untamable hair as Hermione, taught her how to tightly braid the heavy, chaotic curls each morning, to hold them out of her face, keep the wind from making a mess of them and to stop the frizzling when they got wet.

When the fishermen returned in the late afternoons and early evenings, the boys would all stay at the wharf to help haul in the catch, clean and gut anything that needed it and carry any broken gear back up to the house. The girls, Hermione included, would help Aunt Iona prepare dinner and feed the ducks and hens for the evening, herding the fowl back into their coops. The meal tended to be a rowdy one, Uncle Arran and the boys smelling of salt and fish, tired smiles on their faces.

Most evenings, after dinner and washing up, Hermione would read at the table in the kitchen, her notebook and dictionaries open as she painstakingly translated the books from Loki. Sometimes Uncle Arran would give her Gaelic lessons, after he noticed her translating one of the texts written in Scottish Gaelic. Sometimes there would be gear that needed to be fixed and that would take precedence over her books. Hermione didn't begrudge the fact as her Uncle and Aunt's entire lives revolved around the boat and fishing; it was their source of income, their entire livelihoods. She was just glad to help wherever she could after they'd been so kind to take her in.

Every night, before she went to bed in the room she shared with Jeanie, Ina and Leana, Hermione would set up her altar, light the candle and pray to Loki, giving thanks to her god. She didn't have access to chocolate or lollies to give him in offerings, her Aunt and Uncle not having money to spend on the more unnecessary things in life. Sometimes Iona would bake cookies or hand out hard-boiled candies and Hermione would always save most of hers for Loki, leaving the offerings at the foot of her bunk, but most of the time she left out shells and pretty rocks she'd found, little pieces of embroidery that she'd practiced under Aunt Iona's assessing gaze and even once a
necklace she'd made using twine that she'd braided and a shark tooth that had been washed up on the beach and Uncle Arran had drilled a hole in for her.

She thought Loki was pleased with her offerings because they were always gone in the morning and she would wake up feeling that warmth in her heart she associated with her god. She wasn't certain but she also got the feeling that Loki was responsible for the good fortune had by the fisherman of Fraserburgh that summer. There were few storms and Uncle Arran's boat was out nearly every day, seeming to lose a minimum amount of gear while bringing in the maximum amount of catch.

Hermione hadn't thought she could ever be happy again, had never even envisaged it, but while she still didn't think life would ever be as good as it had been when Ness was alive she was content with her routine. She fit in among the rag-tag children of Fraserburgh in a way she'd never really fitted in among the children of the upper-class elite that her parents had belonged to and mingled with, and the Macleods treated her like one of their own.

As the heat of August flowed into the cooler days of September, Hermione's clothes started to turn faded under the sun, the fabric stiffening from the repeated exposure to salt as the children all swam more frequently to make the most of the water before winter arrived. The sea was getting colder but Hermione had regained most of the weight she'd lost in the months following Ness's death and had even developed lean muscle from working hard to help Aunt Iona, as well as all the time spent running around the wharf and swimming in the ocean.

Her parents rang three times a week, always in the evenings. They told her about the dental practice and the work they'd had done around the house and the social gatherings they'd attended. Hermione told them little about her own life, mostly just discussing what she had learned from Aunt Iona that week, and she was always guiltily relieved when they exchanged their goodbyes. She loved her parents, she always had, but they had never been the most affectionate people, always busy with their work or the society gatherings they attended. Helen and Richard never dealt well with children, especially ones as precocious as Hermione and Ness, and to Hermione her parents served as a constant reminder of her sister's death.

Her mother invited her to join them on their annual trip to France but Hermione declined, explaining how she felt too far behind on her schoolwork and would rather stay to catch up. It was a lie– she'd more then caught up and was already miles ahead of the curriculum for her age– but her mother hadn't questioned it. After, Aunt Iona had given her a hug. She hadn't asked why Hermione had lied, just squeezed her tight and kissed her head before telling her to go help Jeanie herd the hens and ducks into their coop for the night.

Hermione had done so gladly.

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"That's new," Fenris commented, upon opening the door. He motioned to the necklace, a shark tooth hanging from braided twine and Gabriel shifted uncomfortably. He'd forgotten he was wearing it and someone else looking at the effort his little disciple had put in to her offerings made him feel oddly exposed and vulnerable. It was not a feeling he appreciated.

Fenris rolled his eyes when Gabriel didn't say anything and waved a hand again, this time beckoning him forward. "Come in, then. These old bones can't stand here forever." He grumbled, shuffling back into the house. Gabriel pulled a face as he followed his son. He didn't like visiting Fenris when the boy was going through one of his mortal phases. The kid liked to get Hel to remove his godhood so he could live among mortals, ageing like a human until he 'died' of old age and returned to her realm where she'd restore him his youth and power. Gabriel never liked seeing
his son with white hair and olive-spotted skin. It made his insides twist into knots at the wrongness of it.

"Nice family," he offered as they made their way through the hall, the walls decorated with framed photographs, to a spacious living room. The earlier photos were in black and white, but the later ones showed the woman always with Fenris as auburn-haired with warm mint-green eyes. The later photos also started to include a boy with sandy hair and bright blue eyes who gradually aged to an adult, soon holding a sandy-haired, blue-eyed baby of his own.

Fenris smiled proudly. "They are, aren't they? My beautiful wife Mardi, and our son Lyall."

"Adopted?" Gabriel asked. Fenris nodded.

"Of course. I didn't want Odin getting anywhere near Mardi. He would have tried to kill her if he discovered she was carrying our baby, even though the child would have been mortal."

Gabriel scowled automatically at the mention of Odin. If he could get away with smiting that dick he would have centuries ago for what the bastard had done to him and his family. Unfortunately, "Loki" didn't have the mojo to pull that off, and pagan gods hated angels— if they discovered he was one, which was a very real possibility if he killed Odin, he'd have entire pantheons out for his blood. That would mean he'd have to kill a lot of pissed off pagans, which wouldn't be difficult but it would, no doubt, draw the attention of his brothers and sisters. The whole purpose of his witness protection gig was to hide from said brothers and sisters so unfortunately, as of the current moment, killing Odin was not an option.

He would kill him one day, though, for what he'd done to Hel, Fenris, Sleipnir, Jörmungandr and the twins.

That day was just not today. For now, Odin got to live and suffer.

"Is Mardi home?" Gabriel asked, changing the subject. Fenris shook his head.

"She passed away two years ago."

"I'm sorry," Gabriel said, genuinely apologetic. Fenris just smiled, sad but fond.

"It's alright. We shared a wonderful life together. We raised a wonderful son who gave us an equally wonderful daughter-in-law and grandson. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

"You're going to make your old man cry." Gabriel grumbled and Fenrir laughed.

"This mortal body won't last much longer. A year or two at most. Three, if I'm very lucky. Promise me you'll go to the funeral. I want you to meet Lyall, Hope and their son, your great-grandson. He's a werewolf, you know."

"What?" Gabriel asked, shocked.

"I don't know the full details," Fenris admitted. "Lyall never told me, but I could sense it in the boy, even in this mortal body. You know I have a certain affinity with wolves, werewolves especially. The poor thing was very young when he was Bitten, barely more than six years old. Lyall and Hope kept him from hurting people by locking him in the basement for full moons."

Gabriel winced and Fenrir looked every year of his age.

"Poor Lyall tore himself up over it, thinking he was a terrible father." He said, quietly. "They had to say the poor boy was frequently ill, and Lyall confessed to me that he felt terrible because the
treatments for little Remus's 'condition' seemed to be hurting so much, but it was the only way to keep him safe. He quickly changed 'safe' to 'healthy', of course, realising his slip-up. I pretended not to notice and reassured him the best I could. Remus is in his twenties now– if Lyall hadn't kept him secluded on full moons and taught the boy the importance of keeping himself locked up and away from other humans during that time of the month, the poor lad would have found himself a murderer by now. Even if a hunter didn't kill him for it, I don't think Remus could have lived with himself. Either way, his death would have broken my son's heart. It would have broken my heart, and Mardi and Hope's hearts too."

"I'm sorry," Gabriel said, sympathetic. "Remus doesn't deserve to suffer like that. I'll find out who the werewolf responsible for turning him is– and if it was intentional, or due to irresponsibility, I'll make sure they pay for it."

"Just desserts," Fenris said and then smiled. It showed teeth. "I would appreciate that. Just don't kill them– that pleasure will belong to me after I've regained my powers. We'll see how well they fare against a true werewolf."

"Of course." Gabriel agreed, smiling back his Trickster smile– sly, feral, forever laughing at a joke nobody else understood.

"Don't think I've forgotten your new accessory." Fenris said, mouth curving into a trickster's smile of his own, the one mirrored on Gabriel's own face. "It looks an awful lot like something Remus or Lyall would make when they were children, you know. Do I have a new brother or sister I'm not aware of yet?"

"No you definitely do not! You lot were trouble enough!" Gabriel exclaimed, with a mock-shudder. "You all took decades off my life and gave me more grey hairs and wrinkles then I can count!"

Fenris chortled. "You haven't aged a day since the first time I opened my eyes and saw you smiling down at me– now stop trying to deflect."

"Fine." Gabriel sighed, pouting a little at his undeterred son. "Don't tell anyone, alright?"

"I can keep a secret." Fenris promised.

"I've got a new little worshipper." He admitted. "She prays and gives offerings and doesn't ask for anything in return, not since the very first time when she petitioned to me to deliver some just desserts. Her older sister, who happened to be the person she loved most in the world, was bullied by her classmates to the point that it was too much for her to cope with. She committed suicide and my new disciple was the one to find her. It traumatised her and none of the bullies were even given a slap on the wrist. She was so hurt, so desperate for justice and vengeance– her soul was so pure, but it was still screaming in pain and anger and hatred."

"You always liked them difficult," Fenris commented knowingly. "The damaged ones were always your favourites, even back when you were colder and crueller. Maybe especially then."

"Guilty as charged." Gabriel agreed. He wasn't sure if it was the angel in him that was drawn to the broken ones, wanting to heal them, to soothe their pain, if it was the pagan in him that was drawn to the pretty, pretty mess they were, or maybe it was just a fundamental part of what made up who he was. He didn't care why, not really. Whole, unbroken people were never a challenge and he liked challenges; nobody Gabriel chose would ever be easy. He'd be bored to tears and he hated boredom.
"I took the offerings," he confessed to Fenris, needing to tell someone. It was probably the reason why he’d chosen to visit his most easy-going son in the first place. "Sent her newspaper articles of how I dealt with the bullies responsible, as well as those who stood by and let it happen."

"You what?" Fenris asked, startled. "You revealed your existence to her in this day and age?"

"She's special," Gabriel told him. "She had magic in her, passed down from a thousand years ago when Hecate blessed her followers with the ability to manipulate the energy woven into the fabric of the earth."

"Had? Past tense?" Fenris asked, picking up his slight slip of the tongue.

"I didn't like Hecate having a claim over her." He admitted. "I removed all trace of her from my little disciple and replaced it with my own replica of the blessing used in the first place."

"How did you figure out how Hecate performed the blessing?" Fenris asked with a frown. "The magic must have been severely weakened, after so much time."

"Ah, I might have done a smidgen of time travelling." Gabriel said, casually. "Just a few centuries. Around ten, to be exact."

"A thousand years." Fenris said flatly. "For one little human child."

"Like I said... she's special." Gabriel said quietly, forgoing casual and turning serious. "I'm not sure just why yet, but she's special." Fenris frowned.

"Be careful." He warned. "You have many enemies out there. You'll have to keep her safe from them."

"I will." Gabriel reassured. Fenris sighed.

"I've missed you, faðir, but I haven't missed the drama you inevitably bring." He grumbled, looking every part the grumpy old man.

"Sorry about that. Though in my defence, you were the one who pushed." Gabriel reminded him cheerfully, winking obnoxiously just to be irritating.

"Because I'm an idiot who never learns." His son grumbled.

"You get that from your mother."

"No," Fenris said, a long-suffering look on his face. "I really, really don't."

And Gabriel really, really couldn't argue with that.

Chapter End Notes

To those interested, Lyall Lupin is still a wizard, technically a ‘muggleborn’. Fenris never informed Gabriel at the time he found out as Gabriel was never very involved in his ‘mortal’ lives, or his mortal families, and Lyall never involved his ‘muggle’ parents in the magical world. Fenris will probably mention it if it comes up, but so far it hasn’t. This may or may not be passive aggression on Fenris’s part—he is his
father’s son ;}
Chapter 7

Hermione's life in Fraserburgh had lifted such a weight off her shoulders. It wasn't a paradise, though she sometimes privately thought of it as such. As someone who'd lived in London all her life, day to day life in a small fishing town was a jarring change.

There was no school, for one— homeschooling had certainly been something that took time to adjust to, though she did enjoy helping explain the lessons to Leana and Angus, sometimes even Jeanie and Alex too. The family barely used the car, not that there was any real need in such a small town; everywhere she went, Hermione had to go on foot. The meals were often simple, easy to cook large quantities for a lower cost, with most of the ingredients often coming from the garden or the ocean (she was getting so very sick of fish), nothing like the fancy dinners her mother liked to make or order in. There was no bookshop or library to waste away hours in, not that she had any hours to waste— Aunt Iona did not believe in idle hands.

She'd never been expected to help out around the house in London, only to keep her room neat; here, she and the other children were given a list of chores each day, ranging from scrubbing floors to cleaning the chicken coops, from weeding the garden to mending rips and tears in clothes— in the few short months she'd spent in Fraserburgh, she'd been more physically active than in her seven years in London.

So it wasn't a paradise, no, but Hermione loved it anyway. She loved the wildness and freedom of the other children, who ran around barefoot and dived fully dressed into the ocean without care. She loved the independence that came with being able to roam around town without needing adults to supervise. She was even growing to love the smell of the ocean breeze; salty, a hint of seaweed and, when the boats were coming in, fish.

But most of all, she loved her cousins. The Macleods were all so welcoming to her, a stark difference from some of her other cousins in Fraserburgh, the ones from Helen and Iona's brothers who thought she was strange and saw her as an 'outsider' and were always telling her that she didn't belong, that she should go back to London.

Hermione knew that the fact she generally preferred books over the company of people confused other children and that her intelligence was also well above that of others her age. It set her apart, isolating her from her age group, but while the Macleod children didn't quite understand either, they were still as protective of her as if she were their sister; it was a special brand of childish logic, that they were allowed to playfully tease her but if anybody else dared try then they'd rain hellfire down on them— and that almost wasn't even an exaggeration.

Hermione would sometimes bring a book down to the wharf to read while the others played and swam, usually the ones in English so she didn't have to bring a translator too, though she was getting much better at her Gaelic with Uncle Arran's lessons. The other children didn't understand why she'd want to read instead of play and, like always, some of them were cruel about it, calling her a 'freak' amongst many other choice words— it certainly wasn't anything she hadn't heard before, nothing she wasn't accustomed to. What was different, however, was that now other children rose up in her defence— and it wasn't just the Macleod children either.

With the help of Jeanie, Leana, Angus and Alex, children around her age with both actual social skills and a willingness to teach them to her, Hermione had managed to do something she'd never done before— she'd made friends, real friends. Friends who chased down the one boy who'd snatched her book from her and grabbed her precious copy of *Hogwarts: A History* right back off him. Friends who threw handfuls of stinking seaweed and rotting fish-guts at anyone who dared
call her names (which Hermione honestly thought had to be worse then raining down hellfire, because they reeked). Friends who laughed with her and played with her and told her she was brilliant and thought she was weird, yes, but that it wasn't a bad thing.

Hermione felt like she was glowing and when she went to bed each night, she never failed to give thanks to her god for the wonderful opportunity he had given her. He hadn't just avenged Ness, giving her poor, brave sister the justice she'd never received when she was still alive, even though that was all Hermione had asked of him-- Loki had saved her from drowning in her grief, throwing her a lifeline that she'd used to kick and claw her way back to wanting to wake up each morning. He'd given her a whole new purpose by giving her the books to teach her about her magic. He'd challenged her, giving her the translator dictionaries so she could pave her own way in the world, not rely on short-cuts. Most of all, he'd given her the courage to face each new day and think 'I want to be here.'

She'd never understood the devout chaplain at her old school, had never understood why she should pray in mass. It wasn't that she didn't believe in the Judeo-Christian God, she honestly had no strong opinions about the possibility of the God's existence either way, but she'd always thought that if the Judeo-Christian God did exist, why would He ever pay attention to a single individual in a planet full of them? And why would someone devote their lives to Him, knowing they'd never get any sort of answer from Him, that they'd never receive any sign or proof of His existence?

Hermione was more inclined to believe in what she could see. She'd only believed there had to be magic in the world, because the laws of science hadn't explained why she'd been able to do the things she had.

Her belief that pagans could exist, however, had been somewhat of an anomaly in that respect-she'd believed that pagan gods could exist not because of evidence, but because she had been desperate and grief-addled and needed something to believe in, some reason to hope.

Which, Hermione supposed, answered her previous questions. Her old chaplain had believed in his God because he needed a reason to hope. To believe in something bigger, something grander, that there was a purpose to existence.

If Hermione as she was now was faced with the question of 'are pagan gods real?’ even with the memory of her... well, her magic, she'd still have said no. But after Ness's death she'd immersed herself so deeply in Greek tragedies and old mythology, while simultaneously starving herself, depriving herself of sleep and tumbling freely down the rabbit-hole that was depression, that anything felt possible. In that irrational, unstable state, combined with her desperation and the unexplainable happenings of That Night, well... it was little wonder the helpless, grieving child that she'd been had latched onto the idea of a deity able to deliver the justice she craved and believed with all her heart and soul because she had so desperately needed it to be real.

But against all the odds, and despite the fact she'd been more then just a touch out of her mind at that point in time (to the extent where her parents definitely should have sent her to see a child psychiatrist or at least a grief counsellor) her crazy had paid off. She'd actually, unbelievably been right. Loki did exist and he had answered her prayers. He had heard her petition for justice (and vengeance) and had delivered for her, and for Ness, what she'd craved so desperately that she'd probably have sold her soul for it, had the opportunity arisen.

Loki had saved her life by saving her from herself. The least she could do was keep her word- she had pledged her devoutness to him in return for her vengeance and she had no desire to go back on the promise she'd made. She would never forget all that Loki had done for her and every day she would give her thanks to him. He was her god and that would never change.
When she was older, she would build him a proper altar and she'd buy him all the best quality chocolate and confectionary she could afford. And until then, she would pray at her make-shift altar and do her best to find offerings for him that he might like.

Nearly half a year after she'd first arrived at Fraserburgh, a circumstance of pure chance turned Hermione's life entirely upside a second time– and the ripples in destiny caused by the choices made in the aftermath would reach further then anyone could have ever imagined.

Hermione had been swimming with Jeanie, Leana, Angus and Alex when it happened. She and Angus were further from the wharf then the others- Angus thought he'd spotted a clam and a funny-colored rock had caught Hermione's eye. She'd continued to remain diligent about setting out offerings for Loki at least once every week or two, along with her daily prayers. A rarity in sweets meant that she tried to make do in other, slightly more unconventional ways yet the way her offerings were always gone when she woke up, leaving in their place a tell-tale warmth tingling in her chest, gave her the motivation to keep trying to find or create offerings for her god.

Leana, Jeanie and Ina had all seen her altar by this point as sharing a small room between them lead to little privacy, but they all believed it was about Ness– it wasn't a complete lie, but it was certainly twisting the truth enough to make her feel guilty. Ina and Jeanie, the older two, found her habit of leaving 'gifts' on the foot of her bunk to be strange, not that they ever said anything bad about it, likely out of respect for her method of grieving (they also never said anything about how the 'gifts' seemed to disappear, but Hermione privately thought that was most Loki's influence). Leana, however, was too young to realise it was a bit of an odd thing to do and she thought it was great fun 'finding presents for Ness'. She'd even made a sort of game in helping point out things that might be fitting.

The funny-colored rock Hermione had spotted in the water while swimming that day was beautiful one. It looked purple almost, and speckled. The water was over two and a half meters deep as far out as she was, but Hermione thought Loki would like it– he liked colorful things, she'd discovered; the tingling warmth in her chest always lasted longer after she left out something bright for him.

It was both deeper and further out then she'd usually dive, but Angus was her age and he was already ducking under the gentle little waves and kicking down to the sand where he'd spotted his clam. Taking a deep breath, Hermione dove down after him. The water dragged at her and she squinted against the stinging saltiness of it as she used the powerful kick that Jeanie had taught her, with her arms helping to propel her down.

Her lungs were burning and the pressure in her skull was bordering on painful as her fingers finally scrabbled against the surface of the rock. She clawed at the sand around it for a few moments then managed to yank it free. It was a bit larger then her clenched fist and heavier then she'd expected, but she hung onto it determinedly as she tucked her legs under her, turning in the water so she was facing the surface and could use the seabed to help push herself up.

She was about halfway to the surface when an odd movement to her left caught her attention. Her lungs felt like they were on fire but she still automatically turned to look then almost opened her mouth to scream at the sight before her squinted eyes.

It was a- a thing, terrifying and menacing in how unnatural it was. Whatever it was, it almost looked like a person, one not much older then them even, but at the same time it wasn't even close to human. Its face was too long, too narrow and too pointed. There was bristly looking fur on its legs and it seemed to have claws– claws that it had used to latch onto Angus.
Thin trails of red were rising up in the water from where Angus was struggling and Hermione starting panicking– she needed oxygen, needed it desperately, but the- the monster was moving down and away from her at a frighteningly fast speed and Hermione was afraid if she kicked up to the surface she’d lose Angus.

She felt like her lungs were burning, she felt so, so afraid, but it was Angus– he’d shoved a dead crab down the shirt of a boy who’d called her a weirdo and whenever he found anything while diving he shared it with her once Aunt Iona had cooked it up. He’d been nothing but sweet to her and Hermione wouldn't let the monster take him from her. She wouldn't let anyone she loved die if she could help it, not again.

She released the rock, letting it plunge back down to the sand as she frantically kicked forwards, pushing her legs as hard as she could- Angus hadn't been dragged too far away yet and swimming across was easier then swimming down. With desperately scrabbling hands, she managed to grab onto one of Angus's wildly kicking ankles and she hung on with a grim determination as the monster dragged them both deeper and further away from the wharf, out to sea.

Keeping at least one hand gripping tight onto him at all times, Hermione managed to claw her way up Amgus's struggling body, locking her legs tight around his waist so her hands were free. The monster let out some sort of horrible screeching noise that hurt her ears even underwater, releasing one of its clawed hands from Angus to lash out at her. White-hot pain flared along her upper arm as claws like fish-hooks caught in her flesh and ripped, but Hermione kept her mouth shut and didn't let go.

There were black spots in her vision that were slowly expanding and her head was spinning so badly she knew she had maybe half a minute at most before her body's instinctive reflexes would kick in, making her automatically inhale even when she knew she couldn't.

Horribly aware that she only had one shot at this, Hermione threw her upper body forwards, keeping her legs locked tight around Angus who the monster was still latched onto, and reached out for the odd, narrow head, managing to grasp one small hand on each side of the misshapen skull.

Eyes were a vulnerable point on any animal and Hermione shoved aside all the parts of her that wanted to be violently sick as she dug her thumbs hard into the eye-sockets of the monster without any hesitation. It instantly started to scream, releasing her and Angus both immediately as it propelled itself back, causing more damage to its eyes as the abrupt movement ripped her nails along the eye-sockets as it pulled itself free.

Hermione had a brief moment to feel triumph before her lungs seemed to burst and her body's instinctive reflexes had her automatically trying to suck in oxygen. She immediately started choking, the salt water flooding her mouth, pouring down her nose and her throat, down into her stomach and lungs. Her vision went completely white and her arms and legs refused to obey her. She could feel herself sinking down, away from the surface of the ocean despite her increasingly weak struggles for otherwise.

Her legs were still wrapped around Angus and a vague, distant part of her brain noted that he wasn't moving anymore.

Despair and desperation filled her and, in her last moments of consciousness, Hermione closed her eyes and prayed, just one word screamed in her head as loud as she could–

HELP!
In almost the worst of ironies, as he’d later reflect, when little Hermione's terrified prayer came through Gabriel had been in the process of drowning someone.

A CEO of some business or other had taken the cheap way out when disposing of chemical waste, dumping it in a river where it had ended up poisoning a number of people. There had been three fatalities, two of them very young children and one a woman in her early nineties but the CEO hid behind an army of lawyers, and ended up getting away scot-free. Gabriel had been less then impressed and had conjured up a very large vat of the same chemical waste to the one the company had dumped which he’d then dropped the CEO into.

The man was floundering around in a terribly amusing manner and Gabriel had conjured himself up a whipped cream sundae to enjoy while he watched when Hermione's frantic prayer practically crashed into his head. It was the scream of a terrified child– a terrified child afraid for her life and desperately crying out for help.

Gabriel forgot the CEO completely as he used her prayer to transport himself instantly to her side. She was drifting underwater, unconscious and unmoving, with another child a few feet away from her. She was bleeding openly from her shoulder where something with hooked claws had torn into her– the boy had similar wounds, except in his case it looked like he'd been dragged.

Their attacker wasn't hard to find– the young selkie was screaming its pain, thrashing in the water around ten yards away. The reason for its distress was abundantly clear as Gabriel got a glimpse of its face– small fingers had been jammed into its eye-sockets, gouging into the vulnerable organs. Despite the overwhelming fury Gabriel was experiencing, there was also a good deal of pride– for he had no doubt she was the one responsible. His little disciple had defended herself well.

Clicking his fingers, Gabriel transported both the children and himself out of the water. Another click ensured the selkie wasn't going anywhere– he'd deal with it later– and he took a moment to transport the rest of the children out of the water, sending them all to sleep so he didn't have to listen to all the hysterical screaming (hey, he'd never claimed to be nice. Or patient).

He'd wipe their memories before he left, but his immediate priority was healing Hermione. Vanishing all the water from her lungs and that of the boy's, he was relieved to find both children still had a pulse. They were weak and flickering things, but it meant their hearts were still beating and kick-starting their lungs was an easy thing to do.

Using grace to heal the claw marks, Gabriel rested a hand on both their foreheads and concentrated. Human minds were delicate, extremely so, and while surface thoughts were easy to read and dream walking was simple enough, viewing and manipulating memories was much harder– for most angels it was easier and safer to just make humans forget, to wipe the memory from their minds completely, but Gabriel wasn't just any old angel; he was an archangel.

Pride filled him as he witnessed Hermione's actions, her bravery and determination and the sheer strength of her resolve to save her cousin. She'd been smart about it too, going straight for the eyes and not even hesitating. She'd also ignored the fact the selkie wasn't human, despite clearly having no idea what it was, just accepting it was real and reacting to help the boy– Angus Lachlan Macleod, her cousin.

Tweaking Angus's memory was delicate work but still simple enough– he changed the boy's recollection of the events to being caught in a current and dragged away from the others. Because
Gabriel was proud of Hermione, proud of her actions and not wanting to take away the praise she had earned for her bravery and quick-thinking, he kept it so she'd saved the boy, spotting the danger before the others and helping pull him back to safety.

"L-Loki?" The hoarse whisper startled him and Gabriel turned away from the boy to where Hermione was laid out. She was stirring slightly and squinting tiredly up at him. Her eyes were red from the salt, her breathing rapid and shallow and her heart a wildly fluttering thing in her chest, but despite her near drowning experience her expression was one of childish wonder and awe as she looked up at him.

...he couldn't remember the last time someone had looked at him like that.

"You saved me." Hermione whispered and despite her clear exhaustion she still managed to smile up at him, a warm, wondrous smile, reaching out with one trembling hand to brush her small, cold fingers against his ankle, the only part of him within her reach. "Thank you." She breathed out before her eyelids drooped, her hand flopping back to the ground as the exhaustion from her ordeal dragged her back under into unconsciousness.

Gabriel looked down at her fondly, at the little girl who had pledged herself to him and was always so sweet and sincere in the prayers she sent him every night, always so diligent in finding or making something to lay out in offering. She was one of the oddest children he'd met which was certainly saying something considering one of his sons had been born as an eight-legged foal.

She was wiser then a child her age should be and sadder too. Despite her improvement since her parents had sent her to live with her relatives, there was a part of the girl that was still deeply grieving the sister she'd lost. When children lost someone they loved their whole worlds fell apart, integral pieces of their lives carved out leaving them struggling to understand why the people they loved were gone and not ever coming back. Hermione was certainly intellectually mature, but emotionally she was still a young child who'd found the dead body of a loved one and lost both her sister and best friend in one terrible blow.

But Hermione was brave, too– every morning she faced the new day with strength and determination and her soul was a bright little thing. The depression she'd fallen into in the months after Clytemnestra's death had left its scars, her continued grief painting itself in streaks against the brightness, creating a mosaic of loss and love, of struggle and determination, proof of the beauty found within pain.

And it was his; Hermione's devotion to Loki was a flowering vine growing around the softly shining brilliance, winding along the brightness, over the scars, around the streaks, encasing the vibrancy and declaring her as his for all to see.

Hermione, he was realising, clearly did not believe in half measures– when she set her mind to do something, apparently she gave it her all; an ability to perceive souls was unnecessary to witness the layers of piety and reverence glowing raw and bright on her very skin. She had woven her devoutness around her soul, had poured her heart into her worship and fed the vines with her love and her admiration, her gratefulness and her devotion, her fierceness and her grief, helping them flower and grow, intertwining them with the very essence of who she was.

Hermione's soul was beautiful and wounded and bright with the strength of her belief. She burned like a flame and he wanted her all to himself.

Gabriel tangled his hand in her chaotic curls, using a bit of grace to get them to fall out of their tight braids and spill freely over the wooden planks of the wharf, a wild, out-of-control tumble of curls. He let the part of him that was greedy and selfish and covetous come forwards, let Loki's pagan
magic flow over the small girl and sink under her skin to where she shone, interlacing his claim with her devotion until she was painted with layers of ownership as distinctive as they were obvious, a glaring claim of MineMineMine for everyone else to see.

Gabriel hadn't just been masquerading as a pagan, he was one. For almost two thousand years he'd shaped himself into his new identity, had immersed himself in it and everything it represented. He'd become something he was never meant to be, had done things that no angel ever should (really, using magic he should never have possessed to claim a soul that he should never have touched to take what should never have been his was laughably far from the worst thing Loki had done, or had been done in his name).

He knew he could have gone to Hermione as Gabriel the Archangel, instead of Loki the pagan god. He could have saved her instead of owning her, but like all pagans, he was self-indulgent, possessive and cruel in his kindness; Hermione Granger had offered herself to him, too young, innocent and naïve, too trusting to know better, and he had accepted, knowing better, knowing it was wrong, but wanting it anyway.

Any god or goddess or angel who laid eyes on Hermione Granger would know that she belonged to him, that he was twisted around her very essence, wound tight around her very soul. They'd know she belonged to him, heart, body and soul, and he was too greedy to let her go.

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It took less than an hour for the guilt to kick in.

Actually, that was a lie— there was enough angel in him that Gabriel had immediately felt guilty, but it was more about feeling guilty about not feeling guilty and that made him feel even guiltier. It took him almost an hour, though, to actually admit it to himself and acknowledge the fact he needed an outside perspective.

Fenris sighed when he shuffled into his living room to find Gabriel standing morosely in front of the crackling fireplace. "Back again?" He asked exasperatedly. "Is my house your new confessional now? Am I your personal priest for you to confess your sins?"

"Don't even joke about that!" Gabriel said with a shudder. "I don't think I could look you in the eye for at least three centuries if you became a priest."

"You're clearly back here for a reason, because we both know you like to avoid me when I'm mortal," Fenris pointed out dryly. "These past two visits have been anomalies, which very reasonably leads me to believe that they're related to the other current anomaly in your life— this has something to do with your little stray."

"That is a distinct possibility," Gabriel agreed, snapping up a squashy armchair and flopping back in it, unsuccessfully trying to convince himself that the expression on his face was not a pout.

"So what's happened now?" Fenris asked, settling down carefully on the sofa with a creaky sort of grace.

"I, er, may have placed a little claim on her soul."

"...oh dear," Fenris said finally, blinking once, the only sign of his shock— the rest of his face was very carefully neutral. "I see why you're here. And again, I reiterate, this is clearly your confessional. You feel guilty. Or perhaps you feel guilty for not feeling guilty?"

"Leaning more towards the second then the first," Gabriel admitted and Fenris shrugged.
"Then don't overthink it. You're Loki now, faðir. Claiming our favourites and favoured as our own is what we pagans do."

"An angel would have saved her. I chose to claim her as mine. That's... significant." Gabriel said quietly, letting his head fall back so he was looking at the ceiling. "My Father would be appalled."

"Are you intending to use your little stray? To abuse the power you have over her? To take advantage of what she was too young to truly understand she was giving you?" Fenris asked seriously.

"No," Gabriel said, pulling a face, "but I still acted without her proper consent, and consent is—"

"Irrelevant to pagans." Fenris interrupted him. "You are either an angel or not an angel, faðir. You can't have it both ways, not when they have such a conflicting set rules and values. You have to choose, you can't be both. So make a decision, finish your existential crisis and sort out just how you're going to deal with your little stray."

"I knew I came to you for a reason," Gabriel sighed. "You're good at putting things into perspective."

"I'm good at sorting out your bullshit, because you're an emotionally constipated child." Fenris corrected. "I blame your upbringing. Not enough encouragement to find your own solutions to your problems instead of going to Daddy for advice."

"Oh shut up," Gabriel grumbled.

He didn't admit that maybe his son was a little bit right. He'd always gone to his Father when he'd found himself facing a quandary, asking Him for help to find a solution. It was just how it was done, no one ever questioned it.

No one had questioned much at all, actually. It may have been Paradise, but there was something about this ragged, torn apart and built back up world and the flawed creatures that called it their own that had always been so much more appealing to him.

And Gabriel had never been good about letting go of things that appealed to him; his dedicated little disciple with her beautiful soul and unusual mind was his now.
Hermione woke up in her bed with a gasp, bolting upright to a sitting position and nearly hitting her head on the bunk above her. She could feel herself shaking, trembling, could feel the sharp pounding of her heart against her ribs and the short, shallow pants escaping her throat. She felt too tight and too hot, her skin sensitive and twitching.

Her mind seemed to stall as she tried to figure out what had happened, what she remembered last; vague recollections flickered at the corners of her mind, a confusing tangle of memories; lines of heat winding, curling, claiming, sinking down under her skin and into her bones as the warmth in her chest she'd always associated with her god burned all the way through.

There was something tied around her wrist, the foreign weight of it against her sensitive skin enough to make her look down. It was a knotted braid of leather, silver thread and feathers, an Ancient Norse design that she recognised from one of her books and when she ran a trembling finger over the feathers, they felt slippery and staticky to touch.

And then she remembered; the monster in the sea, salt water forcing its way down her throat, flooding her lungs, a desperate prayer for help… and then the sun in her eyes, blinking against its brightness, turning her head away towards the silhouette of a man she’d never seen before, yet was so achingly familiar that she knew exactly who it was that had rescued her.

And when he turned to her, when those golden eyes had seemed to look right through her to her very soul, any lingering doubt disappeared.

Loki had come for her. He had saved her. Her god had saved her.

His skin had been hot to touch, far hotter then a human’s, like a living flame was flickering under his skin; fitting for Loki, she thought as she stared, wide-eyed and wondering, down at the braided bracelet, the god of mischief and chaos and fire.

“Like it?” A light, playful voice asked.

Hermione’s head jerked automatically around towards the sound, to where a stranger/not-stranger was lounging against the wall, a grin on his face, too-bright golden eyes gleaming with something she couldn’t place. He was like the sun; bright and brilliant, otherworldly— there was an air about him that was distinctly not human; something wild, something that set off the age-old instincts inside her that warned of power and predator.

The realisation of just who it was standing there was so shocking that Hermione could barely process it, but she still managed to scramble off her bed, ignoring the trembling in her limbs, dropping to the floor so she could kneel in front of her god. He looked fond as he reached down, running his hand over her untameable curls, spilling uncontrollably over her shoulders. So close to him, she could feel the heat pouring off him, like she was standing next to an open stove.

"Hello Hermione," Loki said, voice warm like sunshine.

"You sound American!" She blurted out before she could stop herself, her cheeks immediately flushing pink with mortification.

"You meet a god and that's the first thing you say?" Loki teased and her blush deepened.

"It's just— I was expecting a Scandinavian accent," she mumbled, embarrassed.
"I have a great Scandinavian accent," Loki grinned. "And a damn good British one too, when I want. I've just been hanging out in America these past few centuries."

Hermione nodded, putting that away to think on later— right now she was too busy being occupied by something else entirely. “You… you saved me,” she repeated her earlier words, the same wonder in them as she gazed reverently up at her god.

“Of course I saved you,” Loki said, his voice shifting from playful to something so much less human, undertones of power clinging to each word, lending them a strength that stole Hermione’s breath. “You’re one of mine and I wasn’t about to let some selkie steal you away from me.”

Despite herself, Hermione’s brain managed to latch onto the semi-familiar word, her curiosity sparking, the ever-present need to know, to understand, taking control. “Selkie?” She asked before she could stop herself, “that was a selkie?”

Once again, to her relief Loki looked more amused then anything— fond even. “You’re a curious little mortal, aren’t you?” He teased and Hermione blushed, trying to look down at her lap, to hide from him behind a shield of curls, but he crouched down, his hand moving from the top of her head to gently cup her face and tilt her face back up, keeping her from looking away.

His touch crackled along her bare skin with the same almost-static as the feathers on her bracelet— not uncomfortable, just strange. His skin was just shy of being too hot to be comfortable, the heat sinking into her skin like she was sinking into a hot bath and Hermione slumped automatically into the touch. “Now, I never said being curious was a bad thing, did I?” Loki admonished her and Hermione bit her lip shyly, shaking her head as much as his gentle grip allowed.

“No,” she mumbled and Loki smiled.

“Only stupid people don’t ask questions and stupid people don’t interest me. You’re not stupid, are you sugar?”

Hermione had never seen the need to downplay her own intelligence; even when she’d been teased and mocked for it, she’d still valued knowledge and learning, knowing it would only benefit her in the long-term, would feed the constant thirst she had for uncovering and understanding the truth of the world around her and all that it held. And so she didn’t try to assume a mask of fake-humility when Loki asked his question, to pretend that she wasn’t aware and proud of her intelligence.

“No,” she told him honestly. “I’m the opposite of stupid.”

“Exactly,” Loki said, his smile widening into something undeniably pleased as he let go of her. Hermione immediately missed the comfort of the touch, the feeling of staticky otherness tingling on her skin, before his answer to her original question distracted her quite thoroughly. “Yes, that was a selkie,” he told her, “a juvenile that got separated from its mother and ended up in your ocean quite by accident.”

The part of her that wasn’t amazed by her chance encounter with an actual mythical creature wondered if she should feel bad about hurting the selkie so badly when it had been young and lost and likely both desperate and panicked when it had attacked. Then she recalled the way it had tried dragging Angus away, the way it had lashed out at her with those hooked claws, and didn’t feel bad at all. Loki’s smile went from pleased to satisfied.

“Good,” he said, a hint of something vicious threading its way through the satisfaction, “you should never feel bad for doing whatever it takes to survive. Given the chance, that selkie would have drowned your cousin and stripped the flesh off his bones for its next meal. It didn’t care
about his age, or your age, so there’s no reason you should care about its age.”

She couldn’t help her shudder, remembering those hooked claws, finding it far too easy to imagine them ripping away long strips of flesh to feast on. Without thinking, her eyes sought out where the selkie had lashed out at her— except there were no wounds there, no pain; not even scars remained, just smooth, undamaged skin.

“You healed it,” she murmured, turning wondering eyes back towards Loki.

“Of course I did,” Loki replied, like it was obvious. Maybe it was, her brain was just… stalling a bit. It had been forced to process a number of shocks today. “It has,” Loki agreed and a new realisation struck Hermione, one she’d overlooked a minute or two ago.

“You read my mind!” She gasped. “You can do that?”

“Hermione,” Loki said, all fond and amused again, “I’m a god— besides, with how loudly you’re projecting your thoughts right now it’s difficult not to hear them.”

Hermione wasn’t sure whether to be uncomfortable or amazed by that revelation and Loki laughed. “Don’t worry, sugar, I won’t purposefully go digging around in that busy little head of yours,” he winked and Hermione blushed again, before biting her lip as she remembered those same claws that had torn open her flesh hooked into her cousin.

“Is… is Angus okay?” She asked tentatively.

“Yup,” Loki said, popping the last syllable. “Right as rain. Doesn’t even remember it happened— none of them do.”

“Wha- pardon?” Hermione asked, almost forgetting her manners in her shock. “How?”

Loki wiggled his fingers in front of him and winked at her. “Magic.”

Magic… Hermione’s mind immediately flew to the books he’d left her, the ones she’d devoured so eagerlly, the ones she’d so desperately hoped he’d given her because he believed that inside her, there was the capability for her to accomplish the same fantastical feats written in those pages.

“Could I… could I ask you about the books you left me?” She asked hesitantly and Loki arched an eyebrow at her.

“Have you already forgotten what I said before?” he asked, the rebuke clear in his voice.

“‘Stupid people don’t ask questions’,;” Hermione immediately recited and he nodded.

“So there’s your answer, sugar.” He told her. “If I don’t want to answer something then I won’t, but I’m not going to get ticked off about you asking in the first place.”

And that… that silenced Hermione for a moment, her mind suddenly spinning with the thousands upon thousands of questions that she found herself wanting to ask this ancient being who had been around since the times of the Vikings.

“Oh much, much earlier then that.” Loki’s voice cut through her thoughts again and Hermione wondered if she’d ever stop blushing— she seemed to keep embarrassing herself in front of her god; it was mortifying, really.

Before she could get herself lost off on another tangent— the question of ‘how much earlier?’ was
right on the tip of her tongue— she returned her focus to the question she’d originally wanted to ask him.

“Why— why did you leave me those books?” She asked tentatively.

“Mm, I think you know why,” Loki said and Hermione could feel her heart speeding up in sudden excitement.

“So I was right? I’m a witch?” She asked, breathless and eager.

“You are,” Loki agreed, his expression flicking back to satisfied. “My witch.”

Hermione, too distracted by her once-again whirling thoughts, missed the undertones to his possessive statement, missed the possible implications it could hold. Instead, her attention had focused to the question that had been lingering in her mind since the first time she’d picked up ‘Hogwarts: A History’.

“Do you think I’ll get to go to Hogwarts?” She asked hopefully. “Will they still send me a letter, even though my parents aren’t magical?”

“They will,” Loki promised, with an edge of something absolute to his voice— like if it wasn’t already assured, then he would make it so. It both warmed and humbled Hermione to know that her god had her back.

“Of course I do,” Loki said, reaching out to playfully tug on one of her curls, which bounced stubbornly back into place.

But why? Hermione couldn’t help but wonder; why had he decided to take such an interest in her? She was just—

“Just mine,” Loki interrupted her thoughts and the expression on his face was much less playful now. Hermione froze, her heart beating faster in her chest as she was caught in those flashing golden eyes and in them caught a glimpse of the absolute power of the god before her, of her god. “Do you think I would ever claim someone I didn’t think was worth my time?”

Hermione, struck silent, just shook her head and Loki’s face relaxed, returning to the friendly, playful visage of before; losing the wilderness and edge of danger like a thunderstorm rumbling on the horizon. She couldn’t help but think of how he wore both power and playfulness with such ease, like they were his birthright— they suited him, both of them did.

Loki’s mouth had curled back up into the playful smile from before. “I met the Hogwarts founders, you know,” he said, speaking casually like his words hadn’t just blown her mind.

“Really?” Hermione breathed, eyes shining with awe.

“Really, really,” Loki nodded with a grin, “Hogwarts didn’t have any students yet— the castle had barely finished being built— but some of those books I gave you actually belonged to them.” Apparently aware that she was currently speechless with shock, her entire brain having stalled, Loki didn’t wait for her to reply before continuing with, “You actually remind me of Salazar and Rowena. Clever, dedicated and ambitious.”

Hermione really felt a bit like she might faint at this point. Still— “I’d love to have met them,” she said longingly and Loki smirked at her.

“Well, you never know— stranger things have happened.”
Well yes, Loki’s presence right in front of her at this very moment probably counted as a stranger thing— there was a literal Norse god standing in the bedroom she shared with her cousins and Hermione was fairly certain the only reason she wasn’t freaking out about it was that her brain still hadn’t quite wrapped itself around the enormity of the situation.

Though now that she was thinking about it, surely someone would have heard them talking by now — why hadn’t her Aunt or her cousins looked to see who the owner of the strange voice was?

“Don’t worry, we won’t be disturbed,” Loki assured her, “we’re in a… think of it as a magic bubble outside time.”

Hermione very firmly did not think of such a thing, because if she did then she’d never stop asking questions about how—how—how—how—

“Magic.” Loki answered her dizzy thoughts in a lightly teasing voice, wriggling his fingers again and winking as he repeated his earlier response.

Magic, Hermione thought to herself— and not for the first time— was utterly brilliant. She couldn’t wait to start learning.

“Do you think I’ll be very behind when I go to Hogwarts?” She asked Loki anxiously, “since I don’t know how to do any magic yet?”

“I’m not sure,” Loki said thoughtfully, stroking a beard that appeared without warning on his chin. Hermione couldn’t help but stare in wonder at the casual display of his powers, even as a small giggle escaped her at the ridiculousness of the sight. “I can’t say I’ve spent much time around witches and wizards.”

Hermione, who wouldn’t deny that she prided herself on her academic prowess, blanched slightly at the awful, horrible, appalling realisation of the possibility she could be at the bottom of the class!

“Now, now, don’t go panicking,” Loki scolded, tapping her on the end of her nose admonishingly. “I’m sure it would take you no time at all to catch up, but if you’re really worried, I can always teach you a few tricks— I am, after all, a Trickster.”

“I— I couldn’t possibly ask that of you—“ Hermione started to stammer, but Loki interrupted her.

“No, you couldn’t,” he agreed, “which is why it’s a good thing I offered, because that’s another matter entirely.”

Hermione had to swallow past the sudden lump in her throat as she looked at the god still crouching in front of her where she was kneeling. “I— I don’t know how to thank you,” she whispered, “I don’t even know how to thank you for what you did for N-Ness,” she stumbled slightly over her sister’s name, her breath hitching as a familiar heartache gripped her and tears burned her eyes. Loki gently stroked her head, his fingers lightly snagging in her curls. The warmth of his touch soaked through her again, this time seeming to ease the potency of her emotions like a heavy blanket had been draped over them, muffling them.

“I don’t need thanks for delivering Just Desserts to those deserving of a trickster’s wrath,” Loki said, his voice gentle but firm, leaving no room for argument. “And you can thank me for the lessons by not wasting my time and giving them your full attention and effort.”

Hermione couldn’t even imagine why she wouldn’t put her all into everything her god took the time to teach her, not when he was blessing her with the immeasurably valuable gift of his time and
attention, and she knew she would give him her absolute very best. Except… “I- I don’t have a
wand,” she told Loki, who made a dismissive sound.

“Neither did Merlin or Morgana,” he told her, “they didn’t ever use them, didn’t need to, and
nobody trained by me will ever be anything less then the very best.”

And that? That Hermione had no trouble with striving to be, just as she always had.
Chapter 10

About a week after rescuing Hermione from the selkie, Gabriel decided it was about time to fulfil his promise to the little witchling and teach her some magic. The only problem was that, in his usual style of leaping without looking, he actually had no idea how to teach her magic.

The very brief amounts of time he'd spent with Merlin and Morgana had been spent much more focused on other things, not how they used their magic, and he'd only spent a few hours in the company of the Founders of Hogwarts, which basically left him with a little natural-born witch he'd promised to teach and no idea how to do it.

He spent an hour or two puzzling over it then decided fuck it. Hermione had been blessed with magic by him, not Hecate— he didn't need to teach her what she'd be learning when she attended Hogwarts, it would be a waste of both their time; no, he was going to teach her how to use her powers trickster style.

Not to mention, there was a lot of useful magic and supernatural knowledge out there she could learn; he had no intention of stunting her potential growth, and pagan tricks were just the start— his girl was going to be better than Hecate's Blessed in every single way he could teach her.

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Gabriel waited until Hermione was alone before approaching her (and no, that wasn’t as creepy as it sounded). She was cleaning out a chicken coop and he announced his presence by clicking his fingers and vanishing all the yuck, replacing it with fresh straw.

Hermione jumped, gasping in shock as she spun around. The moment she realised it was him, however, she immediately dropped to her knees, looking up at him with the same reverence as the last time he'd seen her.

"Loki," she breathed out, her wide, chocolate-brown eyes shining.

"Miss me?" Gabriel asked brightly and her cheeks went pink as she nodded shyly. How adorable. Resisting the urge to keep teasing her, which was no small feat, he grinned at her instead and asked, "Ready to learn some magic, sugar?"

Hermione nodded her head frantically, her entire being radiating excitement— even her soul seemed to have lit up at the prospect of being taught magic.

Shifting them both out of time only took a moment of concentration; it was much easier then travelling through time, though it provided its own complications— while it didn't affect Gabriel due to his status as a primordial cosmic being of unfathomable power, stepping out of time for too long was Very Bad for mortals.

(...which reminded him, he really did need to check on Grindelwald at some point. He had no doubt the Dark wizard he'd stashed out of the time stream would be a drooling, tortured mess of insanity at this point and letting him die would be a mercy that Gabriel had no intention of delivering)

Taking Hermione out of time just for a couple of hours at a time, however, wouldn't do her any harm and it meant there wouldn't be any distractions or interruptions for the lesson ahead.

"Let's get comfortable," he said, snapping two squishy cushions into existence and sitting down on the obnoxiously orange one. Still on her knees, Hermione carefully shuffled forwards so that she
was kneeling on the blindingly bright yellow one. He knew he really should be telling her not to worry about all that old-fashioned, traditional kneeling before a deity shtick, but the pagan part of him was positively *preening* at the show of worship and respect and Gabriel had never been good at denying any part of himself what he wanted.

"Right," he declared, clapping his hands together. "Lesson time! First thing you need to understand is that it's not going to be *'abracadabra'*— and *voila*, magic happens! Unfortunately, that’s not how it works. To use the powers inside you, you need to be aware of them and then train them to respond how you want them to. Eventually using magic will be a mostly automatic process that requires very little concentration, like tying your shoes. Before tying your shoes became an automatic process, though, you had to learn how to actually tie the laces and then practice doing it again and again until you didn't have to think about it anymore— and it's the same with magic. Magic takes focus, repetition and effort when you first start out learning, and you, sugar, are most definitely a beginner."

"Hard work doesn't scare me," Hermione said firmly, her little face filled with fierce determination. "I'll practice everyday, Loki, I promise I will."

"I know, sugar, I believe you," Gabriel said fondly, reaching out to tug on one of her bouncy curls. She pouted up at him, looking as huffy as a little kitten whose tail had been tugged, and he barely refrained from patting her head and cooing. "Now, this part is going to be tricky for you," he said, returning to his lesson. "That busy little head of yours is always thinking about three or four different things at once, but for this you're going to need to learn the fine art of meditation."

"Meditation?" Hermione asked, looking confused.

"Meditation," Gabriel confirmed cheerfully. "Nothing too difficult, don’t worry— just some deep breathing and slowing down all those sprinting thoughts."

To her credit, Hermione didn't ask what meditation had to do with learning how to use magic. Instead, she shifted her legs so that she was sitting cross-legged on the cushion, resting her hands against her knees with her palms facing up and then closed her eyes.

"Take deep breaths, inhale and count to three, then exhale and count to three," Gabriel instructed her, pleased with her prompt, unquestioning response. "Remember, there's no need to rush. We have all the time we need."

Which turned out to be a very good thing because, like he'd predicted, meditation was not something that came easily to Hermione. It took nearly fifteen minutes for her thoughts to stop racing about that busy little head of hers, continuously colliding with and tripping over each other only to spawn more thoughts in the process. And maybe he eventually ended up cheating a little, nudging a wave calmness into that brilliantly chaotic brain of hers, but he never claimed to be a patient being— quite the opposite, in fact.

With her thoughts slowed and her concentration steady, Gabriel decided Hermione was ready for the next step and broke the easy, comfortable silence that had settled between them. "I want you to turn your attention inward now," he instructed her, keeping his voice calm and steady in a manner he very rarely projected as *Loki*. "I want you to remember how it felt, every time you've used your magic. Was it hot, did it tingle, where did you feel it? Remember and focus on those memories, relive the sensations, let them guide you and bring your attention to where your magic is centred within you. You’ll know it when you feel it— it’s unmistakable."

Gabriel watched as Hermione's face tensed in concentration for several minutes before abruptly going slack, her mouth opening slightly in wonder. He didn't need to ask to know she'd succeeded,
not when he could see it in her expression and feel it in the slight swell of power in the air, but he was curious about how her human senses perceived the magic she held within her being (to him, Loki's magic felt like wildness and crackling flames while his grace felt like an approaching thunderstorm; the warning of static in the air, the crashing of thunder so loud it shook the ground and the deadly heat flash of lightning strikes splitting the sky asunder) and asked his little disciple, "So what does your magic feel like to you?"

"Warm," Hermione whispered, her eyes still closed and her mouth curving into a small, soft smile. "I can feel it in my chest and it feels warm, like the heat coming off a fire..." her voice trailed off, a look of childish wonder on her little face. "It's beautiful."

It was beautiful, Gabriel silently agreed with her as he let enough of the archangel in him slip through that he could see Hermione's magic, his blessing, as a tangible thing; it was like an orb of light gently pulsing over her heart in time with its beating, shining bright and golden and untamed. And as Hermione focused her attention inward to it, its glow increased in strength, brightening further and further until it was almost like a miniature sun blazing over her heart.

While Gabriel didn't mind admiring her magic, he was actually supposed to be teaching Hermione how to use the power within her, not just appreciate how pretty it looked, and now that she was able to identify her magic within herself it was time for stage two of her training.

"There are three key components to using magic– intention, visualisation and power," he told her, silently snapping a lollipop into existence for the next part of his lesson. "Open your eyes," he instructed her, "but don't let go of that warmth."

Hermione's eyes obediently fluttered open and, as they met his, Gabriel wondered if the flecks of gold in her chocolate brown irises had always been that bright or if he just hadn't noticed them before. "Here you go," he grinned as he dropped the lollipop onto one of her still-open palms. "You're going to make that float for me." He said and although Hermione's eyes widened in shock she didn't say anything, just nodded. "Do you remember the key components?" He prompted.

"Intention, visualisation and power." She immediately recited.

"In regards to magic, ‘intention’ refers to you needing to really want the lollipop to float. ‘Visualisation’ refers to the need to vividly picture in your head what that lollipop will look like floating. And, most importantly, ‘power’ refers to actually possessing the power needed to make that lollipop floating a reality– which you do, sugar. You can feel that you have that power within you and you know that you can use it, because you've used it before. I want you to reach for it now, Hermione, and combine your want and magic the way we both know you can and make that lollipop float for me."

With fierce concentration and fiery determination, Hermione nodded her head, curls bouncing wildly, and turned her full focus onto the lollipop in her hand.

While she would never have the power to bend and shape reality around her according to her whims, not like he could, Gabriel still felt just as proud of his little disciple as if she had when, with a pulse of her golden magic that was invisible to all eyes but his, the lollipop rose up off her palm.

It barely floated an inch into the air before Hermione's sheer surprise at her success caused her to lose focus, dropping the lollipop back into her hand. She apparently didn't care at all though, instead turning her shining eyes up towards him. "I did it!" She exclaimed, clearly thrilled and startlingly childlike in her excitement. "I really did it!"

"Of course you did," Gabriel playfully scoffed with a cocky smirk. "I'm the one teaching you."
And he’d make sure she was never anything less than extraordinary.

"You did," Hermione said, so sweetly earnest, tears brimming in her eyes. "You taught me magic."

She spoke the word "magic" with nearly the same awe and reverence that she looked at him with and, without his permission, Gabriel’s smirk softened into something kinder. "I did," he agreed. "And I'm not finished yet either— I want you floating that lollipop at least as high as the house’s roof before I go."

Hermione's small face set in determination and she nodded hard. "I will," she said, voice filled with conviction, and Gabriel smiled.

"I know."

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Learning how to make the lollipop float, Hermione was quick to learn, just turned out to be the first step. Magic was still as breathtakingly amazing to her as it had been when she first learned of its existence, but she was also discovering it was very hard work.

After she’d succeeded in making the lollipop float, Loki had set her the ‘homework’ of practicing moving it through the air in a more purposeful manner, extending both her arms out and using her magic to make it float from one hand to the other while keeping it in the air.

To say that that was ‘complicated’ would be an understatement— concentrating her magic on keeping the lollipop hovering in the air was hard enough by itself without having to move it too, and the ‘homework’ required her to use her magic to jump the lollipop from side to side while using her magic to catch it so that she never actually touched the lollipop with her hands at all.

And after a few weeks when she’d mostly mastered having it jump the distance from one side to the other while catching it with her magic, Loki had shown up again and frozen zing time around them so he could teach her next step— which turned out to be him throwing the lollipop at her for her to catch with her magic. The unpredictability of his throws meant she had to react within moments, forcing her use her magic instinctively rather then through concentration— and then Loki wanted her to send it flying through the air back to him, which was much harder then it sounded due to the difficulty that was getting the trajectory right so it actually flew towards Loki, especially when he started moving around instead of remaining in the one place.

It was like a confusing, complicated, mentally exhausting game of ping-pong but Loki’s proud smile and ruffle of her hair when she got it right made her feel like she was glowing with pride, even when she was sweaty and panting and her head was pounding.

Over the next few months, Loki moved on from making lollipops fly to making them turn insivible, disappear and appear and teleport them across the garden, followed by then teleporting them somewhere out of her line of sight— such as into her bedroom or the kitchen and then even further, such as out to the wharf.

Even with Loki’s initial warnings, learning magic was still so much more difficult then Hermione had expected— but he’d been right when he said it would become more automatic and as she practiced every day, sometimes staying up late and practicing until past midnight while the rest of the house was asleep, using magic became more and more instinctive. She quickly understood the purpose of using the lollipop to learn and practice magic as what she was being taught was helping her to form a base set of magical skills, abilities and techniques to build off that she’d one day (hopefully) be capable of using for a variety of different purposes.
Despite the difficulty of learning magic, however, using it... it was *amazing*. Hermione loved it so much, loved the warm golden light over her heart that she could immerse herself in when she closed her eyes and turned her attention inward. It reminded her of Loki; her god had always reminded her of the sun, he was as bright and golden as the softly pulsing orb of light over her heart, which felt just as warm as Loki did, heat always pouring off her god like she was standing beside a fire. And when she immersed herself in her core, she could even feel that slight static tingle against her skin that made her think of the feathers on her bracelet.

The magical texts that she’d read cover-to-cover and practically memorised at this point called it her ‘magical core’, but for once Hermione didn’t find herself wanting to desperately research everything she could about the phenomena— she didn’t have to, not really; her magical core was *her*, she didn’t need other witches and wizards to explain something so private and unique to her, something that she found she instinctively understood on a deeply intrinsic, personal level.

It was an intense comfort to her, having what felt like a piece of her god with her always. It wasn’t something she’d ever voice aloud, not when it felt so intensely private, but every night she fell asleep feeling safe and protected and didn’t have a nightmare even once.
Chapter 11

The problem with getting attached to mortals was the very obvious fact that they were mortal. Sooner rather than later, they'd be off to Heaven and Gabriel never planned on darkening those hallowed halls again. Even with Hermione's naturally lengthened lifespan as a witch, she'd be lucky to reach a hundred and eighty.

It was why he tended to avoid humans, sticking with pagans instead—mortal lifespans were just too short, their loss came too quickly. But he had been around long enough to know that attachment wasn't always something that could be controlled, and in this case he had two options— he could distance himself from little Hermione to lessen the emotional impact her inevitable loss would have on him, or he could do the opposite and become more involved in her life, making the most of the time they did have.

Neither was an easy decision to make, but in the end it wasn't much of a choice at all; he'd already claimed her, his 'little stray' as Fenris had taken to calling her, and he was too involved with her life to start distancing himself now without causing that trusting, earnest little girl pain and distress. And that was the last thing he wanted to do, to hurt her when she was already so vulnerable to loss, with soul-deep scars of hurt and loneliness left behind when the part of her that had loved so unreservedly and completely had lost its anchor.

And maybe (okay, definitely) he was a selfish creature, maybe he liked to put his own needs first and foremost and spare himself discomforts like grief and loss, but he'd always, always, even in the worst of his pagan days, had a soft spot for children, especially the bright, wounded ones like his little stray. He could be just as greedy, spiteful and cruel as the next god, but he had a soft spot for innocents, broken things and those that were his— and Hermione was all of those.

He'd taken responsibility for her, when he'd claimed her as one of his— and no matter what else he was, all of his kids could attest to the fact that he looked after his own.

So Gabriel decided to make the most of the time they did have, before it was too late.

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It was a gradual thing, startlingly discrete considering just who it involved. Hermione didn't notice how Loki was around more and more until suddenly it was stranger for him not to appear every few days to tease her or teach her or both, bending time around them so that no one was any wiser.

Hermione loved learning from Loki. He taught her how to mix 'ingredients' such as herbs, hair and bones into what he called 'hexbags', explaining how the latent properties of all the different 'ingredients' interacted together with the help of a spark of magic to produce different effects. The hexbags he taught her to make were for protection, but he also told her how they could be used to cast curses instead. Hermione had used the magic he'd taught her to turn lollipops invisible to turn her hexbags invisible then hid one in each corner of the house to protect her family.

After hexbags, Loki started teaching her how to write, activate and strengthen runes with her magic. He'd started her off with a variety of protective symbols from different runic alphabets and she loved it. Seeing her enthusiasm, Loki began dropping off books for her to study, marking chapters for her to read and the different runes and symbols he wanted her to memorise and practice writing out over and over until she could do them perfectly.

Hermione eagerly drank up all the knowledge offered, delighting in the challenge of memorising,
writing out and then linking various runes together to various effects and results. It was amazing the variety of applications runes had, though she was currently limited by the fact that she could only use chalk and ink to write them and they were most effective and powerful when drawn with blood or pure magic. She wasn't advanced enough to use blood or magic yet, but Loki had promised he'd teach her once she'd reached that level— he'd also promised that he'd teach her how to create matter when he thought she was ready, an idea that honestly blew her mind.

Considering how busy she was, Hermione almost forgot about her fast approaching eighth birthday. And maybe... maybe that hadn't been entirely an accident, either. After all, it would be her first birthday without Ness and that hurt.

(It had been ten months since her sister had died and it still surprised Hermione that the earth had kept on spinning when Ness was gone)

The morning she turned eight, Hermione woke up feeling hollow. Her Aunt, Uncle and cousins all tried to cheer her up and make the day special, but she felt like she was a spectator to her own body, just going through the motions in a fugue-like state that was blindingly obvious to the people around her.

Aunt Iona eventually sent everyone away and let Hermione have her space. She pulled out Ness's collection of Ancient Greek legends and tried to lose herself in them, not even emerging for dinner. Aunt Iona let her skip the meal, for once, and Hermione pretended to be asleep when Ina, Jeanie and Leana came to bed. After the three girls were asleep, however, Hermione snuck out of the house, using the cover of night to sneak through Fraserburgh and make her way down to the wharf.

The ocean was transformed under the night-sky; it was beautiful with an edge of otherworldliness, its still waters black and glittering under the light of the stars and pale glow of the moon. Hermione dipped her bare feet into the cold water, letting the ocean turn them as numb as she felt inside. The tears she'd been holding in all day finally started sliding down her cheeks, burning-hot against her chilled skin.

She didn't realise Loki had appeared until he was already sitting beside her, wrapping one of his arms around her as he followed her gaze out towards the seemingly-endless expanse of ocean and the warmth of his touch burned all the way through her, chasing away the cold of the night. She turned and buried her face into his side, barely noticing the strangeness of his bare skin brushing against hers, the touch crackling like static against her skin, consumed by her grief.

"I know it hurts now," Loki said quietly, an ancient grief in his voice that briefly reminded her of the mythologies surrounding him, of caves and betrayal and dead, banished children, "but it won't hurt forever. I promise."

Hermione just clung to him and cried, letting him hold her through her tears as she burrowed into his side until she fell eventually into an exhausted sleep. When she woke up the next morning, she was in her bed, wrapped up in her blankets with a scattering of beautiful white and pink carnations on her pillow beside her head and a book of Victorian flower language with a single green ribbon tied around it with a large bow.

White carnations were for pure love and innocence, she discovered, and pink carnations for remembrance. As far as birthday gifts went, she thought Loki's was perfect. Later that day, she scattered the flower petals in the ocean and prayed that Ness was at rest. When she returned back to her home, she felt a weight lifting from her bowed shoulders, letting her stand tall once more.

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A week after her birthday, Loki appeared and announced he was taking her somewhere for the day, reassuring her that he'd return her to the same point in time that he'd taken her from so it would be like she'd never been gone. Hermione barely had time to wrap her head around the mind-bending concept of time-travel before Loki was snapping his fingers and she found herself standing in the middle of a colourful, eccentric boardwalk packed with crowds of cheerful, laughing people.

"Welcome," Loki said with a wide smile and a grand flourish of his hands, "to the Coney Island boardwalk!"

"Are we in America?" She asked, stunned, and Loki's smile widened.

"Surprise!"

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, spinning around in a circle to drink in the sights. She'd barely formed the thought that it was hard to see through the crowds of people when Loki's arms scooped her up and she found herself lifted up so she was standing on his shoulders, gripping onto his hands to keep her balance. She let out a breathless, excited sound as she took in the sights now visible to her—colourful tents and stalls, a packed arcade, fairway games, a roller-coaster, a huge ferris wheel towering over what appeared to be an amusement park and a golden beach with a turquoise ocean that sparkled jewel-like under the warm brightness of the sun.

"This is amazing!" She laughed as Loki spun in place, giving her a full view of her immediate surroundings. She'd almost gotten used to amazing things happening when Loki visited, but this... this was something else entirely.

Hermione didn't want to get down from Loki's shoulders, to leave both her vantage point and protection from the press of the crowds, and obligingly instead of lowering her back to the ground Loki just told her to sit on his shoulders as he started weaving through a crowd that didn't even seem to realise how it was parting for him, people automatically stepping out of his way.

Loki, of course, first whisked her over to a stall selling candy-floss and bought two sticks of it, the clouds of spun sugar each easily the size of her head—curls and all! The guilt she'd once have felt about eating something made entirely of sugar had long since faded over the months she'd been spending in the company of her god, as Loki was almost always eating something tooth-rottingly sweet and packed with sugar that he inevitably shared with her. The spun sugar of her candy-floss melted in her mouth sweet and delicious, sugar granules sticking to her teeth, tongue and lips.

Loki took her to the fairway games next—"We'll go on the rides when your stomach has time to settle," he promised her, before proceeding to win every single game he tried from the ring toss to the dart throw, the fact that all of them were clearly rigged apparently inconsequential compared to a pagan god's power. Hermione had a go at some of the games too and she suspected some godly assistance when she managed to knock down all the tin cups with a baseball. When she gave Loki an accusing look he just winked at her and helped her pick a giant stuffed owl as her prize.

The owl wasn't the only prize she and Loki got to pick out and Hermione ended up laughing alongside her god as she tried to hold the stack of giant stuffed toys he kept winning. "I guess we're going to have to make shrinking things your next lesson," Loki commented and Hermione smiled at him so widely that it hurt. She ended up giving away several of the stuffed animals to other children but she kept the owl, as well as the stuffed snake, horse and wolf that Loki had personally picked out. Loki had then helpfully shrunk them all so they fit in her pocket before dragging her to a stall selling hot-dogs for lunch.

Hermione had never had a hot-dog before and after watching Loki eat about three of them in ten seconds, she cautiously nibbled the one he'd bought her, her eyes widening as the flavour exploded.
across her taste-buds.

"This is horrible!" She exclaimed with a giggle.

"But also bizarrely delicious," Loki added smugly and she giggled again, nodding— because weirdly enough, it was.

After the hot-dogs, Loki took her to the arcade and proved he was just as skilled with the arcade games as he'd been at the fairway games as he used his godly powers to cheat outrageously at the games of chance and his supernatural reflexes to ace everything else. Personally, Hermione found the ping-pong machine to be the most fun, enjoying how it tested her reaction times and made her have to concentrate and think ahead.

She was pretty sure that if Loki hadn't been influencing the people running the arcade to ignore or overlook them and their wild successes they'd have been long-since kicked out, but she didn't care— she was having too much fun to worry about the morality of Loki using his powers like that.

After they'd finished picking out more prizes, Loki lifted her back onto his shoulders and they made their way along the promenade, watching the different acts. Hermione thought they were all amazing— there were fire-swallowers, sword-swallowers, contortionists, performing animals and even clowns doing skits!

Once they'd had their fill of watching the performers, they finally approached the Cyclone roller-coaster. Loki used his powers so they got to skip the queue (and made sure the everyone looked the other way about the fact she didn't reach the height requirement of the roller-coaster) and butterflies exploded in Hermione's stomach as they climbed onto the Cyclone, in one of the cars right at the very front of the ride, and she held onto Loki's hand extra-tight as they set off.

It was crazy, wild, terrifying and exhilarating— Hermione screamed nearly the whole ride, but at the same time she couldn't stop smiling and they ended up riding the roller-coaster five times in a row, Loki's powers meaning they never even had to get out of their seats.

Loki had to carry her off the ride afterwards, her legs were so shaky, and he didn't bother walking over to the ferris wheel— or 'Wonder Wheel', as the ride was called— instead he just snapped his fingers to transport them both onto one of the carriages. The Wonder Wheel was nowhere near as crazy as the Cyclone, but it was still breathtaking to be up so high, looking down at the bustling, colourful boardwalk below them.

Hermione honestly thought that the day couldn't get any better, until Loki revealed the biggest surprise yet— as they walked hand-in-hand along the promenade, he suddenly ducked off to the side, leading her towards a dark purple tent with the sign 'Explore The World Of Magic' in front of it. Unlike most of the tents, which were open at the front to advertise their contents, this tent was closed off with a curtain of heavy-looking fabric blocking the inside from view.

As they got closer, Hermione was confused to see how the eyes of the people walking past the purple tent seemed to slide from the tent selling tacos and empanadas on one side of it, to the coconut shy stall on the other— it was almost as if they couldn't see the purple tent at all!

"You're going to love this," Loki told her, stopping outside the tent and letting go of her hand, gesturing for her to enter first. Cautiously, Hermione pushed the surprisingly heavy fabric to the side, a strange sensation like walking through thick fog brushing over her as she stepped into the tent, expecting to find herself in a small, dimly-lit space— instead, she stepped into sunshine and onto a boardwalk just as busy as the one she'd just left, except this one was very different.
"Pretty cool, right?" Loki asked happily, having followed through after her, and Hermione looked up at him, bewildered.

"What— what is this?" She asked.

"This," Loki told her, looking like a combination of smug and proud, "is the magical side of Coney Island, created and run by your fellow witches and wizards."

Breathless with wonder, Hermione turned back to the spectacular sight before her. She was still in Coney Island, that much was clear, but it was vastly different from the one she's just left. It was so much more old-fashioned, to start, filled with a variety of figures, including normal-ish looking people in robes and pointed hats that she assumed were witches and wizards; tall, willowy, pointy-eared beings she thought might be elves; short, bad-tempered—looking men with huge beards that were probably dwarves; bald, long-fingered, sly looking richly dressed figures with pointed faces who were the same height as the dwarves— goblins, she was guessing, from the books Loki had given her; there was even a centaur, the half horse, half man not getting a second look from the amalgamation of beings.

The magical Coney Island still had rides and stalls, just like the normal one, but it also had proper shops, not just in the tents but in actual brick buildings, the tents constantly flashing different colours while the shops advertised that they were selling everything from potion ingredients to books to broomsticks, and owls carrying mail dipped and soared through the air while dodging the roller-coaster cars rocketing madly about the sky without any rails.

It was bizarre, brilliant, unbelievable, fantastical— and most of all, it was magical.

"This occupies the exact same space as the normal Coney Island we were just standing in," Loki explained to her as she eagerly drank in her surroundings, "concentrate on the magic around you, see what happens."

Hermione was confused by his instructions but did as he said, concentrating on the strange sensation she'd felt while walking into the 'tent'. "Can you feel the enchantments?" Loki asked, quieter now, and she nodded immediately, not needing him to explain what he was talking about—the enchantments were like gauzy veils draping over her, obstructing her from seeing clearly through them, and, without thinking, she lifted her hands to brush them away from her face, feeling the magic catch and drag on her fingers.

She then gasped, her eyes widening as she found herself standing in the coconut shy stall, both her and the stall literally occupying the same space while remaining intangible to each other. It hurt her head to even try and comprehend how it was even possible and she hastily dropped her hands back to her sides, letting the enchantments settle back over her, obscuring the non-magical Coney Island and leaving only the magical one tangible to her senses.

Loki was grinning at her again and she blushed at seeing the pride visible on his face, not that it did anything to dampen her curiosity and enthusiasm. "How did they do that?" She asked him eagerly. "It's bloody brilliant!" Loki laughed.

"It's a complicated ward and charm system, from what I've figured out— the magic is older then most of the non-magical Coney Island boardwalk, but that makes sense seeing as after the Second World War it went through a real rough patch, a lot of it being sold or closed."

"So this is like a mirror of the original Coney Island?" Hermione asked and Loki nodded, smiling.

"Pretty amazing, huh?"
"So, so amazing," Hermione agreed fervently.

"Come on, sugar," Loki held out his hand which she grasped onto, the now-familiar static flickering warm as sunshine along her skin at the touch of his bare skin to hers, "let's go exploring!"

There was so much to see that Hermione felt like her head was permanently turning from one direction to the next. As they were passing a post office filled with sleepy-eyed, softly hooting owls which she'd stopped to look at in delight, Hermione noticed a shelf stacked high with flashy magical magazines and newspapers with titles that grew and shrank as articles shuffled about, rearranging themselves. Intrigued by the newspapers, she stepped into the shop for a closer look and noticed something rather peculiar— more peculiar, even, then the moving photographs (she'd almost gotten used to those, what with the magical books Loki had given her).

"Wait," she said, slowly. "The date on these say it's June!"

"Coney Island's the most fun in summer," Loki said, with an air of great wisdom. Hermione could only stare at him and he smiled fondly down at her, ruffling her hair. "Only the best for you, sugar."

Hermione kept staring— Loki had managed to desensitise her to stepping outside of time, she hadn't even spent too long been mind-blown about his promise to return her to the point of time he'd taken her from (Coney Island had been too distracting to keep her mind stuck on the 'smaller' details), but travelling several hours through time was wildly different from travelling entire months back in time!

Loki just laughed at her expression, tugging playfully on one of her curls. "Come on, sugar— want to see how magical hot-dogs compare to normal ones?"

The answer to that was they tasted the exact same (disgusting yet bizarrely delicious), and Hermione decided to just let go of her bewilderment— Loki was capable of astonishing things that didn't make any sense at all and she was just going to have to learn to go along with it, or she'd go mad.

"That's the spirit," Loki said cheerfully, looking down at her with that same fondness again. Hermione elbowed him the best she could while he was still holding her hand.

"Don't read my mind!" She complained and he grinned.

"Tell you what, sugar," he said, "if you learn how to shield your thoughts, I promise I won't read them."

"How do I do that?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she mentally ran through the books he'd already given her, trying to remember if any of them had mentioned shielding her thoughts.

"I'll teach you," Loki told her, which made the bubble of happiness she felt whenever Loki promised to dedicate his time to teach her new skills grow. "Though I'll warn you now, part of learning how to make shields will mean having them tested— which will mean I'll be getting very well acquainted with that crazy little head of yours." He added.

"I'm not crazy," Hermione grumbled, elbowing him again.

"Put your claws back in, kitten," Loki said with a laugh. "We're all a little crazy."
"You stole that from 'Alice in Wonderland'," she told him, pouting slightly, and Loki's grin
widened, his golden eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Maybe I did— or maybe Lewis Carroll stole it from me."

Hermione blinked then shook her head and groaned. "Stop breaking my mind!" She complained
and Loki laughed again.

"Come on, kitten— let's check out the magic candy-floss, I think it's supposed to change flavours
as you eat it!" (It did. Loki loved it and immediately bought ten more after finishing his first and
ate them so quickly even the witch running the stall had looked shocked.)

Magical Coney Island was every bit as good as normal Coney Island— better, even! The
performers showed off amazing feats of magic to the milling crowds, Hermione's favourite being
the ones turning cartwheels in the air while juggling objects that were magically switching shapes
and forms without warning, spinning knives one second then crystal balls or live toads the next.
There were animal acts too, magical animals, and Hermione adored the foul-mouthed ferret-like
creature that Loki told her was a jarvey— it got into a shouting match with its 'owner' as it grew sick
of performing for the crowds and she learned nearly two dozen new swear words in about thirty
seconds before Loki dragged her away, cackling as he did so.

Once she'd had her fill of the performers, she and Loki visited a bookstore where she bought as
many books as she could pile into the basket that floated around behind them as they browsed,
including several on the history of magical Coney Island. Once they'd paid, Loki helpfully shrank
them down for her to fit in her pockets alongside all the stuffed toy prizes.

After visiting the bookstore, they decided to check out the magical rides with Loki still managing
to get them to the front of the queue without anyone looking twice. The rides apparently ran on
magic and were about ten times as terrifying as their muggle counterparts, considering the fact that
the roller-coaster's cars didn't actually run on railway tracks, rather they rocketed through the air
without any apparent support, doing loop-the-loops and steep drops and upside down spins and
even plunging underwater down into the ocean, a protective bubble of magic keeping everyone on
the ride dry while they zoomed past schools of fish so fast Hermione could only register blurs of
colour. The magical 'Wonder Wheel' was just as amazing, taking them so high up into the sky that
they were actually amongst the clouds, protected from the freezing cold and thinning air by the
same bubbles of protective magic as the roller-coaster.

By the time the sun started to sink, painting the dusk sky in softs shades of pink and orange and
turning the surface of the ocean a dazzling gold, Hermione was beyond exhausted. When she
almost tripped over a loose board, too tired to pay attention to where she was stepping, Loki
scooped her up into his arms and she snuggled into him.

"Time to go home, I think," he murmured and Hermione made a sound of agreement, letting her
heavy eyelids drift shut. She felt the shift in the air that meant Loki had teleported them from
Coney Island and recognised the faint scent of lavender now clinging to the air as the soap she and
Leana had used when they'd washed the bedsheets the day before. Sure enough, when she pried her
sleepy eyes open she found herself in her bedroom— Ina, Jeanie and Leana were all fast asleep and
Loki kneeled down beside her bunk bed, carefully settling her down and tucking her in under the
blankets.

Hermione let her eyelids fall shut again as her head sank down into her squishy pillow. "Goodnight
Loki," she mumbled sleepily, "I love you."

There was a slight pause, then something brushed against her face— not a hand, something lighter
and softer that left a slight tickle of static in its wake.

"Goodnight Hermione," her god whispered and Hermione basked in the comforting warmth of his presence, floating off into the gentle embrace of her dreams.
Chapter 12

Hermione had just told him she loved him and it wasn't as if he hadn't already known, but... Well, it was something else entirely to hear it being said out loud.

Gabriel couldn't stop himself from brushing one of his mostly-intangible wings along Hermione's half-asleep form; it was the closest he could get to touching her with one of his own limbs, not those of the vessel he'd taken. In response to the touch, his little disciple's bright, beautiful soul reached out to brush against his feathers and he closed his eyes, wondering what in his Father's name he was doing.

The moment Hermione was fast asleep (helped along by a little bit of grace), Gabriel flew away so quickly he ended up halfway across the globe in a handful of seconds. He'd claim he wasn't running away except no, he was most definitely running away— if he was going to be honest with anyone, it may as well be himself.

As a rule, Gabriel did not love humans— as a species, of course he loved them and he understood exactly why his Father had loved them so much too, but he didn't love them as individuals and he'd never planned to. He'd decided to make the most of Hermione's short mortal life and the too-brief time they'd get to spend together, but he hadn't intended to ever love the bright, wounded child and it was suddenly dawning on him just how dangerously close he was to loving the little girl who'd sworn her life to him.

There was only one thing Gabriel could think of now to do— deciding to make the most of their time had obviously been a mistake and although he wouldn't abruptly remove himself from Hermione's life, he could and would minimise his presence in it, starting with setting up a bit of magic to transport the offerings she laid out for him to one of his homes instead of retrieving it in person. He didn't want her to think he was abandoning her entirely, but there obviously needed to be a distance created between them.

He wasn't her friend, he was her god and he'd blurred those lines which was his mistake to rectify.

And rectify it, he would.

(He was going to miss Hermione)

::

Hermione missed Loki.

It had been months now since she'd last seen him, and it had really made her realise just how often he'd been popping around to visit her before that. She knew that he must be busy, that he was a god and he had a life of his own, one that he'd been living for thousands of years before she'd even been born and would continue living thousands of years after she'd died, but—

She still missed him.

She'd been practicing her magic every chance she got, desperately wanting to show Loki when he returned that she hadn't been slacking off just because he hadn't been around to give her lessons, to prove that she was worth the time he took to teach her. It was difficult to get the privacy to practice without Loki stepping them both out of time to ensure there wouldn't be interruptions, so Hermione started to sneak out of the house at night— something made easier by the fact her Aunt and Uncle always both went to bed early, both having to wake each morning before the sun.
Other than the wharf, the ocean shore and the scattered houses, Fraserburgh was mostly rolling
green fields and clusters of trees forming small pockets of wooded areas that provided perfect
places for her to practice magic while concealed from the sight of any possible passersby. She had
a favourite woods to practice in, one about an acre in size and barely fifteen minutes from her
house at a brisk jog. It was dense enough that she could hide amongst the trees and was filled with
wildlife— field mice, red squirrels, rabbits, voles, pine martens and more. Sometimes the smaller
woodland creatures would creep over to watch her, which made her feel like Snow White.

When a squirrel actually hopped close enough to her that its whiskers tickled against her ankle she
found herself turning automatically to where Loki would usually be, laughter bubbling up inside
her only to be cut off at the knees before it could ever leave her mouth when she was once again
faced with the reminder that Loki wasn't there.

*I miss you* she prayed quietly, blinking back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

There was no reply and her chest felt cold.

Close to four months after Coney Island, Hermione was once again out practicing in the forest at
night under the light of the waxing moon. The weather was mild with only a soft breeze whispering
between the trees and rustling the leaves as she coaxed wild flowers into unfurling so she could
change the colours of their petals to all the colours of the rainbow and more. She'd just finished
turning the petals of one flower to a gold so vibrant it was almost glowing when her peace was
abruptly shattered.

"What a clever little human!" A sweet, silvery voice like tinkling bells chimed. Hermione couldn't
help the shriek that tore from her throat as she immediately jumped to her feet, heart pounding in
her chest as she frantically scanned around her for the source of the voice— finding it, however,
did nothing to lessen her panic.

The strange, fluting voice and the use of the word 'human' as a description should have prepared
Hermione for the speaker to be something other then human, yet she was still shocked when she
found herself staring wide-eyed at a small, winged being barely two-feet tall.

The fairy— for what else could it be, with those gossamer wings and slim ears curved into fine
points?— was as quixotic as it was inhuman to behold; undeniably beautiful but too androgynous
for her to comfortably label either male or female. Perfectly proportioned for its slight size, the
fairy was luminescent with its moon-bright skin that seemed to soak in the glittering light of the
night sky, long, tangled hair the colour of clear glass and glittering purple eyes that were
unnaturally fever-bright.

It was hovering in the air at about her eye-level and as Hermione stared it smiled at her, revealing a
mouthful of razor sharp looking white teeth that ended in needlepoint-like tips. It was immediately
obvious to her, upon seeing those teeth, those *fangs*, that the fairy was dangerous— much closer to
the Grimm Brothers depictions then to Disney— and with that observation came the sinking
realisation that she was in danger.

"Such pretty flowers!" Chimed the fairy, its words almost sounding like it was cooing at her.
"What's your name, little witchling?"

Hermione may not have realised that fairies existed until thirty seconds ago, but she'd read enough
fairytales to know better then to give any magical creature her name— names had power and the
last thing she needed right now was to give the fairy power of her when she was so uncertain of the
situation.
"You can call me Ness," she told it, her sister's name the first that came to her. The fairy laughed, the chiming sound cloyingly sweet, like rotting fruit— it was enough to set her teeth on edge.

"Such a clever little witchling," it cooed and Hermione took an uneasy step backwards. It immediately fluttered forwards, erasing the added distance she'd put between them and more. "In such a hurry!" It trilled, "silly little girl, hasn't anybody told you that you can't run from the fey?"

The fairy's words, how it had called her a 'silly little girl', brought to mind how Ness used to read Shakespeare plays out loud to her, specifically Midsummer's Night Dream ("Lord, what fools these mortals be!") and somewhat irrationally, Hermione suddenly felt furious— those memories were special, they were precious, and it felt like the fairy was tainting them. The thought enraged her, made her rash. The fairy claimed she couldn't run away from it?

"Just watch me!" She retorted with more bravery then she felt. But before she could do more then take another step away from it, the fairy swooped forwards, colliding into her midsection with the force of a cannonball— or that's what it felt like, anyway. Hermione was thrown back several feet and ended up on the ground gasping for the air that had been knocked out of her lungs.

For a brief, surreal moment, she reflected on the bizarre fact that she was being attacked by a fairy ("Though she be but little, she is fierce!") and then she turned her focus towards survival, staggering to her feet while her lungs fought to draw a breath, her eyes not leaving the now annoyed-looking fairy.

"You don't get to leave," it informed her crossly, "I found you and now you're mine, my little curiosity— but I won't hurt you, no need to fret, and everyone at Summer Court will love you."

"So you want to make me your prisoner?" Hermione demanded as fear started to sink its vicious claws into her. Fairies stealing humans was common enough in the old fairytales, the ones that were gritty with bloodstains, violence and shadows of madness. Fairies weren't nice, the old tales rightfully warned— quite the opposite in fact. Fairies were dangerous beings that ranged from capricious to downright wicked; they murdered children for petty grievances, cast lifelong curses of poverty, terror and ostracisation for the slightest of offences and abducted humans to take to their Realms and enslave— newborns for pets, beautiful young women for brides, new mothers for nursemaids and humans that managed to capture their attention; curiosities that they took and kept forevermore in their Courts.

The idea that she'd somehow gained the interest of a fairy was terrifying, the thought that it wanted to take her to the Fairy Realm was even worse— she had no wish to spend her life enslaved.

"You'll be happy," the fairy assured her, easily reading the horror on her face, "once you've dined in our Realm, you'll never want to leave— you'll be happy, content."

Not bloody likely, Hermione thought to herself furiously, even as part of her mind latched onto a random thread of Greek mythology, recalling how Persephone had been offered six perfect pomegranate seeds and after consuming them had then been trapped in the Underworld for six months of the year for the rest of time— apparently eating in the Fairy Realm would be just as dangerous. Not that she planned on setting foot there, ever.

According to the same old fairytales, iron was a major weakness of the fey— Hermione could only hope that that held true to real life fairies. She didn't have any iron with her, but Loki had taught her how to teleport objects away from her, out of her line of sight— it stood to reason, then, that teleporting a far away object to her was also possible and she knew herself, she knew that she had the tendency to do her best work while under pressure. Usually that involved tests— this time, however, it involved a fairy who wanted to abduct and enslave her and the weapon she would need
to save herself from such a fate.

There was a fire-poker made of iron leaning next the wood-and-coal burning stove in the Macleod house; she'd seen it every day for as long as she'd lived with her cousins and could picture it perfectly, could feel her magic stirring inside her like a caged wild thing, eagerly pacing and ready to lunge the moment the doors to its prison opened— so she opened them.

"What is that—?" She vaguely heard the fairy mutter, but she was too focused on the way the warmth in her chest she'd always associated with her magic, with *Loki*, felt as if it had been stoked to an inferno, burning all the way through her as her magic leapt eagerly to her fingertips, practically begging to be used— and she had no intention of denying it.

Teleporting objects was something she'd done hundreds, if not thousands, of times now and twisting the magic around so as to summon unseen objects to her instead of banishing them was simpler then she'd expected or could have hoped for. Hermione felt her fingers close around the cold metal of the fire-poker, barely needing to concentrate to ensure her magic kept it hidden from sight, at the same time as the fairy let out an alarmed sound of realisation.

"What is this claim on you? You are Loki's get!?" It demanded in shrill disbelief, and its high voice suddenly sounded less like bells and more like the cringeworthy sound of steel nails scraping against a chalkboard, grating against her ears to the point she was surprised they weren't bleeding.

"I am," Hermione confirmed with fierce pride before she grasped onto the poker with both hands and *swung*. It caught the fairy entirely unawares, just as she'd intended, and it let out a scream of agony as it careened through the air until it crashed into a tree.

Hermione could see the bubbling of its skin where the iron had hit it, like she'd poured acid onto the fairy, and it took a stunned moment to wail loudly in pain before throwing itself at her with a furious shriek, wings fluttering madly. Hermione ducked its sloppy attack, the pain of what appeared to be its *dissolved* skin throwing the fairy off its game.

Before it could turn around and attack again, Hermione swung the poker a second time, aiming— and hitting— the fairy in the back of its head with as much force as her arms could manage. There was a wet crunch and then a meaty thud as the small winged being hit the ground.

Hermione had a moment to take in the gruesome sight of the half caved-in skull before she doubled over and gagged violently, vomit splashing against her shoes as her stomach rolled violently. She staggered backwards, still clutching onto the poker with white knuckles, and tears mixed with smears of bile as she started to cry.

What had she done? She'd *killed* it, she'd *killed* it—

*Oh Loki Loki Loki, please, I need you, I need you, it's dead, I killed it, I need you, please—*

A rustling sound like a bird's wings, except much, much larger, had her spinning around, gripping the poker with both hands, ready to swing at any fairy that might have appeared to avenge the one she'd— the one she'd defeated (*killed*).

Except it wasn't a fairy; it was *Loki*.

"Oh kiddo," he said with a deeply sympathetic look on his face, so real and standing right there in front of her. "This is a mess, isn't it?"

Hermione dropped the poker and stumbled straight into his waiting arms, burying her face into the softness of his stomach as she sobbed.
"Shh, kitten," Loki murmured, rubbing a circle between her shoulder-blades as his warmth burned through her, chasing away the cold dregs of sickness and the shivers that had started to work their way through her body after the poker had cracked open the fairy's skull like the bone was mere eggshell to be shattered.

"Don't call me kitten," she mumbled wetly into the material of his shirt— it smelt like burnt sugar and lightning storms. Or maybe that was what Loki smelt like. The little details didn't particularly matter to her, not right now at least.

"I can't help it," Loki said, and even though she couldn't see his face she could hear the smile in his voice. "It's not my fault— you're just so tiny and fierce, it's adorable." She made an annoyed huffing sound and he stroked one of his hands over the top of her head. There was a brief silence between them as Hermione soaked up his presence, and then Loki spoke again— and like she'd heard the smile before, this time she could hear how it had disappeared, replaced by something uncommonly serious and almost sad. "Why didn't you pray to me for help?" he asked her quietly.

Hermione felt her insides twist with a sudden anxiety and she bit her lip nervously, her arms tightening automatically around him. "I..." she wanted to lie, but she couldn't, not to him. "I wasn't sure you'd come." She whispered, closing her eyes in shame for having doubted him.

::

Gabriel felt frozen as Hermione admitted to him in a small voice that she wasn't sure he'd have answered her prayer for help.

"It wasn't that I thought you'd just leave me, to be hurt by the fairy," the little girl hastily tried to explain, her words muffled due to the fact she hadn't moved her face from where she'd pressed it against his stomach, her limbs still shaking slightly. "I just... you've been so busy, I didn't know how quickly you'd be able to get here, or if you'd get here in time to save me, so I couldn't just— I couldn't just do nothing and hope that I'd be saved, I had to try and save myself... I'm so sorry I doubted you!"

She sounded tearful and apologetic and ashamed— and Gabriel? Gabriel felt small— and considering his True Form was approximately the size of Jupiter, that wasn't an easy thing for someone to manage. Worse still, he knew that she wasn't trying to make him feel lousy; Hermione didn't expect things of him, she was just thankful for he did give her, treating him like he was granting her the most wonderful of blessings with his presence alone.

It made him feel... he wasn't quite sure. He liked that she didn't pray to him expecting him to just snap his fingers and solve all her problems— she didn't treat him like some wish granting genie she could freely use, that just because he had phenomenal powers he owed her the use of them; no, Hermione treated him like a god, like his existence alone was worthy of her worship and respect and there was no greater boon he could possibly give her then to have accepted her as his disciple.

And yet, he'd been avoiding her, spooked off by a child's sleepy confession that had sparked a realisation he hadn't been ready for. He'd been avoiding her because he was a coward— a coward who always ran. And Hermione could have been stolen away by the fey, could have been killed, even, if the faery had lost its temper, all because she hadn't been sure that he'd have answered her prayer for help in time, not when he'd been ignoring her other prayers. Not that she actually knew he'd been ignoring them, which was at least a small consolation to him in this shitty situation he'd landed himself in.

Gabriel hadn't realised just how much it had meant to him to be the god that she saw when she looked at him, the god she believed him to be, her god, until that belief was threatened—
threatened by his own stupidity.

"I will always answer your prayers, Hermione Jane Granger," he told her, letting enough of his true voice to leak through into his words to give them weight, to turn the air heavy with his holy presence and power; a trumpeting of horns audible within each syllable, words ringing with undeniable authority. Hermione gasped under the sheer onslaught of his promise and he had to grab hold of her when her knees gave out ('For the word of God is living and powerful' and runaway or not, Gabriel was still God's Messenger, His mouthpiece on Earth).

Hermione, only kept upright by his hold, looked up at him in wide-eyed wonder, her expression awed and dazed and reverent, and Gabriel vowed in that moment not to let her down again.

Seeing that her legs didn't look like they were about to start supporting her again any time soon, Gabriel lowered them both down so they were sitting on the slightly damp ground. Hermione immediately curled up in his lap like the kitten she tried to claim she wasn't and he tucked his chin over the top of her curly head and let her seek the comfort she needed from his closeness while pretending he wasn't doing the exact same thing.

The corners of his mouth curled up slightly as he took in the rainbow wildflowers around them. He wasn't surprised the faery had been drawn to Hermione— his little stray's magic was thick and charged in the small clearing amongst the trees; she had clearly spent a lot of time here, practicing her magic, and the fey were drawn to power.

It was actually fortunate it had just been the faery she'd attracted to her— or perhaps there had been others who'd been drawn to the clearing, but they'd recognised his claim on her and left her alone, so as to not risk his wrath.

Not liking the thought that he'd unthinkingly left her vulnerable, Gabriel's hold tightened protectively. "You did well, Hermione," he told her, glancing proudly over at the faery with the caved in skull and vanishing it with a thought— she didn't need to see the evidence of what she'd done, not when it distressed her so much. "I will admit, though, that the presence of the fire-poker is confusing me. You weren't carrying it around with you, were you?" He asked, mostly teasing but also curious.

"Fairytales say that iron is a weakness of fairies," Hermione mumbled, suddenly sounding very nervous. "And I know you said when you first started teaching me that I shouldn't experiment with my magic unless you were there to watch and help me if I needed it but I was desperate and I've teleported objects from here to the house before so it made sense that I'd be able to teleport an object from the house to here."

"A fire-poker is significantly different from the lollipops we started you off at, when you first began learning to use your powers to shift objects through space away from you," Gabriel said dryly, though with no small amount of pride at what she'd managed to achieve through her instincts and understanding of her magic alone.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said miserably and he made a scolding sound.

"Don't be sorry, sugar— never be sorry for saving yourself from danger. Because you did; you saved yourself and I could never be angry about that. If you were messing around experimenting with your powers without me there to keep an eye on things just because you wanted to then sure I'd get mad, but not when you're in danger."

"So... you're not mad now?" Hermione asked in a small voice.
"I am mad," Gabriel admitted, "but not at you, at myself. You, Hermione, I'm proud of. Me? Not so much, considering I've apparently completely overlooked the need to teach you both how to defend yourself and what you'll need to defend yourself from."

"Does that mean more lessons?" Hermione asked hopefully, looking up at him with those big chocolate-coloured doe eyes.

"That it does, kitten." Gabriel confirmed, grinning back down at her. Hermione looked so thrilled at the prospect that she didn't even complain about the nickname and he wondered, amused, just how long that youthful exuberance would last in the face of what was no doubt going to be a truly gruelling training regiment—Hermione needed to know how to defend herself against supernatural threats and he was going to make damn sure that she had every trick possible at her disposal.
Chapter 13

The Faery Realm had many names— TirnanOg, Avalon, Land of Ever-Young, Annywn, Otherworld, Albion, Tir Nman Bamn and more. To Gabriel, however, it didn't matter what the place was called, it mattered who ruled it— and that was Oberon.

Oberon was King of the Fey and he presided over all of the Faery Realm with the aid of a Tribunal, which he headed, and his two Queens, who held dominion over the two Courts— Titania, Queen of the Summer Court, and Maeb, Queen of the Winter Court. The Summer and Winter Courts were also commonly known as the "Seelie" and "Unseelie" Courts respectively, though to consider the Seelie fey 'good' and the Unseelie 'bad' was the sort of mistake that would end up getting a person killed. The fey had no care at all for any human laws— or human lives. They took whatever— or whoever— they wanted, killed for the pettiest of reasons and loved causing chaos for the sake of chaos.

It stood to good reason that as a god of chaos, Loki had always been welcomed within the Faery Realm. It wasn't somewhere Gabriel often went, he preferred Earth, but he knew his way around it well enough— and he knew the King and his Queens well enough too.

The Summer Court was a bright, gaudy place that had well earned its title— the sun was always bright there, the grass long and lush, fresh blooms of brilliant bursts of colour grew with abandon and fey of all shapes and sizes flitted around on either foot or wing, from the ones who were so small that to a human's eyes they'd be little more then pin-pricks of light, to the sharp-toothed, sharp-clawed fey the size of a man's forearm, to those the size of human children with fever-bright cat-eyes and red painted lips.

And, of course, draped lazily over a shining golden throne was the Summer Queen herself.

Queen Titania's features were too sharp and feline to ever pass as remotely human, her ears also tellingly long, thin and pointed, yet she was captivating to behold. Her skin was bronze, her hair as brilliant as sunbeams and her eyes sparkled brightly with all the vitality of new leaves. It was those bright eyes that were first to snap over to him as he let his pagan powers spill out around him as a beacon of his presence.

"Loki," she purred in a silvery voice of sweetly chiming bells, rising from her throne and slinking over to him. He noticed with appreciation the way the white silk Titania was draped in clung to her every curve and didn't protest when she pressed herself up against him, her nails like pricking like a cat's claws through the fabric of his shirt. She smelled syrupy sweet and he knew from experience she tasted exactly how she smelt.

Unfortunately, he was visiting for business today, not pleasure.

"I like to think we both have a healthy respect for each other," he told her, one hand on the curve of her hip, the other playfully coiling tresses of her sun-bright hair around his fingers. Titania's rose-pink lips curled into an enticing smile that had tempted many a mortal over the centuries.

"Why of course, Loki. You are certainly one of our most favoured of Earth's gods."

"Which is why I'm so confused," he continued, letting his voice go sharp as he abruptly tightened his grip on her hair, causing a small hiss to escape suddenly clenched teeth as the Summer Queen was forced to look him in the eye as his power built up around them, turning the air heavy and dangerous, "as to why a faery from your Court tried to take a human I'd already claimed as my
own."

Several emotions flitted over Titania's face, fear being one of them, as well as confusion and anger, before finally settling on a resigned acceptance. "You have my deepest regrets, Loki of the Norse Pantheon," she murmured and Gabriel released his grip on her, pulling Loki's power back under his skin. Titania swayed slightly at the sudden absence, her unnaturally bright eyes fixed still on his.

"Don't let it happen again," he warned her and her now-silent Court, "or next time I won't settle for the one who tried to take what's mine alone. Stay away from Siórrachd Obar Dheathain.*"

"We will," Titania assured him, "we have no wish for enmity between us and yourself– as I said, God of Chaos, you are one of our most favoured."

Gabriel nodded, trusting her word as the fey couldn't lie– now he just had to extract the same promise from Maeb.

"Care to stay to dine and dance with us?" Titania asked playfully, discarding the seriousness like an ill-fitting shroud as she lifted her hand to caress his mouth with the tips of her fingers, carefully minding those sharp fingernails of hers.

"Sadly, I now have business with your Sister-Queen," he told her with a theatrical sigh and Titania's mouth immediately twisted down at the corners as she stepped back from him.

"Another time, then," she said. "It has been too long since you've walked this Realm, Loki."

Bidding Titania farewell, Gabriel flew from the Summer Court to the outskirts of the Winter Court's territory where he stopped and waited. Sure enough, it only took a few minutes for Puck to appear.

His fellow Trickster was the shrewd and knavish sort and Gabriel would reluctantly admit that Puck's gift for mischief and chaos outdid even his own, though considering he was one of the fair folk that wasn't as surprising as it otherwise would be. Only four feet tall and with thick russet hair that hid his pointed ears, Puck was as disliked by most of his fellow fey as Loki was by most of the Norse Pantheon, but he was powerful and he was King Oberon's emissary which meant that as resentful of him as they often were, none of the fey bothered him.

Gabriel had once tried to fashion a relationship with Odin based off Puck and Oberon's– that had been one of the worst mistakes of his very long life. Gabriel had been resentful of Puck after it had all gone down, but after a century or two he'd admitted to himself that Puck hadn't had anything to do with what had happened between him, Odin and his children. Puck, of course, hadn't even noticed Gabriel had been avoiding him– the fey could be remarkably obtuse and were terrible at keeping track of passing years, as time moved differently in the Faery Realm and on Earth.

"Word going around is you've got yourself a pet," Puck greeted him, not bothering with any flowery niceties.

"Word travels fast, apparently," Gabriel said with a roll of his eyes– and now that Puck had heard of it, he knew it would travel around even faster. "That warning I gave Titania and her Court applies just the same to everyone else," he warned and Puck scoffed.

"Like I'm stupid enough to challenge you just for the sake of some human," he said dismissively. "I'm just curious– it's not like you."

Gabriel shrugged, carefully casual. "I like her. She's mine. Hands off."
"Alright," Puck said easily, though there was a hint of something sly in the Fey Trickster's smile. "Enjoy your chat with the ever-so charming Queen Maeb— catch you later, Loki." He then winked and disappeared and Gabriel frowned uneasily at the spot where his fellow Trickster had vanished from.

Until he'd realised the necessity of warning the fey away from her, he'd planned on keeping Hermione a secret from the supernatural world. Now that that was no longer entirely plausible, the best he could do was make sure she knew how to defend herself— and to make it very clear what would happen to anyone who dared to lay a hand on her.

Starting with the Winter Queen and then ending with a friendly visit to Oberon himself.

It was going to be a long day.

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The first step towards teaching Hermione self-defence was making sure she knew what she needed to defend herself from, Gabriel had decided after his return to Earth from the Faery Realm, his talks with Maeb and Oberon having dragged on as it always did when dealing with the Unseelie Queen and the arrogant King of Fey. He'd then gone through his houses to locate all the bestiaries he had stashed away, most that he'd stolen from demon-witches he'd killed or hunters he'd been playing tricks on before letting them 'stake' him.

After scanning them to make sure the information they contained was accurate and discarding them if they weren't, as well as adding his own notes to point out which supernatural creatures and beings could be negotiated with and how to best react when faced with one, he translated the bestiaries all to English with a snap of his fingers then dropped them off for Hermione.

Hermione, of course, solemnly promised to read and memorise them all as fast as she could. He didn't doubt her word either— he well knew by now that when Hermione committed herself to a task, she committed every single part of herself to fulfilling it.

Defensive magic was easy to teach her; after her experience with the faery, Hermione seemed to have gained a new awareness of her magic and he could see the increasing ease in which she wielded it— and he wouldn't deny that it filled him with smug pride to watch her flourish under his tutelage. He taught her how to use her magic to throw away people and projectiles, to turn invisible and to yank weapons from the hands of attackers. He'd also begun teaching her how to create a shield, though she was struggling with it— he suspected it was too complicated for her current magic levels but that didn't mean he'd stop having her keep trying.

Of course, being able to defend herself with magic wasn't enough, something that Hermione had already proven to herself— after all, magic had only provided her with the iron poker, she'd been the one who'd had to actually swing it. Being able to physically defend herself was important for her to learn.

Hermione was physically fit enough from all her swimming and running around Fraserburgh with her cousins that instead of having to plan getting her in shape, Gabriel was able to go straight to teaching her how to fight. He'd been around long enough that he knew most of the human fighting styles that existed and he picked Jujutsu to teach her, seeing as for the foreseeable future if Hermione found herself needing to fight someone, her opponent would almost certainly have a physical advantage over her in sheer size and brute strength. He couldn't make Hermione bigger or stronger, but he could focus on increasing her speed and agility.

Hermione, fortunately, was a fast learner— that clever brain of hers was able to pick things up,
swiftly memorising the combinations of techniques he taught her, which he'd then have her practice over and over to commit to muscle memory (and if he cheated a little and made teeny, tiny adjustments to her brain so it would take in what he was teaching her faster... well, he was impatient and protective—and because she'd devoted her entire being to him, he hadn't needed her consent so there had been nothing obstructing him from helping her).

He created constructs of different genders and builds and with baseline human strength for her to practice sparring against and he was proud of her progress—she had a long way to go yet, but she'd formed a solid basis of skills that she'd only ever build up.

Gabriel was becoming slightly concerned, however, by how much of her time and energy he was taking up—Hermione seemed quieter, more withdrawn into herself and less open with her chatter and enthusiasm, and she was always so exhausted after their lessons, both the magic lessons and the sparring ones, that he'd often either keep her outside of time longer so she could sleep or use his powers to adjust her body chemistry to undo the physical symptoms of exhaustion.

After spending a few weeks worrying that he was pushing his human too far, Gabriel visited Fenris, who had actually raised a human child from infancy as well as experienced being human himself, to express his thinly veiled fears through complaints about the fragility of mortals. Fenris, of course, saw straight through him—though in all fairness, he hadn't exactly been trying to hide it.

"You seem to think highly of your little stray," his son had pointed out with a roll of his eyes, "and I can't imagine that you'd be so fond of her if she didn't have a mind of her own—so why don't you trust that she'll tell you if it's too much for her? Or that she'll tell you, if she has a problem?"

Considering that the majority of the contact he'd had with mortals in the past had been when he was fucking them, Gabriel had decided to go with his son's advice, considering that between them Fenris was clearly the authority on human children.

He still worried, though, especially when Hermione continued to be quiet and less...well, less like she had been—less amazed and wondering and exuberant over each new thing he taught her. It was...strangely upsetting.

When nearly two months had passed without any change in her, Gabriel decided that instead of waiting for Hermione to speak up, he'd make the decision for them to have a break from the lessons for the day and to take her for a treat. He remembered how much she'd loved Coney Island and had decided on a destination that he was sure she'd be even more thrilled with—the world's oldest public library; the Biblioteca Malatestiana in Cesena, Italy.

Except when he announced he was taking her somewhere special for the day, instead of lighting up with excitement like he'd been expecting, Hermione abruptly burst into tears—and not happy tears either; they were shattering, soul-wrenching, heartbroken sobs that shook her whole body as she desperately clung to him like he was bleeding out in front of her and there was nothing she could do to stem the blood flow.

What the ever-loving hell?

::

When Loki started to visit her again constantly, Hermione was overjoyed—but also afraid; she was terrified, in fact, that he would abruptly stop visiting her again, that she was ultimately just a form of distraction to the ageless being, not at all important to him outside of his amusement.

It wasn't that she'd resent such a thing—he had no obligation towards her, not outside the bond
between god and worshipper, and yet... it had hurt her, when he'd abruptly stopped visiting. She'd gotten used to his presence, had considered him her friend, even, and then he'd just been gone without even a word. And despite herself, Hermione found that she couldn't help but pull back from her god in a likely futile attempt to try to guard her heart against a second (third) loss— she didn't think she could bear to have him then lose him, not again.

She wasn't sure if Loki had taken notice of the distance she was trying to put between them, but if he had he hadn't mentioned anything. Hermione wasn't sure if that was better or worse. The new magic and self defence he was teaching her certainly occupied most of their time together, not leaving much room for conversation, not like before. She wondered briefly if she should be concerned about how fixated her god suddenly was on teaching her how to protect herself, but then she remembered the kelpie and the fairy (no, faery, according to the bestiaries) and decided that no, it wasn't concerning at all.

She was surprised by how quickly she was picking up the physical side of his lessons as she'd never been particularly athletically-inclined— or particularly flexible, for that matter— but the jujutsu techniques seemed to come so easily to her. It involved a lot of throwing, pinning and joint-locking techniques, as well as several grappling and striking ones.

She'd originally felt a bit awkward at using force against the constructs Loki created, especially after reading how in jujutsu, practitioners were trained in the use of any potentially fatal moves, but Loki hadn't approved of that hesitation and she'd only been able to put up with being sent slamming into the ground and the breath being knocked from her lungs by his constructs so many times before she'd snapped and started really putting into practice what she'd been taught.

The new magic he was teaching her was both easier and harder then the jujutsu. It was easier in that since she'd summoned the fire-poker, she didn't have to concentrate anymore to feel her magic— it leapt eagerly to her attention, ready and willing to be used. It was harder, however, in that the new magic she was being taught was much more complicated then clever tricks with lollipops—and required a lot more magic.

Hermione hadn't realised how much her magic was like a muscle needing to be exercised to strengthen until the first time she'd found herself collapsed on the ground, her magic feeling like a gigantic, throbbing bruise where it was centred over her heart. Since then, she'd been much more careful not to accidentally drive herself to a state of 'magical exhaustion', as Loki had called it, but it still took a lot out of her, especially at the start— and considering that each time she mastered something, Loki upped the difficulty, it felt as if she was constantly 'at the start'.

She did her best, she honestly did, but she was still human and the full-on schedule was draining and when Loki didn't start to show any signs of slowing down, new fears started to snake their way into her thoughts, fears that the reason he was teaching her so much, so intensely and in such a short amount of time was because he was planning on leaving again for good and that he wanted to make sure she wouldn't need him to save her.

Hermione tried telling herself it was ridiculous to think such things, she really did, but the fear had already set root inside her mind and it only grew more and more with each new thing Loki taught her.

And then it happened; instead of popping by to teach her a new piece of magic or fighting move, Loki had appeared and, with a huge grin, announced that they were going on a special adventure for the day.

All she could think of in that moment, as she stared at him with her heart in her throat and feeling like she'd just plunged into a pool of icy water, was how the last time he'd taken her on a 'special
adventure’ he’d disappeared from her life without a word for months. Was he about to vanish again? Was this another goodbye?

She tried to breathe, not an easy task when it felt like steel bands had abruptly tightened around her chest, squeezing until they’d crushed the breath from her lungs and the hope from her heart, and her breath caught in her throat, hitching unsteadily. She tried to think of how to ask Loki if he was going to leave her again but instead, much to her shock and horror, she found herself unexpectedly bursting into tears.

Not quiet tears either, but harsh, choking noises she couldn’t swallow up and hide; great wrenching heaves that shook her body and left her face a wet, splotchy mess, cheeks and nose flushed red and mucus bubbling in her right nostril and her mouth hanging open and empty in a silent, grasping plea.

Unlike how they showed it in films, crying wasn't clean and pretty; it was a messy, ugly affair and Hermione couldn't stop herself from stumbling forwards and gripping onto Loki's shirt, desperately clinging onto him like she could somehow stop him from disappearing and keep him in her life forever.

"Oh pumpkin," she just barely heard Loki murmur before he was suddenly lifting her into his arms and she didn't hesitate to bury her face into the crook of his neck, his bare skin pressed against her tear-soaked face and sending shivers of warm static along her skin. A calm that wasn't her own sunk into her, like she'd submerged herself into a piping hot bath and the water was washing all her misery away.

Her tears finally slowed, a wave of fatigue replacing the grief and panic and turning her boneless in Loki's arms, supported only by his gentle but firm hold. Loki lowered himself so he was sitting on the ground and gently adjusted her so she was curled up in his lap like a kitten, her face still pressed to him and her fingers curled in his jacket.

One of his hands, the one not attached to the arm currently supporting her weight, stroked her head, his fingers gently running through her hair (which always seemed to somehow escape the tight braids she'd wrestled it into whenever Loki was around), the slight tugs against her scalp as they briefly caught in the curls grounding, almost.

"Think you can tell me now what has you so upset?" He asked her gently, after an indeterminable amount of time had passed. Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her face harder into his neck, not wanting to see his face when he admitted to her he was going to vanish again.

"You're leaving." She whispered, her voice rough and scratchy from crying. Loki's thumb briefly brushed down the back of her neck and the soreness abruptly vanished from her throat, her next words clearly audible. "You're leaving again and I d-d-don't know when I'll s-s-see you again."

"What in my name are you talking about?" Loki asked, sounding honestly bewildered. Hermione sniffed, finally leaning back so she could look up at him with teary eyes.

"Last time we w-w-went somewhere s-special, you d-disappeared for m-m-months," she told him and sudden understanding dawned on his face.

"Oh sugar," he said, his golden eyes softening to warm sunshine as he smiled gently down at her, "I'm not going anywhere."

A sudden hope blossomed to life inside her chest and Hermione's breath caught in her throat. If he was lying, if his words were a trick, she honestly couldn't think of anything crueler for him to do
— except he wasn't cruel, she knew he wasn't, not to her at least, so... so it had to be true.

"You're not going to disappear?" She breathed and Loki solemnly lifted his hand, his littlest finger extended.

"I pinky promise," he told her, "and nobody can break the sacredness of a pinky promise."

Hermione surprised herself when a giggle escaped her, one only slightly hysterical sounding, and she lifted her own hand, hooking her pinky finger with his. "You're not leaving." She repeated and Loki smiled at her like the sun.

"I'm not leaving." He confirmed. And for the first time in what felt like months, Hermione could breathe again.
Chapter 14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gabriel had known that Puck would start spreading rumours about Hermione throughout the different pantheons, the fey trickster was a little shit who could never resist the urge to start stirring up trouble, but that hadn’t meant he’d expected returning to his favourite house to find a familiar face waiting for him.

"Váli!" He said in surprise, a warmth swelling inside him at the sight of his youngest son, "what are you doing here?"

Gabriel cared deeply for his children, all of them, but their relationships were... not quite normal by human standards. Pagans certainly felt love, felt it wild, greedy and strong, but their extended lifespans meant decades could pass before they felt the need to seek each other out. As the influence of both science and the Abrahamic faiths had spread and gained prominence across the globe, the different pantheons had lost their anchors to the people who'd once worshipped them. Finding themselves no longer tied to their lands, they’d left to go exploring and had never truly stopped.

Gabriel hadn’t seen Váli for nearly a hundred years now, though his son looked barely changed from the last time he’d laid eyes on him— Váli had always resembled his mother, Sigyn; tall and fair with waist-length hair so dark it seemed to soak in the light. His eyes, however, were the same honeyed colour as Gabriel’s own, flashing a bright, brilliant gold like sunlight when he used seiðr. [seiðr = magic]

“I heard a few interesting whispers going around and thought I’d go to the source.” Váli said with an easy smile but sharp eyes.

“Interesting whispers, huh?” Gabriel asked, mouth twisting in displeasure at the confirmation, although he’d hardly expected anything different. He wasn’t at all expecting what his son asked next, however.

“So is it true that I have a new little sister, then?”

“What!?” Gabriel demanded, shocked and not even attempting to hide it. Why did his sons keep thinking that? And for that matter, was everyone thinking that now? Because that… that wasn’t good. That was very not good.

Váli tilted his head in apparent surprise. “It’s not true?” he asked.

“No, I just favour her,” he admitted.

“Devotee?” Gabriel confirmed flatly. “I have a new devotee, not a new daughter.”

“A devotee?” Váli asked, interested now. “Is she your gyðja?” [gyðja = priestess]

Gabriel shook his head. “No, I just favour her,” he admitted.

“You must.” Váli murmured, those terribly familiar sharp gold eyes boring straight into his own. Gabriel met his son’s gaze calmly and when Váli eventually dipped his chin he allowed his expression to relax into something teasing.
“So, tell me— how’s Eris?” He asked, wagging his eyebrows, and Váli let out a bark of laughter, his own face relaxing into lazy amusement.

“Better then you and Kali, I’d say,” he smirked and Gabriel winced. Kali had… possibly not been the best choice he’d ever made, but beauty and power attracted him and Kali was gorgeous, exotic, and deadly. She was also prideful and obstinate and paid no heed to anything but her own whims, which had eventually led to a break up that had been a disastrous mess on the same level as the Titanic and Chernobyl.

“Urgh, don’t talk to me about her,” he complained out loud to his son, “I still can’t set foot in India unless I’m hiding my presence!”

“Oh please,” Váli scoffed, “we both know you could crush her without even trying.”

“There’s a difference between ‘can’ and ‘should’— and ‘want’, for that matter,” Gabriel pointed out, because he wouldn’t deny he still had a soft spot for the Indian goddess, and Váli shrugged, uncaring.

“I don’t pretend to understand any of your choices, faðir,” he said bluntly, “about Kali or your new devotee, for that matter. But you do seem to be… happy.”

“You sound surprised,” Gabriel said, meaning it as a joke but Váli just made a quiet sound of agreement.

“I am. You’ve been unhappy for a long time,” he said, almost brutal in his honesty, and Gabriel flinched into himself slightly, his lowest set of wings curling unseen around himself, as if in protection against his son’s words. He thought briefly of Heaven, then of Odin, Sigyn and Narvi, and thought it wasn’t as if he hadn’t had a good Dad-damned reason to be unhappy. He didn’t say that out loud, of course; he’d lost a home, a lover and a son, but Váli had lost his mother and his second half— and yet, it was Váli who’d managed to move forwards with his life, even succeeding in catching the interest of Eris; the Greek goddess of strife and discord and a trickster with a penchant for cruel mischief and chaos.

“You deserve to be happy, faðir,” Váli told him, his golden eyes far too knowing. “And if your devotee makes you happy, then I will help you protect her— Eris and I will deal with the rumours and those spreading them.”

“Thank you,” Gabriel said quietly and Váli smiled.

“You will have to introduce me, one day. She must be an interesting creature, to have captured your attention so thoroughly.”

“She’s one of a kind,” Gabriel agreed, “and she’s going to grow up to be magnificent.”

~

Everything had improved for Hermione since she and Loki had used the power of words to talk things through, with her god now visiting her at least twice a week for lessons as the months passed, as well as taking her off on an occasional 'adventure'.

Over the next year, she visited some amazing places and experienced some amazing things, both magical and non-magical— she went swimming with blue whales without the need of a snorkel, visited France's Diagon Alley equivalent, located in Orléans; explored the Galápagos Islands; witnessed the aurora borealis while standing in the midst of Arctic itself, and even stopped to chat with a local yeti tribe that had migrated from the Himalayas while dog sledding through Canada's
frozen north (and even though yeti really gave the phrase "gentle giant" new meaning, Loki had still managed to annoy one of them to the point it had given him frostbite yelling at him).

Eleanor Roosevelt had said "The purpose of life is to live it, to taste it, to experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience" and living that reality, Hermione couldn't agree more. Her life had been enriched beyond any imaginings she could have done—but, of course, she firmly believed it wouldn’t have been nearly half as amazing if she’d experienced all those wonders with anyone but her god by her side.

For their time together hadn’t just been about learning magic and having fun—it had also been about getting to know each other. Hermione adored all the memories they made together and the conversations they shared, as well as Loki’s constant commentary on the world around them—her god was snarky, quick-witted, had a very cutting and sometimes cruel sense of humour and a fierce sense of justice that burned hot and bright inside him.

She was perceptive enough to recognise there was something… not broken, but something wounded and hurting inside her god—there were jagged edges inside him that sometimes seemed to grind together, turning him quiet in a way that made the air thick and heavy, sharpening his tongue and shortening his patience.

During those times, Hermione knew to tread carefully—she trusted Loki with her life, of course, and had absolute confidence in the surety of her belief that he would never harm her, but she knew how anger (and grief) turned lips loose, how it caused people to lash out, and she knew her god well enough to know how furious he’d be with himself if he turned his dangerous tongue, capable as it was of words that scored bloody wounds across their target’s skin, onto her.

But those times were rare—or at least it was rare that the turmoil of her god was close enough to the surface for her to read. Most often, Loki was laughter and sunshine; bright, brilliant and burning, her light and guide and love.

She was so grateful to her god for his friendship, his kindness and everything he’d done and continued to do for her, that she started wondering if there was a way she could give proper thanks to him. She prayed daily, of course, and left out offerings at least once a week, but it didn’t feel like enough. Not anymore.

The idea came to Hermione after Loki took her to visit a temple in Old Uppsala, Sweden, that had worshipped the Norse gods thousands of years ago, before the temple had been hidden from humans in order to protect it when the Abrahamic faith grew in influence. Built surrounded by hills and beside a massive evergreen tree with far-spreading branches and a spring close to its roots, the temple was beautiful and ancient and generously adorned with gold. A shining golden chain surrounded the temple itself, hanging from the gables of the building where it was visible from a fair distance.

Inside the temple there had been three statues of different gods sitting on a triple throne, all of which Loki had sneered at and muttered something she tentatively translated to the Old Norse equivalent of "f—ing bastards". As well as the statues there had been an altar as part of the temple’s scarce ‘decoration’ and when she’d asked what its purpose was, Loki had dived into a much too cheerful and detailed explanation about how each year the worshippers at the temple used to offer up nine men as sacrifices with the intention of placating the gods with their blood. The corpses would then be hung within the grove and feasts would carry on for a total of nine days, during which each day a man would sacrificed along with two animals, with a total of twenty-seven sacrifices occurring.

Gruesome as that was to hear, it had gotten her thinking—surely there had to be rituals out there
that gave thanks to Loki?

It wasn’t exactly an easy or straightforward thing to research but she had managed to get her hands on some books about the Norse Old Gods while visiting a magical shopping district in Scandinavia. To her disappointment, she hadn’t found the wealth of information she’d been hoping for— apparently the population of witches and wizards in the Nordic and Baltic countries hadn’t really started to organise until the conversion to Christianity had started taking place. She did wonder if there was some sort of connection there but she had too much on her plate already to start a new research project.

In the end, Hermione compiled information she’d collected from several different books to get an idea of just what sort of rituals were performed to give thanks to the Norse Old Gods. It was obvious very quickly that the most common form of worship was to give sacrifices to the Old Gods — the sacrifices were called *blót*, with *blóta* meaning "to worship with sacrifice" or "to strengthen".

Such sacrifices usually consisted of animals, in particular pigs and horses, but a human life was considered the most valuable sacrifice that could be made to the gods. The animal, or human, would be sacrificed over an alter made of piled stones, a hörgr, and the blood was collected in a copper or stone bowl.

The priest or priestess— goði or gyðja, in that order— would give chants in honour of the god being worshiped then pass the bowl around a flame three times while reciting a traditional prayer before finally sprinkling the blood of the sacrificed animal on themselves and anyone in attendance then pouring what was left on the altar or statues of the gods in question.

After Hermione got over her initial squeamishness, she was quick to realise the importance of blood in the sacrificial rites— there was even had a word for it; *hlaut*— and it gave her an idea. She was very reluctant to hurt another living creature, even to give thanks to her god, but human sacrifices, *human* blood, was considered most valuable— and she was human.

She did hesitate at the idea initially— Loki hadn’t taught her any healing magic yet, after all— but then it had dawned on her that if she just erased any injury she made, it wouldn’t really be a sacrifice as the point of a sacrifice was to actually make a sacrifice.

After coming to that realisation, Hermione made her decision and began to organise the information she’d collected into the closest recreation of one of the traditional rituals of worship as she could. She picked out a date and then, on the day, gathered all the items she’d need, making sure to hide them under her bunk in a backpack ready before waiting with no shortage of anxiety for night to descend and her relatives to all fall asleep.

At a little past eleven, she was confident that she was the only one in the house awake and she slid out of bed, pulling on a woollen jumper over the thermals she’d worn to bed before retrieving her backpack from where she’d hidden it and creeping out of the house, stopping briefly in the kitchen to pull on her wellington boots, lined up against the wall along with everyone else’s.

After she’d exited her home, she made her way along the familiar path to the patch of woods where she’d had her unpleasant encounter with the faerie— and where Loki had held, protected and comforted her. The site of the *blót* was important, it needed to be a location where there was a particularly strong connection to the god in question.

Once Hermione reached the small clearing, she opened her backpack and started pulling out what she needed to set everything up. She’d collected stones from the shoreline to pile up to create a hörgr which she then placed the fat white candle with the wax that never melted beside. She didn’t
have a stone or copper bowl, so she’d borrowed the closest thing she could find— her Aunt Iona’s mortar, from the stone mortar and pestle set (which she planned on very thoroughly washing before returning to the kitchen).

Hermione knelt before the candle and small hörgr she’d created and used her powers to very carefully spark a small flame to light the candle-wick before returning to pull the last item from her backpack. The long curve of her uncle’s fishing knife, one of many kept around the boat and cottage, looked almost eerie under the moonlight and her breath caught slightly as nervous adrenaline started to hum through her.

She held out her left arm, the one that she wore the bracelet that Loki had given her on, the knotted braid of leather, silver thread and feathers that was always tied around the wrist, and carefully pressed the blade of the knife midway down her forearm. For a moment she hesitated then she steeled herself, summoning up her courage and carefully applying enough pressure to cut into her skin. The raw sting of her parting flesh as she dragged the knife made her hiss in pain and she was quick to tilt her arm over the mortar as red started to spill over her skin, the blood shining wet and dark under the moonlight.

Shivering, though not from the cold, Hermione waited until her blood stopped flowing quite so eagerly from the wound she’d made, easing off first to a trickle then to a slow ooze. She wasn’t sure how long it took; time seemed oddly stalled as the two inch long cut throbbed with heat, a mark of blood and fire carved into her skin, but when it seemed like it had mostly stopped bleeding, she moved onto the next stage of her blót— the chants and prayers.

She’d chosen a devotional poem from one the books as her chant, having practiced it over and over until her keen memory had latched onto the words and they now spilled easily from her lips.

"Hail to You, Loki, Breaker of chains and Bringer of change, Companions of the discarded and downtrodden, Speaker of harsh truths and Avenger of the innocent, Hear my prayer tonight," she recited, shivering as the air in the clearing started to feel heavier, wilder; a hint of electricity against her skin.

"Hail to You in the skies, Flashing in the folds of Grey storm clouds, Lighting up the gale night sky, Traversing the space between Heaven and earth.

"Hail to You in the earth, World-breaker, Whose writhing Cause the continents to collide And the ground to tremble; Whose escape will see The world burn about You.

"Hail to You in the home, Heater of the hearth, Comforter from the cold, Protecting those children Under Your care From forces that wish them harm."
"Hail to You in the city,
At the corners against the walls
Where those without shelter huddle;
In the places where bricks are flung
And flags raised
Against cruel worlds.

"Hail to You in the mind,
In the flashes of mad inspiration
And destructive-creative urge;
In retorts against our oppressors,
In slicing remarks and cutting words,
And in those that bring joy and laughter.

"Hail to You in the body,
In the burning of the heart
And the fire in the veins;
In the quick feet and nimble fingers
And fast tongues
And sly grins.

"Hail to You near and far,
Seen and unseen,
Day and night,
In darkness and in light.

"Hail to Loki, god of the bound and silenced,
God of the hidden and the lost,
And of resistance at all costs,
Hear my prayer tonight;
May You be hailed."*

Hermione's hands were trembling as she reached for the mortar; inside her body, it felt as if a thousand dimmed embers had flared to life and her magic burned through her veins and in her heart like a miniature sun. "I dedicate this sacrifice to Loki the Unbound, Trickster God of Fire, Mischief, Lies and Chaos," she whispered, as she circled the stone bowl three times around the flame of her candle. "Til árs ok hrǫngl.**

She dipped her fingers in the bowl then sprinkled drips of red that sizzled with power onto her skin and caused a shudder to run through her, before she poured the remainder on the hörgr, painting the grey-brown stones with streaks of her blood. The reaction was immediate; the sudden release of magic felt like nothing she'd experienced before—a lightning strike under her skin, channelling molten-hot and crackling through her veins.

Hermione knew the moment Loki had appeared; she could feel his power spilling thick and staticky across the clearing; powerful, dangerous and tempestuous as a summer storm. She instinctively turned towards where she just knew her god was standing, her breath catching in her throat and her heart stuttering in her chest at the sight of Loki’s face; bright and wild in a way she hadn’t seen before, in a way that wasn’t human at all. Dark shadows stretched out behind him and she caught a brief glimpse of something high and arching that hurt her head to look at before they were gone and it was just Loki there, his eyes golden and incandescent as they met hers, leaving Hermione feeling like a planet in the orbit of a bright and shining sun.
Loki crossed the clearing to where she was kneeling with an otherworldly sort of grace, moving like the earth shifted aside for him with each step before he then lowered himself into a crouch before her. Hermione couldn’t breathe; she barely recognised the ancient being before her to be the same one who constantly whisked her off to carnivals, who liked tugging on her curls to watch them bounce and threw boiled lollies at her to ‘teach’ her how to use her magic to deflect projectiles. In this moment, he felt like something beyond her comprehension; layers and layers of ancient wildness and power and fire.

“Minn blótgyðiur,” he murmured, and even as the ancient syllables worked to untangle themselves in her head (my sacrificial priestess), she opened her mouth to reply, the Old Norse spilling from her lips natural as breathing.

“Já, iak em þinn.”

Yes, I am yours.

~

Gabriel had been delivering just desserts to a sorority of girls in an American college who’d driven one of their pledges to suicide through their cruel “hazing” when he felt a shiver of power stir within him.

It took him a few moments to recognise it, as he hadn’t had a proper sacrifice dedicated to him in hundreds and hundreds of years—‘Lokeans’ occasionally chanted out rituals but they were weak, barely noticeable things that lacked the power the sacrificial rituals of old, performed by the blótgoði and blótgyðiur; the priests and priestesses responsible for leading sacrificial rites and rituals. He tipped back his head and closed his eyes, drinking in worship that made him feel powerful and divine in the wild way of pagans. There was a rawness and purity to the ritual; but more then that, there was true power behind it.

He didn’t even have to wonder who was responsible; with that kind of strength, there was only one person it could be.

Finding Hermione was as easy as following the claim he’d imprinted on her soul; her eyes snapped over to him the moment he landed in the clearing, her irises lit up like warm liquid sunshine. She was bright and glowing with power before him, like the searing heat flash of a lightning strike; she was iridescent and pure and his. Gabriel couldn’t help how his wings preened in response to the pride he felt; his feathers may be woven of light and chaos and prayer, but there were definitely times when they liked to act like they belonged to a bird.

There was a flicker of confusion in Hermione’s eyes and Gabriel tracked her gaze, realising with a start that she had channelled enough power to get a glimpse of his wings. Seeing the brief flinch of pain as her squishy little human brain tried to comprehend the divinity, he folded his wings in and out of sight before crossing over to her, crouching in front of her as she gazed reverently at him.

“My sacrificial priestess,” he murmured, slipping automatically into the old tongue of the Norse gods.

“Yes, I am yours.” Hermione responded immediately and without hesitation, not even seeming to notice how she’d replied to him in the same old tongue. There was blood on her arm and Gabriel realised, with a spark of surprise, just how she’d managed to channel so much power through the ritual; blood had power, blood willingly spilled even more so.

He looked down fondly at her, reaching forwards to brush his thumb over the wound, knitting the skin back together but allowing a faint silvery scar to remain; a mark of her worship, permanently
engraved into her skin.

“Was… was that okay?” Hermione asked suddenly, her irises losing the golden shine of pagan magic, turning back to their natural chocolate brown as her power sank back under her skin.

“That was perfect,” Gabriel told her, fondness and pride in his voice as he looked down at her beaming face and came to the undeniable conclusion that he’d officially fallen grace over wings for his little devotee turned blótgyðiur. “Absolutely perfect.”

*This is a mix of prayers I found on a website for Lokeans, I do not own it

**During their ritual sacrifices, the sacrificial priest/priestess would speak the old, traditional prayer; Til árs ok fríðar, which means "for a good year and frith (peace)". Til árs ok hrǫngl, translates to for a good year and chaos.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter!

~Cheshire Carroll xoxoxo
Chapter Notes

I'd just like to make a note here that the way I've portrayed various gods and goddesses of various religions is not at all accurate to how they're portrayed in religious texts. For example, I've based my Kali character after the Kali on the Supernatural show, but according to the Hindu religion she is a divine protector who is very loving and loyal to her husband, Lord Shiva.

It's hard to write any sort of Supernatural fic without being blasphemous, but I don't mean to be offensive towards anyone's beliefs.

Thanks for taking the time to read this note!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After performing the ritual, life went on for Hermione. The intensity of the experience had been breathtaking, of course, and despite the pain it was one of the most magical experiences she'd ever gone through (she was definitely picking up Loki's sense of humour, which she was pretty sure was a Very Bad Thing considering how fond he was of awful, ridiculous puns). Channelling that much magic had been a thrill that she hadn't managed to replicate, but the memory of it had allowed her understand her magic on a deeper level which helped her learn how to increase the power behind the magic Loki was teaching her.

Time passed as time was wont to do, and before she knew it her ninth birthday was approaching. Unlike the misery of her previous birthday without Ness, this time Hermione found she was looking forward to the day—mostly because she couldn't wait to see what surprise Loki had planned. And he didn't disappoint either; on the day of her ninth birthday, her god whisked her off to the Biblioteca Malatestiana (also known as the Malatesta Novello Library), the world's first ever public library that had been opened over 550 years ago in Cesena, Italy.

The ancient library was everything Hermione dreamed her Heaven would one day look like; designed like a basilica with beautiful venetian windows, it was stunning architecturally and filled with more books than she'd ever seen in one place in her entire life, over four hundred thousand of them and some so valuable they were even chained in place. The old library was part of a complex that included a beautiful reading room, as well a modern library, a media centre and a small archaeology museum, though she hadn't been interested in the latter three, too lost in the ancient history preserved around her.

She spent the entire day there, just walking through the stacks and curling up with one of the precious books inside the reading room lit by a rose window—she thought she could probably spend the rest of her life in the Malatesta Novello Library and die happy. In the ancient library filled with sacred tomes and classics, codices covering various fields such as religion, Greek and Latin classics, sciences and medicine, thousands of manuscripts dating back to the Middle Ages, an interesting collection of miniature books, maps of local interests and illuminated chorals, she didn't think she could ever be bored.

Loki had even used his powers so she could hold the oldest manuscript in the library (without
a copy of Saint Isidore of Seville's 'Etymologiae'—published in twenty books after his death in 636, the 'Etymologiae' summarised and organised a wealth of knowledge from hundreds of classical sources and was considered an encyclopaedia of all human knowledge. It contained everything the influential Christian bishop had thought was worth keeping, the subject matter ranging from grammar and rhetoric to the earth and the cosmos, buildings, metals, war, ships, humans, animals, medicine, law, religions, heretical sects, pagan philosophers, and the hierarchies of angels and saints. As she poured over the ancient manuscript, the very small part of Hermione that wasn't so enthralled couldn't help but feel proud of just how fluent her Latin now was.

It was past midnight when Loki finally had to take her back home to bed as, despite her stubbornness, her eyelids were so heavy she could barely keep them open and the words were blurring on the pages. He messed with time as casually as he always did, taking her back to the night before her birthday and tucking her into bed before kissing the top of her curly head and disappearing with a snap of his fingers.

When she woke up on her (second) ninth birthday, there was a gift on the end of her bed that she hadn't noticed in the exhaustion of the (sort of) previous night wrapped in bright green paper with a gaudy gold ribbon—she almost wasn't surprised when she eagerly tore open the wrapping paper to find a perfect replica (well she hoped it was a replica...except not really, there was definitely a part of her that hoped it was real) of the Etymologiae manuscript she'd been so entranced by the day before.

"Thank you," she prayed, smiling so wide it hurt—it was going to take her forever to read it all and she couldn't wait to get started.

~

It had taken a few months, but Váli had done as he'd promised and the rumours about Hermione and who she was to him had finally gone away. Gabriel didn't think for a moment that they'd been forgotten, but at least they weren't continuing to spread—and everyone seemed to know better then to risk "Loki's" temper by going after Hermione. That didn't stop him from creating a few wards to keep her safe, of course, but he'd definitely started to relax more.

Ever since the ritual, he'd found himself drawn to Hermione more and more—their connection, forged between priestess and god, was only growing with each day that passed and Gabriel wondered when Hermione would start to feel it; she was certainly powerful enough that he had no doubt she'd soon be able to tap into it.

The strength of their connection meant that he was always aware to some degree of her emotions, so when he felt her plunge into a sudden grief mixed with traces of fury, he didn't hesitate a second to wing his way over to her side.

She was out in the garden and appeared absolutely furious. "Now that's an impressive frown, sugar," he teased gently as he landed before her, easily scooping his little priestess up into his arms. At nine and a half now, about two and a half years since she'd first prayed to him, Hermione had certainly grown from the small, skinny child she'd been but Gabriel could lift the Earth itself if he really wanted to and had no difficulty at all in holding her in his arms.

Hermione made a quiet grumbling sound as she slumped in his hold, her head flopping back against his shoulder. There was an agitated, unhappy air to her and Gabriel was wracking his mind but he couldn't think of any anniversaries that might have her feeling that way. Before he had to ask her what was wrong, however, Hermione spoke up.
"I got a letter in the mail yesterday," she told him quietly. "It was the results for the tests I did. I've officially completed the primary school curriculum."

"A year and a half early at that!" Gabriel added encouragingly with a wide, proud smile. And that was on top of her magic, self defence, supernatural creatures, runes and language studies— she was practically fluent in three and a half languages at this point, not to mention her proficiency in several runic alphabets!

No one he claimed could ever just be ordinary, but his Hermione was extraordinary in every sense of the word and continued every day to accomplish extraordinary things— so why was she upset? "Did you not get the marks you were hoping for?" He wondered out loud. He felt more then saw Hermione shake her head as she turned to press her cheek against his chest.

"I got full marks," she mumbled.

"Which nobody doubted for a moment," he said, trying to cheer her up, but Hermione's breath just hitched slightly like she was trying not to let out a sob. Shit. It was times like these he regretted teaching Hermione how to guard her thoughts from him. "Tell me what's wrong, kitten," he coaxed.

"Mum and dad rang Auntie today." Hermione blurted out and as she turned her head up, he could see the tears shimmering in her chocolate-brown eyes. "They were posted a copy of my results too and they— they said that now I'm going into secondary school, it's time for me to come home!"

The way she practically spat out the word 'home' like she'd just spotted half a worm after biting into an apple made it abruptly clear to him just what Hermione thought of returning to London. Gabriel, remembering the state she'd been in before her parents had sent her to Fraserburgh, had to hold back a wince. She'd been miserable and depressed and her parents' decision to send her to the Macleods had probably saved her life. The thought of her having to return to that situation was an unpleasant one, to say the least.

"I can make them change their minds," he offered, with a slight internal cringe. Free will wasn't something he liked messing with or taking away from people, for obvious reasons, but Hermione was his precious little priestess and he'd do much worse, and do it gladly at that, to keep her happy.

Indecision and yearning warred on Hermione's small face before she sighed, slumping in his arms. "I can't," she said miserably. "I want to, so so so much, but I can't ask you to do that."

"Those pesky morals of yours," he teased her gently.

"They're so inconvenient." She agreed, mouth tugging into an almost smile.

Of course, considering she'd petitioned a trickster at age seven, Hermione's morals weren't exactly pointing true north on her compass, but they were close enough to balk at a bit of mind manipulation. His sweet, sweet summer child— he still had so much to teach her.

"Do you know when they want you to go back?" He asked her, settling down on the ground so he was seated with his legs crossed and his little devotee still in his lap with her arms loosely around his neck.

"A month before the school term starts," she told him, sniffling slightly. "So I can acclimatise back to living in London."

"You know that no matter where you are, I'll still be able to find you," he reminded her. "And I'll visit you just as much in London as I do here."
"I know," Hermione assured him, her voice only wobbling slightly. "But..." she released him with one of her arms, gesturing around them. They were sitting in her backyard currently, surrounded by lush green foliage, a vegetable patch and a good number of chickens and ducks. The scent of the ocean was strong and salty in the light breeze and he could smell the roast that Iona Macleod was cooking up for dinner.

The garden was where they most commonly met, as Hermione had long since taken over the duty of cleaning out the hutches and pens (assisted, on occasion, by a snap of his fingers) and they could be best assured privacy, even without the aid of his powers. Gabriel had many fond memories that had been created here and he knew Hermione did too.

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she looked up at him, misery stark on her young face. "This is my home, Loki," she choked. "This is where I belong... it's where I'm happy," her voice cracked on the last word.

"Oh Hermione," Gabriel sighed, stroking a hand through her curls as she finally gave up on trying to hold back her tears and simply buried her face into his shirt as she sobbed. "I'm so sorry, pumpkin."

"Not your fault," she sniffed wetly, "if it wasn't for you and your lessons, I'd have finished primary school months ago, probably even a year, and I'd have had to go back even sooner."

Gabriel rubbed soothing circles on her back. "Well," he said slowly, "speaking of my lessons, it wasn't what I originally had planned for today but how would you feel about starting to learn illusions?"

Hermione sucked in a startled breath, twisting in place so she could look up at him with wide, if slightly red and puffy, eyes. "Really?" She asked excitedly and Gabriel smiled fondly down at her.

"Really," he confirmed. "What sort of trainee trickster would you be, if you couldn't make an illusion or two?"

"Trainee trickster?" Hermione asked, sounding surprised, and Gabriel mentally swore at the slip of his tongue. While he was fully aware that he was teaching Hermione how to use her powers trickster-style not witch/wizard-style, he hadn't exactly shared with her that he had no idea how to do the sort of magic witches and wizards used, nor was he that sure about what they found important to learn. He'd flipped through a few textbooks, of course, but all the magic seemed to require a wand and it was illegal for a witch or wizard to own a wand before turning eleven. And while he was confident he'd be able to get his hands on one for her anyway, he didn't want Hermione to have some sort of black-market wand, he wanted her to have a proper one.

"Most of what I'm teaching you right now is trickster style magic," he told her, utilising something he rarely ever did— the truth. "I wouldn't want you to be bored at Hogwarts, like you would be if you already knew all the material. Of course, you're still going to have the best control of your magic of all the students there." He added smugly.

"Okay," Hermione said with a small and shy but definitely real smile. "I... I like the idea of learning trickster tricks," she admitted. "So... how do I make an illusion?"

Gabriel grinned at her. "You're going to love this." He told her.

(And he was right, she did)

~
Saying goodbye to her family hurt. Aunt Iona, who had loved her like Hermione was her own daughter, and Uncle Arran, who'd warmly and patiently taught her Scottish Gaelic, both hugged her tight, while Leana, Jeanie and Angus clung to her and cried. Ina's eyes were pink and puffy as she'd helped Hermione pack and she, Andrew, Alex and Arran Junior (or AJ, as he preferred to be called) had stayed close to the house during her final few days, instead of using the time they weren't working to hang out with their friends as they usually did, or in the case of Alex and AJ spend time with their girlfriends.

Leana, Jeanie and Angus had insisted on joining her, Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran on the drive up to the train station. The trip took several hours and the car was cramped with four kids crammed in together in the back seat but Hermione was only too happy to put up with the minor discomfort, a fair trade in her mind for the presence of her cousins.

Once they reached the station, Hermione almost missed her train as she kept bursting into tears and hugging her cousins. She almost wished she had missed it, but Aunt Iona had chivied her along at the sound of the warning whistle, a look of regret on her kind, lined face.

"You will always be welcome in our home," her Aunt told her seriously. "It's your home too, Hermione, and it always will be. And if you're ever struggling, or even if you just want to talk, always know that you can ring us."

"I love you," Hermione choked out, clinging to her Aunt for one last hug.

"I love you too, darling," Aunt Iona said, hugging her fiercely before the train let out the final whistle and Hermione had to reluctantly let go and board the train, making her way to the compartment where Uncle Arran had carried her trunk.

Sitting there alone in the train, Hermione could feel a fresh wave of tears coming on and the sudden warmth of an arm wrapping around her, accompanied by the scent of sugar and ozone that seemed to cling to her god, had her leaning into Loki.

"Leaving your home behind is always hard," her god told her quietly. "And you're allowed to grieve. But remember too, that with change comes opportunity and infinite possibilities."

"It's like that quote Uncle Arran likes," Hermione said with a sigh, turning slightly to look up at him, "'We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sail'."

"Your uncle's a clever man," Loki smiled down at her, the light dancing in his honey-gold eyes like a promise, like sunlight after a storm, "and he has a very clever niece." The corners of Hermione's mouth tugged up into a small smile.

"Thanks Loki," she said, snuggling into him and letting his heat soak into her, warming up all the cold, grieving parts of her.

Loki helped her wheel her trunk through the airport when they arrived, easily strolling onto the plane beside her as everyone else seemed to look straight through him like he wasn't even there. Hermione's ticket had mysteriously changed to First Class and none of the flight attendants looked twice at Loki lounging on one of the comfortable seats beside her and holding a brightly coloured cocktail.

The hour and a half flight passed quickly, almost too quickly, Loki easily keeping her distracted with his quips, teasing and snarky commentary. "Flying in a plane is so painfully slow," he groaned several times, glaring briefly at the windows as he did so.
"Can you fly?" Hermione asked him, intrigued. She hadn't read any mythology about Loki being able to fly, but some of the names given to him were 'sky-walker' and 'sky-treader'.

Some brief emotion she couldn't identify flickered briefly over Loki's face, before it disappeared and her god grinned at her. "Yup," he confirmed, "I'm special like that."

"You're special in every way," Hermione told him and his grin relaxed into something softer, more fond.

"Keep feeding my ego like that and this plane will sink right out of the sky," he teased and Hermione scoffed. "No it won't, you're weirdly light." It was something she'd noticed about him several times as he'd been teaching her self defence, that despite how he was impossible to move if he didn't want to be, Loki was much lighter then a human.

"I guess I'm just built to fly," her god murmured, his expression briefly flickering again to something ancient, almost nostalgic. She reached over to squeeze his hand, a show of wordless comfort she knew he'd accept. He gently squeezed her hand back.

When the plane landed, Hermione could feel her stomach start churning with anxiety. While she'd spoken to her parents regularly on the phone over the past two years, she'd only seen them in person a handful of times. It felt like Helen and Richard Granger were strangers to her; strangers that she was going to go live with.

With Loki's aid, she retrieved her trunk from the baggage terminal (it was the first piece of luggage to come out on the conveyer belt, which she knew better then to think it was a coincidence) before letting him lead her straight to where her parents were waiting, her god easily able to pick them out of the crowd.

Helen and Richard looked... well. They looked well. Her mother was dressed elegantly in a slim-fitting pantsuit and heels and had trimmed her hair to chin length. Her father's hair was starting to thin but he was dressed in a sophisticated fashion, clad in trousers, a cashmere sweater and new gold-framed glasses. They both had an expensive air about them that made Hermione feel uncomfortable in her secondhand knitted jumper over faded denim jeans that had been tucked into a pair of old boots. Money wasn't something the Macleods had had in abundance and whatever clothes Aunt Iona didn't make herself were passed down through the children once they'd been grown out of, as were shoes.

"Hermione," Helen smiled, her eyes going straight past Loki like he wasn't there— and for them she suspected he might not be— as she carefully wrapped her arms around her in a delicate hug. Hermione instantly missed the way Aunt Iona's strong arms had crushed her into her chest. Richard smiled at her too, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze but not hugging her.

It had only been about thirty seconds, but Hermione already felt off-kilter, like she didn't belong with these two polished, proper people and her stomach churned while her eyes stung. She smiled back at her parents the best she could while wishing that she was back in Fraserburgh where she belonged.
Chapter 16

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

Helen and Richard Granger were strangers to her. It was a realisation less startling to Hermione
then it should have been. She had, after all, spent seven and a half years living with them and had
spoken on the phone with them once a week; they should have been familiar to her, they were her
mum and dad, but they just weren’t.

All their interactions felt stiff, awkward; like they were all just going through the motions of
Mother, Father and Daughter without any emotional connection to the roles. There was a distance
between them and a part of that, Hermione would admit, stemmed from her resentment towards
them for taking her from her home.

She missed Fraserburgh with a sort of desperation that had surprised her. Summer was hot in
London without the ocean to dive into and the heat made it feel like everything was in slow
motion. Hermione’s days were suddenly too empty; her parents employed a house-keeper to do the
cooking and cleaning while they spent the day at their dental practice so she had no chores, no
school and no friends or cousins to play with. She found that more often then not she wasn't quite
sure what to do with herself and was even starting to yearn for the school year to begin, just to
break up the tedium.

Most days she slipped away from the house to make her way to the nearby park– unlike in
Fraserburgh, children wandering the streets unaccompanied by adults was frowned upon in London
and she knew her parents wouldn't be happy if they found out, but she just didn't care. They were
the ones who’d made her come back, only to leave her alone each day in a big, empty house where
her sister's absence thudded a hollow reminder in her chest with each heartbeat.

The park, at least, was a nice enough; there were a number of street chess tables arranged around
and under a copse of tall willow trees, a stretch of thinning green grass where kids played ball
games, several picnic tables for families to sit at and a small playground where little children ran
around shrieking with excitement. Hermione personally liked to spend her time there curled up
with 'Etymologiae' and slowly puzzle her way through the ancient manuscript; it was a peaceful
sort of tranquility, the sort she’d sometimes longed for in Fraserburgh, yet now she had it only
made her yearn for her cousins, aunt, uncle, friends and the wild joyfulness and sense of
community of her home.

Loki’s visits were her only true sources of real happiness during the miserable month. He’d often
join her in the park, challenging her to games of chess where he’d teach her all sorts of tricky
moves, drumming strategy into her head and forcing her to constantly have to think four or five
moves ahead.

The empty house at least meant it was easy for him to continue her lessons without having to twist
time to suit their needs, though she could tell by his tight, darkening expression each time he found
her alone and listless that he wasn't happy about her parents’ absence. Hermione thought about
telling him she preferred it when they were gone, it meant she didn't have to act the part of
‘daughter’ to Helen and Richard’s ‘parent’, but the words tasted like ash in her mouth so she held
them back.
Still, she wasn't ignorant to her god's increasing worry as she grew a little more tired and pale and thin with each passing day, sleeping less each night and increasingly picking at her meals. She wondered if this was how it had started for Ness, before she’d taken that kitchen knife to her wrists; a persistent unhappiness that weighed her down, crushing her appetite and disturbing her sleep.

When Loki’s visits suddenly increased to daily things, Hermione wondered just how much of her emotional state her god was able to pick up— clearly enough that he felt the need to be around her constantly, which she was relieved for. Loki was like the sun warming her skin when she was cold, heating her up from the outside in with bright smiles, joyous laughter and a kind tenderness that made her feel cherished.

But Loki couldn’t always be there, and sometimes it was worse when he left, like her head was some sort of rollercoaster where she’d go up before going down, her brain ceasing to produce ‘happy chemicals’ and so her mood would sink. The ups and downs were almost more exhausting then always being down and sometimes she just wanted to curl up under the covers of her bed and cry.

Then, a bit under a week before she was due to start school, Loki seemed to snap. “Right,” he declared, a firm set to his mouth as he appeared beside her bed that morning without any warning. “Pack some underwear and your toothbrush, we’re going on a trip.”

“A trip?” She asked, confused. Loki grinned, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“A trip,” he confirmed, without going into details.

“And I only need to pack knickers and a toothbrush?” she asked doubtfully.

“I can snap anything else you need into existence,” Loki said casually. “Clocks ticking, sugar.”

Almost without her permission, Hermione found her mouth tugging up into a smile as she rolled out of bed. Loki snapped a knapsack into existence and she quickly stuffed a handful of knickers into it and several pairs of socks before hurrying into the ensuite connected to her bedroom to grab her toothbrush, toothpaste and a hairbrush. She splashed some water on her face and took a few minutes to wrestle her hair into twin braids before returning to the bedroom where Loki was waiting.

He scanned her up and down and Hermione abruptly realised she was still in her pyjamas. She opened her mouth to say she could go change, but Loki snapped his fingers before she had the chance and Hermione found herself wearing an ankle-length linen shift with the neck closed by a golden brooch under a shorter blue woollen dress fastened at the shoulders by two more brooches — it was a hangerock, she realised; an old Norse style apron-dress. Amber and glass beads were strung between the brooches— the three of which, Hermione noticed as she stared down at them in surprise, were of identical design, all depicting Yggdrasil.

“Why—?” she started to ask, but before she could even finish her sentence Loki interrupted.

“Do you trust me?” he asked and Hermione blinked up at him in confusion.

“What kind of ridiculous question is that?” she asked, not sure whether to be annoyed or just plain bewildered.

“The sort that needs an honest answer,” Loki told her, a rare seriousness in his eyes. “Do you trust me?”
“With my life,” she said, simple and honest. “And with the lives of everyone I love.”

Loki’s expression softened into something gentle and fond. “My little blótgyðiur,” he murmured, before snapping something into existence and holding it out for her to see. It was a length of cloth, black and soft-looking.

“What’s that for?” She asked curiously.

“It’s a blindfold,” he told her. “I need you to wear it.”

Hermione thought about asking why, because it was a strange request, but then she remembered what he’d just asked her—about trust. “Okay,” she said, stepping forwards and closing her eyes. The cloth was soft against her skin as Loki gently tied it in place, firm enough that it wasn’t about to get accidentally dislodged. Loki then held her hand in his own and she heard a whoosh-ing sound, almost like a bird; she recognised it to mean that Loki had transported them somewhere.

Sure enough, she felt a wave of heat against her face—they were outside now, though she wasn’t sure where. The air felt thick around her, humming with power against her skin, and sudden sweat had the linen shift clinging to her skin.

She thought about asking where they were, but considering the fact that Loki had asked her to wear a blindfold she wasn’t sure she was supposed to know. “Okay,” her god said, and without her vision she could hear much more clearly the slight tension in his voice. “This is going to be the tricky part. I need you to hold on tight and stay as still as you can, okay?”

“Oh, sugar,” her god said, and she could hear the smile in his voice, “now I need you to pray.”

Hermione obeyed without hesitation. “Hail to you, bringer of mighty gifts won by your own cunning. Hail to you, trickster god who incites chaos to reveal the truth. Hail to you, Loki, the destroyer who through fire sparks rebirth—“ her voice broke off into a gasp as it felt like fire was pouring through her veins; it wasn’t painful, just overwhelming and it reminded her of the sacrificial ritual she’d performed. Loki made a satisfied sound.

“Perfect,” he said, “now hold on tight.”

And then, very suddenly, it felt like she’d been hit with the worst case of vertigo she’d ever had in her life times about a thousand and when she opened her mouth, she couldn’t speak because there was no air—sort of like how she imagined open space might be. She wasn’t sure where up or down was, she couldn’t breathe but her lungs weren’t tightening in her chest and she had to clench her eyes shut for the light around her was so blindingly bright and strong that it hurt even through the thick, heavy material of the blindfold.

It felt endless, it felt like barely seconds; her brain couldn’t truly make sense of anything until she found herself kneeling on grass, Loki’s hands on each of her shoulders as he murmured comfortingly to her.

“We’re here, pumpkin, you’re alright, it’s over now,” he kept repeating until she finally managed to rearrange her thoughts into something vaguely cognisant again.

“That was… trippy,” she mumbled, using a word she remembered Loki using, and her god laughed in response, one of his hands leaving her shoulder. Moments later, the blindfold fell from her eyes and she found she was kneeling on a small hill overlooking a seashore, though not one that she
recognised. As Loki helped her to her feet, she peered around in interest, noting that there wasn’t anything around them but rolling green hills and fields, gently swaying trees and sparkling turquoise ocean for as far as she could see.

“Where are we?” she asked curiously and a little nauseas still.

“Somerset, in England,” Loki said, pausing slightly before casually adding, “about a thousand years ago.”

“What!?”

“You did say you’d have loved to have met the Hogwarts founders,” Loki told her, looking very much like he was trying not to laugh, presumably at her expression. Hermione could only stare up at him, unable to speak she was so shocked. Her god took pity on her, continuing his explanation without waiting for a reply she was currently unable to give him. “Before I take you to visit Hogwarts though, first I thought you should meet a friend of mine. I’ve spoken to her about you before and she actually offered to teach you herself. However,” Loki’s face abruptly turned serious, “nobody can know that we’re from the future. You’ll go by the name ‘Hulda’ and,” he tapped the tip of her nose with a finger, “only speak Ænglisc or Norrœnt mál.”

“Old English and Old Norse,” Hermione automatically translated aloud, before blinking in surprise as the words came out in Old English, also commonly known as Anglo-Saxon, without her meaning to. She understood a decent amount of Old English, she’d had to learn it while translating some of the books Loki had given her, but she certainly wasn’t nearly fluent enough to be able to speak it as if it was natural as breathing— and while her Old Norse was actually very nearly fluent, thanks to Loki’s teachings and her own studies, it still wasn’t her first language and she didn’t have the correct accent.

Apparently, her god had fixed all that.

“You’ll take the spell off after we go back, won’t you?” she asked anxiously, the foreign syllables coming out of her mouth rearranging themselves in her brain to the English equivalent— or closest to. “It feels like cheating, not having to work for it.”

“If that’s what you want, then of course,” Loki said, seeming fond and amused, before he tugged on the end of one of her braids. Hermione watched, startled, as her hair lightened before her eyes to a rich honey-golden colour that reminded her of her god’s eyes. “Now you look like a proper little Norse girl,” Loki teased her and she huffed slightly, but couldn’t help feeling pleased.

“What about you?” she asked and Loki glanced carelessly down at himself— he was wearing a dark red button up shirt with the collar undone, a pair of black jeans and an olive-green jacket, not at all suitable for the time period if they were planning to act as if they belonged in it.

“Right,” Loki muttered, flicking his hand slightly and Hermione’s eyes widened as the jacket, jeans and shirt disappeared, replaced by furs, leather and hide. His chest was partially bare and for the first time she got a glimpse at the tattoos that had previously been hidden from view, unfolding from his upper-arms and shoulders up to his neck and across his chest. They looked ancient and intricate, curling lines twisted into knots that were almost Celtic-looking, but not quite— they were rougher, wilder, less refined.

“They’re amazing,” she breathed and Loki laughed.

“No tattoos for you until you’re sixteen,” he teased, tapping her on the nose again— apparently this time just to annoy her. She scowled lightly at him, too entranced and mind-blown to really be
annoyed.

“I can’t believe I’m in the past,” she told him wonderingly.

“You’ve seen me mess with time before,” Loki reminded her.

“A few months at most!” Hermione protested. “Not nearly a millennium!”

“I’m just that amazing,” Loki said smugly. “Now come on, I want you to meet Morgana.”

Hermione blinked. “Did… did you just say Morgana?” she asked weakly. “As in, the Lady Morgana le Fey?”

“Yup,” Loki said, popping the last syllable obnoxiously and winking at her before snapping his fingers. Hermione blinked again as she abruptly found herself standing in front of a startled-looking woman. She was quite beautiful, dressed in a heavy red velvet gown that matched the deep red of her lips, her silky black hair tumbling down her back in perfect ringlets and her eyes as brilliant as emeralds.

“Loki?” She asked, her voice rich and thickly accented. “This is certainly a surprise.”

“I thought I’d bless you with my scintillating company and handsome face,” Loki purred to the lady and Hermione was startled slightly at the heavy Norse accent her god had slipped into, the syllables rolling lazily across his tongue. It was what she’d been expecting to hear, the first time she’d spoken to him— not the American accent he most commonly used, though sometimes he slipped into a British one. “Also,” Loki added, “I wanted to introduce you to my little protégée here.”

Hermione very carefully did not react to her god’s use of the word ‘protégée’ even when her mind started racing at over a hundred miles an hour. Almost as if he could sense the chaos currently going on in her head, Loki dropped a hand to her shoulder, squeezing lightly, and when she glanced up at him, the cold arrogance he’d donned when they’d appeared before the woman softened slightly, his eyes warm as honeyed-sunshine as they met hers.

“It is a true pleasure to meet the sorceress Loki spoke so highly of to me,” the woman said, her eyes sharp but kind as Hermione turned back to her. “I am Morgana le Fay, the High Priestess here.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my Lady,” Hermione said, wondering if she should bow, but Loki’s hand tightened slightly on her shoulder, preventing her from making the action, so obviously that was a no. “My name is Hulda.”

“A lovely name,” Morgana le Fay said warmly. “Welcome to the Enchanted Isle, Hulda.”

~

After Hermione had returned to London, it quickly became very clear to Gabriel that his little blótgyðiur was not doing well. Each day he watched her grow quieter, sadder and thinner, her skin losing its healthy glow while her eyes turned hollow, sleepless bruises forming under them.

He didn’t blame her for being miserable— she’d been torn from her home, thrust back into a house and lifestyle that brought back vivid memories of the sister she’d lost and her parents apparently couldn’t even be bothered sticking around to make sure she was okay. And Hermione wasn’t okay, not even slightly, and it worried him. He could feel her emotions through their link forged between god-and-priestess and he rapidly found himself growing more and more concerned, to the point that
he started to visit her every day to try and pull her out of the emotional slump. When she barely showed any signs of improvement, he decided drastic action had to be taken.

Gabriel didn’t believe in half-measures or small gestures— he much preferred ‘go big or go home’, which was how he came to the decision to do something very reckless. “Fenris is going to crack the shits if he hears about this,” he noted out loud to himself before putting his plan into action without delay.

It warmed his grace to hear Hermione state that she trusted him— and not just with her own life, but with the lives of those that she loved. There was no bigger declaration of trust that she could possibly make and it made him want to live up to it, to never abuse or betray it— and to smite anyone who dared attempt such a thing.

Like he’d said— go big or go home.

He’d chosen to blindfold her before taking her to his (sort of, it’s complicated) half-brother’s birth site; Hermione was a clever kid and he didn’t want her making any sort of connection between him and Christianity— not when he was about to flaunt just how much more powerful he was then Loki’s mythology.

Taking Hermione back with him through time without sending up a flare of grace would have been impossible for any angel or archangel— that was, except for him. Even holy ground wouldn’t be able to give his ‘mojo’ the boost needed for such a thing, but fortunately he wasn’t as limited as his siblings were— he wasn’t just play-acting a pagan god, he was a pagan god and unlike angels, pagan gods were much more creative about using human souls for power. It wasn’t nearly so invasive, dangerous or painful as it was for an angel to gain power through soul-contact; the bond between god and disciple was one of worship and offering— and although Gabriel tended to avoid the latter, not needing the power boost the way other pagan gods did, every time she prayed Hermione opened up her soul and offered herself.

So this time, when he asked her to pray and she did so without hesitation, he accepted the willing offering, allowing the rush of her brilliant, incandescent soul to stoke Loki’s powers, letting pagan magic and grace intertwine inside him until he was brimming with belief and worship and strength.

“Perfect,” he murmured, letting all three sets of his wings stretch and shiver as he tightened his grip on his little priestess. “Now hold on tight.”

Travelling through time with someone else should have been exhausting; travelling so far back wasn’t easy, not with the limited grace he was using, but the soul-contact had lent him enough strength to safely move them both through the time stream without having to resort to accessing more of his grace— Hermione’s soul had truly been just that strong. He’d even managed to keep his Vessel mostly together during the process, with only part of his True Form slipping through (there was a reason he’d made Hermione wear a blindfold, and it wasn’t just to hide Bethlehem from her).

And it was all worth it, to see the look on Hermione’s face, to feel her pure shock and happiness as her very soul glowed with excitement and delight when he revealed when they were.

Of course, Fenris was absolutely still going to chew him out when he returned back to the present… Maybe he should bring Hermione with him, so his son couldn’t get too mad? Definitely something to think about…

But that was a thousand years away yet (thank Dad).
Chapter End Notes

Fun fact- "Hulda" is a name derived from Old Norse hulda meaning "hiding, secrecy" and was the name of a sorceress in Norse mythology. As a modern name, it can also derive from archaic Swedish huld meaning "sweet, loveable"

Also, a link to an amazing pic of Hermione in her hangerock by kitsunesongs~
http://kitsunesongs.tumblr.com/post/174878055733
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

Her god stayed with her at the Enchanted Isle the first three days they were there, much to Hermione’s relief considering just how awestruck she was by Lady Morgana. Together, she and Loki explored the Isle; Hermione was positively enchanted by it—the wild grass was lush and green, the paths were lined with natural, polished river-stones and streams wound their way through the island, creating lovely ponds and lakes filled with brightly coloured fish and small, tumbling waterfalls, as well as powering a mill. Part of the island had been turned into farm-land, where fruits, grains and vegetables were grown, sheep, cattle, pigs, chickens, geese, ducks, goats, horses and deer roamed freely to graze where they wished and buzzing hives of bees lined the beautiful orchard.

The Enchanted Isle, it was explained, was entirely self-sufficient. It was the home of the priestesses of the Old Religion—the witches who had pledged themselves to the Old Religion—and was separate from the rest of the world, with the priestesses content to remain in their small paradise learning the magical arts, giving worship and performing the daily chores necessary to keep their small community independent, without the need to leave the island for supplies.

As well as prayers and attending lessons to either provide education or receive it, the priestesses and noviciates (those still in training to be a priestess) were given a different task or responsibility for that day, such as washing, cooking, attending the farm-lands or spinning, weaving and embroidery. Magic, of course, made all the work much simpler, and the daily chores were considered a type of training for the noviciates, but there were still some things that were better done by hand.

It was, Hermione thought, a lot like a nunnery; the women all lived in one place, grew their own food, made their own clothes and had sequestered themselves away. None of them were married, though by the way Lady Morgana and Loki looked at each other, Hermione was pretty sure that celibacy wasn’t required for the priestesses (also unlike in a nunnery, the priestesses took no vows of poverty; they wore rich clothing and jewels, their rooms were furnished with beautifully carved furniture and they were allowed to keep their own possessions).

The priestesses’ place of worship, a large stone temple, was easily the loveliest building on the Isle. It was built of white stone with flowers and ivy growing along the pillars and spreading across the arches, the bright splashes of colour decorating the carvings etched into the stone.

At the forefront of the temple was a beautifully carved alter that seemed to always be decorated with baskets of fresh fruit, herbs and sweet-smelling flowers, as well as two elegantly carved candles placed in holders that had been worked from the stone of the alter and were kept permanently burning. Also on the altar was a stone bowl, the bottom of which was stained a dark colour Hermione was fairly certain was blood.

Large windows kept the temple well-lit, though Hermione was initially surprised to realise there was no glass blocking up the windows. It took her a moment to remember the rarity and expense of glass back in these times and she guessed that with magic to protect the temple from the elements and wild animals there was no true need for glass anyway.

The temple was the principal building of the Isle, but grouped near it was a series of smaller buildings also built from stone, including a refectory with a kitchen and buttery attached, a dormitory-style building where the priestesses slept, a library, a building for the ill, a bathing
house, the building where the lessons for the noviciates took place, a guest house for the reception of strangers and visitors, a washing room, and storerooms for provisions. It also had a barn and granary, for the animals and harvest respectively.

The food itself was a surprise—a good surprise. Either the priestesses were making an effort because of Loki’s presence, or they always ate like kings and queens; for their sake, Hermione hoped it was the latter. Each night multiple courses were served upon golden plates stacked on tables covered with richly-coloured cloth; there were civets of hare, stuffed chickens, salted meats, enormous pies, hard-boiled eggs covered with saffron and flavoured with cloves, minced loins of deer, entire pigs… not to mention the desserts; oh, the desserts were delicious— coloured jellies of swans and peacocks, cream covered with fennel seeds and preserved in sugar, plums stewed in rose-water, fresh fruits and various sweet pastries.

Hermione found herself fascinated by nearly everything around her, starting from the very simplest of things such as how people "brushed" their teeth in these times in order to prevent decay and discolouring (it was her parents’ influence coming through there). She learned from Marsion, one of the noviciates, that the girl rubbed her teeth with rough cloth twice daily using a concoction made from powdered stone, burned spices, myrrh, honey, dried iris flowers, ashes and salt before rinsing her mouth with vinegar and chewing a second concoction of cinnamon, mace, cloves, bay leaves, peppermint and nutmeg, all to keep her teeth pearly white and her breath fresh. Just like modern toothpaste, it couldn’t be swallowed and instead had to be spat out.

Despite having packed toothpaste and a toothbrush at Loki’s instruction, Hermione had wanted to try it, just to see what it was like—she had very nearly regretted her curiosity as it tasted utterly foul, but she knew she’d definitely have regretted not trying it at all. Loki, of course, had just laughed at her as she spluttered and gagged, but he’d eventually taken pity on her and snapped up a jar of mint humbugs.

Hermione didn’t see Lady Morgana much outside of meals during those first three days, and when she did Loki was always with her and Loki had a way of pulling the attention of the room to himself; he was the sun that people orbited around, not even realising they were doing it. Apart from their introduction, she’d barely traded a sentence or two with the intimidating older witch, though she had made friends, of sort, with Marsion and one of the other noviciates, Argante, and had joined them for their daily lessons and chores—she had enough experience with tending vegetable and herb gardens and cleaning out chicken coops that it wasn’t really a hardship, though it was certainly a lot more fun than usual getting to use magic to help.

Naturally, the magic lessons were her favourite and she got to sit every day with the noviciates and learn from the priestess whose task it was to teach that day. It had quickly become apparent to her that her grasp on her magic was far beyond the noviciates, despite the fact that at fourteen Marsion was the very youngest of them all, while she was just nine. It made her feel awkward and she hid from the noviciates just how quickly and instinctively she picked up all new magic they were being taught, though she was aware that she’d yet to manage to fool the priestess teaching; she was just grateful that the older witches seemed to take pity on her, or perhaps they didn’t feel comfortable scolding her, considering she wasn’t actually a noviciate, she was a guest of the High Priestess herself.

It was on the fourth morning on the Enchanted Isle that Loki broke the news to her he’d be leaving for a few days. “You’ll be well looked after here,” he promised her, “and if you need me, I’m just a prayer away.”

Hermione, despite the sudden attack of nerves at the thought of her god leaving while she was stranded back in 990AD, nodded to him. Likely in response to sensing her anxiety, despite the fact...
they were standing in front of Lady Morgana, Loki didn’t hesitate for a moment to pull her into his arms, hugging her tightly. “You'll have fun, sugar,” he promised, kissing the crown of her head as she clung to him, “you won’t even notice that I’m gone and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Promise?” She whispered, unable to help herself.

“Pinky promise.” Loki said solemnly and she huffed, jabbing him in the ribs with her fingernails, causing him to gasp in mock-affront, lowering her to the ground.

“What did I do to deserve that?” He grumbled.

“You weren’t taking it seriously,” she told him.

“On the contrary, a pinky promise is the most serious, sacred type of promise there is,” he informed her and Hermione groaned.

“I take it back, go away.” She told him and he laughed at her, tugging on one of her curls before disappearing with a snap of his fingers.

In the moments after he vanished, Hermione quickly became aware of Lady Morgana’s eyes on her and she blushed slightly as she realised that the older witch had just witnessed the childish interaction between her and her god.

"You hold his favour," the High Priestess observed and Hermione hesitated, not sure how to answer that but Lady Morgana saved her from having to. “Peace, child,” she said, with a kind smile. "I am just pleased to see that you are not unhappy, for I know more than most how the favour of a god can be a double-edged blade, for the gods are as powerful as they are capricious.”

Lady Morgana didn’t elaborate on her apparent personal experience of how the favour of gods wasn’t always what it was shaped up to be, but Hermione had read enough mythology to understand where the older witch was coming from— and she wasn’t wrong; Hermione had read a lot of mythology and was well aware that things didn’t often go well for mortals who earned the eye of a god, so she found herself hurrying to speak up to reassure Morgana. "I'm very happy with Loki," she told her earnestly. "He's saved my life more then once and he protects me and he makes me happy when I'm sad and he teaches me. He… he takes care of me, my Lady."

"Please, there is no need for formalities, just Morgana is fine. And I am well pleased to hear that," Morgana said warmly as her red mouth curved up into a clever smile. "He teaches you, you say? Well, while I, of course, am not fool enough to claim to know more than a god, there are aspects of magic that I can teach you that perhaps your god cannot," she offered and Hermione’s mouth almost dropped open in shock at the offer.

"Anything you could possibly teach me, I’d be honoured to learn," she said, earnest and eager, and Morgana laughed.

“Yes, I can see that,” she said, lightly teasing, and Hermione’s cheeks went pink again. “Those who come to me to learn, seek to be taught one of two things; I am a deft hand at healing, that is fairly well known and I could teach you it well, but it is in the art of divination that my true talent lies,” Morgana explained. "It is a fine but fickle art," she freely admitted, “however, it is not one that can be taught to those without the gift— one either has it, or they do not.""How can you tell if you have the, uh, gift for divination?" Hermione asked curiously and Morgana made a light humming sound of consideration.

“"My assumption would be that you would have the predilection, Hulda— divination is most
prevalent in those who have been gifted by the gods or have ancestors who were strong with the gift or have significant magical potential,” she explained. “Tell me, have you ever experienced a dream that became a reality? Or perhaps, there has been a time where you have been gripped by a most terrible premonition that turned out to be true?"

Hermione was about to say no when a sudden feeling of sickness hit her, like a brick to the chest. She wasn’t sure what her expression looked like, but Morgana’s eyes immediately softened, an understanding expression dawning on her lovely face.

"Rarely are we gifted with visions of joyful happenstance," she said quietly, reaching out to brush a gentle hand over Hermione's shoulder and Hermione had to blink rapidly to clear her vision.

"It was my sister," she said, barely louder than a whisper. "Once, she was in danger and I just... I just knew. Nobody believed me, and she was hurt. Badly.” She’d been left tied to a goalpost overnight during a winter London night because nobody had believed her when she said Ness was in danger, and there was a part of her that hated her parents for that, the part that didn’t think she could ever forgive them. "And the only other time... it came out of nowhere, but suddenly I just knew something was wrong, horribly wrong. I was too late, though– my sister… she'd already passed away by the time I reached her."

"May the goddess bless her soul," Morgana murmured, bowing her head in respect before straightening up once more, looking down to meet her eyes. "The gift is not kind," she told her gently, before smiling slightly. "But this is most fortuitous news," she said, "for it means you can be taught the art of divination– and there is no sorcerer or sorceress alive at this very moment who has greater knowledge of the art then I; not even Merlin, for all that he argues it. Come, Hulda– you have much to learn." And Hermione, thrilled by the opportunity, was only too eager to follow.

Over the next week, she barely saw Marsion or Argante as she spent her days learning different branches of the art of divination from the Morgana le Fay herself. The sorceress taught her to meditate while burning sage, birch and cinnamon before scrying in shallow stone basins of crystal-clear water. She taught her the ways of casting knucklebones, of how to read the wax splatters of a candle and the true art of haruspicy; sacrificing an animal in trade for a glimpse of the future divined through the shape of its liver, the twists and turns of its intestines and the pattern of its blood splatter.

Hermione was fully aware that most people would be horrified at the idea of gutting a sheep to learn the future (and she'd freely admit that Morgana had had to be the one to slit the ewe's throat), but at this point she'd been half-raised by a pagan god, had learned from her uncle how to gut and fillet a fish at eight years old and had sliced open her own skin to bleed for a sacrificial offering. In the end, it hadn't been a huge leap and learning haruspicy from the Morgana le Fay herself was truly a priceless opportunity.

Overall she'd had very little talent for the wax splatter, knucklebones and haruspicy, but she did have some success with scrying. She was well-trained in meditation thanks to both Loki's help learning how to visualise her magic and teaching herself occlumency, so it had been a simple matter for her to slip into a meditative state surrounded by the thick, smoky scent of burning sage, birch and cinnamon. Once she'd cleared her mind, she then gazed into the crystal-clear water in an almost trance-like state where shapes and images that were mostly too blurry for her to make sense of (which Morgana had assured her was quite common, especially for a beginner) danced and rippled across the reflective surface of the water.

There was only one real image that was clear enough to consistently make out and had imprinted
itself into her mind and memory— and that was the Ancient Rune *sowilo* [soh-veal-oh]. Like a jagged lightning strike, *sowilo* represented both the sun and the triumph of the Light over the darkness, and Hermione found herself certain that it was a reference to Loki, despite it not being one of the symbols traditionally connected to her god.

"I've just always seen him as like the sun," she explained to Morgana, as they walked together through the gardens of the Isle. "Not because he's always happy and sunny, because he really isn't, but because he's like... he's like *gravity*, like everything and everyone is drawn to him and revolves around him and he's at the middle of it all and he could burn the whole world with all the intensity he's got locked up inside him, but even then I couldn't do anything but think about how worthy he is of awe and revelation. He's the centre of my whole universe."

"Do your people believe that we revolve around the sun?" Morgana asked, her green eyes bright with curiosity. "How truly fascinating... and what is this 'gravity'?"

"Um," Hermione said blankly, stopping suddenly as she started to internally panic. Morgana stopped too, arching a questioning eyebrow. "It's, uh, it's the natural force that stops us all from just floating away," she tried to explain. "It's what gives everything weight."

"How fascinating," Morgana repeated, appearing intrigued, and Hermione wondered just how badly she'd screwed up history. At least she'd stopped herself before automatically going on to describe how the moon's gravity was responsible for the ocean's tides and how gravitational attraction was believed to be responsible for many of the large scale structures in the universe, causing the original gaseous matter present in the universe to coalesce to form stars and then for those stars to group together into galaxies. Medieval Britain, she was quite confident, was not ready for that.

"Putting that aside, though," Morgana continued, "that is quite a beautiful way to perceive your god. I personally view the Triple Goddess as the mother of all, she who gifted us with our magic. My belief is that it is through her honoured blessing that we can touch the magic bound to the very fabric of the world."

"The Triple Goddess?" Hermione asked curiously. She knew the name, of course— living on the Enchanted Isle, it was impossible not to have heard of it, but none of the priestesses or noviciates had actually explained the goddess to her— they all seemed to assume she would already know, like it was unfathomable that she wouldn’t. She’d read about triple goddesses during her study of mythology, of course— a triple goddess was three separate deities that represented either a triad who always appeared as a group, such as the Moirai, the Erinyes, the Norns and the Morrígan, or a single deity known as having three aspects, such as Hecate and Diana of Nemi— but she hadn’t read about a goddess known singularly as ‘The Triple Goddess’.

"She is the Maiden Huntress, the Mother Goddess and the Death Crone," Morgana explained to her, a sudden great passion in her voice. "She is of the waxing, full, and waning moon; the great goddess that presides over all, sees all and knows all. She is the protective goddess with power over the heavens, the earth and seas who bestows prosperity and blessings to those who fall under her domains of magic, witchcraft and sorcery."

The silver circlet that Morgana was wearing in her hair that day with its symbol of the lunar cycle— a crescent moon in a waxing phase and a crescent denoting the waning moon framing a circle representing the full moon— suddenly made sense as more than a pretty piece of jewellery, Hermione realised. "Have you... have you ever met her?" she asked hesitantly, unsure if her question was too personal.

"I often see her in my prophetic dreams," Morgana answered with a brilliant smile, her eyes going
distant for a moment. "She is most gracious and magnificent and both blesses and honours me with the gift of her presence."

Hermione wasn't quite sure what to say to that, finding herself awed by Morgana’s devoutness as well as madly curious about the Triple Goddess (after all, she'd had her magic before she'd ever prayed to Loki, so she knew he wasn't responsible for it... was it Morgana's Triple Goddess, then, that had blessed her with her powers?), and she was saved from the need to when, out of what seemed like nowhere, a dark shape emerged from the clouds and started to rapidly descend down upon them.

Automatically, Hermione ducked, her magic flaring up in the air around them, ready to defend her the way Loki had taught, but that turned out unnecessary when the dark shape, quickly revealed to be avian in nature, slowed its dive to a glide before gently landing on Morgana's shoulder, where it was clearly welcome.

The bird had the look of a small underfed vulture; a thin and mournful-looking creature with greenish black feathers and a very sharp-looking beak. From its perch on Morgana's shoulder, it tilted its head slightly as it appeared to peer down at her with an unblinking onyx eye. Hermione stared back at it with great interest, fear gone.

"I've never seen a bird like that before," she told Morgana.

"Sorrow is an augurey," Morgana explained, “an augurey is a breed of phoenix."

"You named her Sorrow?" Hermione asked, a bit confused by and unsure of the choice in name.

"I did indeed," Morgana said with a small smile. "It is believed that the cry of an augurey foretells death, and though I am yet to witness any proof of such a thing they are seen as Dark, evil creatures who herald great sorrow. Yet, I find there is a curious beauty in sorrow; it is, after all, during the darkest hours of the night that the stars shine brightest."

The augurey, Sorrow, let out a low, keening moan that sent shivers crawling down Hermione's spine, but despite the unpleasant sensation she still found herself enchanted by her.

"She's beautiful," she told Morgana honestly. Maybe not classically so, but there was a curious beauty to her— Sorrow, she thought, might actually suit the phoenix well.

"Yes," Morgana agreed fondly, gently stroking a hand over glossy black feathers. "She is. And if she is here, then Glaedwine will not be long to follow."

"Is Glaedwine a friend of yours?" Hermione asked curiously.

"In a manner of speaking," Morgana said mysteriously. "Come, dear– let us change, for we are about to have guests."

So far during her week and a half stay, there hadn’t been a single visitor to the Enchanted Isle and Hermione had got the impression that that wasn’t at all unusual; there was a certain isolation to the lifestyle of the Isle’s occupants. Curious about the mysterious visitor, Hermione followed Morgana back to the guest house.

The rooms she’d been staying in were excellent, considering it was 990AD. Her bed in particular, with its feather mattress, fur covers and heavy blankets, was one of the most comfortable things she’d ever laid down on—not something she’d been expecting (she suspected magic was involved). Tapestries covered the walls, a large chest sat at the foot of her bed for her to store her belongings in, a wooden barrel that served as a bathtub sat in the corner and there was even a
Morgana instructed her to bathe, filling the wooden barrel with a single wave of her hand then warming the water with a second wordless gesture. After she’d washed and scrubbed, Hermione used her magic to dry herself (now *that* had been a good trick to learn) before turning her attention to the bed where Morgana had laid out a beautifully embroidered tunic in forest green silk with golden thread that belted loosely around the waist for her to dress in, a replacement for the plain woollen dress she’d been wearing before.

Morgana, who was now encased in a draped silk gown of crimson with a layered skirt that pooled around her on the floor and flowed as she moved, her dark hair braided into a crown and her lips painted a velvety red, then worked some of her most impressive magic yet to tame Hermione’s hair, wrestling the chaotic curls into pretty looping braids all interweaved with golden thread and tiny gold bells, leaving a few loose curls to frame her face.

Hermione felt unbelievably fancy; she’d almost gotten used to wearing the woollen dresses and not feeling like she was playing dress-up, but she could quite confidently say she’d never worn something as fine as her current clothes.

There was a quiet knock on the door and one of the priestesses, Tyronoe, announced that “he” had arrived with enough dislike in her voice that Morgana laughed, dismissing the woman with a nod.

“Come, Hulda,” Morgana once again beckoned, “my friend awaits us.”
When Morgana led her over to the dark-haired young man waiting for them by the gardens outside the temple, Hermione was *not* prepared for just who the older witch’s *friend* was. Though to be fair, even with advanced warning she didn’t think she’d be prepared.

Merlin was skinnier then she’d always pictured him to be and much younger-looking then the image of a wizened old man with a long, grey beard that his name conjured up, but she recognised him from old portraits of his earlier days in some of the Arthurian books Loki had given her. He looked about twenty, twenty-five at a stretch, and was dressed in a tunic that appeared as if it had been thrown on in a great rush, a woollen coat, and leather boots and a belt. The only true indication that he was more than what he appeared was the aged look in his eyes, the magnitude of the magic that hummed in the air around him and the brilliantly coloured phoenix perched on his shoulder.

"Merlin, Glædwine; welcome back to the Isle," Morgana greeted them warmly. "It is a pleasure to see you again, both of you hale and hearty."

"You forget exhausted," Merlin said with a disgruntled sigh, "Arthur has been working me to the bone!"

Morgana laughed, the sound rich and throaty. “Ah, the price you must pay for serving a king,” she teased gently. "Now, let me introduce you to the disciple of Loki– Merlin, this is Hulda. Hulda, this foolish man is Merlin Emrys."

"It-it's nice to meet you," Hermione stammered slightly, unable to quite believe she was really standing in front of the Merlin, even after all the extraordinary things that had happened to her.

"Ah! You are the child Loki discussed with those delightful sorcerers constructing Hogwarts!" Merlin exclaimed, sounding delighted. Hermione's cheeks turned red as she nodded shyly. "He had many wonderful things to say about you," the extraordinarily famous wizard told her, his bright blue old-soul eyes crinkling as he smiled at her. He had a lovely smile.

"Th-thank you," she stammered and Glædwine trilled, spreading his magnificent, fiery wings so he could gently glide down from Merlin's shoulder to perch on her hastily proffered arm. The phoenix was beautiful with its—his?—brilliant crimson feathers, glittering golden tail as long as a peacock’s and gleaming golden talons. Surprisingly light for such a large bird, Glædwine’s talons and beak were intimidatingly sharp. Hermione felt entranced as the phoenix tilted its head, peering at her like Sorrow had before cooing softly and leaning forwards to groom one of the stray curls framing her face.

"He likes you," Merlin said, stroking a hand down the phoenix's back. "And Glædwine is an excellent judge of character."

Hermione blushed again at the implied praise.

"She is god-chosen," Morgana pointed out, though she appeared proud, almost, as she looked down at her. "Naturally, Glædwine is drawn to her– she will grow to be extraordinary, of that I have no
"Morgana," Merlin scolded gently, a smile on his face, "you are embarrassing the poor child!"

Hermione, her cheeks now a burning red, wished she could duck her head to hide behind her hair—she was really regretting her braids.

"I am boasting," Morgana corrected with a haughty swish of her curls. "I have been her teacher for this past week, I am allowed to boast."

“If you have been her teacher this past week, then it is my turn to claim her time,” Merlin said and Morgana smiled, waving a hand obligingly.

“I see no problem with that, so long as Hulda is willing…?” Morgana turned to her, raising an eyebrow, and Hermione couldn’t nod fast enough which prompted the older witch to smile again. “Then of course you may.”

“Splendid!” Merlin announced, before smiling down at her. “Truthfully, it is a gift to have you here,” he said, before lowering his voice conspiratorially. “All the priestesses loathe me, a welcoming face on the Isle other than the lovely Lady Morgana is a rare sight indeed.”

Hermione couldn’t help her giggles and Glædwine let out a trill before launching himself into the air. “Ah, off he goes to find his lady love,” Merlin said fondly.

“Sorrow?” Hermione guessed and Merlin nodded, before flourishing his arm grandly for her to rest hers over his. She carefully placed her hand on his arm, hoping she’d got it right—she wasn’t quite sure how she was supposed to position her arm or what she was supposed to do with her hand. Merlin didn’t say anything though, so she didn’t think she’d messed it up too badly. “We should go sneak something from the kitchen,” the famous, world-renowned wizard whispered to her with a grin as they started walking together, his toffee-coloured eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I heard that!” Morgana called out after them but Merlin just laughed and pulled her along towards the kitchens.

Merlin, she realised very quickly, was funny—somehow, that hadn’t come across in the history books. He always seemed to have a joke ready and his merry laughter was a warm sound that automatically lifted her mood.

Despite the fact it would have been easy for him to teleport in and out of the kitchen to steal the freshly basked sweet-pastries, Merlin first checked if she could turn herself invisible—and she was very proud to show him she could—before they both crept into busy kitchen, dodging the three priestesses and three novic peace currently preparing dinner and sneakily snatching up a sweet-pastry each while none of them were watching.

The moment they’d escaped with their goodies, Hermione broke down into breathless giggles, flushed and excited as she beamed at Merlin who grinned back down at her. “Ready for our next adventure?” he asked, holding out his arm and she nodded eagerly as she accepted it. “Hold tight,” he said cheerfully, before twisting on the spot.

It was a truly horrible experience, whatever it was. It felt like she was being squeezed through a straw, the building pressure so intense it was as if her eyes were being pushed back into her skull. The moment she felt her feet touch the ground, she doubled over and vomited up the sweet-pastry she’d just stolen.

“Oh, I forgot most people are sick the first time they apparate,” Merlin said, a tad sheepish as she
lifted her head to glare at him, vomit dribbling down her chin. He vanished the mess with a wave of his hand, including the bits of sick on her face and somehow replacing the taste of vomit in her mouth to lemon— a strong but acceptably much less disgusting flavour considering minty toothpaste currently wasn’t an option— before holding out his own sweet-pastry. “Forgive me?”

“I suppose,” Hermione sniffed, accepting the pastry offering and taking a big bite out of it, mostly just to see the look on his face when his hard-won prize was taken from him. “Where are we?” she then asked curiously, looking around them.

They weren’t on the Isle, she could immediately tell— there was no forest like this on the Enchanted Isle; the trees towered over her and there were so many of them packed together that there could be someone standing just two yards away from her and she wouldn’t be able to see them. There was, however, a path that she and Merlin were standing on, where the dirt on the ground was smoothed out and lined with fallen leaves and moss. If she left the path for any reason, Hermione doubted she’d be able to find it again.

“This is Brocéliande,” Merlin told her and Hermione’s eyes widened. According to mythology, Brocéliande was a legendary enchanted forest, a place in medieval legend of magic and mystery. It featured in a number of medieval texts, most to do with Arthurian legend, and was said to contain the magical fountain of Barenton and shelter the enchanted Val Sans Retour, which translated to the Vale of No Return. The Vale was considered to be the place of Merlin’s retirement— and of his eventual death. One day, the forest she was standing in would hold the tomb of the young-ish looking wizard currently grinning down at her. It was… a discomforting thought that she hastily pushed away.

Trees weren’t the most interesting things to look like, even the rather magnificent and ancient-looking specimens like the ones she was currently surrounded by, but it was a thrill to just be standing in a place of such history and ancient, natural magic. Much like Morgana’s Enchanted Isle, in her present-time nobody knew where Brocéliande was, though it was most commonly believed to be the forest now known as the Paimpont Forest, located in Brittany, France.

“I see you have heard of it,” Merlin said, looking pleased. “The magic in this place is a wonder, is it not?”

“It is,” Hermione agreed, because it truly was— she could feel the wildness of the magic around her; it was untameable, wild, a complete rush that practically had her blood buzzing in her veins.

“Shall we walk?” Merlin asked and she nodded, happy to explore along the winding paths surrounded by autumnal woodland with the historical figure beside her. The path was mostly flat but there were parts that were narrow and muddy and she tripped over more than one knobbly tree-root. Huge red mushrooms sprouted from the loamy forest floor, the occasional small stream trickled by, the trees created a canopy of brilliant green and the ferns and bracket around them had a rich golden hue.

She and Merlin chatted together as they walked, mostly Merlin telling her stories about King Arthur and his Knights, particularly Sirs Lancelot, Bedivere, Percivale, Tristan and Cadagon; they all apparently got themselves into an awful lot of trouble an awful lot of the time. Hermione thought Loki would probably like King Arthur and his Knights— the amount of complete and utter chaos that seemed to constantly surround them was impressive.

Despite the fact she couldn’t make rhyme or reason out of all the wending, winding paths that kept branching out into multiple directions every hundred yards or so, Merlin seemed to know exactly where they were going and after an hour or so of wandering they reached a clearing that held what she immediately knew had to be the Fountain of Barenton.
It was written in Arthurian legend that it was at this very fountain that Merlin had taught Vivianne, the legendary Lady of the Lake, the magical arts, and beside the fountain, over by its source, there was a large stone slab that Hermione recognised as an integral part of the legend— it was said that whoever sprinkled water from the fountain onto the slab would bring about a huge thunderstorm and rouse the Black Knight, protector of the fountain.

Merlin, with a casual wave of his hand, conjured two goblets from thin air that he dipped into the fountain, filling them with crystal-clear water then offering one to her.

“It’s not going to… do anything to me, is it?” She asked hesitantly as she accepted it, peering down at the water.

“It will not,” Merlin reassured her, visibly amused, before lifting his own goblet to his lips and drinking deeply. The walk had made Hermione thirsty, so despite her misgivings— fountains didn’t earn the name ‘magical’ for no reason— she tentatively sipped at the water. It was cool, crisp and possibly the freshest water she’d ever tasted.

“Thank you,” she told Merlin, once she’d lowered the goblet.

“It is no matter,” Merlin said with a smile, “I have enjoyed your company today, mystery that you are. There is something quite curious about you, Hulda; you speak with magic in your words.”

Hermione was confused for a moment before abruptly realising what Merlin was referring to— the magic Loki had used, so she could speak Ænglisc with a Norrœnt Mál accent.

Merlin grinned at the look of sudden, worried realisation on her face, winking at her and tapping the side of his nose. “Worry not, your secret is safe with me.” He promised. “You are a strange, fascinating little creature, I would not want to scare you away when I have been enjoying your company so.”

Hermione immediately pulled a face at his description— ‘little creature’, urgh. “You’re as bad as Loki!” she complained and Merlin laughed.

“A comparison to a god? I believe I will take that as a compliment!” He cheerfully declared and Hermione glowered at him, her scowl further darkening when it became apparent that Merlin was trying not to coo at her. Then his gaze flicked up above her, to something over her shoulder. “Ah, we have a visitor.” He said and Hermione spun around, her eyes widening.

The being who had just entered the clearing was a centaur, of that she had no doubt— and, to her surprise, it was a female. In her present-time, a female centaur hadn’t been seen for hundreds of years and they had always been rare, even back now, living deep in their forests; caring for, teaching and protecting their young. This centaur was beautiful, with a coat as silver as the stars and long hair and a tail as dark as the midnight sky. Her skin was porcelain-fair with a spattering of pale freckles like constellations dusting her cheekbones and her eyes were dark and solemn-looking. Her breasts were uncovered, which stood to reason but Hermione still felt slightly uncomfortable at the nudity.

“The beauty of the setting sun in the skies above pales against you, oh fairest one,” Merlin said, bowing to the magnificent centaur.

“The stars do look down favourably on flatterers,” she responded, with a light smile. “It has been some time since we have seen you in our home, Wild One. And with a filly touched by the gods, no less.” The mare turned slightly, meeting Hermione’s eyes before dipping her head. “Lokabrenna shines brightly upon you.” She said and Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise.
While the brightest star in the night sky was most commonly known as ‘Sirius’, to the Nordic people it was ‘Lokabrenna’, a name which meant ‘burning by Loki’ or ‘Loki’s torch’. This centaur had not only seen a god’s claim on her, but she’d also somehow seen exactly which god that claim belonged to. It was… impressive and slightly unnerving.

“Hulda, this is Rhea the Stargazer, Herd Leader of the centaurs of Brocéliande.” Merlin introduced them and Hermione hastily bowed.

“I, um, I apologise, my Lady, I’m afraid I don’t know if there’s a traditional greeting I’m supposed to give you, I’ve never met a centaur before,” she stammered, going for the generic title of respect, particularly to someone of higher station, in this age.

“Be at peace, child,” Rhea said kindly, “knowledge of the customs of my kind is rare, it is no surprise that our ways are a mystery to you, Young Tempest.”

“Tempest?” Hermione asked, confused.


“Great change,” Rhea agreed solemnly. “All centaurs understand the highest truth, that while the stars above impel, they do not compel— your path is your own, yet for you the skies speak of tempest, so tempest I name you.”

A week ago, Hermione would have seriously doubted that the position of celestial bodies could influence or predict human affairs, but after everything Morgana had shown her this past week… well, she couldn't help but wonder if Rhea’s predictions were right. She certainly wasn’t about to automatically dismiss them.

“Is it… is it a good thing?” she asked hesitantly.

“Change is turmoil and conflict,” Rhea told her solemnly, “and it is opportunity. There can be no good without evil, no light without darkness, no heaven without hell, for one cannot exist without the other; it is the way of the universe.”

Hermione, reminded of her earlier conversation with Morgana, murmured, “the darker the night, the brighter the stars.” Rhea smiled at her.

“Lokabrenna shines brightly upon you,” she repeated her previous words before bowing her head once more. “May Jupiter align for you, Young Tempest. Travel well, Wild One”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, bowing back before watching the centaur gracefully turn and step from the clearing, disappearing into the trees. “Um, what did she mean by Jupiter aligning?” she asked Merlin, who was looking after Rhea with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Jupiter is the planet of luck and good fortune,” he explained, turning back around. He then smiled. “To translate it from centaur speak, she was wishing you good luck.”

“It’s not very comforting that she thinks I’m going to need it,” Hermione admitted and Merlin chuckled.

“You are god-chosen, Hulda— your future is one of greatness, of that I have no doubt, but the path to greatness is not one that is unchallenged.”

Hermione wasn’t quite sure what to say to that, but Merlin didn’t appear to be expecting a response. Instead, he looked up at the sky, now bathed in the burning, golden-orange glow of the
setting sun, and sighed. “I believe it is time for us to return to the Enchanted Isle.”

“I had a really wonderful time today,” Hermione told him honestly and Merlin grinned.

“I am very pleased to hear that, little tempest.” He said and she immediately groaned.

“No, no, no— I refuse, that’s almost as bad as ‘kitten’!”

“Kitten?” Merlin asked, his grin widening, much to her horror. “Oh I can see why you are called that, you do remind me of a huffy little kitten when you get annoyed.”

“Kittens still have claws,” Hermione threatened but Merlin just held out his arm, snickering at her expense as he— what had he called it? Apparating?— as he apparated them back to the Isle. It was just as sickening as the last time; a terrible pressure that felt like being squeezed through a straw that was not designed for humans to squeeze through. She didn’t throw up, at least, which was a vast improvement.

Later that evening, after the dinner feast (she’d gotten to sit between Morgana and Merlin, much to the envy of everyone else, and the conversation had been amazing), Hermione returned to her rooms, only to find her god waiting there for her— and she’d thought her day couldn’t get any better!

“Loki!” she shrieked, running forwards to jump into his arms. He caught her, laughing as he spun them both around until she was so dizzy she thought she’d throw up on him. “I missed you,” she confessed, burying her face against the furs covering his chest. They felt soft as velvet against her skin.

“Really? I couldn’t tell at all,” Loki teased her, but she didn’t take the gentle mockery to heart, not when he’d yet to put her back down, still holding her tight in his arms.

“Guess what?” She said excitedly, not even waiting for an answer before continuing on to exclaim; “Merlin is here! The Merlin! And he took me to visit Brocéliande! And I met a centaur! A female centaur! And Merlin said he’d teach me some shape-shifting magic, if I wanted to— which of course I do— and he said—“

“Breathe, pumpkin!” Loki interrupted her, laughing, but she could only beam excitedly up at him. “I’m not sure I should be telling you this when you’re already so psyched up,” her god said playfully, “but I went to go have a chat with some old friends of mine while I was gone— and now we’ve been invited to spend a week or two at Hogwarts.”

Hermione’s squeal in response to that could probably be heard across the entire Enchanted Isle.

Chapter End Notes

Robert de Boron, the 13th-century author of the poem "Merlin", laid great emphasis on Merlin's power to shape-shift and his joking personality, which is what I’ve based my Merlin character off. This is not a cross-over with the BBC Merlin show.
CHAPTER NINETEEN:

Once Loki managed to calm her down following his announcement they got to go visit Hogwarts (to quote her god, she was “bouncing around like a demented squirrel on a sugar high whose tail had been set on fire”) they sat together in front of the merrily crackling fireplace and she excitedly told him about her about her past week.

Talking about her lessons with Morgana reminded her about an earlier question she had; a question that, in the excitement of meeting Merlin then Loki’s return and learning about their upcoming visit to Hogwarts, she had quite forgotten about— the Triple Goddess, and her possible role in her magic.

“Loki,” she asked hesitantly, unsure whether or not her question would upset him— gods were notoriously possessive and she had no doubt Loki was too. She didn’t want to upset him or make him angry, but... well, she hoped that he’d understand that while she was his, no matter what, she was curious. Her magic was, after all, an integral part of her— she just wanted to know if that part was touched by a god other then Loki.

“Yeah pumpkin?” he asked absently, most of his focus currently on perfectly stacking his s’more— he had snapped up the ingredients about half an hour ago, declaring that the fireplace in their room was perfect for roasting s’mores while she told him the stories of her week. She’d already eaten herself sick on the chocolatey gooey goodness and watching Loki assemble his latest one was making her feel a bit nauseous.

“When I was talking to Morgana earlier today,” she said, still hesitant, “she, um, she mentioned the Triple Goddess and when I asked about her, she told me that the Triple Goddess was responsible for my magi— holy cow!”

Hermione stared, wide-eyed, at the s’more that had just spontaneously combusted into a ball of fire, leaving only bits of charcoal behind— and this was before Loki had actually started roasting it. The metal skewer he was holding now looked suspiciously bent too.

“Hecate,” Loki said very stiffly, “is very annoying. She has no claim over you.”

“Is... is Hecate the Triple Goddess, then?” Hermione asked cautiously.

“She is.” He said shortly.

“So... is Morgana right, is she responsible for, um, for blessing us with the ability to touch the magic, er, ‘bound to the very fabric of the world’?” She asked, internally wondering if this was what was considered ‘poking a sleeping dragon in the eye’.

Loki turned to her, his eyes glowing gold. She could feel his magic building up in the room, could feel its wild intensity; it felt like the sort of power that could swallow oceans, split lands and carry mountains. She felt both small under the enormity of it and breathless from having all that power focused solely on her.

“You are mine, Hermione Jane Granger,” Loki said, voice fierce and final. “When you gave
yourself to me, I took Hecate’s blessing out of you and replaced it with my own— I refuse to allow any other god or goddess to have a claim over one of mine!”

Hermione looked up at him with wide eyes. “Really?” she breathed, her hands coming up to press against her chest, over where she’d always felt the miniature golden sun of her magic inside her.

“You are mine,” Loki repeated. “Not hers.”

“Well, of course I am,” she told him, wanting to reassure her god. “I never thought any differently for a moment. And even if it was her blessing, I would still be yours— but I am so pleased it’s your blessing.”

And at that, Loki looked like the cat with the cream. After taking a brief moment to banish the mess of charred remains, bent skewer and remaining s’mores ingredients, he pulled her over to him so she was curled up at his side. The warmth radiating from him was hotter than the fire, but somehow not uncomfortable at all in that odd way of is and she happily let him tuck her up beside him.

“How is it even possible, for Hecate’s blessing to be responsible for all the other witches and wizards out there, when they exist on such a wide scale?” she asked curiously, her mind spinning as it tried to figure out the logistics of it.

“Now that,” Loki told her, much calmer now, “is an interesting set of circumstances. You’ve done the reading, I’m sure you’ve noticed that communities of witches and wizards didn’t start to really organise themselves until after the spread of Christianity began on an international scale.”

“When we visited Scandinavia’s magical district while I was researching rituals I did start to wonder if there was a connection,” Hermione said excitedly. “Communities of witches and wizards in the Nordic and Baltic countries didn’t start forming until after Christianisation began, any history before that is... well, scarce.”

“Clever girl,” Loki smiled, clear pride on his face. “The reason for that is Hecate is a Greek pagan god and before Christianity started to spread, she wouldn’t have left Greece unless she wished to accompany her people when they waged war. After Christianisation began, however, the pagan gods started to lose their ties to their homelands as their people began to lose faith in them and convert.”

“That’s horrible,” Hermione said, frowning.

"Not really, most of them were complete assholes," Loki reassured her. "Losing the faith of their people meant they were significantly weakened, but Hecate is... well, I'll admit that she's smart," he said, grudgingly. "Christianity condemns witchcraft, so she created a "blessing" that allowed you mortals to use magic— not only did that turn them against Christianity, because why would they worship the Christian God when it seemed that He condemned them for something they couldn't help— that's actually a complicated story, but rest assured that your sort of witchcraft isn't the type referred to, not that the witches and wizards back then knew that— and to them, Hecate's blessing was tangible proof of her existence, because they'd been "blessed" by a god, so how could they not believe in her?

"And so, while so many other pagan gods were losing their powers as they lost their followers, Hecate traveled the globe to create followers to keep her strong. The children of her witches and wizards inherited the blessing and the religion of the ‘Triple Goddess’ was passed down from parent to child.”
“Except witches and wizards don’t worship her anymore,” Hermione pointed out and Loki smirked.

“No. No, they do not. For all her planning and despite the fact hundreds of thousands of mortals now carry her blessing, they lost their faith and Hecate is as weakened as any other pagan deity out there.”

Loki looked viciously, vindictively pleased by this fact. “You really don't like her,” she observed.

“No,” Loki answered instantly with a shudder. “She’s too… knowing. She looks at you like she knows all your secrets and nothing is hidden from her. It’s creepy and annoying.” Hermione giggled slightly at the face he pulled before a new worry started to niggle at her.

“Are you… are you like that?” She asked hesitantly. “Have you lost some of your powers, because you lost so many of your followers?”

Loki smirked at her, golden eyes bright with mischief. “Oh no, I’m much smarter then Hecate,” he told her, “and all the rest of them too— I don’t need the worship the way they do, though I won’t deny that it’s a nice little power-boost.”

“Good to know I’m useful to you,” Hermione said playfully. She was joking, but Loki’s expression turned abruptly serious.

“You are so much more than just some convenient, inconsequential battery, Hermione Granger— don’t you ever go thinking that that’s what you are to me,” he told her and Hermione shivered slightly at the intensity in his voice and eyes.

“I believe you,” she told him, slightly breathless, and as he smiled the pressure in the room eased.

“Good. Now it’s time for you to go to bed, you’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“How am I supposed to fall asleep knowing that?” She asked with a pout and Loki wiggled the fingers of his left hand at her.

“Abracadabra,” he said cheerfully and Hermione’s world went dark.

She woke up disorientated and with the sun in her eyes, confused to find herself in her bed when she didn’t remember lying down in it. When she remembered what Loki had done, she immediately sat up to scowl at him, over where he was still lounging by the fire. Entirely unrepentant, he just grinned back at her.

“Come on, cupcake, time to get up,” he said, his eyes bright, “we’re off to Hogwarts today!”

Hermione almost tripped over her own feet she got up so fast and Loki barely managed to stop laughing at her long enough to snap his fingers, changing the shift she was apparently wearing as pyjamas into a natural-coloured loose ankle-length linen underdress with large bell sleeves ending in wide cuffs over which she was now wearing a heavy, sleeveless autumn-green overdress that reached her mid-shin and was lined with rich brown fur. Her hair was loose except for the odd braid woven with golden thread and tiny golden bells that she could hear when she moved her head.

“Why do I still have bells in my hair?” She asked him, confused, and Loki shrugged.

“Morgana has good taste— they suit you.”
“Could you make them soundless, then? The tinkling gets annoying,” she told him and he obligingly snapped his fingers before announcing it was breakfast time.

Over a breakfast of freshly baked rolls of bread, fruits, oats and fillets of fish such as herrings, anchovies and salmon, Hermione said her goodbyes to Morgana, Merlin, Marsion and Argante. She gave both Marsion and Argante tearful hugs before returning to her rooms to pack her things. She had more belongings now then what she’d come with; not only did she have all the Norse dresses Loki had snapped up for her, but she had the tunic Morgana had gifted her with as well as a book about scrying and a crystal basin.

“Are you ready?” Loki asked, once the chest she’d been storing her things in was empty, and Hermione took a deep, calming breath, remembering his squirrel on crack comments from the day before and wanting to at least appear calm and poised, even if she didn’t feel it.

“I’m ready,” she told him and with a snap of his fingers, she found herself no longer standing in the guest house of the Enchanted Isle, but instead on the grounds of a grand castle built of stone with towers and turrets and carved gargoyles and a pair of magnificent oaken doors. It was built in a valley area, surrounded by mountains, a large lake and a deep forest over to the west. She and Loki had appeared on a sloping lawn that led up to the oak doors.

“I can’t believe I get to see Hogwarts!” Hermione tried not to scream in excitement, feeling like she could start turning cartwheels. “It’s even more amazing then the photographs! Do you think they’ll let me explore? Did you know that it has seven storeys but nobody knows how many rooms, because some keep disappearing, and it even has a dungeon!”

“Kinky,” Loki smirked and Hermione shot him a scandalised look.

“You can’t say stuff like that in front of me, I’m nine!”

“You’re a mature nine-year-old,” Loki assured her.

“Oh, and that makes it alright, then,” she said sarcastically.

“Exactly.” Loki agreed. “Now hurry up, they’re expecting us.”

With a huff, Hermione followed after Loki, quickly forgetting her annoyance in the utter thrill of actually being on the Hogwarts grounds. As Loki knocked on the great oaken doors, she couldn’t help but hold her breath— and then, they opened to reveal four of the world’s most famous witches and wizards of all time.

The first of the Founders that her eyes were drawn to was the man who had to be Godric Gryffindor. He was hard to miss; a large, powerful man with a red beard, flowing red hair like a lion’s mane and green eyes, a much more verdant shade then Morgana’s emerald-green. According to ‘Hogwarts: A History’, Godric was known for his hearty enjoyment of food, drink, and swordplay (no, that wasn’t an innuendo), which was the exact impression Hermione got when faced with him. After staring at Godric in amazement for a few seconds, Hermione then turned her eager gaze to the other founders.

Salazar Slytherin had a much slimmer figure then Godric, lending the impression he was more of a scholar than a warrior. His sleek, dark hair was bound back in a ponytail and his eyes were a pale grey that looked almost ghostly. Hermione wasn't quite sure what to think of the wizard, considering what was written about him in the history books— Loki had assured her, however, that this Salazar Slytherin was far more interested in books and learning then the genocide of all muggleborns. She still couldn't help but worry, though, that Salazar was the snake in the grass
people failed to see until its fangs had already clamped around their throat.

Standing at Salazar’s right was Helga Hufflepuff, a pleasingly plump woman with fair, freckled skin and long, pale reddish-blonde hair that was elaborately braided. Her cornflower-blue eyes were warm and her smile both gentle and welcoming. Finally, by Helga’s side, was the final Founder, Rowena Ravenclaw; a slender woman with sharp amber-brown eyes and long, lightly curled dark hair worn loose. Her fingers were stained with ink and she wore a beautiful silver circlet set with a large, oval-shaped sapphire in her hair.

It was Helga who stepped forward to greet them. “Welcome to Hogwarts, Loki and Hulda,” she said warmly. “My name is Helga, this is Rowena, Godric and Salazar,” she gestured to each of the founders in turn. “We all hope that you will be comfortable here.”

*How could we possibly not?* Hermione wondered, wanting to pinch herself to check that she wasn’t dreaming.

“We have not opened Hogwarts yet, so there are no students, but our families all live in the castle with us so Hulda will have company her age while she is here.” Helga continued. “They are all waiting to meet you in the Great Hall.”

Hermione followed the Founders through what appeared to be the Entrance Hall, past a large marble staircase and into the Great Hall. It was an enormous room; a large wooden table sat at the centre as well as a second table positioned along a raised dais at the front of the Hall.

Even though there were no students, the table was by no means empty. *Hogwarts: A History* had given little detail on the families of the Founders, but she knew all four were married with children of their own, and apparently all four families lived in the castle.

Each Founder took turns to introduce their significant other and their children to her and Loki. Salazar was married to Princess Viviane of Aquitaine, and together they had two children—Sylvianne and Valentyn. Godric’s wife was Brynhilde Bigge, and together they had an entire pride of red-haired, freckled lion cubs; twin girls, Gerda and Greta, and four boys, Geirolf, Gunther, Gareth, and Gunnar.

Rowena Ravenclaw née Mannerings was married to Aldwyn Ravenclaw and they had two children; a son, Eldric, and a daughter, Helena. Helga Hufflepuff née Holgersson was married to Caradoc Hufflepuff and they had two daughters, Heulyn and Britta, and three sons, Meilyr, Owain, and Dyfed.

Sylvianne and Helena were the closest to Hermione’s age; Helena was eight, nearly nine, and Sylvianne was ten and a half. Sylvianne looked like her father; slender, dark-haired and fair-skinned with light grey eyes, while Helena had soft blue eyes and the same wavy dark hair as her mother which she’d left tumbling freely over shoulders. It only took about five minutes of conversation between them before Helena was eagerly dragging her off to give her a tour of the castle, Sylvianne smiling fondly at Helena’s enthusiasm as she followed them, leaving Loki behind with the founders.

Hermione felt almost light-headed from all the magic humming in every single brick and stone of Hogwarts and the tour was beyond fascinating. She, Sylvianne and Helena spent hours exploring the castle; they poked their heads inside the empty rooms waiting to be filled, Sylvianne and Helena showed her all the secret passageways that they’d so far managed to find, they all shrieked with laughter when the staircases they were standing on started to move, and despite how much it hurt her legs, Hermione decided it was definitely worth climbing up all the steps to see from the tops of all the different turrets and towers.
She learned more about her two companions as they explored too; Helena was feisty, talkative, prideful and clearly a prodigy, with a memory as sharp as her tongue. Hermione really liked her; she appreciated Helena’s headstrong attitude in a time where men were the rulers of society and yet Helena refused to be some quiet, meek, submissive girl, like expectations for her gender demanded.

Sylvianne was nearly Helena’s opposite; she was smart, yes, but she was soft-spoken and well-mannered, happy to let Helena lead and only offering her input in the pauses of chatter when the younger girl had to actually breathe. Sylvianne was just so sweet and gracious and genuinely kind that Hermione honestly couldn’t imagine how she was supposed to have been raised by the Salazar Slytherin in the history books. This, she thought, was definitely an example of nature over nurture, proof that children didn’t have to grow up to be their parents.

It wasn’t until the three of them started exploring the dungeons that they first ran into trouble. They’d just turned a shadowy corner, bold Helena in the lead, when the younger girl let out a sudden, piercing shriek of pure terror, and Hermione let out a horrified gasp while beside her Sylvianne screamed at the sight of the monster-creature that lurched out from the shadows. It looked like some kind of combination of a bear and a goblin, with nasty sharp teeth, long claws, starkly visible ribs and a long black tongue dripping saliva.

*Loki! I need your help!* Hermione prayed frantically, even as she yanked Helena back behind her, getting between her two new friends and the monster-thing. She shoved both her hands in the air towards it, using her magic to send the monster flying backwards— only, instead of crashing into the wall, the *thing* spun and blurred in mid-air, before falling to the ground in a lifeless tangle of waxy-pale limbs and wet, tangled hair, a slowly growing pool of dark blood spreading across the stone beneath it.

“*Ness,*” Hermione choked, falling to the floor when her legs failed her. Her brain couldn’t quite comprehend what she was seeing, the sheer impossibility of it, but she still tried to crawl forwards towards her dying-dying-dead-dead-dead sister, but someone had seized onto the back of her dress, holding her back even as she screamed for them to let go.

And then Loki was there, standing between her and Ness’s body— except it wasn’t Ness’s body anymore, it was a screeching black shadow with glowing white eyes desperately trying to flee, only Loki had seized onto it somehow, gripping the intangible shadow in a clenched fist as his hand started to glow with a bright, searing light that hurt to look at and it only took a handful of seconds for the black shadow to disintegrate in the light.

Hermione had to blink through the black spots in her vision caused by the light, her breath tearing painfully through her throat as she reached for Loki who bent down to pull her up into his arms. “Now that was a particularly nasty creature,” he murmured. “It was a boggart, a type of shape-shifter that takes the form of your worst fear. Not particularly fun.”

“So… it was not actually a bugbear?” Helena asked tremulously, from where she was clutching onto a ghostly-white Sylvianne.

“It wasn’t,” Loki reassured her and Hermione, still clinging onto her god, frowned slightly, her brain eagerly latching onto the distraction. She hadn’t come across ‘bugbears’ in the texts and journals Loki had given her about supernatural creatures.

“What’s a bugbear?” she asked.

“A very unfriendly monster that hunts and eats small children,” Loki told her and Hermione immediately shuddered as she pictured those sharp, nasty teeth.
“I saw one once when I was younger,” Helena informed them, “it was really, really, really scary. I thought it was going to eat me, but mama saved me.”

“You… you stepped in front of us,” Sylvianne blurted out, seemingly fixated on something other then bugbears, and Hermione shifted in Loki’s arms to see the girl looking up at her with wide, awe-filled eyes. “That was the bravest thing I have ever seen!”

“That’s my pumpkin,” Loki said fondly, gently placing her back down on the ground and patting the top of her head. “I’m going to go check the rest of the dungeons for boggarts, why don’t you three finish exploring down here tomorrow.”

“Okay!” Helena agreed, chirpy again— she seemed to have bounced back from her encounter with the bugbear-boggart with much more ease then Hermione had from her encounter. Helena didn’t seem to notice how shaken Hermione still felt— or perhaps she ignored it— and forcefully linked her arms through both hers and Sylvianne’s. “Thank you for rescuing us, Mister Loki!” She called back over her shoulder as she dragged them both along. Despite the grief and shock clinging to her, it was hard to stay depressed in the face of Helena’s enthusiasm as she took them down to the kitchens where she introduced her to the House Elves, friendly little creatures who provided them with a bucket of raw fish so they could go out onto the grounds and feed the Giant Squid that was living in the lake.

“How did it even get there?” Hermione asked in true bewilderment as she tossed a whole trout into the air and watched a monstrously huge tentacle snatch it out of the air.

“Oh, that was my fault,” Helena said a bit sheepishly. “I took a live squid from the kitchens that the elves were planning to cook later for supper because I wanted to practice living transfiguration and, er, borrowed mama’s wand, but it… did not quite go to plan.”

“By which she means she accidentally made the squid grow to a monstrous size and nobody has been able to figure out how to shrink it again, because shrinking spells no longer work on it— or any other spells, for that matter. And now Rowena and father are trying to study how she actually accomplished that, because a spell that blocks the effects of magic would actually be extremely valuable,” Sylvianne explained with a resigned sort of amusement.

“Godric wanted to eat him,” Helena huffed indignantly. “But I told him he was most certainly not allowed to eat Bertramus!”

“Bertramus?” Hermione asked in a confused sort of disbelief.

“Its name,” Sylvianne said, in a long-suffering voice.

“I thought it was clever,” Helena said sulkily, her bottom lip sticking out in an adorable pout. “It means ‘bright raven’ and he is smart and he is my pet so he is a Ravenclaw.”

“It is pretty clever, I guess,” Hermione admitted. “It’s just…”

“An atrocious name for a squid,” Sylvianne completed her sentence for her, only to shriek when Helena threw the next fish at her instead of into the lake for Bertramus. Hermione couldn’t help but laugh as Sylvianne started to chase Helena, determined to wipe her hands, slimy from picking up the fish in the bucket, onto the younger girl’s face.

Then Helena, seeming to feel that she was being left out— not that Hermione was complaining in this instance— darted back to the bucket, scooped out another fish and she threw it right at her. It was Hermione’s turn to shriek then, but instead of trying to dodge the fish she caught it instead (a
fresh fish was much less gross to handle than the handfuls of stinking fish-guts that she used to run around throwing with the other kids in Fraserburgh) and joined Sylvianne in chasing after Helena.

Eventually, they all collapsed in a pile, breathless from laughter and all of them smelling strongly of fish. Hermione wasn’t particularly bothered— she’d lived for years with a fisherman in a fishing village; sheer necessity had desensitised her to the stench of fish— but Helena and Sylvianne weren’t quite so immune to the smell. Still, all three of them had wide, beaming smiles on their faces and Hermione came to the realisation that there were just some experiences that you couldn’t share without ending up as friends— and facing a boggart was one of them.

So was shoving dead fish down the front of dresses, it turned out, and that was much more fun.

Chapter End Notes

IMPORTANT: the offspring of the Founders other then Sylvianne and Helena are unimportant and mostly uninvolved in the story, so don't stress about remembering their names.
Chapter 20

CHAPTER TWENTY:

Hermione ended up spending over a month at Hogwarts in total, more than twice the original time that had been planned for her to visit there. Loki didn't stay there the entire time, he had a tendency to disappear off— it was actually a lot like it was back in the twentieth century, where he'd come visit her and spend time with her but he'd leave afterward. She didn't mind, though— she still got to spend time with him, after all, and now she had two new friends to spend her time with too.

Since the day of the boggart-battle-and-fish-fight (Rowena, Aldwyn, Salazar, and Viviane had all been most unimpressed by the 'strongly-scented' mess they'd all been), Hermione, Sylvianne, and Helena had been nigh inseparable. Hermione had been given her own rooms, but she spent her nights either in Sylvianne or Helena's bedchambers instead, the three of them sharing the large four-poster beds with their heavy drapes and feather mattresses charmed to be permanently warm.

During the day, the three girls would explore every nook and cranny of the castle, grounds included, they'd eat their meals together and they'd join the rest of the Founders' collective offspring for lessons with each Founder, all of whom specialised in different fields of study which resulted in a surprisingly well-rounded curriculum.

The style of magic the Founders taught was very different from either Loki or Morgana. The biggest difference was the fact that the Founders all used wands to help them channel their magic. All their offspring had wands too, but Hermione didn't and so she had to rely on wandless magic to participate in the 'classes'. Her already above average control became very fine-tuned by the delicate spell-work she needed to practice in and out of the lessons. Hermione thought Morgana might have had a wand stashed somewhere, but she didn't know because the magic the witch had taught her didn't involve "foolish hand-wavy theatrics", to quote the sorceress's exact words.

Both Sylvianne and Helena had begged her for stories about her time on the Enchanted Isle, and in return she had begged them for stories about the creation of Hogwarts, which had begun three years ago— apparently, even with the aid of magic building an entire castle took time.

Hermione learned from them that one of the priestesses from the Enchanted Isle, Caillean— the priestess responsible for the mists that hid the Isle— had visited Hogwarts to teach the founders how to hide the castle from non-magicals. Both Sylvianne and Helena had been positively enchanted by the sorceress (and Hermione had definitely been spending too much time around Loki, if she thought her own pun was funny).

Helena, who loudly and repeatedly declared she had no interest in 'dull' and 'boring' things like boys, pretty dresses and marriage, wanted to go to the Isle and train to be one of its priestesses. Rowena and Aldwyn had refused to let their only daughter go, much to Helena's ongoing displeasure. Hermione planned on reading up on Helena's life once she returned to the future-present, to see if she did eventually manage to fulfill her dream.

She'd wondered at first if it would be an invasion of her friends' privacy to look them up once she'd returned to her present, but had eventually decided that if she was actually from this time, she'd know how their lives would pass as she'd witness them while growing up with the two girls. Since she wasn't from this time, however, reading up on them would be the only way she ever found out
what their futures held.

The knowledge that she didn't really belong here, even when she'd never felt like she belonged somewhere more, not even Fraserburgh, hurt and she tried not to think about leaving Sylvianne and Helena—it was simply too painful. Instead, she focused on all the time she did get to spend with them and the adventures they had together—like when they'd eventually gathered up the nerve to explore the dungeons again, this time armed with 'borrowed' kitchen knives which they managed to return before any of the house elves could tattle on them. They had engraved their initials into one of the stones with the aforementioned knives, charmed to never blunt, to forever commemorate their adventure and Hermione planned on searching to see if their initials were still there, a thousand years into the future.

It was near the end of her third week at Hogwarts that Merlin arrived at Hogwarts with plans to whisk her away for the day.

"I did promise to give you a lesson," he said with a cheerful smile, "and I never break a promise."

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione protested without thinking (yes, she had definitely been spending too much time around Loki... and probably Helena too, now she thought about it). "Everyone's broken a promise," she continued, "my Auntie calls them 'easily made, easily broken'."

"Your aunt is a very cynical lady," Merlin told her, thankfully looking amused instead of offended. "Are you ready?"

"To apparate? Never," she sighed, reaching out to hold Merlin's proffered arm regardless.

"Ah, but you are in luck," Merlin said brightly, "apparating is impossible on Hogwarts grounds—Glædwine has agreed to transport us instead."

"Really? How?" she asked eagerly, looking around for the phoenix. Merlin just smiled at her, reaching up with his left hand. The brilliantly coloured bird soared down from the skies on flaming crimson wings, stretching out his golden talons to grip onto the offered fist; the moment Glædwine landed, there was a bright flash of fire that filled Hermione's vision and it was only her faith in the knowledge that phoenixes were as Light as it came that kept her from praying to Loki in her panic.

She didn't even feel them move; all she felt was heat, just on the verge of too-hot, and all she could see were the flames—and then, they were standing in the Brocéliande forest clearing Merlin had taken her to last time, the one that contained the Fountain of Barenton.

Shaken by the experience, Hermione took a moment to take some deep breaths before turning to hit Merlin—and not softly either.

"Ow!" He complained, but Glædwine just let out an amused trill from his new position on Merlin's shoulder. "What was that for?" he griped, rubbing his chest where she'd driven her knuckles into him.

"For being an inconsiderate buffoon!" She accused angrily. Most famous sorcerer in wizarding history or not, that had not been nice. "I thought we had—had exploded or something!"

As she scowled ferociously up at Merlin, Glædwine turned his head to peck Merlin's ear. It didn't look gentle either. "Ouch!" Merlin squawked, reaching up to bat Glædwine off his shoulder and causing the phoenix to take off into the air, smacking Merlin around the head with one of his wings as he did so. "You stole the loyalty of my closest companion," Merlin pouted down at her, rubbing his reddened cheek and ear.
"You deserved it," Hermione informed him primly and he chuckled wryly.

"Aye, perhaps. If I promise to give you sufficient warning next time, will you forgive me?" He asked.

"No I will not," she said crossly, "because you did the same thing to me last time when you apparated us without warning me and you haven't learned from it at all!"

"Ah, I forgot about that," Merlin said sheepishly. "How about I make it up to you, then— Arthur is holding a feast in eight days time; how would you like to attend?"

"I forgive you," Hermione said immediately, not even having to think about it for a second, and Merlin grinned at her eagerness.

"That gladdens me very much so," he told her. "Just grant us both the favor of avoiding mentioning this invitation to Morgana."

Hermione frowned again at that. She knew that in Arthurian legends Morgana had been King Arthur's enemy, but Merlin and Morgana didn't seem like they were mortal enemies at all, going by their interactions. "Can I know why I shouldn't tell her?" She asked and Merlin sighed.

"We used to be quite close, Arthur, Morgana and I," he told her, a quiet grief evident in his bright eyes. "But after Arthur married Gwenhyfar*, well... everything changed. Arthur was raised to follow the old gods, such as Britannia, Andraste, Nantosuelta, Camulus, Belatucadros and Rudianos, but Gwen was raised as strictly Christian.

"When she and Arthur began struggling to produce an heir, Gwen became convinced that the Christian God was punishing her for her sins, chief amongst them her failure to persuade Arthur to outlaw pagan religious practices in his kingdom. When Arthur made the decision to set aside the Pendragon banner, replacing it instead with Gwen's Christian banner the next time he rode into battle, well, you can imagine how Morgana reacted to such an insult against the old gods she worshipped."

"Oh no," Hermione breathed, her eyes wide with horror as she remembered how passionately Morgana had spoken about the Triple Goddess, the deity she loved so dearly. The betrayal she must have felt, when Arthur turned away from Her and the other old gods...

"Yes," Merlin sighed. "And to make matters worse, Gwen convinced Arthur to marry his 'heretic' sister off to King Urien of Gorre, wanting her and her 'heathen' influence away from the court—and away from Arthur, who she believed continued to follow Morgana's 'heretical' preaching as they still had yet to produce an heir. The issue with Gwen's plan was that not only is Urien old enough to be Morgana's grandfather, but as a priestess of the Triple Goddess she is forbidden to marry. When Morgana learned of what she saw as, and perhaps rightfully so, Arthur's second betrayal of her, well... she left Camelot and swore if she ever saw Arthur or Gwen again she would kill them both."

"That's horrible!" Hermione exclaimed, horrified, and Merlin smiled sadly.

"It is indeed a sad tale," he agreed. "But Gwen... she is not a bad person. The pressure she is under as Queen of Camelot to produce a son for Arthur is immense, and she truly does believe that her lack of child is due to punishment from her God. But—" Merlin clapped his hands together, "that is quite enough tragedy for today. Let us talk of happier things—how are you enjoying Hogwarts?"

Hermione took a deep breath, pushing away the anger she felt on the behalf of both her mentor and
all the old gods who were being pushed aside, losing their powers as their followers waned. She knew that Loki thought they were all, er, *jerks*, but she still couldn't help but feel grief for them.

But Merlin was right— this wasn't the time for sad thoughts about things she couldn't change even when she so badly wanted to. Not even the gods and goddesses had been able to change things, and she was just a human, so Hermione pushed away her thoughts and concentrated her attention on Merlin's question.

"Hogwarts is wonderful," she told him. "It's the most magical place I've ever been and I *still* keep thinking that I'm dreaming and I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm awake."

"You know, I was considering attending it myself," Merlin said thoughtfully.

"But how? You helped build it! And— and you're an accomplished wizard already!" Hermione protested and he grinned at her.

"Yes, *Merlin Emrys* helped craft the enchantments of the castle, and yes, he is renowned to be a most accomplished sorcerer— but *Merlinus Sylvestris***, who will eventually prefer to go by Merlin, is not."

Hermione watched with wide eyes as Merlin changed before her, his body shimmering like the bright, wavy heat haze over asphalt and concrete on hot days, before seeming to shrink until he was only her height, still with his dark hair, bright blue eyes, and mischievous grin. She reached out and poked his arm, her eyes widening further when she touched actual, squishy flesh.

"It's not just an illusion!" She exclaimed and Merlin laughed.

"No, this is no illusion at all, this is shape-shifting."

Looking at him, Hermione could just imagine how, as the centuries passed by, Merlin Emrys and Merlinus "Merlin" Sylvestris would become synonymous, until they were believed (rightfully, in fact) to be the one person, known to all as *Merlin*. It was brilliant and ingenious and— "*Amazing!*"

she breathed.

"It is certainly something," Merlin agreed, pleased. "Care to learn how I do it?"

"Yes!" She blurted out, "yes, yes— oh my goodness, yes!"

"Slow down," Merlin teased her and her cheeks went pink in embarrassment, but her excitement didn't fade. "I am afraid that shape-shifting on this level," he gestured at his child body, "will be beyond you, likely for many years. It takes hard work and dedication to learn to transform and reshape the form of your body; it is a magic far beyond simple illusions."

Hermione nodded, disappointed but having already been expecting to hear something along those lines.

"But, fear not, for I am the best teacher you will ever find for learning how to shape-shift," Merlin declared, without even a hint of modesty. When you were as powerful as Merlin was, Hermione figured there was no point in false-modesty. She certainly never tried to downplay her intelligence, it made sense to her that Merlin wouldn't downplay his magical abilities.

"Where do we start?" She asked, ready and determined to throw her all into learning what Merlin was prepared to teach her.

"Here," Merlin led her over to the fountain, pointing down at the water. Hermione frowned
slightly, not sure what she was supposed to be looking at, other than her own reflection in the water—oh, that made sense; Merlin was using the fountain as a makeshift mirror. "Watch this," he instructed, and in the reflection of the water, Hermione watched as Merlin blinked once, opening his eyes again to reveal the blue irises had been replaced by the same chocolate-brown shade as her own.

"Ooh," she breathed, looking up from the water to Merlin himself, peering closely into his now-brown eyes and finding them a perfect mimicry of her own, with even the same slight fleck of amber in the left iris that she had. "That's brilliant!"

Merlin laughed, blinking again to return his eyes to blue. "You are easily impressed, Hulda," he told her and she blushed again.

"I just... I love magic," she told him honestly. "It never stops amazing me, and I don't think it ever will."

Merlin's face softened. "I often think that too," he admitted. "It is a wonder, is it not?"

"It really is," she agreed.

It took nearly two and a half somewhat frustrating hours, but by the time Merlin and Glædwine returned her to Hogwarts, Hermione's eyes were as golden as her god's. Merlin had given her a most amused look when he realised just whose eyes she was taking inspiration from, but she was completely unashamed and after Merlin made her practice turning them from honey-gold to her natural brown then back again several times, he let her keep them gold.

Merlin didn't bother knocking as Glædwine transported them via flame, a much less terrifying experience now that she knew what to expect, back to the grand oaken main doors of Hogwarts. As he swept inside like he owned the place, Hermione trotting along behind him, much to her dismay the first person they ran into was Salazar Slytherin.

"Ah, Hulda, Sylvianne will be delighted to know of your return," Salazar said. "She was half afraid that you would decide to return to the Enchanted Isle instead."

"I'd never leave without saying goodbye!" Hermione said, horrified by the very thought.

"Perhaps you should go to her now and assure her that you plan to stay, at least for the next several weeks," Salazar suggested. "I can take you to her."

"I, uh, of course," Hermione said, her stomach sinking with the realisation that she was going to be alone with Salazar for the first time. "Thank you, Merlin," she said, turning back to face the legendary sorcerer who'd just devoted hours of his time to teach her how to change the colour of her eyes.

"It was a delight, as ever," Merlin told her warmly. "I shall return for you in six days, for the feast."

"Can Sylvianne and Helena come?" Hermione asked hopefully and Merlin laughed.

"Ah, why not? The more the merrier!" He declared and she beamed at him.

Her smile disappeared, however, when Merlin and Glædwine disappeared in a bright flash of flames and it was just her and Salazar standing in the entrance hall.

"This is quite the fortunate circumstance as I have been meaning to speak with you," Salazar told her with a smile. There was nothing actually wrong with the smile, or with the way he was acting,
but Hermione couldn't help but feel uncomfortable under his pale-eyed gaze, like a butterfly that had been pinned in place.

She'd been trying not to hold Salazar's future against him, she knew that history was always biased towards the victors and it had been Godric, Rowena, and Helga who had stayed at Hogwarts and therefore shaped its legend, but she'd still tried to avoid Salazar whenever she could and had so far avoided been caught alone with him.

Her luck, it appeared, had just run out.

"Before I take you to Sylvianne, I just have a question for you," Salazar said, his voice easy and friendly as he withdrew a scroll of parchment from his robes, unrolling it to show her. It was covered in symbols; runes, Hermione thought, as she recognised a few of them, her eyes drawing automatically to the familiar shapes. "I was curious," Salazar said smoothly, "if Loki had taught you any of these symbols. And I see that he has."

"A few," Hermione said vaguely, suddenly very uncomfortable without being able to pinpoint why— but Morgana had told her to always trust her premonitions, and this... this felt dangerous and significant. "Is that important?" She asked, already knowing the answer— and already knowing that Salazar was going to lie.

"Just a small curiosity of mine," Salazar said, smiling at her again. "Do you know what this language is called?"

"No," she admitted and Salazar's smile gained an unsettling edge, a sharpness that hinted at satisfaction.

"The language," he told her, "is known as 'Enochian'. It is very rare and very, very old. Ancient, even."

"I don't know much of it," Hermione told him, actually speaking honestly. "You'd have to ask Loki about it if you're interested, he's the one who knows it."

"Indeed he does know it," Salazar said, appearing distracted now as he stared down at the symbols. "My thanks for your aid, Hulda. Sylvianne is in her rooms, and Helena is with her."

Hermione nodded, taking that thankfully as a dismissal and rushing away before he could possibly ask her any more questions— or he remembered that he'd said he'd escort her to Sylvianne, not just send her on her way with directions. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach and, although she had no proof, Hermione just knew that the seemingly inconsequential exchange she'd just shared with Salazar would send off large ripples.

It was discomforting, to say the least. She thought about telling Loki, but she knew how overprotective he was— he'd either take her away from Hogwarts, maybe even back to the twentieth century, or he'd do something to Salazar, and Hermione might be uncomfortable with the man but she knew that Sylvianne loved him dearly and for her friend's sake, she didn't want Loki to do anything to him.

And so, she decided to stay quiet and keep the unsettling encounter to herself.
*Gwenhwyfar is the traditional Welsh spelling for Guinevere. It's pronounced as GWEHNHHayV-R — an English pronunciation guide is: G as in "grin (G.R.IH.N)"; W as in "we (W.IY)"; EH as in "ebb (EH.B)"; N as in "knee (N.IY)"; HH as in "he (HH.IY)"; AY as in "side (S.AY.D)"; V as in "vow (V.AW)"; R as in "race (R.EY.S)"; GWEHNHHayV-R

**Poet Hugh MacDiarmid wrote this: "After the battle of Arfderydd, Myrddin, sometimes called Myrddin Wyllt or Merlinus Sylvestris, the Merlin of the Arthurian romance, fled to the Caledonian forest and finally escaped with his paramour, Chwimleian (Vivien), in a ship of glass." It suggests that Myrddin Wyllt, Merlinus Sylvestris and our Arthurian Merlin are all one and the same.

Also, I thought I'd mention that there are many different accounts of the adventures of King Arthur and Merlin—my adaption is kinder to Morgana than most, but the part about Gwenhwyfar/Guinevere being a devout Christian who wanted Arthur to outlaw paganism and convinced him to marry Morgana off to a king old enough to be her grandfather is true for some of those accounts.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:

After her unsettling encounter with Salazar, Hermione had been going out of her way to avoid the man while trying not to make it obvious. She rarely went anywhere without Helena or Sylvianne, and when she wasn't with them she was either with Loki or with Merlin, who every second day showed up to take her to Brocéliande where he continued to teach her shape-shifting.

Loki, the first time he'd seen her with golden eyes, had looked smug as anything and snapped her up a massive banana-split with ice-cream, whipped cream, chocolate sauce, nuts, and cherries, which she took to mean he approved. She'd almost felt sick after eating the banana-split, it had been so sweet and rich, but it was delicious and it had been over a month now since she'd had proper ice-cream.

He began to turn up after every lesson she had with Merlin after that, and she'd told him excitedly about how she'd seen Merlin turn into an old man, a lion, a mouse and even a little girl! Loki had then winked at her and proceeded to shift into each mentioned form and she finally got the satisfaction of pulling on one of the long, springy honey-golden curls of the little girl-shape the way he always liked to tug on her curls to watch them bounce.

Merlin, because he was, to use one of Loki's favourite phrases, a complete and utter asshole, had refused to teach her how to change her ears into anything but cat ears—he'd then refused to tell her how to change them back for the next two days and Hermione just knew when she saw the gleeful look on Loki's face when he first saw them that she was never going to lose the loathed "kitten" nickname.

She'd just returned from a lesson with Merlin, near the end of her fourth week at Hogwarts and she, Helena and Sylvianne were about to go feed Bertramus the Giant Squid when they overheard the raised voices of Godric, Rowena, and Salazar as they crossed through the Entrance Hall. They traded looks and were prepared to dash to the main oak doors and out onto the grounds when Godric spotted them through the open doors connecting the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall, where all four of the founders appeared to be facing each other with scowls and crossed arms—well, except for Helga who just looked disappointed.

"Bugger," Hermione muttered, much to Helena's awed delight.

"Girls!" Godric boomed cheerfully, apparently ignorant to their strong desire to leave. "Come, come– help us with our little disagreement!"

"Why are you arguing?" Helena asked curiously as they reluctantly entered the Hall and made their way over to where the founders stood.

"We are... disagreeing over the students we feel we should accept into the school," Salazar explained, his face softening slightly as it always did when he looked on his daughter.

"What do you mean?" Sylvianne asked, her brows furrowing.

"What is he talking about, mama?" Helena frowned too.
"We each have different standards that we feel we should hold to those who wish to attend Hogwarts," Rowena explained, frustration evident in her voice. "I believe that our efforts are best to be focused on scholars; those who are interested in learning and knowledge, not warfare and battle!" Here, Rowena gave Godric a dark look.

"Nonsense!" Godric declared dismissively. "All young men should be trained how to duel, it is a fine and honourable skill to know how to protect and defend the innocent and defeat a most terrible foe!"

"Why would we need more warriors, there are more than enough of those around already," Salazar scoffed. "We should teach those who wish to achieve something with their lives, those with the ambition to accomplish great things!"

"Well I fail to see why you all feel the need to pick and choose which children you feel deserve to be taught!" Helga exclaimed, appearing to have had enough of the arguing. "Have you all forgotten just why we all came together to build this school? We wanted to create a safe place for all magical children to learn, not to sort them all as we see fit into categories of who we believe do or do not deserve to be taught!"

The other three Founders fell silent at Helga's outburst. There was faint shame visible on Rowena's face and Godric appeared uncomfortable at the reprimand, but Salazar wore a look of deep thought. Hermione felt extremely awkward about witnessing the scolding of three grown adults but before she could think of a way for her, Sylvianne and Helena to make a hasty retreat without making things even more awkward, Salazar spoke up.

"...sort," he murmured.

"Pardon?" Helga asked.

Salazar turned to Helga, a slow smile curving on his pale-skinned face. "You said that we are sorting the children into categories," he said, "so why not do just that?"

"I do believe you missed the point Helga intended to make quite entirely, old friend," Godric told him, but Rowena shook her head, a look of dawning comprehension on her own face.

"No, Salazar is right," she said. "And I think it would work."

"What would work? Speak plainly!" Godric exclaimed, annoyed. Hermione, however, was just starting to realise and understand what she was witnessing— the formation of the four Houses of Hogwarts.

"Salazar is suggesting that we create four separate categories, to sort our students into," Rowena explained with growing enthusiasm. "Perhaps.. four Houses? They could be named Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin," she planned out loud. "The students that embody the traits that we most value can be sorted into the House named for ourselves— for example, those we sort into Gryffindor House would be the students who value bravery, chivalry, and combat above all else, whilst those sorted into Ravenclaw would be scholars, those who set the highest value in knowledge, wisdom, and learning."

"And instead of assigning the children to a dormitory of their age group, we could assign each House a separate sleeping quarters," Salazar suggested. "That will keep students with similar interests together, to support each other."

"It is a fine idea indeed, but how would we sort the children?" Godric asked excitedly, while Helga
pursed her lips together in deep disapproval.

"Perhaps an interview with each new student?" Rowena suggested, but Salazar was already shaking his head.

"Children lie," he said bluntly. "Unless we could see into their heads, then we could not be sure we were getting an honest portrayal of who they are and what they value."

"Well what if you could look into their heads?" Hermione asked without thinking, finding herself just as invested in finding a solution as the four founders and Sylvianne and Helena both at this point. She didn't know how the sorting worked— that was a secret kept out of 'Hogwarts: A History' as it was considered a rite of passage for each new student— but she knew they must have come up with something that wasn't an interview, as 'Hogwarts: A History' had stated that the Sorting Ceremony took place during the Start Of Year feast, before the entire school, and an interview of each student would take far too long.

"What do you mean?" Rowena asked, her curious amber-brown eyes turning in the direction of her, Helena and Sylvianne.

"Well, there are magics that allow mind-reading," Hermione pointed out, thinking of all the times Loki had read her mind before giving her the occlumency books so she could learn to guard her thoughts.

"But that would be terribly invasive," Helga disagreed, albeit very kindly so. "I would loathe to have someone look into my mind."

"What about something, then?" Hermione suggested. "Surely it's possible to enchant some sort of object that's capable of reading the minds of prospective students, or at least reading an impression of what sort of person they are, to sort them into whichever House suits them best?"

"That... has potential," Salazar said slowly, already looking over to Rowena who was nodding.

"It would be tricky, of course, but not impossible," she agreed. "A piece of jewellery should work — a ring each new student must try on, perhaps, with a jewel that changes from clear to the colour representing the House a student would best be suited?"

"Adding a charm to a piece of jewellery to ensure it fits all who wear it would likely render the no doubt delicate magic required to ensure it can 'sort' the children most unstable," Salazar immediately disagreed.

"Besides, trying on a ring, or some piece of jewellery, is hardly exciting!" Godric scoffed.

"And I suppose you have a better idea?" Salazar drawled and Godric smirked.

"As a matter of fact, old friend, I do," he said, before whipping the pointed wizard's hat from his head and brandishing it before them all. "I present to you all," he said grandly, "the Sorting Hat!"

Hermione had an odd, shivery sort of feeling that she'd just witnessed something significant; like history had just been made before her, and she found herself struck momentarily silent in a breathless sort of awe.

Helena, it turned out, was much less impressed.

"The Sorting Hat is a silly name," she announced scornfully. "I think we should call him Cuthbert*."
Godric, still holding the hat—Hat?—just shrugged.

And that was how Cuthbert the Sorting Hat came to be.

~

"Is anyone else annoyed that Godric only said that young men should be trained how to fight and that nobody corrected him?" Hermione wondered later, as she, Sylvianne and Helena sat to eat their lunch (or technically "dinner", as the people in this time called it; dinner was eaten at "noon", which was at approximately three in the afternoon. In this time, everyone rose with the sun at six in the morning, so three pm was considered the ninth hour of the day, with the word noon coming from the Latin word "none", meaning 'ninth hour'. Honestly, it was all so fascinating; her days were filled with learning so many new and interesting things about everything from magic to daily living in these ancient times).

Gunther Gryffindor, who was sitting close enough to overhear them, made a rude noise. "Of course girls cannot be trained to fight!" He exclaimed, with all the scornful arrogance of a sexist prick in the making. Unsurprisingly, that did not sit well with Hermione who, very abruptly, found herself wanting to teach Gunther a lesson about just what a girl was capable of in a fight.

"Oh?" She said lightly, turning to smile sweetly at Gunther. Gunther's loud exclamation had gained the attention of the adults, who'd all quietened as Hermione continued to smile at an increasingly unnerved Gunther. "So you're saying that us ladies can't fight, are you?"

"Women do not fight," Gunther repeated despite his obvious unease as if it were something obvious, an indisputable fact. Hermione's smile sharpened into something predatory that she'd unknowingly copied straight from Loki.

"Oh yes we do," she said silkily. "Do you want me to show you just how well?"

Gunther looked uncertain for a moment, clearly not wanting to back down but very aware of the fact she was being taught by a god. And then, the uncertainty abruptly vanished from his face, replaced instead by a cocky smirk.

"I accept your challenge, Hulda. Shall we meet on the grounds, an hour after this meal?"

"That suits me perfectly," Hermione said, her voice and expression all sugary pleasantness, ignoring the looks the adults were trading and the clear disapproval there and biting back the wicked grin threatening to give away her amusement.

This was going to be fun.

As soon as she stood up to leave the Hall, the six-year-old twins, Gerda and Greta Gryffindor, descended upon her, Helena and Sylvianne.

"Do you think—"

"That you—"

"Can really—"

"—beat him?" they demanded.

"Of course she will," Helena said loyally, "Hulda can use magic without a wand!" Sylvianne looked much more worried then Helena, but there was still determination evident on her pale-
skinned face.

"I believe she can do it," she said softly.

"Do you think—"

"If she wins—"

"That father might—"

"Finally let us—"

"—learn to duel?" Gerda and Greta asked longingly.

"I promise I'll show just how capable us girls are and kick Gunther's butt," Hermione vowed and earned herself delighted twin smiles from twin little girls.

While Helena and the twins became more and more excited as the large minute hand up on the clock tower inched its way forwards, Sylvianne grew anxious and fretful. She didn't like confrontation, Hermione knew, so she wasn't surprised Sylvianne found it all so stressful.

"Don't worry," she told her quietly, while Helena and the twins bickered about something or other. "Loki's taught me how to fight. I'll be fine, I promise."

"I am afraid he will try to humiliate you," Sylvianne confessed. "Gunther is... unused to opposition. He is a boy and one of the oldest here, and he can be quick to anger when challenged."

"I can handle him," Hermione said firmly. "Trust me." Sylvianne gave her a tremulous smile.

"Of course I trust you," she said and her faith warmed Hermione right through.

The sudden tolling from the clock tower alerted them that it was time and together, Hermione, Helena, Sylvianne and the twins made their way to the Entrance Hall, exiting the large oaken doors of the castle and making their way down the steps, onto the lawn.

Gunther was already waiting with Godric beside him. Godric was holding two wooden swords and Hermione was confused for a moment before realisation struck— Gunther, it seemed, had found himself a loophole. She hadn't specified just what sort of duel she'd been referring to, just assuming that it would be one of magic, and Gunther had taken advantage of that assumption in a way that Salazar would probably be proud of when he heard.

By the smirk on Gunther's face, he was clearly waiting for her to back out of the challenge and Hermione frowned thoughtfully. She knew how to fight physically as well as magically, Loki had been teaching her jujitsu for nearly a year now, after all, and she'd picked it up far quicker then she'd ever expected, but sparring with a sword, even a wooden one, was something entirely new to her.

But Loki had taught her the basics of wielding a rather special blade of his, one that he always took back at the end of each session. Made of a metal that felt like silk over steel to touch, it was coloured bright as quicksilver and her god always handled like it was something infinitely precious— and infinitely dangerous. It held within it an undercurrent of energy that made Hermione think of a trapped lightning strike; raw, molten power contained in a blade a mere foot and a half long, less than the length of her arm. The blade wasn't a sword, but she was small enough that it almost felt like one— enough so that when, much to everyone's surprise, she accepted the wooden sword from Godric and tested its weight, her grip was comfortably solid.
Gunther appeared momentarily shocked that she hadn't just given up before he shook off his surprise and readied his own wooden practice sword, a smug grin already plastered over his face that made it clear he already believed he would be the winner of their duel. But Hermione knew better than to go into a fight so convinced of her own superiority and when Godric announced "begin!" she wasn't at all surprised that Gunther made the first move while she slid into a defensive position.

Godric's cocky lion cub smirked and charged her straight on, rushing forwards so that she had to dodge his strike, gracefully twisting out of the path of his swing. She dodged his next three strikes too, dancing around Gunther on light feet, before turning her body into the fourth strike to deflect the sword, not unlike how Loki had taught her to deflect the stab of a knife. Another strike, another evasion, then another and another-- and that was when she spotted the opening she had been waiting for.

Jujitsu used an attacker's energy, strength, and speed against them, and as Gunther charged forwards once more, Hermione spun into a roundhouse kick, her booted foot slamming into his stomach. Physical strength didn't matter when it came to a blow to the stomach-- if the abdominal muscles weren't tightened, the body's organs took the full force of the hit and Gunther doubled over wheezing, the shock of the collision giving her time to whack his fingers hard enough with the side of her wooden blade to make him drop his sword.

She then took advantage of Gunther's shock and how he was still struggling to breathe, darting into his space again to kick the air out of his lungs and then, with a conveniently placed foot and a harsh shove as he choked and wheezed, she sent him tumbling to the ground before pressing the tip of her practice sword firmly against the back of his neck.

"Do you yield?" She demanded harshly. "Or does your thick skull need a few more blows to get the lesson across?"

"I believe my son has been soundly defeated," Godric interrupted before she could go through with her threat, clearly amused and, going by the gleam in his eyes, also both surprised and impressed. "And I can assure you that this experience is not one he will soon forget. I declare Hulda to be the victor!"

"Good," Hermione muttered, stepping back from Gunther's still-wheezing form.

"That was utterly brilliant!" Helena declared, visibly delighted, and Sylvianne, her cheeks stained pink and her pale-grey eyes wide, nodded in agreement, smiling shyly at her.

"Oh, father please—"

"You must teach—"

"Us how to—"

"—fight like that!" Gerda and Greta pleaded together.

"Just because you're a girl and you've got magic, it doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to thoroughly thwack a toser in the bollocks," Hermione added, giving the downed Gunther a sugary-sweet smile. Sylvianne made a mortified sound at her choice of language while Helena, Gerda, and Greta looked awed and impressed and Godric bellowed with laughter.

"I suppose, after such a show of capability, that I may have to consider it," he said merrily and Gerda and Greta both shrieked in delight.
That night at supper, the duel was all any of the children could talk about. Hermione was fairly certain that the adults, apart from Godric, were leaning more towards horrified and disapproving than anything, but for the girls in the castle she'd become some sort of hero.

She'd spun a tale to them about the skjaldmær—Norse warrior women known as "shield-maidens"—to explain her skill at fighting, despite the fact that the historical existence of skjaldmær was heavily debated, and then she'd spent the remainder of her afternoon teaching Sylvianne, Helena and the twins the beginnings of Jujitsu, with the explanation that self-defence didn't have to rely on magic and that any witch or wizard attacking them would be far less prepared to fend off a physical attack then a magical attack.

As she went to bed that night, curled up on the feather mattress with Sylvianne and Helena on either side of her, she realised that she wasn't dreading her new secondary-school as much as she had been before. She'd proven to herself she was capable of making friends, and with children older than her too, without the help of her cousins.

She was, she realised, probably about as ready as she'd ever be to start at her new school year. The only problem was it was going to be horribly difficult to leave Sylvianne, Helena, Morgana, Merlin, Marsion, and Argante behind. Once she left, she wouldn't ever get to see them again.

A thousand years in the future, they'd all be long dead.

Chapter End Notes

* Cuthbert = Anglo-Saxon boy's name meaning intelligent / famous
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:

Anticipation began to build between Hermione, Helena and Sylvianne as the day of King Arthur's feast approached. Due to his association with Merlin, King Arthur of Camelot was well respected amongst magical folk, and Rowena, Aldwyn, Salazar, and Viviane all seemed pleased by their daughters' invitations to the royal feast.

On the day in question, Hermione found herself quite unable to concentrate on the morning lessons and Sylvianne and Helena were the same, so rather then try to make them sit down paying attention, an exasperated but amused Rowena took them all up to the seventh floor of the castle to show them what appeared at first to be a stretch of blank wall; there was nothing out of ordinary about the plain grey stones which matched the rest of the corridor perfectly. However, when Rowena paced back and forth in front of the wall whilst saying "I require a room for the children to practice their dancing", a door appeared– and when she opened the door, much to their shock and amazement it was to the sight of a magnificent looking ballroom.

Large mirrors with golden frames lined the walls and a magnificent sparkling chandelier cast rainbows across the marble floor. Hermione could hear the sounds of instruments playing a lively tune, and an examination of the room had her locate said instruments hovering in the air while playing themselves.

"What is this place?" Helena asked, her eyes wide with amazement, and her mother smiled fondly down at her– Helena and Rowena didn't agree on a lot of things; Helena was fiercely independent, determined, argumentative and had very little patience for societal expectations and ladylike behaviour, and her attitude constantly drove Rowena to despair, but both mother and daughter did share a love of magic and learning. Sitting down for lessons was one of the only times that Helena was actually quiet and studious, eagerly devouring whatever learning materials given to her, soaking in the lectures and practicing spells over and over. She was determined to become a spell inventor, just like Rowena, and Hermione had no doubt that with her sheer passion Helena just had to succeed.

"This room," Rowena explained to her quite enraptured daughter, a fond smile on her face, "is a place I have decided to call the Room of Requirement. If one thrice paces before the wall I showed you, the room will shape itself into whatever it is you require, within reason of course– it cannot provide food or living things, such as plant-life, nor can it provide infinite space and any objects removed from its walls will vanish back into non-existence, but there is very little else that it cannot do."

"This is the most impressive magic that I have ever heard of!" Helena said delightedly, her eyes shining. "It is– oh mama, it is brilliant! How long has it taken you?"

"Over a year," Rowena said with a light laugh. "Though that was just to enchant the room, all the spellwork was the result of a lifetime of study. But I have not just shown it in order to impress you– you all have too much energy, so considering that you are attending a King's feast tonight, we shall spend up some of that energy by practicing your dancing."

Hermione found herself grateful for Rowena's idea, for while both Sylvianne and Helena already
knew the dances the older witch was making them practice, it was all new for Hermione. Fortunately, her jujitsu training meant Hermione was quick and light on her feet as well as graceful, and all the time she'd spent memorising different, complicated fighting sequences enabled her to swiftly pick up the much simpler different dance formations and steps.

After Rowena dismissed them for the day, the three girls picked up some fresh bread rolls from the kitchen for lunch (technically called "dinner") and a bucket of trout then passed the remainder of the day first feeding and then playing fetch with Bertramus before it was time to start preparing for the evening ahead.

The magnificent bathrooms of Hogwarts had no plumbing, but the chamber-pots were self-emptying and there were special runes that produced a flow of heated water to fill the drop-in baths that Hermione thought were almost large enough to be considered swimming pools. The water was mixed with scented oils, and she, Helena and Sylvianne all shared the bath, washing each other's hair with soft soaps made of mutton fat, wood ash, natural soda and herbs.

After drying, they dressed in simple white shifts then went their separate ways to get ready, Hermione heading over to the bed-chambers she'd been given but had never actually slept in, instead only using it to spend time privately with Loki. Helga had offered to help her get dressed and Hermione was grateful for her aid, considering how complicated medieval dresses were.

Loki had been the one to snap into existence her clothes for the evening; a beautiful ensemble consisting of a soft forest-green overdress embellished with swirls of gold and with white skirts underneath. The overdress had a high collar that was open to the white shift beneath, gold laces that crisscrossed over the bodice and full-length bell sleeves that flared from elbows to wrists into wide, draped cuffs.

With Helga's help, Hermione's wild curls were pulled back from her face by a pair of heavy golden combs decorated with engravings of flowering vines and spilled freely down her shoulders and back. Around her neck, she wore a gold medallion hanging from a leather cord, the flat gold disc inscribed with *sowilo* at her request. Her bracelet, the knotted braid of leather, silver thread and golden feathers, was fastened around her wrist where it always was—she hadn't taken it off once since Loki had first given it to her, so long ago.

"You look beautiful, sweet girl," Helga said warmly, once they'd finished dressing her. "Like you are royalty yourself."

Hermione blushed and was unable to help her shy smile at the kindly woman's words.

"Thank you," she said and Helga's own smile widened fondly.

"You are most welcome, dearest Hulda. You will be sorely missed when you leave here."

Hermione's eyes stung at that and she hastily turned away as she blinked back the threatening tears. *I wish I could stay here forever,* she wanted to tell Helga, but she knew that wasn't possible. She just had to make the most of the time she had.

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Hermione met Helena and Sylvianne in the Entrance Hall, where Merlin was already waiting in resplendent robes of red. Both her friends were dressed in finery, just as she was. Helena wore a dark blue dress lined with bronze etchings of tiny flowers with bronze laces to cinch her billowy bell sleeves in at her elbows and a skirt that flowed down to her ankles. Her chestnut-brown hair was pulled into two tight braids that fell nearly to her hips and she was pouting and tugging at
them, complaining that they were hurting her scalp while Rowena scolded her for her poor manners in front of their guest (Merlin just looked amused by it all, the prat).

Sylvianne looked like royalty herself, which reminded Hermione that actually, she technically was royalty considering her mother was a princess of Aquitaine. Delicate gold pins with emerald tips kept her long, black hair pinned up in elegant braided coils and her dress was made entirely of thick, luxurious crushed white velvet, the lustre of which created a silvery, almost lace-like shimmer. The velvet gown was decorated with elegantly ornate lace trim, the sleeves were fitted from shoulder to elbow before gracefully draping off her arms in wide-cut cuffs decorated with additional lace trim and around her neck she wore a heavy golden locket studded with emeralds that formed an 'S'. Hermione thought she looked as pale, pure and beautiful as freshly fallen snow.

"Are you all ready?" Merlin asked cheerfully as Rowena and Viviane fussed over their daughters, much to Helena's annoyance and Sylvianne's placid acceptance.

"Are we apparating?" Hermione asked nervously. "Because if we are, I think someone's going to have to charm my dress to repel vomit."

Merlin laughed, his blue eyes bright with humour. "Fear not, for you shall be spared that horror today," he told her merrily. "Side-along apparation only works with one additional person, not three, and so Glædwine has kindly offered his services for the evening."

"Oh thank Loki," Hermione sighed in relief.

Glædwine chose then to glide over to them on fiery crimson and gold wings and Hermione hastily held out her arm when she realised the phoenix appeared to be angling his flight towards her. Glædwine perched lightly on her outstretched arm, seeming to take special care not to tear the sleeves of her dress with his golden talons, and trilled softly, stretching out to gently nip her nose. She couldn't help but giggle, even as the sounds the phoenix made caused a warmth that seemed to seep through her veins.

"You have stolen the affections of my dearest companion," Merlin sighed dramatically, a pout on his face. "Whatever will I do now, bereft as I am of my beloved Glædwine?"

Glædwine gave Hermione a look that clearly seemed to be asking 'what am I doing with this idiot?' and she couldn't help but laugh, proffering her arm that was being used as a perch towards Merlin. Glædwine, with a last affectionate trill and nuzzle of his golden beak against her cheek, hopped over from her arm to Merlin's and Merlin then held out his free arm for her to rest hers over. "Miss Ravenclaw, Miss Slytherin, if you could join hands with Hulda, then we can be off," he announced cheerfully and Helena was only too eager to escape her mother and grab hold of Hermione's hand, before impatiently holding out her other to Sylvianne, who gracefully accepted.

Hermione cleared her throat and gave Merlin a pointed look. He seemed confused for a moment before his expression turned sheepish. "Ah, fair warning to you all, phoenix travel occurs through a burst of fire— it will not burn, it is just bright and somewhat startling if you are not warned in advance." He explained.

"Brilliant!" Helena declared happily, and Rowena just looked resigned at her daughter's unladylike behaviour.

"Are we all ready?" Merlin asked, checking that they were all holding hands. And then, in a flare of brilliant flames, they all found themselves not in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts but instead standing before the dais of a grand room lined with tables and filled with men and women in colourful dresses, tunics and even gleaming silver armour paired with long red capes.
It was immediately obvious who King Arthur and his Queen were; both were dressed richly and King Arthur was wearing a large jewel-encrusted crown atop his golden-haired head. The King had a kind face and it was clear to Hermione why Queen Gwenhwyfar was described in literature as one of the great beauties of her time; with skin smooth and pale as fresh cream, she was fair-haired and lovely. Her dress was intricately embroidered, there was a veil fixed over her hair and she was positively draped in golden jewellery, including a gold circlet that held the veil in place and a large golden cross around her neck. She had a gentle, gracious manner about her, but Hermione knew she wouldn't be able to bring herself to ever think kindly of the Queen, not knowing what she did about the woman's treatment of Morgana and her personal role in the declining worship of the pagan gods in Great Britain.

"Merlin!" King Arthur exclaimed as he spotted their arrival. "It is good to see you, my friend! And these must be the young sorceresses you said were to accompany you!"

It was only because Hermione was watching her so closely that she saw how Queen Gwenhwyfar's face darkened momentarily before smoothing back to its previous graciousness. "How wonderful it is to meet you all," she said sweetly and Hermione couldn't help how her teeth showed as she smiled back at Queen Gwenhwyfar, the only thought in her head being liar.

Merlin's foot nudged hers slightly and Hermione made an effort to look less like she wanted to throw something at the Queen, or curse her with live anchovies squirming out her nose. Beside her, both Sylvianne and Helena were curtseying, but Hermione didn't even attempt to follow their example— she'd only ever given one (clumsy) curtsey in her life, and that was to Lady Morgana who she actually respected enough to make the effort for.

"My people don't curtsey, your royal highnesses," she said, remembering her previous lie about training to be a skjaldmær, a Viking shield-maiden, and keeping her spine proudly unbent. "But it's an honour to meet you... both."

"Ah, you are from the Northern countries!" King Arthur said, surprised. "You are a long way from home. Pray tell, what is your name, young sorceress?"

"Hulda Rikardsdottir," Hermione introduced herself. Loki had never given her a last name, but the Norse used 'son' or 'dottir' after their father's name as their version of a surname and 'Rikard' was the Norse equivalent of Richard.

"And this is Lady Helena Ravenclaw and Princess Sylvianne Slytherin of Aquitaine." Merlin hurried to introduce Helena and Sylvianne, probably in an effort to prevent her from making any more social faux-passes in front of royalty.

"We welcome you all here tonight," Queen Gwenhwyfar told them with a beautiful smile.

"I will show them their seats," Merlin said, giving a quick bow before hastily shepherding them along. "I," he groaned, as soon as they were out of earshot of the royal couple, "should not have told you about the feud between Morgana and Gwen."

"Not if you wanted me to like her," Hermione agreed, with a sharp look at him. "I am a gyðja of Loki and a student of High Priestess Morgana; the Queen's actions are an insult to my religion, my teacher and my god." She didn't care who it was, or what station they held– she would always defend her friends and her god to her last breath.

"Truly, it is no wonder that you are one of Loki's," Merlin sighed, though there was a reluctant smile tugging at his mouth. "You are a troublemaker, at heart."
"I cannot believe you did not curtsey," Sylvianne finally spoke up, appearing to be in shock.

"It was brilliant," Helena said with clear admiration.

"There's a saying my aunt taught me, that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar," Hermione said, ignoring Helena's 'why would anyone want to catch flies?'. "but the truth is, you actually catch more flies with dung then with honey."

"You," Merlin said, with unmistakable fondness on his face, "are a menace."

"You love me anyway," she said cheekily and he laughed.

"Gods help me, I do! Now sit down, young tempest, before you manage to start any more trouble!"

Hermione, through sheer will alone, held back her eye-roll at the nickname, instead settling down onto one of the long benches and properly taking in the sight before her for the first time since they'd arrived in King Arthur's castle. The banqueting table was decked with truly spectacular dishes, albeit unusual-looking to her eyes, and it all appeared positively grand.

The meals weren't separated into savoury courses and sweet desserts, and were instead all laid out together, as was the norm in these times. The usual stews, fritters, hams, sausages, black puddings, smoked fish, salted quarters of stag, stuffed geese and loins of veal were accompanied by the rarer spicy potage, civets of hare, peacocks and swans redressed in their feathers, sturgeons cooked in parsley and vinegar, beef, game birds covered with yolks of eggs and sprinkled with spice, fat stuffed capon, a wild boar, and enormous pies with silvered crusts surmounted with smaller pies forming a crown, each containing roe-deer, minced veal, capons, rabbits and hard-boiled eggs covered with saffron and flavoured with cloves.

Edible sugar sculptures in the form of castles, dragons and horses decorated the table, as well as centre-pieces made of large peacocks' feathers, mossy green branches and bright, sweet-smelling flowers, and other dessert dishes included colourful jellies in the shape of swans, sweet and savoury custards dyed with vivid natural colourings; sandalwood for red, saffron for a fiery yellow, and boiled blood for black, a variety of fritters, crêpes with sugar and flower petals, darioles, and tarts with strawberries, cherries, apples, plums and figs. There was also plenty of wine, ale, and mead.

Hermione would never be able to get used to how in these times every part of an animal was eaten, including the ears, snouts, tails, tongues, and wombs— fried slices of the horn of a young stag were actually considered a delicacy, the 'daintiest' of food, and even the intestines, bladder and stomach were used as casings for sausages. Despite her willingness to try the more bizarre dishes, such as peacock (which was actually dry and stringy, despite its beauty), she just couldn't bring herself to try any of the more unusual animal parts served up.

What she did end up eating was mostly delicious, with a few exceptions (the pastry stuffed with eggs and bone marrow was foul), and she and Helena each had a few sips of mead when Merlin wasn't watching, Sylvianne shaking her head at them with equal parts amusement and resignation. The taste of the mead was strong and heady; the drink thick and sweet, sticking to her tongue and leaving Hermione feeling carefree, cloudy and giggly.

After the feast, they all joined in the dancing as musicians played lively music. Some of the dances were between two people, others were group dances. Hermione found herself positively giddy with delight and excitement (and probably a bit from the mead), laughing and beaming as she spun between partners. She danced with a number of strangers, as well as Sylvianne, Helena and Merlin; both her friends' faces were flushed with pleasure and she imagined hers was the same.
The evening was so wonderful she never wanted it to end, but of course it had to and, as King Arthur's court started to tire, Merlin found her, Sylvianne and Helena where they were sitting down to catch their breath.

"You all appear to have enjoyed yourselves tonight," he said and Hermione beamed up at him.

"It was awesome!"

"'Awesome'?" Merlin said, seeming a bit puzzled.

"Uh—" apparently there wasn't an equivalent to 'awesome' in Ænglisc—"it means extremely impressive or daunting—something that inspires awe. Well, that's its official definition. It can also just mean really, really good."

"Interesting," mused Merlin, before apparently deciding, "I like it. It is an awesome word."

"Awesome!" Helena repeated happily, her cheeks bright pink and a large, beaming smile on her face. "I love it, I love it, I love it!"

"You are most certainly ready to retire for the evening, Miss Helena," Merlin said with gentle amusement. "I believe it is time for us to return to Hogwarts."

Helena immediately pouted, but the effect was ruined by an impressively large yawn. Hermione didn't really want to go either, it seemed such a terrible shame for the wonderful evening to end, but she was beginning to tire and her feet had started to ache.

Merlin and Glædwine transported them back to Hogwarts where Rowena, Viviane and Helga were waiting up for them. Rowena and Viviane escorted their daughters off to prepare for bed while Helga led Hermione up to her bed-chambers to help her undo the laces and ties of her overdress and underdress and the knot of the medallion's cord then pull the combs out of her hair and run a brush through the curls.

Hermione thought about going to either Helena or Sylvianne's room as she usually did, but away from the energy of King Arthur's court, the tiredness from the evening was really starting to hit her and her eyelids felt heavy.

"Sleep well, sweet girl," Helga murmured as she helped tuck her up in her bed.

"G'night Helga," Hermione mumbled back sleepily, easily drifting off to sleep.

~

Being in the past, Gabriel mused, was kind of boring, if he was being honest.

So far, he'd yet to actually do anything interesting. It had been hugely tiring, taking a passenger so far back in time with him, and after settling Hermione in on the Enchanted Isle with Morgana, he'd retreated to rest and recharge for a few days. After his energy was restored, he'd then flown off to Hogwarts, which was noticeably not warded against angels yet (and he really needed to get to the bottom of that), to make arrangements with its founders before finally returning to Hermione.

His little priestess had been glowing. It was breathtaking to see, after the misery that had sunk itself deep into her bones back in London. He wanted to see her like this forever; so in love with life and learning, soaking in every new thing she was being taught and bonding with children close to her age.
It felt like such a cruel thing to do, to take her away from this time where she was so happy and he kept putting it off, even though he knew it would just make the relationships she'd been forming so much stronger and so much harder to leave behind.

The decision was taken out of his hands, however, when on the night that Hermione was off to feast with a king he found himself approached by a goddess whose face he wished he never had to lay eyes on again (well, faces— this particular goddess had three; the maiden, the matron and the crone, and he despised every single one of them).

"Loki," Hecate said with that knowing look in her eyes that he loathed, "how strange to see you here. I could have sworn you were just recently in Járnviðr*, spending your time with Angrboða."

"Somehow, I've managed to master the art of teleporting," Gabriel sneered back at the goddess, cloaking himself in Loki's power and arrogance. "Which isn't a common skill among us at all. Except, oh that's right, it is."

Hecate just smiled placidly at him in the face of his rudeness. She was currently wearing her matron visage, which was less annoying and know-it-all-y then the crone. Just. "Of course," she said magnanimously. "How foolish of me to forget." Gabriel curled his lip.

"Is there a reason you've decided to burden me with your presence?" He demanded and Hecate's placid smile turned cold.

"Actually, there is. You stole from me."

Gabriel's face went dark and, invisible to the goddess's eyes, his three pairs of wings flared out threateningly, a display that sent dark shadows rippling through the night. Power rose up in the air around them; thick, stifling and electric, making the air crackle with the faint tang of ozone while the ground shuddered beneath his feet, the earth there cracking and crumbling.

(Archangels were considered Heaven's most terrifying weapons for a good fucking reason; they were his Father's hands in Heaven and on Earth— Gabriel and his three older siblings could shape the very matter and foundation of Creation into anything they could imagine, the laws of time and physics had no hold on them; Hecate could never hope to match up against him, even if she was at her prime)

"Hermione Granger is not yours!" He snarled at her in as close to his True Voice as was possible with these vocal cords; the sound a high and wild clashing of swords, a jagged lightning strike and a chorus of horns, words spat like the crash of thunder, the beating of drums(wings) and the shrieking of the wind— fierce and dangerous and powerful.

Hecate involuntarily cringed back from him; she couldn't have helped it, only Michael, Raphael and Lucifer would have been able to withstand that onslaught without flinching, and Gabriel swore internally— he could hear the stirring of his siblings up in Heaven, could hear the confusion of the Choirs in the back of his head. He'd been noticed— not by name, there would be far more noise if he'd actually been identified, but he'd still been noticed and that was Not Good.

"Go near Hermione and I'll rip you apart," he warned Hecate darkly, his unseen wings twitching and quivering with anxiety and the need to flee, to hide, from his curious brethren. The goddess bowed her head in submission, apparently smart enough to realise this was a battle she would not win— prior claim or not— before vanishing into the night.

Swearing out loud now in her absence, Gabriel knew that it was time to leave the past— he hated to do it to Hermione, and with so little warning, but they needed to return to the present.
His little priestess was asleep when Gabriel appeared in Hogwarts but it only took a touch of grace to bring her stirring back into consciousness. "Loki?" she asked sleepily and he smiled down at her, hiding the strain he was feeling from his expression and body language.

"I heard you had a fun night," he said lightly, not having actually heard any such thing, instead judging his guess by how bright her soul was. Hermione yawned as she sat up in her bed.

"It was wonderful," she told him, rubbing at her eyes. "But... I have a question."

"Of course you do," he said, unable to help but smile down at her. Hermione just wouldn't be Hermione if she didn't have questions.

"Why don't people know that King Arthur was real?" She asked him inquisitively. "Is it because of magic?"

"No, there wasn't any magic involved in making you mortals forget," Gabriel told her honestly, "just the inability of humans to accept what they believe to be impossible. King Arthur's reign was so deeply entwined with magic and prophecy that, even faced with an abundance of proof that he did exist, humans choose to believe him to be just a myth, a medieval legend based on 'real' historical figures."

"And so he was forgotten," Hermione said quietly, looking sad.

"Or, you could look at it as unlike most of the ancient kings, Arthur is actually remembered." He pointed out, wondering when he'd ever gotten so soft. "People know his name, do you think they've heard of King Olaf of North Dublin?"

"King Olaf of North Dublin, also known as Olaf the White, or Óláfr hinn Hvíti in Old Norse, was a Viking sea-king– a title given to powerful Viking chieftains– who was named King of Dublin in 853 AD," Hermione immediately recited before blushing at the incredulous expression he couldn't help but give her. "I read a lot about important figures connected to the Norse, including Vikings, when I was learning Old Norse." She mumbled. "And I always remember what I read."

"That'd be that near-photographic memory of yours," he said and Hermione frowned up at him.

"That," she said, in that tone she used when she was very strongly opinionated about something, "is incorrect. Photographic memory has never been proven." Hermione then paused before adding, "also, 'photographic memory' is a deplorably loose term to describe the ability to recall visual information from memories with very little exposure to them– it's also a term that, contrary to popular belief, is not interchangeable with 'eidetic memory'."

"Kitten," Gabriel said, fond and amused, "you forget that I've actually been inside that noggin' of yours–" and tweaked it a little, to improve her ability to absorb material such as language and movement sequences, not that he planned on ever mentioning that to her, not when she felt so strongly about what she considered 'cheating'– "so unlike you humans, I actually can definitively state that photographic and eidetic memories exist."

"Eidetic memories are already definitively stated to exist," Hermione mumbled, and he just adored how she never backed down– he'd spent so long submitting to his Father's and older siblings' orders that to see someone, a child at that, so blatantly challenge even gods and demand evidence that they were worthy of her respect and obedience to be laid out before her like the finest of offerings, well, it was almost intoxicating; one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen, surely so, and he did love beautiful things– he was unapologetically hedonistic in that regard. His various homes across the world were filled with priceless art and artifacts and only the very finest of
architecture, appliances, and apparel.

"No matter what you hear, or what you're told, promise me that you will never let anyone or anything change you— you are fucking perfect, Hermione Granger." He told her and Hermione immediately blushed.

"You really shouldn't swear in front of me." She mumbled and he could only laugh.

Dad-damnit, he really wished he wasn't about to ruin her day.

"Hey pumpkin," he said gently, choosing one of his affectionate nicknames for her that he knew she wasn't as opposed to (he'd been in her head enough before he gave her the books to learn how to guard her mind to know she didn't really object to any of them as much as she pretended to— well, except 'kitten', which was of course why he kept calling her it).

"That... that's not a good voice," Hermione said, her face falling. "Is it... is it time?"

"Oh honey," he sighed, sitting down on the edge of her bed and letting her curl up beside him, "I'm so sorry, sweetheart." He wrapped an arm around her small frame and pretended he couldn't hear how her breath was hitching as she fought back tears. "I promise there's a good reason why we have to go back, I just can't tell you."

"'S'okay," she sniffed, not lifting her head from where it was pressed against the fur he was wearing (jeans and button-ups really were a heck of a lot more convenient and comfortable than leather, wool, and fur— something he was definitely looking forward to going back to. That, and plumbing — not for his sake, he didn't need it, but for the sake of his poor nose whenever he dropped by a human town). "I trust you," Hermione added and jeez, this kid...

She was definitely worth getting into a pissing contest with Hecate over.

Chapter End Notes

*Járniðr, the "Ironwood", was home of Angrboða, Loki's second wife (the first was Glut, the third was Sigyn). Angrboða is the mother of Fenris, Jörmungandr, and Hel.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:

Hermione wasn't sure what her expression was like as she and Loki made their way together down to the Great Hall that morning. It must have been something awful, because Helena and Sylvianne both looked horrified. It was Sylvianne who was quickest to realise what was happening.

"Are you– are you leaving?" She asked in a tremulous voice. Helena looked distraught.

"What? No! Hulda, you cannot leave us! Who will teach us to be skjaldmær like you, if you go?" She demanded tearfully. Hermione could feel the tears stinging at her eyes and she sniffed noisily. Loki's hand dropped to her shoulder and he squeezed gently, offering both silent support and an apology.

Helena jumped to her feet and dashed over to her, Sylvianne just moments behind. Loki let go and stood back slightly as both young girls threw their arms around her, hugging tight.

"Why can you not stay with us?" Helena demanded. "Everybody at Hogwarts would be thrilled to have you here as a student!"

"It would be awesome." Sylvianne said softly, with a wobbly smile. Hermione couldn't help her tears as she smiled back at Sylvianne.

"So, so awesome," she agreed, wiping at her tears. "But I... I can't."

Sylvianne started crying then; quiet, hitched little sobs. Helena forewent any kind of delicacy altogether and just bawled. Hermione felt like her heart was breaking as she clung to them, knowing that when she left today she'd never ever see them again.

~

Far from the excitable mood of the previous day, a gloomy upset had settled over Hogwarts as everyone gathered in the Entrance Hall. Hermione had packed her things with Loki's help before going with Helena and Sylvianne to say goodbye to the House Elves, Bertramus and even the newly enchanted Cuthbert, which kept bursting into poetry and song. When it saw(...) the tear-tracks on Helena's face, it(...) had quite sorrowfully recited: "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean; Tears from the depth of some divine despair; Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes; In looking on the happy Autumn-fields; And thinking of the days that are no more*." "The spellwork is quite difficult and extraordinarily delicate," a rather tired Rowena explained as she looked exasperatedly down at the Hat her daughter was sorrowfully patting. "And we made the mistake of exposing it to Helena far too soon."

Hermione couldn't help laughing at that, even as Helena pouted at her mother. Now atop her head, Cuthbert also appeared to be attempting to pout. Seeing a Hat trying to mimic Helena's expression was one of the strangest things Hermione had ever seen, which was really saying something, and cheered her up slightly so it was with a slightly lighter heart that she hugged Helena, Sylvianne, Gerda and Greta all goodbye in the Entrance Hall.
She hadn't really gotten to know the other children of the Founders that well, but she did say a polite farewell to them, as well as giving Helga, Rowena and Viviane shy hugs. Gunther Gryffindor then surprised her, by stepping over to her and clearing his throat slightly.

"Hulda, I believe I owe you an apology," he said. "You were quite correct; you are a most capable fighter. And I have a gift for you."

A very startled Hermione accepted the wooden sword that had been attached to the belt of Gunther's tunic until he presented it to her. Much to her puzzlement, the practice sword appeared to be made of a far nicer wood than the ones they'd used for the duel and as she turned it around in her hands, she noticed that Hulda had been engraved into the hilt.

"If we ever meet again, I will be challenging you to another duel," Gunther said with a grin that made his blue eyes sparkle. "I will be expecting a good match from you!" To her surprise, Hermione felt her cheeks heat slightly, but she ignored the strange squirming feeling in her stomach as she grinned back at him.

"I wish I could say the same, but I suppose I'll just have to see," she teased, promoting laughter from those around them (except Loki, for some reason). She held out her hand out to Gunther to shake, only for the older boy to gently take her hand into his then bend over to kiss it. Hermione really was blushing now, but before she had to say anything Helena was pushing Gunther aside to give her one last big hug, Sylvianne joining moments later.

"I'm going to miss you both so much," Hermione choked out, Gunther's strange behaviour vanishing from her mind as she hugged both girls back, paying just enough attention as to not jab either of them with the wooden practice sword she was still holding.

"I wish you were staying here with us," Sylvianne whispered and Helena started to cry again.

Loki's face as he gently reminded her they had to go was very apologetic, even if his eyes appeared a little tight. Hermione vaguely wondered what had upset him before casting the brief thought from her mind, not truly interested when she felt so heavy with grief.

As she and Loki stepped out of the large oaken doors, Hermione took one last look around the grounds of Hogwarts then she and Loki vanished.

~

Their last stop before their return to the twentieth century was, of course, the Enchanted Isle where Morgana and Merlin were already waiting. Glædwine and Sorrow were also present, perched on one of the trees that framed the clearing awash with golden sunlight and arches of white stone engraved with flowers. The trees perfectly intertwined with the stonework, blending both natural and the made together into an architectural work of art.

"Oh sweet child," Morgana said sadly when she saw her, immediately stepping forward to pull Hermione into her arms. Enveloped in the soft velvet of her dress and the scent of roses and incense-heavy smoke, Hermione hugged Morgana tight and tried not to start crying again. Only a few tears escaped, so she counted her efforts as successful.

Merlin didn't hug her, but he patted the top of her head, looking sad. "I will miss our lessons, little tempest." He told her and Hermione pretended to scowl at him, but didn't quite manage to keep the corners of her mouth from from trembling.

"We have something for you, before you leave," Morgana said with a gentle smile.
"Well, not quite from us," Merlin amended, his gaze flicking over to where the crimson-and-gold phoenix and the greenish-black augurey whose feathers looked closer to warm emerald in the glittering sunlight.

Hermione was confused until Morgana gently coaxed her over to where the phoenix and augurey were perched, the low-hanging branch level to Hermione's shoulders. Glædwine leaned forwards to rub his head against her cheek while Sorrow carefully rose up, lifting her wings to reveal what had been hidden below her feathers.

It was a nest woven of green, red, gold and black feathers, within which sat three eggs that glittered like jewels; one akin to gold, one ruby and one emerald. Morgana stroked Sorrow, her hand pale against the augurey's dark feathers, before gently scooping from the nest the emerald-coloured egg. It was beautiful, sparkling in the sunlight, and when Morgana placed it in her trembling hands, the heat of the shell nearly burnt her skin.

"What-- what is this?" She stammered.

"It is a great responsibility," Merlin answered her, his voice unusually serious. "A bond with a phoenix is more then just rare; to be chosen by Sorrow and Glædwine is a sign that there is a most important future before you."

Hermione's eyes widened impossibly further as she reverently looked down at the egg. "Thank you," she whispered. Beside her, Loki clicked his fingers then held out what appeared to be a necklace of leather braided with golden thread, at the end of which hung a small golden silk pouch.

"This is a very small, very protected pocket-dimension," her god told her, loosening the strings of the tiny pouch so she could peer inside to where gentle flames crackled. "When a phoenix-- Irish phoenix or otherwise-- isn't sitting on their egg, they keep it warm in a nest of flames," Loki explained, before adding, "this pouch could be sat on by a hippopotamus and no harm would come to the egg inside."

"Thank you," Hermione told him, beaming up at him with watery eyes before she gently placed the egg into the pouch. The little pouch remained flat, as if there was nothing inside it, and she tightened the silky strings before holding her hair out of the way so Loki could fix the necklace around her neck. She then slipped the pouch under her dress and shift so it was resting against her skin, right beside her heart. It felt warm there.

"Run along now and say your farewells to Marsion and Argante," Morgana instructed, briefly resting her palm against Hermione's cheek. "I wish you the best of luck with the destiny before you, sweet child."

"Fare thee well, little tempest. You will create great change, of that, I have no doubt." Merlin added, his bright eyes crinkling as he smiled kindly down at her.

Hermione wouldn't deny to feeling somewhat intimidated by the great future these powerful figures of history were predicting for her, but as she looked over to Loki, her fear vanished because she knew he would always be there for her to help with anything fate might throw her way.

~

Gabriel gave Hermione as long as he could, but he could hear the Choirs talking, heard how a garrison had been sent to Earth to search for the runaway angel. They still didn't know it was him, and he knew from his own memories of this time that he wouldn't be found, but it was time for him to make his retreat to a safer time, where the Choir was not so attentive to the goings on of Earth,
other than to make sure their little Apocalypse plan was still on track.

He didn't dare go back to the birth-site of his half brother, not even for the extra-boost in power the holy ground would give him. Instead, he once again blindfolded Hermione– he didn't want to blind her, after all– and asked for her to pray.

This time, however, Hermione hesitated. "It takes a lot of power to travel through time, doesn't it? That's why you ask me to pray, for the... the boost in your powers, right?" She asked tentatively.

With the use of his full grace, time-travel would be as easy as blinking, actually, but that was for an archangel, not a pagan.

"Sort of," he admitted to Hermione, "but it's not quite the prayers themselves that gives me the strength, it's what they enable."

"Enable?" Hermione asked curiously and he couldn't help his smile, even though he knew she couldn't see it.

"Such a curious little mortal," he teased her, not for the first time, and her cheeks went pink.

"Sorry," she mumbled and he gently tugged on one of her curls.

"Now what have I said about being curious?" He asked admonishingly.

"That only stupid people don't ask questions," she immediately recited.

"Good girl," he said approvingly, before going on to explain, "Worship strengthens pagan gods. Willing sacrifices are one such method of giving strength, and a willing offering of oneself is another."

"A willing offering of- of oneself?" Hermione asked, sounding oddly choked as her cheeks went from a pink flush to flaming red. It took Gabriel a moment to realise where her thoughts had gone and he immediately blanched.

"Not like that!" He said, horrified.

Well, technically sex was a willing offering that could be used by pagan gods as a way to gain strength from souls, and it had been something he'd done before (many, many, many times) but he had no intention of informing Hermione of such.

Hermione's cheeks still looked like he could fry eggs on them, so he hastily continued his explanation. "A pagan god's bond with their followers is one of worship and offering," he explained. "It's difficult to put in human terms, I don't quite have the right words, but when you pray, you open a sort of... channel, as through the prayer you offer a part of yourself, of your soul, up– and pagan gods are capable of accepting that offering, of using the power of a soul as a way to strengthen their powers."

"So human souls are strong," Hermione said slowly and Gabriel almost laughed, because that was an understatement if he'd ever heard one.

"Humans are the only beings in creation to have souls," he told her. "And yes, souls have an extraordinary amount of power, and even though humans don't know how harness that power–" which wasn't quite true, Rowena Ravenclaw had managed to create a spell that could be considered soul-magic but he hoped to his Father she hadn't created any other soul magic, nor did he plan on informing his curious little mortal that it was possible, "–there are other supernatural
beings out there who can."

"Like demons," Hermione realised out loud. "In those hunter journals you gave me, it said that some demons make deals with humans for souls!"

"That is one example," Gabriel agreed. "Demons do trade for souls, which they use for power– not well, but enough to make them dangerous. Even more dangerous then they already are, that is."

"But it's different, with us," Hermione said thoughtfully, "because even though I'm offering, you're not taking; not beyond what's safe for me, anyway."

"Damn right I'm different from a demon," Gabriel growled and Hermione giggled.

"Pun intended?" She asked playfully and Gabriel rolled his eyes, even though he knew she couldn't see it.

"You're a cheeky thing, aren't you?" He accused, tugging on her hair again, and she just laughed before bowing her head, pressing her hands together.

"In the blistering furnace of our hearts,
may You be hailed.
In the fierce rantings of mind and memory,
may You be hailed.
In the tumultuous storm of our senses,
may we chant Your praises.
Where You are honored, there be in all of Your glory.
Where You are reviled, there also be,
and work Your cunning wiles.
May You ever be the unquiet thought,
the unruly impulse, the unwary stirring
of holy cravings, the longing for internal revolution,
the descant-mad, dervish-driven
prophetic-spewing roar that drives us
ever and always, unceasingly, unmercifully
into the arms of our own liberation.
Hail Loki, Liberator,
cunning, wild, and wise.
May You ever be hailed."**

It was different this time; the rush of her brilliant, incandescent soul was just as he remembered, except this time Hermione was aware to a degree of what was happening, and her soul was reacting to that– acting like a kitten again, it reached out to him, pressed up against his grace even as he let her offering stoke Loki's powers, and nuzzled at him. Touching her soul was like touching a star; shining, shining, bright, blazing, magnetic.

It was no trouble at all to scoop Hermione into his arms, two pairs of his wings flaring out as he took to the air before diving into the timestream. His third set of wings, meanwhile, cradled Hermione safe within them, feathers of stardust woven with belief as golden as her beautiful star-soul protecting her from flashes of his True Form as his vessel frayed at its seams, threatening to unravel, to fall apart into less than molecules and scatter across the timestream.

They arrived back in London, in a small garden square not far from Hermione's home. Gabriel felt disgustingly drained, but he wasn't exhausted enough to miss how, when the blindfold was removed, Hermione hunched into herself as the sights of twentieth century London came into view.
around her.

Fuck, he'd been hoping the jaunt in the past would have helped her more. At least she was starting school in a matter of days, hopefully she'd make some friends there and she wouldn't be quite so miserable.

He lived in hope, anyway.

~

Hermione experienced a real sense of cognitive dissonance upon finding herself back in the twentieth century. Everything was so loud and clean; it seemed that everywhere she looked was concrete and steel and people, so many people. There was a scent of pollution in the air that she remembered bothering her when she moved from Fraserburgh to London, except about five times worse.

She knew that Loki must be tired, but she allowed herself a moment of selfishness as she begged him to take her first to Hogsmeade, to the bookstore there, before returning her to her parents' house. She wanted the comfort of reading the futures of her friends, to know what they'd made out of their lives, even without her there.

Loki did as she asked, because he was the most amazing being that existed, and she found a thick book over two thousand pages long that focused on the descendants of the Founders. Her god then took her back to the house, ruffling her hair when they arrived back in the bedroom that was hers.

He helped her unpack all her new things, using his powers to expand the space inside her wardrobe for all her new dresses, promising that anyone who looked inside wouldn't see them. She then reluctantly changed out of the long, woollen dress she was wearing and the shift underneath it, dressing instead in a soft blue blouse and a long white skirt that fell below her knees.

As she unpacked the new books, scrying bowl and athame given to her by Morgana, she found the little golden bells the older sorceress had woven into her hair, the ones Loki had said suited her. "Could you put these in my hair please?" She asked him and Loki's face softened.

"Of course," he murmured, snapping his fingers. Hermione, in the reflection of her dresser, watched as her hair (which had returned in colour to brown) twisted itself into looping braids interwoven with the golden bells, loose curls tumbling down around her face, glancing off her shoulders and collarbone.

"Thank you," she whispered, snifffing slightly.

"You're not alone, remember," Loki told her gently, his golden eyes warm as honeyed sunshine. "You have me, and you have them," he leaned forward slightly to press his fingers over her blouse, where the golden pouch holding the egg rested. Hermione brought her hands up to the pouch, over his warm fingers, and took a deep breath, reminding herself that he was right– maybe she didn't have Helena or Sylvianne, but she had Loki and she had the priceless gift that Glædwine and Sorrow had bestowed upon her.

"Thank you," she whispered again, this time for something entirely different. Loki gently pulled his hand back, turning his wrist slightly so his fingers closed around her hands, drawing them out between them before he bent his head down to lightly press his lips to her knuckles, the way that Gunther had. Then, with one last fond look, he disappeared.

Hermione's cheeks felt hot, even though she was well aware that it was a common enough gesture
from the time they'd just come from. She quickly finished unpacking the remainder of her things, placing the scrying bowl, athame, wooden sword and jewellery in her trunk, where runes carved into the surface of the trunk ensured that any wandering eyes in her room would simply look straight past it. Her new books were placed on the shelf on her second bookshelf, the one that contained all her magic-related books and had been given the same treatment as her trunk.

Finally unpacked, Hermione took her new book on the Founders' descendants, curled up on her bed (and quietly mourned her feather mattress with its cushioning and warming charms) and flipped it open to the section on Salazar Slytherin.

The first chapter covered Princess Viviane of Aquitaine, then moved on to her and Salazar's two children, Sylvianne and Valentyn. Hermione skipped Valentyn's section, uninterested in Sylvianne's older brother who she'd had very little to do with during her time in the past. Finally locating the chapter on Sylvianne, she settled in to read.

Sylvianne, she learned, had married an Irish wizard by the name of Turlough Gaunt at fifteen years old. Within two years, she had a daughter, Sadhbh Gaunt, and a son, Tiarnán Gaunt. By all accounts, she'd been happy, living at Hogwarts with her new family, teaching healing magic to the students and serving as the school healer alongside her husband.

Hermione was smiling, her heart feeling warm despite the hollow pang of loss, and then she turned the page and her world turned numb.

At age nineteen, Sylvianne Gaunt had been burned at stake when the family of a muggleborn wizard turned against her. The muggle family had reacted poorly to learning their son was a 'witch' and Sylvianne had been defending the boy, Acwellen, when the child had turned on her and hit her over the head from behind. Her wand had been snapped and she was burned at stake before Salazar even knew something was wrong.

Hermione's hands were trembling as she frantically flipped the pages over to find Helena; her friend, her opinionated, independent friend, never married, never had children– just like she'd always said. Instead, she ran away from Hogwarts before being found by Baron Willelm Rochefort, who stabbed her to death when she turned down his romantic advances and refused to return to Britain with him.

Helena and Sylvianne both had been horrifically, violently murdered. Her two friends who she loved so dearly had died young and alone and in terrible pain.

The warmth that burned in her, the golden sunshine flames of Loki and Magic, had been extinguished by an arctic wind; inside her chest was a frozen glacier, ice-water had replaced the blood in her veins. She couldn't breathe, could barely even think; she wanted to call Loki, to scream for him to take her back, to let her warn Helena and Sylvianne, to save her friends from dying so young.

But she couldn't; she knew the rules of time-travel, Loki had gently instructed her of them, had explained how time was one of the set rules of the universe, that any and all changes she'd made in the past already existed in the present, because they'd already happened.

Both Helena and Sylvianne's lives had been cut tragically short, torn from them in their youth, far before their time, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Why did everyone she love die?
She couldn't even cry; she could only hunch into herself, knees curled to her chest as she desperately tried to breathe, with only ragged, broken sounds escaping her throat. She wasn't sure if it was grief or a panic attack, all she knew was that she felt like she was dying.

Briefly, she wondered if that would be such a bad thing; surely it had to hurt less.

But then Loki was there, cradling her in his arms, holding her to his chest where she could feel the steady thump of his heart. A warm blanket of calm soothed the harsh stranglehold of grief, melting her insides from their frozen state. She couldn't bring herself to speak, to explain, so she simply lowered her mental shields so he could read what happened from her mind and buried her face into the crook of his neck, where warm static hummed against her skin and his pulse was a steady pattering that soothed and reminded her that she still had him, she still had her god.

"Always," Loki said; fierce and fervent, turning so his chin was resting over her head, his arms tightening around her almost to the point of pain. "You will always have me."

And Hermione, as she finally let her tears spill freely, believed him, clinging back to him just as tight.

~

Chapter End Notes

*Tears, Idle Tears' is a lyrical poem written in 1847 by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I researched for nearly an hour to find a pre-1000 AD poem about grief/loss/sorrow that wasn't about someone dying then gave up and decided the Sorting Hat is a magical, mind-reading, talking hat anyway, it doesn't have to make sense. If anyone is particularly offended, I welcome you to provide me with a verse of a poem I can use from the appropriate time.

**prayer/hymn located online, edited for the story (can't remember the exact site, google Loki prayers)

Turlough, means 'helper'
Sadhbh, means 'goodness'
Tiarnán, means 'little lord'

A/N: Hermione gets her first (sort of) crush, as a lot of nearly ten year olds do, and Gabriel was definitely considering smiting Gunther. The ages for marriage were, of course, quite different back then– around twelve for girls and fourteen for boys– and Gabriel was very offended by Gunther's thoughts about Hermione (let's face it, Gunther is a Gryffindor– Hermione beating him up had him halfway in love with her).

Sorry about the rather tragic ending, guys. It wasn't done on a whim, I promise– there is very relevant plot attached to Sylvianne Slytherin (Gaunt)'s death.

~CC xxx
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR:

After the devastating blow that had been learning the ultimate fate of the two girls she'd grown so close to Loki had offered to post-pone her starting high-school but Hermione, after careful consideration, had decided against it. She knew she wouldn't be getting over the murders of Sylvianne and Helena any time soon, and the best thing she could do was distract herself.

Her parents had enrolled her in a very posh school by the name of St Judith's College*. The students that attended came from wealthy families of doctors, surgeons, CEOs, politicians, wealthy socialites and even minor nobles. There was a certain standard of excellence required from the students, who were all expected to go on to be as successful as their parents. Hermione, being two and a half years younger then the youngest student, about twice as intelligent as most of the twelve-and-thirteen-year-olds she shared classes with and homeschooled for the last few years, did not fit in even slightly.

On her first day of school, during her very first class, she corrected her mathematics teacher for writing an equation incorrectly on the board. It was not a particularly auspicious beginning to her life as a high school student, but she wasn't in a headspace that let her actually care, not when it became very clear to her very quickly that her peers had no idea what to make of her; she was too young, smart, and fierce– too different.

She didn't act like them, didn't speak like them, didn't even dress like them; she wore her hair in strange hairstyles of looping braids interwoven with golden thread and soundless gold bells, or simply let her curls, nearly at her hips by now, fall freely, tumbling chaotically down her back like they had a will of their own. Her skirts always seemed longer then regulation rather then shorter, falling below her knees, her jewellery was strange, knotted braids of leather cord, shimmering thread and golden feathers that the teachers never seemed to notice, and she moved with a dancer's grace; light, smooth and agile movements that almost, at times, seemed borderline predatory.

It didn't take long for the novelty to wear off, and, of course, because she was different and small and terrifyingly intelligent (as one teacher described her when Hermione was still within earshot) and alone, bullies considered her an easy target and went in for the kill.

The problem (for them, not for her) was that Hermione's best friend was Loki Silvertongue, and her exposure to him had honed her tongue sharp as a dagger that she knew just how to wield, her slicing remarks and cutting words tearing the bullies to shreds, flaying them and leaving them bleeding even as she drove her teachers insane by already knowing everything she was being taught and being so obviously bored in classes.

That was their mistake.

Once, Hermione would have cared, would have felt lonely and timid and have been horrified by the lack of respect she showed her teachers. But she just didn't have the energy to care, not really, not when her world felt so greyed out and empty and the only time she really felt anything positive was when she was curled up in Loki's arms, feeling the heat that didn't burn and the flickers of static against her skin as she listened to the steady beating of his heart reminding her that she wasn't alone.
The days crawled past, each second like wading through syrup, heavy and sticking, and it began to feel like she was living inside some sort of sharp-edged vacuum of increasingly destructive emotion, until she inevitably reached her breaking point.

It happened at school, during the lunch hour. She was sitting in one of the empty classrooms with a half-written essay surrounded by a scattering of pens and pencils on her right and an apple on her left that she was just staring at, half heartedly trying to convince herself to eat it, when one of the more insistent of the bullies sauntered into the classroom like she owned it, sitting down next to Hermione with a sugary smile in place as her giggling friends stood behind her.

Charlotte Graham was a pretty girl, the daughter of an heiress and a neurosurgeon. It would have been bad enough if she was a vapid, vain idiot, like how stereotypical 'popular' girls tended to be depicted, but Charlotte was actually very intelligent and had been the top student in all of her classes until Hermione had started at St Judith's. To say that Charlotte had not taken that well would be an understatement; Charlotte had been furious and the girl had done her very best to make Hermione's life a misery since. Hermione's alternating obvious apathy or verbal flaying had only enraged her more.

Seeing Charlotte's pale-eyed gaze filled with dislike flick over to her essay, Hermione swiftly reached out to remove it from the other girl's vicinity before it could be ruined. Charlotte's lip curled up, even as her attention turned elsewhere, focusing on the hand Hermione had used to snatch up her essay.

"That is such an ugly bracelet," she scoffed, her pale eyes now fixed on the knotted braid Hermione never took off her wrist, the first gift given to her by her god. Rage began stirring within Hermione, and when the maliciously petty girl made the mistake of reaching out as if to try and grab it from her, Hermione reacted without thinking. Charlotte screamed as, in one swift movement, Hermione snatched up a pencil and stabbed it into the older girl's palm with enough strength that the graphite tip splintered off and dribbles of blood smeared across her skin.

"You freak!" Charlotte wailed, clutching her hand to her chest as the other girls started shrieking. Hermione bared her teeth at Charlotte in a vicious grin, already knowing how much trouble she was going to be in but not caring, not with the burning anger raging inside her.

And that was when one of the desks caught fire.

~

Fenris looked distinctly unimpressed to see him at his doorstep once more but Gabriel didn't care. It had been a week since Hermione had stabbed one of her classmates (only with a pencil, but still... definitely not a good sign) and things had not improved since then.

"Hermione is doing worse then terribly and I don't know what to do," he said in place of any sort of greeting and his son looked like he was trying to decide whether to sigh or roll his eyes.

"Have you considered getting her therapy?" He asked dryly and Gabriel blinked.

"Therapy?"

"It's this thing people do when they want to actually deal with and work through their issues, not run away from them." Fenris drawled and Gabriel winced slightly– he'd been the one to teach his son how to wield brutal honesty as a weapon, to be as silver-tongued as his old man, and Fenris was brilliant at it which Gabriel felt both smug and proud about, right up until the point it was turned on him.
"That he was much less fond of."

"I don't run away from all my issues." He couldn't help but mutter sullenly.

"No, of course not," Fenris agreed, with a sharp-toothed smile that looked distinctly wolffish. "Just the important, meaningful ones."

"So, therapy?" Gabriel hastily changed the subject (which was not running away). "How does that work?"

"See, when someone is trying to overcome a traumatic event like finding their sister's dead body after she's killed herself or learning two of her friends have been murdered, or when they're trying to live with a mental illness such as depression, they go see a professional to—"

"I meant, how do I get Hermione into therapy, you obnoxious little shit?" Gabriel interrupted his son's sarcastic explanation with a flat look. Fenris, of course, just smirked like the absolute troll that he was.

"Pose as one of her parents and take her to her family doctor. She lost a sister through traumatic circumstances, the doctor will probably beg you to get her into therapy," his son said like it was obvious. Gabriel was beginning to think, and not for the first time, he'd taught Fenris a little too well.

"Or," his son suddenly added, gaining a thoughtful expression and losing the general air of mockery, "I've heard of someone over in America, a shapeshifter who works as a grief counsellor."

"A shapeshifter? Those usually aren't that pleasant," Gabriel said with a frown. He'd turned up to a city or town more then once to deal out some Just Desserts, only to find it had been a shapeshifter posing as a human and making trouble.

"This one's different," Fenris said simply, with a light shrug. "Kokopelli** mentioned her to me, says she helped someone he knew whose life-mate was killed by a hunter."

"Huh," Gabriel said thoughtfully. "Interesting. So whereabouts in America did Kokopelli say this shifter was?"

~

Returning later to Hermione's house, Gabriel found a very unhappy little girl pacing angrily in her bedroom. Hermione looked tired, thin, strung-out and furious and it pulled at the heartstrings he technically didn't have because celestial wavelengths didn't actually have hearts.

"So how is my unstable little ball of sunshine today?" He asked her, making an effort to sound lighthearted as he settled cross-legged on the foot of her bed. "Have you, by chance, stabbed any more of your fellow pupils? Or set another classroom on fire?"

Hermione, instead of calming down at his gentle teasing like he'd hoped, appeared to get even angrier. "I hate it here!" She seethed. "I hate it and I want to go home!"

"So... not great?" He asked with a grimace. Hermione's chaotic curls seemed to crackle with the force of her anger and agitation.

"I was expelled!" His little priestess spat, puffing up like an indignant kitten. "Expelled!"

Well that... wasn't as unexpected as it probably should have been.
"Don't worry, kitten, I'll undo it all." He soothed her and Hermione deflated slightly.

"Thanks," she mumbled. "I still don't want to go back to that place, though." A pause, then-- "and don't call me kitten."

"Plenty of other schools out there," Gabriel said with a shrug before adding, "and you are a kitten-- my fierce, tiny, adorable baby animal with sharp little teeth and claws."

"I am not a baby!" Hermione hissed, apparently mortally offended by his explanation going by the wounded eyes and pout.

"I'm approximately several millennia older then you--" plus a few billion years-- "practically everyone's a baby to me," Gabriel pointed out. "But I've got good news, actually-- I've found you a therapist; a grief counsellor, to be exact. And she knows about the supernatural, so you don't have to lie to her."

Hermione stayed silent for a long moment, her small face troubled, before she hesitantly asked, "You... you think I should see a grief counsellor?"

"You stabbed someone with a pencil, and your magic, which I know you have exceptional control over, accidentally set a desk on fire." Gabriel pointed out, before gentling his voice as he saw how distraught she looked. "Oh honey, you lost someone you loved in a very traumatic way and you never truly worked through your grief. Then, in a short amount of time, you were taken away from your home and the family you loved and learned that your closest friends were murdered," because hadn't that attempt to help her backfired on him completely. "I can't force you to go to therapy, but I think it's the best choice going forwards for you right now."

Hermione was silent for a long, stretched out moment before she let out a quiet sigh. "Alright," she said softly. "If you think it's best."

"I do." Gabriel said firmly and Hermione nodded.

"Alright," she repeated, before her brow furrowed slightly. "You said she knows about the magical world?"

"Not about witches and wizards-- well, your sort of witches and wizards-- but she's very aware of the supernatural. Personally so, considering she's a shapeshifter." He explained.

"Really?" Hermione asked, visibly surprised. "That's unusual-- I thought shapeshifters were driven by their id."

The id was the disorganized part of the personality structure that contained a human's basic, instinctual drives, the source of bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses, particularly sexual and aggressive drives, and none of the morals that held most humans back. It was the primary source of instinctual force that was unresponsive to the demands of reality, acting according to the "pleasure principle"-- the force that motivated the tendency to seek immediate gratification of any impulse. Understandably, as beings driven solely by their id, that made shapeshifters much more likely to commit violent, repulsive and reprehensible acts then humans with their handy consciences.

"She was raised by a mother who instilled a more human set of values in her, rather then growing up so far removed from humanity that human laws and decency have no impact on her." Gabriel explained. "She's offered to see you twice a week for as long as you need."

The appointments were free too; Dr. Mia Vallens*** had just requested that he track down another shapeshifter she'd had a relationship with when she was, to quote her exact words, "young and
stupid”, and get him to stop hunting her down. The shapeshifter in question was a sadistic, violent murderer who enjoyed hurting people— including the good doctor. She was terrified of him so Gabriel had brought her the asshole’s detached head and she’d been so grateful that she’d promptly offered free therapy for as many people as he wanted for as long as he wanted.

"Therapy with a shapeshifter," Hermione mused. "That's pretty weird."

"Almost as weird as you of all people getting expelled," Gabriel agreed and Hermione's face went red as he smirked down at her. "Now how did that happen, sugar?"

"My magic accidentally set Charlotte's hair on fire," Hermione admitted sheepishly.

And Gabriel knew he shouldn't laugh, but really, he was a trickster at heart and he really did loathe bullies, especially at this moment the vain little girl who'd been trying to make Hermione's life a misery– and Hermione had burnt off all her hair. That was an example, in his opinion, of Just Desserts at its finest.

Hermione really was going to make an amazing Trickster one day– especially if he had anything to say about it.

~

The walls of the therapist's office were painted soft green, which looked good with the pale grey carpet. Darker green curtains covered the windows, the desk in the corner was made from white lacquered wood, and the couches were a dark grey and soft to Hermione's touch.

The shapeshifter who went by the name "Dr. Mia Vallens" appeared as a slim woman in her late twenties or early thirties with black hair that was curlier then hers, dark satiny skin and a warm smile. She was dressed in a green ruffled blouse, a slim black pencil skirt and a pair of black patent leather mid-heel pumps.

Despite her reservations, Hermione couldn't help but automatically find herself liking the shapeshifter– she had warm eyes and a lovely, welcoming smile.

"Hello Hermione," Dr. Vallens greeted her in a rich, gentle voice. "My name is Doctor Mia Vallens, but please call me Mia."

"Hi," Hermione said quietly, twisting her hands together in her lap.

"My job is to offer counselling to help people, both children and adults, in regards to grief and bereavement." Dr. Mia explained. "Both are, of course, entirely normal responses to the loss of a loved one, and can be worse if the loss is unexpected, such as a sudden death, murder or suicide. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, all of us are different and handle emotional loss in different ways, and even with professional counselling, it is fair to say that no two people will ever experience grief and loss in the same way."

Dr. Mia then smiled kindly at her. "Why don't we start off by you telling me however much you feel comfortable with sharing about why you're here today?"

Hermione shifted slightly in place, continuing to twist her hands. "Didn't... didn't Loki tell you already?" She mumbled.

"A bit, yes," Dr. Mia agreed, "but an important part of therapy will be the communication between us. I want to know your perspective, how you perceive certain events and your corresponding emotions to said events, which only you can tell me."
Hermione bit her lip, her mind flashing back to the boggart, to two murdered little girls, their bodies burned and broken, to water stained red, waxen flesh carved open and the taste of copper in her mouth. She flinched, hit by a wave of overwhelming grief. "I– two of my friends, they– they were killed. And my– my sister, she was my best friend," she whispered, unable to look up at Dr. Mia. "She– she took her own life, and I was the one who found her. She was my best friend and she's gone, they're all gone, and it makes me so angry sometimes and it hurts, it hurts so, so much!"

"I know it does," Dr. Mia said compassionately, reaching over to gently place a box of tissues in Hermione's hands. "But that's what you're here for, and it's what I'm here for, and together we're going to help you work through this, so one day it doesn't hurt so much. I promise."

And Hermione, with the desperation of a drowning child, reached with both hands for the safety line Dr. Mia was offering and grasped on tight.

~

Therapy wasn't easy. Intellectually, Hermione had known it wouldn't be, but she still hadn't realised just how hard the reality of it was.

The day she'd admitted out loud to herself, and to Dr. Mia, that she was suffering from depression had been one of the hardest days of therapy (so far). After returning home from the session, she hadn't left her bed for the rest of the day and night. Loki had sat with her that entire time; a silent, supportive presence at her side, always, and she was so relieved that he was a part of her life.

Therapy brought a lot of her emotions to the surface; the emotions she'd pushed away and tried to hide from, the ones she'd been too afraid to deal with because of how much they hurt. She always felt raw, after an appointment; raw, exhausted and emotional. Sometimes, it was an aching loneliness that she felt, the recent reminder of the violent loss of Helena, Sylvianne and Ness, of the less horrific but still permanent loss of Morgana, Merlin, Marsion and Argante, and even the absence of her cousins, Ina, Jeanie, Leana and Angus in particular, who were still alive but so far away; all of it felt akin to a jagged wound in her chest that was torn open afresh each session.

Other times, Hermione didn't feel sad or lonely or grieving, she felt angry; furious, even– at her parents, at her classmates, at those little bitches like Charlotte, didn't deserve the thick haze of her rage; they were just stupid, petty little girls who had no idea what the real world was like. It was harder to convince herself not to lash out at her parents. Unlike her classmates, she really did feel like they deserved her anger– they hadn't helped Ness and they hadn't helped her.

She had to work on not lashing out with her anger at people who didn't deserve it. Her classmates, even those little bitches like Charlotte, didn't deserve the thick haze of her rage; they were just stupid, petty little girls who had no idea what the real world was like. It was harder to convince herself not to lash out at her parents. Unlike her classmates, she really did feel like they deserved her anger– they hadn't helped Ness and they hadn't helped her.

She wanted to yell at them, to scream at them; she wanted them to feel what she felt, wanted them to just fucking notice. But she didn't yell or scream or confront them with their obliviousness. She didn't, because the opposite of love wasn't hate, it was apathy, and she was so determined not to feel anything for them at all because she couldn't risk them letting her down again (which Dr. Mia said wasn't healthy, but considering she had a healthy support network set up it was something they could work on later).

Dr. Mia really was amazing. She was kind, she was intuitive, she was intelligent and she genuinely cared as she helped Hermione equip herself with the skills she needed to deal with her grief and depression, with her parents, with the bullying, with her anger and with life itself. Hermione had
never been faced with an endeavour or challenge that she hadn't committed herself fully to, giving it her absolute all– and therapy was the same. She learned that anger was healthy, that so was sadness. She learned how to not lash out at easy, convenient targets. She learned relaxation and breathing techniques to help deal with stress and anxiety. She learned to put her thoughts and feelings into words, instead of pushing them away or holding them trapped up inside her.

School became easier. Dr. Mia had helped her blunt all her sharp edges until she wasn't so much a wild creature, stuck in that place between fight and flight, to soften her tongue so she wasn't so quick to hurt or defend.

She'd ended up asking Loki to convince her parents to change her school, even though he'd made St Judith's College and everyone involved forget she'd ever been expelled. The new school, Red Roofs, was still frustratingly posh and proper, but Hermione managed to not immediately alienate herself. She was physically younger then most of them (though mentally she was older then she looked, considering all the time-travelling and the stepping out of time), but she was mature, well-spoken and quick-witted and this time took care not to immediately shove her intelligence down their throats (though she maintained it wasn't her fault everything was so bloody easy– at this point, she was going to have to skip another grade or pick up a new language– or both– to try and stop her brain shrivelling from boredom and disuse).

Of course, she still didn't let herself be pushed around; she had no intention of being bullied, nor did she stand idly by if and when she witnessed others being bullied. And, to her surprise, the effect of her confidence and her willingness to fight tooth and nail just to be herself, bells in her hair, curls flowing free, 'odd' braided jewellery and all, was... surprising. The other students actually started to like her. She didn't differentiate between the different social groups; the 'swots', the 'jocks', the 'popular kids'– she treated them all equally, with politeness and compassion but absolutely no patience for bullying. Apparently, those were attractive qualities to her peers, even as did quickly test out of her current classes.

It was in that next year level that she made her first friends at Red Roofs. Or at least, she was mostly certain that she, Hugo and Muriel Beryne, were probably friends. The three of them ate their lunch together, paired up in classes when it was required and occasionally had conversations, though they were all quite comfortable with silence, which had been the biggest factor that had drawn her to the twins when they'd initially offered to partner up with her in History and then had insisted on evenly dividing the work instead of letting her do it all.

The twins were both fourteen and in most of her classes, other then French. Hugo had dark eyes and dark hair and a quiet smile– in fact, he was a quiet person in general, content to watch the other students play and make noise and cause trouble. Just as dark haired and dark eyed as her twin, Muriel's hair was always woven back in a long braid and her smile was sweet. She had a knack for learning secrets, which Hermione appreciated as it was a quick way to deal with potential bullies.

Perhaps the biggest winning point of all was that when Muriel first got a glimpse of the bracelet Loki had given her, the older girl's reaction was to smile and comment on how pretty it was, then ask where she'd gotten it. Hermione's reply that someone very dear to her had made it for her had caused Muriel to pout ridiculously, which had then made Hermione laugh.

Things weren't perfect, but Hermione knew better then to expect perfection and she was content.
*Fun fact: St Judith's College doesn't exist, but I named it after Saint Jutta (English: Judith) of Prussia. She was born in 1200 and was a wealthy woman who sold everything she had and moved to the eastern boundary of Germany, at the mouth of the Vistula, where the Prussians were still living as pagans as attempts to convert them to Christianity had failed. Jutta/Judith lived as a hermit in a little hut and spent her time attempting to convert the pagans and praying, especially for nonbelievers to come to Jesus in faith and for the newly baptized Christians to be true to their faith, and taking care of weary travelers who passed by. Really, it's no wonder Hermione never fit in at St Judith's ;)

**Kokopelli, a fertility god of the southwestern Native American culture. Depicted as a hunchedback flute player, he is known as a playful prankster and storyteller

***Dr. Mia Vallens is a shapeshifter from episode 4 of season 13 of Supernatural. She was born to a female shapeshifter and an unknown human lover. Growing up, her mother kept her away from other shapeshifters. Mia eventually met another shapeshifter named Buddy when she was "young and stupid" and began a relationship with him. However, Buddy was sadistic and violent and enjoyed hurting people. After witnessing Buddy murder several people and suffering abuse at his hands, Mia fled the relationship and took on a new name and face, becoming Mia Vallens. As Mia Vallens, she became a grief counselor. Wanting to make up for the things that she and Buddy had done, Mia began helping her patients by shifting into the forms of their deceased loved ones so that the people have a chance to say goodbye and to finally get closure.
Hello everybody, I've been away in Europe on holidays and I apologize for my lack of contact, I'll be going back to reply to comments and I am, as always, grateful for you all taking the time to share your thoughts <3
Please enjoy this new chapter!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE:

On the day Hermione turned ten, two things happened; first, she met three of Loki's children for the first time (and a pagan goddess too!), and second; the phoenix egg hatched– just not in that order.

The time leading up to September 19th had fallen into a dependable sort of schedule of therapy, high school, jujitsu, runes and magical based studies, with self-studied divination added to the offensive and defensive magic Loki was already teaching her. High school, unfortunately, was both boring and frustratingly simple. Hermione was tempted to sit the tests that would let her move up another year level, but she didn't want to leave Hugo and Muriel behind. Dr. Mia, who she was continuing to work with, supported her decision. Being intellectually stimulated was one thing, but social interactions with her peers was just as, if not more, important to her mental health and well-being.

With how busy she was, Loki didn't whisk her away on spontaneous adventures so much anymore, but he had taken her to New Orleans for Mardi Gras (she really loved time travel, it was amazing), where in the French Quarter of the city she'd managed to get her hands on a box of vintage tarot cards and a set of marked knuckle bones. She'd dressed up in one of the dresses Morgana had given her for the festival itself, with an added elaborate cape of feathers coloured every shade imaginable. It didn't surprise her that Loki enjoyed Mardi Gras, considering how much he lived by the popular slogan used in relation to New Orleans: 'Laissez le bon temps rouler'– "let the good times roll".

On the day of her birthday, Hermione woke up to both her parents having already left for work– they'd left a birthday card on the dining room table, so at least she knew they hadn't forgotten the significance of the date, but Loki? Loki was there, a bright grin already present on his face, and Hermione cared far more about his presence then about her mother and father's absence.

Opening her presents was the first thing she did– her parents had left her a hundred pound note in the card; Hugo and Muriel had gifted her with a new monogrammed book bag and a box of chocolates, both which they'd handed to her all wrapped the previous day for her to open on the morning of her birthday; Uncle Arran and Aunt Iona had sent her a framed photo of her with her cousins and a Charles Dickens novel she hadn't read yet called 'Bleak House'; Jeanie, Ina and Leana had sent her jewellery they'd made from sea-shells, and Angus had sent her a wooden fish he'd carved himself.

Unsurprisingly, though, Loki's presents were the best. The first gift he gave her was a delicate-looking locket. It was made of gold and oval-shaped, about the size of a fifty pence coin. The face
of the locket had a lily engraved on it in elegant swirling lines and when she opened it, she sucked in a shocked breath. On the inside faces of the locket were two small photographs; one was of her, Helena and Sylvianne— it was a moving photograph and they were all laughing together, occasionally looking over and waving, and the other was of her and Ness; it was also a moving photograph and they were hugging each other, Ness picking her up and twirling her around, kissing the top of her curly head.

"Oh," Hermione murmured in a small voice, looking up and giving Loki a tremulous smile. "Thank you," she told him.

"Turns out all you need is to soak the photo in a bit of special potion to make them move," he said lightly, eyes warm like sunshine.

"I didn't even know you took photos of Helena, Sylvianne and I," she admitted quietly, looking back down at the small images.

"I'm pretty good at being sneaky," her god told her. "I thought you'd appreciate them. The rest are in there," he nodded at the second of the three gifts he'd brought. She carefully unwrapped it to find an album with an embossed golden lily on the front of the pressed leather cover, the same delicate design as the face of her locket. Inside the album was picture after picture, of her with Ness, her with her cousins, her with Helena and Sylvianne and her with Loki.

Hermione loved it, and told Loki so through her tears.

His third gift, which she unwrapped after regaining her composure, was... confusing. She thought it might be some kind of statue; it seemed to be a model of a small tree with startlingly realistic silver and gold leaves that reached up to her shoulders with branches of different heights. The 'tree' was made of a glossy chestnut wood run through with seams of silver and gold that reminded her of kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Kintsugi was about not hiding scars, but displaying them with pride; an art of making something beautiful from something broken. She doubted it was a coincidence that Loki had chosen such a design.

"What is it?" She asked, confused about why he'd gifted her with a such a beautiful yet seemingly random gift.

"It's a perch," her amused god told her.

"It seems... um, extravagant?" She offered, which was an understatement, if anything.

"I like pretty things," Loki said with a shrug.

"It is pretty," Hermione agreed, because it certainly was– and by now she'd have to be an idiot not to be aware of Loki's predilection for the finer things in life, beauty being one of them, but she did have to admit; "I'm still not really sure what it's for, though."

Loki laughed, but the sound was fond, not mocking. "A perch only has one purpose, sugar," he told her, "which is to be perched on. But specifically, you're going to need this perch because I happen to know that a certain egg is due to hatch today."

Hermione stared at him, her breath catching in her throat. "You mean– my egg?" She asked breathlessly and when he nodded she actually let out a squeak of excitement, her hands going straight to the silken pouch resting over her heart. Snatching up one of the gold trimmed white velvet cushions from her bed (one word— Loki), she set it on her desk before carefully opening the
pouch and pulling the beautiful green egg out, the flames inside not burning her fingers, and gently placing it on the centre of the pillow.

Nearly immediately, she saw the egg give a little tremble, then another and another until a tiny little crack formed on the shell. Hermione hurriedly dropped down to her knees so she was at eye-level in front of the egg and watched with wide-eyed eagerness and baited breath.

It took far longer then she was expecting, waiting for the egg to hatch– the chick seemed to keep getting tired and pausing to rest– and she took the time to bombard Loki with questions. "Is it a coincidence, that it's hatching today?" She asked him breathlessly, speaking about twice as fast as normal in her excitement. "It can't be a coincidence, can it? Surely the chances are too ridiculously small–" 

"It's not a coincidence," Loki interrupted her excitable babbling, clearly amused. "The phoenix has already bonded to you; you were carrying it against your heart, unconsciously cradling it in your magic and soul– I'm guessing you were born sometime between 8am and 9am?"

"Twenty three minutes past eight," she told him and Loki smiled.

"Then that's when your phoenix first started to hatch," he told her and she pouted at him.

"And you never thought to tell me?"

"And deny you such an exciting birthday present?" Loki teased and Hermione found herself smiling back at him, despite herself.

"Okay, this is a pretty amazing surprise," she admitted, before a small peep-like sound had her spinning back around to face the egg– which, with a final shiver then crack, split enough for a tiny little head to stick out of the shell. As her eyes met tiny ink-drop ones ringed with irises of molten gold and framed by delicate little lashes, Hermione's heart melted. From there, the rest of the hatching happened relatively quickly and soon the newborn phoenix chick was completely free of the egg.

The gooey, goopy, sticky sogginess drenching the tiny little phoenix disappeared with a whisper of Loki's magic, and Hermione almost squeaked again in excitement at the sight of the now-dry newborn phoenix in all of its adorableness.

"Do you think they're a boy or a girl?" She asked, her voice hushed as she stared down at the tiny thing with wide eyes. With soft downy feathers that looked fluffier then a marshmallow, the little phoenix chick was one of the most adorable things Hermione had ever seen as it blinked in a sort of confused bewilderedness up at her with eyes as golden as its beak and claws. Its feathers were a beautiful and unusual greeny-gold colour, like the warm, bright sunshine filtering through the canopy of leaves in Brocéliande forest– a perfect mix of its parents' colouring, Hermione fervently believed.

The baby phoenix would grow up to be beautiful, she was sure– it already was, in her opinion, even if it was a little bit bald, its skin strawberry-pink and fragile-looking under the outrageously fluffy feathers.

"She feels like a girl to me," Loki said after a moment of observation.

"A girl," Hermione breathed, positively enchanted. She very, very carefully touched the pad of her finger against the tiny golden beak and the chick immediately nuzzled her little head against her finger. With gentle movements, Hermione carefully lifted the tiny baby bird into her hands where
she could feel the fluttering heartbeat and little wings so fragile against her palms.

"Cute little thing, isn't she?" Loki murmured.

"She's beautiful," Hermione agreed solemnly.

"Any ideas for names for the beautiful girl?" Her god asked.

"Well," Hermione replied thoughtfully, "I thought I'd follow Helena's example, and give the chick a name with special meaning attached so I did some research. For a girl, I was thinking 'Amara'— it means 'grace or bitter', which I thought paid equal tribute and acknowledgement to both halves of her heritage... except your face is doing something really funny right now."

Loki was indeed wearing a bizarre expression that looked to be stuck between horrified and constipated, and it was honestly sort of disturbing to look at. "I," her god said, appearing to be picking his words carefully, "knew an Amara. I was not fond of her."

"I think that seems like a bit of an understatement," Hermione muttered, considering the fact his face had yet to straighten out from its grimace. "But of course I can pick something different. Maybe... well, it doesn't have the sort of significant meaning that, uh, that the other name had, but I do like 'Vashti'," she mused out loud. "There's a Vashti in the Old Testament of the Bible who was a queen who refused her husband's orders to appear naked in front of his party guests and so she was deposed. I like how she didn't bow down to the pressure of societal expectations to obey her husband when he was ordering her to do something she was uncomfortable with."

"And Vashti means 'lovely'," Loki added with a warm smile, having lost the horrible tenseness of before. "It's a good name for a lovely little phoenix who no doubt is going to grow up to have the same headstrong spirit as her namesake and mama."

"Her 'mama'?" Hermione asked, curious. "Is... is that what I am for her? Her mother?"

"Well, maybe not her mother," Loki amended, "but she's imprinted onto your soul like a baby duckling— you'll never be able to get rid of her now."

"I'd never want to get rid of her!" Hermione immediately cried out, seized with horror at the very idea.

"Believe me, I know the feeling," Loki said fondly, kissing the crown of her head and then brushing his finger over Vashti, who squeaked at him in response.

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Hermione was supposed to be attending school that day, but her god rang up the administrative office and posed as her father to say she wouldn't be coming in for the day. Then, in the space of a blink, Loki magicked her into a long, floaty white dress with black birds flying around the bodice and a sheer black underskirt. On her feet, she was now wearing a pair of black lace-up boots which were heavy enough she knew the toes of the boots were reinforced with steel— they'd do a lot more damage if she kicked someone, Loki had said with a smirk the first time he'd conjured her up a pair.

Startled by the abrupt change, Vashti let out an alarmed squeak from where the little newborn phoenix was perched on her shoulder, nestled up against her neck. After taking a moment to calm her sweet little baby down, Hermione looked curiously over at the mirror to examine her reflection and saw that Loki had styled her hair for her too— sprays of small, bell-like lily of the valley blooms were twined into the freely tumbling curls but for several tiny braids ending with just-as tiny bells,
their white colour standing out in the darker whirls of her hair.

"Lily of the valley flowers? Weren't you going for a lily theme today?" She asked, looking curiously at the pale flowers in her reflection, her eyes flicking briefly down to where her new locket rested just over her sternum then over to where her new photo album had been lovingly shelved.

"Lilies are for remembrance," Loki told her, prompting her to look back over at him. "Lily of the valley blooms, though, symbolise the return to happiness."

"Oh," Hermione said softly and her god smiled at her.

"I thought it was fitting."

"I feel like a doll when you dress me up," she told him and he laughed, causing her to pout playfully at him before looking down at the dress. "Well, it's very pretty. Are they ravens?" She asked curiously, tracing one of the birds with a finger.

"No," Loki said, his voice losing some of its lightness, which caused her to automatically look back up at him, at the subtle tightness around his eyes. "Ravens are Odin's thing," he told her, which made her wince slightly in realisation. "Those," Loki continued, "are crows." He flashed her a grin, one that showed his teeth. "I like to think of them as my thing. It's only fair."

Hermione wasn't entirely sure what the difference between crows and ravens were, other than there was a difference, but she vowed to research it the next chance she got.

She wasn't quite sure where she was supposed to put Vashti, considering the dress didn't have pockets, but the baby phoenix solved that for her when Vashti wriggled from Hermione's shoulder and along the curve of her clavicle so she could burrow determinedly down the front of Hermione's dress and curl up against her heart. Loki obligingly made the fabric a little looser and promised that he'd make sure her precious passenger wasn't crushed if anyone leaned against her or tried to hug her.

"So, if we're dressing up, then you must have plans for us," Hermione said, looking up at him with hopeful eyes.

"Lots of plans," Loki assured her, "but let's start with breakfast."

Breakfast turned out to be crêpes in France, where Hermione fed Vashti puréed berries with a glass pipette between bites of delicious goodness. After they finished eating, she turned eagerly to her god, knowing that he must have something special planned, considering how evasive he was being.

"So what are we doing next?" She asked excitedly.

"Well," Loki said, a slow grin on his face, "I thought you might like to meet some of my kids."

Hermione stared up at him with wide, shocked eyes. "You... you want me to meet your kids?"

"They're not exactly kids anymore," Loki amended. "But I thought it was about time."

"I--I'd love to," Hermione said, tearing up again. "Oh, I'm so sorry about all the crying, I'm being such a mess--"

"Relax, honey," Loki interrupted her with a warm laugh. "It's your birthday, pumpkin, you're allowed to be a bit weepy."
Which, of course, just made her tear up even more, wrapping her arms around god to hug him tightly.

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Gabriel took his little mortal to visit Fenris first—considering his son was currently (mostly) mortal, he figured Fen would be the least intimidating.

He'd prepared his son, and Fenris greeted his little priestess warmly as he opened the door.

"You must be Hermione," he said, reaching out to gently shake her hand with his own wrinkled one.

"Y-Yes," Hermione said, seemingly struck breathless. "I'm Hermione Granger, it's an honour to meet you, sir."

"Please, just Fenris is fine," Fenris chuckled, near-golden eyes gleaming with amusement. "I'm sure you've been around the old man long enough to know we're not that interested in titles."

"It's nice to meet you, Fenris," Hermione shyly corrected herself.

"Please, come in," Fenris invited them, and Gabriel caught Hermione's small hand with his, giving it a gentle squeeze of support as he led her inside.

He watched with quiet amusement as her eyes tracked the photographs on the walls, her eyes widening as she took in the family displayed there.

"Ah, my human family," his son said fondly, tracking her gaze which caused Hermione to startle slightly, her cheeks turning pink. "My lovely wife Mardi, may she rest in peace, our son Lyall, my beautiful daughter-in-law Hope and my grandson, Remus."

"Fenris likes to have his godhood taken away occasionally so he can spend a life as a human," Gabriel explained to Hermione. "When he passes away, his sister will collect him and restore his godhood."

"Is that a common thing to do?" Hermione asked curiously and Fenris smiled as he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'm more of the exception then the rule," he said, "though you'll find that all of faðir's children are like that." His teeth flashed as he smiled, suddenly looking years younger. "We pride ourselves on it."

As Hermione curled up on Fenris's couch with a mug of tea and a fresh pipette of berry purée for Vashti, Fenris drew him aside. "Your little stray is very sweet," he said quietly and Gabriel smirked, knowing his son didn't mean that entirely as a compliment.

"She is," he agreed, amused, "but don't let that fool you—she killed one of the Seelie with a fireplace poker when it attacked her, about a year ago, and when she was seven she shoved her thumbs into the eye sockets of a selkie trying to drown her cousin."

Fenris looked over at Hermione, who was now nuzzling her nose against the beak of the phoenix chick cradled in her cupped palms, with new interest.

"Now that is surprising," he murmured, "though I suppose it shouldn't be—you don't like boring people."
"Of course not," Gabriel said, pulling a face. "They're boring."

During lunch, Fenris regaled Hermione with stories of both his current family, the Lupins, and his life as a pagan god throughout history. Hermione was particularly interested to hear about Hati and Sköll, his godling 'kids'; Sköll, apparently, had decided to take a leaf out of his father's book and try living a human life as a human—currently, he was living in Svalbard, married to a human woman. Meanwhile, Hati was off creating trouble all over the globe, as a good Trickster did. Dishing out Just Desserts was a family trade, after all, and Fenris even passed on a few recollections of his less... morally questionable exploits over the years of serving assholes their comeuppance to a delighted Hermione.

After eating, they said goodbye to Fenris and Gabriel whisked them both off to Scotland, to Loch Ness.

"Why are we here?" Hermione asked curiously as she looked around their new surroundings with great interest and Gabriel grinned.

"We're here to meet Jörmungandr— he likes living as a giant snake more then he likes having two legs and warm blood, and he prefers the serenity of life underwater to above it. It's weird, but he's my son so he's bound to have inherited some of my unconventionality." He explained. Or, as his children seemed fond of putting it, inherited some of his "crazy".

"Wait," Hermione said slowly, with a look of dawning realisation on her expressive little face, "are you saying that your son is the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Monster's a bit harsh, don't you think?" He teased her, which predictably made her cheeks go red, before he nodded. "Yeah, Jöry thinks it's a real laugh."

"He takes after his father, then," Hermione said, her mouth curling up into a smile in the face of his own clear amusement.

"Come on, it's a great trick!" Gabriel playfully protested. "He gives people a few sightings then either hides himself with magic when they start searching the loch with sonar, or he shifts to two-legs and joins the search."

"He joins the search?" Hermione repeated in disbelief before she appeared unable to help but start giggling helplessly.

"It's a good trick," Gabriel said smugly and Hermione nodded, her eyes bright and cheeks flushed with laughter.

"It kind of is," she agreed.

"Come on," he said, clicking his fingers to create a boat for them that was a copy of her uncle's fishing boat, the Robina. "I'd suggest swimming, but I don't think Vashti would appreciate it."

"No she most certainly would not," Hermione agreed, her hand protectively going over her heart, to where Vashti was once-again snoozing. Apparently phoenix chicks slept a lot.

"So, boat it is," Gabriel said, touching her arm to use pagan magic to teleport them both into the newly created boat. A click of his fingers sent the boat cutting swiftly through the murky waters along its course and Hermione stood holding onto the side, peering around at their surroundings with interest.

Gabriel let out a flare of his magic when they arrived at one of the deepest parts of loch, where it
reached over 750 feet deep. When he felt a responding flare, he smiled and with a flicker of magic brought the boat to a halt. A handful of moments later, Jörmungandr's upper body rose from the water in a graceful arch. His head was currently no bigger then the boat (he could grow and shrink at will), his scales were a deep green and he blinked the large, golden eye facing them curiously.

"Who is this, faðir?" He asked in the hissing language of serpents.

"This is Hermione Granger, my blótgyðiur," he introduced her proudly, lifting her up so she was sitting on the edge of the boat, her toes tickling against the surface of the water whilst he kept his arm wrapped securely around her waist so she didn't accidentally fall in.

"It's an honour to meet you," Hermione told his son with a bright, genuine smile.

"How curious," Jöry mused, peering closer at her. "You should give her knowledge of Beast-tongue, faðir, so we can talk without needing an intermediary."

"Ah," Gabriel said, and Hermione twitched slightly, likely in response to his grace brushing against her soul to impart the knowledge, "try now."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, small mortal child," Jöry politely greeted Hermione.

"Oh!" She exclaimed, understandably startled by her sudden comprehension of Jöry's hissing– and perhaps by the unusual manner that Jöry had addressed her. "Oh! Um, please feel free to just call me Hermione."

"You may call me Jörmungandr. Or Jöry. Faðir likes to call me Jöry." His son told her. He leaned a little closer and Gabriel was proud when Hermione didn't flinch or try leaning back– he could sense no fear from her at all, only curiosity, excitement and a sense of awe that made him want to preen. "You smell nice." Jöry told her and the urge to preen vanished, replaced by one to face-palm at his son's complete and utter lack of social skills.

"Jöry doesn't really get out much," he explained to a startled Hermione. "He's not generally a fan of people. I'm pretty sure it's been about, oh, ten or fifteen years since he's talked to anyone but me."

"People are loud." Jöry told her solemnly. "I prefer when it is not loud, even thought it is funny to pretend to be hunting for evidence of my own existence, with the loud mortals and their loud boats."

"Aren't you... don't you get lonely, Jöry?" Hermione asked, her concern for his son obvious. He imagined it had a lot to do with Dr. Mia's gentle insistence on her not isolating herself from her peers.

"I have lots of friends," Jöry assured her. "Fish are dreadful gossips, but they are quite funny. And the eels are very friendly– they think of me as a very large cousin, so they can be quite protective."

"Wait..." Hermione said, her small face creasing with horror, "are you saying– are underwater animals sentient? Are all animals sentient?"

"It's not how you're imagining it," Gabriel was quick to clarify. "It's not like a Disney movie– animals with long term exposure to magic, like the inhabitants of Loch Ness, develop a much greater intelligence as opposed to your average animal, who are barely aware of anything outside of the instincts they are born with. I promise that you haven't ever eaten anything with enough intelligence that it would have been able to hold a conversation– or be capable of having any kind of sense of self."
Hermione looked unhappy and conflicted, and Gabriel knew her well enough to know that her natural aversion to the idea of killing anything that could possibly have some form of sentience was warring with the practicality developed by living with a family whose income came from fishing. It wasn't an easily solved conundrum, so he nudged her into a different direction of thinking for now, coaxing her to let Vashti snooze on a conjured cushion while she went swimming with Jöry, using his powers to filter the oxygen in the water for her so she could swim without needing to come up for breath.

Hermione's time in Fraserburgh had instilled a great love of swimming in her, he knew, and his son shared that joy. He watched with warmth as Jöry let her wrap her arms around his neck to hold onto him as he dived deep, introducing her to the world that existed beneath the surface of the Loch, including the swarm of eels who were so convinced that Jöry must be one of them and constantly fuzzed over him for not having a mate or offspring.

It warmed Gabriel right through to his grace to see his shy, socially awkward and hermit-like son giving Hermione a chance. When they both finally surfaced, a couple of hours of underwater exploration, swimming, diving and conversing with underwater animals later, Hermione's cheeks were flushed with happiness and as he used his powers to dry off her clothes and fix up her hair for her, Jöry purposefully met his eyes and nodded.

It was, quite possibly, the highest praise his son could give.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX:

The last of his children that Gabriel planned on introducing Hermione to that day was Váli, who had been giving hints that he'd like for such a thing to be arranged for some time now. Considering Váli and Eris's assistance in dealing with the rumours about Hermione that Puck had been spreading, he couldn't really deny his son the opportunity to meet his little priestess in person and so had arranged to meet up with Váli and Eris for dinner in Greece, where his son was currently living with his lady love, the Greek goddess of Strife and Discord.

He took Hermione to met them at a restaurant his son had picked out for the occasion. It was expensive and luxurious, of course, as Váli had inherited his taste for the finer things of life. Located on the hill of Lycabettus, the highest peak of Athens, the beautiful restaurant overlooked the entire historic city with stunning views of the city's most important icons.

The inside of the restaurant was designed with soft colours and simple lines, a harmonic combination of elegance and discreet luxury, while the outdoor terrace, which he and Hermione were led to by a waiter dressed in a crisp white tuxedo with a professional smile, was one the fine marbles and stones, a recreation of the more traditional structures of Athens.

Váli and Eris were already seated there and waiting for them. Lazily sprawled over his seat as he watched with sharp eyes as he and Hermione were escorted to the table, Váli reminded Gabriel painfully of Sigyn; both in appearance and how he carried himself with the casual arrogance of a noble-born.

Beside him, Eris looked exactly how Gabriel remembered, unchanged by the decades that had passed since he'd last seen her; lovely, sensuous curves clad in a silky white wrap-dress, a thick, glossy mane of golden-blonde hair, and large, bright eyes shining with a glint of madness. Dazzling jewels set in a heavy gold choker glittered at her throat, matching bracelets inlaid with garnets, carnelians, sardonyx, and emeralds circled her slender wrists and she grinned at he and Hermione with devious mischief, her lips red and shiny as the apple that had supposedly tempted Eve (it had actually been a predecessor of the modern fig).

"Hermione– that's Greek," Eris observed lightly, her accented voice thick and sweet as honey, when Hermione shyly introduced herself to the couple. "Are either of your parents from Greece, mikró arnáki?"*

"Er, no, I'm named after the daughter of Helen of Troy," Hermione explained, "because my mother's name is Helen. My... my sister's name was Clytemnestra."

"Ah!" Eris exclaimed, with a pleased smile. "Such beautiful names! It is a pity they have fallen out of favour, they truly do hail from a more romantic time."

"Um, thank you?" Hermione said, her cheeks tingeing pink.

"I've heard quite a bit about you, Hermione Granger," Váli spoke up, his golden eyes fixing on Hermione's as his smile widened to show far too many teeth. Gabriel felt an immediate urge to intervene between his priestess and son in what he recognised from experience as an approaching
clash of sharp-witted minds and silvered-tongues, but that wouldn't do Hermione any favours in dealing with Váli, nor was his son likely to respect either of them if he did. No, it would be best for Hermione, at least in the long-term, to face Váli directly—no matter how much he disliked the thought.

He watched with approval as Hermione almost imperceptibly straightened in place, an entire shift to her demeanour settling over her as her spine turned to steel and her smile turned sweet.

"So, I hear you seem to get yourself into an awful lot of trouble for one little mortal," his son drawled to her.

"Thankfully, I always seem to be able to get out of it too," Hermione replied sweetly.

"You mean my faðir gets you out of it," Váli corrected and Hermione's smile widened in a way that wasn't at all friendly.

"With all due respect, I'm afraid you're quite mistaken," she said, all sharp teeth and dangerous eyes. "While I have no intention of dying and am not afraid of using every resource I have available to stay alive, including praying to your father, I have never in my life just sat back and waited for him, or anyone else for that matter, to come along and rescue me, and I never, ever plan to. I can, have and do work to save myself."

"So the kitten has claws," Váli commented mockingly, most likely to distract Hermione from the flicker of calculating interest in his eyes. Gabriel's little priestess' saccharine smile instantly vanished, her face turning icy-cold.

"There are exactly two people in all of existence who are allowed to call me 'kitten'," she hissed, with enough biting-chill in her voice to leave frostbite on the skin of the listeners. "You are not either of them."

"And just how do you suppose you can do to stop me, kitten?" Váli challenged her, leaning forwards slightly in his seat.

"Well, nothing right now," Hermione said softly as she fixed her cold gaze directly to Váli's, clearly unafraid at looking the god straight in the eye, "because the best revenge is well-thought out, planned with prejudice, and implemented when one has an iron-clad alibi, but I'm a very intelligent person and I believe I'm quite capable of thinking up something appropriately horrifying." She then, quite suddenly, smiled at him, disarmingly sweet; "and on an entirely unrelated note, I'm currently wearing boots reinforced with steel. Just so you're aware."

She and Váli stared silently at each other for nearly a minute her and then Váli finally relaxed, turning to him with his mouth quirked and a glimmer of approval in his golden eyes.

"Not bad, faðir. Not bad at all."

"Smart, sassy, sweet and a spine of steel," Gabriel said smugly. "And she's mine."

Váli nodded, turning back to Hermione to smile properly at her. To her credit, Hermione showed very little of the confusion she was likely feeling and it just made him all the prouder of his little priestess who'd stood strong in her verbal spar against his son.

"Welcome to the family, little sister," Váli told Hermione, "I think you'll fit right in."

Hermione immediately went red. "I— I'm not—"
"Oh you're not my biological sister, I know," Váli chuckled, "but you're the only blótgyðiur that faðir has ever introduced to us, which means you're special, and I have no doubt you are going to be around for a while."

Hermione turned even redder and both Váli and Eris laughed. "You can threaten a god without blinking an eye, but a little compliment defeats you?" Eris teased and Hermione pouted adorably at them.

"Isn't she just the cutest little thing?" Gabriel said fondly, reaching over to tug on one of her curls, and Hermione buried her brightly blushing face in her hands.

"How did you find her, faðir?" Váli asked and Gabriel grimaced slightly as Hermione went still, slowly lifting her head as her blush had quite vanished, her face instead now pale.

"She petitioned for some Just Desserts to be delivered to several deserving targets," he explained vaguely.

"Ah," Váli said, recognising just why that would be a sensitive topic– for Gabriel to have delivered Just Desserts, then Hermione must have been wronged in a significant way (well, her sister had been wronged, but through her so had everyone who loved Clytemnestra, with Hermione first and foremost).

"After that, I continued praying and leaving out offerings," Hermione softly continued his explanation, surprising him slightly. "When I petitioned to Loki, I promised to be his loyal follower and I meant it. I never expected him to continue being a part of my life, not in my wildest imaginings, but I know that every time I see him I am blessed."

For the second time that day, Gabriel felt like preening in smug pride. Seeing the amused look Váli flashed him at his reaction, he shifted his unseen wings partway from waves to particles, making them just tangible to clip his troublesome son over the head with one which prompted Váli to pull a face at him before turning his attention back to Hermione. Beside Váli, Eris was also studying Hermione curiously.

"I'm glad," his son said, "that you do not take my faðir for granted."

"I would never," Hermione vowed fervently and Váli gave her a real smile, which was much more demonstrative of his approval than his reply of;

"I'll hold you to that."

The atmosphere of the dinner changed after that; Hermione had clearly passed Váli's tests and things turned back to casual and relaxed for Hermione's birthday celebration. In Greece, it was more customary to celebrate Name Days then birthdays, but candles held significance in Greek pagan traditions, symbolising the sending of a signal or prayer. Blowing out the candles with a wish was considered a way of sending that message to the gods and Gabriel smiled at her when, as she blew out the candles, a soft murmur of thank you flickered against his senses.

They didn't hang around long after dinner; Hermione was clearly exhausted from her big day so after bidding his son and Eris a fond farewell, he flew them both back to London, slipping slightly through time so that Hermione would get a good night's sleep.

He waited around for a bit to help her get the flowers out of her hair, turning his back while she changed into her pajamas. It wasn't until Hermione was curled up in bed, Vashti curled up on the pillow beside her, that his little priestess spoke up, asking something that he suspected had been on
her mind all day.

"How much... how much of the mythology about you is true?" She asked hesitantly and Gabriel grimaced slightly, which going by how her face fell was exactly the response she'd been dreading.

This... wasn't exactly how he'd wanted her birthday to end, but Gabriel supposed he shouldn't really be surprised that she'd have questions after having met his sons. Váli's existence alone was a glaring red flag, considering the mythology about Váli and Nárvi. Pagan gods couldn't kill an archangel, not many beings out there could, but they *could* trap them. And Gabriel... Gabriel had fallen too far into pagan arrogance to realise the danger until too late.

He hadn't killed Baldr– the myths had got that wrong. But Baldr had been involved in the spiraling tragedy of events that led to what was known as "the Binding of Loki".

The true story didn't start with death, it started with a wedding; Baldr's wedding, to be exact, to the Sumerian goddess Inanna. Gabriel had approved of Baldr marrying outside of the pantheon, something not often done back then, but he hadn't approved of the match itself, correctly predicting that Baldr would be too boring for Inanna.

Inanna was known as the Evening Star; she was associated with the Heavens as she was the daughter of the Sumerian Earth and Sky gods and her grandmother was Nammu, the Sumerian creator goddess. She was loving, beautiful and graceful, and considered by most to be the perfect match for the Norse god of light, joy, purity, beauty, innocence, and reconciliation. She was also a powerful warrior, however, and she was clever, wily and had a fierce temper and an amusing tendency to take over other pantheons domains.

At first, Inanna and Baldr were happy together, and they had a son; Forseti. Like Gabriel had predicted, however, Inanna inevitably got bored of 'good boy' Baldr and turned her sights on 'bad boy' "Loki"– and Gabriel had been amused enough to go along with her seduction, a decision he'd later go on to regret.

Baldr has been furious with them both, starting a (now thousand-year-old) grudge against "Loki", which wouldn't have been so concerning if it wasn't for another unfortunate and untimely sequence of events that had occurred at the same time– though this one Gabriel didn't regret, and never would.

Gabriel despised rape. He loathed lack of consent in any shape or form, but rape? That was particularly repugnant in his eyes, and pagan gods had a very rocky relationship with the idea of 'consent'. Gabriel had never, and would never, take away someone's consent in such a monstrous, despicable manner (hell, even when he'd made the mistake of responding to Zeus's dares that time with Svaðilfari, the stallion, well, he'd been the *mare*) but when it came to pagan gods, his disgust and abhorrence towards rape was the exception, not the norm.

Odin had seven children, six of which were the result of consensual sex; Víðarr was the result of a dalliance with Gríðr; with his first wife, Jörd, he had Thor and Týr; and with his second wife, Frigg, he fathered Baldr, Hǫðr and Hermóðr. His seventh child, however, a boy named Bous, was born to a human princess that Odin had raped; Princess Rinda of Ruthenia.

As a demi-god, Bous was strong and skilled with weapons and he'd made a vow to kill Odin for the violence he'd committed against his beloved mother– and in the spirit of fairness (and out of anger towards Odin), Gabriel gave Bous a weapon that was capable of killing a god.

At around the same time that Gabriel had slept with Baldr's wife, Bous mistakenly killed Hǫðr, whose resemblance to his father was unfortunately strong, and an infuriated Frigg had blamed
"Loki" for Hóðr's death. Baldr and Frigg had teamed up to get revenge, and with Baldr's help Frigg created a false prophecy about "Loki" and his children that she delivered to Odin.

From there, the tale was bleak but recognizable in Norse mythos as Odin turned on Gabriel and his children. Like he said, pagan gods might not be able to kill an archangel, but they could trap them—and in his arrogance, Gabriel had expected to be able to foresee a betrayal from Odin. He hadn't, and he'd paid for that mistake by being bound to a slab of rock in a cave deep underground with chains engraved with particularly insidious sigils that used his own power to keep him trapped—including his grace, which was accidental on Odin's part but devastatingly effective.

Trapped, Gabriel could only remain bound and helpless as he learned of how Odin had forced Sleipnir into becoming his steed, how he'd killed Nárvi by cursing Váli, turning him into a mindless beast who tore apart his beloved twin, how he'd imprisoned Jörmungandr and Fenris, had cast Hel into Hell and slain both Sigyn and Angrboda as they tried to protect the children. Only Gabriel's daughters Eisa and Einmyria had escaped the wrath of Frigg and Baldr, both safe with their mother Glut in the pocket-realm of Muspellheim, far from Odin's power.

Gabriel's rage was a terrible, terrible thing; if he'd been able to free himself at that moment, he would have gladly brought the full force of his grace down against Odin, consequences be damned. For decades, he'd felt only hatred and rage and grief. With his own grace keeping him trapped, he'd cursed and writhed and violently thrashed his wings, causing the entire area to shake and tremble like it had been struck by a series of earthquakes.

It took him over a century to wear down the magic of the chains. Considering they'd been created to bind him for eternity, that had actually been a good effort, but it had still been far too long in his mind. He'd wanted to tear Odin, Baldr, and Frigg to pieces once free, but after a century trapped underground he'd managed to sort out his priorities and his children came first over any revenge. Also, as the white-hot hate and rage had started to lose its heat, he'd been revisited by caution—while he'd love to go all pissed-off archangel on Odin, Baldr, and Frigg, if his identity was revealed his children would be in danger from the Choirs of Heaven.

They weren't nephilim—pagan gods and goddesses didn't have souls, and a nephilim was born from an angel's grace and a human's soul, but Gabriel had no doubt his children would be seen as monstrous abominations by his siblings and he feared (rightfully) that angels would be sent out to kill them while Michael and Raphael dragged him kicking and screaming by his wing-bones back to Heaven like a misbehaving fledge. And so Gabriel erred on the side of caution, choosing to first set aside revenge in order to focus on locating his children.

He found Váli first; his youngest son had been taken in by Aegir, Kári and Rán**, the two brothers and sister respectively of his 'Loki' vessel (and that was another long story). His poor Váli was the closest the boy could be to broken before reaching the point of no return and Gabriel had cradled his son in his arms, promising that Odin would never touch him again, that he would pay for what he'd done to Nárvi.

Rán had then informed him of Sleipnir, who had been freed from his bondage by a furious Demeter who had enlisted the aid of her brother, Zeus—Demeter had also given birth to a foal, Arion, who was very close companions with Sleipnir. Arion had been highly distressed by Sleipnir's forced bondage and Demeter's protectiveness over her children was infamous—just ask Hades. To avoid going to war against the Greek pantheon, Odin had reluctantly handed Sleipnir over to the Greek goddess.

Hel had then found Gabriel, instead of the other way around, and his daughter had clung desperately to him, sobbing in his arms. He'd been horrified to see what had happened to his
beautiful daughter, whose body was half-dead, and the story she told him made Gabriel tremble in rage.

Just as he had her brothers, Odin had imprisoned Hel, trapping her in the part of Hell where those who worshipped the Norse Pantheon were sent. Hel hadn't just allowed Odin to defeat her, however, and his fierce daughter had forcefully taken over her prison, giving it the name Helheim and declaring herself its Queen. By then, too much time had passed for her to safely leave Hell—Helheim; Hell wasn't meant for the living and her body was long-dead and beginning to decay, and if she left Hell, where even the worst injuries were regenerated (so the damned souls could be tortured over and over without ever being destroyed), she'd fall over dead—and there was no afterlife for a pagan god(dess).

Several decades into her rule of Helheim, however, Death had approached her and offered her the position of his Hands. In her desperation to escape Hell, his daughter had agreed and as one of Death's Hands, a sort of glorified Reaper, she was finally able to leave Helheim as her duties now included collecting the souls of the dead who worshipped the Norse pantheons and transporting them to either Heaven or Hell.

As one of Death's Hands, however, she was unable to interfere with the Living World, bound to vows of Neutrality that she literally could not break, even if she wanted to, and she'd been forced to witness what was happening to her family while unable to do anything to help them.

Now, in a time where followers of the Norse gods were exceedingly rare, Hel was able to exist as more than a glorified reaper, but she was still bound by neutrality and she served Death before any other, even her family.

Gabriel had comforted his daughter the best he could, assuring her that her brothers' suffering wasn't her fault, that there was nothing she could have done and he was proud of her for making the best of her situation.

With Váli, Sleipnir and Hel accounted for, Gabriel had turned his attention to his two remaining sons; Fenris and Jörmungandr. Jörmungandr was much easiest to locate and then free; Odin's magic kept him trapped in the depths of the ocean, but Gabriel tore that magic apart and brought his son home to Váli, Aegir, Kári and Rán.

Fenris, his last son, was the hardest to save, in that the chains that bound him in his cave were the same that had bind Hel in his cave. Fenris had also been guarded, which made sense considering that in Frigg's false prophecy it was said that when Fenris broke free of his chains he'd kill Odin, but Gabriel had killed the guard without blinking and had then manifested his archangel blade for the first time in centuries to strike through the chains binding his son. They'd shattered into hundreds of links, scattered across the floor of the cave, and Gabriel has transported Fenris to his brothers where he coaxed Jörmungandr and Fenris both into their humanoid forms, shedding their animal-skins for the first time in over a century. With three of his sons together, the fourth son safe (but his fifth son gone forever and his youngest daughter permanently out of his reach), Gabriel let himself hold his children and weep for everything they'd all lost.

After reuniting with Sleipnir, an occasion that resulted in even more tears from everybody, even Arion who'd been with Sleipnir at the time, Gabriel finally set off to teach Odin, Frigg and Baldr just how big of a mistake they'd made when they'd gone after his children.

The only one of the three he felt any iota of empathy for was Frigg; her son had been killed and he'd played a role in that, albeit unintentionally. If she'd gone after him for revenge, then Gabriel would have understood—but she'd gone after his children instead, and that was unforgivable.
It was his first real serving of Just Desserts, and still one of his most violent to date: he'd slaughtered both Frigg and Odin's first wife, Jörð, he'd slaughtered Týr, Hermóðr and Viðarr, Odin's three remaining sons aside from Thor and Baldr, Thor having managed to avoid him, while Baldr he'd intentionally left alive to suffer as he'd also slaughtered Baldr's son; Forseti. And then, in his most vicious and unmerciful act yet, he left Baldr and Odin alive with the knowledge that their wives and children were dead and it was all their fault; truly a torturous agony greater than death— he'd know. Admittedly, he later regretted not killing Odin at the time, but he'd wanted his 'blood-brother' to suffer like he had suffered before ever being granted the mercy of death.

It was a messy, tragic tale; one captured in bits and pieces in Norse mythology, threads of truth and fiction woven together into the tapestry of a myth as terrible as the true story. The bare bones of it was there; a prophecy, Baldr, betrayal, a dead son, a bound god and a family torn apart and desecrated. Gabriel wondered how long Hermione had wanted to ask, with that endless curiosity of hers, and he couldn't help but feel appreciation for her restraint in refraining from doing so.

"Most myths contain a certain element of truth," he admitted to her. "The facts often get mixed up, but... usually the gist of it is there."

Hermione's eyes, too honeyed to be brown, the way she'd preferred them ever since Merlin had taught her how to change their colour, filled with tears and Gabriel wasn't surprised at all when she lunged forwards, wrapping her arms tight around him as she started to cry great big heaving sobs against his shirt.

He stroked her back and kissed the top of her head as she clung to him and wept, her tears those of both anger and sorrow. Unknown to her, that beautiful soul of hers reached out to him in an unconscious attempt to offer comfort and he smiled as he let free enough of his grace to nudge up against the essence of her being, which then did the soul-equivalent of nuzzling against his grace and purring and he sighed quietly as he let his forehead rest against the top of her curly head.

"It was a long, long time ago, kitten," he murmured.

"But it still hurts, doesn't it?" Hermione whispered and Gabriel sighed again, his unseen wings curling around them both in comfort.

"Yeah," he admitted, "it does."

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Chapter End Notes

*mikró arnáki = little lamb

**In Norse mythology, there are myths about a pantheon of gods that predate the Aesir. These are Aegir [King of the Sea], Kári [North Wind] and Logi [Fire], as well as Rán, the sister-wife of Aegir. Together, Aegir, Kári and Logi make up a sort of creation myth that predates the Aesir, with the interaction of Sea, Flame and North Wind creating and shaping the world of the North. Concerning 'Loki' and 'Logi' being
the same person/god, the Eddas know three different versions of the god Loki: Loki, Logi and Utgard-Loki. While they are portrayed as three different personalities, there is a significant amount of overlap between them and that has led to some believing that originally they may very well have been one and the same, but over the process of time have been split into three, which is far from unheard of in mythology. In this story, I follow the theory that all three Loki's are one, and the "Loki" that Gabriel took over is the same being as Logi.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:

Hermione adored Vashti– the little phoenix chick was everything she could have ever dreamt of for a life-long companion; she was sweet, inquisitive and as in love with Hermione as Hermione was with her. She couldn't fly or travel by flame yet but she was usually content to just travel around either in Hermione's pocket or curled up inside her blouse or dress, against her heart.

Vashti also liked to sleep either nestled in the crook of her neck, or nesting in her hair. The tangles in the morning were positively frightful– "elf locks", Richard Granger had commented with an amused chuckle one morning– but Vashti was worth every snag of her hairbrush, and it didn't take long for Loki to offer to teach her how he used his powers to style her hair so as to avoid the horror that had become untangling the knots every morning.

It proved much more difficult then Hermione had been expecting, which she shamefully admitted to herself was because she'd viewed the more 'cosmetic' magic as silly and frivolous when compared to other magic she was learning. It was a humbling lesson that she'd taken on board, one that was reinforced every time she painlessly untangled her hair or twisted the curls into fancy loops and braids interwoven with fresh flowers, colorful beads and tiny golden bells without lifting a finger, and she determinedly vowed not to make such a judgmental mistake again.

Vashti brought more with her more than just companionship, unconditional love, and a valuable life lesson– she was a living reminder, to Hermione, of her god. It was partly due to Vashti's colouring; it was obvious to most who knew him that Loki favoured the colours green and gold*, and Vashti's molten-gold irises also reminded Hermione of Loki's when he wasn't trying to hide how otherworldly he was, but mostly it was because of how Vashti was so hot to the touch, just like her god was; a little ember of flame that didn't burn.

When Loki had given her knowledge of what he called "Beast-tongue" (taking Norse mythology into account, Hermione suspected it was a form of Allspeak), he explained that he'd given her the ability to understand animals that had enough intelligence to be capable of speech (and she was still agonising over the revelation that some animals were capable of sentience– she hadn't eaten anything with meat in it since her birthday, her inability to come to terms with the new knowledge an ongoing conundrum). One day, Loki told her, Vashti would also be capable of speech, but she was currently too young, much like a human newborn would be, though unlike a human newborn Vashti's development was much quicker– she was already nearly twice the size she'd been when she was born.

Hermione was thrilled by the idea of it, of a best friend who would be there with her for however long she ended up living– witches and wizards, she'd learned, had a lifespan that was, on average, about double that of normal humans– who she could hold conversations and share secrets with.
As well as being too young to speak, Vashti was also too young to fly or travel by fire, though she occasionally let out determined puffs of smoke from her feathers which was always followed by disgruntled chittering and beak click-clacking when not so much as a flicker of flame appeared. Hermione always distracted her when Vashti seemed to be getting truly distressed by her lack of results, which wasn't hard– preening her feathers always had her little sweetheart forgetting about flying or flaming or anything else in favor of crooning and trilling and melting in a bundle of happy, feathery fluff.

This distraction had also proven itself useful when Vashti's talons had started growing out– a phoenix's talons, Hermione quickly learned (amongst many, many other things to do with raising a newborn phoenix chick) from the large pile of books Loki had provided her on phoenixes, were capable of cutting through solid stone if the phoenix willed it and their beaks could tear solid steel to shreds. Vashti didn't start slicing everything to ribbons on purpose, of course, but she wasn't so good yet at willing them to not destroy Hermione's things and Hermione had to purchase a pair of clippers for bird claws when Vashti started leaving deep scratches and gouges on her skin, much to both of their distress. Preening Vashti's feathers served as an excellent distraction while she clipped the little chick's talons.

Hermione did feel bad about it, but considering Vashti barely left her person other than during school hours (and even then, not all the time), the claws were an issue that had to be controlled until Vashti was capable of doing it herself. But her little sweetheart didn't let it get her down, and neither did Hermione– a few scratches and nail clippings were nothing on the bond they were developing together.

It wasn't just Vashti that Hermione was developing a deeper bond with in the weeks following her birthday either. Her friendship with Hugo and Muriel seemed to be blossoming and a month after she turned "ten" (physically, at least, as that didn't count all the time she spent in the past or outside of the time stream, where due to Loki's intervention her body hadn't aged but her mind had), she was invited to her first play date with the older two students. Except she was fairly certain people in secondary school didn't actually call it "play dates". Hanging out, maybe? Whatever it was called, it didn't really matter to her– not with how excited she was.

Hugo and Muriel had invited her over to their house after school on a Wednesday, for an afternoon of socialising, studying and an early dinner with their parents, who Hermione was yet to meet. Hermione's parents were thrilled, Loki was proud, Dr. Mia was encouraging and Vashti, reacting to the positive atmosphere around her, kept letting out excited trills and chirrups. Hermione wished she could bring Vashti along with her, but although Loki had started teaching her illusions to let Vashti go unnoticed, she still needed to work on it. Vashti's sad little cheeps when she had to go to school, though, were heartbreaking and she sometimes snuck her along in her blazer pocket anyway, whispering to her how she had to hide and be very quiet and Vashti would happily snooze the day away.

On the day of the "play date", Hermione packed a change of clothes into her school bag, gave a sad Vashti lots of kisses as she left her little sweetheart on her tree-perch (Loki had promised to come fetch her for the day– considering they were both beings of fire, Vashti and her god got along well) and actually smiled at her parents as she ate her breakfast.

Muriel appeared just as anticipatory as she did, though Hugo had a sort of reticence about him that made Hermione feel nervous and insecure, prompting her to worry about if he really liked her as much as he seemed to, or if his sister was making him 'hang out' with her. Hugo had always been the quiet one of the twins. Muriel's enthusiasm, however, swept away most of her anxieties and as the final bell rang, she skipped happily beside a gleeful Muriel, along to the house of the twins.
It seemed a very stereotypical trim and neat house from the outside, an impression that continued as they entered it. The interior, as far as she could see, was very clean and everything appeared perfectly in place as Muriel urged her inside, yet Hermione found herself pausing in the foyer, a subconscious uneasiness prickling at her nerves as something about her surroundings, something she couldn't quite pick out, seemed... off.

"Are you okay?" Muriel asked, giving her a curious look, and Hermione quickly smiled at the older girl, pushing her worries from her mind.

"Of course," she rushed to reassure her friend, before asking, "is there somewhere I can get changed? And put my things?"

"Of course!" Muriel said brightly, directing her to what seemed to be an unused study where Hermione quickly changed out of her uniform and into the clothes she'd brought; a white blouse with butterfly sleeves and a pale golden feathery design on the back, a soft green skirt that fell below her knees, white leggings and light brown sandals.

Emerging from the study, Hermione found that one of the twins had already moved her bag somewhere, as well as their own, and both were waiting for her in the corridor. "Should we get something to eat, or do you think we should get started on our homework?" She asked them a bit hesitantly, not really sure what sort of "playing" the twins might do– her only references were from Fraserburgh, and things like swimming in the ocean and playing tag and hide-and-seek on the wharf weren't possible in London. Thankfully, Hugo and Muriel didn't seem to notice her hesitation and lack of confidence. Instead, Muriel beamed at her again.

"Getting started on our homework would be great, but first you need to meet our father," she said, seizing onto Hermione's arm and almost dragging her forwards, Hugo a silent presence behind them. Hermione went along with Muriel, letting the older girl pull her along in a way that reminded her of Helena as her friend led her to what she guessed was the living room of the house. It gave her the same sense of unease that she couldn't quite place as the foyer, but she once again cast it from her mind as she focused on the room's inhabitant.

It was a man, older-looking and scruffy, with wiry, greying light blond hair, a short, bristly sort of beard and piercing grey-blue eyes. He was wearing dark jeans and a bomber jacket and he didn't much resemble the twins, who Hermione assumed must then look like their mother.

"Hello, I'm Hermione Granger," she introduced herself politely, smiling brightly at the intense-looking man and holding out to her hand out to him to shake. Rough fingers closed around her much smaller ones, but the man didn't shake hands, nor did he let go of hers or smile as he stared down at her.

"Hermione Granger," he said slowly, in a deep, rumbling voice. Hermione swallowed, trying to subtly tug her hand free from his grip, but his hold didn't budge. Casting a look around the room, searching out Hugo and Muriel, it finally clicked into place what had been unnerving her about the house– there were no photographs to be seen; not of Hugo or Muriel or their parents. An inkling of panic started to stir up within Hermione and she gave her hand a proper yank this time, not caring that it was rude but wanting to put some distance between herself and the man.

When he still didn't let go, she cleared her throat so her voice wouldn't wobble, and said as evenly as she could manage, "please let go of me."

He didn't. Instead, his grip tightened until she was yelping in pain. "Cursed child," He rasped, and there was something frighteningly like hate in his eyes as he stared down at her with narrowed eyes.
"Let go of me!" She demanded, this time twisting in place to kick him in the gut when he didn't respond. Almost as if he'd been expecting it, he caught the kick, grabbing her leg and pulling sharply as he finally released his grip on her hand. Not expecting the yank or sudden release, she went tumbling to the ground and her head slammed against the wooden floorboards with an audible crack and searing pain. Her eyes watered and she let out a cry as the world briefly flashed white and black. Everything was muddled. She couldn't think properly, too hazy and confused.

Through her tears, she could see Hugo and Muriel flanking the man they had called 'father' and she managed to whimper out, "please... please... help me..." but neither of them reacted. Muriel, even, seemed pleased, and the man reached over to ruffle her head, which she preened in response to.

Hermione, unable to face the betrayal in that moment, cried out to the one being who'd always been there for her. "L-Loki," she choked out, desperate and hurt, "Loki-Loki-Loki-*"

A foot collided with her stomach and she cried out again, curling forward to protect her organs. Moments later, a hand seized onto her curls, dragging her upright so she was forced to look the man straight in the eye as her scalp screamed with pain.

"Bikkja! Your wretched father cannot hear your call, Loki's get!" He snarled, shaking her like a rag-doll.

What–?

Loki's "get"?

But didn't that mean–?

"I will make him regret what he did to my wives and sons," the man continued ranting, "and you–you, úsælligr child, will be the trap!"

"I– I'm not– I'm not Loki's child–" Hermione choked out, only to let out another cry as the man shook her harshly.

"Do not lie to me!" He bellowed. "I know better than to believe anything that comes from the mouth of the god of lies' monstrous hrogn! I already know all there is to know about you– Huginn and Muninn have been watching you closely, they tell me his presence is all over you and they are right! He should have protected you better, he should have known that I would never rest until I could get my revenge against him!"

Through watery eyes, Hermione once more turned to the twins, realisation slowly dawning on her as she watched "Hugo" and "Muriel" begin to change, dark feathers replacing pale skin and dark hair.

'Ravens are Odin's thing' Loki had said, and she'd researched what he'd meant by that; in chapter thirty-eight of Gylfaginning (the first part of the Prose Edda), it was mentioned how two ravens sat on the king of the Norse god's shoulders. Odin had granted them the ability to speak and would send them out daily at dawn to fly all over the world before returning at dinner-time to inform him of everything they saw and heard, earning him the name "raven-god".

Those two ravens had gone by the names of Huginn and Muninn.

Faced with the two large, black, glossy-feathered birds now where moments before the twins had stood, Hermione finally realised just who it was who was holding her upright by his grip on her hair– Odin might look more like a lumberjack than the king of the Aesir pantheon, but there was no doubt in her mind who she had unwillingly found herself face-to-face with.
Her moment of horrified realisation was followed by a desperate panic that threatened to suffocate her, but instead of letting it turn her limbs to lead and trap her breath in frozen lungs, she reacted how Loki had trained her; she grabbed onto Odin's extended arm, using it to help swing her legs up, ensuring there was the maximum strength possible behind her kick as she slammed both her feet under Odin's chin in a powerful blow that snapped his head back. She then used both his grip and her weight against him, flipping herself over backwards so as to twist back the hand holding her, rotating Odin's wrist back in a way that wrists weren't meant to be bent, not even a god's, and he was forced to let go.

The moment her feet hit the ground, Hermione turned and ran, heading straight to the front door. When Muriel– Muninn tried to grab onto her, swooping down on dark wings with outstretched talons, Hermione let the rage of her betrayal lend strength to her magic, lashing out at the raven with a raw burst of power that sent her(?) crashing into the wall. Reaching the front door, Hermione hit the barrier between her and freedom with another burst of magic, followed up by a hard kick when it didn't budge.

When that did nothing either and it became obvious that the door wasn't going to open, Hermione spun around and dashed for the closest open doorway that wasn't back in the direction she'd come from.

She found herself in some kind of sitting room and instantly made for the window which overlooked the front yard, just large enough in size for her to get through. Her magic yanked the closest heavy object– a lamp– through the air and into her hands and she used both her momentum and a powerful swing to smash the stand of the lamp into the glass. It shattered in a hail of glass shards and Hermione didn't waste a moment in hoisting herself out the window and into the garden, not caring about how the broken glass tore up the skin of her palms.

As she staggered out onto the grass, she was horrified to, in a single blink, abruptly find herself face-to-face with Odin, who had apparently not bothered to chase her and instead teleported himself directly into the path of her flight to freedom.

Hermione didn't let herself hesitate for a moment before diving at him, instead of away, startling Odin enough that she was able to roll past him, letting her momentum carry her easily back up to her feet— she sparred several times a week against constructs created by a god; she was more than used to fighting an opponent so far out of her league that every moment of combat, every move she made, had to be instant, instinctive and flawless otherwise she'd lose (well, lose faster). She'd learned in those spars that she had to use every advantage she had, such as her slight size, and, even more importantly— perhaps most importantly of all— that when she was so hopelessly, horribly outmatched, the more unexpected her moves were, the longer she'd last.

Her body's ability to move on instinct meant that her mind had time to frantically search for a solution outside of frantic evasion— and she came up with one. Loki's failure to respond to the frantic, panicked continuous stream of prayers in her head could only mean that Odin had set up some sort of warding preventing her prayers from reaching her god. Hermione knew she couldn't run from a god forever, she was lucky to have taken Odin enough by surprise that she'd lasted as long as she had, so the best chance she had that she could think of was that surely the wards could only extend so far— if she could get beyond their reach, however far out they covered, then surely, surely Loki would be able to hear her prayers.

With her one plan being to run as far and fast as she could, Hermione had almost reached the edge of the property where the clipped green suburban lawn met the dark asphalt of the road when a sudden and unexpected weight hit her back with her with enough force to send her tumbling over, slamming into the road and skidding forwards, tearing up the skin of her palms and knees.
Hermione couldn't help but scream out, the shock, panic and sudden pain a sickening combination. Her scream then rose in pitch and hysteria as, when she turned her head to face her attacker, she was met with the hot, rancid stench of raw, stinking meat, a jaw of vicious, jagged teeth, long strings of drool and poisonous-yellow eyes.

It wasn't Odin, it wasn't even one of the ravens— it was a wolf.

Huginn and Muninn weren't the only animal companions Odin was known to have— Norse mythology also spoke of a pair of wolves; Geri and Freki, whose names meant "ravenous" and who were known to be "greedy for the corpses of those fallen in battle".

Frozen in terror at the sight of those vicious, hungry teeth so close to her face and vulnerable throat, Hermione only started struggling again when Odin appeared beside Geri or Freki, whichever one it was, reaching down for her and closing his hand around her neck. She kicked out and fought as he straightened back up, pulling her up off the ground as he did so, but she could feel something grinding painfully in her neck as his grip tightened and tightened and tightened, and the strength sapped from her limbs until she was hanging limp as a doll from his fist as the world turned first muddled and hazy and then black.

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Chapter End Notes

*I know that green-and-gold for Loki is a Marvel thing, not a Supernatural Gabriel/Loki thing or a Norse mythology Loki thing, but I like it and I've been using it in this story (as everyone has probably already noticed)

Translations:

bikkja = bitch

úsælligr child = unfortunate, joyless, wretched, ill-fated child

hrogn = spawn
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT:

As consciousness returned to her, the first thing Hermione became aware of was that she couldn’t move her arms or legs more than a few inches, bound as she was. She was stretched out over rock, a stone altar of sorts, with her shoulders trussed down, a single length of chain twisted around her body, under her armpits, winding round and round her hips then clamping her kneecaps to the stone before tying tight around her legs. Her body was trapped in a painful arch that had her back already aching, and when she tried to lift her head to look at how she was trapped, she abruptly learned there was a loop of the chain around her neck too, preventing her from lifting her head more than an inch or two.

Panic shot through her like lightning; it sparked all her senses alive and into overdrive and she yanked desperately at the chain binding her, her struggles only increasing when she realised just how useless her attempts to free herself were. The stone she was bound to was as unyielding as the chain; hard, solid and cold in a way that felt as if it was leeching all the warmth from her body. Her arms and lower legs were bare, her skirt tangled around her knees, and she was already shivering, her teeth chattering loudly– though that could also be the shock.

She tried to force herself to calm down before she ended up strangling herself with useless, panic-driven struggles, tried to observe her surroundings with a desperately grasped for cool detachment– she was inside a cave, dimly lit by a light source out of her range of vision, rocky walls covered in runes and sigils painted in what appeared to be blood– but any attempts at calm were destroyed by a single sound that pierced straight through her, right to her very soul, a sound like a swarm of wasps but far more terrifying; a long, drawn-out serpent’s hiss.

‘And then Skadi did carry a vile snake into the cave. She fastened it to a stalactite high up in the darkness so that its venom would drip straight on to Loki’s face. For all his wiles and wit, there was nothing Loki could do’

Barely able to breathe in her panic, Hermione looked up– and directly above her in her line of sight, winding its sinuous body down a stalactite, was a snake; just like it had been written in “The Binding of Loki”.

“No,” Hermione choked, her struggles renewing with desperation enough that the tightening of the loop of chain around her neck almost caused her to pass out. As the snake drew closer, swaying slightly as it stretched out from the end of the stalactite with the upper length of its body, those bared fangs with the clear, glistening beads of venom clinging to deadly curves getting closer and closer, Hermione felt so sick with fear she thought she might throw up and drown in her own sick.

She wasn’t prepared for the first drip of venom, didn’t even notice it falling with as close to an outright panic attack she’d found herself in, not until it landed on her cheek and she let out a shocked, agonised shriek of unbearable pain– the snake’s venom felt like fire and acid and her skin bubbled and burned where it touched.

She thrashed in her bindings, hysterical sobs tearing from her throat, her bare skin scraping roughly against where it was held tight to the stone she was bound to, bloodying the altar as it bruised and tore, but in her desperation Hermione didn’t care about the damage she was doing to herself, didn’t care about the smears of red she was leaving on the stone of the altar. LokiLokiLoki she prayed desperately, a strangled scream escaping her lips at the next drip of venom that fell, dripping onto her cheek and trickling a threatening, blistering trail towards her eye, like a terrible parody of a
reverse-tear. She had to nearly strangle herself, lifting her head as high as she could without blocking her breathing entirely, so that gravity didn’t drag the venom down into her eyes; it hurt enough on skin.

Her breathing was raspy, her screams strangled by the chain-links digging harshly into her throat, and tears leaked continuously from her eyes. It took a long time for her to compartmentalise the torture enough to calm down to the extent that she could gather her thoughts, the combination of agony, terror and panic all overwhelming in their own devastating ways, but it was the sound of a voice that dragged her from her emotional maelstrom and allowed her to focus her attention on the present.

“Thissss issss dull,” a sliding, sibilant voice muttered. It took Hermione just a moment to realise whose voice it was she’d just heard.

Loki had told her that certain animals with enough magic were capable of gaining a certain sentience, and he’d given her knowledge of what he’d called ‘Beast-tongue’ to communicate with Jörmungandr—apparently he’d never taken that knowledge away.

“Please,” she immediately started to beg the snake, “Please don’t hurt me, please stop, please, please, if it’s dull, why don’t you just leave? Please, just leave, please, please—!”

With the angle her head was at, the growing ache in her neck a terrifying reminder that she wouldn’t be able to hold the position forever, she couldn’t really see the snake, only part of the altar she was bound to in a horrible parody of how her god had, according to mythology, once been bound himself.

There was a brief, surprised pause—apparently the snake hadn’t been expecting for her to talk to it. But then it let out a long, menacing hiss. “Massster hasss given ordersss,” it told her, “and Massster’sss ordersss mussst be followed.”

“Fuck!” Hermione let herself swear, out loud. Despite the threat of hyperventilation she was struggling with, she could logically understand that panicking was useless so she forced herself to slow down her breathing. Panicking. Was. Useless—there was nobody coming, if she wanted to get out of this she had to rely on herself and only herself. Focusing on the feel of her lungs expanding and contracting with the occasional stutter as the poison dripped onto her face, Hermione chanted her mantra over and over in her head; *Stay calm. Stay collected. Stay one step ahead.*

Think, she ordered herself, *think*—where had Odin gone wrong? What mistakes had he made, and how could she exploit them?

Hermione might just be a child, a terrified child at that, while Odin was a god, but she was a whip-smart, wily and calculating terrified child who’d been halfway raised and all-the-way trained by a trickster—and that? That made all the difference. Odin might be a god and he might be more powerful then she could ever dream of being, but she knew the story of David and Goliath, of Arachne and Athena, of Odysseus and Cyclops—overwhelming odds could be overcome, gods and monsters could be outwitted.

Carefully, ignoring the way her body trembled each time a new drip of venom left a blistering, bubbling path along her skin as it trickled down her cheek, over the curve of her jawbone to drip onto her neck, Hermione tried to take in as much of her surroundings as she was able to in the dim light of the cave.

A solution came to her easily enough—the runes and sigils, the ones she could read, focused on trapping gods, and Hermione wasn’t Loki’s child, she wasn’t a god; it was a loophole, a mistake,
an unintentional, *exploitable* weakness in the warding— if she could escape the binding she was sure she could slip through the warding and get out of the cave. But how could she get free of the altar?

She needed to get out of the chain— how could she do that, though? How could she get free?

And then the answer came to her— *Vashti*.

A phoenix’s beak and claws were supposed to be able to cut through even diamond, and Hermione had faint scars on her shoulders, almost invisible silvery lines that were *proof* Vashti’s claws could cut through even cloth enchanted by a *god* against being ripped, torn, pierced, and so on. Surely, *surely*, there was a chance her claws could cut through the chain.

Vashti was also the only one with any sort of chance of finding her through the warding; as strong as the link was between her and her god, the link between her and Vashti was soul-deep— and Hermione, with sheer, bloody desperation and determination, forced down the overwhelming emotions she was drowning in, the awful pain she felt, the best she could in order to meditate—

(—*pretending like she wasn’t so afraid she wanted to just scream and scream, like she wasn’t in so much pain she wanted to throw up, like she wasn’t trapped and helpless and betrayed*—)

—because it was the only thing she could think to do, to locate the bond that existed between her and Vashti, forged with her magic and soul. Loki had originally taught her to meditate in order to find her magic and she’d continued to meditate when she was teaching herself the magic to keep her inner thoughts and emotions private from her god (if Loki ever asked to read her thoughts, she’d show them to him, of course she would, she’d *never* hide anything from him; he was her god, everything that was hers was his, but she just preferred not to just have everything out there to see, like a book discarded with its pages open on the floor), and Hermione used every single moment of practice she had to focus her mind despite the distractions.

Locating where her magic sat within her was easiest; it was something she’d done countless times, and the small golden sunshine that pulsed in time to her heartbeat was as familiar as it was comforting. Her link to her god was also surprisingly easy to locate and isolate; it didn’t have colour, not the way her magic did— it was the hot taste of blood on her tongue, the crackling of flames warming her skin, the sacrosanctity of sunlight streaming through stained glass, the warning hum of a thunderstorm in the air, the searing heat-flash of lightning; it was a mess of concepts, of confused poetry, of prayers and the ephemerality of worship, a chaotic tangle of impressions that was pure *Loki*.

It was also *wrong*; it felt bound, the same as she was, and smothered; it was as if their link was free-burning fire and the runes and sigils around her were the unforgiving weight of an ocean come bearing down to extinguish it. She wanted to scream, to bring the full might of her magic against the dousing pressure of the warding, but she knew it would be useless and instead she forced herself to turn her attention further inwards, to sink deeper and deeper into her own mind.

Her bond with Vashti, when she found it, was different from the link to her god; for one, there was no constraint there, no grinding weight, crushing it down. Two, it was... younger; softer, gentler, warm flames and pattering rain, golden sunlight streaming through green leaves, sweet songs and haunting melodies.

Hermione *reached* out, grasped onto the bond like the lifeline it was, and almost *sobbed* when she felt Vashti *reach back*.

Vashti was so innocent, so young and pure and bright and untouched by the world— and Hermione
was forced to bear witness to that innocence be horribly and irreversibly damaged by the little phoenix’s sheer fucking distress. Hermione didn’t even know if Vashti would manage to flame to her— Irish phoenixes, augureys, they didn’t travel by flame and Vashti, who was half augurey, had only managed puffs of smoke before— but she still pressed her need to Vashti, hating the horribly unfair pressure she was putting on her, alongside frantic apologies and reassurances of love-forgiveness-sorry-sorry-sorry—

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Gabriel thought he might break something— like London. Or possibly Europe. Or possibly the whole fucking Northern hemisphere.

Hermione was gone.

Hermione. Was. Gone.

It felt like the air had been taken from his lungs, like it had been stolen from him like she had been, leaving him dizzy even when he had no need for the oxygen; not as a being of grace and prayer and power— and rage.

His fingernails had shredded the palms of his meat-suit. Blood dripped from his fists to the ground but he ignored it, didn’t bother sparing even the split-second of concentration it would have taken to erase the damage like it had never been there, too focused on not levelling the continent he was currently standing on in his complete and utter fury.

He hadn’t been this angry since Odin, Frigg and Baldr had bound him to an altar and desecrated his family while he was helpless.

The day had started off ordinarily enough. Hermione had been in a bright mood as she’d given her daily morning prayers, lighting the candle of her altar, laying out sweets in offering and pricking her finger to leave a few drops of blood on the altar stones she’d created in honour of Jörmungandr and Váli to join her altar (she hadn’t created one for Fenris, she’d shyly explained when she’d shown them to him, anxiously looking for his approval, because he was currently still human).

If it had been anyone else at all she’d created the altar stones for, he’d have gone off into a jealous rage, but instead he just felt a fierce, fierce pride— in Hermione, for her obvious care and affection for his precious sons, and his boys, for making such a positive impression on Hermione.

Her morning prayers and offerings complete, Hermione had set off for school and he’d popped by the house a half hour later to fetch Vashti.

The young phoenix was about four and a half inches long now, from the tip of her golden beak to the ends of her green-threaded-with-gold tail-feathers, and weighed just over fifty grams. She was also spoiled rotten and when he’d arrived, she was sulking on her perch about Hermione not bringing her along to school. The moment she registered his presence, she’d turned her mournful eyes up at him, all wretchedly disconsolate and woe-the-feathery-fluff-ball-that-is-I.

“Oh don’t you go pulling that face on me now,” he’d scolded her and she’d sniffily turned her head away from him and refused to look in his direction until he offered up a handful of his best sugar mice in apology. She’d cheered up considerably after that, perching on his shoulder as he went about his day, dozing off at one point and nearly falling which had prompted him to relocate her to a hastily added hood of his jacket.

It was at a little past four, when Hermione had surely arrived back at the Beryne twins’ house, that
the calm, sleepy little phoenix suddenly jerked into full consciousness in a blast of feathers, smoke and panic.

The little chick started screeching, nothing at all harmonious about the sound; on the contrary, the drawn-out cry of the young phoenix felt a bit like it was flaying the skin off his vessel and Gabriel swore when he got slapped on the side of his face with a madly flapping wing.

Snatching up the young phoenix and holding her out in front of him, he frowned and demanded, “what the heck is the matter with you!?"

Vashti, of course, couldn’t answer, she was still too young, but like all living creatures, her mind was open enough for him to nudge his grace up enquiringly against– the natural defences she had in place as a magical being blocked him slightly but they were nowhere near strong enough to keep out a determined archangel; very little was, even when he was taking care to be gentle and delicate.

The connection Hermione and Vashti shared was soul-deep, their bond entirely different from the link between god and priestess that he shared with her– which explained why, unlike Vashti, none of the raw, soul-deep, overwhelming **fear-terror-betrayal-agony** that Hermione was feeling at this very moment had passed on to him.

Gabriel reacted to the revelation that something was deeply, horribly wrong with Hermione with the panic and haste it deserved; he immediately reached for the link between Hermione and himself, only to find a **barrier**– he couldn’t feel Hermione at all, she was blocked from him entirely and he hadn’t noticed until it was too late.

It took half a second to fly to the school, straight to the student files– Hugo and Muriel Beryne’s address was listed and he was outside it in less time then it took for his vessel’s heart to beat.

The house listed on the file was empty and useless, clearly uninhabited and not touched by pagan magic. Pushing down his panic and rage the best he could before he accidentally snapped up a thunderstorm or hurricane, or possibly set off an earthquake, Gabriel concentrated on releasing just enough of his grace to stretch out in search– a property warded against **Loki** would be hard to miss, in such an ordinary, mundane neighbourhood.

And he was right, it was hard to miss– the single-story house seemed pathetically ordinary, bar for the unmistakable **stink** of pagan magic; hidden sigils traced out in blood circled the property, sigils that kept **Loki** out, but did little against the weight of an archangel’s grace, burning out one by one, becoming visible again as they were reduced to blackened marks on grass and concrete alike.

Gabriel bared his teeth as he let out an animalistic snarl that was far from human and damaged his vessel’s vocal cords; his wings trembled with rage as he fought to keep his grace tightly reined in, knowing that the level of destruction it would mete out if he didn’t would rival Vesuvius, and finding Hermione would be much more difficult if he was fending off the Choirs of Heaven and two determined archangels at the same time.

Vashti, still on his shoulder, her claws now having pierced the skin of his vessel’s shoulder and sunk deep into the muscle there, was letting out horribly distressed sounds that grated unpleasantly against his entire being, had even his grace cringing away, but he didn’t have the heart to leave her– not when she was so terrified for her soul-bonded witch.

Gabriel couldn’t deny that he was terrified for Hermione too, not only because he’d just spotted fresh-looking smears of blood on the ground, blood that had nothing to do with magic or sigils, but because he’d never **not** recognise the feel to the magic in the air around them– Odin’s particular brand of power was one he’d never forget, not for the billions of years he’d live yet.
Odin had Hermione. He didn’t know how or why, but questions like that didn’t matter, not right now—Odin had Hermione, he had stolen her from him, and Gabriel intended on taking her back.

Vashti’s cries sounded more like a banshee’s wails at this point, and Gabriel was briefly reminded of her augurey heritage—and despite knowing that the cries of an augurey foretelling death was a bullshit superstition, a sick dread still settled over him, heavy as a funeral shroud.

Then—suddenly and without warning, in a wild burst of fire, the tiny phoenix disappeared, leaving nothing but dark trails of smoke in her wake.

And all Gabriel could do was swear loudly as the only link he had to Hermione literally vanished into thin air.

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In the cave, Hermione’s eyes snapped open as a cry echoed in her ears; the cry was haunting and melancholy in a way that vibrated against her bones, yet it had to be the sweetest sound she had ever heard. A ball of feathery-fluff collided with her face and Hermione couldn’t help her relieved, exhilarated laughter, which sounded suspiciously close to sobbing. Little Vashti let out frantic little croons, rubbing her feathery head against Hermione’s burned, blistered cheeks, as if trying to wipe away the tears and injuries, snapping her beak viciously at the chain, carving through it like it was butter, just as Hermione had predicted she would, and, abruptly, Hermione could actually breathe again as the links fell apart.

Such was her relief that her idea had actually worked, as well as her joy at the reunion, Hermione didn’t even remember the danger until too late. Without even a hiss of warning, the snake struck and a deadly pair of curved fangs like twin scythes sunk deep into the tiny green-golden phoenix, barely a month old with more fluffy down then actual feathers on her small body, pulling back lightning fast to strike twice more before Hermione could even really register what had happened.

“VASHTI!” she screamed and Vashti let out a weak squawk, her downy feathers bursting into flames. The snake had to pull back to avoid being burned, but it was too late. Hermione barely noticed how the chain was unravelling in response to her fierce struggles, the now-broken length of chain-links falling away and freeing her limbs, too focused on Vashti’s alarmed cries. Small, flapping wings sent embers leaping and flying everywhere as the fire appeared to be consuming the young phoenix until, with a final, fading cry as Vashti was reduced to nothing but a ball of fire, the flames disappeared as suddenly as they’d appeared, leaving behind only a pile of ash as evidence to their once-existence.

Hermione couldn’t find it within herself to feel any victory when she finally succeeded in untangling the chain so that she could sit up, only caring in that her hands were now free to scoop up the ashes, too horrified and aghast that Vashti had just paid with her life to free her. Except, before her stunned eyes, the pile of ashes Hermione had collected in her cupped palms shivered then collapsed to reveal beneath them a tiny, pink and mostly-bald but still alive newborn phoenix chick—Vashti had been reborn from the ashes.

“Oh thank Loki,” Hermione barely had the chance to choke out, before sudden movement in her peripheral had her awkwardly diving off the altar, narrowly missing her own encounter with the snake’s fangs as she hit the ground in a tangle of limbs and clattering of chain-links, stubbornly keeping her hands cupped around the ashes the newborn phoenix was curled in instead of reaching out to catch or brace herself, though she had the presence of mind to at least roll with the fall and let the momentum of the roll help carry her to her feet.

She needed her hands free, needed somewhere safe to put the fragile and helpless Vashti, and
Fortunately she actually had a good solution; like most of her clothes now, the short-sleeved blouse she was wearing was one that Loki had added a pocket to, a pocket positioned over her heart for Vashti to curl up in that was protected with magic to prevent the little phoenix from being crushed when she was inside it.

Once her hands were free, Hermione turned her focus to the snake— which wasn’t hard, considering the snake had lowered itself from the stalagmite down onto the altar and she was just now getting her first good look at how unnaturally large it was, easily over three meters long, thicker than a grown man’s thigh and terrifying.

But Hermione had within her a great, fierce rage; for Vashti and for herself, for the blistered, burned skin of her face and neck, and she met the glowing eyes of the snake without fear and told it, her voice harsh and ragged with emotion, “I’m going to make you pay!”

She might not be Loki’s child, but she was his priestess, the priestess of a trickster, and she believed in punishing wrongdoers, in delivering Just Desserts, and right now she fully intended on taking out her fury on the hides of everyone involved in this stupid plot, and make them regret it.
A/N: For the people who wanted a total BAMF Hermione, this chapter is dedicated to all of you <3

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*warning for violence, including against animals, that may be considered disturbing*

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE:

Ninety-nine percent of snakes wouldn't attack when faced with a human, Hermione had once read — they'd simply leave without intervention. The snake she was facing, however, was definitely from the one percent that had absolutely zilch intention of just going away. No, ‘going away’ looked to be the furthest thing from the snake's agenda, and while normally Hermione would be terrified by that, she was currently far too enraged— not that she let her anger make her stupid and rush forwards to attack without a plan.

No, instead, after taking a breath, Hermione reached out a hand to summon the smaller part of the broken length of chain that had been used to bind her, just a scant few minutes ago. The length of chain leaped eagerly to her hand and she closed her fist tightly around the metal, swiftly adjusting the chain to just a few feet in length dangling freely— snakes could dart several feet forwards very quickly to attack, and a weapon that gave her distance was her best bet for staying away from those deadly fangs. She'd suffered enough from the agonising venom.

Hermione didn't get any longer to plan, because the snake chose then to lunge forwards in attack, its fangs bared ready to strike. Hermione spun to the side, thrusting her free hand towards it to send it flying back with her magic, and its heavy body crashed back against the wall of the cave with enough force to seemingly stun it. Hermione took the opportunity to dart forwards as close as she dared, swinging the heavy chain with as much force as she could muster at the snake's head. The heavy metal links crashed directly on target, and the snake didn't move to react at all.

She wasn't stupid enough to approach it yet, however, and struck it several more times in the head with heavy blows of the chain, not daring to step any closer until she could see dark streaks of blood, and only then did she warily approach and use one of her shoes, with its steel-lined sole, to stomp several times on its head, crushing its skull under her heel.

On any other occasion, she'd feel guilty about the violence, but this snake had tortured her, it had killed Vashti (even though Vashti was technically immortal, she'd still died), and it had called Odin its Master— there were no regrets in her for her actions.

With the snake unquestionably dead, Hermione let out a shuddering breath, dropping the chain and lifting her hands to hover over her cheeks, not daring to touch the burned, blistered skin for fear of increasing the pain— her tears were agony enough.

She gave herself exactly one minute to have a hasty break-down before forcing herself to focus on escaping. Now that her vision wasn't so restricted, she could see where the walls of the cave seemed to narrow in, forming a sort of tunnel—the cave's exit, Hermione guessed.

Remembering the wolf that had attacked her, Hermione crouched down to pick back up the chain. As she did, however, her eyes drifted to the terrifying fangs of the snake, both still intact despite her best efforts to shatter the snake's skull. A dead snake could still envenomate a victim— even a
severed snake head had the ability to inject venom when touched, and the biting reflex could be activated for hours after death.

It would be, Hermione thought grimly, a gruesome but effective weapon—though lugging around over three meters of dead snake would definitely be inconvenient. She couldn't help her grimace as she realized she was going to have to actually decapitate the dead snake, and she didn't even have anything sharp to make it a clean decapitation either.

It wasn't a fun process—she had to break its neck with her hands, bending and twisting until she was certain there were no bones or ligaments attaching the neck of the snake to the rest of its body, and then kick that area until the skin started to tear. Next, she wrapped the chain around the neck where the bones were snapped and the scales were torn apart and put one foot on the head and the other on the body to brace herself as she pulled on the wrapped chains until she managed to sever the snake's head from its body.

She actually had to gag, leaning against the side of the cave, doubled over as her thankfully empty stomach churned violently. Her breathing was shuddery and most of her rage had drained away at this point, but her determination to survive, to escape, still burned just as hot.

Armed with one part of the broken chain in her left hand and the decapitated snake head in her right, Hermione grimly made her way to where the cave walls narrowed into a tunnel. It was very dimly lit, just light enough to pick out any incoming shapes (she hoped), and she could feel the magic of the wards washing over her, a discomfiting weight that caught and dragged at her like fish-hooks that never quite managed to get their barbs into her as she forced her way forwards—she'd been right, when she was studying what little of the runes and sigils she'd been able to see from the altar; they were designed for trapping gods, not humans.

She heard the approach of the wolves, of Geri and Freki, before she saw them. She could hear the slight thud and clatter of the paws against the rocky floor of the cave, the heavy sounds of their panting, and she abruptly regretted how quickly she'd been hurrying along the underground cave tunnel, as its walls had become increasingly narrower the further along she'd gotten. Where she was currently standing was only just wide enough for her to hold out her arms on each side without her fingers touching the walls, nowhere near enough space to properly swing around the chain.

Still, she knew better than to try and run, then to show her back to the hunting wolves again, and she steeled herself for the attack, shortening the chain so it was only a foot long and wrapping the excess around her forearm as makeshift armour—it would be good protection against attacking wolf teeth—before she crouched in preparation.

The first wolf that lunged at her had a shaggy, mud-brown coat that blended perfectly into the darkened cave-tunnel. It didn't hesitate for a second and neither did she, throwing herself to the ground, underneath its leap. Rolling to her feet, she immediately found herself throwing up the arm with the chain wrapped around it in defence from the second wolf, this one closer to sandy-yellow in colour then brown, whose vicious teeth snapped immediately shut over the chains.

The pressure of the wolf's jaw hurt, but its teeth didn't cut into her, the make-shift armour doing its job, and Hermione instantly took the opportunity to bring the snake's fangs down on the much-too-close neck of the wolf, making sure they were angled to pierce straight into its flesh.

The wolf immediately released her with a pained howl that was so loud in the narrow space that it hurt her ears, but Hermione didn't have time to feel triumphant as the snake's head was ripped from her hand when the wolf staggered back, and for the second time that day (or was it night now?) she was hit from behind by an attacking wolf, and sent crashing down hard to the ground.
Hermione twisted frantically in place as she fell, bringing the arm with the chain wrapped around it up between her and the teeth of the first wolf, the brown one, fending off those terrible jaws as she struggled to try and kick the vicious beast away off her, aiming with her steel-lined shoes for its fleshy stomach and genitals. Its breath stank of rotting, fetid meat, of corpses and death, and its poisonous yellow eyes gleamed with frightening intelligence and malevolence, terrifying her far more than the snake had managed.

"Just stop fighting already, welp!" it snarled at her, its words garbled by its grip on her, and Hermione, not allowing herself the time to be shocked by its speaking, bared her teeth at Odin's wolf, snarling back,

"Never!"

She tried using the powers Loki had taught her to force it back with a concentrated burst of magic, but the wolf appeared immune, her magic sliding straight off it like oil on water and instead hitting the side of the cave-tunnel, causing dirt and small bits of rock to fall down on them from the ceiling.

Desperate, Hermione tried to claw with her now-free right hand at its eyes, its ears, its nose, going for any vulnerabilities she could think of, but all those sensitive points had the misfortune to be located near those terribly vicious teeth— and before she could react, the wolf released its grip on her protected arm, instead twisting its head to bite down hard on her vulnerable, unprotected arm. The pain of bone being crushed between strong jaws warred with the agony of those vicious teeth tearing deep into her flesh. Hermione screamed, lashing out with her now free left arm, whipping the loose foot of chain into the face of the wolf, causing it to let go with a pained whine, dancing back as she aimed a second vicious blow at its face, getting as much momentum as she could behind the blow with the limited space she had to swing it.

She didn't dare try to move her injured arm as she brought her legs up and rolled over backwards, into a crouch then up to her feet. Grey blurred at the edges of her vision as pain warred with shock and Hermione kept wildly swinging the chain as she staggered backwards in an effort to keep the wolf off her, to try and give herself time to think up a plan of attack— only to literally bump into one, as she almost tripped over the sandy wolf where it was collapsed still on the floor of the cave-tunnel in apparent lifelessness—or at least unconsciousness—with the severed snake head still in its neck.

Still stumbling backwards, actually stepping over the sandy wolf to put it between her and the brown wolf, Hermione sacrificed the chain as her weapon, putting her bets on the poison in the dead snake's fangs being her best chance against the brown wolf, releasing the chain in order to snatch up the severed snake head with her only good hand as her right arm was now coated in a dripping crimson glove of blood, limp and useless at her side. Without her grip to hold it in place, the chain unravelled from her arm, falling to the floor of the cave with a clunking-clatter.

Hermione didn't have time to second guess her choice, not when the moment she stopped swinging the chain the brown wolf lunged for her. She had no armoured sleeve of chain to protect her from those dangerous teeth, instead she twisted in place and kicked, aiming for the side of wolf's head. The steel-lined sole of her shoe lent weight to her kick, forcing those teeth away from her and giving her time to dart forwards, into its space.

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She got the fangs of the snake hooked into the meat of the wolf's shoulder at the same time as it swung its head back around and snapped its jaws closed over her right thigh. She screamed again, the white-hot pain briefly turning her world grey than white, and Hermione found herself collapsed on her butt against the side of the cave when her vision cleared properly. The brown wolf's teeth
were no longer dug deep into her leg, instead it was collapsed on the ground a short distance away, twitching in apparent death throes.

Hot, wet blood had already soaked through her skirt and spread out underneath her in a pool. With her good hand, she pulled up the ruined material of her skirt to try and examine the wound, but she couldn't even see it properly under all the blood.

Not even trying to hold back her sobs, Hermione used the side of the cave to claw her way into a standing position. A tentative attempt to put any pressure on her leg almost had her collapse back to the ground and she panted harshly as she leaned heavily on the wall of the cave-tunnel, forcing herself to count her breaths, to compartmentalise the pain as best she could. She needed to keep moving, she couldn't stop, which meant she had no choice but to keep walking. And so she did. Every step on her left leg was a flare of agony that made her want to retch, but she forced herself to just keep moving forwards, reminding herself that the tunnel couldn't go on forever.

The sound of beating wings was her only warning that she hadn't faced her last foe in this cave. The dark feathers of the raven blended so well with the darkness of the cave that it was pure instinct alone that had Hermione duck in time to avoid the swoop of Odin's bird. The narrow cave-tunnel had very little room for the bird to manoeuvre, at least, giving Hermione time to brace herself against the rocky walls.

"How dare you defy Odin-King!" The raven shrieked in Old Norse, the harsh, cawed words echoing oddly in the enclosed space. The voice was nearly unrecognisable—nearly. It was Muriel, Hermione realised, before correcting herself—no, it was Muninn.

The betrayal burned. She had adored Muriel-Muninn, had trusted her. She'd considered Hugo a close friend too, but he had been quieter, had interacted less with her—Muriel-Muninn had been the one to truly initiate the "friendship" between the three of them, had been the one Hermione had secretly cared for more.

Prompted into recollection by her thoughts, a passage from the Poetic Edda drifted to the front of Hermione's mind, a passage where Odin had expressed his fears of Huginn and Muninn not returning to him from their daily flights;

"O'er Mithgarth Huginn and Muninn both
Each day set forth to fly;
For Huginn I fear lest he come not home,
But for Muninn my care is more"

The 'raven-god' cared for both his ravens, but according to the Poetic Edda he had a particular soft spot for Muninn that went above his care for Huginn (just as Hermione had, and she hated the thought of her and Odin having something in common with the burning fury of a hundred suns).

With that knowledge sharp and focused in her head, as Muriel-Muninn turned sharply in the air to swoop at her a second time, those talons like flashing blades outstretched threateningly, Hermione reacted with a viciousness that would have stunned her at any other time. The pain of the betrayal and the strength of the hate was so intense inside of her that even above the pain she felt, Hermione was seized by a vicious want, a need, to make Odin hurt the way she was hurting.

Recklessly uncaring of how those dangerous talons were tearing into her only good hand, cutting as deep as if she was clenching onto a handful of actual razor blades, Hermione seized Muninn by her outstretched clawed feet, holding stubbornly onto the struggling raven with an iron grip and then swinging so as to smash the bird's body into the stone inside of the cave. Muninn shrieked in pain, her wings flapping madly and uselessly, but then the wings were gone, the feathers too, and
Hermione found herself face-to-face with fourteen-year-old Muriel Beryne.

Hermione did the very first thing that came to mind in that moment—she punched the bitch in the face as hard as she could. And when Muriel-Muninn shrieked in pain and anger, fighting back with unsurprising ferocity and aiming straight for where Hermione was wounded and bleeding, Hermione didn't bother trying to hold herself up on her bad leg, instead she used her weight to knock the spy to the ground then used all her lessons on fighting someone bigger and stronger to get Muriel-Muninn into a pin. Then, still with that terrible rage-hate-fury burning like wildfire under her skin, she forced her left forearm down hard on Muriel-Muninn's throat, blocking her airway and choking her in an almost-mimicry of how Odin had choked her.

Hermione would never know how far she'd have gone, if she'd really have been able to hold Muriel-Muninn down under her and choke the girl she'd thought had been her friend to death if she'd had the chance to, and a part of her was almost relieved that she'd never find out—only almost, though, because being hit by a blast of pagan magic and sent crashing into the cave-tunnel wall by an enraged Odin put a swift and decisive end to her desperate escape attempt.

"HOW DARE YOU!" Odin was bellowing, his sheer rage a horrifying, terrifying thing as he stormed towards her. Hermione tried to get to her feet, but her left leg wouldn't obey her, nor would her right arm, and she couldn't even get her left hand under her to brace herself, the amount of blood gushing out of her palm honestly concerning.

As Odin approached her in his fury, Hermione was honestly convinced she was about to die right then and there and she closed her eyes, wanting to the last thing she saw to be something other than her murderer.

Only, instead of killing her, Odin seized her by her neck and started dragging her back along the cave-tunnel, to the actual cave where she'd been bound, throwing her bloodied, broken form on top of the altar, rolling her onto her back. Her head lolled down and she didn't have the strength to lift it.

"You will die on this altar, úsælligr child, burning in the flames of your monstrous father-god!" Odin snarled and Hermione shuddered as dread flooded her, a single line from the Ynglinga Saga stark and horrifying at the forefront of her mind; '—taking him by surprise, they burned him alive in his house and gave him to Odin as a sacrifice for a good year.'

Dying in fire was a horrifying thought and, as if he was reading her mind, or perhaps reading the fear in her eyes, Odin smiled viciously down at her with sharp teeth that reminded her vividly of his wolves. And then, without warning, he pushed a dagger into her stomach while around her the cave went up in flames, ones that were clearly made of magic, considering there was nothing in the cave that was particularly flammable.

Odin disappeared before she even managed to part her lips to release a hoarse scream. Pain was spreading in her entire midsection like a rush of scorching heat that rivaled the burning flames and Hermione had to fight to keep conscious as it felt as if an explosion had gone off inside her stomach, the new agony radiating up and down her entire body. If she'd been able to, she'd have curled into a tiny ball and screamed.

Odin hadn't bothered to bind her—apparently, he'd considered stabbing her to be enough to keep her in place as the deadly heat of the flames pressed closer. That was his mistake, and she was almost thankful that he was enough of a sadist that the dagger to her stomach wasn't a fatal blow, that he'd wanted her alive and conscious to burn to death in fire and that the flames were designed to build slow enough for her fear to build with them, because it still gave her a chance. The pain even felt almost as if it was starting to recede, or at least becoming something distant and
secondary compared to how her whole scalp felt as if it was covered in ice, so cold it numbed her head down to the base of her neck.

She brought her left hand up to the handle of the dagger, her shredded palm sliding wetly against it before she thought the better of pulling it out— that would only reduce whatever time she had left. Instead, she shifted her hand down to the altar and used it to brace herself, to help roll over onto her side. Everything burned, both white-hot and ice-cold, and the growing flames around her didn't help (at least if she died in those flames, she comforted herself, only a tad hysterically, Vashti would still live).

Her vision swirled, blurring in and out of focus, and when she tried to stand she fell to her knees instead, hunched forwards and coughing up blood. She truly considered just curling into a ball and waiting for the flames, she really did, but she was too stubborn to just die that way (no, she'd pull out the dagger and bleed out rather than burn to death) and Hermione forced herself to crawl forwards the best she could instead (and wasn't it better to stay down low, during a fire, anyway, to avoid excessive smoke inhalation?), dragging her left leg and right arm along the ground, doing her best not to focus on how the blade of the dagger shifting in her stomach with each movement was sending fresh lancets of pain through her.

She managed to reach the wall. She wasn't even sure how she managed it, but she did. Clawing herself up to an almost-standing position took nearly everything she had, but she needed to be upright to do the only thing left she could think of.

Her hand was already bloody from Muninn's talons, the skin of the palm shredded deep, probably deep enough to expose bone, and, blinking through the stinging of the smoke in her eyes, she used her blood to smear over the closest rune to her, painted as it was in dried blood, destroying it and then moving on to the next closest and then the next.

Her last, final hope, the only plan she had left, was with the aid of the fire destroy enough of the warding that Loki would be able to find her— Odin had been angry and stupid; the runes and sigils on the walls and ceiling of the cave that made up the warding were written in blood, the fire would swallow them up and ruin them.

Her last chance to survive this was enough of the warding being destroyed that her god would be able to find and save her before the fire swallowed her up to, and she couldn't just sit back and hope for the flames to do all the work for her, not when she could do her part too.

With how her entire focus was on remaining upright, on staying conscious through the pain and the unbearable building heat of the fire around her as she used her own blood to smear away the runes and sigils, Hermione didn't even notice that the tiny, reborn-newborn Vashti had left her pocket and determinedly clawed her way up to her shoulder until she heard a low, mournful cry over the loud crackling of the fire, one that shivered straight through her skin to her bones, then deeper.

*It is believed that the cry of an augurey foretells death,* Morgana's voice whispered to her, and, frozen, Hermione wondered if this was it.

Suddenly, and without warning, the ceiling of the cave split open above her, revealing a sky of grey-black clouds and jagged lightning that lit up the entire storm as thunder rattled the earth. A bubble of hysterical laughter escaped her lips along with a wet cough that tasted of blood as her brain supplied her with an excerpt of the *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* entry on augureys: *In the past, wizards associated the cry of the Augurey with death, and a few early wizards are believed to have succumbed to a heart attack upon being surprised by the wail of an unseen augurey. Later it was determined that, instead of foretelling death, the augurey's cry signalled an impending rain shower.*
Vashti hadn't been sensing her death, she'd been sensing the storm.

Hermione tilted her head up to face the rain violently sheeting down; in the brief handful of seconds she'd been exposed to the sky, the rain had already drenched her through, sluicing down her body. She couldn't feel the heat of the flames any longer, couldn't even really feel the pain.

She didn't notice her god until she was already in his arms. Hermione managed to smile blearily at him, even as her head lolled back against his chest. Her face was cold and thinking was becoming... difficult. Blurry. Her strength had now left her body entirely, but that was okay because she didn't need to support herself any longer, no, not now that her god was there to support her instead.

"I knew you'd save me," she said (or she thought she said). Loki's eyes were glowing a bright, brilliant, otherworldly gold in the dark of the storm, and the flashes of lightning made his face look bone-white.

"Hermione—" she thought he might have said, but the next flash of lightning turned the whole world white and Hermione knew no more.

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Chapter 30

CHAPTER THIRTY:

*warning for violence, which may be considered disturbing*

Gabriel went to Váli first, not because he was the most vicious of his sons (which he was), or because he knew his boy had grown a soft spot for Hermione since she'd started including him in her prayers and offerings (which he had), but because he knew Váli would never forgive him if he didn't.

His youngest son was stretched out on a bed alongside his lover when Gabriel appeared in their villa accompanied by a flash of lightning and echoing growl of thunder, the weather in Zakynthos, Greece, reacting to his current emotions. "Odin took Hermione," he told them both, voice harsh with rage, and Váli was on his feet in a heartbeat, eyes glowing bright gold and a truly vicious snarl to ripping through clenched teeth.

Eris, who had been sprawled casually on the slightly tangled silk sheets, immediately stood up too, her blue eyes flashing dangerously. The air shifted around her, Greek Amazonian armour shimmering into existence instead of her usual silk toga dress. The golden-plated steel was indecently crafted to mould against her every curve and the twin daggers held in her now-gauntleted hands looked as gorgeous and deadly as their mistress. "Right," Eris said, her honey-sweet voice somehow even more terrifying than the vicious expression on his son's face, "let's go make Odin regret every moment of his existence and rescue the little lamb while we're at it."

"Eris," his son said warningly, and the smile Eris turned on him was nothing short of deadly.

"Zeus," she said, "can kiss my perfectly shaped ass– you are mine, Váli, and I've been prepared for this day to come for centuries now."

Gabriel would be more touched by his son's partner breaking the unspoken rules of interfering with another pantheon's business if he wasn't so agitated that the earth was actually starting to tremble slightly, the tectonic plates over two and a half thousand kilometers beneath his feet shifting in response to his mood.

"Right," Váli said, turning back to face him, "how long has he had her?"

"I don't know," Gabriel admitted, his wings flaring out in frustration and fury. "After her school day, she planned to go home with two friends she'd made– Hugo and Muriel Beryne." He smiled bitterly at the god and goddess before him. "Beryne, of course, meaning raven." How could he have ever overlooked that?

"That fucking– he sent Huginn and Muninn to watch her!?" Váli snarled, his hands curling into claws at his sides as his teeth lengthened and sharpened, far more wolf than human.

"What time does her school finish?" Eris demanded sharply, keeping them both focused through their rage.

"About half past three," Gabriel told her. "Her phoenix didn't start panicking until about a quarter past four. By then, she was warded against me– I can't find her, and her prayers can't reach me."
"Fuck!" Váli started to pace, his prowling movements nothing short of predatory as he circled the room. "How do we find them? Is there anything you can do?" His son's golden eyes pinned him with an unspoken question—was there anything **Gabriel the Archangel** could do to find her?

"No," he said, his wings flexing furiously again. If Hermione prayed to him, to **Saint Gabriel**, he might be able to find her; Odin had warded her against pagans, and against Loki in particular, and enough of him was **Loki** that it was **fucking working**, but a prayer directed to Gabriel the Archangel might not be blocked by the warding— it depended on the type of warding Odin had used. Except, of course, Hermione would die before praying to an angel.

Gabriel had never made the mistake of thinking himself all powerful like Michael and Lucifer and even Raphael did, but he'd never felt quite this powerless before, not even when he'd been bound to that fucking altar— he was free and he had access to all of his power and grace, and yet he still couldn't find one little human child.

"Hermione might just be a young human, but she's a clever young human," Eris told them both. "You remember what she told you, *hara mou*[^1], during our dinner."

"It's hard to forget such a tiny little mortal speaking back to one of us," Váli snorted, which was true enough.

"She said she never once in her life just sat back and waited to be rescued, nor did she ever plan to, that she would always work to save herself." Eris said sharply.

"This is a bit different from a juvenile selkie, or one of the Unnamed fey," Gabriel snapped, "we're talking about her fighting a **god**, here."

Eris made a dismissive sound, shaking her head. "We're not talking about her fighting a god; she doesn't worship **Thor**, for **Zeus's** sake, she's the priestess of a **trickster**— and outsmarting a god is very different from fighting one."

"I do not doubt Hermione's strength or intelligence," Gabriel told Eris, voice as hard as his eyes, "but I have learned my lesson in underestimating what Odin is capable of."

"But you clearly have yet to learn not to underestimate your little lamb," Eris replied, not missing a beat.

Váli, clearly sensing the imminent danger, stepped between him and Eris before Gabriel lost his temper entirely at the upstart pagan goddess. "Whether we have faith in Hermione's ability to escape or not, waiting around doing nothing is a shit use of our time. **Faðir**, Eris and I will hunt down Baldr and find out if he's involved, you go talk to Fenris, Jörmungandr and Sleipnir; leaving them out of this would be a mistake, and they can help us hunt Odin down— he may have hidden Hermione away from us, after all, but he himself cannot hide forever, nor will his arrogance let him."

Gabriel was about to argue, to tell Váli he would go after Baldr himself while his son fetched his half-brothers, when Eris spoke up again. "Baldr and Kali are fucking." She stated bluntly, not sugar-coating the harsh truth slightly, or avoiding it, like Váli had apparently been.

At literally any other time, Gabriel would have been furious and felt betrayed by Kali, the one being who knew more than anyone else not involved in the entire fucked up ordeal about his **feelings** when it came to what Odin, Baldr, and Frigg had done to him and his family, but his fear and panic and guilt for Hermione managed to douse the burning wick of the chaotic Molotov cocktail of emotion Eris's revelation had ignited inside him before it could explode— and take out

[^1]: The Greek for "hara mou".
"Fine." He ground out, "get the answers from Baldr, I'll get your brothers." And then, before he could change his mind, he flew away.

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He sought out Sleipnir first.

Sleipnir was special. Not just because he was Gabriel's firstborn, his eldest child, but because he was the only one of his children that Gabriel had carried himself, mother instead of father. Sleipnir had spent twelve months, the usual term of gestation for a mare, carried inside an angel's vessel, twelve months in direct exposure to an archangel's grace; out of all of Gabriel's children, Sleipnir was the closest to a nephilim.

The pregnancy had been a nightmare as Gabriel had been terrified about how Sleipnir might turn out— he had fought the nephilim, after all, and they had been abnormal in size and growth, unnerving in their power and in possession of tempers that led to mass slaughter of the innocent and other unpleasant, homicidal-related incidents.

A nephilim was born of an angel and a human's coupling, the angel's grace more often than not reacting badly with the human's soul and twisting them both into something monstrous. Horses, unlike humans, did not have souls, and Sleipnir's father had been a stallion, but an angel and horse coupling was... likely not something He had foreseen (or maybe He had, who knew? Certainly not Gabriel). It probably would have been fine, Gabriel figured in hindsight, if he(or she, at the time) hadn't panicked the moment she felt an actual life come into existence inside her and realised that a baby had been conceived and immediately shed her mare-form in response to that panic, instantly shifting back to her True Form.

Now that had been a truly epic fuck-up. Where before the newly conceived foal, barely a fertilised egg, had sat snugly within the mare's uterus, in their True Form Gabriel lacked the necessary... parts. Such as, just to start, an actual fucking physical body. The tiny cell hadn't dissolved into ether, however; instead, it had been cradled in Gabriel's grace and Gabriel had known instantly there would be consequences for her lapse in judgment, even with how quickly she had returned to the mare form.

When Sleipnir had been born (after one of the longest years of the billions that Gabriel had existed), she'd been relieved to see her child was not a nephilim— despite already been mostly certain Sleipnir couldn't be one, not without the human soul involved, it was still reassuring.

However, Sleipnir also wasn't... not a nephilim, not exactly. Developing inside Gabriel, exposed to all his(her) grace, combined with those few scant seconds where Gabriel had been in their True Form, had left its mark. He wasn't a full-nephilim, but he did have certain characteristics of one—the eight legs, for example; nephilim had True Forms that were a lot more physical then angel True Form, and Sleipnir had the extra limbs and the unusual colouring, a coat so dark it seemed to swallow up the light, that was typical of a nephilim.

He'd also inherited a nephilim's tendency to naturally be very, very large, and had grown very, very quickly. Fortunately, he'd also inherited their ability to make themselves smaller— it was similar to how a nephilim had to learn how to control their True Forms, tucking away all the bits and pieces (tentacles, wings, claws, feathers, extra arms and legs, etc.) and how Sleipnir had had to learn to tuck away his extra legs and dull the intensity of his coat when around humans.

Unfortunately, he had also inherited the more violent instincts of the nephilim. Not quite to the
horrifyingly homicidal levels of a full nephilim, but enough so that Sleipnir tended to prefer living in quiet, unpopulated corners of the world, and that the "Hulk Smash" mug Gabriel had bought his son the first time he'd read a comic about the Incredible Hulk (this was during his research into Marvel following his annoyance at learning that they'd made Loki into a supervillain while turning Thor and Odin into the good guys) was actually almost spookily accurate– pissing Sleipnir off was NEVER a good idea.

Gabriel found Sleipnir on Assateague Island, a small but long island located off the United State's Delmarva peninsula, facing the Atlantic Ocean. Assateague Island was best known for its pristine beaches and herds of feral horses which Sleipnir and Arion (Demeter's son, also born horse-shaped and, like Sleipnir, far more fond of it then his human-shape) were currently living amongst.

Sleipnir, even disguised as a Chincoteague Pony (technically Chincoteague Ponies were still horses but due to only standing around thirteen hands high, they were far more commonly called "ponies"), looked handsome and fierce. There was muscle evident under his glossy, midnight-dark coat that the other Chincoteague Ponies lacked, and his bearing was regal.

Arion was with him, of course, because Arion was nearly always with him. A breathtakingly handsome stallion, Arion looked like he was made of starlight, his silver coat shining like liquid mercury and his movements as elegant as Sleipnir's were fierce.

Gabriel hadn't introduced Hermione to Sleipnir as he'd doubted his stallion-son would be interested in one little mortal girl, an attitude that had rubbed off on him from his time spent amongst the Greek pantheon (and yes, that was definitely meant to sound dirty, because it definitely was). He had no doubt, however, that Sleipnir would be very interested in fighting Odin– one very quick, easy and absolutely fool-proof way to piss Sleipnir off was to just whisper the name 'Odin' within a hundred miles of where he was; it was a bit like hitting a berserker button (Odin had wanted to use Sleipnir as his warhorse for a fucking good reason, and it was because Sleipnir could be fucking terrifying).

"Faðir?" Sleipnir asked, surprised, as he approached his son. "What are you doing here? It's been decades since we last spoke."

"We have a problem," Gabriel told Sleipnir grimly, ignoring the way Arion pranced slightly in nervousness— Arion was the embodiment of 'lover, not a fighter', which was the exact bloody opposite of his sister, Persephone. Still, if Arion was what Sleipnir needed in order not to "Hulk Smash" the world, then Gabriel was glad for the other god.

"A problem? That sounds ominous," Sleipnir said warily, and if a horse could frown, Sleipnir would definitely be frowning.

"I have a new priestess, a young girl I took under my wing," Gabriel briefly explained, not having time to get into the details. "Earlier today, Odin took her— that fucker is a walking dead man."

Well, walking dead god.

Sleipnir's nostrils flared dangerously, his ears flattening back against his neck and his tail thrashing as he pulled his lips back to bare his teeth and stamped his front hoof down hard enough to cause the ground to crack and crumble. "Finally! I will crush the bones of that vámr** beneath my hooves! I will rend the flesh from his bones and leave his innards to the crows!"

Despite his dark mood, Gabriel couldn't help but grin viciously back at his son— Odin was going to regret ever breaking the uneasy ceasefire between them, Gabriel and his children would ensure it.
Having sent Sleipnir to find and provide back-up to Eris and Váli for their conversation with Baldr, Gabriel's next move was to take a side trip to Helheim to visit his daughter. Hel, in her own way, was just as complicated as Sleipnir—maybe even more so, though for quite different reasons.

The fact that time in Hell moved faster was a commonly known one. The fact that it was Lucifer's fault wasn't. The four archangels, they'd been around since before the cosmos were more than a twinkle in their Father's eye. A mere couple of thousands of years locked in a Cage were barely a blink of an eye for beings so old—that's why their Father had had to ensure that time moved faster in the Cage, to lengthen Lucifer's time out punishment, and his handiwork had... well, leaked from the Cage and into Hell. It was probably intentional on their Father's part, though Gabriel was aware there was a difference between an all-seeing God and an all-knowing God, and his Father had only ever claimed to be all-seeing.

But going back to the time in Hell issue, the closer to the Cage, the faster time moved. Helheim, thankfully, wasn't located close enough to the Cage to turn minutes into years, that was much deeper down, but a week in Earth-time was equivalent to a year in Helheim-time, which meant that while her brothers and Gabriel had been separated from each other for around a hundred years, she'd been isolated from them all for over five thousand years.

It was part of why she'd taken Death's offer, despite what the Neutrality would mean—she'd been barely a century old when Odin had trapped her in Hell; she never forgot her love for her family, but it was a much more damaged, distant thing than it was in the case of her siblings, the pain faded by time. While that upset Gabriel, he was almost relieved too—life as one of Death's Hands would be far crueler if she still had a strong attachment to her family. Her emotional distance saved her from a good deal of heartbreak.

Gabriel found his daughter in her castle; after taking over the Old Norse division of Hell, Hel had transformed it according to her wishes and as he wandered through the opulent halls of her grand home, he couldn't be more proud of his youngest daughter.

She was in her throne room, and despite everything Gabriel couldn't help his slight smile as he laid eyes on her. Hel was as tall and elegant as her mother, her right side glowing and fair with tumbling waves of long crimson hair, warm-tanned skin and her eye a bright honey-mead in colour. Her left side, however, was a very different matter, the hair wispy, brittle and lifeless, the eye white and the skin around it gone to reveal bone and muscle, all rotted and dead.

Hell was no place for the living; her millennia in Hell had caused his daughter's body to start rotting until Death, the bastard, had taken advantage of her desperation (and yet, despite that, Gabriel was still thankful for the asshole for saving her from an even worse fate). Gabriel still considered her one of the most beautiful women in existence, it was just a different sort of beauty, the type most wouldn't, couldn't, appreciate.

"Faðir," she quietly greeted him, rising from her throne to stand before him. "I believe you came here for this."

From the deep pocket of the dark grey hooded cloak she wore over a green dress, a cloak that resembled shadows more than cloth, hardly seeming tangible enough to contain anything within it, Hel drew a double-edged broadsword. She held the great, heavy sword with ease, despite the apparent thinness of her wrist, before handing it to him. As Gabriel closed his hand around the hilt, he could feel the wild hum of power under the palm of his vessel; once, this very sword had been used to gag Fenris, now his son used it to contain his godhood while he lived a mortal lifespan, leaving it for safekeeping in the hands of his sister for her to return to him upon his mortal death.

"Thank you," Gabriel told Hel, who looked at him with a soft sadness.
"I am sorry I cannot help, faðir," she told him, and he gently brushed a wing against her. "It's not your fault, little dove," he told her, the use of the old nickname making her smile slightly. "All I ask is that if--" he paused, breaking off mid-sentence, unable to make himself give voice to Hermione's possible (probable) fate. "If your Hermione meets her end during this ordeal, I will escort her to Heaven myself," Hel promised him gently, not needing him to explain. "Now go, faðir; I wish you the very best of luck, and I wish your young priestess the very best of strength."

"Thank you," Gabriel told her, before spreading his wings and flying from Hell, straight to Fenris's house.

"Fucking hell, what's wrong now?" Fenris groaned when Gabriel abruptly appeared before him, where he was seated comfortably on a reclining armchair. Then Fenris saw the sword, and his gaze snapped to Gabriel's face where whatever it was he saw there had him turn paler than snow. "Odin took Hermione," was all Gabriel had to say to turn the wrinkled, liver-spotted aged face before him hard with resolve. Fenris stood and reached for the sword, not even hesitating before driving the blade into his chest. Fenris choked wetly for a handful of seconds, blood bubbling up between pain-parted lips, and then power swelled in the room as he was restored to his natural form.

Practically the stereotype of a Viking made flesh, Fenris was over six and a half feet of scarred muscle, long crimson hair and gleaming, inhuman golden eyes. As he bared teeth turned sharp, vicious and distinctly wolfish in a wide, wild grin, it was abundantly clear he wasn't Fenris Lupin the kindly old grandfather any longer; no, before Gabriel now stood Fenrisúlfr, the Vánagandr.

"We'll find her," Fenris, Fenrisúlfr, promised, his words a deep snarl that rumbled from his broad, bare chest, modesty barely preserved by his leather armour. "And we'll tear everyone involved to shreds."

"Go find Váli and Sleipnir, they should be together," Gabriel instructed, with a brief nod of acknowledgment of his son's promise, then he took flight once more, this time heading to his last son.

Jörmungandr, much like his brothers, was visibly horrified at learning what had happened to Hermione. Like Arion, Jöry was definitely the 'lover not fighter' type, but unlike Arion, his rage was just as dangerous as the rage of his brothers.

Whether or not Odin murdered Hermione, Gabriel and his children would ensure the Norse God King met his end.

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"Baldr knew nothing," Váli reported when Gabriel and Jörmungandr met him, Eris, Sleipnir, and Fenrisúlfr at Gabriel's London property. "You're sure?" Gabriel pressed and Váli grinned, his sharp white teeth stained red. "Very sure. Thor, however, was much chattier— emphasis on the 'was'. He told us Odin's been gathering his followers to one of his old courts, high up north."

"Which one?" Gabriel pressed, impatient, and Váli's smile widened, inhumanly so.
"The very first of them all—Ásgarðr."

"Right," Gabriel said grimly, "let's go."

Ásgarðr was the oldest hall of the Norse gods. Though misremembered in human mythology as a realm, it was actually the first of Odin's courts, the throne where he had once ruled over the Norse pantheon. It was located in one of Earth's wild, lost places where no human had ever set foot; a great temple of gold at the foot of a large, open field surrounded by ancient forest.

As he, his sons and Eris appeared on the outskirts of Ásgarðr, Gabriel noted with disgust the weak wards surrounding it, barely worth the blood that had been spilled to create them. Odin clearly hadn't intended to hide Ásgarðr from him, or to hide from sight those waiting before the great golden temple; pale, milling shades, dark-coated horses with their huge, hideous riders, baying jet-black hounds and, above the temple, female warriors with great feathered wings and spears in their hands.

"The einherjar," murmured Fenrisúlfr. "And Odens jakt and the valkyrja. They're all waiting."

Odin's undead warriors, his Wild Hunt, and his valkyries; the King of the Norse Gods had clearly been planning this for some time, to have gathered them all in one place.

"This is a battle already lost," Eris said uneasily, twirling her daggers, over and over, so they were twin blurs of silver and gold in her gauntlet-clad hands. "We are strong, but we are not an army."

"You aren't," Gabriel agreed, his grace blazing inside him, "but I am."

Eris had a brief moment to look confused before he pressed his palm to her skull and, before she could react, she fell limp into Váli’s waiting arms, unconscious. His son hesitated a moment then vanished, reappearing again moments later with empty arms.

"Are you sure about this, faðir?" Sleipnir asked gravely.

"Oh yes," Gabriel said grimly. "Don't worry, I won't leave anyone alive to spread the word of what will happen here today."

He could almost hear the Horn in his ears as he brought down Ásgarðr's wards with a crash like thunder; the valkyries, the Wild Hunt and the undead Viking warriors whose souls had been claimed by Odin were all prepared for battle, but Gabriel knew it wasn't going to be a battle; it was going to be a massacre.

There were thirty-nine valkyries in total and as they were the most powerful of Odin's warriors, they had to be the first to go. Being the only ones airborne made them easy targets for him and Gabriel's blade ripped through Odin's warrior host as he flew around them, moving too quickly for the valkyries to follow. Below him, he could hear the roars of Váli and Jörmungandr's rumbling growl as his sons faced off against the einherjar and Wild Hunt.

His vessel was splattered with blood as he used his wings as weapons alongside his blade, smashing open skulls with hard blows or crushing the valkyries between them. "Who are you!?" Herfjötur, one of the valkyrja he vaguely remembered serving him mead once, howled in fury as she drove her god-killing spear directly into his vessel's heart and he didn't even flinch. "You are not Loki-god, foul monster— who are you!? What are you!?!"

Gabriel seized her by the throat, dragging her close; "I'm fire and brimstone, bitch," he told her viciously, before tearing her head from her shoulders and letting her blood rain down on the
battlefield below.

Thunder rumbled, the heavy, dark clouds of a storm gathering around them and with a sweep of his hand Gabriel directed jagged streaks of lightning towards the few remaining valkyries, their screams quickly snatched up by the wind as their burnt corpses fell heavily to the ground.

Wings tucked in tight, Gabriel followed them down in a tight spiral, landing lightly on the battlefield. He observed the fighting before him for a moment, watched how Váli, Fenrisúlf, Jörmungandr and Sleipnir tore through Odin's army, before he transported his sons back out of range with another casual wave of his hand. And then he set the battlefield on fire; hungry, roaring, grace-enhanced flames that tore through the undead and the Hunt, their blistering heat burning hot enough to cook flesh from over three feet away.

Gabriel walked, untouched, through the flames, his blade and wings ending anything that still moved, stretching out his senses to ensure that he was the only living thing left as he carved a path through the field of slaughter, right up the grand entrance of the temple, to Odin's front door, which he sent crashing open.

He was expecting Odin to be there, waiting.

He wasn't.

The fortress was empty. Odin wasn't there. Hermione had never been there.

Gabriel's rage flared and the fortress burned.

::

Váli was laughing, cackling like a hyena as his body twitched with battle-adrenaline. The wolf and horse-shaped Fenrisúlf and Sleipnir were similarly hyped up with energy, prowling and pacing about, but Jörmungandr was much less enthused than his brothers.

"Well that was messy," he muttered, before peering worriedly over at Gabriel. Gabriel had transported them all back to England, in the aftermath of the battle, finally having regained enough of his senses to take note of the attention the whole bloody mess had drawn, and not just from the pagans— the thunderstorm, he'd admit, was a bit much, and suspicious too considering that weather was supposed to be an act of God. Thor's very recent death at Váli's hands, however, would convince most that the Thunder god had fought at Ásgarðr, and was responsible for the thunderstorm— and considering that Odin's armies had been reduced to ash, nobody would know that Thor's body was absent from the carnage.

Still, 'messy' was an understatement, if anything. It had been a 'battle' in only the loosest definition of the word— slaughter, massacre, carnage, butchery, annihilation, destruction; any of those would be better descriptors for what had occurred at Ásgarðr, but just as Gabriel had intended there were no survivors outside of his sons to spread word of what had happened, and the flames had destroyed all evidence.

"'Messy'," Váli repeated mockingly, his thoughts apparently travelling a similar path to Gabriel's own. "Seriously, Jör? 'Messy'? More like— 'Upon the wicked he shall rain fire and brimstone and horrible tempest'!"

"You just horribly misquoted that," Jöry retorted huffily, glaring at his brother before turning back to Gabriel, concern apparently winning out over annoyance. "Faðir, are you alright? You still have a spear in your chest."
"No," Gabriel said through gritted teeth as he yanked the spear out of his body, ignoring the rush of blood that spilled from him before he healed his vessel. "No, I am not alright. I lost control, and it didn't even result in finding Hermione or killing Odin."

"Well," Jöry said gently, sympathy evident in his solemn eyes, "it is how they say, isn't it? Love, it brings out the best and worst of us, makes us both gods and monsters."

Gabriel closed his eyes, not wanting his sons to see there the anguish he felt. Grief-stained rage ate at him, ate at his very grace as he choked on the bitter taste of his own failure.

"Faðir! You must not give up!" Jöry grabbed his arm, shook it until Gabriel had opened his eyes again, and met his son's own. "She is not lost to you yet!" His recluse son told him fiercely. "Have faith in her, as she has faith in you! You must not give up; not on your priestess, and not on yourself!"

Gabriel took a deep, unneeded breath and nodded. "You're right." He murmured, looking up at the sky, at the stars there. "I must have faith."

He hadn't prayed to his Father in a long, long time, had forgotten a long, long time ago how to ask Him for help, not after the War and His abandonment. But... he did have faith. His faith was a ragged thing, something he'd lost before, had nearly lost again in the wake of the World Wars, but it was there.

'Father,' he prayed, 'let her live. Let me find her. Please.'

And then, bringing with it an explosion of emotion so intense it nearly knocked him out of his vessel, Hermione's link to him blazed back to life.

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Chapter End Notes

* hara mou (Χαρά μου) = my joy/pleasure (term of endearment)

**vámr = loathsome person

***Odin's Army:
Einhirjar = those who have died in battle and are brought to Valhalla, where they prepare daily for the events of Ragnarök where they will advance for an immense battle
Odens jakt = the hunt of Odin (name of the Wild Hunt led by Odin)
Valkyrja = valkyries are referred to in Norse mythology as nǫnnor Herians; 'the ladies of War Lord'; in other words, the ladies of Odin
It only took a mere moment of concentration for Gabriel to transport his sons and himself to the bright beacon of Hermione’s presence—and when he recognised the new location, recognised the cliffs above his old prison, all his previous convictions of subtly and reigning himself in vanished in an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Lightning split the sky as far as the naked eye could see as dark, heavy clouds gathered and thickened. The wind howled as the skies opened, rain lashing down, and another crash of thunder heralded the earth splitting beneath his feet, revealing the cave he knew was below.

Flames, enchanted flames, rose up to greet the open sky, but Gabriel gave them no attention, too focused on the source of the constant prayers streaming to him. Hermione’s skin was waxy white, bruised, and soaked with wet crimson, her clothes torn and bloody, her red, blistered face was drawn tight with pain and terror—and there was a fucking dagger in her stomach.

Gabriel had her in his arms in less time than it took to blink; he hadn’t been this furious since his son had been murdered, or before that since Lucifer had turned their brothers and sisters against each other and Michael had cast him into the Cage. It was the sort of terrible, terrible rage that had the potential to bring about untold destruction on a scale Earth hadn’t seen since the Great Biblical Floods. Already, the ground around him was beginning to shake apart as the storm brought with it lashing rain, screaming winds, crashing thunder and burning lightning.

Hermione’s eyes, glazed with agony, managed to meet his and her blood-flecked lips curled into a small, heartbreaking smile, the sudden softness on her face such a juxtaposition to the violence painted over her body. “I knew you’d save me,” she murmured, her eyelids drifting shut.

“Hermione, keep talking to me!” He immediately demanded, but the little girl was still as death in his arms, her heart barely beating as her battered, smoke-scorched lungs struggled to draw breath. Her soul, her beautiful, vibrant, kittenish soul, was unfolding from her being, barely attached by gossamer-like threads (she was closer to death then she’d been even when he found her mostly-drowned, those scant few years ago).

“Fādīr,” Jörmungandr rested a scaly hand on his, golden eyes solemn and otherworldly, “take her from this place. Heal her. You are the only one who can.”

“Odin—” he started to say, but Jörmungandr’s grip tightened.

“Trust us.” He said firmly. “Save her. And go, before the angels arrive—this storm is not inconspicuous.”

Faintly, Gabriel could feel Odin’s foul presence, could practically taste his blood-drenched power, could swear he even heard the god-king bellowing his name (could definitely hear the Choirs in his
head, could hear Zachariah giving orders, assembling a garrison to investigate the massive disturbance—

But Hermione came first.

“Try to stop your brothers doing anything too stupid,” he told Jörmungandr, before spreading his wings through the storm, through the swirling, overwhelming power an archangel’s wrath had summoned, and flying—not back to London, no, but closer, much closer, in the same country even, to the wild forests where Loki’s altar had remained hidden and untouched for centuries, the pale stone still stained with old blood and brimming with the heady power of sacrifice.

He laid Hermione’s deathly still form over the altar, gently but swiftly untangling the tiny Vashti from her bloodied curls and using a swirl of power to carry the reborn phoenix to one of the closest trees, leaving her perched on an overhanging branch as his attention focused on Hermione.

Her injuries were terrible, painful things—broken bones, bloody, blistering burns, torn open wounds and lungs scorched black with smoke—but only one of them was so immediately fatal, and that was the dagger. It wasn’t an ordinary dagger either, he could feel Odin’s foul power in it, could feel the god-king’s pagan magic fighting him as he swiftly drew the blade from her body and pressed his palm over the wound, over the fresh hot, pulsing blood. But he, Loki, had laid claim over this mortal first, it was his power that was bonded so deeply into her very soul as to be inseparable, and with the aid of the old, wild power soaked deep into the altar and the righteous fury of an archangel, he burned Odin’s foul magic away, claiming back the stolen sacrifice and sealing the wound with a crackle of power that rivalled a lightning strike in heat and intensity, filling the whole clearing with the burning scent of thunderstorms.

His grace dealt with the rest of the injuries, gently flowing through her body, healing her lungs, knitting back together the torn blood vessels and flesh and splintered bones. The acid-like burns on her face nearly had him snapping another thunderstorm into existence, but he managed to reign himself in. Just. He could already hear the uneasiness of the Choir, the reports of the garrison that pagan infighting was responsible for the disturbance—and his grace went cold for the umpteenth time since Hermione had been taken as fucking Zachariah, the upstart fledge, gave an order for all the pagans involved to be eradicated, as they had clearly grown far too powerful ‘then could be reasonably allowed’.

He left Hermione unconscious but stable on the hidden altar with Vashti standing vigil, cloaking himself in Loki’s power, burying his grace deep within himself and folding his wings into a plane not visible to even his brethren before using pagan magic to teleport back to the cave, to his sons and Odin.

The fighting was brutal, Odin defending himself viciously as Sleipnir, Váli, Jörmungandr and Fenrisulfur attacked him with all their combined strength, the god-king’s sword clashing with Fenrisulfur’s claws and Sleipnir’s hooves while Jörmungandr shielded his brothers from the magic lashing out and Váli took every opening he could to wound Odin. Foul insults spewed from Odin’s mouth as he fought them, but with just a glance it was abruptly clear to Gabriel that the passing time had not been kind to Odin. He was far from the god powerful enough to (however unknowingly) trap an archangel, even briefly; dwindling belief in the old gods had hurt him in a way that it hadn’t touched Gabriel, a way that his sons had been spared due to their status as lesser gods who’d never been worshipped even back a thousand years and more ago.

If it hadn’t been for the oncoming threat, Gabriel would have happily let his children tear Odin to pieces—would have joined in, even. As it was, they were on a time limit and Gabriel only took a half-second to feed Odin his own dagger, the “Odin-blessed” one he’d used to stab Hermione,
before sending his sons away, using Loki’s powers to banish them to the relative safety of their sister’s pocket of Hell then teleport himself back to Hermione.

Mere moments later, he could feel the intensity of a garrison’s combined burst of grace from across the country as the angels followed Zachariah’s orders smote every living being in the immediate vicinity of his old prison— the humans would probably record it as a particularly intense lightning strike, but Gabriel knew better. At least the large-scale smiting would hide any remnants of his own grace lingering in the thunderstorm, he belatedly attempted comforted himself, shaken by how close he’d been to both losing his sons and to being discovered by his brethren— and all for one little human child.

...and he’d do it again, too. Maybe he wouldn’t involve his sons, but he’d risk the Hosts of Heaven discovering he was alive and hiding as a pagan, risk his older siblings dragging him back, all to keep that beautiful little soul and those brilliant, beaming smiles that shone bright enough to rival the sun safe.

“What a fucking day,” he sighed to Hermione’s unconscious form and Vashti, tiny, half-bald, reborn Vashti, let out a sympathetic squeak of agreement, blinking at him with large, solemn eyes.

::

As he held Hermione’s still-unconscious form in his arms, Vashti nesting all tangled up in her hair once again, Gabriel briefly debated what to do with her, having no intention of either bringing her to Hell with him to fetch his sons, or leaving her alone somewhere— and he had even less intention of returning her to London yet, to her clueless, neglectful parents. He ended up deciding to take her to his grandchild, the one currently living a human life— after all, “human” or not, wherever Sköll was, Hati would never be far and he needed Hati and Sköll to be aware of what had happened for the sake of both their safety.

He was going to need them to take precautions in case the Norse pantheon saw Odin’s death as a sign to start their stupid Ragnarök— which would see both his grandchildren as targets. Also, he was pretty sure Fenris mentioned Sköll’s human wife was (maybe?) a nurse, and he wouldn’t mind having someone with a medical degree watching over Hermione in his absence as he fetched his sons from Hell and then went to sort out the mess that had been created.

Sköll and his human wife, Astrid, lived in Henningsvær, a Norwegian fishing village spread over several tiny islands in the Lofoten archipelago. With a population of less then five hundred, it was a beautiful village, filled with traditional Norwegian houses painted in either bright colors or startling white that almost looked like they’d been dropped into the ocean. Their house, one of the largest, was painted a bright, happy orange, like a sunset.

Sköll looked a lot like his father— six and a half feet of thick muscle built over strong bones and long, dark red hair; his eyes, just as golden as all of Gabriel’s descendants, looked curious at Gabriel’s sudden presence at his doorstep. Gabriel really wasn’t surprised to see Hati also present; rumours must already be racing about following the huge fight at Ásgardr, not to mention the unexpected presence of the spooked angels on Earth, and even if he hadn’t been currently mortal, and therefore vulnerable, the fiercely protective Hati would want to be close by to him.

Sköll reminded him of Fenris, but Hati reminded Gabriel intensely of Angrboða— his grandchild was just as fierce, passionate, violent, and bloodthirsty as his once-wife. Gender was a fluid concept for Hati, not a stationary state of being; their inheritance of a trickster’s skill in shapeshifting meant they were sometimes male-shaped, sometimes female-shaped, sometimes both, or neither, or something far more animalistic, not human-shaped at all. While their masculine form resembled their twin’s, their more feminine form— the one they were currently wearing— resembled
Angrboða a great deal physically, the form that of a tall, muscular woman with reddish hair the colour of dried blood and golden eyes that contained a very wolflike gleam.

“Oh aði*,” Hati purred as they slid next to their brother in the open doorway, voice husky and smile all bite and teeth and predator, “there are rumours going around that you, my faðir and my frendur [uncles] finally faced Odin-king in battle, but surely you’d know better then to do that without us?”

If Gabriel didn’t know for a fact that gods didn’t have souls, he’d think Hati was a reincarnation of Angrboða, terrifyingly so.

“It’s a long story,” he said, ignoring how Stöll stiffened with badly suppressed anger and Hati’s eyes turned bright with rage, instead lifting Hermione slightly higher to draw their attention to her.

“I need to go get your faðir and frendur, will you look after her while I do?”

“Is she the one faðir told us about, then?” Stöll asked, a bit of curiosity peeking out through the anger. “Your new little priestess?”

“Odin took her from me,” Gabriel explained with a dark snarl and even darker anger. “I refused to let him hurt one of mine ever again– he brought the end the ceasefire onto himself!”

“You should have brought us!” Hati snarled back, eyes flashing as their power surged and roiled, teeth elongating in their mouth to something far more canid.

“Your inclusion, or lack of, was your faðir’s prerogative, not mine,” Gabriel felt absolutely no shame in throwing his son under the bus (or in the path of the child Fenris had named “One Who Hates” in a drama queen-esque fit of pique; he had no idea which goddess the mother was– he privately suspected Inanna, Fenris could definitely be spiteful and petty like that– but he’d love to demand why the hell she’d ever allowed the moping emo idiot to have his way. It was difficult to believe Fenrir’s choice of wolf pun names were actually an improvement, but dear Father they were).

Hati and Sköll both narrowed their eyes at him, pinning with with literal twin glares before seeming to accept his excuse. “Alright then,” Hati purred, the glint in their eyes nothing short of menacing. “We’ll take care of the priestess while you’re gone to fetch daddy dearest.”

“If you’ve got any protective runes around the house, now’s the time to activate them– and Sköll, you and your wife should call in sick to any jobs you might have for a few days,” Gabriel warned. “I don’t know what the situation is right now, but the power vacuum left by Odin’s death is going to cause some significant unrest.”

Sköll paled slightly, losing some of his anger as he was apparently reminded of his current vulnerable status. “You think my Astrid could be in danger?” He asked urgently.

“I know that I didn’t think Hermione would be in danger, and I was wrong,” Gabriel said grimly. “I’m not willing to make any more assumptions.”

“I’ll protect Sköll, Astrid and your little priestess,” Hati promised. “There are wards around the property we’ll activate that will keep anyone who doesn’t share our blood out.”

“Good,” Gabriel said grimly, holding out Hermione for Sköll to gently accept into his own arms. “I’ll be back.”

“Oh, and aði?” Hati said, prowling forwards slightly, eyes and smile too sharp by far. “Why don’t you bring faðir back here? We should all be together, after all, in these dangerous times. And I’d
like to have... words with him.”

If Angrboða had ever had the chance to meet the precocious little upstart that was her grandchild, Gabriel thought as he hastily left, she would absolutely adore them– Hati was everything his once-wife had loved. What a truly terrifying thought.

Hel was waiting for him, her expression grave enough that his grace lurched. “What is it?” He asked her urgently. “Are the boys all okay?” He hadn’t sensed anything wrong with any of his sons, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t missed something–

“They are all in perfectly adequate health,” Hel told him, and he sighed in relief. “They are not what currently concerns me.”

“What’s got you worried?” Gabriel asked, anxiety renewed.

“All of the Norse pantheon will have felt Odin-king’s death,” Hel warned, sounding very grave (pun not intended), “and they aren’t the only threat you’ll be facing. Many of the pagan gods will be highly displeased by the interference of the angels, and even more so with those who brought their attention back to Earth after the thousands of years they have been ignoring it.”

“So there’s going to be trouble,” Gabriel concluded grimly and Hel nodded, both eyes twins in solemnity, if not appearance.

“You must be wary, faðir– and you must take care of those in the family who are more vulnerable,” Hel told him. “The other gods may fear you, after the slaughter at Ásgarðr and fall of Odin-king, but not all of those you care for have that protection, and Odin is not the first to wield the vulnerabilities of loved ones as a weapon against a stronger opponent.”

“Great,” Gabriel said sourly. “Just... fucking great.”

Hermione’s stay at Norway may end up being longer than the few days he’d originally anticipated. ::

Hermione woke up in a bedroom she didn’t recognise, and it only took a heartbeat for fear to seize her at her with icy fingers, nails digging in deep like claws, the memories of the last time she’d been conscious flooding her mind. The panic and terror and memory of absolute agony was so intense she nearly vomited, shoving herself upright in the bed and kicking off the heavy covers as she frantically looked around the room for some hint of where she was.

“You’re safe, Hermione, you’re safe, I promise,” a voice as familiar to her as breathing soothed, and Hermione let out a loud sob of relief as she practically threw herself into Loki’s arms. Her god, who had been sitting on an armchair beside her bed, cradled her to him, burying his head in her hair as she pressed her face to his chest. “I’ve got you, little one,” he said soothingly, “I’ve got you.”

Hermione just bawled into her god’s shirt, clinging desperately to him. Slowly, she registered the lack of pain and realised Loki must have healed her, and the gratitude just made her cry that much harder.

It took a long time for her to calm down, but Loki didn’t rush her, he just held her and rocked her and hummed songs she didn’t recognise but made the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stand up on end.

When her tears had slowed to hiccups and the odd sniffle, Loki finally started talking again. “Odin,” he said, with fire and steel in his voice, “will never touch you again. He’s dead.”
“He– M-Muriel a-and H-H-Hugo they– oh gods, it hurts—” she choked, mostly incoherent, on the verge of dissolving back into tears again as she tried to give words to her betrayal at the hands of her ‘friends’. “It hurts, it hurts, it hurts—”

“I can make it not hurt so much,” Loki offered, a low, soothing murmur, hands gently cradling her. “If you want, I can take away the emotional pain, like I took away all the physical pain.”

The offer... it was tempting, it was so, so tempting, but— “…‘No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown’.” She recited hoarsely.

“William Penn,” Loki murmured with a quiet sigh. “Okay. I won’t push you or argue, kitten, because you’re right— ‘no pain, no gain’ is a very real concept, and the lessons taught by pain and suffering aren’t easily set aside or forgotten, but sometimes... sometimes those lessons aren’t the ones we should learn. I think you should talk to Dr. Vallens.”

“Is she here?” Hermione asked, voice still hoarse from the tears, not acknowledging what he’d said as she looked up at him, before adding; “um, and where is here?”

“Norway. With family,” Loki told her, with concern in his golden eyes that she also chose not to acknowledge. “I don’t want to take you back to London until I’m certain none of the other gods will come after you in revenge for Odin. I also don’t want to leave you unguarded while I hunt them down, and you remember Fenris telling us how Sköll was living a human life? This is his place, his and his wife’s, and Hati is staying here too until everything’s sorted.”

“Oh,” Hermione murmured quietly, a lot less enthused about meeting more of Loki’s family than she’d have been before Odin abducted her. The thought of new people, of strangers, frightened her, unreasonably so, but the instinctive fear wasn’t something she could control as she clung just a bit tighter to Loki.

“And yes, Doctor Vallens is here– now that you’re conscious, I’m sure she’ll be eager to speak with you,” her god told her, pausing briefly before adding gently; “‘Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place’.”**

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Chapter End Notes

*”afi” translates to grandfather [Old Norse]*

**quote by Kurt Vonnegut (Hermione’s earlier quote is by William Penn)
Hi, sorry for the hiatus everyone, I've been dealing with some shit. I'll be going back over the comments people posted for the last chapter and replying, so please don't think I've been ignoring you out of rudeness, I appreciate each and every bit of support, advice, feedback, etc. that people leave <3

I hope you enjoy the update! xxx

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO:

The first thing Hermione did after crying her eyes out all over her god was have a very, very, very long steaming-hot shower. She'd agreed to talk to Dr. Mia, but wanted to wash first– she needed to scrub away at her skin until she'd cleaned Odin's taint off her, the memory of her vulnerability at his hands, of her helplessness, pinned to that altar like a skewered butterfly who'd been put up for display.

Loki had seemed reluctant to let her out of his sight, and Vashti had downright refused, her angry screeching sounding like nails on a chalkboard until Hermione stopped trying to untangle her from her hair and just took the little phoenix into the shower with her, where Vashti proceeded to aggressively preen her curls.

The shower's scalding hot water (which Vashti, as a phoenix, was clearly unaffected by) did little to burn away the memory of Odin's hands on her, around her throat, or how she'd pressed her own forearm against Muriel-Munnin's throat as hard as she could—

No, she couldn't think about that, she just couldn't. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

(She didn't ever want to think about that ever again)

Despite the slight relief and cleansing the hot water brought her, the shower did also reveal the new scar. Most of her injuries had vanished without a trace– including, to her relief, the venom-burns that had horribly seared and blistered her face, as those would have been both impossible to hide and a constant reminder of what had happened to her. There was only one injury that had actually left scarring, and that was the dagger to her stomach– except, it wasn't the scar of a stab wound that had been left behind, there was no puncture mark where the sharp blade had been driven deep into her flesh.

No, the scarring looked more like Lichtenberg figures, the tattoo-like fractal patterns left behind by lightning strikes whose heat could reach upward of five times as hot as the sun. Despite technically resembling a burn, the scarring reminded Hermione of frost spreading along a windowpane, oddly beautiful in a haunting sort of way; it also resembled branching lightning, she thought... and maybe feathers too, fanning out across her lower torso, from her hip to halfway up her ribcage.

Hermione felt like she should be disgusted by the marks on her body, but when she touched the
silvery scarring, the power simmering within them didn't feel like Odin's heavy, foul magic, all dark and bloody and skin-crawling. It felt like wild, crackling, compressed fire—like Loki. Fresh tears mixed with the hot, cascading water from as she crouched on the shower floor, pressing one palm to the scarring and one over her mouth, sobbing silently into her palm.

(She wondered if this was how Ness had felt, when she'd been betrayed by her classmates, left bound overnight in that football field by the peers that should have supported her... she wondered if Ness has felt this soul-crushing agony of anger-grief-hate-disbelief-sorrow-despair—)

The water never went cold—likely Loki's influence, a vague part of her noted absently—and Hermione didn't get out of the shower for nearly two hours, at which point an increasingly-agitated Vashti nipped her ear hard enough to draw blood. She felt as if she was moving through some sort of fog, her overworked brain glitching after having been forced to experience overwhelming relief, crushing grief, sickening panic, hateful rage and more, and all in the short span of time since she'd woken up in the strange bed. It left her now feeling numb, like she was moving through heavy mist.

As she stepped out into the olden-styled bathroom, small enough to be considered 'quaint' but consisting of the sort of high-quality materials that betrayed the actual wealth and standards of its owners, she noticed that clothes had appeared for her sometime while she was in the shower. The clothes were of fine quality—a set of thermals, a woollen skirt, a long-sleeved blouse and a fleece-lined jacket—and her exact size, which either meant she'd been unconscious long enough for her new hosts to shop for her, or Loki had snapped them into existence.

She dressed slowly, her movements heavy and dragging, like the air had turned to molasses. The brief glimpse of her reflection as she exited the bathroom revealed how pale, bleak and hollow she looked, reminding her of those long months following her sister's death.

Loki descended upon her the moment she exited the bathroom, his face pinched with badly concealed worry. She went gladly into his arms, into his warmth.

"Time to speak with Dr. Mia?" He coaxed, after a few minutes of her pressed desperately against the warm crackling of his magic under his skin, and Hermione reluctantly nodded.

Usually her sessions with Dr. Mia helped her, but this time, as she sat with the shape-shifter in the home office that had been offered up for their use, she just felt sick to her stomach and terrified and so fucking furious that everything around them had started to rattle ominously. To a certain degree, she could cope with the torture and the memory of fighting for her life, but the betrayal of her friends? That had shattered something inside her, damaged her in a way she hadn't ever thought to protect herself against, hadn't ever even considered she'd need to.

How was she supposed to ever trust anyone she met again, to trust that they were who they said they were, that they were sincere in their attentions or affections, that they meant her no harm? How could she ever believe someone claiming to want to be her friend, after what Hugo and Muriel—Huginn and Muninn—had done?

(Why did it feel like everyone she'd ever loved had hurt her?)

She hadn't even asked Loki if the ravens were dead yet. She was terrified to know, terrified that they weren't—and equally terrified that they were. She'd cared for them, adored them, and despite what they'd done, she couldn't just turn all that emotion off.

After the 'session', which she'd left feeling the weight of Dr. Mia's worried eyes on her back, everything went from bad to worse as a visibly reluctant Loki shared with her the bad news.
"Now that you're awake, I have to go," he told her gently, while still holding her in his arms. "It's the last thing I want to do right now, believe me, kitten, but I have to go and make sure no idiots think Ragnarök has started, and sort out all the morons who've got it into their heads that it's okay to attack my family. You'll be safe here, I promise, nobody can touch you while you're within the boundaries of this property. You'll be safe and you'll have family with you."

Hermione just nodded, unable to speak with the lump that had formed in her throat, and when Loki disappeared after a last, long hug, all she could do was bury her face in her knees and cry once more.

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Hermione didn't know how long it had been since Loki had left. She didn't know if it had been days or weeks or months, just that he was gone and she was left drifting around a stranger's house as a pale, soundless, grieving shade of herself. Later, she'd be horrified to realise she'd lost track of the passing of time completely, but in her foggy, traumatised state, she just hadn't cared, nor had she possessed the capacity to care. She couldn't bring herself to set foot outside the house, could barely even leave the room she'd been given, and couldn't stop herself from cringing away from Hati, Sköll and Astrid– really, she couldn't stop herself from cringing away from anyone who wasn't Loki, the fear still a horrifying, living thing inside her.

Objectively, she'd experienced a number of devastating emotional blows throughout her short years alive, beginning with the bullying and unwitting but nevertheless potent parental neglect, continuing on with her sister's suicide and her entire life being uprooted on multiple occasions, plus there was being attacked by a kelpie and nearly drowning, losing two of her closest friends and learning after that they'd both been murdered even, just to rub salt in the wound... the betrayal, torture and near murder at the hands of Odin and his stupid ravens, it was the latest of a long list of blows and it was just too much. It was too much and Hermione couldn't cope, she just couldn't, and whenever she wasn't so numb she couldn't feel anything at all, all she could do was cry.

Peripherally, she was aware of the growing concern of those around her, but none of them would talk to her, not when she cringed away whenever they moved in her direction, or when her magic started to shake apart the room whenever Dr. Mia tried to get her to share.

In the end, it was Váli who managed to break her out of the numbness and self-imposed isolation. She'd been sitting in the bedroom that was 'hers', looking out the window, over at the sea, when the god had knocked on the door then proceeded to walk straight in.

She hadn't seen Váli much. Apparently, from what she'd overheard and vaguely registered, he'd been working on making something up to Eris– something about her being knocked out, and missing a fight? Hermione didn't really care, except that it meant there was one less person around.

Apparently, he was visiting– and he had no sense of personal space whatsoever, crossing straight over to her then sitting down on the floor, leaning slightly against the leg of the chair she was curled up on.

"Beautiful view," he said. "I can see why you're spending so much time in here."

Hermione didn't reply, didn't acknowledge him at all other than to tense up slightly, but Váli didn't seem at all affected by her silence. They sat like that for a little while, silent except for the faint sounds of the waves and calls of birds. Váli, of course, was the one to eventually interrupt the almost-peace that had settled over them.

"Do you know how the Aesir got their hands on me?" He asked her suddenly, looking up at her
with eyes a familiar bright, burning gold. "I admit I haven't ever looked into their mythology," he continued, voice deceptively calm for such an emotionally loaded subject. "I've never been interested to see how badly they've twisted everything, turning my father into a villain when it was the Aesir ultimately at fault for what happened to him, and for the crimes committed against my innocent brothers and sisters."

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children'.' Hermione whispered, her voice hoarse and croaky from disuse. "Nelson Mandela said that," she added, managing through sheer, shaky willpower alone to meet and hold that golden gaze, unsure if he knew who Nelson Mandela was. Váli nodded, but didn't comment, instead continuing to share his story.

"I was a child." He said quietly. "By our standards, anyway. I had only just reached my first century. Nárvi and I were the youngest of all our father's children."

It was hard to wrap her head around, to consider someone who was over a hundred years old as young, but she supposed it was like the elves from Tolkein's books, who aged slower and were still considered children when they were several centuries old– when someone had a lifespan stretching over millennia, then suddenly a mere hundred years didn't seem quite so ancient.

"I wasn't close to any of the Norse pantheon." Váli told her, seeming almost unnaturally solemn. "Father wasn't... well-liked, but he's one of the oldest Norse gods and he was grudgingly respected for that, if nothing else. But my mother... she was liked, and she was beautiful. The other gods couldn't understand why she would be with my father, but she loved him."

Hermione wasn't entirely sure where Váli was going with his story, but she knew it wasn't a story that would end well and her stomach was already tight with a dreadful sort of anticipation for the inevitable horror.

"We lived by the ocean; mother, Nárvi and I." Váli said, grief and rage warring in his voice. "Nárvi... he loved the water, the ocean especially. We were welcome in Uncle Aegir and Aunt Rán's domain, of course– they loved us dearly, and the sea was theirs. We were happy there. But then Frigg and Baldr created their false prophecy... we didn't know; when they came for us, we didn't know, not about the danger or the prophecy or even the tragic chain of events leading up to it all. We did have protection, of course; mother and father both knew the other gods resented father, they were careful lest someone lash out at us to hurt him.

"Not many knew where our home was, but mother's best friend, Freya, she led them straight to us. She betrayed us to them and when mother tried to defend us, Odin proclaimed her, Sigyn, a traitor and he ripped her heart from her breast with his bare hand. She had begged Freya to help her, to not let them hurt us, but Freya just looked away; this woman I had known all my life, who had played with me as a young child, who had brought me gifts and held me in her arms, just looked away, even as Odin tore out our mother's heart and turned me into a rabid, mindless beast who tore my brother, my second-half, to shreds."

Hermione down at Váli, aghast. "Oh, my sweet little sister," Váli said gently, reaching up to gently cup her face in his hands, "I told you that not so you would grieve for me, but so that you understood that you were not alone, no matter how much it feels like you are. I told you my story so you would know that one day, despite the betrayal you have suffered, despite this terrible blow, you will trust again. It may not be soon, but one day it will happen. I promise you this, on my beloved Nárvi's grave, I swear it to be true."

"I believe you," Hermione choked out, overcome with emotion. "I believe you." For how could she not?
"You are brave, little sister. You are the bravest mortal I know, and I have met many a brave warrior over the centuries," Váli told her, still cradling her face. "You will get through this, and you'll be stronger for it-- I know it."

Hermione half-scrambled, half-fell out of her chair, practically flinging herself into Váli's arms. He held her tight in his lap, just as his father did, and she let herself cry into his neck too, but the tears were different this time. These tears had a hint of acceptance to them, the final stage of a grief that still raged viciously inside her, but whose terrible claws and vicious jaws had finally blunted.

"By the way," Váli added, voice slightly muffled as he tried (and failed) at speaking without getting a mouthful of curls, "you using that fucking shit of a snake to kill those cowardly bitches, Geri and Freki? That was one of the greatest, most hardcore things I've ever seen in my life, and I'm literally over a thousand years old."

To her shock, Hermione felt her cheeks heat up with a fiery blush, bringing life to her face for the first time in what seemed like a very long time, and she buried her face in Váli's shoulder to try and hide her embarrassment. Váli just laughed, because apparently he was a jerk like that, but he still sounded almost unbearably fond as he told her, "when you've finished growing into your claws, kitty-cat, you're going to be fucking terrifying."

"Don't call me that," Hermione grumbled, pulling her face back so she could glare, but Váli just smirked at her.

"You said I couldn't call you 'kitten', you didn't say anything about other feline-themed nicknames," he said smugly, and Hermione just groaned and let herself faceplant back onto his chest, mumbling 'arsehole' as she did so.

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After her talk with Váli, things slowly improved. She actually began to open up with Dr. Mia, no matter how raw it made her feel to be so vulnerable and have to relive the still painfully fresh memories, and she began to interact more with the occupants of the house.

As well as Dr. Mia, Fenris– clearly restored as a god– was also living in the house on Henningsvær, and, of course, so were the actual owners of the house, the currently-mortal Sköll 'Fenrisson', his human wife Astrid, and Sköll's still-a-god(dess?) twin, Hati. Hermione learned that Sköll taught scuba-diving to tourists while Astrid was a qualified midwife, though as the entire village consisted of only around four hundred people, if that, midwives weren't exactly in high demand and she also worked at Nord Norsk Klatreskole, a hybrid climbing and skiing school, hostel, and travellers bar.

Hati didn't seem to have a human job, which made sense as they clearly weren't human– sometimes they didn't even look human-shaped at all, which could be intensely disturbing, though Hermione tried not to stare. Hati scared Hermione, both in how wild, fierce and animalistic they were and in how they were so clearly not human, but they were never cruel to her, never treated her any way but courteously, and Hermione was determined to return the favour.

Even with the improvements she was making, however, that didn't change the fact Hermione woke herself up most nights with a throat raw from screaming, or that she flinched if anyone moved too quickly in her direction, or that the sight of a black bird flying in the sky was enough to send her into hyperventilation.

During the day she could usually bury the memories deep, deep down in the dark, haunted parts of her mind until the echoes of her own screams weren't so loud in her ears, but whenever she closed
her eyes to sleep, the choking, bloody, terrifying nightmares would wreak havoc over her increasingly fraught psyche.

And Hermione, no longer fresh off her trauma, had the time to really think things through sensibly, eventually coming to a decision, and nearly three months after Odin had taken her, her god finally returned to Henningsvær.
Chapter 33

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE:

Loki returned to Henningsvær on a surprisingly clear winter’s day; the sun was bright, the skies were blue and the air was cool but crisp, carrying both the scent of the ocean and a promise of the warmer months ahead. He didn’t send a message, or alert anyone that he was coming, he just appeared in the living room— literally appeared, in fact, right out of thin air in front of a startled, panicking Hermione who’d reacted on pure instinct by blasting him with her magic and summoning both the wooden practice sword Gunther Gryffindor had given her and the athame Morgana had given her to either hand. The second she recognised who’d just appeared in front of her, however, the armed and braced-for-a-fight Hermione immediately dropped her somewhat-makeshift weapons where she was standing and threw herself into his arms.

The commotion she’d caused by summoning the wooden sword and athame from her bedroom to the living room had brought Fenris, the currently-mortal Sköll, his human wife Astrid and the visiting Hati all running, with Fenris, Sköll and Hati all clearly ready to fight, just as she’d been, and the preparation for violence left them just as quickly as it had left her when they realised just who it was holding her.

It was a happy reunion all around, and the news Loki had brought that the pagan deities who’d considered Ragnarök to be set in motion because of Odin’s death had been dissuaded, along with any others who’d been angry with Loki’s actions (something about attracting attention? Loki hadn’t been at all specific about whose attention it was the deities hadn’t wanted to attract, and Hermione knew better than to ask questions when he was being purposefully vague— her god was the original Silvertongue; if he didn’t want to talk about something then he’d talk his way around the topic until she’d forgotten what it was she’d asked in the first place, not remembering until hours later) had been met with much cheer. Fenris was already making plans to move out, expressing his gratitude to his son for having hosted him but more than ready to stretch his metaphorical wings after regaining his godhood following nearly a century spent as a mortal, and Hati was talking about inviting Váli, Eris and Jörmungandr over and bringing out the mead to celebrate.

After her initial enthusiastic greeting, Hermione faded back slightly into the background, waiting for a quieter moment before asking Loki for a private word, to which her god willingly obliged. She wasn’t sure where he took her, only that it was outdoors and that the forest clearing was warm, so wherever they were, it had to be summer. Loki sat down on the grass, under the sun, and she happily plonked down beside him, curling up into his side.

“It’s good to see you, pumpkin,” he told her, his voice so very fond, and she beamed up at him.

“It’s so good to see you too,” she told him earnestly, snuggling into his side for another hug before taking a deep breath and asking her question. “Loki,” she said, “do you– do you remember your offer? From when– when I first woke up?”

Loki looked puzzled for a moment, his offer to take away her emotional pain like he’d taken away the physical pain clearly not something he’d been agonising over like she had, though comprehension quickly dawned visibly on his face, and Hermione hastened to explain to him what she’d decided on with Dr. Mia’s help. “I don’t want to completely forget what happened,” she said, “I don’t think that would help me much either, it would just be running away, but... but I don’t want it to keep hurting like it does. Is that... is that weak of me?”
“Of course not,” Loki said gently, his warm golden eyes so kind as he smiled warmly down at her, “sweetheart, it’s human of you.”

Hermione could feel the hot tears stinging at her eyes at the relief his validation of her emotions brought her, one even escaping to trickle down her cheek. “Then please,” she choked, “please.”

Loki didn’t even hesitate, easily pulling her up onto his lap so that she was facing him. With her unshed tears blinding her, Hermione felt, not saw, him rest his forehead against hers, and the brutal memories that had been lingering so violently at the forefront of her mind suddenly didn’t feel so overwhelming, and with each breath she took she found they were losing that sharp, raw edge, the painful details no longer quite so painful, or so easy to recall in their previous clarity.

She knew what had happened, of course, she remembered everything that had been done to her and that she had done in turn, she just couldn’t recall the details quite so quickly or intensely; it was as if it was something that had happened to her hundreds of years ago, not mere months.

And, for the first time since the betrayal and abduction, Hermione finally found she could just breathe.

“It’s done,” Loki murmured, after what felt like an age but may have only taken a few minutes. She wasn’t quite sure, but as full awareness of her surroundings returned, she found that her forehead was resting against her god’s and both her breathing and heartbeat were steady and even. The memories were still there, but the raw pain and panic and sheer grief that had accompanied them were gone, reduced to faded memories that lingered with the other faded memories, no longer vicious, invading entities waging war against her battered mind. The sheer relief almost had her tearing up again and she instinctively knew that tonight she would sleep well, no nightmares dragging her viciously from her rest.

The distance she now felt to those memories also gave her the courage to finally ask the question she’d held back until now, too afraid of the answer. “Nobody’s ever said anything, and I never asked, but Hugo and Mur—Huginn and Muninn… did they survive?” she asked quietly.

“Muninn died at Odin’s side, the day everything… went down,” Loki told her, appearing to be choosing his words with care. Hermione appreciated the thought, even though it did little to lessen the emotional blow. She wasn’t sure if it was relief she was feeling or not, and that still hurt.

“Huginn,” Loki continued, “wasn’t fighting my sons when I returned after healing you, so I’m unsure of its fate. If it did survive, it hasn’t shown its face since.”

“But he could still be out there,” Hermione said, and once again she wasn’t sure if it was relief or not she was feeling.

“Yes,” Loki admitted, “Huginn could still be out there.”

“Do you think… do you think he might come after me?” she asked, her stomach twisting with sudden anxiety at the thought of possibly having to fight her once-friend.

“I think,” Loki said, seemingly unconsciously tightening his grip on her as his golden eyes burned with protective rage, “that there’s something I’d like to do so that I’ll never be unable to find you again, no matter what wards you’re hidden behind.”

And Hermione didn’t even hesitate a second before agreeing.

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After the reports he’d been getting from his children and grandchildren in the form of prayers of a
Hermione so quiet and distant and haunted that she was little more than a pale, faded shadow of herself, Gabriel was more relieved than words could describe when, after he finally returned from settling all the unrest amongst the pagan deities the best he could contain it for now, she had asked for his help. The memories of what had been done to her, the pain and fear and betrayal she’d faced, were more than any child should ever have to cope with, and he was grateful for both her sake and for his ease of mind that she’d allowed him to reduce her suffering.

Her question after, about Odin’s pet spies, had made him bristle internally, a shiver of pure rage curdling his grace at the very thought of Huginn getting its filthy talons on her, and that combined with the glimpse of fear in her eyes effectively removed any and all his remaining reservations about implementing a rather out-there idea he’d had while dealing with the pagan deities, an idea he’d come up with for on the off-chance either they or one of his many other enemies ever managed to get their hands on her again.

“There’s something I'd like to do,” he told her, as he cradled her in his arms, “so that I’ll never be unable to find you again, no matter what wards you’re hidden behind.”

“Yes,” Hermione consented immediately, clinging to him with desperate hands, an equally desperate relief replacing the fear in her chocolate-coloured eyes, “yes, yes, yes—” she repeated, and he hushed her, soothed her, gently pressing her eyelids shut then laying her out across the grass.

“Don’t open your eyes,” he instructed and she nodded, holding herself still and silent and her eyes tightly shut.

Gabriel had never before heard of any angel doing what he planned to do, not even the ones who’d fallen so deeply in love with humans all those centuries upon centuries ago that they’d disobeyed Father and created the Nephilim with them, but he was determined that Hermione never be taken and hidden from him again— and he’d ensure it. With a grim decisiveness as he steelized himself against the upcoming pain, he manifested his wings so they were physical enough that he could grip one of the smaller feathers and gave it a sharp yank, ripping it right out.

There was a very distinct difference between using his grace or his pagan powers to create feathers like the ones he’d woven into the bracelet he’d given Hermione in order to mark his claim over her, and a feather that was from one of his actual wings. In their natural state, his wings weren’t so much wings as they were an amalgam of wavelengths that vaguely resembled wings when manifested on Earth and were as capable of shedding their 'feathers' as a human's hand was capable of shedding fingers.

Ripping out an angel’s wing 'feather' wasn’t at all like ripping out a bird’s feather; it was separating a part of himself, severing fragments from a wavelength, almost like a human pulling off their arm or leg or head, except unlike a human he'd still have a connection to the ‘feather’, an awareness that remained until the 'feather' lost its physicality, returning to the original form so as to merge back with the rest of the wavelengths that made up his wings, and it took a concentrated effort to prevent the dissipation of the feather he'd torn out, having to actively fight an instinct he'd formed and honed over literal billions of years.

Instead, he pressed the 'feather' to Hermione’s skin, over her heart, letting it sink into her, entwining with her very soul, weaving into place amidst her beautiful devoutness, Loki’s pagan mark, her magic and the very immortal essence of her being; he would never not be aware of where she was, now that part of him existed within her. Hermione gasped, her eyes involuntarily fluttering open to reveal new gold flecks in the chocolate-coloured irises that he didn’t think were the effects of the magic Merlin had taught her at all, and the possessive pagan part of him thrilled at the physical mark he had left on her for everyone to see. She was panting and trembling, reaching with
her small hands to cling to his hand, still pressed over her heart, and Gabriel couldn’t help the
burning satisfaction in his voice as he told her, promised her; “You’ll never be hidden from me
again.”

“Thank you,” she whispered hoarsely, just as sincere, heartfelt, and devoted as always, her
perfectly imperfect soul now threaded through with the gold of his ‘feather’, and, for the first time
since she’d been taken from him, Gabriel felt his grace ease.

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Even after Loki left Henningsvær, several days after he’d returned to confirm that there was no
longer any threat active against them, Hermione stayed in Norway.

She hadn’t seen her parents in months now, but she felt no inclination to go hurrying back to their
side. On the contrary, she was happier in Henningsvær then she’d ever been in London and had no
plans to leave Norway to return “home”. She did feel a bit guilty sometimes about Loki basically
dropping her off on his grandson and grandson’s wife’s doorstep and then never taking her back,
but Sköll and Astrid had never made her feel at all like she was unwelcome or a burden, which was
more than her actual parents could claim, and with Dr. Mia settling in and opening her own local
practice and Loki and Váli both visiting her multiple times a week, she never lacked for company,
entertainment or support.

Astrid had helped her order new copies of her school-books and she’d continued on with the same
style of self-learning as when she’d been home-schooled back in Fraserburgh, preferring it to a
classroom setting anyway. And after Loki’s visit, Váli had also finally started teaching her how to
use weapons like she’d been asking (begging) him to since their conversation about betrayal that
had finally pulled her out of her headspace, where she’d been so lost— though in hindsight,
Hermione had a feeling that it was less that Loki had given Váli permission to teach her, and more
that he’d been worried she might have intended to harm herself with the weapons.

The weapon-fighting style Váli had decided to teach her was called "Silat", an umbrella term
encompassing a number of fighting arts from the Malay Archipelago. It was an ancient art with
animistic origins and its own Creation myth of a woman observing animals fighting and creating
the fighting style based of what she’d observed. It used a number of swords, daggers and other
knives, and considering her rather petite size, Váli had chosen to begin with a focus on knives.

When it came down to it, there wasn’t really a style when it came to knife fighting, he’d explained
to her. No, knife fighting was far more akin to chaos in motion, which she considered very suitable
considering just who her god was. There were still certain skills to learn, of course, and Hermione
found she particularly enjoyed being trained how to use Silat’s most notorious weapon, the
Karambit, a small, sickle-shaped knife that resembled the claw of a tiger and was extremely
effective in close-quarters, plus its finger ring also meant it was almost impossible to be disarmed.
She had a niggling feeling that Váli had decided on Silat solely so he could teach her to fight with a
pair of Karambit knives, which gave him both more than enough fuel for the feline-themed
nicknames and the excuse to use them. She forgave him though, because she really did adore the
pair of Karambit knives he’d given her.

Her other favourite weapon was a dagger called the Keris, a wavy double-edged blade meant to
resemble the tongue of a snake and that many Silat practitioners believed had magical powers. The
Keris that Váli gave her was forged with poison, as was traditional so to ensure that any cut would
be lethal, but at Váli’s request, Loki had made her immune so she didn't accidentally kill herself by
nicking herself on the blade.

At her request, Váli had also taught her the basics for the practice sword Gunther had given her and
she was decent enough at it, but sword-fighting wasn't her favourite— she was still too small to comfortably swing the larger weapon around; it didn't suit her style of fighting, not the way that the Karambit pair and Keris dagger did.

Váli was a very different teacher from Loki— not that Loki had ever gone easy on her, she’d certainly earned herself more than a few bruises while learning to fight with her god’s constructs, but Váli was downright brutal, and he liked to recruit Hati as an extra opponent, citing the dangers of becoming too accustomed to fighting just the one person. Hati was utterly terrifying to fight— Hermione wasn’t sure if she was more grateful or terrified when Hati started to show an interest in her training outside of Váli’s lessons and began giving their own lessons in Váli’s absence. Considering Hati was around quite a bit more than Váli as they tended to visit their currently-human twin three to four days a week compared to Váli’s two to three visits, Hermione was forced by sheer necessity to become more and more desensitised to them as Hati basically took over her training.

The training didn’t just consist of the lessons and the sparring (though ‘sparring’ sounded far too tame a word to adequately describe the practice matches— and neither Váli nor Hati believed in using constructs to fight her), it was the daily training regimen that she was expected to uphold even in their absence, which proved far more intense (brutally sadistic) than Loki’s had ever been. At first the sheer amount of strenuous physical exertion made her feel like her body was being forcibly rearranged every day one bone after another, and it took literal months, the winter first bleeding into spring, then spring bleeding into summer, for it to transition from merely endurable to something that was almost routine as her body and mind adapted to the strain and stress when she persisted despite the pain, sweat, and literal tears.

It certainly paid off, at least— just six months of daily training alongside her home-schooling and magical studies and already her movements were faster, stronger and more instinctual, her magic leaping eagerly to her command as her daggers spun in her hands and she ducked and weaved between whichever god she was fighting that day (or both, if she was particularly unlucky and about to get beaten into the ground until she was more bruise than witch).

It was Hati who eventually decided (without letting Loki know, though Hermione would only learn about their omission later) that Hermione should test her skills against an enemy in an actual fight, and found her a monster to face off against— apparently, Hati had originally gone to deliver some Just Desserts, only to find that it wasn’t actually a human causing trouble, but a ghoul that had eaten the human and then taken over the dead woman’s face and her life.

Considering the ghoul had slaughtered several locals of the old mining town of Røros, Hermione didn’t feel any guilt about Hati picking it out for her as a sort of training dummy, and she was thankful for Hati giving her the opportunity to see how she fared in a real fight. She’d held up well against Odin, his wolves and his ravens, she knew that, but she’d still come out of that ordeal much worse off, considering the bloody dagger in her stomach and the fact she would have died from her various injuries if it hadn’t been for her god. Her capability to hold her own against the ghoul, a supernatural creature capable of super-speed, super-strength, and super-agility, had been validating, almost, and definitely reassuring— though compared to Hati and Váli, at least one of whom she’d been sparring against almost daily, the ghoul was… very lacking as an opponent. It had relied solely on its speed, strength, and agility, for one, and had no actual combat skill, plus it had taken one look at her, completely underestimated her and then failed to readjust its original impression after she’d so clearly proved that she was more then she looked.

But that was its problem, not hers.

According to the hunter journals Loki had given her several years ago, decapitation or severe brain
damage were the two most efficient ways to kill a ghoul—complete immolation also worked at a pinch, as very few beings could survive being burned to ash—and Hermione ended up using a combination of her magic, her new blades, and Vashti to defeat the ghoul.

A human could fight their best for a few minutes before beginning to tire, so her aim had been to finish the fight as quickly as possible. This was made difficult at first as despite the ghoul not being able to land a hit on her, she’d also struggled to inflict any long-lasting damage to it. That was, not until Vashti, who over the past six months had grown to about the size of a macaw and was fully capable of flight, let out a piercing song-cry which caused the ghoul let out a horrific shriek in response, the tainted monster visibly cringing back as the pure sound created by the young phoenix caused it actual pain. Hermione had been sickened to then see its false human skin begin to almost melt off it in places, sloughing off almost like a snake’s skin being shed as Vashti’s song inflicted real, physical damage to the ghoul.

Barely human-looking at all without its stolen face, any hesitation Hermione might have once felt about fighting something that looked like a person disappeared and when the enraged ghoul made the fatal error of turning its focus towards Vashti, she’d attacked it from behind with a hastily summoned rock (all of her teachers had taught her not to hold back from “dirty” tricks), hitting the monster in its pterion, which was the thinnest, weakest part of the skull, located on the side of the skull, right behind the temple. While a direct blow to the pterion with the force she’d just used would have killed a human, it hadn’t been enough to cause the extreme brain damage needed to kill a ghoul—using her keris knife to decapitate it while the monster was dazed, however, had done the job, though hacking, sawing and cleaving through thick muscle joints and cracking the cervical vertebrae until she was cutting into soft tissue again and the ghoul’s head was rolling away had been a messy, somewhat sickening affair.

She’d been soaked from the blood spray and shaking slightly with adrenaline in the fight’s aftermath, but Hati had been nothing but approving and Vashti had preened proudly from her perch on Hermione’s shoulder. Loki and Astrid had both been less than impressed when the three of them returned to Henningsvær (and both had worn amusingly similar ‘mother hen’ looks of disapproval), but Hermione had defended Hati’s choice—she’d managed, hadn’t she? She’d destroyed the ghoul and she’d done it without Hati’s help. Loki had still banned Hati from taking her out to fight any more monsters, and no amount of pouting had changed his mind, but he had let her start exploring Henningsvær unaccompanied, apparently confident enough now in her being capable of keeping herself alive until help could arrive if she managed to get in trouble.

Summer in Henningsvær was very different from the icy cold winter she’d arrived in, and Henningsvær was a beautiful place to explore. Hermione particularly loved the mountain trails, and she and Vashti spent hours and hours hiking them. She met several local children on one of the trails, and they showed her a local lake along one of the trails that was popular amongst the youth of Henningsvær for having a splash around in and invited her to join them. After nearly nine months of living in Henningsvær combined with both her instinctual grasp on languages and previous fluency in Old Norse, an earlier form of the language, Hermione’s Norwegian was easily fluent enough for conversations with the local children, and although she found herself hesitating to really open up to friendship with them the way she had with Hugo and Muriel, she was friendly enough with several of them that they’d often stop by Skoll and Astrid’s house to see if she was free to come spend time with them when the local school was out.

She hadn’t doubted Váli when he told her that everything would get better in time, but knowing something to be true and actually, truly understanding it as a fact were two very different things. It had taken her time, even with Loki’s help in numbing the raw memories, but Hermione thought she’d finally reached that understanding, just like Váli had said she would, and as Dr. Mia told her ‘understanding is the first step to acceptance, and with acceptance comes recovery’. 
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR:

The day Vashti finally started ‘speaking’, Hermione almost started crying like the proud mamma she sort-of was. She’d been growing more and more concerned about Vashti’s lack of speech as months had passed and her little phoenix who wasn’t quite so little anymore remained silent other than her beautiful songs and battle cries, concerned that the violent death Vashti had experienced before she was even halfway grown had hurt her in a more long-lasting way. Vashti had still been very capable of communicating with her chirping, singing, crooning, and sharp beak, but when Vashti began to ‘speak’, the relief Hermione felt was astronomical.

Phoenixes didn’t talk out loud like a parrot might, they spoke within people’s heads– though only within the heads of those they chose to communicate with. Because of the scarcity of phoenixes, who had been rare even in the Founders’ Era, the texts Loki had supplied her with were all very vague about their communication and Hermione suspected that the translations of the old writings should have been more along the lines of how phoenixes could only communicate with the minds of their ‘Chosen’, not with those they’d ‘chosen to’. Phoenixes bonding with a person didn’t appear to be common knowledge at all, however, so she supposed the mistranslation was forgivable.

Vashti’s first words had been a complaint that day’s impending rain– apparently, she’d been woken by her instincts demanding she ‘sing’ about the rainstorm approaching and had wanted to keep on sleeping. All the grumbling in such a sweet, chiming ‘voice’ had been very amusing to hear, and Hermione had been relieved that although Vashti hadn’t been actually talking until this point, her development was still on track and she was capable of ‘speaking’ and understanding full sentences.

Despite the complaints that had started everything, sleep had been forgotten by both of them after that as they instead spent the next several hours figuring out how their communication worked. It turned out Vashti was capable of not only singing but of speaking right inside her head, as well as of sharing her senses with Hermione. Witnessing a literal bird’s eye view of Henningsvær as Vashti flew above the small town to see how far she could go while still talking to Hermione (they hadn’t found a limit yet) was breathtaking, if slightly headache-inducing as her brain wasn’t quite accustomed to viewing things from the angles a bird’s eyes saw things.

Hermione could also show Vashti what she saw, though not by projecting her thoughts/speech/senses inside Vashti’s mind the way Vashti projected her thoughts/speech/senses into her head. It was more that she could push the words, images or emotions at the link, and Vashti could ‘tap’ into the link.

Hermione had already started a notebook recording everything she’d discovered so far and all the discrepancies between their different experiences and their ideas of why (Vashti was certain that phoenixes must have minds too complicated for humans to brush against without possibly going mad, but as humans were a far simpler species a phoenix could brush against their minds without issue, a theory which made Hermione smile but she wrote it down anyway, projecting her...
amusement to Vashti as she did so). Hermione had a suspicion that her notebook would never be seen by another living being, except perhaps Loki and his family if any of them were interested, and she also suspected that that protective nature she felt was the truth behind why there was so little information about Phoenixes available—any who actually knew anything of value were too protective to even consider publishing it where someone who might use the information against Phoenixes could read it.

After thoroughly exploring their ability to communicate, they’d spent a few days sharing some of their favourite experiences from their own perspectives, opening their senses to each other so Vashti could experience casting magic, sparring with Hati and Váli, and swimming through the water of lakes and the ocean, while Hermione learned what it felt like to soar through the skies, burn bright with the fire that simmered under ‘her’ feathers, and feast on Vashti’s favourite pureed berries mixed with honey and Hati’s mead with a Phoenix’s sense of taste (experiencing the thoughts/feelings/senses of a mildly tipsy Phoenix was also an interesting experience).

When Loki had visited and she’d excitedly told him all about the link, there had been something very sad about his golden eyes, something ancient and grieving that made Hermione’s heart hurt and Vashti croon and chirp soothingly, gently preening her curls.

‘Loki-god always feels so sad,’ Vashti sent to her.

‘I wish I knew how to cheer him up,’ Hermione sent back. ‘He deserves happiness.’

‘You make him happy,’ Vashti promised with a gentle nibble of her nose, and Hermione smiled as she stroked those beautiful feathers, thankful beyond mere words that Vashti could now finally talk (yes, she appreciated the irony there)—and it would only take a handful of days for everyone else to share that same thankfulness, when Vashti’s ability to ‘talk’ quite possibly saved her life.

It all unfolded on a bright, warm day when the sun was shining and the ocean resembled a jewel under its brilliant rays, sparkling and reflecting the bright light. It was a perfect day for swimming, and Hermione had made plans with several of the local children to go visit a lake on one of the nearby islands.

As it was located partway up Vågakallen, a mountain that overlooked Henningsvær from the neighbouring main island Austvågøya, there was a fair amount of walking involved in getting to the lake that she’d visited only a couple times before. Hermione loved to swim though, and considering the natural beauty surrounding the lake in question, it had truly become one of her favourite places to visit in the Lofoten archipelago that Henningsvær was part of.

There was truly something very special about the archipelago that she found herself drawn to, and she certainly understood why Skoll had decided to make it his home during his time as a mortal. The cluster of islands may not be classified as magical in the traditional sense of the word, but Hermione thought they still had their own magic; a magic seeped in the ancient weight of an age-old history, in the wildness of the diverse and diverting nature, and in its picturesque landscapes, the dramatic mountains and peaks, open sea and sheltered bays, beaches and untouched lands, all that stole the breath of all who laid eyes upon them. The lack of any actual witches or wizards that Hermione was aware of however meant that she had to leave Vashti behind when she went off to play with the other human children, as Vashti was just too obviously other. Young though she might be, Vashti understood and didn’t begrudge Hermione the time they spent apart, and since they’d started communicating through the link and discovered their ability to open their senses to each other, Hermione was looking forward to showing Vashti ‘firsthand’ why she loved these times so much.

Hermione met three of the local children, nine-year-old Inger, twelve-year-old Kjell and fourteen-
year-old Silje, outside Astrid and Sköll’s house and the four of them set out to meet the others at
the lake, first crossing the bridge connecting Henningsvær to the main island of Austvågøya and
then making their way to the base of Vågakallen. The lake wasn’t located very high up the
mountain, but considering that Austvågøya was largely a mountain massif with very little lowland,
there was a lot of hiking upwards involved in getting there. Still, Hermione couldn’t help but
finding herself enjoying how close to effortless the physicality of it all was, after all her hell-
training, and she was proud of her progress, especially when she compared it to how puffed her
companions were becoming.

Hermione was also glad to see from the brief, excited moments when the young phoenix shared
her senses that Vashti appeared to have found a pair of sea eagles she’d befriended and while
Hermione had been hiking, she’d been soaring above the islands with them on her strong wings.
She was pleased that they were both enjoying a day with good company– and for the distraction
from the slight tediousness of the hike.

Arriving at the lake made the ordeal well worth it. Several of the other locals from Henningsvær
had already arrived, as well as some other children she didn’t recognise that she guessed were
locals from Austvågøya, and Hermione wasted no time stripping off the clothes she’d worn over
her bathing suit, despite the slight discomfort she felt about being so bare in front of others.

The bathing suit covered the scars on her stomach, it was a full-piece, but Hermione didn’t exactly
have the normal body of a ten, almost eleven, year old girl. For all that she wasn’t large, because
she wasn’t, she was clearly muscled. It wasn’t bulky muscle, but rather flat and wiry muscle. Hours,
days, weeks, months of training, it had all led to this, to the creation of a carefully controlled and
tightly leashed power within herself that was just waiting to be called upon when needed. And she
refused to be ashamed of her body, of the weapon she’d honed that may very well one day save all
their butts, and without giving any possible gawkers a moment of attention, she dived out into the water, feeling half like she was being welcomed home
by its cool embrace and immediately relaxing, losing the final parts of her hesitation and just
enjoying herself and the warm day.

After spending a couple of hours swimming and playing games in the lake with the other children
and occasionally opening the link between her and Vashti as she swam through the water and the
phoenix soared through the skies, both of them trading scenes of tranquility and joy, Hermione
decided to climb out of the water for a break and found herself drawn over to where a clump of
children had gathered, some that she recognized, like little Inger, her neighbor, and some she
assumed were Austvågøya locals. The children had all surrounded a beautiful white horse that
seemed to have wandered into the area, and despite clearly being a wild animal, the creature was
friendly enough to allow the excited gaggle of children stroke its beautiful coat and gloriously long
and silky-looking mane.

Hermione couldn’t help but reach out to stroke that glossy-looking white fur herself, and it felt like
velvet to touch. The horse turned its head in her direction, meeting her eyes with a deep, soulful
blue before letting out a soft wicker and bowing its graceful neck to nuzzle at her cheek with a
velvety nose. Hermione let out a delighted giggle at the ticklish sensation, and when the
magnificent creature knelt down on its front legs, she didn’t even think a moment about climbing
onto its back, leaning forwards and wrapping her arms around the strong arch of its neck as she felt
more children climb up behind her.

She felt only delight fill her as the white horse stood and turned to the lake, its gait gentle and
barely rocking her or any of the others on its back as it moved towards the water, its hooves
making small splashing sounds as it entered the lake. Hermione’s eyelids felt heavy, peace settling
over her like a warm, heavy blanket that gently weighed down her limbs. She let her head fall
forwards, her face pressed against the silky mane as her eyes drifted close.

The sharp spike of alarm that slammed through her head was entirely foreign to the peace enveloping her, but it managed to drag her out of her sleepiness just enough for the first hint of unease to seep through the fog of calm. Panic, just as sharp and just as foreign, now slammed into her head, and a quiet groan escaped her as her brain fought to make sense of such conflicting emotions, none her own.

Wait– none her own!?

The fog cleared just in time for Hermione to realise she was neck-deep in water without having even realised it, and that she couldn’t get her legs to move from where they were gripping the sides of the horse... a horse? What the bloody hell was she doing on a horse? She barely had moments to comprehend what was happening before she was forced to react as she was dragged under the water completely, the sound of an enraged phoenix’s shriek echoing in her ears as the lake water she was now submerged in muffled all other sounds.

Hermione thrust her hand in the direction of her clothes, back up on the shore, her magic stirring under her skin, a heat in her chest that rushed eagerly to obey. It took mere moments for the Keris dagger she’d brought to slice through the water, handle first into her hand, and even as she screamed out for Loki in her head, she was already leaning forwards, curving her arm around the neck of the horse-shaped monster currently trying to bloody drown her and a handful of other children and using the new angle to drive the entire length of the blade upward through its throat to the hilt of the dagger.

Blood as black as spilled ink began to stain the clear lake-water, pumping out in much greater volumes then she’d expected, except she didn’t exactly care, not when her legs were suddenly free and the children behind her were panicking, clearly now awake and alert. And then, an arm was scooping her up, pulling her out of the water. The other children vanished from the water too, and Hermione looked automatically to the shore where they all appeared a second later, taking a second to register their safety before turning back to Loki... who was currently standing on water. She fully intended on having a proper laugh about the religious connotations of his magical feat later, but for now she was still shaking with leftover adrenaline, dagger in hand and staring at the black stained water, such an ugly mar to the otherwise crystal-clear lake, in shock.

Had she really just almost died? After surviving the weight of depression, the wiles of the fey and the wrath of a god, had this monster almost just murdered her?

The sudden, familiar weight of Vashti on her shoulder and the young phoenix’s mental press of a panic too great to put to words against her mind finally broke Hermione free from her shock, and she hastily stroked Vashti with one hand while reaching to hug Loki with the other, instinctively recognising her god needed the comfort just as much as Vashti did.

“What the heck even was that?” She mumbled aloud.

“That,” her god said, in a rough voice, “was a Nökken.” He paused briefly, then added with pride audible in his voice, “and you just killed it with one blow.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. Nökken were dark water monsters that lurked in freshwater lakes and deep ponds, waiting and watching for their victims. They preferred young children for prey, and would shape-shift into white horses, letting kids ride on their back, enchanting them so they either couldn’t or wouldn’t fight back and then jumping with them back into their ponds or lakes to drown them... and then stash the bodies away to later consume them. Shuddering slightly at the thought of what her fate would have been, she rubbed her thumb over the sharp golden curve of Vashti’s beak.
‘Thank you,’ she told her, projecting both her knowledge of Nökken and her gratitude to her companion. ‘You saved my life.’

‘You went quiet,’ Vashti sent back, sounding far too muted. ‘Your mind felt wrong. I didn’t like it, and you wouldn’t answer me.’

‘I’m sorry for scaring you,’ Hermione sent gently, and Vashti just pressed herself harder into the curve of Hermione’s neck, like she was tiny again and could curl her whole body there. Sending a pulse of love/affection/care/gratitude/joy to the young phoenix, Hermione focused her attention back to her surroundings. While she’d been communicating with Vashti, Loki had vanished the Nökken’s body and cleared its blood from the water before carrying her back to the shore of the lake. He’d also apparently done something to the children, both the ones targeted by the Nökken and those who’d just been playing in and around the lake, because the two of them and Vashti were the only ones still conscious.

“I need to change their memories,” Loki explained, when she tilted her head up to give him a questioning look– the sight of all the unconscious children on the shore of the lake was kind of eerie. “And believe me, that’s a better job to be done when they’re not awake and further complicating something already so fiddly. Now,” her god said, carefully placing her down so she was standing then taking a step back and looking her up and down, likely scanning for any injuries, “what in Hell’s name happened?”

“I really just wanted to go swimming with my new friends before the Nökken turned up,” Hermione told him with a sigh, before a thought hit her. “I’m glad I was here, though,” she said, and she meant it. “I’m glad it picked me. If it hadn’t, those kids would probably have all died. Vashti saved their lives too, when she broke its enchantment on me.”

It was just hitting her now the fact that defeating the Nökken hadn’t just saved her own life, it had saved the lives of those other children it had ensnared too. And just like with the ghoul, Hermione felt like she’d just made a real difference in the world– and that was a good feeling.

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Gabriel had been pleased to take note of how Hermione’s health had improved with the weather following his aid with her memories. Her current appearance reminded him most of her time in Fraserburgh; even now, completely soaked from head to toe from her dip in the lake during her tangle with the Nökken, she was warm-gold from the sun, her hair was a wet, tangled mass of riotous curls and her eyes, chocolate flecked with gold, were bright and wide and happy.

She was also clearly entirely unrepentant about that horrible altruistic, self-sacrificing attitude of hers, and that was just not acceptable at all.

(He could have lost her, he could have lost her and he wouldn’t have even known until their connection was already severed by death and she was no longer his but his daughter’s to claim in the name of Death)

“How is it,” he demanded, immensely frustrated, though not just at her, “that if there’s any trouble within a hundred miles, you seem to fall right into it?”

“I’m guessing it has something to do with the fact my main role model in life is a Trickster God,” Hermione answered sweetly, with a mischievous grin. “Also, I want to do that again. Not the almost being drowned by a supernatural shape-shifting water monster part, the saving people part. I liked that part. Can we do that again?”
“Oh Father,” Gabriel realised, looking down at her in horror– surely she must be suffering some kind of horrible brain injury, to have said such a terrible thing! “Oh Father, what have I done wrong?”

And Hermione? She just laughed, yet behind the humour there was an edge of steely resolve that told Gabriel she wasn’t joking, and there was no chance she’d be letting this go. He had the terrible, terrible feeling they were about to become some sort of hunters– where had he gone wrong with her, that she ran towards trouble instead of away, actually seeking it out if it didn’t manage to find her first?

“I hate everything.” He decided, out loud.

“So that’s a yes?” Hermione asked cheekily, before her expression turned to something more serious. “I like helping people,” she said quietly. “I like making a difference, a real difference, and saving lives... that’s making a true difference in this world.”

“Sometimes it's the humans that deserve to die,” Gabriel told her, just as serious now. Hermione was already powerful and he knew her power would only continue to grow– he needed her to understand the fundamental truth that most hunters didn’t before he’d feel at all comfortable enabling her in this way; humans weren’t always in the right. The magical, the supernatural, sometimes they killed for a good fucking reason– the majority of his fellow tricksters, for example. Sometimes the situation wasn’t so straightforward. Sometimes the humans they killed deserved to die. Hunters were always so determined to believe that the magical, the supernatural, was evil; they never spared a thought to the fact that the dryads slaughtering workmen were doing so because the humans were chopping down their homes of hundreds if not thousands of years, they just saw beings that weren’t human killing humans and judged them as monstrously evil then passed and carried out the death sentence.

Attempts to try and get them to see reason were a lesson in futility that Gabriel had given up long ago. If he came across hunters now, he observed them, judged them, and if they were the ‘good’ type, the ones who actually cared enough about the living to do some good in the world, he let them ‘kill’ him and they’d both continue on their way. If they weren’t, well, tricksters dealt with those in the need of learning a lesson one way, and rarely was that way non-lethal. He would never deny Hermione the right to make her own choices in life, his priestess she may be but he wasn’t the monster hunters thought he was, but he wouldn’t ever enable her to become the monster far too many hunters were, in soul if not body.

Hermione frowned at him, an honest confusion and slight annoyance in those expressive eyes of hers, like she couldn’t understand how he couldn’t understand. “Loki,” she said slowly, with a tinge of exasperation, “I’d really like to think I have at the very least a decent understanding of the fact that humans aren’t saints– human teenagers bullied my sister until she took her own life, and humans burned Sylvianne at stake. Humans can be truly awful– and the supernatural can be so, so good, like you and your family and Dr. Mia. But there are also the good humans, like Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran and my cousins and Astrid, and there are also awful supernaturals, like that ghoul and the Nökken and O-Odin.

“Loki,” she leaned forwards as she repeated his name, her eyes bright and earnest and flaying him right to the core of his grace, burning with sincerity as they met his own, “if there’s one thing you’ve taught me, it’s that there’s no such thing as black and white in this world. Right and wrong doesn’t always exist in such rigid categories with clear distinctions. That selkie that hurt me, when I was seven, I don’t regret fighting back or hurting it, I’m not ashamed of wanting to survive and wanting Angus to survive, but it was young and lost, it was barely more then baby that didn’t know any better. If I found out about a similar situation, I’d want to help the selkie... even if it had hurt
someone. When I say I want to help people, to help save lives, I'm not just talking about human lives, because human lives aren't the only ones that matter.”

“I am very proud of you right now,” Gabriel told her, not even trying to fight or deny the urge to pull her up into his arms, ignoring Vashti’s indignant squawk as the sudden action nearly unseated her from her usual perch on Hermione’s shoulder.

“So is that a yes?” Hermione asked hopefully, snuggling into his arms without hesitation, completely comfortable in arms that had the strength to rip her apart without any effort and trusting entirely that they wouldn’t even bruise her.

“It’s an ‘if I find a situation I believe applies while doing my business then I’ll consider fetching you’,,” he told her with a sigh and she let out a high sound of excitement that had him rolling his eyes. “I’m definitely going to regret this,” he muttered, wondering if this was his Father at work—how had he managed to teach Hermione to be tricksy so well, but fail entirely to teach her proper pagan self-preservation?

It was absolutely, definitely all God’s fault. Gabriel had no doubt at all—he’d had to inherit his streak of mischief and love of irony from someone, after all.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE:

As time continued to pass, just as time had the unfortunate tendency to do, the air in Norway gained a sharp bite and the days started to turn colder. The afternoons were still sunny and pleasantly warm, but the shift in weather was an unwelcome reminder that autumn approached, bringing with it Hermione's eleventh birthday– and the delivery of her Hogwarts letter.

From what Gabriel had learned in the time he'd spent observing the Wizarding world, because Hermione was a 'muggleborn' Hogwarts would send a representative to her home (so he was going to have to take her back to her neglectful parents soon too, a thoroughly unpleasant prospect) to introduce her and her parents to magic. Gabriel didn't think Helen and Richard Granger would react very well to this revelation, he was actually fairly certain that they'd end up sending Hermione back to Fraserburgh in an attempt to once again distance themselves from their daughter, but that wasn't his main concern.

No, his main concern was that the time for Hermione to go off to Hogwarts, where she'd be beyond his reach, was approaching much faster then he'd wanted. He'd examined and re-examined the warding blocking him from Hogwarts, and it was both thorough and frustratingly powerful. Whoever had created the wards hadn't done so accidentally– they'd very intentionally assured that Hogwarts was impenetrable to angels. Gabriel was confident he'd be able to break them if it was a case of Hermione's life or death, but there was no chance he'd be able to do it without using enough grace to broadcast to even the lowliest cherubim exactly who he was and where he was. It was the very definition of a last resort, and the idea of Hermione getting hurt while he was unable to protect her had him both wanting to destroy something and order his son and grandchild to step up her training, even though it wasn't really physically possible for them to do so.

Maybe he could tweak with her biology a bit? Increase her healing, strength, speed, endurance and agility? She had enough of his grace in her that it wouldn't be hard, and human bodies were very malleable, very simple to meddle with... if he told her not to, Hermione wouldn't even ask before giving her consent– as uneasy as the thought sometimes made him, he knew if he asked his young priestess to jump, she'd be in the air before even asking 'how high?', that if he told her to step off the side of a cliff, she'd do it without hesitation (perversely, it also made him both proud and smug, but he tried not to indulge those cruder, wilder parts of himself).

He'd feel (and rightfully so) like he was tricking her if he told her not to ask what she was consenting for, like he was taking advantage of her devoutness when he knew how she felt about cheating– and to Hermione, it would be cheating. She believed in hard, honest work, and he was already cringing in preparation for the day (by his Father's grace, may it never come) she realised he'd tweaked her brain slightly to help her pick up languages, movement sequences, and information more efficiently.

He was also cringing in preparation of having to inform her that she was going to have to go back to London. He'd put it off as long as he possibly could, he really had, but in early August, just over a month until Hermione's birthday, he finally broke the news.

Hermione... well, her whole form drooped, shoulders curling forwards as her face fell in dismay. "I guess I've been waiting for this for a while now," she said miserably and with no small amount of
"It sucks, I know," Gabriel didn't bother to pretty up his words, instead just stating it as it was. "But it's not going to be forever. You know better than that. And before that dickwad Odin, you were actually beginning to get into a good routine in London."

"I'm going to be ahead of all my classes again," she muttered and he shrugged.

"So take the tests to skip another year. We both know you can do it." What went unsaid between them was that she'd been fully capable of skipping the year before, but had refrained for the sake of her good friends 'Hugo' and 'Muriel'—also known in his head as McChicken and McNuggets. Or at least that's what he intended on doing to Huginn when he caught the feathery asshole. It could join Muninn in whatever part of the Empty animals twisted by pagan magic that had just been smote by pissed off angels ended up in. Nowhere good, he hoped.

"And," he continued, "you've got Vashti this time. She's going to be there with you, whenever I'm not."

Hermione's face brightened at that reminder, turning slightly to face the young phoenix, their eyes meeting as silent passed between them and whatever Vashti 'said' made Hermione giggle. Watching her communicate with Vashti hurt a bit, he'd admit—it reminded him of how he'd talked to his siblings, the private 'radio waves' of communication between them that he'd long-since blocked out, and the chorus, oh the chorus... once, they had been glorious; before Lucifer Fell, before Michael withdrew, before Raphael, their healer, was forced to become a general in a war... once, they had been glorious, the four archangels leading the Choirs of Heaven in the Song of the Universe, and everything now just sounded like cheap imitation.

How many of the angels in Heaven today had never heard the four archangels sing in harmony? How many of them remembered? How many of them forgot?

How many of them had been made to forget?

A warm, squishy, infinitely fragile, breakable little mortal hand gently rested atop his own, softly squeezing in an attempt to give comfort, and Gabriel couldn't help his smile as he looked over into the kind, concerned eyes of his little priestess, then looked further, to where his grace was wrapped around her human soul, shining bright and gold, as wild and untamed as her spirit.

Maybe he'd lost his first family, but he wasn't alone. He had a new family; he had a daughter, he had sons, he had grandchildren, he had friends, and he had the most devoted priestess a god could ever hope for to call his own. He loved his Father and he loved Michael, Lucifer, and Raphael; he'd never not love them, that love was a part of his very grace and intrinsic to his existence, but he'd started to move forwards, to move on. The Earth hadn't stopped spinning, the Stars hadn't stopped moving, and neither should he. His Father hadn't created the Universe to be stagnant, He'd created it as ever-changing, always evolving, and it was time for Gabriel to follow in its image.

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Saying goodbye to Sköll and Astrid, the kind couple who had opened their house up to Hermione for the last ten months, had been rough. She certainly hadn't grown any fonder of goodbyes, and she couldn't help the instinctive fear that she'd never see them again, like far too many people she'd said goodbye to. Hati and Váli were easier, as both had promised to visit with no intention of letting her 'slack off', but Astrid and Sköll were mortal, they didn't have the power to visit whenever they felt like it, and saying goodbye to Henningsvær... now that had hurt most of all. She'd called the island her home for long enough to get attached and it positively ached to leave it
behind, to return to busy, packed London with its lack of old, wild, natural magic humming against her skin.

It probably didn't help that the very first thing she had planned for her unfortunate return to London was to attend a funeral. Fenris wasn't actually dead, of course, but with his godhood restored, his mortal life was at an end and so Fenris Lupin had officially "died". After hearing about his upcoming 'death' for the sake of his mortal family so that they could say a permanent goodbye, Hermione had felt an obligation to attend the funeral— after all, Fenris had "died" to help save her from Odin, and even if that was Odin's fault, not hers, she still felt a sense of responsibility and decided that she owed it to both Fenris and to what was left of his mortal family who had lost their beloved friend/father/grandfather to be there.

Loki had decided to time her return to London around the funeral, something she'd originally judged as a questionable decision, and yet to her surprise, it actually turned out to be good for her, a sharp reminder that while she had lost another home, the 'people' she loved still lived. Loki had decided to attend the funeral with her, and though he wouldn't admit it, claiming he was only attending so she wouldn't be alone, Hermione had a feeling his decision to accompany her was made for a similar reason as to why she'd chosen to attend herself.

It wasn't a large funeral; most of Fenris's human friends had already passed away from old age, but his human family were there— Lyall Lupin, his adopted son, Lyall's wife Hope, and their son, Fenris's grandson, Remus.

She'd dressed for the funeral in a flowy black dress that trailed on the ground, partly to hide the fact she was wearing steel-soled black boots underneath it that weren't really funeral-appropriate, a pair of black elbow-length opera gloves, her golden locket with the embossed lily, and a wreath of white stargazer lilies which she'd pinned to her hair like a crown. Her braided bracelet was obvious against the dark fabric of her glove, but she liked that it was obvious, liked the bold claim marking her as one of Loki's own. Vashti had remained behind, and though Hermione didn't particularly like being separated from her, not since the Nökken incident, for a phoenix everything 'far' was simply a matter of bending space and moving time— if Hermione needed her, or if she needed Hermione, Vashti could be at her side in moments. Not that Hermione thought she'd need Vashti there, not when Loki was attending with her, her god disguised as a much older man, one with wrinkles and spotted skin and wiry white hair, who she was posing as the granddaughter of so that their presence made sense.

The funeral service itself was short but sweet. There was no coffin, as there was no real body, just a magical construct that had been created to fool the human officials, and now all that remained was a handsome urn containing ashes that had apparently been scooped up from the site of the battle against Odin. Lyall Lupin, hair grey, face lined and blue eyes heavy with grief, gave a short, shaky, emotional speech about the strong, positive influence Fenris had been over his life and how he hoped that wherever his father was now, he'd been reunited with Mardi. Loki had winced slightly beside her, hearing that. Hermione winced too— pagan gods didn't have an afterlife, not the way humans did. Fenris would never get to reunite with Mardi Lupin.

There was a short reception after the funeral service. Lyall didn't really talk to anyone, slumped in a chair with his head in his hands, and Hope spent most of her time comforting him, so the responsibility fell to their son to make the rounds, thanking the funeral attendees.

Remus Lupin was a kind though ill-looking man with tired blue eyes, sandy-brown hair flecked with grey, a pale face with premature lines and a number of faint scars that cut across his cheeks that had Hermione's hand drifting automatically to her abdomen, to where her own scars were located. "Hullo," he greeted both her and Loki quietly, though there was something a touch curious
evident on his weary face as his eyes met theirs. "Thank you for your support here today. I'm Lyall's son and Fenris's grandson, Remus Lupin. I don't believe we've met?"

"No, we haven't met," Loki agreed, 'shuffling' forwards to accept Remus's offered hand in a gentle shake. "I knew Fenris a good many years ago, and when I heard of his death, I wished to pay my respects to his family. He loved you all a great deal, always had a new story to tell when we met up."

"Well, I'm sure he'd appreciate you being here," Remus said, sounding very genuine about it too, before turning to smile down at her. Hermione smiled back, wondering if he’d noticed how Loki had failed to introduce either of them, though she was immediately distracted when, as she accepted his hand to shake, she felt something inside her react to his touch, like there was some sort of current under his skin... not electricity, or heat, not anything like Loki’s touch, but something more reminiscent of Hati, Váli and Fenris... something wild (and hungry).

"What was that?" she whispered to Loki after, once Remus had continued on to the next attendees, though he did glance back at them several more times, as if he'd wanted to stay and talk, but propriety had demanded he continued his rounds.

"Hmm," Loki said thoughtfully, looking down at her with shrewd eyes. "Interesting."

"Informative." Hermione sighed, only just managing not to roll her eyes at the non-answer. Loki looked like he was only holding back a laugh at her expression because of how inappropriate the sound would be in their current surroundings.

"Okay kitten," he said, with hushed amusement in his voice, "time to go, I think."

"Alright," she agreed, with one last look around the room, her gaze pausing briefly on the mourning, grief-stricken Lyall. "I feel really bad for him." She admitted, and Loki rested a hand on her shoulder, squeezing in comfort.

"Death is a very natural part of life, honey," he said to her gently. "Lyall's father was old, and Lyall would have been expecting this for some time now. He's grieving because the loss that accompanies death is sad, there's no question there, but he'll recover, and he'll move on. Humans do that, they're remarkably adaptable creatures."

"I still feel bad," Hermione sighed, but she followed Loki out of the small function center where the funeral service had been held (Fenris had specified a compulsory lack of Christian-influence in his Last Will and Testament for his funeral arrangements), and in a click of her god's fingers, she was standing in her London bedroom for the first time in about ten months. "Home sweet home," she muttered as she looked around the bedroom with a frown, one that immediately darkened to a scowl as she spotted the monogrammed bookbag Huginn and Muninn had given her for her tenth birthday.

Marching over to it, she roughly emptied its contents onto her bedcover before focusing her magic the way she'd been taught– and, in a rush of heat, the bookbag burst into flames, burning to ash in just seconds.

As if summoned by the fire she'd set, Vashti appeared with her own burst of flames, flickering golden ones that disappeared as quickly as they appeared, leaving the beautiful young phoenix in their wake, hovering in place on brilliant wings of emerald shot through with a gold as bright and vivid as the sunlight filtering through the bedroom window as she looked around the room for a place to land. Loki very thoughtfully transported Vashti's perch to her room with a snap of his fingers, along with all Hermione's important belongings, such as her charmed trunk of clothes,
books, various odds and ends from her travels and her altar, and Vashti glided over to her golden perch.

"I don't think you'll be here long, if it's any consolation," her god said gently, as Hermione prodded the ashes of the bookbag with the tip of her boot. "We both know your parents aren't going to react well to the Hogwarts messenger."

"That's still an entire month away," Hermione said gloomily, and Loki ruffled her hair affectionately.

"Well we're not all about to just abandon you," he said. "Váli and Hati aren't about to stop teaching you now, and you've got all those exams to study for if you want to skip another year... or two."

"Or three," Hermione huffed, with the (admittedly well-deserved) arrogance of a child who'd gotten bored of studying Latin and had turned her attention to Archaic Latin, looking for a greater challenge.

"Or three," her god agreed with a grin. "And for each year level you do skip," he added enticingly, "I'll take you on a 'hunt'." He pulled a slight face there, but Hermione couldn't help her sudden smile and excitement. Though—

"Not a hunt," she reminded him, "there are too many negative connotations involved if you call it that."

"What do we call it, then?" Loki asked, with an amused look, and Hermione paused thoughtfully.

"Hmm... seeking out justice, maybe? That is the trickster's way."

"I'll take you on a trip 'seeking out justice', then," Loki said, with a laugh and another affectionate hair ruffle before he disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

The room already felt colder without his presence. Her god was the ray of sun in the dark and cold, and Hermione already yearned to bask in his glowing warmth once again. Instead of letting herself sink into those thoughts as she would have done in the past, however, she focused on Dr. Mia's advice and turned her attention to the still-present Vashti.

'He's about as fond of goodbyes as I am,' she sent to the young phoenix, who projected a snickered agreement before looking around with curious golden eyes.

'I remember this place... I hatched here,' she sent curiously, and Hermione nodded.

'You did. On our birthday— you were the best present I could have ever asked for.'

'Well of course I was,' Vashti preened, angling her wings just so, so that the light of the afternoon sun through the window caught and set the already brilliant feathers ablaze with golden light.

'You're as beautiful as you are vain,' Hermione teased her, and Vashti only fluffed her breast-feathers in agreement.

Hermione peeled off the opera gloves and changed out of the black dress she'd worn to the funeral, packing them into the trunk and trading them for a pretty vintage soft blue dress with long sleeves and a dark blue velvet ribbon around the waist. She also pulled on a pair of pink socks decorated with bright, colourful fabric butterflies that didn't match even slightly but she knew her mother would hate (sometimes her passive-aggression surprised even her).
Despite steeling herself for the worst, however, the reunion with her parents turned out to be very anti-climactic. Upon reflection, Hermione wasn't really sure why she'd ever expected anything different—they didn't know she'd been gone for ten months, to them it was just an ordinary night and her parents had never spared much, if any, time for her on ordinary nights, too caught up in their own worlds to spare any attention to hers.

It was in near tears that she stormed back up to her room, half throwing herself onto her bed in a fit of miserable temper. Vashti was at her side in moments, letting out small, comforting croons, and Hermione rolled onto her side so the young phoenix could curl against her stomach. Taking several deep breaths, she made an effort to move beyond her immediate reaction to her parents' indifference and the onrush of old memories of this house, of this room even, reminding herself about what Dr. Mia had said.

_start small. Set achievable goals. Establish a support system. Be proud of your achievements and the progress you make, no matter how small._

"I didn't get into an argument with them," she said out loud, her voice only hitching slightly. "That's an achievement. Technically."

A small one, yes, but Dr. Mia had specifically mentioned small achievements.

_They don't matter anyway,' Vashti declared haughtily. 'you don't need them, you've got me._

_Yes, I do have you,' Hermione agreed, carefully curling her arm around Vashti to snuggle the young phoenix and projecting her feelings of warmth and affection to their link. 'I love you, V._

_I love you too,' Vashti crooned back, before she started to sing, a soft, warbling little song that resonated directly to her very soul, or at least that was how it felt.

And contrary to her expectations, Hermione had no nightmares that night.

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Chapter End Notes

To any interested, Lyall Lupin is still a wizard, a 'muggleborn' (he's adopted, for those who may have forgotten). Fenris never informed Gabriel at the time as Gabriel was never very involved in his 'mortal' lives, or his mortal families, and Lyall never involved his 'muggle' parents in the magical world. Fenris will mention it if it comes up, but so far it hasn't. This may or may not be an act of passive aggression on Fenris's part—he is his father's son ;)


CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX:

For once neither tragedy or catastrophe followed in the wake of Hermione’s return to London. Vashti’s presence certainly helped, as did all the exercise she was getting, both physical and mental, the frequency of visits from Loki, Hati, and Váli– and even Eris on one occasion– and her commitment to keeping in weekly contact with Dr. Mia for her therapy sessions.

Dr. Mia had offered to move back with Hermione to London, but Sköll had nagged Loki into offering himself up as a teleporting taxi service so she could stay. Hermione knew that her therapist was relieved– Dr. Mia felt like she owed Loki, but she’d also opened a new practice on Austvågøya, one of the main islands of the Lofoten archipelago and connected by bridge to Henningsvær, and had befriended Sköll and Astrid, particularly Astrid, both women having grown close– hence the nagging from Sköll, who loved his wife and wanted her to be happy. Hermione knew Loki felt he owed Sköll and Astrid for their generosity in opening their home to her, so he had given in to Sköll’s nagging pretty quickly.

Dr. Mia had been hesitant about Hermione’s decision to skip more years of school considering she was already in year nine and amongst children three to four years her senior. The therapist was concerned for her social health, but she was still supportive of her choice– they both knew that Hermione wasn’t about to trust her peers again in a hurry, and she was bored in her classes. At least an accelerated learning would be more interesting to her, a challenge to keep her mind occupied and far less likely to turn against her.

Unlike Dr. Mia, the school guidance counsellor she managed to get into contact with had been much less supportive. He was reluctant to schedule the testing involved to allow her to skip levels of schooling, including her GCSE examinations, even when she clearly demonstrated her capability, and Hermione ended up going over his head, petitioning directly to the Headmaster of Red Roofs and playing on his desire for good publicity for Red Roofs as the new school year was about to begin. It worked too, and the man bulldozed over the counsellor’s protests, scheduling the necessary tests which Hermione buckled down to study for and passed in flying colours, of course. The GCSE examiners were particularly impressed by her linguistic skills, as coming across a ten, nearly eleven, year old polyglot was quite unusual. That wasn’t to say she wasn’t up to scratch in the various other subjects required– Mathematics, English, English Literature, the sciences, History, etc.; she sat and aced them all.

Once all the placement testing and GCSE examinations were complete, Hermione wasn’t at all surprised to find she’d passed, and with excellent scores at that, and despite the fact the new school year was just mere weeks from starting several different prestigious schools offered her academic scholarships for her final two years of high school to complete her A-Levels. Her parents were delighted, of course, and all too pleased to have her photograph published in the local paper. Hermione was less pleased, but as an early birthday present that was also a congratulatory present for passing her GCSE’s, they had bought tickets for the family to visit France, where her father had cousins and second cousins that Hermione hadn’t met before.

The idea of a family holiday was a surprisingly nice one. Hermione didn’t think they’d gone on a family holiday since before Ness had... since before Ness. Maybe it would bring them closer together, or at least offer her a form of closure if they rejected her after the Hogwarts letter, like she
suspected (and quietly dreaded) they would. Either way, it was something to look forward to for the first week of September.

More exciting than the upcoming trip to France, however, was Loki keeping his word about the three Not-Hunts he now owed her, and a week before the planned trip to France he whisked her off to Brighton, a coastal town in Australia where five people had been found dead after coming in contact with a corrosive, highly toxic and currently unidentified poison, and the authorities suspected foul play was involved. One of the five was just a child, not even six years old– it was why Loki had even heard of it, her god didn’t look kindly on humans who murdered children. He’d brought her into it to fulfill his promise after realising it wasn’t a human murderer after all.

Loki told her he’d already solved the mystery, and that he wanted to see how she handled the situation– and after wrestling a promise that he wouldn’t let anyone else die if she was too slow, Hermione agreed and set to work. One of the first things she learned was that each of the victims had visited the town’s local beach within an hour of their demise– the beach had actually been shut off from the public and teams from the Australian Department of Health had combed through it searching for a possible source of the toxic poison.

Hermione didn’t go search through the beach, though, instead she focused her attention on both her reference materials and the medical autopsy reports in an attempt to match some sort of magical creature to the symptoms. It was the keen observation of one medical examiner that the two victims they’d performed the autopsy on appeared to have suffered some sort of electrocution prior to their deaths that finally let her narrow down what magical creature was likely responsible, no matter how unlikely it should be.

“Loki,” she said, on her second day in Australia, “please don’t laugh, I know how ridiculous this sounds, but... were these people all killed by a Mongolian Death Worm!”

“Well, when you’ve eliminated the impossible,” Loki shrugged, and Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise at the roundabout confirmation. She’d known that the symptoms matched– Mongolian Death Worms were capable of both spitting out a highly corrosive and very deadly venom and of electrocution from a distance, and the evidence of the unlikely combination of symptoms was the only reason why she’d ever even considered them a possibility when it should be impossible.

“Why would one even be here?” She asked, honestly bewildered. “They’re only supposed to inhabit the most arid, sandy regions of the western Gobi Desert– and this is clearly not a desert!”

“You’ll just have to figure that out,” Loki told her, clearly not about to give her the answers for free– and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to thank him or strangle him for it.

The next step would usually be actually finding the Death Worm before it hurt or killed anyone else, but Loki insisted that she find out how a Mongolian Death Worm would ever show up in an Australian town before finding the Death Worm itself, promising her again that he wouldn’t let anyone else get hurt while she did so.

It didn’t take her too long to figure it out, and she was appalled by what she found. Brighton happened to be the home town of a relatively well-known (in his field) scientist who had recently returned from a research trip to the Gobi Desert. Hermione, sick to her stomach at the horridness of it all, suspected he’d brought home either the egg of a Mongolian Death Worm, or a very young specimen that he’d have been able to smuggle into the country. The imported Death Worm had hatched/grown, then escaped– and subsequently found itself lost, alone and suffering out of its natural environment. It had found the beach, the sand the closest imitation to the Gobi Desert in Brighton and had holed itself up somewhere buried in the sand. Its victims, Hermione suspected, had merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time, accidentally disturbing the Death Worm
who had lashed out in fear against the perceived intruders.

It was horrible, and a child had died, which was heartbreaking, but... was it really the fault of a frightened, young creature, taken from its home, its natural habitat, and who had only really been defending itself?

Hermione abruptly realised why her god had chosen this Not-Hunt to be her first. She’d declared that she understood the world wasn’t black and white, that sometimes humans were the ones at fault. She’d said that she wanted to help save lives, and not just human lives, because human lives weren’t the only ones that mattered, and that if she found herself in a situation like the one with the selkie, young, lost and alone, terrified and far from its pod, she’d want to help the selkie, even if it had hurt someone.

This Not-Hunt was a chance to prove she meant everything she’d told him... and she had meant it. She’d meant every word, and she truly did believe in the Death Worm’s relative innocence in this horrible situation. It had killed those people, including the child, that was irrefutable, but if it wasn’t for the scientist who’d brought it to Brighton, then those people never would have been placed in danger from the Death Worm— a terrified, wounded animal would rip someone apart if it was cornered, Hermione could personally attest to that. If there was anyone to blame for the horrible situation, it was the scientist who’d started it all.

And that’s what she told Loki, that was the judgment she passed— and when he smiled at her with pride and approval both, she knew she’d passed his test.

He took her to the beach after that, using his magic to hide them both from the police car guarding the entrance, the rotating patrolmen there to prevent any more people from entering the beach, which was currently closed off to the public. Finding the Death Worm wasn’t hard— Mongolian Death Worms lived in the hottest parts of the Gobi Desert, so all she had to do was ask Vashti to use the flames under her feathers to create an intense heat source and the Death Worm was drawn straight to them.

Nearly four feet long, thick as a grown man’s thigh and dark red in colouring with large spike-like projections at each end of its body, the Death Worm was intimidating to look at, to say the least. While Hermione’s immediate instinct was to skewer it with her Keris dagger, she instead used her magic to stun it— thankfully, due to their isolation from humans and witches and wizards alike, the Mongolian Death Worm had never developed any resistance to magic— before gladly handing over responsibility to Loki to transport it back to the Gobi Desert, far from any humans.

And then it was time to pay the scientist a little visit. She might have... ‘forgiven’ wasn’t the right word, but she had understood why the Death Worm had lashed out and murdered people, and both she and Loki had agreed that in its natural habitat, far, far away from civilisation, the Death Worm didn’t pose a risk to other humans, but five people had still died. A child had died. And there would be consequences for that.

It was only the fact that the scientist hadn’t meant for anyone to die that spared his life, though the discovery of a second Mongolian Death Worm in the locked basement of his home that he’d renovated into a laboratory clearly sorely tested Loki’s agreement to spare his life. But Hermione believed a trickster’s primary objective was not malevolence, it was to teach, and if the man died, he wouldn’t learn from his horrible mistake. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t suffer for the deaths on his hands, though— the Death Worms had both been juveniles, barely two months old, and one of them had killed a child. There would be just desserts for what had happened, to both the Death Worms and the victims.

She and Loki had talked it through before confronting the scientist, and in the end they’d decided
to strip him of his ability to understand language and communicate before dumping him in a foreign land where he would get to experience being lost and confused and panicked. He wouldn’t be killed, the area Loki dumped him in wasn’t dangerous enough that he’d end up dead, just remote, rough and nowhere near Australia, but he’d suffer and he’d learn from that suffering. In seven years time, he’d wake up back in Australia– one year of his life for each of his victims, the two Death Worms included. It was both a kinder and a crueler fate then killing him outright, and it would certainly teach him a lesson he’d never forget.

“I’m impressed with how you dealt with this situation,” Loki told her after the scientist had been banished and the second Mongolian Death Worm returned to the Gobi Desert, speaking to her with uncharacteristic seriousness.

“I meant it,” Hermione said quietly, exhausted and slightly shaken but still satisfied with how the Not-Hunt had ended. “I want to help those who need helping.”

Loki sighed, giving her a look that was both tender and tired. “And I really am proud of you, Hermione,” he murmured, leaning forward to ruffle her hair, “but I want you to be careful too. A bleeding heart is all well and good, but you don’t want to bleed to death.”

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Three days after the Mongolian Death Worm Not-Hunt (and she really needed to think up a proper name for the Not-Hunts), Hermione boarded a plane headed to Paris with her parents and promptly decided that she much preferred travelling by god or phoenix, or even apparation, over the slow, drawn-out affair that was travel via plane. And considering just how much she disliked apparation, that was really saying something. They arrived in Paris in the early hours of the morning, and from the airport, they booked a cab to where they’d be staying at the house of Richard’s grandparents, both who’d been born and raised in France, Richard's mother having moved to England in her early twenties where she’d met Richard's father.

Hermione's great-grandmother, Richard Granger’s grandmother, was waiting for them when they arrived at her large home. Jeanne de Beauvoir, a small woman made even smaller by her advanced age (for a human), but with eyes that were clear and sharp with intelligence, was Hermione’s namesake– her middle name, Jean, was in honour of Jeanne. As well as Jeanne, Hermione would be introduced to several cousins, two uncles and an aunt that she honestly didn’t pay much attention to over the next week in Paris, but none of them had the same impact on Hermione as her great-grandmother did.

Jeanne had lived a full life that Hermione admired and her great-grandmother regaled her over her week in France with stories of her exploits and experiences over the decades she'd lived. Jeanne, Hermione learned, had lived in Paris all through its occupation by German forces during World War II following the six week blitzkrieg in May and June of 1940 where France had been rapidly defeated by Nazi Germany and she'd participated alongside other Parisians during that time in a general strike that escalated into a full-scale uprising and witnessed firsthand the Liberation of Paris. Hermione listened with wide-eyed fascination as Jeanne described the jubilant crowds of Parisians following the German surrender of the city in spite of Hitler's orders to fight to the last man and destroy Paris rather than allow it to fall to the Allies, finding her great-grandmother’s stories of life under such a regime, both surviving it and fighting it as best she could, amazing and inspirational.

Hermione also found Jeanne's other stories, the ones featuring her activism in promoting women’s rights, refusing to accept the post-war ‘reaffirmation’ of traditional gender roles– although women in France had been given the right to vote in 1945, their new political right was not accompanied by
social, economic and sexual emancipation and Jeanne had been one of those who’d fought for such
differences– and her journey of furthering her education just as amazing and inspirational. Jeanne
sincerely believed in the benefits of education and was a very intelligent woman– she’d been a
professor of Literature at a prestigious Parisian university before her retirement, and despite being
in her nineties, she was still involved with the university’s board. To say that Hermione was
delighted to have someone to discuss different texts she’d read with would be an understatement–
nobody had ever understood and returned her love of books before the way that Jeanne did.

Her time with Jeanne wasn’t just spent listening to her great-grandmother telling stories of her life
or discussing great works of literature, though Hermione privately thought she’d have been quite
happy to spend the entire holiday listening to Jeanne talk. Her great-grandmother was a strong
supporter of the arts, declaring the worth of a civilisation could be judged on how it respected and
practiced the arts that brought such joy to the world and contributed far more to the betterment of
humanity than war and violence ever had, and she took Hermione to visit several French museums,
including the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay, as well as to a showing of a still-famous French play
from the 1700s called Candide. In the play, one of the characters exclaimed “Surely this is the best
of all possible worlds!” and Hermione found the words to resonate strongly within her as she
thought of how she was living her life. Things weren’t perfect, and she knew better than to expect
such an impossibility, but she was happy, and that... well, that felt like the best of all possible
worlds.

Hermione would have been quite happy to spend her entire holiday with Jeanne, but her parents
insisted she join them as they went on a sight-seeing tour of the city of Paris. Hermione didn’t
argue with them as she didn’t have anything against seeing more of Paris, she just wished that
Jeanne could have joined them. Still, it was fascinating to visit some of Paris’s most famed
destinations, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Palais Garnier, along with
some of its lesser-known sites of interest too (and if her parents noticed that she managed to avoid
visiting any churches, chapels or cathedrals, well, they didn’t say anything).

One such lesser-known site of interest they visited was the Place du Châtelet, a public square on
the right river bank of the Seine, at the north end of the Pont au Change bridge. The Place du
Châtelet got its name– Châtelet– from a stronghold that used to guard the northern end of the Pont
au Change until the stronghold was destroyed during the first decade of the 1800’s. The Grand
Châtelet, which had contained a court, police headquarters and a number of prisons, had laid claim
to a sinister reputation– and amongst many others who met their end there, four witches by the
names of Margot de la Barre, Marion la Droiturière, Jehenne de Brigue, and Macette de Ruilly had
been sentenced by the judges of the Châtelet during the fourteenth century to be burned at stake
after they’d been tortured into confessing invocations of the Devil and abjuration of Christ, with
their grisly sentences later carried out.

Their cases and trials at the Châtelet were notable in both muggle and magical history as examples
of the shift in attitude towards sorcery and witchcraft that occurred as the Middle Ages drew to a
close, and witches and wizards who’d long held a traditional role in society, and in the very fabric
of the muggle communities they lived in, more and more often found themselves instead the
victims of the muggle judicial system. Once trusted and consulted by their muggle neighbours,
witches and wizards like Margot de la Barre, Marion la Droiturière, Jehenne de Brigue, and Macette de Ruilly
found themselves dragged off to torture chambers, where they were tormented into confessing their allegiances to the Devil and were sentenced to death in a variety of terrible
means, not limited to drowning, stoning and burning– that is, if they survived the torture, or the
deadly infection that often followed if the execution failed to take place soon enough.

It wasn’t until over two hundred years after the executions of Margot de la Barre and the other
three witches that the International Statute of Secrecy was made international wizarding law in the
magical world, but their deaths were what had prompted the Ministère des Affaires Magiques de la France (the French Ministry of Magic) to create its own laws introducing a segregation of the magical and muggle communities. After all, while some of the executed witches and wizards had been falsely accused muggles, others decidedly weren’t— and despite the popular propaganda promoted centuries later by purebloods who refused to believe muggles could defeat them, a good number of witches and wizards hadn’t been able to fight off or escape the muggles' "justice" and had been subsequently executed.

It was all as interesting as it was horrifying, and as Hermione’s eyes were drawn to the site where the Grand Châtelet had once stood, she couldn’t help but feel relieved it was gone. While she did believe in the preservation of historical sites, no matter how horrible, there was something quite unsettling about the lingering, ambient magic of Place du Châtelet. She was quite happy to leave it, though she was still pleased to have had the opportunity to visit it too— not all experiences worth having were positive ones, but it didn’t make them any less worthwhile or significant. Place du Châtelet held a history that although grim was an important part of her heritage as a witch, and she owed her respects to Margot de la Barre, Marion la Droiturière, Jehenne de Brigue, and Macette de Ruilly and the other innocents who’d lost their lives at the Grand Châtelet, but whose deaths had heralded such significant change within the French magical community.

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Loki didn’t come to visit Hermione until the second last day of her holiday, but when he did he took her to visit the main magical arrondissement of France, their equivalent to Britain’s magical district Diagon Alley, which was located in the 6th arrondissement of Paris.

Hermione found it intriguing that the French magical arrondissement would be located in the muggle arrondissement considered the heart of the Catholic Church power in Paris for centuries. The 6th arrondissement of Paris hosted many religious institutions, with the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés as the most notable inclusion. Considering the role the Church played in the condemnation of witchcraft, it was an... interesting choice of location for the magical arrondissement. Was it perhaps the prevalence of those who did not worship the Christian god in the area that had led to so many religious institutions being built there? Or perhaps the area had been chosen by the magical population because of the prevalence of already-existing religious institutions that could serve as a convenient smokescreen that nobody would believe could be hiding an entire magical community?

Not unexpectedly, but slightly disappointingly nonetheless, there wasn’t a very significant difference between Diagon Alley to Paris’ own equivalent. Other than the slight differences in fashion and the shop names all (obviously) been in French, it was very similar to Diagon Alley in both construction and content, which mirrored Hermione’s experiences with the magical districts of other European countries she’d visited. She wondered if the similarities between magical districts across Europe was perhaps owed to the ease of international travel for witches and wizards, as compared to muggles they’d had a far easier time sharing their advancements over the centuries.

Despite the similarity, however, it was still exciting to explore— much like Diagon Alley was still exciting for her to visit, even after being aware now of the existence of magical for several years and having visited it with Loki on multiple occasions. Hermione enjoyed her afternoon exploring with Loki, the pair of them browsing through stores together and her god practically buying out half the lolly shop. Loki only left her alone while they were visiting the bookstore, both of them interested in different topics, and so, of course, that was where she found trouble.

The trouble wasn’t actually focused on her, for once, rather she turned a corner while browsing the shelves piled high to the ceiling with precious tomes of knowledge and nearly bumped into a trio of
girls all several years older than her. At first, Hermione thought they were all friends and had mumbled a distracted apology before returning to her browsing, only for something about the encounter to nag at her. She paused, peering back over her shoulder at the trio and the issue quickly made itself obvious in their body language. One of them, the rather beautiful one with the silvery-blond hair, was holding herself defensively, while the postures of the other two girls were far more offensive in nature. Obviously, something wasn't right.

She still had a moment where she considered leaving the silvery-haired girl to it—going by the way she was glaring and snapping back at the other two, she clearly didn't have any problem defending herself and wasn’t in need of a white knight to ride to her rescue— but when one of the girls spat the word ‘half-breed’ loud enough for Hermione to hear, well, before she even realised she was doing it, Hermione was storming over. ‘Half-breed’ was a slur, and a nasty one at that, and considering the two-on-one nature of the confrontation between the trio, Hermione was getting a ‘bullying’ vibe from the interaction, rather than ‘argument’— and she hated bullying.

“Could you possibly keep it down?” she demanded in fluent French once she was closer, causing all three to turn in her direction, and she took care to obviously focus her ire on the two bullies, not the silvery-haired girl. “Some of us are trying to focus, and the nauseating sounds of your ignorance is both distracting and hurting my ears. Do us all a favour, why don’t you, and take your bitchiness far, far away where it can’t bother anyone. Like, the Arctic, maybe?”

“You’re clearly not from around here,” Bully One said with a pointed sniff, looking very offended at Hermione’s interruption. “Delacour—” the girl waved her hand in the silvery-haired girl’s–Delacour’s–direction, “is part-veela.”

“She's a half-breed,” Bully Two confirmed with a sneer, as if that was justification enough for all their... racist? Species-ist?... for all their prejudiced bullshit. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Better a half-breed then a half-wit like you,” she retorted.

“E-Excuse me?” spluttered Bully One, and Hermione arched a condescending eyebrow at her.

“And apparently you really are as stupid as you look,” she said mockingly, “that’s actually quite an achievement. But fine, off you go, you’re excused.” She motioned for them to leave, rolling her eyes again and sighing in a put-upon way when they both just spluttered at her. “Do I really have to spell it out slowly for you? You’re excused. So do this poor bookstore a favour and just get lost already.”

The bullies spluttered a bit more, before one of them managed to pull herself together with a huff. “Come on, Faustine,” Bully Two said, her lip curled in disgust. “This,” she declared, fluttering a hand in Hermione’s direction, “isn’t worth our time.”

More amused at been referred to as ‘this’ then offended, Hermione watched with satisfaction as the two girls left, giving them a cheerful wave and saccharine-sweet smile as they did so, before turning back to Delacour. Delacour did not look happy.

“Why did you do that?” She demanded, her azure-blue eyes flashing with rage and her glare nothing short of blistering. “I didn’t ask for your interference, and I certainly didn’t need it!”

“Look, I only intervened because you looked like you were about to set those two on fire– and I know from experience that that only leads to inconvenient trouble, like getting expelled,” Hermione told her, pausing a moment before adding, “plus, the fire could have hurt the books.” And that would have really annoyed her.
“You’ve set someone on fire?” Delacour asked, distracted from her anger, just as Hermione had intended.

“Just their hair,” she hastily defended herself, “and not on purpose. Well, mostly not on purpose.”

Delacour looked fascinated, and a bit wistful. “I’d like to have set Perreault and Roux’s hair on fire.”

“Are they the two girls who just left?” Hermione asked, and Delacour nodded.

“Prunella Perreault and Faustine Roux,” she said with a haughty sniff of her own. “They’re wretched cows. They’re both in my year at Beauxbatons, but they think that because I have veela blood I shouldn’t be allowed to attend a school of magic!” She spat.

“Urgh,” Hermione pulled a face, “if only closed minds came with closed mouths.”

Delacour let out a startled laugh at that, the last traces of her anger and frustration fading from her face, replaced by curiosity. “You speak French very well, but your accent is British. Did you move to France recently? And are you planning on attending Beauxbatons?” she asked. “It would be nice to have someone there who shares my opinion, and not Perreault and Roux’s.”

“I’m just in France on holiday, sorry,” Hermione apologised, wincing a bit at the disappointment on Delacour’s face. “I’ll be attending Hogwarts when I start my magical schooling.”

“Oh,” Delacour said with a sigh, “that’s a shame. Are you quite sure? Beauxbatons is far superior to Hogwarts,” she said enticingly.

“I’m sure,” Hermione said, with a small smile. “But if you ever want to rant about those ignorant idiots, you could always write to me– I know a lot about revenge pranking.”

“Oh I do quite like the sound of that,” Delacour said with a wicked smirk, “and after two years, my parents are quite sick of hearing me moan about my classmates.”

“I’m Hermione Granger,” Hermione introduced herself, somewhat belatedly, holding out her hand to Delacour to shake. Delacour accepted it, with a smile to match Hermione’s.

“My name is Fleur Delacour, and I think I will enjoy corresponding with you, Hermione Granger.”

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Chapter End Notes

The UK school system was honestly pretty confusing for me, so to clarify a few things (for those like me who know very little about it), this is what my research came up with:

-in the UK secondary education is from age 11-16
-“year nine” is for ages 13-14
-GCSE’s are undertaken at the end of secondary education at age 16, followed by the first legal opportunity to leave school
Once a student finishes secondary education, they have the option to extend into further education to take their A-Levels (or GNVQ's, BTEC's or other such qualifications) after two additional years of studying.

UK students planning to go to college or university must complete further education.

To any UK residents out there, if I got any of that wrong, please correct me!

~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN:

The first hints of dawn were just creeping into the sky when Hermione woke on the morning of her eleventh birthday. As she blinked sleepily around at her room, she couldn’t help her giggles as she took in the decorations— at some point during the night, a factory that manufactured party supplies had exploded in her room… or that’s what it looked like, anyway. Confetti and glitter covered every surface, garlands of streamers draped across the walls, window, overhanging light and bedroom furniture, her ceiling was completely obscured by the sheer number of balloons, a neon yellow party hat had been stuck on a disgruntled Vashti’s head and a large stack of presents wrapped in colourful paper was piled at the foot of her bed, with the exception of one larger one which had to be placed on the floor.

Her god spoiled her rotten and Hermione couldn’t help but love him for it.

“Happy Birthday!” the god in question crowed, appearing in a burst of bright purple smoke and coloured confetti that joined the rest on the ground. Hermione threw back her blanket, sending off another cloud of glitter and confetti into the air, and literally leapt from the mattress and into his arms. Loki caught her, just like she knew he would, and spun her around until she thought she might be sick, and she just snuggled in closer.

A part of her would forever marvel at the fact that this was her god she was touching, that he was holding her and hugging her and was so overwhelmingly present. Their relationship had gone through many changes in the three and a half years they’d known each other, and it felt like she’d aged a million years over the journey that took her from petitioner to devotee to priestess, then changing again after Odin had taken her, when Loki done something, something intangible and indescribable, so he’d always be able to find her, to something even closer.

Sometimes everything was so overwhelming, like the world was spinning too fast on its axis, a fairground ride out of control, but Loki was always there for her; he was the pillar in the chaos, the sun warming her skin when she was cold, heating her up from the outside in and the inside out with his bright smiles and joyous laughter and love, so, so much love.

“Happy eleventh birthday,” he murmured into her head of sleep-wild curls, and she tilted her head so she could beam up at him.

“I get my Hogwarts letter today!” she exclaimed, and he grinned at her.

“Yes you do, but first— present time!” he announced, looking as excited as a child who’d just eaten their own weight in ice-cream, and after wobbling a bit once he’d placed her on the ground (the room was still spinning slightly), Hermione set upon her stack of presents with an excitement tempered only by the reverence she felt that she had people who cared for her so much.

There were lollies, of course— Loki had a sweet-tooth the size of a mammoth’s molar, and he’d passed his predilection on to his children. Fenris had sent her a hamper filled with sweets from across the world, the wolf-god having been doing some travelling after his powers had been restored.

Eris had sent her several dresses, all of them almost-modern takes on traditional styles, and all of them breathtakingly beautiful. Hermione stroked the brightly cut fabrics, silks, gauze, velvets, chiffon and more, with reverence and sent the Greek goddess a prayer of thanks.
Váli had gifted her with a new set of karambits, these ones military grade and designed for fluid motion and easy application of leverage, and a keris dagger that he described in the accompanying card had been forged three hundred years ago and would rattle in its sheathe to warn her of danger.

Hati had also sent her blades for her birthday, which wasn’t surprising, but Hermione was surprised by how aesthetically pleasing the set of stiletto knives were. Deceptively small, delicate and dainty-looking, the blades were light as feathers and beautiful with their floral engravings—according to Hati’s note, they were designed for throwing, which was to be her next lesson.

Loki had also made sure the presents from her Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran arrived on time, along with the card that all six of her cousins had signed, with her Aunt adding a P.S. that their home was still her home too if she wanted it, and that she was always welcome there.

Aunt Iona had mixed her up some bars of homemade lavender soap she’d tied up in brown paper with twine, the smell which reminded Hermione so strongly of the house in Fraserburgh. She and Uncle Arran had also sent her another book, this one written in its original Scottish Gaelic.

Leana had created her a framed collection of the brightly coloured sea-glass Hermione used to collect from around the wharf of Fraserburgh, arranging the bright blues, reds, yellows and greens in the style of flowers with little shells as the centres. Jeanie had made her a matching set of earrings and a bracelet using shark teeth, which Hermione was delighted by—it was slightly strange-looking, but it looked fierce and Hermione adored fierce. Ina had woven her a homemade bookbag clearly inspired by the ocean, made with bright blue, green and sandy colours with little shells in it, a representation of the sea, sand, and sun through weave, and she loved it.

And then dear Angus, the cousin she’d saved, the one closest to her age, had once again gifted her with carvings he’d made himself, these ones much improved from last year; a school of seven fish, each scale carefully carved and painted.

Even her great-grandmother Jeanne had sent her a present, an edition of ‘La Chanson de Roland’ written in its original Old French—Jeanne had taught the epic poem to her students, back when she’d worked as a professor of literature, and she and Hermione had discussed it during her holiday in France. ‘La Chanson de Roland’ was one of the oldest surviving major works of French literature, its original composition dating back to around the eleventh century, and consisted of about 4,000 lines of poetry that Hermione couldn’t wait to start reading.

And then, of course, there were Loki’s presents.

“Jöry’s present is part of this one,” Loki told her as he handed her the first of the three remaining presents, all from him. She eagerly opened the bright, sparkly wrapping paper, revealing a black velvet pouch. When she tipped the pouch open, a bracelet slid out onto her palm.

“More jewellery?” She asked, with a happy smile. Loki looked smug.

“You’re my blótgyðiur,” he told her. “You should be draped in gold and silks and jewels.”

“It’s beautiful,” she told him, because it was. It was a charm bracelet crafted of gracefully interlocking links of silver and gold, and the charms were all a clever mix of pretty, practical and playful. There was a Loch Ness monster charm and a Celtic shield knot charm, Jöry’s contributions, she was guessing, a miniature devil’s trap made of what looked to be pure iron, a small golden bell, a gold and silver lily, a collection of beautiful, ancient-looking runes she didn’t recognise well but shivered with power crafted of a brilliant silvery metal that reminded her of Loki’s special blade, as well as a series of Elder Futhark runes—kuanaz for Loki, sowilo for her scrying, and hagalaz for... actually she wasn’t quite sure, but she thought maybe Loki had chosen it
to represent her? *Hagalaz* was a rune with associations to perfection, chaos, protection, feminine power, and change.

“I love it!” She told Loki with sincere delight as she slid it on the wrist without the braided bracelet he’d given her years ago, grinning in delight as the clasp fastened itself without her needing to do anything. “Do you think you could add the shark tooth from Jeanie’s bracelet to it?” She asked hopefully, and Loki clicked his fingers, doing just that, before impatiently pushing his next gift into her hands for her to unwrap with a laugh.

The second gift was an old book bound in faded black leather, without a title. Opening it curiously, Hermione’s eyes widened and she let out a gasp as she realised what she was holding— it was the original copy of Sylvianne Gaunt née Slytherin and her husband Turlough Gaunt’s healer’s treatise, or at least a perfect replica of it. Leaning in and smelling the pages, the faint whiff of vanilla told her it was very likely the original, as when the lignin present in old wood-based paper broke down, it gave off a faint vanilla scent. “Thank you,” She told Loki, her voice cracking slightly. “It’s perfect.”

“I know,” Loki said smugly, basically preening as he gestured to the last wrapped present, this one too big to fit on her bed and so it had been placed on the ground beside it. The present was unusually shaped, around four feet high, two and a half feet wide, and nearly a foot thick. It was too heavy to try and lift up on her bed, so she crouched in the floor beside it to carefully tear away the sparkly wrapping paper... and promptly gaped at the sight of the black stone which bore on its surface three sets of inscriptions made clearer with white chalk.

“Loki,” she said weakly, her eyes wide and her heart racing, “please tell me this is just an incredibly realistic replica, and that you didn’t steal the *Rosetta Stone* from the *British Museum*!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I left a copy behind,” Loki said breezily, like that was what she was freaking out about, before proudly adding, “I know how much you love languages and challenges both, so translating the Stone from scratch should be right up your alley.”

He looked so proud of himself that Hermione didn’t know whether to laugh or scream– and the spark of mischief evident in his eyes told her that her god wasn’t quite as innocently oblivious to her inner turmoil as he was pretending to be.

Reverently, she traced her fingertips along the surface of the Rosetta Stone, feeling the indentations of the markings, before reluctantly pulling her hand away and turning back to Loki. “You have to give it back,” she said firmly, before adding, “but... I wouldn’t say no to the copy you created.” She looked up at her god hopefully, and he mock-sighed, playfully shaking his head even as he looked fondly down at her.

“Too many morals still, kitten,” he scolded her teasingly, before clicking his fingers. Hermione couldn’t see any difference in the Rosetta Stone now sitting on her bedroom floor, but she decided to trust Loki had actually returned the real Stone to the museum where it belonged. “We’ll have to work on that.” Her god added, actually looking completely serious about that, and she couldn’t help but laugh again.

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After such a perfect start to her birthday, Hermione hugged her god goodbye and kissed his cheek before getting ready for the day— which, of course, included her morning prayers. She had two altars in her room now, one for Loki and one which held the altar-stones for Hati, Sköll, Eris, Jörmungandr, Fenris, and Váli. She had asked her god if he was okay with her praying and giving thanks and offerings to the other gods and goddesses, knowing that ‘sharing’ was a very human
concept, certainly not a godly one, and Loki had told her he didn’t mind, so long as she never forgot just whose priestess she was—as if she ever could!

She used her athame from Morgana to prick her finger and let little droplets of blood splatter onto each of the altar-stones as she prayed an individual thank you to each god (and goddess), before doing the same to Loki’s altar, adding a burning sprig of cinnamon.

After her prayers and feeding Vashti her sugared berry puree, still the phoenix’s favourite, she practically skipped downstairs. It was a Wednesday, and her parents would be leaving for work soon, so she hoped that the Hogwarts representative came earlier, rather than later, because otherwise she’d be stuck in her eager state of anticipation all day.

Richard and Helen were already eating breakfast, and Helen’s mouth tightened slightly at the sight of Hermione in one of her new dresses from Eris, which unsurprisingly reflected the Greek fashion of flowing fabrics and braids. It was a pretty blue sundress with a silver braided belt, a floaty skirt that reached her ankles and silver needle-work on the bodice, butterfly sleeves, and neckline of flowering vines. She had woven pale forget-me-nots and silver bells into her hair, but otherwise let the chaotic curls tumble freely. Hidden under her skirts, silvery steel glittered at the toes of her shoes and her two karambit blades were strapped to her thighs, accessible through hidden slits in the flowy blue material (and maybe it was overkill to carry weapons to breakfast, but Odin had taught her to be wary of strangers and Hermione was ever the studious one). She was also, of course, wearing her locket, both her new charm bracelet and her old braided one, and her new shark-tooth earrings from Jeanie.

Helen and Richard, Helen in particular, preferred the neat, classy styles of dress, all neat-cut designer brands of subtle colouring and thoroughly disapproved of Hermione’s style. Hermione couldn’t think of anything worse than the prim, proper clothes her mother wore—she liked the style she’d developed, odd and old-fashioned though it may be, as it suited who she felt like inside and provided her with an armour, of sorts, against the world.

She ate her breakfast with a nervous anticipation buzzing through her like a swarm of bees in her veins. When the doorbell rang, much to her relief, she was first to jump up, quickly telling her parents that she’d get it before dashing to the front door. “What is going on with her this morning? Is turning elven really so exciting?” she vaguely heard Richard ask Helen, sounding bewildered. Hermione ignored whatever reply her mother gave, instead quickly pulling open the front door to beam at the person in robes standing on the front porch.

The woman was clearly a witch; stern and no-nonsense looking with her black hair was bound in a tight bun, she wore a pair of emerald-green robes and a black travelling cloak fastened with a silver Hogwarts crest. Hermione could feel the strength of her magic; strong, protective, and fierce, with a hint of something wild and prowling. It made her shiver in delight. “Miss Granger, I presume,” the witch, Professor McGonagall, informed her father. Richard’s frown deepened.

“Well, yes, we’ve received multiple offers from educational institutions across Great Britain for our
Hermione,” he said, which was true—there were quite a lot of schools very keen to have the girl who’d completed her GCSE’s before she’d turned eleven. “But they all managed to contact us ahead of time to organise an appointment to meet.” Her father said pointedly, and Hermione turned to stare up at him in horror, aghast at his rudeness.

Professor McGonagall, impressively enough, seemed remarkably unruffled, merely arching a stern, dark eyebrow. “That may be so, Mister Granger,” she said crisply, “but this isn’t a normal offer, and I’m not here to represent a normal school. This is a conversation best had in a private setting.”

“Well, yes, come in I suppose,” Richard said, still frowning but apparently not comfortable with having McGonagall linger on their doorstep in her strange clothing and likely wanting her out of view of their neighbours.

Professor McGonagall dipped her chin in a short, dignified nod before sweeping into the house, her poise and confidence entirely unaffected by Richard’s poor showing. Hermione liked her already.

“Richard? Who is this?” Helen asked with a stiff smile as Richard lead the professor to their formal living room.

“She’s a school representative,” Richard explained shortly, and as her parents exchanged looks, Hermione fervently hoped that Professor McGonagall didn’t judge her by their poor showing. Honestly!

“Can I get you anything to drink, ma’am?” she asked Professor McGonagall as the witch sat down on one of the sleek sofas, “we’ve got water, tea, and, um, orange juice?”

“No thank you, Miss Granger, but I do appreciate the offer,” Professor McGonagall said with an approving look that made Hermione blush slightly.

“Listen, Ms McGonagall, we do appreciate you taking the time to visit, but Hermione’s already received a number of prestigious offers—” her mother started to say, but Professor McGonagall didn’t even wait for Helen to finish making excuses to get rid of her before pulling out her wand and, with a simple flick of the elegant length of carved wood, turning the coffee table into a lioness.

Hermione had to bite back a laugh as her parents both screamed. Professor McGonagall looked remarkably serene in the face of the chaos she’d just created, while Helen and Richard scrambled backward, both of them trying to grab her and pull her back with them, except Hermione dodged their grasping hands and quickly stepped out of their range.

“I’m not from an ordinary school,” Professor McGonagall said, still the epitome of calm, “I’m here to represent Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the finest magical school in Europe. Your daughter is a witch, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and we’d like to offer her a place at Hogwarts.”

Another wordless flick of her wand, and the mountain lion was a table again and Professor McGonagall was pulling from the inner-lining of her cloak a heavy-looking envelope with emerald green letters inked across it.

Miss H. J. Granger

The Second Floor Bedroom

7 Anthurium Street,

London
“This is for you, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said with a kind smile, and Hermione accepted the envelope with hands that shook slightly in her excitement, while her parents continued their semi-silent breakdown.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. A representative of the school will escort yourself and your guardian(s) to purchase your supplies and answer all questions.

Term begins on 1st September. We await your owl by no later than 31st July.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

“So Hogwarts starts next year, then? On the first of September?” Hermione asked eagerly, looking up at Professor McGonagall. The professor nodded.

“Yes, I’m afraid you just missed out on attending this year,” she explained.

“M-my daughter,” Richard only stumbled over his words slightly as he seemed to regain the power of speech, “won’t be attending this—this hogwash school! It’s all a mistake! She’s not a- a witch!” He appeared terribly indignant at the very idea, and Professor McGonagall’s face softened slightly in understanding.

“She is a witch, Mr. Granger,” the professor said gently, “there is no mistake. Think— has Hermione ever done anything unusual? Anything that can’t be explained away by ordinary logic and science?”

“…the door,” Helen whispered suddenly, her face draining to bone-white. Hermione felt her stomach lurch, even as Richard’s eyes widened in horrified comprehension when he realised what his wife was talking about. “The bathroom door… it was in splinters, Richard— we told ourselves it was bad construction and adrenaline, but… it was solid wood, excellent quality and not even a decade old! And it was in splinters!”

Hermione took a deep breath, very carefully not thinking about that horrible night, where she’d blown up the bathroom door to get to her sister, only for it to already be too late—

No, she wasn’t thinking about that, she couldn’t, not today.

“Exploding things is very common accidental magic,” Professor McGonagall confirmed, her eyes sharp as she clearly took in all of their unhappy reactions, but she didn’t ask for clarification and Hermione was relieved for her insight. “Miss Granger is a witch, and I suspect quite a strong one
Helen and Richard were both silent for a moment, clearly struggling to adjust to the massive adjustment to their worlds with the revelation that magic existed—and that their daughter was in possession of such magic.

“But how can people not know?” Richard finally asked, plainly bewildered. “How can they not know about—about m-magic?”

“We have our own system of government, Mr. Granger, with our own laws and prisons,” Professor McGonagall explained. “Keeping the existence of magic secret is one of our most sacred laws and any breaches of the law are punished severely. Witches, wizards and mugg-ordinary humans once lived side-by-side in relative peace and cooperation, but when the witch-hunts swept across Europe we could no longer justify the danger and hid ourselves and our communities. There are some ordinary humans who know of our existence, such as the British prime minister and the Queen of Great Britain, but for the most part we are completely isolated from non-magical society. It’s safest for us that way.”

“But… Hermione doesn’t have to go, does she?” Helen asked desperately.

“I’m afraid she does,” Professor McGonagall told her, gentle again. “An untrained witch or wizard is dangerous to themselves, and to others around them. Not intentionally, but… untrained magic responds to high emotions and the older a witch or wizard gets, the more powerful their magic. You said the accidental explosion Hermione’s magic caused reduced a solid wooden door to splinters? Well, if she isn’t trained how to control her magic, it would be capable of reducing this entire house to splinters. Not on purpose, of course, but it’s well-known that as children become teenagers, their… emotions can become somewhat imbalanced and that sort of emotional turmoil combined with untrained, unfocused magic is…. problematic.”

Helen slumped against Richard, who was only just managing to stay upright himself, a lost, dazed look on his face while Helen looked close to tears.

Professor McGonagall was kind enough to give them space to process the new information, turning instead over to Hermione. “You don’t appear to have as many questions as I was expecting,” she observed, and Hermione smiled sheepishly.

“Yes, well, I’ve been able to do… strange things for a few years now. Things that don’t follow the laws of physics—or of common sense, really. I can’t say I was expecting to hear I was a witch, but I did know I wasn’t normal.”

“Oh?” Professor McGonagall looked interested. “What kind of strange things?”

“Well,” Hermione said slowly, “it’s probably easier to show you.” She wasn’t sure how much would be too much to reveal, and glanced around the room for ideas, quickly spotting the vase of flowers over by the mantle and waving her hand at it, summoning one of the flowers over and, before the eyes of the very surprised professor, changing the plain white petals to a bright, glittering golden colour. Judging by how shocked Professor McGonagall looked, Hermione had the idea that she may have overdone it slightly, but it was hard to judge what might be considered extraordinary when her god casually reshaped reality around her on a near-daily basis.

If Professor McGonagall looked startled, though, that was nothing on her parents. Her mother had let out a strangled yelp, clutching at her heart with both hands, while her father’s jaw had dropped open as he stared at her in wide-eyed shock—and, Hermione thought, her stomach sinking, what looked suspiciously like fear. Apparently, it was quite different to see their daughter performing too.”
feats of magic then it was a stranger.

To distract her parents from their shock (and herself from their response), Hermione hurriedly asked the professor, “the letter said that I’d be escorted to by a representative to purchase all my supplies?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Professor McGonagall confirmed, and Hermione wasn’t blind to the sympathy in her kind eyes. “Hogwarts runs an orientation day for new students with non-magical parents, where you’ll get to meet your peers who are in the same situation as yourselves, purchase all your new equipment and get answers to any more questions you have. However, we don’t hold the orientation day until a week before the start of the school term.”

“Just one week?” Hermione demanded, aghast. “But—but—what about the new course textbooks!? What about the research necessary for joining an entirely new society and its culture!? How can we familiarise ourselves with the new world we’ve found ourselves in in just one week!”

“I understand your concerns, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall told her, “but part of the reason we don’t take students with non-magical parents to Diagon Alley any earlier is due to concerns about them experimenting with magic by themselves, away from any grown witches or wizards who could assist the if things go terribly wrong, as magic has a tendency to do when practiced by those who do not yet understand it.”

That was reasonable, Hermione could admit, but still… “are there any orientation materials I could study now, at least?” she asked with a slight frown. “You said the magical world has its own system of government, with your own laws. Surely it would be sensible to be familiarised with those laws, and how magical society functions.” She might not be as unfamiliar with the magical world as her fellow muggleborns would be, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t benefit from what the Hogwarts representative considered important for a muggleborn to know before entering the new world of magic.

“That is very practical of you, Miss Granger,” the professor said approvingly. “I don’t have any such materials on me, but I will owl you what I believe you will find most helpful.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, and meaning it—in hindsight, she’d possibly been a bit rude then, but Professor McGonagall didn’t appear to be holding it against her. Professor McGonagall stood then, and Helen and Richard stood too, both shaky on their feet.

“Congratulations, Miss Granger,” the witch told her warmly, “I already look forward to having you in my class.”

“I can’t wait!” Hermione replied, with a wide, beaming smile.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT:

There was something distinctly wild and fey-like about Hermione Granger that didn't even come close to fitting in with the posh London home she lived in with her parents. When Minerva had knocked on the door of the muggleborn witch's home, she'd been startled by the sight of the girl who greeted her—with bright eyes, wild curls woven through with flowers and a long, pretty dress that wouldn't look out of place in Diagon Alley, Minerva had immediately and instinctively known there was something different about Hermione Granger.

She was a fascinating child; her British accent lilting and curled in ways that Minerva couldn't quite identify, she moved in a way unlike any child the woman had seen, with an unusual fluidity that presented her as a creature of extreme, holding herself as predator and prey, ready to both pounce to attack and dive to dodge, and she wore what looked like predator-animal teeth for earrings, and bracelets with Ancient Runes, some that Minerva recognised from her days of taking the class, and some she didn't. And then there was her casual display of magic... Minerva had never seen any eleven-year-old child control their magic the way Hermione Granger had.

Hermione Granger's parents were far more typical in their personalities and reactions. There tended to be two categories that the parents of muggleborns fell into—there were those who were thrilled by the idea of magic and thought their children special and extraordinary for their magical talents, and there were those who were afraid and uneasy and very opposed to their children studying wizardry and witchcraft. Religious families in particular were problematic when it came to accepting that magic wasn't associated with demons and the devil.

Both obviously well off and well educated, Richard and Helen Granger fell into the second category of being very unhappy about their daughter's magic. If they could have refused to send her to Hogwarts, they would have in a heartbeat—and Minerva hadn't missed their fearful reaction to seeing Miss Granger's magic in action. Nor had she missed the young girl's resignation to the fear, as though she'd been expecting it, had prepared herself for it, even.

Minerva's heart hurt for the child, and she regretted that it would be a year before the young muggleborn witch would start her attendance of Hogwarts. The poor girl would do better surrounded by her peers and challenged with the thrill of learning magic then she would spending her time with parents who were afraid of her and her extraordinary gifts. She quite intended on owling Miss Granger the resources she'd requested about their society—resources which she'd already decided to bring along with her to the next muggleborn she was tasked with introducing to the magical world, as well as perhaps the muggleborns of the current school year because Miss Granger was quite correct that familiarity with magical laws and society would serve well in the transition from the muggle to magical world—but perhaps she would include a note inviting the young witch to write to her with any questions she had from the material, encouraging a discourse between them. Her ability to support Miss Granger before she started attending Hogwarts was limited, but she could do this much for the girl.

She really was quite charmed by Hermione Granger, and while she hoped the young witch would end up in her House, she rather suspected she had a future Ravenclaw on her hands—at least Filius would truly be delighted by her.

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Gabriel noticed immediately how quiet Hermione was when he returned to visit her, later on the
afternoon of her birthday, after her Hogwarts letter had been delivered. She was curled up on her bed in a nest of blankets with Vashti curled up with her, reading softly aloud to the young phoenix from one of the new books she'd received. Where her soul had been bright and fluttering with excitement this morning, it was now dim and still and her smile when she looked up and noticed him was weak.

"Oh honey," he said, sitting down beside her on the bed and rubbing Vashti's golden beak with his thumb before gently tugging on one of her curls, "what happened?"

"Hele-mum and dad didn't take it well," Hermione admitted quietly, looking as mournful and helplessly, hopelessly resigned as a kitten who'd been dropped into a tub of water for a bath. "We... talked, after Professor McGonagall, the representative from Hogwarts, left. They don't want me to go, and I had to tell them I already planned on condensing my final two years of high school into one year to get mum to stop getting all teary and dad going on and on about the lost opportunities. Then they started talking about me accelerating through my years at Hogwarts too, so I could finish it as soon as possible and return to the 'normal' world and start university."

Gabriel had to close his eyes briefly as his grace burned with his rage and he fought the urge to enact a series of nasty just desserts on Richard and Helen Granger. But he knew Hermione wouldn't want that, so he restrained himself and instead of focusing on what he couldn't change, he focused on what he could— cheering Hermione up.

"Come on," he announced, holding out his hand to her as Vashti perked up, fluffing her feathers and chirruping excitedly, "it's still your birthday— let's go do something fun!"

Hermione actually managed a smile at that, pushing away the blankets she'd made into a nest and sitting up, reaching to accept his hand. "Thank you, Loki," she said softly, fervently, reverently. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve you in my life, but thank you."

Gabriel looked down at her, down at that beautiful, brilliant, bright, devoted soul, and told her, "I take care of those that I consider worthy of the dedication, and you, Hermione, are more than worthy."

Hermione smiled cheekily then, and he couldn't help but be delighted by the spark of mischief that returned to her eyes. "Does that mean I'd be able to lift Thor's hammer, then?"

"Urgh," Gabriel couldn't help but roll his eyes and grimace. "If it took worthiness to lift Mjölnir, that oaf Thor would never have been able to get it off the ground."

He'd have to ask his sons and Eris what they'd done with Mjölnir after killing Thor— the enchanted warhammer was a powerful weapon, one that was capable of killing pagan gods and therefore not something he really wanted left lying around for any old schmuck to find. His Father only knew what the other pagan gods, demons and demon-witches alike would be willing to pay or trade for it.

"I love learning which myths are real, which aren't, and those that are in between," Hermione said, her eyes having lit up with interest, before she pulled a slight face and grumbled, "even if I was planning on going to a muggle university, not pursuing magical studies, I'd much sooner study myth, legend and history then medicine."

"Well you'd certainly have a unique advantage there," Gabriel said encouragingly, with a bright smile, "though it would be difficult to provide the evidence to back up your claims. But enough of the boring serious talk, it's time for birthday fun!"
And with a snap, the three of them disappeared from London and appeared on the grounds of an American carnival, a simple nudge of perception hiding Vashti from the ordinary humans around them, where Hermione passive-aggressively ate her way through the stalls of carnival food her dentist parents would never have approved of in a million years, before he dragged her and Vashti onto every single ride.

After all the junk she'd eaten, Hermione threw up twice while on the rides, once actually on him, which had startled them both so much when it happened that they both stood there for nearly ten seconds just staring at the partially-digested candy-corn, funnel cake and fairy-floss splashed over his pants and shoes before he remembered he could vanish it.

Hermione was mortified, despite his amusement over the whole thing, and swore she'd make it up to him by winning the most ridiculous oversized, overstuffed prize she could. She managed it too, and the fact she used her magic to cheat and make sure the blunt, improperly balanced darts managed to pop every single one of the half-inflated balloons instead of bouncing off them just made him prouder and he carried around the bright sunshine-yellow and extremely fluffy teddy-bear nearly as big as Hermione that was handed over sourly to him by the stall owner with pride.

He knew her good spirits wouldn't last, not when she and her parents were going to have to work through her parents' new knowledge of her magic, but when Gabriel tucked Hermione into bed that night her soul was once again bright as the sun.

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Helen and Richard lasted two and a half weeks– which was two weeks longer then Hermione had honestly been expecting, as she'd admitted to Dr. Mia in the thrice-weekly appointments she'd been having with her therapist since Professor McGonagall's visit.

Hermione honestly preferred staying with her Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran over her parents, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt when they'd rejected her, preferring to send her far away, out of sight and mind, then to have her at home.

Officially, they claimed it was that her choice to be homeschooled (self-directed learning would make it easier to accelerate her studies to finish her final two years of schooling in just one year) meant that she'd be left alone and unsupervised for far too many hours if she stayed with them in London, as they both worked full-time, whereas Iona MacLeod was already homeschooling three of her children, and one extra wouldn't be an issue. There was an element of truth to what they were saying, Hermione acknowledged, but she also knew that her parents could have just hired an au pair or a nanny to supervise her. They already had a gardener and a housekeeper, after all– it wasn't that they were opposed to domestic assistants, or that they couldn't afford one. They just... didn't want her around.

Hermione wondered if the distance between her and her parents could ever be fixed, if she took the time to put in the effort. Part of her rebelled against the idea that she should have to put in any effort at all; it raged that her parents' love for her should be unconditional, and that anything else was unforgivable. The wiser part of her, however, understood that her parents alone weren't to blame for the strain in their relationship. She'd distanced herself from them too– too angry at them, for not believing her about Ness being in danger, for not realising how dangerously depressed Ness was and getting her help, for not stopping Ness from dying. She'd been too angry to be rational, to truly understand that they'd had about as little idea of how much Ness was truly suffering inside as she'd had and had needed a target for her rage– if it was someone else's fault, after all, then it couldn't be her fault for not noticing, for not seeing, for not helping Ness.

And maybe her parents, as the adults, should have known better, maybe they should have done
something about the deteriorating relationship between the three of them before it had ended up the way it was now, but they hadn't. They hadn't, because Hermione may have lost a sister, but they'd lost their child too and they'd been trying to deal with that, and deal with the wreck that their remaining daughter had become in the aftermath.

It didn't take long after the decision had been made (or at least verbally acknowledged; Hermione suspected the three of them had all known what the decision would be from the day of Professor McGonagall's visit, when her parents had flinched away from her magical display) for the details to be sorted between her parents and her aunt and uncle. It was a tense time in the Granger household, and Hermione was grateful for Hati's lessons in knife-throwing that let her vent out her frustration and anger in a way that wasn't too destructive. Loki even took her on the second of the three promised Not-Hunts, where together they faced off against a colony of malicious Redcaps in Berwickshire, Scotland.

The Redcaps had apparently been banished from Avalon, the Faery Realm, and were now responsible for the deaths of three human children. A Named fey, one of the Tuath Dé, had asked for Loki to deal with the Redcaps as a favour to them, her god had explained to her, and having one of the fey indebted to you was always a good thing. Hermione was fascinated by the idea of the entire separate realm which the fey existed in, which led to Loki's casual, mind-blowing revelation that Avalon wasn't the only realm that existed within the cracks and empty spaces of the universe, but she managed to focus her attention on the problem of the Redcaps first and was able to track them down to the ruins of an old fort, now barely more than rubble, that bordered the town where the children had gone missing.

The Redcaps were foul beings; short and thickset with long teeth that were eerily sharp and white, long, skinny fingers topped with talons like raptors, large red eyes like pools of blood and pointed ears that stuck out through grisly, knotted hair matted with the blood that leaked steadily from their wet, soaked crimson caps. Hermione actually felt nauseous when she realised that the blood their caps were soaked in likely belonged to the missing children— and then she felt pissed.

The Redcaps fought like miniature berserkers, bellowing and shrieking in a language entirely foreign to her, and Hermione got to put her new knife-throwing skills to the test (which was actually probably one of the reasons why Loki chose to bring her along for the Not-Hunt) by aiming her stiletto blades at the blood-soaked red caps to knock them from the heads of the Redcaps so Vashti could swoop down and burn the caps to cinders. This effectively stripped the Redcaps of their powers, leaving them to scream and whither and shrink in place, until only small gnarly and sickly-looking trees remained where they'd been standing. Vashti had then very decisively set fire to the twisted, stunted trees, reducing them to little more than ash.

After catching a glimpse of the remains of the missing children before Loki had noticed, sworn violently and transported her back to London with a snap of his fingers, Hermione felt it was a very deserving fate— though it had lacked a trickster's delicious irony, she was still satisfied that the Redcaps had received their just desserts.

Something else that had helped pass the tense time between Professor McGonagall's visit and the planned date of her departure were the letters she'd received— and they'd been delivered via actual owls too! She'd known that was how witches and wizards delivered their mail, of course, but it was one thing to read about the owl postal system, and quite another to actually experience it!

Professor McGonagall had sent her the promised materials about magical Great Britain's laws and culture, as well as a note inviting her to write back with any questions she had (and Hermione was not the sort of person to turn down an invitation for knowledge!), and the part-Veela witch she'd met in France had actually written to her too! Fleur had badly concealed how upset she was in the
first letter as she mentioned how 'tiresomely' the school year had started, as the two bullies from
the bookstore, Prunella Perreault and Faustine Roux, hadn't taken the humiliation of the encounter
well.

You would think I'd have a thicker skin by now, but alas, even if I make certain not to show it, I still
bruise easily, Fleur had written, which honestly made Hermione's heart hurt. Fleur's following
letter detailing the aftermath of the pranking ideas and spells Hermione had sent back had been
much more cheerful, with the French witch expounding in great detail the glee she'd experienced
watching live anchovies squirm out of a shrieking Perreault's nose, and how Roux had spent nearly
an hour trying to find the counter-curse for the glue in her hair, not realising it wasn't a curse at all
but a pot of muggle glue that Hermione had sent back with Fleur's owl along with her letter, and
the prejudiced witch had ended up managing to accidentally vanish her own hair!

After a moment of contemplation, Hermione decided to glue Fleur's letters in the scrapbook she'd
made of the Just Desserts that Loki had delivered unto Ness's bullies. She also added copies of the
articles about the Mongolian Death Worm victims, the now 'missing' scientist and the articles
about the Redcap victims. It wasn't a precisely happy scrapbook, but it made her feel better to look
at it and know that there was justice in the world, even if that justice was unconventional.

It took around a month after Professor McGonagall's visit for everything to finally be sorted, by
which time Hermione had already started her lessons by correspondence, and the date of her return
to Fraserburgh had arrived. It was while Hermione was packing, however, that she came across a
problem she previously hadn't considered.

There wasn't exactly a lot of extra space available in her aunt and uncle's house, and she would
once again be sharing a bedroom with three other people. There would barely be enough room for
her trunk of clothes and the books she'd need for her schoolwork, let alone all her other books,
Vashti's perch (Loki had already promised to disguise Vashti as a canary, so she didn't have to
leave her behind), her two altars and the Rosetta Stone, amongst the various other odds and ends
she'd collected during her travels with Loki, and she didn't want to leave it all in London, as she
didn't want to have to visit her parents' house, even if it was without their knowledge, every time
she wished to access them.

It was Loki who came up with the solution, in the end. "I've got a spare room," he told her
cheerfully, "whatever you can't bring with you, you can keep there."

Despite how casually he'd declared it, Hermione had been quietly stunned. For all the travelling
they'd done, around the globe and through time both, Loki had never taken her to one of his houses
before.

His 'beach house', as he called the property (though calling it a 'house' was very misleading) he
took her to, was... actually, if she was being honest, it was exactly what she'd come to expect from
her god. Its walls gleamed brightly in the sunshine like a jewel, palm trees and vibrant gardens
grew lush and colourful on the property's grounds, a majestic pool of polished stone she suspected
to be marble shimmered pearly-white and sapphire-blue amidst the greenery, and she only had to
step out the back door to be ankle-deep in the golden sand of a private beach that bordered the
ocean.

The inside of the house was just as magnificent; just stepping inside the foyer, the floor was a
brilliant white marble, the magnificent chandelier was a dazzling gold and everything just about
 glittered and screamed of wealth and hedonism. "What?" Loki grinned, seeing the faintly
incredulous look she turned his way after taking a moment to absorb her surroundings, "I'm a
pagan god, sugar. Hedonism is our jam."
"Yes, but there's hedonism," Hermione told him, before gesturing around them, "and then there's this!"

"I can't help it if I'm the best at everything, hedonism included," Loki told her smugly.

"You are unbelievable," she told him, and he smirked.

"And yet, you're my little believer."

She couldn't really argue with the truth of that, but still— "Your puns are the absolute worst," she informed him, not that that meant anything when he just took it as a compliment, the gigantic dork.

The bedroom of his 'beach house' he’d offered for her to store her things in was as amazing as the rest of the house. It had a ‘summer sky’ sort of theme going, with the walls painted to resemble fluffy white clouds on a pale-blue summer’s day, twinkling lights and an enormous bed covered by a puffy white duvet and equally puffy white pillows, which made it resemble a large, fluffy cloud.

Loki created her several bookshelves with a snap of his fingers for her to unpack the many, many books she sadly couldn’t bring with her that she’d collected over the years, as well as stands for her to place her altars and the Rosetta Stone on to be displayed and a large chest for her various odds and ends. She did bring her altar stones with her, though, as well as the first candle she’d ever used to pray to Loki, the one with the wax that had never melted, and her athame from Morgana— just because she wouldn’t have a proper altar to pray at, it didn’t mean she wouldn’t still be giving her proper thanks and prayers to her beloved god and his beloved family.

She half-wished she could stay the night there, and try out the outrageously soft and fluffy-looking cloud-like bed, but it would be her last night staying with her parents for a good long while, and despite the seemingly insurmountable distance between the three of them, she did feel an obligation and reluctantly turned Loki down when he offered.

There was a great deal of understanding on her god’s face as he muttered, “family,” with a sigh and a shake of his head. She supposed that Loki, ‘blood-brother’ of Odin, according to the mythology that she hadn’t asked about as she didn’t wish to upset her god, would understand the trials and tribulations of family, even more so then she did.

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And then, finally, the day had arrived, a day Hermione thought she’d been waiting for ever since she’d been forced to leave Fraserburgh.

Unlike last time, when Uncle Arran had been the one to pick her up from Peterhead, the town closest to Fraserburgh, after she caught a plane, a train and then two buses, this time Aunt Iona, Uncle Arran, Angus and Leana, her two youngest cousins, were all waiting for her. Hermione didn’t hesitate to throw herself into her aunt’s strong arms, closing her eyes to stop the tears as Iona hugged her fiercely. Uncle Arran ruffled her hair fondly, chuckling slightly as he nudged one of the little golden bells, and once Iona had released her, both Leana and Angus tackled her in great, big hugs of their own.

Her last drive from Peterhead to Fraserburgh had passed in near silence, just her and Uncle Arran in the car, but this time it was filled with happy chatter. Both Leana and Angus were delighted by her ‘pet canary’, tame enough to sit on her shoulder and not fly away, and Vashti, though mildly disgruntled by the disguise, was still preening under their awe and trilling out sweet little songs. The three of them chatted excitedly in the backseat, Leana and Angus filling her in on what she’d missed.
When the car pulled up beside the familiar small but spotless house, Hermione could feel the tears in her eyes again and Aunt Iona turned in the front seat of the car to give her a warm smile. “Welcome home, Hermione,” she said.

And Hermione beamed.
Chapter 39

For Hermione, re-familiarising herself with Fraserburgh was like slipping back into her old favourite woollen jumper; it was comfy, it was cosy, the wool sometimes a bit itchy against her bare skin, but it was still more comfortable than any other jumper in her closet.

Really, the main ‘itchiness’ was having to share a room with Ina, Jeanie and Leana, as she’d gotten quite used to having her own space, and it was odd adjusting to the decrease in places to put her things, but it was such a small price to pay. Hermione loved Fraserburgh; she loved how small and out of the way it was, without all the hustle and bustle of London, all the concrete and cars replaced by boats and the ocean, she loved the self-directed style of learning of her home-schooling without the stressors of other older students feeling threatened by her intellect and academic superiority, and most of all she loved her aunt, uncle and cousins, all of whom she knew thought she was a bit strange but loved her because of it, not despite it.

The first night back, Angus snuck into the room she shared with Ina, Jeanie and Leana, and the five of them piled together on Leana’s bottom bunk, catching up in hushed, excited whispers. Writing letters and talking over the landline just wasn’t the same as talking to her cousins in person, and Hermione’s heart swelled with warmth and affection as Jeanie gently brushed out the wild curls of her hair that they both shared, her cousin admiring the little braids with their woven bells and pleading that Hermione teach her how to do the same with her own curls.

In the quiet, safe place they’d created on the bunk, Hermione found herself sharing with her cousins for the first time a heavily abridged version of what had happened in London, first with Charlotte the bully and then later with “Hugo” and “Muriel”, who had befriended her and then gone on to hurt and betray her. The four of them piled onto her to wrap their arms around her as the (highly edited) story unfolded, her cousins clearly horrified and distraught by what they were hearing– and considering their family’s particularly dark history with bullying, the torment caused by bullies having been a major contributing factor to Ness deciding to take her own life, Hermione wasn’t surprised her cousins were taking it so personally.

She also told them about Helena and Sylvianne, two girls she’d quickly grown close to who’d then ‘moved away’. She even admitted, feeling the tears well up in her eyes as she did so, how pressured she felt by her parents, and how the moment she stopped being their ‘genius’ daughter, bound for Oxford or Cambridge or one of the UK’s other highest ranking medical schools, they’d disapproved of her choices and sent her away. Angus scowled furiously at hearing this, while Leana’s hands balled into fists at her sides and Ina and Jeanie exchanged grim looks before Ina pulled Hermione into another tight hug.

“It doesn’t matter why you’re here,” her oldest female cousin stated in a firm voice that left no room for argument, the warmth of her tight embrace holding Hermione together as she trembled so hard it felt a bit like her body was threatening to fall apart in the aftermath of the emotional roller-
coaster the conversation had been. “All that matters, Hermione, is that you are here and you’re going to stay here, with us.”

“Welcome back home,” Angus added, and Hermione didn’t even try to hold back her tears, the combination of grief and relief she was experiencing positively cathartic. *Home. She was home.*

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After taking a few days to adjust to her abrupt change of scenery, Hermione settled into her new routine for the foreseeable future with a fervour that surprised exactly nobody who knew her, herself included. She was smart and she knew it, but she was still only human and she was fully aware that most of her foreseeable was going to be occupied with studying. She’d already arranged to be scheduled to sit her A-Levels in the May to June examination period, the same time that Ina would be sitting hers actually, and considering it was already October, she had a little over seven months to be as prepared as possible– it was a challenge, but one she was ready and willing to face and to conquer. It just meant she was, unfortunately, ‘disgustingly busy’, to quote a horrified Angus.

Even if she wouldn’t admit it, Hermione was actually slightly grateful Loki had managed to talk her down, in the end, from the six A-Levels she’d originally wanted to take, to the more standard four. She’d been sad to not sign up for Politics or Ancient History, but she did have to admit that English Language & Literature, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Law were all keeping her busy enough. Her unusual array of subjects had earned Hermione a raised eyebrow from her Aunt Iona (mostly, she suspected, due to the conspicuous absence of Biology from the line-up, as would be expected for a student looking to go into Medicine as the Doctors Granger had made clear they were expecting of their genius daughter), but Hermione currently wasn’t actually looking to go on to university, so she didn’t need to pick her courses based on the A-Level requirements of a future university course. Instead, she chose the ones that interested her most.

(...sometimes she thought Loki’s hedonistic tendencies had influenced her more than she’d like to admit)

She’d still managed to take the time out of her intensely busy schedule to read the small stack of books Professor McGonagall had sent her—*’Gamp’s Guide to the British Wizengamot’, ‘TheGreatest Wizarding Events of History’, ‘The Pureblood Book of Decorum; the Care of the Person, Manners, Etiquette, and Ceremonials in Pureblood Society’* (there had actually been a note pinned to the front of that one to disregard all comments about ‘mudbloods’, which the Professor had explained was a nasty and largely outdated slur), *’The British System of Magical Governance’, and ‘International Laws of Magical Beings, Beasts and Spirits, As Defined By The International Confederation of Wizards’*.

The book of decorum was filled with bigotry, prejudice, and slurs, but in an impressively classy style– other than the odd mention of ‘mudblood’, the discrimination in the book was more implied then actually stated, and required a keen eye, sharp mind and discerning ability to read behind the lines to identify. If the author, an Earl by the name of Pollux Black, wasn’t such a racist, misogynistic prick (and also dead for over a hundred and fifty years– apparently Pureblood society was fairly stagnant when it came to advancing with the times), Hermione almost thought she might have gotten along with the bloke– he had a vicious, biting wit edged with a hint of cruelty which she’d learned to appreciate after spending so much time exposed to Loki and his family, as well as an impressive skill in ‘saying’ one thing while actually meaning something else entirely.

Along with her extracurricular reading, Hermione put in a sincere effort to make time for her cousins and her aunt and uncle. Even when her schedule was so flat-out she’d basically planned
her days down to the individual minutes, she made sure she was never too busy for her family—she had her priorities sorted (and yes, that was a jab at Helen and Richard—her passive aggressiveness towards them seemed to have increased tenfold since they’d sent her to Fraserburgh. She didn’t quite understand it, she’d admitted to Dr. Mia, because she actually preferred Fraserburgh and her aunt and uncle over them and staying in London, but somehow... somehow it still hurt).

She also took the time to continue writing back to Fleur, as the French witch continued to send letters. The part-Veela’s owl was clever enough to always wait until she was alone before delivering the letters, as well as lingering to wait for a reply. School had improved for Fleur, but she wrote about knowing better then to let her guard down, because that’s when she’d get the metaphorical knife to the ribs. They’d debated the merits of pre-emptive strikes together, but ultimately decided that Fleur should endeavour to keep the moral high ground in the whole situation. Hermione had still sent along a new list of prank spells as well as fine-tuning for their the plans for an effective whisper campaign against a professor who’d started been a bit too handsy with Fleur since the new school year had begun.

Hermione was continuing with her appointments with Doctor Mia too, of course, and Loki had never failed to show up to take her to the appointments, every single week. If she was feeling up to it afterwards he’d then take her somewhere so they could spend some time together before returning her back to Fraserburgh, making sure to turn back time when he did so, that way none of her relatives realised she’d ever been missing.

Occasionally Hati and Váli utilised Loki’s services as a ‘time travelling taxi-cab’ too, as Váli had mockingly called his father once. Both were still determined to continue teaching her how to fight, beyond what they and Loki had already taught her, and Hermione still wasn’t entirely sure why. Neither of them had any obligation towards her, but Váli in particular seemed determined that she know how to defend herself, while Hati focused more on how to pre-emptively attack others.

Hermione suspected that Váli wasn’t as ‘over’ that awful ordeal with Odin as he portrayed himself to be, and that her kidnapping, torture and near-murder by way of either bleeding out or burning alive, whichever ended up killing her first, in a ritual sacrifice had affected him rather more than he was willing to admit—maybe even to himself. His habit of calling her ‘little sister’ and the fact that his twin brother had been murdered by Odin, just as she had almost been, couldn’t have been good for his mental health and well-being. Really, Hermione thought that Váli probably needed to start seeing Doctor Mia more than she did at this point.

Hati... Hermione honestly didn’t know what to make of Hati. They confused her. A lot. The sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes human-shaped but often not demi-god was... unusual, even going by Hermione’s Loki-influenced standards. They were bloodthirsty, ruthless, playful, cruel, wild, capricious, and somehow still kind, all at once. They were also a very talented teacher and Hermione had learnt a lot from them, as their style was very different from Loki’s and Váli’s both.

She didn’t really get much of an opportunity to test her growing skill, though, as there was no time for Not Hunting—there was barely time for her to keep up her fitness regime, with most of her days starting as early as the fishermen of Fraserburgh, rising before the sun so she had time to jog and run through her forms before starting the day. Even though Loki offered to take her through time to give her a break, it would have disrupted her concentration and the study flow. The breaks would come when the studying was finished and she’d earned her rest and relaxation—she was only sorry that it felt so much like she was neglecting her friends to finish her A-Levels in order to appease her parents about Hogwarts when she knew they’d never really accept her learning to be a witch, graduated from high school at age eleven or otherwise.
Spring was in the air.

With the winter season coming and going, giving rise to warmer weather, but with final exams drawing ever-closer, Hermione barely set foot outside. She was frantically racing towards a finish line that was finally within sight and absolutely frenetic with her studying, snapping at her cousins, aunt, uncle and Loki alike as she focused and fretted. Even Vashti’s song did little to soothe her anxiety these days.

Ina, who was also sitting her A-Levels in the May to June examination period, wasn’t much better. Her cousin was also exceedingly grateful for the study timetable Hermione had drawn up for her, though she’d stared at Hermione’s own schedule with wide-eyed, open-mouthed shock the first time she’d seen it and bluntly asked how Hermione was even upright– or alive. Hermione had just blinked blearily up at her and wondered idly if she was too young to ‘borrow’ some of Iona’s black tea. Ina assured her that she absolutely was too young, but desperate times called for desperate measures and made up two large mugs of it which tasted foul because Ina had cared much less about the flavour and far more about how much caffeine it was possible to steep into the boiling water.

Iona and Arran had exempted them both from their usual chores in the weeks leading up to the exam period and Loki, in a role reversal that made Hermione blink with surprise afterwards when she actually noticed it, was the one who left her ‘offerings’ of sweets for her to snack on while she studied. She was quite grateful for the sweets too, as despite an exasperated Iona’s best efforts (the fiendishly clever woman had recruited Angus, Jeanie and Leana, and by the gods Angus could nag with the best of them!) she did keep forgetting to take breaks to eat– she tended to eat what was put in front of her without even thinking about it, be it her breakfast, lunch or dinner, or a pile of foreign sweets from countries all across the globe.

For the final exams themselves, Hermione reluctantly returned to London to sit her A-Levels at the registered venue, though it was less London itself that had her reluctant and more the fact she had to stay at her parent’s house. At least she had Ina staying with her too.

She earned quite a few incredulous looks from the students ranging from sixteen to nineteen also sitting the exams, as at eleven years old she was the youngest and shortest in the room and stuck out like sore thumb. She’d ended up with four exams scheduled over a three week period and to say it was ‘intense’ would be an understatement. Ina cried on no less then seventeen different occasions that Hermione was aware of, big, ugly, snotty tears that were the exact opposite of her rational, put-together cousin. Hermione accidentally set fire to several textbooks, exploded one of her mother’s favourite vases and shorted out all the electronics within three miles of her house– apparently her accidental magic was not reacting well to her heightened emotions.

When one of the invigilator’s pants caught fire after the woman cleared her throat during a routine patrol of the hall where the Law examination was being sat by a colourful variety of long distance education students and the sound caught a very stressed Hermione by surprise, Dr. Mia organised for her to be accompanied to her remaining exams by a ‘therapy dog’. Hermione spent her last two exams with a large ‘wolfhound’ that looked suspiciously more wolf then hound and mildly intimidating with its gleaming too-smart golden eyes curled up on her feet, and the soothing purr-like rumble she could feel better then she could hear sank straight through her skin, down to rest easy on her bones. Hermione didn’t know what she’d done to deserve getting adopted by Váli as his ‘little sister’, but she wished she did because it was clearly one of the best things she’d ever done.
It was with wolf-Váli loping faithfully along at her side that she finally walked out of her last exam, blinking a bit at the brightness of the sun overhead, and was confronted with the thrilling realisation that with all her exams done her next three months were officially entirely free.
CHAPTER FORTY:

Gabriel had witnessed some terrifying things in the many, many years he'd existed; the chilling figure that was Death, the monstrous hunger of the Leviathan, the twisted humor of the cosmic entity that existed in the Empty, his Father's sister, dear old Auntie Darkness, throwing a tantrum, the final battle between Michael and Lucifer– and Hermione during examinations.

Honestly, he would have done more to calm her down except watching the unholy terror she was transformed into be unleashed on her parents really warmed his black heart. He also didn't want to take anything away from her achievement in any way. Not only was it not his place, but he wanted her to be able to look back on this time and know that she conquered her A-Levels entirely on her own merit. And conquer them she did, only starting a few small fires in the process (okay, he did interfere that one time, to make sure the invigilator forgot about being set on fire). Since she'd bonded with Vashti, Hermione's magic had definitely taken on an affinity for fire– Gabriel wouldn't deny that it pleased him, considering one of the aspects that Loki was god over was fire.

After her last exam, he didn't hesitate to whisk Hermione off to celebrate her success with his family. They had dinner in Henningsvær with Hati, Sköll, Astrid, Fenris, Váli, Eris and her shapeshifter counselor, Mia. He snapped up a feast for the occasion and Hermione's face glowed rosy with pride and embarrassment the whole time, especially when the mead came out and Gabriel, Váli, Eris and Fenris started getting a touch... overly enthusiastic with their praise and affection– at one point, Váli composed some sort of ode to her defeat of Geri and Freki that had Hermione burying her face in her hands and refuse to come out from behind her hair. And then a curious Vashti got into the mead, decided she quite enjoyed the taste of the strange liquid and a lot of things started to catch on fire. All in all, a very good night– what was a party without any arson?

Hermione and her cousin, Ina Macleod, didn't linger in London once the examinations were over. Hermione's thoroughly terrorised, traumatised parents were only all too eager to get their daughter off their hands, especially considering her newfound addiction to black tea, the most highly caffeinated of all the teas. Honestly, Gabriel thought it was adorable how a tea-deprived Hermione's hair crackled like live flames, sending off actual sparks into the air, but Hermione's parents had a much weaker constitution. Ina, who was just as addicted to the caffeine as Hermione, had entirely failed to notice due to her own distraction before her first morning cuppa. It was actually both amusing and impressive that she'd managed to stay ignorant of Hermione's magic with the sheer number of accidents it had been causing during the exam stress.

Gabriel did have a newfound appreciation for Hermione's cousin Ina, though, after the time the teenager had spent in London. Apparently Ina approved about as little as he did of her Aunt Helen and Uncle Richard, and she had no problem expressing her disapproval and dislike in a variety of creative, mostly passive-aggressive methods, from the strongly accented brogue she affected after observing how Hermione's accent unconsciously seemed to shift to match, to her sly little comments about moments during Hermione's childhood that the Grangers had missed out on due to their absence the last few years, her smile sweet as honey while her words stung more painfully than a bee.

The pièce de résistance of Ina's one-woman war, in his opinion, was her admirably petty act of tipping newly-purchased weed killer all over the Grangers' lawn and garden beds in the middle of the night. Knowing how much the Grangers cared about appearances, it was a particularly low blow– Gabriel felt a sincere pang of affection towards Hermione's cousin for her many efforts and
made a note to do something nice for her in return.

As much as he enjoyed the show during the many occasions he swung by to check up on Hermione (he got mildly paranoid about the combination of London, Hermione and her parents, especially with the added stressor of the examinations) he was glad to see them returning to Fraserburgh. Ina didn't stay long– she'd had a backpacking trip planned with three of her best friends until she suddenly learned she'd "won" a raffle she didn't even remember entering, with the first prize being a 'round the world' cruise package for her and three others of her choice (Gabriel had really, really enjoyed the despair on Helen Granger's face when she saw her precious roses, and Richard Granger's futile attempts to fix his lawn were frankly hilarious)– but Hermione was back in Fraserburgh to stay until she headed off to Hogwarts.

He still visited, of course– nothing could ever keep him away– but Gabriel was happy to let her spend time bonding with her family and enjoy the stability and peace after the stressful last year and mostly popped around when it was time to take her to her appointment with Mia. He really did miss taking her to new places, though– he'd been around a long, long time and the world didn't hold many surprises for him anymore, though thankfully those living in it still did or he'd be bored stiff. When he took Hermione to sight-see, though, he got to relive that magic of the first time he'd visited in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, or witnessed the Northern Lights in Tromsø, recapturing the thrill of the once exciting experiences that time and repeated exposure had dulled. He missed Hermione's sense of wonder at a world he'd grown far too indifferent to over the millennia.

It was about a month after she'd returned to Fraserburgh that Gabriel decided enough was enough– he'd given her the space to concentrate during her studying, but she was on holidays now and he was going to take her somewhere that would make her eyes light up almost as bright as her soul. Maybe the moon? He remembered the enormous fuss during 1969 when humans had finally managed to actually take a stroll on its surface– he'd personally be more impressed if they managed to take a stroll on Pluto, where on a good day the sun provided about as much warmth as the full moon gave Earth, or on Neptune, with its Earth-sized hurricane that whipped around at more than twice the speed needed to break the sound barrier, or even Jupiter, with its atmospheric pressure intense enough to squeeze the electrons out of hydrogen atoms. Earth's moon was just so dull compared to that sort of excitement, though the view was admittedly pretty.

Gabriel found Hermione out in the woods where she liked to practice her magic, despite that one time she'd been attacked by one of the Unnamed fey. While she didn't appear outwardly upset, she was throwing her stiletto knives from Hati at a number of bulls-eyes that had been painted on the trunks of several trees with a very intense focus that didn't appear as if it was letting up anytime soon, despite the fact she kept hitting the center rings.

The moment she saw him, Hermione's face lit up and she practically leaped into his arms. "How are you doing?" Gabriel asked her after hugging her tight and swinging her around in a few circles before returning her to her feet. He wasn't quite sure if he should be concerned for her or not– she didn't seem upset, but she was throwing knives at trees and it looked like she'd been doing it for a while too.

"I'm, well... I really don't really know what to do with myself!" Hermione blurted out, sounding like she was embarrassed about the fact, to his amusement. "It isn't that I want it to be doing examinations again, but there was just so much to do and to plan, and there was pressure and high stakes and my head and days were always so busy, and now they're just... not."

"And you're bored," Gabriel summarised and Hermione sighed and nodded.
"I am so, so, so bored, Loki," she agreed mournfully. "I'm not good at going from a hundred and ten percent focused, to holiday mode. It's so unnatural! What do people even do with themselves with so much free time?" She sounded so genuinely bewildered that Gabriel couldn't help but laugh, even when she pouted up at him.

"Well, I don't think they usually practice their knife-throwing skills," he teased her.

"They should," Hermione retorted, a little huffily, but with no real offense. "It could save their lives one day."

"Hm," Gabriel mused, "judging by these poor trees, your knife skills have certainly stayed *sharp*--" he ignored her playful groan at his pun-- "during all your studying. How about your hand-to-hand?"

"Váli and Hati have had no complaints," Hermione said, "and you know I don't accept anything from myself short of perfect." There was no boasting in her words, just determination and confidence, and Gabriel couldn't help but laugh again as he looked fondly down at her, his fiercely intelligent little priestess with her sharp eyes, chaotic curls down to her elbows and a trickster's smile he was proud of.

"You know what?" he decided, "if you can get this--" he snapped his fingers, conjuring a human-shaped construct-- "pinned on the ground, then I'll take you with me to go deal with a shapeshifter that's been making trouble over in America." That little shit Puck had passed it on to him, as the fey trickster had no interest in exerting any effort to help humans, but he knew Loki didn't mind dealing with that sort business.

Hermione's eyes immediately lit up with determination. "Deal!" she declared, carefully placing her knives on the ground and settling into a ready stance as her eyes assessed the construct. He'd purposefully made it unnerving in its appearance, outwardly mostly-human but several unsettling degrees off ordinary, such as the empty eyes revealing its lack of soul, and he was proud that Hermione wasn't visibly put off by it. And when the fight started, he found himself impressed-- he was well aware of just how intensely focused Hermione had been on her studies, particularly over the past month before the exams, but it was clear that she hadn't neglected her physical training during that time either.

The construct she was sparring with was the first to move, charging at her like a bull, but she easily twisted out of reach of its grabbing hands, moving swiftly to swing her leg around to kick the back of its knee. The construct stumbled but didn't fall, retaliating with a blow in the direction of her head that she again evaded. Hermione was a good fighter, better then he'd have guessed. Her sharp, analytical mind let her think on her feet and adjust her strategies, and she had the speed and flexibility of someone who'd started training young and was dedicated to their craft. She'd supplied all the raw materials in abundance, and Váli and Hati had honed her into something capable and *fierce*.

After several minutes of 'sparring', during which Hermione mostly evaded the construct-- clever of her, she knew it was stronger and she wasn't about to win if it came down to brute force, which was the same case as it would be with most supernatural entities-- Hermione finally spotted a misstep on the construct's behalf that she was quick enough to take advantage of. It swung its leg around to tangle between Hermione's and trip her but Hermione spotted the move ahead of time and instead of being knocked over, or retreating back to evade, Hermione actually *leaped* forward, grabbing the construct's shoulder and using it to leverage herself up over it, onto its back. Already off-balance from the evaded kick, the construct ended up over-balancing and falling. Hermione, still on its back, moved like lightning, using her body-weight and grip to angle the fall so the construct ended up pinned face-first to the ground with the threat of a messily dislocated shoulder if it
With her free hand, Hermione summoned one of her knives and jabbed the blade threateningly against the artery in the construct's neck. "I win," she panted, the sound ragged but fiercely triumphant and Gabriel couldn't help his broad, proud grin.

"You do win," he agreed fondly, holding out a hand to pull her to her feet. "I owe you a 'Not-Hunt'."

"A 'just desserts'," Hermione corrected him. "We agreed that 'Not-Hunt' was a stupid name, and we're seeking to deliver justice."

"Just desserts and justice aren't always mutually exclusive." Gabriel pointed out, and Hermione shrugged slightly.

"I think people are lying to themselves, when they say that a call for justice is anything but a cry for revenge," she said, all matter-of-fact. "Just desserts are about ensuring the deserving get their due, no matter what type of being, creature or spirit they are. It's about doing our best to make the world a fairer place, whether that's helping to stop beings, creatures and spirits being hurt, or to ensure that the dead are honoured, with those who wronged them not going unpunished."

"When you say things like that, I don't know whether to call you an idealist or a cynic," Gabriel told her and Hermione grinned at him.

"Personally, I consider myself a realist."

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They arrived in Leawood, Kansas, just past dawn, when the night's chill still lingered in the air. Upon their arrival, Gabriel was immediately uncomfortable. There was something off about the small American town, something that itched at his grace, an inescapable, constantly gnawing sense of crawling wrongness. It took him far too long to pinpoint the origin of his unease, and when he finally did, Gabriel felt like violently cursing— and then tracking Puck down and smiting the wretched fey.

Usually, when multiple people in one town who all had a distinct lack of any prior criminal record were crying innocent to brutal crimes they swore they hadn't committed despite having been arrested after they were witnessed committing the crime or their DNA and fingerprints were found at the scenes, there was a shapeshifter involved. That was what Puck had assumed when he'd passed along the information, and it was Gabriel had assumed too and he hadn't had an issue with bringing Hermione along, comfortable in his knowledge that she was capable of dealing with a shapeshifter so long as he was on standby as back-up if something went wrong.

It wasn't until Hermione asked him to steal her a copy of the transcripts of the police interviews with the arrested suspects that he realised the gravity of the mistake he'd made— someone who'd been imitated by a shapeshifter would have some sort of alternative explanation of where they'd been when they'd supposedly committed the crime, even if it was that they'd been hit over the back of the head and left unconscious somewhere while the shapeshifter assumed their identities. Instead, every single interview had the suspects reporting to have blacked out the entire time, not remembering anything up to the point they'd been arrested. And every single one of them reported that the very last thing they remembered seeing before their arrests was black smoke.

The police were debating if it was some kind of drug, but Gabriel knew better— it wasn't a shapeshifter who'd made Leawood its hunting grounds, it was a fucking demon. One powerful
enough to ward itself against angels, though not quite strong enough to completely hide its presence from an archangel.

Gabriel's immediate reaction to this disastrous realisation was to grab Hermione and get her out of America and back to Fraserburgh right that fucking instant.

Hermione's immediate reaction was to refuse to leave until justice had been served.

Now, he'd never been the most scholarly of gods— or angels, for that matter— but Gabriel had been around long enough to pick up a book or two over the millennia. Not to mention, Hermione was definitely the scholarly sort and he liked the way she lit up, her eyes sparkling up at him with utter adoration, when he discussed literature with her the way nobody else she knew could. He'd read the works of Ernest Hemingway for her sake, though admittedly he'd found them enjoyable enough, and there was a quote of Hemingway's that had stuck with Gabriel, a quote that he remembered now, staring down into Hermione's fiercely determined gold-flecked chocolate-brown eyes— 'When you have a child, the world has a hostage'.

It was... accurate. Uncomfortably accurate. As much as he approved of the fierce way Hermione sought to fight back against the injustice in the world and had enjoyed how capable she'd looked as she practically danced around the construct he'd conjured to fight her, Váli and Hati's training evident in her every sleek move, there was a part of him that preferred the idea of forever stashing her away in one of his properties where she'd be safe from the world. Maybe he could create his own Enchanted Isle for Hermione to develop into a self-sustaining community that worshipped Loki, like the Isle that Morgana had ruled for Hecate, where she'd be sequestered from everything that had the potential to endanger her. He knew Hermione would go along with it, if he asked— his perfect little priestess would do anything for him, with the pure dedication of the wholly devout.

But he couldn't do it. Tempting as it was, hiding Hermione away from the world would be committing an injustice against the fire that burned fierce and absolute within her very soul, preventing her from reaching the heights she was destined for, out of his own, selfish desire. And pagan gods were selfish, selfish creatures, with Loki no different, but deep, deep, deep down (very, very, very deep), Gabriel was, unfortunately, still an archangel. And if he couldn't keep her tucked safely away from the world, then he would help her build the wings she needed to soar.

"Fine," he conceded with a sigh, ignoring her proud look of victory, "fine. You can stay." He wasn't about to let her get anywhere close to the demon, not a chance, but he wouldn't send her away. She could still help with research, investigating to see if there was a reason the demon was targeting the people it was, while he hunted down the hellspawn and smote it with extreme prejudice for daring to exist on the same planet as his little priestess.

He decided on leaving Hermione at the local library, a location which would let her be able to access the town's records (and, 'incidentally', happened out to be newly warded against demonic presences). "Now," he said, as he dropped her off with enough American money for her to pay to use one of the library's computers if she needed it, "I know we've talked before about rules, and the reasons why they exist."

"As challenges for those intelligent enough to work out how to get around them," Hermione recited dutifully, and he smirked at her.

"Exactly," he agreed proudly, before remembering why they were having this talk and grimacing slightly. "Except for this time. This is the exception to that. I need you to not leave this building, no matter what happens. I don't care if someone is being brutally murdered on its doorsteps, you're not to set a foot outside— pray to me instead." That was a touch confronting, Gabriel would admit, but going by her widened eyes and hurried promise, he'd made his point.
He still felt uneasy about leaving her, and he would have preferred leaving Vashti with her too, but phoenuxes, as beings of Light and Goodness, were sensitive to demonic presences and Hermione had insisted he take Vashti with him to find the demon. He hadn't argued too hard, hoping that the combination of his and Vashti's efforts would quickly uncover the demon, wherever the foul thing was hiding. Unfortunately, he was having less success then he'd hoped.

They'd arrived in Leawood in the early morning, and by late afternoon Gabriel was forced to admit to himself that the demon was well and truly hidden from his senses. Annoyed and frustrated, he returned to the library where Hermione immediately glanced up at his arrival, a small, thoughtful frown on her face. She was sitting in front of one of the library's computers, with several of her notebooks, old local newspapers and a school yearbook scattered around the desk the computer sat on.

"Loki," she said, before he could even greet her, "I don't think the demon is working alone."

At this point, Gabriel wasn't about to argue with her-- in fact, he agreed with her conclusion, though he was interested to know the thought processes behind it. "Do you think someone summoned it to make a deal, then? Or that a demon-witch bound it?" he questioned.

"Well, I've been looking into it, and I haven't found one person that has some sort of vendetta against all the victims and the 'suspects'," Hermione dived into her explanation, only babbling slightly in her eagerness to share what she'd found, "but I did find out from the police interviews with the 'suspects' and the victims' families that they all had someone in their lives that they held a great deal of mutual animosity towards. Which wouldn't really stand out if they weren't all, well, all victims, because it's normal to have people in your life you don't get along with. It's not even that unusual to have people in your life you really, really hate, like these people all did, and who really, really hate you back. But I looked more into their known 'enemies' and I realised that at least one of seven women, all aged between twenty-nine and thirty, was present on all thirteen lists, for the 'suspects' and the victims."

"That's a little strange," he noted, and Hermione nodded eagerly. "But," Gabriel had to add, "Leawood isn't exactly a large town. It's only got a population of, what, about thirty-thousand people? It could just be a coincidence."

"I know, I know," Hermione agreed impatiently, "the connection was vague and unlikely and most likely unrelated, but I don't like coincidences and it was really bothering me, so I looked into it and discovered all of the seven women in question attended the same high school, they were all in the same year level-- and all seven of them were friends!"

Here, she pointed to the open yearbook in front of her-- or, more specifically, to a photograph on the page of the open yearbook that depicted seven teenage girls. All of them looked ordinary enough and according to the description under the photo they were all members of one of the school's history clubs. Nothing about the photo seemed particularly interesting, but Hermione was practically vibrating in place in her excitement. His lack of response seemed to irritate her, and she eventually huffed and jabbed her finger at the neck of one of the teenager's in the photo. "Her necklace, Loki!" She said impatiently. "Look at her necklace!"

Gabriel's eyes widened slightly as he finally noticed what had caught Hermione's attention in the photograph. It was difficult to see but, unless he was mistaken, the cross on the necklace of one of the girl's wasn't the normal cross he'd originally dismissed it as-- it was inverted. As Satanic symbols went, an inverted cross wasn't a particularly interesting one, but it was very traditional-- and that was very interesting, considering there was a demon currently going around killing and framing people who the seven women apparently had had problems with.
"You think those seven women are a coven of demon-witches," he realised, and Hermione nodded so hard that one of the flowers fell out of her wildly bouncing curls.

"Yes! I think they were interested in the occult at school, probably as a way of lashing out against their conservative parents, and they accidentally stumbled onto a real ritual and it became less of a game, and more of a carefully hidden lifestyle. I don't know why they've just now decided to summon a demon, but I've looked into the past ten years since they graduated high school and not only have all seven seemed to have stayed close, but they also seem to have very, very good luck– and their co-workers, ex-partners and anyone in their way seems to have very, very bad luck," Hermione explained, flipping open one of her scattered notebooks to point out a neatly written list of various accidents attached to people– and inked lines connecting them to one of the names of the seven women.

"This is excellent work," Gabriel said appreciatively, and Hermione's bright, beaming smile put the sun to shame.

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Chapter 41

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE:

It had been about a year ago, when Loki was explaining demons and Hell to her after she'd found a reference to them in one of the hunter journals he'd given her, that Hermione learned the Judeo-Christian God was real. By that point she'd already long acknowledged the existence of gods (how could she not, when she spoke regularly to one?), but Loki confirming to her the existence of God with a capital 'G'... that had threatened to send her spiralling into an existential crisis in a way that not even discovering magic, secret societies and pagan gods had managed.

Hermione found the idea of an omniscient, supposed creator of everything in the universe rather disturbing, truth be told, especially considering the contents of the Bible– it outright demanded that people should *murder* her, for Loki's sake, that they ought to *burn her to death* for being a witch, declaring she was destined for Hell! And even more upsetting then that, it stated people who committed suicide ("committed", like suicide was a *crime* to be *committed*, not an act of sheer desperation!) went to Hell– if God was real and Hell was real, did that mean that the Bible was correct, and that *Ness* had been sent to Hell for taking her own life?

That had set off one of the most terrifying panic attacks Hermione had ever experienced, one that had taken Loki's firm reassurance that the Bible was very much a political document, one that was ghost written, badly translated and had chunks of the text omitted over the centuries by men afraid of a woman's power, to calm her down from. Clytemnestra Granger, Loki promised her, was *not* in Hell– Hell was for souls that were either tainted by the terrible evil they had committed or had been traded to demons in deals, not for souls who had been in too much pain and sought out their eternal rest early.

After she'd stopped panicking, reassured by her god that Ness was resting in Heaven and not suffering in Hell being relentlessly tortured until her soul twisted into something dark, broken and unrecognisable, Hermione had promptly started babbling out her many, many questions– had God really created the universe? *Was any of the Bible true? How old was the Earth? Was God really omniscient?*

Loki had seemed very uncomfortable with her eager questions, which she'd hastily stopped asking as soon as she'd paused for breath long enough to notice the subtle strain on his face. He did still
answer her, though, because he was amazing and wonderful and thoughtful like that (Yes, Parts of it, Much younger then the universe itself but still about four and a half billion years, and Sort of-- apparently there was a difference between an All-Seeing God and an All-Knowing God, but most people didn't manage to make the distinction-- Loki seemed strangely bitter about that). He had even given her a Bible which he'd corrected line by line.

It had actually been quite funny to read, as the corrections started off in English before quickly devolving into runes shivering with power, ones written in anger judging by how spiky and jagged they appeared on the pages. At first, Hermione hadn't actually been sure Loki even realised he'd changed languages, until she'd figured out that the runes were Enochian-- the language of angels-- and realised he must have taken it as an opportunity to teach her more, as obviously it made sense that he'd choose Enochian for the Bible*.

Her Enochian had certainly improved in leaps and bounds through her translation efforts too, which she made sure to send extra prayers of thanks to Loki for-- though she hadn't actually mentioned just why she was thankful. She'd commented to Loki about angels just once before, mentioning how they were depicted as humanity's protectors, and Loki had laughed, a bitter, humourless sound that was so horrendously wrong coming from her god, his expression all tight and horrible, that she'd never brought them up again. It was one of the only times that one of his reactions had come close to frightening or upsetting her-- it was nearly as bad as his reactions to hearing Odin's name, which she figured meant he'd probably had a bad encounter with an angel in the past.

(There had been new bookmarks in the corrected Bible he'd given her that night, marking the sections discussing the Great Flood to drown the infant Nephilim, the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah, the tenth plague that killed all the Egyptian first-borns, and more-- and Hermione had understood Loki's unspoken reply to her earlier comment; angels weren't humanity's Heavenly protectors, they were soldiers, weapons, punishers).

She half-wished she had that Bible with her now, or maybe one of those hunter journals discussing demons, as she settled in at the library to wait for Loki. She knew just how capable her god was, how powerful and awe-inspiring, but that didn't stop her from fretting-- if anything ever happened to her god, Hermione would destroy her in a way that she doubted she'd survive.

She would freely admit to feeling a bit disappointed that Loki had left her behind as he went off to confirm her theory about the demon-witch coven and then presumably deal with the demon-witches and the demon they'd summoned, but she did understand why he didn't bring her along with him. Demons were well beyond her ability to handle, not that she even wanted to be near one-- she may have argued to stay in Leawood, but that was because she thought she could help with the investigative side of things, not because she was delusional enough to think she'd last even five seconds against an actual demon! If she was being honest, she was actually surprised that Loki had left her at the library instead of returning her to Fraserburgh after she'd figured out about the coven of demon-witches, but she was glad he hadn't.

After Loki had left and she'd finished returning the various local newspapers and high school yearbooks to where she'd found them, Hermione ended up settling down to read one of her own books which she'd brought with her. Professor McGonagall had recommended 'The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts' to her following their in-depth discussion over letters on 'Modern Magical History' and 'The Greatest Wizarding Events of History', and Hermione was finding the magical population's perspective of World War II just as fascinating as Professor McGonagall had suggested she would.

She'd just reached the section of the book detailing the British war hero Newton Scamander's first encounter with Grindelwald during his rise to power in the tense time leading up to what would culminate in the most devastating war in known human history, magical and muggle alike, when a
small hand tugged at the sleeve of her dress. Surprised, Hermione glanced down into a pair of large, soulful puppy-dog eyes, set in a small, thin face framed by floppy brown hair.

The little boy looked about three or four years old, though he could be older as the slightly threadbare clothes he was wearing were at least two sizes too big, the sleeves of the shirt rolled over several times, which made him appear very small. His eyes, however, held a very familiar spark of keen intelligence, a spark Hermione recognised from looking in the mirror, and she knew instantly not to underestimate the boy, or dismiss him based on his age.

"Can I help you?" she asked politely, and the little boy nodded, those sharp, curious eyes not hesitating to meet hers.

"How is the picture in your book moving?" he asked, his voice young and piping, and Hermione froze, staring in shock at the supposedly muggle child who shouldn't have been able to see past the magic of the book designed to hide the moving photographs from non-magical eyes. Had she just managed to bump into a muggleborn in the middle of nowhere, Kansas?

"Um," she stammered, unsure what in Loki's name she was supposed to say, or do, in the face of the child's curiosity. She wasn't even sure what was legal or not for her to say, as 'International Laws of Magical Beings, Beasts and Spirits, As Defined By The International Confederation of Wizards' had made a point of mentioning that MACUSA's laws regarding muggle (or 'no-maj') interactions was different to the international standard. She didn't want Loki to have to break her out of prison!

"Sammy!" A slightly panicked shout from across the library had the little boy– Sammy, presumably– rolling his eyes in a manner that Loki himself would have been proud of and huffing slightly.

An older boy, maybe eight, with short dark blond hair, the type that would have darkened to brown by the time he'd reached his teenage years, and a panicked expression on his face rounded the corner of the shelves, visibly deflating in his relief when he spotted Sammy. Like Sammy, the older boy was dressed in the same slightly threadbare clothes, with a thinness to his face that came from hunger, not genetics.

"Sammy, what the hell?" the older boy hissed, marching over and glaring down at the smaller boy. "You're not supposed to wander off! Dad said we have to stay together, while we wait for him!"

"I didn' wander off!" Sammy defended himself, with a frankly adorable pout. "I wanted to know how the pictures in her book moved!" He pointed to 'The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts' and the older boy– Dean– frowned, glancing over at her and then down at her book, his eyes abruptly widening.

"Jeez," he exclaimed, and for a shocked moment Hermione thought she'd just managed to stumble across two Muggleborns (a halfblood wouldn't have been surprised by the moving photograph), before Dean continued, "how frickin' thick is that book? Shouldn't you be on school holidays?"

"I am," Hermione replied with a slightly hesitant smile, not sure if she was relieved or disappointed that only Sammy could see through the glamour. "This is just some light reading."

"That's supposed to be light reading?" Dean demanded incredulously.

"Well, the content isn't overly complex," Hermione defended herself and the admittedly two and a half inches thick book, "a little bit dry in some sections, maybe, but it's very fascinating!"
Dean was giving her the same incredulous look that Hermione had become very familiar with over the years, from her fellow students and teachers alike, but Sammy hadn't forgotten what had attracted his attention to the book in the first place and he seemed quite unwilling to let it go.

"But how do the pictures move?" he asked again, pointing insistently at the black-and-white photo of Newton "Newt" Scamander, whose small figure was ducking bashfully away from the boy's attention. Hastily, Hermione snapped the book shut, covering the title with her hand as casually as she could, and tried to figure out how to get out of answering—because Sammy didn't look like he was about to move until he got his explanation.

In the end, however, she didn't have to figure out a lie, because that was when the three of them were interrupted by a loud, furious snarl of—"YOU!"

Snapping her attention over to the rapidly approaching speaker, due to the woman's dishevelled state it took Hermione a moment to recognise her as Lacey Fair, one of the women she suspected of being a demon-witch. Reacting immediately to the approaching danger, Hermione was already reaching for her magic, ready to defend herself, when she realised that Lacey wasn't paying her any attention as she stormed over—no, Lacey was heading straight for the two boys Hermione had been talking to with absolute murder on her face.

"Did your stupid hunter daddy really think we wouldn't notice he brought a pair of kiddies with him when he came to our town?" The demon-witch snarled, sounding positively deranged and apparently not caring one iota that they were in a public space and she was attracting the attention of all the library's current patrons. Lacey's cheeks were streaked with smudged mascara, her eyes were red and swollen and her mouth was twisted in a vicious snarl of pure rage.

"We were gonna leave you alone, we don't hurt kids," she spat, "but Beth and Tammie are fucking dead and I can't get into contact with any of my other best friends, so chances are they're all fucking dead too!" The demon-witch was shrieking by the end of her rant, pure hatred dripping from every syllable as rage glinted in her pale eyes. "My best friends are dead! They're dead! And now your daddy gets to lose you, like I've lost them!"

'Loki!' Hermione prayed frantically to her god, even as she leaped into motion. Shoving both her palms forward, a raw burst of her magic slammed into the demon-witch, sending Lacey flying away from them and into one of the bookshelves. The woman collided with a bookshelf with a vicious-sounding crunch that made the entire shelving structure shudder, though it didn't tip. Staggering to her feet, Lacey let out an enraged shriek, whipping one of her hands in Hermione's direction and the other in the direction of Sammy and Dean. Hermione dove out of the way of the malevolent magic, while hastily summoning one of the library chairs to block Lacey's magic from hitting the boys. The chair made a horrible shrieking sound of tortured metal as the magic hit it, twisting the chair into a knot, and Hermione felt dizzy in horror of what could have been. But she didn't have the time to panic about what-ifs or near-misses; Loki still hadn't shown up, she didn't know where he was, and she couldn't continue to fight Lacey while also defending all the innocents around her—she had to end this.

Vashti appeared then, in a magnificent flare of golden fire and a war-cry that raised every hair on Hermione's body. Lacey screamed in apparent agony at the sound of the phoenix song, slamming her hands over her ears, and taking advantage of the demon-witch's distraction, Hermione yanked out one of the throwing knives Hati and Váli insisted she take with her everywhere (and oh gods, was she relieved that she'd listened) and took aim.

Lacey didn't even notice the stiletto blade until it was buried hilt-deep in her throat, and by then it was too late for her to do anything about it. The demon-witch could only gargle and choke for air.
that would never come, collapsing to the ground as she clawed weakly at the handle of the stiletto for several seconds before her hands went limp as her heart beat its last. Vashti screeched in victory, swooping down over the corpse to engulf it in her golden flames; moments later, all that was left of what had mere moments ago been a living, breathing human being was nothing but fine ash.

Hermione couldn't help herself; she doubled over and threw up, right on her own shoes. She was still throwing up, a terribly anxious Vashti perched on her shoulder, the poor phoenix cooing and crooning and trying to help hold the curls out of her face as she vomited, when Hermione heard Loki arrive with a resounding clap. It was a sound like literal thunder, one that vibrated through her bones, right to her very soul. He must be angry, she noted distantly, dully; her god could never quite manage to contain the overflow of his power when he was angry.

She felt rather than witnessed his approach, and, ignoring the sight she must make, all teary-eyed with vomit smeared across her chin, she looked up to glare at him, her stomach lurching all the while like she was standing on her uncle's fishing boat during a storm. "Where were you?!!" She demanded tearfully, the accusation thick in her voice. The look of horror on Loki's face did very little to soothe her anger, even if the more distant, rational part of her could acknowledge that Loki wasn't the true object of her anger, just the one unfortunate enough to be standing in front of her in this moment.

"The demon and its pet witches put up more of a fight then I was expecting from them, I couldn't get away when I heard you, no matter how desperately I wanted to," her god admitted, sounding shockingly hoarse as he banished the vomit with a flick of his wrist then gently coaxing her into his arms, careful not to dislodge Vashti. "I'm so, so, so sorry, kitten."

"It's fine," Hermione lied, voice muffled against his chest. Loki pulled away slightly to give her a very sceptical look and she shook her head. "Alright, that's a lie," she muttered. "But... later, okay? We'll talk later– we need to fix all this first," she urged, gesturing to all the panicking patrons of the library, including the two boys who the demon-witch had just tried to kill, Dean clutching Sammy protectively against his chest.

"Later," Loki agreed after a moment of looking down at her with his piercing golden eyes, and Hermione wasn't sure if he meant it to sound quite so much like a threat. Still, while her god went to go 'fix' people's memories, she hurried over to check that the two boys were okay. Only, when she approached, Dean hurriedly stepped back away from her, eyeing her with a suspicion that was rapidly edging toward hostility. Hermione was confused for a moment, before she abruptly remembered Lacey's words– 'Did your stupid hunter daddy really think we wouldn't notice he brought a pair of kiddies with him?' the demon-witch had demanded of Sammy and Dean. And Hermione abruptly felt sick.

Loki had warned her on multiple occasions that any hunter who witnessed her use magic would automatically assume she was a demon-witch and do their utmost to kill her, not 'wasting' any time asking questions. Sammy and Dean's dad was a hunter, according to Lacey Fair– and going by the look on Dean's face, he knew exactly what it was his daddy hunted.

"I saved your life!" she couldn't help but hiss at him, bristling defensively through the wave of hurt even as fresh tears stung at her eyes and Vashti made an angry clicking sound, snapping her golden beak at the hunter's boy. "You could at least pretend to be grateful!"

"You're a witch!" Dean hissed back, holding his little brother even tighter, while the four-year-old looked around in confusion and fear, clearly not understanding what was going on but very aware of the danger he'd just been in. "Just like that– that evil bitch who attacked us!"
"I am nothing like her!" Hermione exclaimed, glaring furiously at Dean for even daring to compare her to the murdering demon-witch she'd just saved him from. "I was born with my magic! She made some sort of foul, unnatural demon-deal to get hers! We are nothing alike!"

The blatant prejudice wasn't something she'd ever prepared herself for, not really, and when Dean just continued to glare back at her, it was abruptly all too much. Without any warning, Hermione found herself bursting into tears.

"Aw, dammit," she vaguely heard Dean mumble, but she didn't really care. Instead, she just slumped down to the ground, pulled her knees up to her chest and sobbed into them with swiftly mounting hysteria, because she'd killed Lacey Fair, she'd killed someone, she'd bloody murdered someone—

The small hand tentatively patting the shoulder not currently acting as a perch for a phoenix actually took her by surprise, interrupting before she could fall into a proper spiral. Hermione jerked her head up to see Sammy standing next to her, a very concerned look on his small, solemn face, while an uncomfortable Dean hovered behind his little brother. Dean was still scowling, except it was more of a worried-looking scowl than a defensive-looking scowl. Like he was concerned about her, but he was too embarrassed to show it.

"Are you okay?" Sammy asked earnestly, looking into her teary eyes with his big, soulful, puppy-dog ones, and Hermione sniffled a bit, hiccupped, but nodded.

"I– I'm okay, Sammy," she said, though her wobbly voice didn't exactly make her words sound very convincing. "Just... a bit overwhelmed."

"...I know you're not really like her," Dean muttered, looking awkwardly down at his feet, "you saved us. It was shitty of me to say you were like her."

"It was," Hermione agreed, with another sniffle. "Really, really shitty."

"I still don't believe you about being born like you said you were, though," Dean added obstinately, apparently unable to help himself. "Dad would know if that was possible, he would have told me!"

"You're wrong– and so is your dad!" Hermione retorted, about to start getting angry again, but before she and Dean could resume arguing, Hermione found herself abruptly yanked across the library. She would have started panicking, except she recognised the wildfire-static-thunderstorm touch of Loki's power. Dean and Sammy were both panicking– she could hear Dean's panicked shouting and Sammy's shrill cry of alarm– but before she could ask Loki what the bloody hell he was doing, her god was already scooping her and Vashti up into his arms and a blink later, they were standing in what Hermione recognised as the foyer of Loki's home, the one where her belongings were being stored.

"What the bloody hell was that!?" she blurted out, a touch shrill in her shock at the abrupt change of scenery.

"That," Loki said, his voice grim, "was us leaving just moments before a hunter arrived."

Comprehension quickly dawned. "Sammy and Dean's daddy was about to charge in, probably waving his guns around," Hermione realised, and Loki nodded, his expression dark, dangerous.

"That man is the supernatural world's nightmare made flesh," he said, all cold eyes and mute fury. "I'd kill him in a second for all the innocent supernatural lives he's taken, merely for their crime of not being human, but... there are plans for that man, plans requiring him to be alive that I can't
afford to get involved in."

Oh.

Oh. That... that wasn't something Hermione had heard from Loki before— ever. Her god had never admitted to a situation where he was outclassed and had to step back for his own safety, and she did not like it. Not one bit. Loki was fierceness and freedom and fire, he wasn't ever scared. But she couldn't deny there was something very, very strained about Loki's expression, then, something horribly foreboding, and Hermione suddenly felt afraid.

*Hermione's not stupid or oblivious (obviously not- she's Hermione, and she has her flaws, but those aren't them), she's just used to Loki giving her books in different languages for her to figure out and assumes he's continuing the tradition. She also doesn't question his knowledge, because he is literally her god- she expects him to know everything, because she worships him as this practically infallible deity.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I'd clarify here that Dean is currently eight, Sam is four, and no, Sam isn't actually muggleborn, he's just capable of seeing through the glamour because of his currently-dormant psychic powers.
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO:

John Winchester swore, his boots pounding against the ground as he charged into the library, his fear a tight, hard knot in his chest. His eldest son's startled eyes met his as he burst through the doorway, and he had a moment to take in the tableau of destruction, shelves toppled over, books strewn haphazardly, patrons milled about with confused, dazed expressions on their faces, eyes unseeing, and Dean standing over a girl with wild curly hair and a bright green-and-golden bird the size of a macaw on her shoulder, while Sam was patting the opposite shoulder, before the girl and bird went flying across the room, a startled expression on the girl's face, into the arms of a humanoid monster with inhuman golden eyes that smiled mockingly at him.

He had his gun up, a bullet already flying through the air, aimed between its eyes, but the monster, the curly-haired child and the bird all disappeared, vanishing into thin air and leaving his bullet to bury harmlessly into the wall behind where it had been standing.

"Fuck," he swore to himself, furious that he hadn't reacted faster and already pitying the girl her likely fate as he rushed over to his boys. "What happened? Are you hurt?" He demanded.

"We're okay, dad," Dean rushed to reassure him, his young face pinched tight with upset, while Sam was still looking over to where the girl had disappeared, his brown eyes blown wide. "Fuck. "The... the witch--" his son lowered his voice to whisper the word, still trying to protect his little brother from the truth of what their daddy did, the monsters that he fought, even though the secret was out at this point, "tried to..." Dean paused and swallowed, pointing to the remnants of a chair, twisted into itself, and John felt sick, unable to even imagine that happening to his son. "But then the girl... the one that just... vanished... with that guy, she-- she saved us."

"She saved you?" John asked, confused by Dean's explanation. "How could she save you?"

"She had magic," Sam said, suddenly, and John felt his face twist automatically in disgust. "She said she was born with it."

"Impossible!" John immediately barked out, glaring down at Sam as his mind flashed back to that night, to those sickening, sulfuric yellow eyes and that terrible, twisted smirk as dark blood dripped down into his innocent baby's mouth, forever leaving its evil taint behind.

"How do you know that?" Sam pushed, and John wondered if it was an accusation he was hearing in that young, piping voice, seeing in those large, brown eyes. "She was good, she saved us."

"You mark my words, boy," John said darkly, pushing away the discomfort he felt to give Sam a stern, forbidding look, "nothing good ever comes from the supernatural. Ever."

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It wasn't necessarily the powerful demons that were the most troublesome ones, Gabriel thought irritably to himself, it was the clever ones. And this demon, with the backing of a coven of seven powerful demon-witches? This demon was clever. Which was annoying.

He swore as he tripped up another curse, setting it off. It felt like acid, melting through his vessel
almost as fast he was regenerating the atoms that made up the building blocks of its cells. Ripping the curse to pieces with a slash of his hand that sent a layer of skin sloughing off like liquid as he did so, the curse dissipated around him with a loud hiss and the demon, a tar-black stain inside the demon-witch it was currently possessing, was beginning to appear quite nervous, even as magic charged up around its meat-suit's hands and Gabriel felt the dark blood magic soaked deep into the foundations of the house hum in response.

Three of the five demon-witches that he'd found convened in the house were now dead; only two remained, one both furious and terrified as it huddled back against the basement wall and one currently possessed by the demon. Instead of trying to escape after Gabriel had surprised the coven, the demon had led them all down to the basement and, after the first trap was sprung on him, Gabriel had realised why. Now, several traps later, he was just plain pissed off.

"Leave now, or pay the price," the demon warned him, baring its meat-suit's teeth as it made its impotent threats, "this is your one chance to live!"

"Let me think," Gabriel snarked, glaring back at it, "fuck no."

"Fool!" it hissed, before abruptly spinning in place and driving a dagger through the heart of the last remaining demon-witch, barring the one whose body it was wearing. The dagger immediately flared a violent, bloody red and around them, symbols appeared on the dark, stone floor of the basement, flaring the same bloody red. It fairly reeked of blood magic, pain and suffering as the demon-witch's dead body collapsed to the ground, dagger still buried in her heart, her blood pooling out and soaking into the stone, joining the blood of those that had come before her, adding power to the dark curse.

That, of course, was the moment when Hermione's sharp, panicked, fear-soaked prayer reached him.

And when Gabriel immediately stretched his wings, demon forgotten as he responded to her call—the curse snagged at him, just as the demon simultaneously attacked.

It was a short, brutal, bloody fight, the coven's blood curse tearing Gabriel's vessel apart, even as he, in turn, tore the possessed demon-witch apart, then seized onto the panicked demon as it attempted to flee and smote it from existence in a bright, punishing burst of grace. The blood-curse took a frustrating, terrifying near thirty seconds of finagling to disentangle from himself before it dissipated from existence, and it took another terrifying eleven seconds to put his vessel back together and vanish the blood, before, with a single, powerful beat of his three-sets of wings, he followed the call of his own grace to Hermione's side.

He could have cried out in relief to see that his precious, precious priestess was still alive, was still in the library, even, except the place looked like it had been hit by a hurricane. He barely had eyes for the destruction, however, too distracted by how Hermione was doubled over, apparently having been physically ill. When she looked up at him, with teary, accusing eyes, he felt his metaphorical heart breaking in his chest.

He was more relieved than words could express when she fell into his arms in a flood of tears, though it didn't take her long to pull herself together, her mind turning to the others in the library, that bleeding heart of hers far too big for her tiny frame.

As he glanced around the room, Gabriel briefly froze as his eyes passed over two small boys. Frankly, he was shocked that he hadn't seen them earlier; it was almost unfathomable to him, that he could have missed the pair. The Righteous Man(Boy)'s soul burned bright like magnesium, while Lucifer's True Vessel had a soul as radiant as starlight. And, of course, it was those two boys,
the Winchester brothers, the children of John Winchester, the man beginning to make a name for himself as an obsessive hunter who didn't discriminate between the harmless and the malevolent supernatural when he killed, the future True Vessels for the destined apocalyptic death match between his siblings, that Hermione went straight towards.

Gabriel felt tense, watching her interact with the Winchesters. At first, he burned with protective fury, watching how the older child's insensitive words sent Hermione back to tears—though it did give him a better idea of what had happened, as did editing the memories of the library's patrons, considering there was no body—and then he just felt agitated as he observed the starlight soul tentatively prod against the brilliant sunshine of his Hermione, while burning magnesium hovered protectively next to them.

It was almost a relief, to feel the rapidly approaching presence of John Winchester. It gave him an excuse to pull Hermione back to him, back into his arms, away from anything to do with the True Vessels and the Winchesters. He couldn't help but grin mockingly at John Winchester as the hunter charged into the library—that was, until the man started shooting at him while he was holding Hermione in his arms, a child who could have been, for all Winchester knew, an innocent hostage.

The rage Gabriel felt as he flew them to the house where he had Hermione's possessions stored was a slow, burning fury that pierced deep into his grace, but he pushed it aside for Hermione's sake, knowing he needed to talk her through what she'd been forced to do, and the state he'd found her in when he first arrived at the library.

(He didn't want to ever talk about, or even think about, the fear in Hermione's eyes when he'd had to admit that John Winchester was untouchable, not just because he'd been the one to put it there, but because it was very close to a lie and it made him feel ashamed.

If he was brutally honest with himself, he was capable of choosing a side in the whole apocalyptic mess, to stop being a bystander to destiny. But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Lucifer and Michael were his older siblings. He loved them. He couldn't choose one of them, couldn't betray the other one like that, no matter what they'd both done— not to mention the sheer destruction such a fight between them would cause... to be complicit in that, Gabriel didn't think he could live with himself.

And so, he would just remain a coward, and he would run and hide and protect his loved ones from the fall out and wait until it was over, wait until either Michael or Lucifer had killed the other and he and Raphael were left to weep over the corpse of their sibling while the Choirs sung in victory or fled in defeat)

"So," Gabriel cleared his throat slightly, needing to get away from his own thoughts (always running, wasn't he? Always running, always hiding, always the coward), and gentling his voice as he met Hermione's eyes, blown wide with her fear, "is it later yet, sugar?"

To his surprise, Hermione's face immediately coloured in shame as she understood he was referring to her promise to talk 'later' and her eyes turned shiny with the threat of a re-emergence of tears.

"It's just... she was human," his little priestess admitted in a very small voice, her head hanging low as she blushed bright with shame. "And evil, I know, and I'm not sorry that she can't hurt anyone else, but she was very distinctly human-shaped, and I... I threw a knife at her. Fully intending for it to kill her. And it did, because Hati and Váli are amazing teachers and I want to give them both a big hug, but I also want to just crawl into my bed and cry, and I don't want anyone to think that I'm a bigot, or species-ist, but I can't exactly deny that it's easier to kill something that looks like a monster, compared to something that hides their monstrous nature under a human skin, and—"
"Hermione," Gabriel interrupted her gently, quietly impressed with how long she'd managed to talk without pausing to breathe, "you're babbling, kitten."

Hermione immediately shut her jaw with a loud click, flushing an even darker red as she ducked her chin even lower, hiding her face behind her curls.

He didn't like that. He didn't like to see her hiding, to see her ashamed, when she should be so fucking proud, and he told her just that. "Taking a life, any life, is never an easy thing to do," he said gently. "I would be more concerned if it was easy for you to take a human life. You were put in a very difficult position, where you had to make a very difficult choice, but you made the right one. You saved those two boys' lives," he told her (though either Heaven or Hell would have pulled strings to make sure they wouldn't have stayed dead for long). "And I'm not going to go into detail about what that coven got up to, but I will say this— Lacey Fair got her just desserts, as far as I'm concerned. You've got my Trickster's stamp of approval."

Hermione let out a wet sounding giggle at that, and she lost her fight against the re-emergence of tears, but they were a relieved sort of tears, like the release of a pressure valve, and her soul seemed soothed afterwards. A little less whole, a little more broken, but no less beautiful for it.

Later that day, when they were sitting on the beach together and drinking still-steaming hot chocolates he'd snapped up for them as they watched the sun slowly set, painting the still ocean surface in brilliant shades of orange, red, and gold, Hermione spoke up suddenly.

"I think one of the boys I met in the library was a muggleborn," she said. She sounded concerned, and although the Winchesters were the last topic Gabriel was interested in discussing, he made a small sound of acknowledgement, prompting her to continue, to get whatever was worrying her off her chest. "It's just... his father is a hunter," she explained, turning slightly to look up at him with big, worried chocolate-brown eyes, flecked through with the gold of his True Form's wings. "What if his father hurts him, if he does accidental magic? What if he even kills him?"

"What makes you think he's a wizard?" Gabriel asked her, arching an inquisitive eyebrow as he wondered how she could have come to that conclusion.

"He could see through the enchantments on one of my books," Hermione explained to him, "he could see the photograph moving and asked me about it. Muggles can't see through the enchantment— which means he can't be a muggle."

"He could see through the enchantments on one of my books," Hermione explained to him, "he could see the photograph moving and asked me about it. Muggles can't see through the enchantment— which means he can't be a muggle."

Samuel Winchester was most definitely not a descendant of one of Hecate's blessed, Gabriel knew that with certainty— it would have been noticed in the lines of Cain and Abel. The Campbell line was known to produce natural psychics, however, and Samuel had been fed the blood of a once-seraph, turned-demonic prince of Hell, which would enhance any natural gifts he had, in order to strengthen him in preparation for hosting Lucifer. Any potential he had would have been given a kick-start.

He debated lying to Hermione, telling her he'd go and re-home the child, but decided instead to go with the truth— or at least a version of it, with one glaring, Apocalypse-shaped omission. "Hm, does it really mean he can't be a muggle?" he asked, tapping his lip considering. Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion. "I think that's some black-and-white thinking there, honey. Do you think centaurs could see through the enchantment? What about sirens? Vampires? Veela? Werewolves? Ghosts? Mer-people? The Fey? Psychics? Kitsune? Selkies?"

"Oh!" Hermione said, her cheeks going red. "I didn't think of that. Um, is he one of those?"

"He's not a supernatural creature, but he's not a witch, so I suspect he's some type of psychic,"
Gabriel told her. Hermione was quiet for a moment as she seemed to process that, nibbling her lower lip anxiously.

"What sort of powers do psychics have?" she finally asked him, still sounding worried. "Are they overt? Will Sammy still be in danger?"

"Psychics tend to come into their powers later in life, usually in late adolescence at the earliest," Gabriel explained. "They're born with their supernatural abilities, but not the same way you were--they don't carry a blessing from a pagan god, they carry the ability in their family blood-line. Types of psychic abilities include seeing into the past, present and future, moving objects with their mind, summoning and binding ghosts and reading minds, though it's unusual for a psychic to develop more than one type of ability. Practicing demonic-witchcraft and making deals with demons can enhance their natural abilities, as can studying how to harness the forces of nature. Psychics and demon-witches who've made Deals tend to become particularly powerful demons," he added grimly, thinking of the demon he'd just smote--with their knowledge of witchcraft, they'd most definitely been a demon-witch in life.

Hermione looked like she was bursting with questions, the way she always looked when faced with new, interesting information to devour, but her concern was still evident. "Do you think Sammy is in danger?" she asked softly, still looking up at him with those big, soft eyes, and he melted in the face of all that sheer empathy for a mere stranger she'd only just met but still cared for, because he was an innocent and Hermione's heart was kind and her soul was beautiful and she cared for the innocents in this cruel, fucked up, broken world that chewed up innocents and spat out what shattered, broken mess remained.

"I'll check up on him, sweetheart," he promised, and she beamed.

"Thank you, Loki!"

::

Sam waited until Dad's snores had reached the timbre that indicated he'd sunk into the sort of deep sleep (assisted by a bottle of Jack) that meant he wasn't about to wake up anytime soon before twisting around and sitting up in the single bed he was sharing with Dean. His pillow was at the foot of the motel bed while Dean's was at the head, and a quick peek over showed him that Dean was still awake too and that his big brother was looking anxiously back at him.

He was probably worried that Sam was scared. Dad had given him the Big Talk today about what he really did, after the evil, scary witch lady had attacked him and Dean in the library today. Dad had told him all about how the supernatural was real and that a monster had killed Mommy and that it was Dad's job to hunt monsters down and stop them hurting more people and to find the monster who killed Mommy, and that that was why they weren't like normal families.

Sam had mostly stayed quiet, because he knew that Dad didn't like to be interrupted when he was using that tone of voice--Dean called it his 'Marine sergeant' voice. And when Dad had reiterated at the end that the supernatural was evil, Sam had dutifully nodded alongside Dean, who he was a little hurt to learn already knew about the supernatural and had been keeping it a secret from him too, like Dad had.

But even as he'd nodded, he had doubted. Because the girl in the library, the one with sharp, clever gold-flecked eyes the colour of rich chocolate, chaotic curls down to her elbows, a pretty-sounding voice and that smile, all clever, bright and laughing, like tricks not yet played and just out of sight, hadn't seemed evil. She had protected them with her warm, fizzy magic, even though she'd been sick after what had happened with the witch. And the look in her eyes, when Dean had backed
away from her— that had been pure, blatant hurt, like his rejection had crushed her. How could someone like that be evil?

Dean opened up the covers and Sam quickly crawled up the bed to slide into place beside him. His big brother immediately pulled Sam into his arms, squeezing tightly, so Sam's ear was pressed against his chest, and he exhaled quietly, breathing in and out in tandem with the beating of his big brother's heart. Dad didn't like it when they slept at the same end of the bed anymore, but Dad didn't like a lot of things. Dad also wasn't around a lot, and Sam had already mostly learnt when to pick his battles, waiting until Dad was asleep before going to his big brother.

He knew that Dean had been really scared today— scared that he could have lost Sam like he'd lost Mommy, or that the witch could have hurt him. He knew that Dad had pulled Dean away after the library and out of his earshot, when they got back to the motel, and had spoken to him in a way that made Dean shrink in place, head falling low. Sam knew that Dean had been fighting back tears when Dad had told him the truth about how Mommy had really died, and he knew that in this moment, as he reached out for comfort, and Dean reached out to offer it, his big brother was finally, finally relaxing.

"You okay, Sammy?" Dean asked, his voice a bit scratchy, like he might have cried a little (or a lot) during his shower.

"Do you think Dad's right?" Sam asked, speaking very quietly, even though he knew Dad was deep asleep.

"'Course he is," Dean said roughly, his grip tightening slightly as he tensed. Sam frowned.

"Really?" He asked, and Dean tensed further.

"Look, it doesn't matter, Sammy," he muttered. "Dad knows what he's doing, okay?"

It wasn't okay, but Sam didn't try to argue. Dean hated being forced to play peace-keeper between him and Dad, so he tried to avoid forcing him to. But still... the thought lingered that night, as it would for many nights (and years) to come.

What if Dad was wrong?

::
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE:

As the date for the muggleborn orientation tour of Diagon Alley drew closer, Hermione found herself eagerly watching the sky for owls. But it wasn't a Hogwarts owl that first arrived bearing an invitation.

Fleur's owl was a haughty creature, though Hermione had found that was a common enough theme across most avian species. The letter it bore, and surrendered to her with a sharp click of its beak and a haughty flick of its head, was written on creamy stationary with Fleur's usual, impeccable handwriting. The letter contained within it an invitation Hermione hadn't been expecting at all, an invitation to spend a night or two at Fleur's home in France with her family before the new school year began.

Hermione had enjoyed her correspondence with Fleur, but she couldn't help but feel hesitant about actually meeting the French girl in person. 'Hugo' and 'Muriel' were wounds that would never heal, not entirely, not even with Loki softening the impact of her memories, and while she got along well with Fleur in their letter exchanges, she knew she didn't always relate well to other children in person. But she did really like Fleur, and she also really liked how Fleur had embraced all the chaos she'd suggested that the girl wreak on the species-ist bullies at her school. After taking the time to think it over, ultimately Hermione decided that she would take the risk. Because she could read between the lines, and she understand that Fleur, too, had taken a risk in reaching out, as the part-Veela had likewise experienced past hurts with false friendships.

Decision made, Hermione steeled her spine, calmed the fluttering butterflies of excitement in her belly and wrote back to Fleur accepting the initiation, before belatedly informing Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran that she'd been invited to spend two nights in London with a school friend she'd made at Red Roofs (and that her parents were footing the bill). They both agreed to it, pleased that she was making an effort to maintain connections with her school friends. Hermione felt mildly guilty about misleading them, but she preferred the lie to using her god like some sort of taxi-cab. Loki was a god, not some sort of personal chauffeur for her to just dial up when she needed a lift from him!

Fleur sent back a pleased reply with a portkey attached, and, a week later, with her bags packed and Vashti kissed goodbye (her beloved phoenix could flame to her side in seconds if necessary, but considering her relatives thought Vashti was a canary, to keep up the facade they'd decided she ought to stay in Fraserburgh in her disguise), Hermione hugged and kissed her uncle and cousins goodbye before her aunt made the hour drive to Aberdeen Airport where, to their knowledge, she boarded the two-hour flight to London. Instead, she activated the portkey from one of the bathroom stalls, taking off for France with a dizzying whirl.

She arrived in a spacious foyer that reminded her of the entrances of the houses of her parents' wealthier friends. The space was brightly lit and open, decorated in shades of pale cream and soft gold, and it seemed as if Fleur's entire family had gathered to greet her as she arrived. There was Fleur, of course, who looked just as Hermione remembered her; bright-blue eyes, long-silvery hair, and an already willowy figure, despite her young age. Next to her stood a miniature version of Hermione's, who must surely be Fleur's younger sister, Gabrielle.
Behind Fleur and Gabrielle were a man and a woman, presumably Fleur's parents; Claude and Apolline Delacour. Claude Delacour was a slightly plump man with a serious-looking face but a very kind smile. Next to him, Apolline Delacour was radiant; her beauty reminded Hermione of Eris, in that it was otherworldly, inhuman even, in its perfection. Her hair draped down her back like liquid silver, softly curling along the ends, her skin near glowed in the light of the foyer, and her eyes were like sapphires, bright and glittering. Her rosy lips were curved into an enchanting smile.

Claude Delacour was the first to greet Hermione, speaking to her in quick, easy French. "Welcome to France, Mademoiselle Granger!" he exclaimed, quite enthusiastically. "My daughter says you speak French quite fluently, yes? Yes? Ah, good, good! Well, I am Claude, and this is my lovely wife, Apolline, and my younger daughter, Gabrielle." he introduced, each name accompanied by an extravagant flourish of his hand. Hermione smiled shyly at the family.

"Please call me Hermione," she said politely, copying Claude by speaking in French. "It's so lovely to meet you all, your home is beautiful."

"You are most welcome here, Hermione," Apolline told her warmly.

"We were quite surprised when our Fleur asked to have a friend stay over– and even more surprised to learn her friend was British!" Claude said, the tone of his voice indicating that 'surprise' was likely an understatement.

"Papa!" Fleur hissed at him, her cheeks turning pink.

"Though I feel I really must ask," Apolline added, "if you are the one responsible for the somewhat more... colourful correspondence we have been receiving from Fleur's professors this year, compared to her previous years at Beauxbatons."

Hermione blushed slightly while Fleur raised her chin defiantly, even as the smile curling her lips made her look smug as the cat with the cream.

"And yet, I did not receive a single detention." She said, sounding infinitely satisfied by the fact.

"Because they never managed to prove it was you, my lovely one." Apolline said, exasperated. "Not because you were, by any means, innocent!"

Fleur looked even more smug at that. "The best revenge is well-thought out, planned with prejudice, and implemented when one has an iron-clad alibi." she said proudly, and Hermione couldn't help her surprised laugh at the quote taken directly from one of her letters.

"Oh dear," Claude said, with a chuckle of his own, as Gabrielle giggled and Apolline sighed. Both Claude and Apolline didn't seem upset, however, and Hermione could read the fondness in Apolline's gaze as she looked down at her daughters.

"Off with you, girls," Apolline said, with a wave of her slender hand, "go plan your mischief, if you must, just make certain you continue to avoid getting caught."

"As if we would make such an amateurish mistake," Fleur said, with an indignant sniff, before finally closing the distance between her and Hermione, and, with only the slightest of hesitations, leaning forwards to carefully hug Hermione for the very first time. Hermione only hesitated a moment before hugging Fleur back. Fleur smelled like flowers, amusingly enough, and she was soft, careful in her touch.

After a moment, they parted and Fleur smiled sweetly down at her, blue eyes soft. "I'm glad you
decided to come," she murmured, quiet enough that her words wouldn't be overheard by her parents. "I wasn't sure you would. I knew I probably wouldn't in your place."

"I almost didn't," Hermione admitted, because it was the truth, "but I'm glad I did."

And she was.

::

Hermione spent most of her first day in France getting to know Fleur in person while the French girl showed her around her house and the large grounds that surrounded it, including a large stable and a forest that bordered the far east corner of the property and extended slightly into the Delacour's lands. It was a bit odd, to know so much about someone without really knowing them at all. They'd spent about a year writing to each other, but they'd only met once in person and their meeting had been brief at that.

Fleur filled her in on the success of the whisper campaign she'd started against the 'touchy-feely' not-so charming Charms professor which had culminated in his termination from the position, and all the pranks she'd played against the most outspoken species-ist bullies, until her fellow students had started to get the message and tone down on the blatant and the not-so blatant discrimination. "Closed minds may not come with closed mouths, as you wished they would, but it turns out that with the right bit of magic it's possible to convince them that it's the smarter choice to make," Fleur said, with a great deal of satisfaction.

"That sounds like a perfect dishing out of just desserts," Hermione grinned.

"I do not understand your obsession with 'just desserts'," Fleur sighed, shaking her head, even as she smiled back, her cheeks pink with pride. "Or puns."

"It's an acquired taste," Hermione admitted. "And contagious too. It's probably too late for you at this point."

"I can think of worse fates," Fleur said softly, and Hermione smiled at her.

"Me too."

Dinner that night was a family affair. The Delacours all sat together in a large dining room, Hermione between the Delacour sisters, and across from Claude and Apolline Delacour. Conversation was easy, and mostly led by little Gabrielle, whose innocent questions about if Hermione had any pets (a 'canary'), what her favourite animals were (her answer of wolves, serpents, horses, crows and phoenixes had raised a few eyebrows), and if she had any favourite colours (gold and green) kept the mood light and conversation flowing. That was, until an owl swooped into the room, dropping a crisp white envelope edged with gold trim in front of Claude, who grimaced and shot Apolline an apologetic look.

"We have a rule about this, Claude," Apolline said chidingly, her voice light but with an edge to it that spoke of sharper, hidden undertones. "No work at the dinner table."

"I'm sorry, my love," Claude said helplessly, "you know how they are, I can't ignore this--"

Apolline sighed, waving a hand. "Of course not, of course not," she said, a dismissive note to her voice, "go, do as you must." Claude looked like he was going to say something else, but he just sighed, pushing his chair back to stand up, picking up his letter and leaving the table, pausing in his exit only to kiss the crown of Apolline's head as he left. She didn't turn to acknowledge him, only smiled over at Hermione. Her smile was strained. "My husband, he works for the Ministry of
Magic," she said, her voice kept forcibly light. "They keep him very busy, I'm afraid."

Not sure what to say, Hermione only nodded, and when Gabrielle asked if she'd ever seen a unicorn before, she was only too grateful for the change of subject (Gabrielle was quite disappointed to hear that she hadn't seen a unicorn, but hearing that she'd seen a centaur had partially made up for it).

Later that evening, when she and Fleur were laying on Fleur's luxuriously soft feather mattress, hidden and protected from the outside world by gauzy silk curtains in shimmering shades of ivory, pale rose, and cream, drawn tightly closed around the bed-frame, Fleur quietly explained what had happened at dinner that evening.

"The reason Maman gets so angry is because she thinks Papa should resign from the Ministry," she said softly, fiddling with the end of the long, silvery braid she'd woven her hair into while they were preparing for bed. "Before Papa married her, he was the Deputy Minister of Magic, favoured to become Minister at the next election. After he married her, a half-Veela, a halfbreed, he was replaced as Deputy, demoted to Senior Undersecretary. And when a new Minister and Deputy was elected, along with new Senior and Junior Undersecretaries, he was shuffled off to the side, where he has remained ever since, being moved from position to position. Maman doesn't know why he puts up with it, why he does all the work for such little reward, with someone else usually getting the credit for all his efforts."

"You sound like you understand, though," Hermione said quietly.

"I do," Fleur agreed. "He wants to change things, to change the system. It's why I decided to go to Beauxbatons, and why I continue attending, even when Maman offers for me to be privately tutored at home instead, or by another part-Veela from the Clan that Grandmére is from. She knows how unhappy I have been at Beauxbatons, and even the last year was much better, she is still planning to ask Grandmére to introduce me to the Veela Clan that she grew up with before I return to Beauxbatons this school year."

"Is... is that a big deal?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Fleur said, with a small nod and a sigh. "It is. Veela Clans... they exist very separately from witches and wizards. I've always been proud of my heritage, and have never been ashamed of who and what I am, but there has always been a degree of... separation, I suppose. My mother and my Grandmére are the only Veela I know, and my Grandmére left the Clan, and my Maman was raised outside of it. Sometimes it feels as if Gabrielle and I are Veela in name only. I would like to meet the Veela Clan, to learn about my heritage, and to understand my roots and the Veela culture. But that doesn't mean I want to abandon the other half of my culture, that I want to leave behind the wizarding world the way it feels that Maman wants Gabrielle and I to. The way I think she sometimes regrets not doing herself. I feel like... I feel as if she's trying to stop us making the mistake she feels that she did," Fleur confessed.

"Oh Fleur," Hermione said, leaning over to hug her friend. She could feel the French girl's tears soaking into the skin of her neck and she hugged her tightly, carefully regulating her breathing with the hope that Fleur would unconsciously mimic it. "I know what it feels like, being torn between two cultures," she admitted quietly, still holding Fleur tight. "And how it feels when your parents want something different for you then what you want for yourself, and how that hurts... I'm a muggleborn, you see, which automatically means being stuck between two different cultures with two different sets of expectations and values and rules.

"And then there's my parents, and, well, there's a reason I live with my uncle and aunt. My parents didn't take the fact I have magic well. They were happy to have me as their daughter when I was
their little genius, on the front page of the local news, getting offers from universities across the country, across the world, even, but when I got an offer from Hogwarts? It took three weeks for them to send me packing. They worded it politely, of course, but they didn't want a witch for a daughter."

"Wait... you're a muggleborn?" Fleur asked, her voice a bit scratchy as she pulled back, out of the hug, looking confused. "I thought you said you hadn't attended Hogwarts yet?"

"I haven't," Hermione told her, just as confused.

"But... I met you in one of France's magical districts," Fleur said, her voice rising in volume in her growing anger. "How could you have gotten in, how could you have even known it existed, if you're a muggleborn who hasn't even attended Hogwarts yet? For that matter, how could you have access to all those books about prank spells? If Hogwarts is anything like Beauxbatons, muggleborns aren't given orientations to the magical districts until much closer to the start of the school year to prevent magical mishaps!"

"Uh..." Hermione said, her brain stalling slightly as she realised the extent of her mistake, "that... is a good question. To which I have a good answer. A very good answer. That I am absolutely about to give you."

"The answer is that you lied to me!" Fleur snapped. "You're not a muggleborn! You can't be! Who are you? Is your name even Hermione? What do you want with me?"

Hermione inhaled shakily as Fleur regarded her with open suspicion, having pushed herself up into a seated position on the bed, tense and ready for action. It was her eyes, though, that really struck at Hermione, piercing right to her heart. Fleur's eyes looked betrayed, like all her worst fears had just been confirmed, and, in that moment, Hermione wondered if that's how her eyes had looked in the moment when she realised that Hugo and Muriel weren't really Hugo and Muriel at all.

Maybe that was why she made the decision that she did.

"When I was seven years old, my sister killed herself," she blurted out.

Fleur blinked.

"Excuse me?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Sorry, sorry, it's just-- it's a long story, but that's the start of it. Just... just please, Fleur, please give me a chance to tell you the truth. I want to tell you the truth. Please, I will. I promise!"

Fleur hesitated a moment, indecision on her lovely face, before she nodded. "Alright," she said. "I will listen."

"Thank you," Hermione said, relieved. "Thank you. Okay." She took a deep breath, then let it out. "Okay. So, I know I said I was an only child, but... I wasn't always an only child. I had an older sister, but when I was seven years old, my sister, Ness, took her own life. She was bullied horribly in school, and I think she was also depressed, although I was quite young at the time and I can't remember if she showed any of the symptoms. Knowing my own experiences with depression and the familial genetic links often evident in mental illness, however, she probably was.

"I... struggled with her death, and with the lack of justice involved. It felt as if the bullies I held responsible had gotten away with driving her towards taking her life without facing any consequences for their actions. And, in a somewhat desperate and sleep-deprived state, I ended up
praying to a trickster god, making an offering and pledging myself to their service in exchange for getting justice served.

"And the trickster god heard me. Just desserts were served. And that's how Loki, my god, first came into my life."

"Loki," Fleur said, slowly, as if testing the word.

"Norse God of Mischief, Chaos and Fire," she confirmed, running her fingers over the knotted bracelet, feeling the staticky cling of the feathers. "Over the years, our bond has... grown. He named me his priestess; I pray to him, I leave him offerings, I perform rituals in his honour, and in return he blesses me with his presence, his guidance, his love, and sometimes he randomly appears and takes me for trips to fun or weird or fun and weird places around the world."

"You see your god in person?" Fleur asked, her eyes wide. Hermione was relieved to see the hurt, betrayed look was long gone, as was the distance between them, as Fleur was leaning in close again, eagerness painted all over her bright, pretty face.

"He's kind of like... my magical patron, of sorts?" Hermione tried to explain it, the unique relationship between her and Loki; it wasn't the traditional one between a god and worshipper, but it was their relationship, and she was no less devoted to him for the unusualness of it. "He got me all sorts of magic books, back when I was seven, to help me understand what my magic was, and he's been getting me books ever since, to help me train. He's also helped train me, too. I love him, with all my heart and soul, with everything that I am. He's the one who took me to France that day, to the magical district," she admitted. "And he's the one who I got most of those pranks I gave you from."

"I have never heard of a god interacting with their followers in these recent times," Fleur said, her eyes wide and shining with interest. "We French witches and wizards generally follow no religion, but from the History classes at Beauxbatons, I know that the witches and wizards of Gaul used to worship Deae Matronae, a triple goddess deity with ties to Northern Europe, most strongly in the Celtic areas. And I do know from Grandmére that the Veela Clans have no ties to Deae Matronae, but they do honour their ancestor, who they call Mother of All and revere as their Creator– I don't believe they see her as a goddess, though, for all they honour and revere her."

"I'm not sure about the Veela's Mother of All, but I think I can explain Deae Matronae," Hermione said, slowly. "Loki explained to me about how back when Christianity started to spread across the world, the pagan gods began losing their ties to their homelands as their people lost faith and converted. Before that, they'd only really leave if their people were at war with another country.

"This was really bad for them, because losing their people's faith also meant they were losing their powers, as pagan gods get their power from the belief of their followers. But one pagan goddess, Hecate, she was cleverer than most of the pagan deities. She had a plan. She knew that Christianity condemned witchcraft– though it's actually referring to the type of witchcraft that involves demon deals, not our type– and she created a "blessing" that can be passed down through bloodlines that lets us mortals use magic– I've heard the blessing be described as the ability to touch the magic bound to the very fabric of the world.

"Because Christianity condemns witchcraft," Hermione continued, "witches and wizards turned against Christianity, and towards Hecate. To them, Hecate's blessing was tangible proof of her existence. Why would they not believe in her, when she had blessed them with magic? Why would they not worship her, when Christianity condemned them to the stake? And Hecate continued to travel the world, blessing more people in more countries, creating more followers. If you look through history, you'll see that witches and wizards didn't really start organising themselves into
communities until the spread of Christianity began on an international scale— that's when our written history begins, because that's when we begin.

"Except, for all her cleverness, we still lost faith. The religion of the Triple Goddess was passed down for many centuries as the children of her blessed witches and wizards inherited her blessing before passing it down in turn, with the religion likewise being passed down from parent to child. But us humans? We're kind of a fickle bunch, and even though there are hundreds of thousands of us now, we see the religion of the Triple Goddess, under whichever name she goes by in whichever country or culture, as a relic of the past."

"Is... is your Loki like that?" Fleur asked, her blue eyes sharp with interest. "Is he... weaker than he was, back when there were more people who worshipped him?"

"I asked him the same thing," Hermione admitted, "he said no, that he was smarter than Hecate and the rest of them, and that he doesn't need worship like they do. I'm not sure I believe him, because I know he wouldn't want to worry me or make me feel like I owe him or need to perform more rituals or anything, but I do know he is... very, very powerful."

Fleur nodded, looking lost in thought. Hermione didn't blame her— she'd just unloaded a rather astounding amount of information on the other girl, including some rather world-changing stuff. She didn't blame her needing time to adapt and adjust her world view. Honestly, she was actually surprised that Fleur even believed her— she supposed it was simply too elaborate of a lie to have made up.

"Thank you," Fleur said, suddenly, snapping Hermione back to the present moment. "For choosing to be honest with me. I'm sorry I leapt to conclusions so quickly. It's just that I've..."

"Been hurt too many times?" Hermione said gently, and Fleur nodded.

"Yes," she said, with a small sigh. "I have. And I'm afraid now I just automatically assume the worst. I've become a rather bitter, cynical person... just like my mother, now that I think about it."

"I think," Hermione said carefully, "that you are being too hard on yourself... and maybe on your mother too, though I don't know enough about that situation to really pass judgment on it. You've been dealt a difficult hand in life, Fleur, and you're dealing with it the best you can... and I think your mother is trying to protect you, the best way she can. Maybe she's going about it the wrong way, but I think she wants you to be happy. And so do I. And I am sorry for not telling you the whole truth about everything."

"You don't have to be sorry, I understand why you didn't, and I wouldn't have either in your position," Fleur reassured her, reaching out to grasp Hermione's hands with her own, giving her a wobbly smile. "And you're right, about my Maman. She worries, constantly. And she's so unhappy, seeing Papa try so hard but never getting anywhere, knowing it's because he married her. She just wants better for Gabrielle and I, better then she was ever given when she was our age. She hoped because we were only a quarter Veela, it would be better for us. When she realised it wasn't... she nearly pulled me from Beauxbatons after my first term in my First Year, I was so unhappy there, but I refused to leave. I think she blamed Papa for that. She believed my refusal to leave Beauxbatons was something I copied from his refusal to leave his job. She wasn't wrong either."

Fleur sighed, before shaking her head slightly, as if to dismiss the melancholy. "But enough of that," she said decisively. "We've talked enough of sad things tonight. Let's talk of happier things now— that's what girls are supposed to do, when they stay up late, spending the night at each other's house." She paused for a moment. "I think that's what they're supposed to do, anyway. I haven't actually had a friend stay over before." She confessed, cheeks pink.
"I sort of have," Hermione said, slowly. "But I also sort of haven't. My cousins have friends who have stayed over, and I always sleep in the same room with Ina, Jeanie and Leana when I'm in Fraserburgh, plus there was a month when I was living in the same place as these two girls I became friends with, and we usually shared each other's beds, but... there was always an expiration date on that friendship, no matter how much I cared for them, and there was nothing I could do to change that." She was always going to have to leave Helena and Sylvianne. "But this friendship... I feel like this friendship has limitless potential." She couldn't help her blush as she admitted that and Fleur smiled shyly at her.

"I'm very happy I met you in that bookshop, Hermione. If I hadn't met you... well, thank your god that he brought you there that day."

Hermione couldn't help her laugh at that, even as she smiled happily back at Fleur. "Thank Loki that he did," she agreed, "because I'm so happy I met you too, Fleur."

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Chapter End Notes

The reason Fleur believes Hermione so easily about Loki is because with magic, I believe that witches and wizards would be a lot more open minded about the idea of gods existing. At least in my head-canon.

This is part one of two parts of the Fleur Arc, part two is four fifths written and will be posted tomorrow, going by Australian time :) After that it will be Diagon Alley and then off to Hogwarts at last!!!

Enjoy!
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR:

Hermione and Fleur didn't fall asleep until long past midnight. They talked about many things together that night, about their dreams for the future, about their hopes, their fears, what they loved, what they disliked. They giggled, they snorted, Fleur actually hit her with a pillow at one point, which made them both laugh, and Hermione eventually fell asleep holding the hand of her first real friend that didn't come with an expiration date that had always lurked at the back of her mind.

They woke up late the next morning, unsurprisingly, and Fleur laughed at Hermione's half-hearted attempts to tame her hair without magic before she just gave up and used magic to half-way coax the chaotic curls into looping braids, adding her favourite bells. Then Fleur just looked impressed.

"That was wandless magic," she said, astounded.

"Loki taught me," Hermione admitted. "My hair is... sort of impossible."

"Yes..." Fleur's voice trailed off, and she looked thoughtful as they both dressed for the day, Hermione in one of the dresses Eris had given her— a cream-coloured toga-style dress with a pearly sheen that shimmered like moving waves— and Fleur in a lovely pastel yellow sundress that flared out at the waist, before they headed to the kitchen to get breakfast.

Hermione was delighted by the sweet and fluffy breakfast foods available— Loki would definitely have approved of a pancakes, pikelets and crepes, as well as the steaming scones, waffles, and crumpets, as well as an assortment of jams, honeys, butters, preserves, nutty spreads, syrups, fresh slices of fruit, and creams, all arranged on the centre bench, apparently left waiting for them. She had no shame in happily gorging herself on the sweet pastries as Fleur looked on, seeming impressed, and perhaps slightly inspired.

Afterwards, they went for a walk, at Fleur's prompting, out on the expansive grounds of the Delacour's property. Hermione wasn't at all surprised when the French girl started to ask her questions about Loki. She would have been more surprised if Fleur didn't have any questions at all— Loki was a god, after all. She spoke mostly about her prayers and offerings and her altar with its altar stones, which led on to a discussion about meeting Loki's children, as well as about some of her experiences with Loki over the years. Eventually, after a couple of hours, Fleur's questions subsided into a thoughtful silence and they returned to the house for lunch.

Apolline and Gabrielle joined them for lunch, after which Gabrielle convinced them to change out of their dresses and into (in Hermione's case a pair of borrowed) riding jodhpurs to join her in spending the afternoon horse riding. Or rather, Abraxan riding, as the Delacours had a stable of the rather impressive magical equines on their property, which Hermione had briefly seen the day before when Fleur had shown her around the property.

The Abraxans were remarkably elegant creatures, considering their immense size. As horses closer to the size of elephants then regular equines, they had hooves the size of dinnerplates, brilliant palamino coats and magnificent high, arching feathered wings. The Delacours' Abraxans had coats varying in shade from the classic palamino newly-minted galleon colouring, to the darker sooty
golds, with manes and tails ranging from thick, rich creams to pale, snowy whites that matched their wings, with gold laced through the barbs of the covert feathers.

Tiny, little, petite Gabrielle was a comical sight perched on the back of her Abraxan mare, Madeleine. Madeleine was clearly a gentle giant, however, and an absolute sweetheart as Gabrielle urged the mare to take to the clear blue skies.

"Hello handsome," Hermione greeted Fleur's Abraxan, a stunning stallion by the name of Beau, stroking the Abraxan's velvety nose as Beau bent his large, graceful head to nuzzle at her hands.

'Did you bring any treats?' the stallion nickered hopefully.

"I'm afraid not, but we can fetch some for you after the ride," Hermione promised, and Beau snorted in surprise, his head jerking back slightly.

'You understand me?' He whinnied, and Hermione smiled at him, nodding.

'I do speak Beast-tongue, it was a gift from my patron, Loki, God of--"' she explained. "Do you speak of Loki-God, who is Sleipnir-Sire, who is Mate-Of-Arion?" Beau interrupted her, and Hermione blinked, then nodded.

"Yes, that's him, I'm his priestess," she agreed, and Beau bowed his head.

'Priestess of Loki-God, you are welcome.' He told her, and she beamed.

"Thank you, Beau!"

Fleur, who had been watching with fascination, spoke up. "Can you really understand him?" she asked, and Hermione nodded.

"Because Jörmungandr mostly stays serpent-shaped, Loki gave me knowledge of what he calls 'Beast-tongue'," she explained. "It lets me understand animals."

Fleur nodded, before sudden horror flashed across her face. "Wait, does that mean all animals are--?"

"Oh, no, no, no," Hermione interrupted, rushing to reassure her. "Believe me, I had the same thought, but Loki assured me that it's only animals with long-term exposure to magic, or magical creatures, that develop a much greater intelligence, as opposed to the average animal who is barely aware of anything outside of the instincts they're born with. He promised me that I've never eaten anything with enough intelligence to hold a conversation, or even be capable of having any kind of sense of self, but... well, I'll admit to having less of a taste for meat in the time since."

"I don't blame you," Fleur said, with a light shudder, still looking disturbed.

"You two! What are you waiting for? Why are you still on the ground?" Gabrielle called out suddenly, and Fleur and Hermione traded amused looks at the small child's impatience with them before Fleur carried over the magically ascending stool that Gabrielle had used to reach Madeleine's saddle and they carefully balanced on it together as it floated up so they could reach Beau's saddle.

The leather of the saddle was a rich, buttery brown leather and Hermione straddled it carefully from her position behind Fleur, anxiously wrapping her arms around the French girl's waist. She couldn't help but feel a bit nervous, as the last time she'd been on a horse— or at least a horse-
shaped creature– things hadn't gone quite so well. The Nökken really wasn't an experience she remembered fondly.

She shouldn't have worried, though. Beau's stride was confident and his gait rhythmic as he spread his impressive wingspan out wide, took several powerful strides forwards with his head held high, then leaped up, his powerful hind-legs coiling then thrusting forcefully against the ground, launching him into the air as his wings beat down with explosive force.

Hermione gasped, her head tilting back, eyes closing as she experienced the rush of the wind in her face, the drop of her stomach as they dipped and rose, the sound of the wing beats in her ears. "Are you okay, Hermione?" Fleur called out, and Hermione realised she was still gripping tightly onto her friend. Hermione opened her eyes and saw that Fleur had twisted around and was looking anxiously back at her, reins held lightly in her slender hands. Hermione couldn't help it– she beamed.

"Fleur," she said, breathlessly, "I think I'm in love with flying!"

And Fleur tipped back her head and laughed, the sound silvery and beautiful.

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It was later that evening, after a full afternoon of flying with Beau and Madeleine and dinner with Apolline and Claude, that Fleur faced her, a determined look on her beautiful face.

"I want to do a ritual with you," the French witch declared, the look on her face challenging Hermione to refuse her.

"What?" Hermione asked, startled, and Fleur's cheeks turned pink, but she forged on regardless, still determined.

"I want to give my thanks to Loki, for bringing you into my life. I... I can't explain, what it's meant to me, Hermione. How you've changed everything for me. You've given me friendship and confidence and– and it's like I said, last night; if it wasn't for your god, I never would have met you in that bookshop that day. I want to thank Loki that I did. And... I've been listening to you talk about him. To what it means to you, to be able to pray to him, to give your offerings, your thanks. It appeals to me," Fleur admitted. "The chaos, it appeals to me, the justice, the mischief, the fire– it all appeals to me. I want to learn about your faith, to... to learn if it's possible for it to perhaps become my faith to. If it's possible for me to... to belong," she finished quietly.

"I honestly don't know what to say," Hermione admitted, after a brief, shocked pause. "I've never... I've never really thought about including anybody else in my worship." She'd never thought of ever holding a position like Morgana's, as some sort of High Priestess of Loki. She'd always just seen herself as a lower-case priestess.

But Loki was all about the misfits, the outsiders, the ones who felt they didn't belong. "Right," She said decisively. "How good are you at sneaking around your house, without waking up your parents?"

Fleur looked confused for a moment, then equal parts relieved and excited. "Very good," she reassured, and Hermione nodded.

"Good," she said, "because we're going to need a candle, the closest thing you've got to a copper or stone bowl, and–" here she hesitated for a moment, because this was the test, "–and we're going to need a knife." She already had a knife, of course, she never went anywhere without one anymore,
but she needed to prepare Fleur for the reality of what a ritual meant.

Fleur's slender throat bobbed slightly as she swallowed, but her face was no less determined. "Maman has a small copper cauldron she sometimes uses for brewing," she said, "and small silver daggers she uses for potion ingredients. And there are candles in the kitchens."

"Perfect," Hermione said, thinking of where they could perform the ritual-- the site of the *blót* was important, it needed to be a location where there was a connection to the god in question. She decided the closest connection she had to Loki here would have to be the patch of wilderness at the edge of the Delacour's property, where she'd noticed that the forest on the far east of the property crossed over into the Delacour's land slightly, and so it was to there that she directed to Fleur that they meet. "I'll need to set up the site for the ritual while you gather the supplies," she explained.

Fleur swallowed again and nodded. "Alright." She said, and Hermione hesitated, unsure.

"Fleur," she said slowly, "you know you don't have to do this, right? You're not under any sort of obligation."

"I know that," Fleur assured her. "I promise you, Hermione, I want to do this. I do. I'm nervous," she admitted, "and I think I would be a fool not to be, but I do want this."

Remembering her own nervousness, the first time she'd performed a ritual, Hermione looked at Fleur's eyes, into her bright-blue gaze, steady and sure, and was comforted by what she saw there. "Alright," she repeated, "let's do this."

Sneaking out of the Delacour's house was easy enough, as was navigating her way across the grounds. Wrapped up in one of Fleur's warm travel cloaks over her nightgown, one of the more traditional ones that Loki had snapped up for her when she was in the past, Hermione shortened what would have been a fifteen minute walk to a five minute jog, which managed to warm her up-- despite the warmth of the day, the air was cooler now and the thin, crescent moon provided little light, though it did mean that the stars shone bright in the velvety blanket of darkness. Hermione was sure it wasn't just her imagination that Lokabrenna was particularly bright this night.

There weren't many trees that actually crossed the border of the wards surrounding the Delacour property line; there was a slight, rippling sheen of magic visible where Hermione instinctively knew that to step past would be to alert the elder Delacour couple that she and Fleur were stepping out of the property's boundary. Still, with the forest at her back providing a backdrop of an endless, yawning mystery of mist, gradually thickening trees and foliage, and an air of wildness, Hermione was reminded enough of the forest containing the altar that Loki had taken her to after she'd been stabbed by Odin, slipping in and out of conscious as she had been at the time, to consider the site 'wild forest' enough to have the necessary connection to her god for the ritual.

The first time she'd performed a ritual in honour of Loki, it had been put together from a mishmash of information she'd compiled from various sources she'd found, though afterwards Loki had given her access to more sources on information detailing traditional rituals to give thanks and perform worship towards the Norse Old Gods. Now, she quickly collected stones from the area around her, summoning them with magic from the grounds and carefully arranging them into a hörgr-- an altar of piled stones-- which she then kneeled before. It wasn't long after that Fleur appeared, out of breath with her arms full.

"I have what you asked for," she said, dropping to her knees beside Hermione, and letting the small cauldron she was holding rest on her thighs. The cauldron, about the size of a soup bowl, was indeed made of gleaming copper, and contained within it a short, fat wax candle and a slim, sharp-looking silver blade.
"Perfect," Hermione said, and Fleur gave a shaky smile. Hermione used her magic to spark a flame, lighting the wick of the candle, then tilting it to drip enough of the hot wax onto the hörgr that when she pressed the bottom of the candle onto the top stone of the hörgr, the candle stayed fixed in place.

"The most common form of ritual worship to the Norse Old Gods," she told Fleur, still kneeling beside her, a rapt audience, "was to give them sacrifices. These were called blót, with blóta meaning "to worship with sacrifice" or "to strengthen". These sacrifices were usually animals, but human life was always and still is always the most valuable sacrifice that can be made to the gods. And tonight, in honour of Loki, to give our thanks to him, we will give a sacrifice of blood— of hlaut—to give him power."

Fleur swallowed again, but nodded, pushing up the sleeves of the nightgown she was wearing, the pale pink cloth absurdly innocent-looking against her skin considering what they were about to do.

After transferring the copper cauldron to her own lap, Hermione held out her own arm first, teeth gritted slightly as she lifted the small, silver blade. She winced as she sliced a quick line of fire across her forearm; blood welled up where the flesh was split, brilliant scarlet rivulets that ran across her skin and splattered into the cauldron. She waited until the blood had slowed to a sluggish ooze, already shivering as the air around her started to feel heavier, wilder; a hint of electricity against her skin, and she wondered if Fleur felt the change in the atmosphere yet. Cleaning the blade of blood (magical ritual or not, being the daughter of medical professionals made her wary of blood-borne diseases), she held it out to Fleur, handle-first.

Despite the anticipation and tension building around them, and they both couldn't help but giggle a little bit nervously when Fleur fumbled as she accepted the blade. Hermione was starting feel a growing panic at this point that Fleur would panic and run for her parents, but despite the anxiety Fleur seemed to feel, the part-Veela was also clearly determined as she carefully drew the blade across her own flawless skin, and tilting the precious trails of ruby into the copper cauldron. Hermione sucked in a breath as she felt the swell of magic in the air, felt it resonate through her body. Her curls were crackling, standing on end, and Fleur gasped, tilting her head back as she felt the rush of wild, ancient magic.

Hermione waited until Fleur's bleeding had slowed before she picked up the copper cauldron, the chant slipping automatically from her lips as she passed it around the flame three times;

"Hail the silver tongued!

Hail the defender of the broken!

Hail the hope of the lost!

Hail the harbringer of change!

Hail Loki!

May He Be Hailed!"

She was almost gasping now; it felt like she was burning, like her magic was burning, burning her from inside out, but it wasn't painful at all, it was glorious. "We dedicate this sacrifice to Loki the Unbound, Trickster God of Fire, Mischief, Lies and Chaos!" she cried out, dipping her fingers into the cauldron, coating her fingers with the blood to sprinkle it on the hörgr, where it sizzled like it was burning. "Til árs ok hrōngl."* she murmured reverently, and Fleur repeated the words after her, just as reverent.
Acting without thinking, Hermione channelled the ritual magic as she had once before, molten-hot and crackling through her veins, reaching out to Fleur, to the sluggishly bleeding wound on her arm, and with her still-bloody fingers she traced *kuanaz* on creamy skin. Tiny flames licked in the wake of the blood, and along the self-inflicted wound, until all that remained was *kuanaz*, faint and silvery, almost invisible against Fleur's skin until she traced it with soft, reverent fingertips and the rune lit up a brilliant, burnished gold.

The candle flame suddenly flared up, the fire swelling, growing, and both girls cried out in alarm, before their cries turned to gasps as the fire formed the *kuanaz* symbol, blazing in the air before them before extinguishing in a cloud of ash that drifted slowly down. When it settled, Hermione noted a glint of gold and leaned forwards. Eyes widening, she reached out and picked up the golden medallion from the ashes. The coin-shaped medallion had *kuanaz* engraved on its face, and the meaning couldn't be clearer, to her or to Fleur.

"He accepted me," Fleur said, astonished, blinking back sudden tears.

"Of course he did," Hermione said, with a sniff of her own, leaning back so she could press the medallion into Fleur's hand. Fleur clutched onto it like a lifeline.

"He accepted me," she repeated, sounding almost numb.

"Of course he did," Hermione repeated too, before throwing her arms around Fleur and hugging her tight, ignoring the shaking in her limbs from the come-down of ritual magic, just holding her friend tight as she sobbed in relief.

::

Gabriel should be used to Hermione surprising him by this point. He really should be.

This still took him by surprise.

Hermione was in France with her part-Veela friend, a descendant of one of Eve's many monstrous children who'd had sex with a human— not that he discriminated, he'd had sex with many, many, many beings of various kinds over the years— so he hadn't been expecting to feel that shiver of power stirring within him that sung of ritual/worship/sacrifice, soaked deep with magic/power/mygrace/fire.

Still, far from displeased from the development, he gladly let the part of him that was more *Loki* than Gabriel surface, tilting his head back to drink in the unexpected feast, only to be hit by the true surprise, the part that he hadn't been expecting at all.

*Hermione wasn't conducting the ritual alone.*

There was a second soul participating in the ritual giving worship to Loki, giving sacrifice to him. A second soul, one of wildflowers and wildfire and willpower; one that was human but also not human. The part-Veela was participating in the ritual too. Hermione's French pen-pal, the one she'd been helping deliver just desserts to her vile, 'species-ist' classmates. *Fleur Isabelle Delacour*.

This was... an intersting development. And her offering? Her glorious soul, with all her fire, her passion, her burning need for justice and vengeance? *Loki* wasn't about to turn down such a willing sacrifice.

And as *Loki* accepted her sacrifice, accepted her offering, accepted her as *his*, Gabriel couldn't help but marvel slightly that, without him having even an inkling of it happening, Hermione had managed to recruit her friend to worshipping *Loki* so wholeheartedly, somehow finding someone...
who had been just as lost, lonely and broken inside as she herself had once been. He didn't know if he was more curious, shocked or proud of her. Even when he'd named her a priestess, he hadn't even considered this a possibility! She'd never expressed any sort of interest in gathering a flock!

Mineminemine, his possessive pagan half crooned as he soaked in the power the combined souls offered, almost drunk off the ritual sacrifice; both witches had such promise, such power, such beautiful souls that had faced such wear and tear, but were so far from shattered, so much stronger for the hardships they'd suffered.

Fleur's faith in Loki was like a precious, delicate bloom, its tender petals tentatively unfurling towards him, but such uncertainty was only natural. What surprised him was that while Fleur might be tentative, her faith was still real, still absolute. She had complete faith in his existence, such confidence, she was just unsure if he would accept her as one of his.

Well.

That just wouldn't do, would it?

A snap of his fingers and show of his power, even from as far away as he was, assured that Fleur would be left with no doubt that Loki had accepted her, and the pagan part of him preened at the flock his priestess was beginning to gather for him, the belief that she was fostering, the faith that she was spreading.

And moments later, after his little fire-show and reward, Fleur's faith was blossoming bright and strong, in full bloom under the guiding sunshine of Hermione's own faith.

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The atmosphere in the morning was strange, but not in a bad way. There was a new closeness between her and Fleur, added depth to their friendship now, a new bond forged between them, one of faith, of blood, of priestess and acolyte, that hadn't existed before performing the ritual together.

There was also a sadness in the air at breakfast, however, with the shared knowledge between them that Hermione's stay was drawing to a close, but they both knew it far from the last time they'd see each other. Still, as Hermione packed her things, ready for her two-way-portkey to return her to Aberdeen Airport, Fleur still asked wistfully, "are you sure you wouldn't rather attend Beauxbatons? If you wrote to Madam Maxime, I'm quite sure she'd make an exception for you."

Hermione smiled sadly back at her, reaching out to grasp one of Fleur's hands with her own and squeeze. "Are you sure you don't want to attend Hogwarts?" she asked, and Fleur pulled a mock-disgusted expression that made them both laugh, before both their faces fell.

"You promise to keep writing?" Fleur sounded unexpectedly vulnerable in that moment. "You won't forget about me, when you start your new school?"

"I won't forget about you," Hermione promised. "You're my friend, Fleur, and you're an acolyte of Loki, now," she added, brushing her fingertips over the rune on Fleur's arm, which lit up gold. "I'm the priestess of your faith, I'll always be here for you, and so will Loki."

Fleur let out a shaky breath and nodded, brushing her own fingers over the brilliant, golden rune, before leaning forwards and pulling her into a tight hug. "I'm holding you to that, Hermione Granger," she said fiercely, all fire, and Hermione hugged her tightly back.

"I won't let you down." She promised.
As Hermione said her goodbyes to the rest of Fleur's family in the same foyer that she'd arrived in their house in and thanked them for letting her stay the past two nights, she was surprised to be pulled into another tight, fierce hug, this time by Apolline. "Thank you," the older woman murmured, sounding almost heartbreakingly grateful. "Take care of her for me."

"I will," Hermione made her second promise that morning, just as heartfelt the second time as the first, and Apolline's smile in response to that, as she released her and stepped back, was just as radiant as Fleur's had been.

Finally, and with great reluctance, Hermione then accepted the portkey from Claude and left France with a friendship freely forged in fire and faith.

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She wasn't surprised to find Loki waiting for her upon her return to Fraserburgh. Her journey home had included a tense moment when she panicked that her return-portkey trip would involve her appearing in an occupied bathroom stall that she'd left from, but luck was on her side. Well, it was almost on her side– only one of her feet landed in the open toilet bowl, and Uncle Arran had only raised an eyebrow at her sopping wet sock when she met him at the pick-up zone.

Hermione couldn't help but feel nervous at his neutral expression, but Loki had accepted Fleur, and he didn't look angry. She was pretty sure his golden eyes looked closer to amused, actually, but... she was still nervous. "She's already built an altar to me, you know," Loki told her casually, from where he was lounging against the wall. Hermione was getting a strange sense of déjà vu from the first time he'd approached her. "Just as you instructed– candles, altar stones, and offerings of lollies."

"I honestly can't tell if you're upset or not," she admitted, and Loki laughed, straightening up from the wall and grinning at her.

"Oh, I'm just wondering if she'll be the only member of the little flock you're building, or if I should start preparing for more," he said, and Hermione relaxed slightly in the face of his humour and blushed at the teasing, but found herself hesitating before immediately replying in the negative.

"I... I don't know," she confessed. "But I really do believe Fleur is genuine about her interest in my faith in you, and in wanting to learn how to build her own."

"Oh, I know she is– I wouldn't have accepted her as one of mine otherwise," Loki said, before giving her a thoughtful look. "She's your responsibility to lead now, Hermione. Lead her well, my priestess."

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*A reminder: During their ritual sacrifices, the sacrificial priest/priestess would speak the old, traditional prayer; Til árs ok friðar, which means "for a good year and frith (peace)". Til árs ok hrǫngl, translates to for a good year and chaos.

Chapter End Notes

This was the last story arc before Diagon Alley!!! Next chapter – muggleborn orientation tour! And then – off to Hogwarts at last!!!!
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE:

The letter from Hogwarts arrived exactly two weeks before September 1st, and Hermione ended up getting pecked by a very annoyed owl when she tried snatching it up too quickly. It was clear and concise, giving the date of the muggleborn orientation of Diagon Alley, spring which they would be able to purchase their school supplies. The letter contained an estimation in pounds of the amount of money they should bring to purchase said supplies, as well as precise instructions on where to meet on Charing Cross Road in London, and further instructions on how to contact Professor McGonagall if transportation aid was required. The muggleborn students were expected to be accompanied by a minimum of one parent or guardian.

Hermione thought of bringing her Aunt Iona and Uncle Arran into the secret of magic so one of them could accompany her on the orientation, something which she knew she was going to have to do soon anyway– and was quietly dreading, unable to help the instinctive fear of rejection– but really, there was only one person who she felt right in asking to join her on this milestone. Which was why, on the morning of August 25th, Hermione met Professor McGonagall and four other, nervous-looking eleven-year-olds and their equally nervous-looking parents outside a shabby-looking pub by the name of 'The Leaky Cauldron' with her "Uncle Arran" (or, at least that's how everyone except Hermione would remember seeing Loki).

She'd explained in her reply to Professor McGonagall that she'd moved out of her parents' house and in with one of her relatives, and had asked if they could accompany her instead. Professor McGonagall, of course, had said yes. As had Loki, when she'd shyly asked him, giving her a fond look and ruffling her hair as he did so.

Hermione had dressed for the day in yet another one of the dresses gifted to her by Eris. This one was forest green, with a high collar and short sleeves. The bodice had golden flowers embroidered into the fabric and opened into a flowing skirt that ended at her mid shin. Under the dress, she wore comfortable lace-up brown boots that looked deceptively normal, but had soles reinforced by steel. She ended up using magic to tame her curls into multiple smaller braids, weaving them through with little beads shaped like golden roses no larger than her thumbnail, before plaiting the smaller braids together into a single, heavy larger braid.

As she and Loki approached the group waiting outside the pub, Hermione couldn't help the excitement she felt bubbling up inside her stomach, like she'd just drank an entire jug of that awful fizzy cola drink that Loki loved so much. Professor McGonagall smiled at her and Loki as they approached. "Ah, Miss Granger, and you must be Mr MacLeod," she said, reaching out politely to shake Loki's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine, professor," Loki said, his natural charm turned up high as he smiled winningly at her, and Hermione couldn't actually picture what that expression would look like on her stoic uncle's face. Professor McGonagall looked amused, but several of the mothers looked a bit pink in the cheek.

"Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall turned towards her, a warm smile crossing her face, and Hermione felt her cheeks pink. "I haven't had time to reply to your latest letter yet, as you can imagine it's currently quite a busy time of year at Hogwarts for the staff, but I have to say, I was very impressed with what you wrote concerning Minister Fenwick's amendments to the Statute of Secrecy in 1879. I thought it was very insightful."
"Oh yes," Hermione perked up, feeling her anxiety melt away as the familiar ground of academia was established. "The influence of the international impact of the muggle French Revolution of 1789 on the changes Minister Fenwick's government made to the Statute can't be overlooked or underestimated."

"I agree entirely," Professor McGonagall said, with a nod.

"Pardon me," one of the other eleven-year-olds said, very politely, "but are you Hermione Granger?"

The boy was short, with curly hair, very pale skin, and freckles. He had a very proper, polished accent, and he and his parents were quite clearly upper-class. He was also looking over at her in wide-eyed interest.

"Um," she said, "yes? I think so? My name really isn't a common one."

"Did you really sit your GCSE's at age ten? And your A-Levels at age eleven?" he asked her eagerly.

"Oh, yes, that is me," Hermione said awkwardly. Now the three other muggleborns were looking at her with wide eyes.

"Blimey," said one of the other boys, this one tall and gangly, with russet skin and short, black hair. "You're our age, aren't you? How did you manage that?"

"I drank a lot of tea," she admitted.

"That wasn't tea," Loki corrected, "that was just liquid caffeine." Hermione didn't deny it, because that was a fair enough and detoxing from the Ina's black tea brew had been a very literal headache.

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of another child and their parents, a girl who was apparently the last of their group, and a round of introductions were given. The slightly posh boy introduced himself as Justin Finch-Fletchley, while the other boy she'd spoken was named Dean Thomas. The remaining three muggleborn first years were Kevin Entwhistle, Sally-Anne Perks and Fay Dunbar.

All of them seemed as nervous as she was, and Loki squeezed her hand comfortingly as Professor McGonagall led them into the Leaky Cauldron, which was as grubby-looking inside as it was shabby-looking outside, which clearly wasn't doing much to impress the parents of the other muggleborns, and through to a small, walled courtyard. Here, the professor pulled out her wand, tapped a brick three times, and the entire wall opened up into an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," the Professor said, a small smile on her face as everyone loudly gasped, even Hermione, while Loki smiled fondly down at her, "to Diagon Alley."

Hermione had been to many wizarding districts and marketplaces in many different countries by now, and there was a certain repetitiveness to them at this point. But she couldn't help but feel there was something special about Diagon Alley, something that stirred within her chest, something that shivered within her very soul, and as she stepped through the archway, she couldn't help but squeeze onto Loki's hand tight. Morgana had told her to listen to her feelings, to trust them, and this felt like fate, it felt like destiny; it felt like this was where she was meant to be, that this was the path she was meant to walk.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione walked forwards into Diagon Alley.
The other muggleborns seemed to cross the boundary of the arch with a similar solemnity as her, and Professor McGonagall waited until they were all on the other side before speaking again. "Our first stop today will be Gringotts Bank, where we will be exchanging your money for our currency," she explained. "Gringotts Bank is run by goblins—"

"Goblins?" Blurted out Mrs Entwhistle.

"This must be an enormous shock to you, I understand, but the magical world is quite expansive," Professor McGonagall said, very kindly. "There are many magical creatures and beings from your mythology that exist in truth, including mer-people, goblins, unicorns and dragons, amongst many others."

"Oh my," Mrs Entwhistle looked faint, and honestly Mr Perks wasn't looking much better, leaning heavily on his exasperated wife in order to stay upright.

"I will, of course, be welcoming your questions throughout the orientation today, and I have several books for you to take home with you at the conclusion of the tour," Professor McGonagall said, and this seemed to calm everyone enough that she could resume her speech. "Gringotts Bank is run by goblins, and its vaults are located deep beneath London. As part of the orientation experience," here, the Professor seemed to wince slightly, "we will be visiting the Hogwarts Vault, one of the earliest vaults to be opened at Gringotts Bank, and therefore one of the bank's deepest vaults. It is... quite the experience."

Gringotts Bank was an intimidating building in itself, snowy-white and towering high over the other little shops. Its doors were burnished bronze, and its guards were armed wearing uniforms the colour of arterial spray and galleon-gold. The goblins looked very fey-like, with their swarthy, clever, pointed faces, and Hermione, who had yet to have a positive experience with the fey, resisted the urge to cringe away from them out of self-preservation.

The bow the goblins gave as they walked past, the muggleborns and their parents obviously trying hard but failing not to gawk, was blatantly mocking to Hermione's eyes. Beside her, Loki's eyes had narrowed.

Past the bronze doors was a second pair, these ones silver, with a set of words engraved upon them;

\[ 'Enter, stranger, but take heed,  
Of what awaits the sin of greed,  
For those who take, but do not earn,  
Must pay most dearly in their turn.  
So if you seek beneath our floors  
A treasure that was never yours,  
Thief, you have been warned, beware  
Of finding more than treasure there.' \]

"That's not a warning," Hermione murmured, "that's a dare."

Loki grinned. "Sounds like a fun one too," he replied.

Professor McGonagall overheard them. "Gringotts Bank is not the type of establishment where it is wise to attempt any thievery. In over a thousand years of history, its defences have never been successfully breached." She warned the group, giving them both a stern look. Hermione bit back a smile, because she knew exactly how Loki would take a statement like that— as a challenge.
Stepping through the second set of doors and into the vast marble hall both was and wasn't like stepping into any other bank, designed as it was to both dazzle and intimidate all at once. Around a hundred goblins sat on high stools behind a counter, and yet more were showing customers in and out of the countless doors leading off the hall.

The moment Professor McGonagall had entered, two goblins had broken away from a doorway and made their way straight to her. The pair stopped before her and bowed shallowly, to which she nodded in return. "Madam," the one on the right greeted, while the one on the left bared his teeth in a terrible approximation of a smile. "Follow us, please."

Their small group attracted a few stares for their mostly muggle attire and predominantly nervous looks as they awkwardly followed their escorts across the floor and through one of the doors leading off the hall and into a narrow stone passageway lit by flaming torches. The realisation that she was about to be going underground suddenly had Hermione's breath tightening in her throat, and she took a moment to ground herself using one of the techniques Dr. Mia had taught her.

(The last time she'd been underground, in a cavern, surrounded by darkness and stone and fire... well, even the softened memories were enough to quicken her pulse and shorten her breath)

"Are you alright, sweetheart?" Loki asked her, speaking quietly enough so that they wouldn't be overheard. She nodded and he frowned. "Hermione," he said sternly, "what does Dr. Mia say about avoiding reaching out for help and trying to suppress your emotions?"

"That I'm not a burden to the people who love and care about me and that pushing aside my emotions will only make them stronger and likely cause them to burst out at unplanned moments," Hermione dutifully recited, "but really, Loki," she added, squeezing his hand and smiling up at him, "I'm okay with this. Honest."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, with that piercing, intense stare that always felt as if he was looking at something deeper than just her flesh, and then he nodded, grinning at her. "Excellent– then let's scope out this joint!"

Laughing, they had to walk quickly now to catch up with the others, having fallen slightly behind. The path sloped steeply down, and they walked along it for a few minutes before coming across a large set of railway tracks on the floor. One of the goblins whistled and a large cart, big enough to seat at least ten grown men, came hurtling down the track towards them, grinding to a halt.

"Oh boy," Loki said, a big grin on his face as he looked over at the rapidly paling parents and the delighted faces of the children, "this is going to be fun."

He was right too. It was fun hurtling through the maze of twisting passages at breakneck speeds, the cold air stinging at their eyes as they passed tunnels, underground lakes, stalagmites, stalactites, and even several flashes of fire. Not quite as much fun as flying with Beau or swimming with Jöry, but Hermione was still breathless with exhilaration by the time the cart reached the Hogwarts Vault, as were the other children. The adults mostly looked queasy, though Professor McGonagall managed to look very dignified, despite the fact some of her hair had been blown out of its tight, strict bun and had fallen in stray wisps about her face.

As everyone clambered out of the cart so they could tour the vault, Hermione turned to beam up at Loki in excitement, only for her smile to waver when she saw the tight, pinched expression on his face as he lifted her to the ground, before climbing down himself. "Are you alright?" She asked him anxiously, leaning into him as soon as his feet were both on the ground and grasping onto his closest hand. She hadn't even considered that Loki might have his own terrible memories of being underground, and she cursed herself now for her lack of foresight.
"We went too fast for your eyes to catch it," Loki said in a low voice, sounding very grim, "but we weren't going too fast for me not to notice what the goblins decided were acceptable security measures for their vaults. Apparently, chaining live dragons underground, where they'll never see the sunlight, never be able to move around, and are left blind chained, and terrified, is an acceptable business practice in their eyes."

Hermione gasped in horror, clapping one of her hands over her mouth so the sound wouldn't carry. Thankfully, everybody was quite distracted by Mr Perks making a scene as the poor man was quite violently ill, and her and Loki's conversation was going unnoticed. "That's so awful!" She whispered, fighting the urge to glare at the back of the goblins who'd escorted them down. "We have to do something about it! We can't leave them here!"

"Oh they're not spending another day in this hell-hole, I can guarantee you that," Loki promised darkly, and Hermione nodded fiercely.

"As soon as we're out of here, you need to save them," she said forcefully.

"The tour--" Loki started to say, but Hermione shook her head.

"It doesn't matter," she interrupted. "Not compared to their suffering. And today might be a special day for me, yes, but as sappy as this sounds, Loki, and don't you dare mock me for it--"

"Oh I wouldn't dare," He solemnly promised, eyes briefly flickering with humour.

"-every day I get to spend with you is a special day, you gigantic jerk." She said with a small huff. "So make a construct to be my guardian, and go save them."

"Oh kitten," Loki said, moving forwards with her as Mr Perks finally stopped emptying his stomach and they were able to enter the vault at last, "in all my lifetime, I've never come across someone quite like you before. So much common sense, with a drive for justice and a bleeding heart to match it."

Hermione wasn't quite sure how to reply to that, but it seemed Loki wasn't expecting a reply. Instead, he just squeezed her hand and led her after Professor McGonagall, into the Hogwarts Vault.

The Vault reminded her of a museum exhibit, if said museum was built in a cavern hundreds of miles underground. The walls of the cavern were lined with glass display cabinets housing photographs, artefacts, weapons, clothing, tapestries, and paintings, as well as pedestals encased in glass upon which more artefacts and weapons were displayed. Under each object displayed was a strip of parchment with a name, date and brief description. "The glass is charmed to be unbreakable and impenetrable," Professor McGonagall informed them. "You have twenty minutes to look around while your money is being exchanged, before it's time to return to the surface and continue our tour of Diagon Alley."

Mr Perks let out a pitiful whimper upon hearing that, dropping his head between his hands. Poor Sally-Anne was starting to look quite embarrassed, so Hermione decided to try and rescue the other girl from her misery. "Hi there," she said cheerfully, smiling first at Fay Dunbar, then at Sally-Anne, not wanting Sally-Anne to feel singled out. "Do you two want to explore with me?"

"Yes please," Sally-Anne said quickly, hurriedly edging away from her father. Fay nodded shyly too, and Hermione looked around the room for a place to start, her eyes quickly settling on what appeared to be a portrait of identical women with blazing red hair wearing armour, one holding a shield, the other a gleaming silver sword studded with large rubies. Casually linking her arms
through Sally-Anne's and Fay's, ignoring how both girls startled at the contact, she headed straight for the painting, eager to see if it was what she thought it was, bringing Sally-Anne and Fay along with her.

As they approached, the twin on the right brandished her sword, while the one on the left thumped her shield against the breastplate of her armour. Fay squeaked like a mouse that had just been stepped on, while Sally-Anne gasped. "Did they just move?" The latter asked weakly, but Hermione, who had dropped their arms in order to bend over closer to the parchment strip, was too busy reading the description to answer.

Sure enough, written on the strip of parchment was 'The Lady Knights of the Round Table Gerda and Greta Gryffindor; the youngest daughters of Godric Gryffindor, knighted for their services to King Arthur of Camelot'.

"They did it," she whispered to herself, delighted. After finding out the fates of Sylvianne and Helena, she'd burned the book about the futures of the Founders' families to ashes and then buried those ashes under a patch of lilies, not wanting to know the rest of their fates. It had been the right choice at the time, but it was wonderful now to see that Gerda and Greta had fulfilled their dreams of becoming 'shieldmaidens', apparently having successfully either convinced their father of the need to train them in the art of combat or figured out a way to get trained themselves— it wouldn't surprise her, remembering how headstrong the pair had been. Meeting the eyes of the two Lady Knights, Hermione gave them one last smile before turning away, feeling much lighter as she made her way towards where Fay and Sally-Anne were admiring a collection of Princess Vivianne of Aquitaine's jewels.

Twenty minutes passed too quickly in the Hogwarts Vault. Only the allure of the rest of the Diagon Alley shopping trip could ease the disappointment she felt at being dragged away from the treasures it held, the rich history contained within its walls.

"You really do love all this history stuff," Sally-Anne, who seemed to have struck up a good rapport with Fay in the time that Hermione had spent mooning over a tapestry of the Enchanted Isle, which had perfectly captured Sorrow in flight in one of the upper left corners, commented, sounding quite surprised. "I thought it was more of an old person thing."

"I've always loved stories," Hermione said, with a light shrug, not taking offense at the poor wording of the question. "People don't always realise that it's not just books that can tell you a story."

"Very astute of you, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall praised, with a small smile on her face. "I love history too," Justin said eagerly, bounding over to join the conversation. He'd been lingering at the edge of Dean and Kevin's conversation about football, clearly having little interest in the subject and he seemed glad to latch on to a topic of more interest. As he looked over at her with big, eager eyes, Hermione couldn't help but think he reminded her a little bit of a puppy. "Do you have a favourite time period or culture?" He asked, sounding genuinely interested.

"I love Nordic history," she told him, honestly, "and I love studying a culture's mythology– it's a hobby of mine. It's going to be very fascinating to study it from the point of view of the magical world."

"Oh yes!" Justin agreed, nodding enthusiastically. "Personally, I'm quite looking forward to Arithmancy– I've always enjoyed Mathematics, and when I asked Professor McGonagall if they had Mathematic classes at Hogwarts when she delivered my letter she explained how they had Arithmancy instead." His face fell slightly here. "She said they only started it in Third Year"
"There's no reason why you can't get a book or two and start teaching yourself the basics now, though," Hermione urged, always one to encourage extra-curricular learning. "If you establish a strong base of knowledge, you'll have a head-start in class and be able to advance to more complicated concepts much quicker-- you may even be able to skip a year." Justin perked right up at that, as did his parents, who seemed to be listening. "Arithmancy might also be a transferable skill, if you're considering completing your GCSEs and A-Levels over summer semesters," she added, and Justin's eyes widened, as he turned back to his parents.

"I hadn't considered that," he admitted, and his parents definitely looked interested now. "When I received my Hogwarts letter, I thought that it had to be one or the other. I didn't think I would be able to have both."

"I don't think it's an option many people would consider, or even be interested in, honestly," Hermione admitted, "I've been considering summer semester university classes myself, and it's a lot of work and I know it will take a lot of dedication to complete, but I've never really felt comfortable with the idea of separating myself entirely from the world and culture I was born in. I suppose I'll see how I feel at the end of the Hogwarts term."

"I think that's an excellent idea, Miss Granger," Mr Finch-Fletchley said heartily, and beside him, Mrs Finch-Fletchley was nodding approvingly. Some of the other parents were looking interested too, while the other children mostly looked horrified at the idea-- Hermione didn't think she'd made any friends outside of Justin, who looked just as interested as the adults, by putting this idea out in the air, but that was okay. She liked Justin already, and was happy to chat with him about his acceptance into Eton-- very impressive!-- and which of the universities she was considering attending for summer classes as they all piled into the carts, pausing only to briefly nod at Loki, who winked at her.

She didn't see the transition between her god and the construct, but she felt the difference immediately when she grasped the construct's hand and it felt cold-- none of the constructs had Loki's heat. She and Justin continued chatting together as Professor McGonagall talked Mr Perks into letting her cast a charm on him to reduce his nausea, but their conversation was put to a halt when the cart took off once more, and one wild cart ride later (sans the vomit this time) they were standing outside Gringotts Bank with their newly converted galleons, ready to face Diagon Alley.
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX:

"Now, students," Professor McGonagall addressed them, brisk but not unfriendly in her overall manner, just efficient. "Who brought their booklist with them today?" Five hands immediately rose in the air with varying degrees of eagerness. Dean, however, just looked up at the professor sheepishly and she sighed in response. "I suspect you'll be one of mine," she said, "never mind, Mr. Thomas. Why don't you share with Mr. Entwhistle? Everybody, please take out your lists."

Hermione did as she was told, carefully removing the booklist from the bookbag she'd brought with her, the homemade one from Ina with bright blue, green and sandy colours, and little shells in it, like the sea, sand and sun in weave.

Despite the care she'd taken, the parchment had badly creased from the number of times she'd unfolded and folded it in the year since she'd received her Hogwarts letter and the ink had faded, but the words were still legible.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

Three sets of plain work robes (black)

One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear

One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)

One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble
OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)

1 set of glass or crystal phials

1 telescope set

1 brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICK

"Strangest bloody booklist I’ve ever seen," muttered Mr Perks, whose temper was apparently running short after the Gringotts cart ordeal. Professor McGonagall levelled a cool look at him and the man immediately wilted in place, chastised.

"Excellent. Shall we begin?" The professor asked, and nobody was quite brave enough to do anything but nod hurriedly in response.

Their first stop was Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, as Professor McGonagall explained that the shop had been booked that morning specifically for the muggleborn orientation tour and that Madam Malkin would then complete their order ready for an afternoon pick-up while they did the rest of their shopping.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch, dressed in a lovely taupe and soft violet robe who hurried them through to a fitting room where, three at a time, they stood up on footstools with robes slipped over their heads and friendly witches pinned the material to the right length. The witch working with Hermione, a friendly shop-assistant who introduced herself as Ellerie, complimented her on her hair. "I don't know how you manage your curls– I can't do anything with mine unless I use about a litre of Sleekeazy!"

"Patience, practice, and a really good friend who taught me some life-saving tricks," Hermione answered honestly, which made Ellerie laugh, and tuck several of her own, admittedly quite voluminous, curls out of her eyes and behind her ears before sliding the next pin in place.

After the fitting, they bought their pewter cauldrons, phials and brass telescope sets. They were then able to use their cauldrons to store their purchases, and their next stop was for potion ingredients. The Apothecary was fascinating enough to more than make up for its overwhelming stench of decomposition. Barrels of slimy... well slime stood on the floor, jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls, and bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. As they all gawked around them, Professor McGonagall pointed out each of the ingredients on their list so they could identify them, before requesting six of the 'First Year Hogwarts basics' from the wizard behind the counter, as well as a pair of protective dragon-hide gloves for them each.

Hermione, unable to help but think of the dragons Loki was currently freeing, winced at hearing that. She'd come to terms with her uncle's fishing, with Loki's reassurance that the fish didn't have the intelligence that magical creatures did, but dragons fell firmly under the magical creature category, and using dragon-hide gloves felt somewhat akin to wearing human-hide gloves. Her stomach turned as she held them gingerly away from her body, eager to quickly drop them in her
new cauldron.

In the next store, Amanuensis Quills, they purchased their supplies of parchment, ink, ink pots, and quills, as well as a guide for using quills for beginners. Professor McGonagall advised they make good use of the guide in the week leading up to Hogwarts, and to get in lots of practice. Next, at Eeylops Owl Emporium, three of the six families ended up buying an owl for their children, though they all looked nervous about doing so. Mrs Entwhistle kept a careful distance, looking terrified whenever one of the owls so much as rustled its wings.

Finally, the group approached one of the two shops Hermione had been looking forward to the most—Flourish and Blotts, Diagon Alley's bookshop. Stepping inside the bookshop was, in her opinion, a little bit like stepping into paradise, and Hermione took in her surroundings like a sugar-deprived Loki set loose in a chocolate shop. "I'm afraid we have a fifteen-minute time-limit here," Professor McGonagall said, sounding amused.

"We'll collect the First Year course-books for you both, Hermione and Justin," Mrs Finch-Fletchley offered, and Hermione took a moment to thank her profusely before she and Justin were diving off for the Arithmancy section. They managed to find 'Numerology and Grammatica' and 'New Theory of Numerology' for Justin, which he was delighted with, and Hermione decided to purchase copies of for herself too. She also managed to find a few new, interesting books of her own, including 'The Wizarding Way: Magical Solutions to Everyday Problems', 'A Traveller's Guide to Magical Britain', 'A Traveller's Guide to Magical Europe' and an intriguing book on the intermingling of Nordic, Egyptian, Old Celtic and Gaelic Runes.

"Do you enjoy travel, or do you have a trip planned?" Justin asked her as they reluctantly made their way to the counter, barely a minute left of their fifteen minute time limit.

"I love travelling," Hermione enthused. "I just absolutely love it. Seeing new places, experiencing new cultures—there's nothing like it, and magic means being able to experience it again from an entirely new perspective, of an entirely new culture!"

Flourish and Blotts, thankfully, had the foresight to sell canvas book-bags with extendable charms for an extra five knuts for customers to put their purchases in, considering that the cauldron just wasn't big enough for Hermione and Justin's hauls, and with their purchases safely tucked away, they reluctantly left the glorious haven of knowledge.

"Time for lunch, I think, then we'll pick up your uniforms and make our last stop for the day," Professor McGonagall announced, and a hush settled over the group, because there was only one item left on their book list.

Their magic wands.

Hermione knew she was fully capable of performing magic without a wand, but there was a sort of reverence placed on magic wands in wizarding society, and she could feel her heart start to speed up in her chest as anticipation built amongst them all, children and parents alike. Professor McGonagall looked around at all their tense, eager faces and smiled, the corners of her eyes softening slightly. "It's well worth the wait, children," she told them kindly, "I most sincerely promise you that."

They had a private room reserved on the second floor of the Leaky Cauldron for lunch, after a brief stop by Madam Malkin's to pick up their uniform orders. Tucked away from the rest of the pub-goers, they were able to order their meals (Hermione and the Loki-construct ordered pancakes drizzled with syrup, ice-cream and chocolate sauce, along with huge, frothy milkshakes, much to the mild horror of most of the parents and the envy of the other children) and spend the next hour
asking Professor McGonagall questions about Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and the magical world in general. It was a pleasant way to spend lunch, and as the parents bombarded the professor with questions, Hermione found herself talking quietly with Justin, who was sitting to her right, while the Loki/Uncle Arran-construct sat on her left.

Inevitably, the question about how to keep in contact without an owl came up. "We live in a flat," Mrs Entwhistle explained, nervously. "We can't buy an owl to keep in contact with Kevin, and so Kevin can keep in contact with us– does Hogwarts have a landline?"

"I'm afraid not," Professor McGonagall said, apologetically. "Magic and electricity tend to have a rather... explosive effect when mixed, but we do have a number of school owls available for student use throughout the year, and there is a system in place so that letters addressed to Hogwarts sent through regular post do make their way to the school."

Thoughtful, Hermione nudged her link with Vashti. 'How do you feel about a new disguise?'

'Is it more dignified then this songbird?' Vashti asked, projecting a sense of disgruntlement along their connection and Hermione sent back a wave of amusement.

'That depends on your standards. Is an owl more acceptable?'

'Urgh, owls?' Vashti sounded even more disgruntled, which didn't really surprise Hermione– Vashti wasn't a fan of sharing her perch with Fleur's owl. She didn't like the haughty birds, even though she was twice as haughty, and about ten times as vain. 'I heard that! Vashti squawked indignantly. 'Lies! Slander! Defamation!'

'It's true and you know it, you beautiful, ridiculous creature,' Hermione sent fondly, and Vashti sent back a distinct impression of ruffling her feathers in an unimpressed manner.

'I will never admit such a thing,' she said sniffily. 'But I will let Loki disguise me as an owl. Only because you need me close by to keep you out of trouble.'

'Of course, my heart-sister,' Hermione sent fondly, before focusing back on the conversation taking place at the table, which had turned to how to access the Hogwarts Express.

"Everyone boards the train from Kings Cross Station," Professor McGonagall was explaining to the group, "at Platform Nine and Three Quarters."

"Nine and Three Quarters?" Mr Thomas asked, looking bewildered, as did everyone else at the table. "I've never heard of such a platform!"

"That's because it's hidden, Mr Thomas," Professor McGonagall said with admirable patience in Hermione's opinion, as she thought it was quite obvious that the entrance to the secret train to the secret school teaching witchcraft and wizardry would be hidden. "To access it, you need magic, so only your children will be able to pass through the enchanted barrier. I'm afraid you'll have to say your goodbyes outside the platform, and then, children, while keeping a firm grip on your trunks, or on the handles of the trolley that your trunks are on, you will need to walk straight through the wall separating platforms nine and ten."

"Through the wall?" Sally-Anne squeaked.

"Yes, through the wall," Professor McGonagall confirmed, with a nod, before smiling kindly down at the girl. "I've heard it can be easier to do it at a bit of a jog if you're nervous." Sally-Anne gulped slightly, and nodded.
Professor McGonagall flicked her wand, causing glowing numbers to briefly flicker in the air before her and then nodded. "I believe," she said, "it is time for you to buy your wands."

The shop that she led them to was narrow and shabby. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window and peeling gold letters over the door read 'Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.' Hermione thought it was probably a false boast, considering Hecate hadn't started blessing witches and wizards with magic until the spread of Christianity began in the 1st century A.D. It didn't lessen her excitement though as Hermione filed after the others into the wand shop. The moment she stepped through the doorway Hermione could feel her hair starting to crackle as the magic in the air tingled, and she just knew her wand was waiting for her in this shop.

The adults, including Professor McGonagall, had to wait outside, the parents holding the cauldrons and all carry bags, as the inside of the shop was tiny, with barely enough elbow room for six children. Most of the space was taken up by thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling and a single spindly chair. They all looked around in eager impatience, wondering where Mr Ollivander was amongst the stacks. Hermione noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and turned, nudging Justin as she did so, so he wouldn't get a fright by the old man's sudden appearance.

Her first impression was that Mr Ollivander was old, with wide, pale eyes that shone like moons through the gloom of the shop. "Good afternoon," he said, and Fay and Sally-Anne both shrieked in surprise, while Kevin jumped and Dean swore. "Welcome," Mr Ollivander continued, as if their reactions had been entirely normal— they probably were, if he always snuck up behind his customers like that— "to the wizarding world. You are all here today to choose your wands. Or rather, you are all here for your wands to choose you, for it is the wand that chooses the wizard— or the witch.

"A wand is the object through which you will learn to channel your magic. Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance; we use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand

"If you damage or break your wand, you will need to alert one of your professors, as attempting to perform magic with a damaged wand can cause magical malfunction, misfire and backfire with horrific consequences. You must understand that as extraordinarily wonderful as magic is, it can also be extraordinary dangerous. Your wand can be a weapon, and it can cause enormous harm if misused. By selling you a wand today, I am trusting that I am releasing that wand out into the world to do good, not evil."

Mr Ollivander paused, giving them all a long look. Hermione wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but it felt as if his gaze had paused on her the longest before moving on. "Now," the wandmaker said, clapping his hands together, which caused a tape-measure to fly over and hover beside him. "Who's first?"

Hermione ended up volunteering to go last, hoping that Loki would have finished freeing the dragons by the time her turn had come around. To her disappointment, it wasn't to be. Justin, who was second last, was chosen by a ten and a half inch long applewood wand with a unicorn hair core, had beamed at her before hurrying outside the shop after all the others to show his parents his new wand, as had the others after they'd been chosen by their wands, leaving Hermione alone with Mr Ollivander, who looked thoughtfully across at her with those piercing eyes.

"I do believe," he said thoughtfully, "that you are the first High Priestess blessed by an Old God
that this world as seen in an age." Hermione jolted, eyes wide, and then narrowing as she stepped back, holding herself defensively. Mr Ollivander slowly extended both his hands out in response, his palms held flat in a position of surrender. "I mean you no harm, you are just a welcome sight to these old eyes," he told her, and Hermione narrowed her eyes further.

"How do you know about me?" she asked, suspicious.

"I know, Priestess Granger, because I haven't seen magic like yours for a very long time," the old man told her, and Hermione sucked in a breath.

"Pardon?" she managed to say, and Mr Ollivander smiled.

"It is not Hecate's blessing that you carry, Priestess," he said, and Hermione felt her stomach sink as panic surged through her.

"What? How can you tell?" she practically squeaked.

"Because," he said gently, "neither do I."

"I knew it!" Hermione gasped, straightening out of her defensive posture as she pointed to the door, above which outside the sign was painted in peeling letters. "I knew it! Hecate didn't grant her blessing until Christianity started to spread; you couldn't have started making wands in 382 B.C.! It isn't possible!"

"Not as one of hers, no," Mr Ollivander agreed, "but I do not belong to the Triple Goddess. My bloodline was blessed long before, by a god older than Hecate. But the gods and goddesses rise and fall at the whims of the worshipful masses, and Marduk withered when Babylon was abandoned, even as his blessing lived on within my family's bloodline."

"Marduk," Hermione murmured, taking a moment to remember where she'd read the name. It didn't take her long, not with her expansive knowledge of what non-magical people supposed was mythology, but she knew to hold more then a grain of truth. Marduk was a god from ancient Mesopotamia and patron deity of the city of Babylon; she remembered him in particular because he was associated with magic and judgment.

Mr Ollivander gave a small smile, tilting his head forward in acknowledgment of the comprehension visible on her face. "And to which god do you pray, Priestess?" he asked.

Drawing herself tall, Hermione said proudly, "I pray to Loki, God of Fire, Mischief, Lies and Chaos."

"Ah, yes," Mr Ollivander said, with a nod. "Yes, I can see that. Chaos, after all, bows to nothing and no one."

Hermione blushed slightly, opening her mouth, but, before she could say anything, Mr Ollivander turned sharply towards the doorway. A moment later, it opened and Professor McGonagall stepped through. "How are things progressing in here?" She asked, a knowing look in her eyes. "Not getting too caught up discussing wandlore, are we?"

Chagrined, Hermione held out her arm for the tape-measure, but Mr Ollivander shook his head. "No, we have no need for that," he said, "I know which wand will suit you better then any of these."

Confused, Hermione watched as he wandered out of sight, behind the rows and rows of stacked boxes, emerging a few minutes later with a very dusty, crudely carved wooden box. "If I could
have a moment alone with my client, Professor," he requested politely, and Professor McGonagall
gave them a curious look, but still nodded and stepped back, and exited the shop.

Mr Ollivander carefully placed the box down on the counter and placed his hand atop the lid.
"This wand was not crafted by me," he said, "but it is said that it is made from wood carved from
the Barnstokkkritself, and that the core is from a scale of the World Serpent himself, willingly
given. I have examined it thoroughly, and despite the fact I can identify every known type of wood
and serpent scale in existence, magical and non-magical, I could not identify either, so I believe the
claim to may hold some truth to it."

Hermione immediately perked up. The World Serpent was another name for Jörmungandr, who
she adored, while Barnstokkr was a tree introduced in the second chapter of the Völsunga saga; it
had stood in the hall of a king and was described as having fair blossoms growing along its
branches. In the saga, a sword was driven through its trunk and it was said that he who pulled the
sword from Barnstokkr would never carry a better sword than it– Hermione liked to think some of
the sword's invincibility carried over to a wand carved from the tree the sword had been sunk to the
hilt in.

Still, upon hearing what Mr Ollivander said, she had to say, "I don't see how witches and wizards
could possibly forget the existence of the gods and goddesses when they seem to have so much
evidence to the contrary!"

"I believe magic makes it easier for them to be blind," Mr Ollivander explained as he opened the
box and carefully lifted the wand from the dusty velvet cushioning. It was a beautiful wand, in
Hermione's opinion. Simple, but elegant, it was just over fourteen inches long, made of a smooth,
rich, honey-amber coloured wood and had small blossoms etched into the handle. "If they see a
giant serpent in the seas, they don't suspect it to be the son of a god, they think it's just an over-
large breed of magical sea-serpent. They see gods perform extraordinary feats and call it wandless
magic. They explain away everything that does not fit within their narrow worldview, just like
muggles do, and continue to live in their ignorance. Here," he held out the wand, and Hermione,
breath caught in her chest, accepted it.

She felt a rush of warmth, soft and tingling, and she immediately knew, without a single doubt, that
this was her wand. But she also knew that something was missing, and she told that to Mr
Ollivander, who nodded thoughtfully. "I think," he said, "that tonight you should pray to your god."

"Alright," she said, puzzled but accepting his wisdom in the matter. "How much do I owe you?"

"You owe me nothing, Priestess," Mr Ollivander shook his head, "you are the only one that wand
could have ever accepted."

"I can't just take it," Hermione argued, and Mr Ollivander regarded her with solemn eyes.

"If you insist on payment, then let this be it. Listen to my warning, Priestess Granger; the gods are
powerful. Very powerful. It's said that you cannot be all good, if you are all powerful, just as you
cannot be all powerful, if you are all good. Be careful."

Hermione wanted to defend Loki, but she bit back the words that wanted to come out and instead
nodded. "Thank you, Mr Ollivander," she said, and he sighed quietly.

"Good luck, Priestess." The old man said, before bowing her out of the shop. She left gladly,
pleased to join the others, who were waiting impatiently for her to join.

It was with a tired, but happy air that the group gathered out the front of the Leakey Cauldron at
the conclusion of the tour. The parents exchanged contact details, glad to be able to keep in touch
with people who understood what they were going through, and the six muggleborns all promised
to meet on Platform Nine and Three Quarters so they could share a compartment on the Hogwarts
Express together, a few last minute questions were asked, and everyone thanked Professor
McGonagall for her time before everyone parted ways, returning to their homes.

As Loki’s construct returned her to Fraserburgh before disappearing off to return her school
supplies to the room at his house where she kept her belongings, bar the canvas bag filled with
books from Flourish and Blotts, the quill, ink, ink pots and guide writing to using a quill, and, of
course, her wand, Hermione faced the house and took a deep breath. Hogwarts was six sleeps away
now. She couldn't justify staying silent any longer. Yes, she was afraid, but it was time to finally
tell her Aunt and Uncle the truth. The absolute worst they could do was send her back to her
parents, and if they did, she could just go and stay with Loki until it was time to leave for
Hogwarts. She had no doubt her god would let her. Or she could probably even write to Fleur, or
Astrid and Sköll, and she could definitely contact Dr Mia if she needed to. Maybe even Váli and
Eris would be willing to provide a place for her to stay. She wouldn't be homeless. She wouldn't be
unwanted.

(She wouldn't be unloved.)

Taking a deep breath, Hermione marched determinedly forwards, her chin up, and her head held
high. It was early afternoon and the fishermen hadn't returned yet, so Hermione joined her cousins
with the chores for the day, and when the boys went off in the early evening when the boats came
in with the catch, Hermione set to work with Jeanie in the yard, hunting down the chooks to return
to their coop. Eventually, her uncle and the boys returned from the wharf, her uncle and oldest
cousins looking weary from the hard day at sea, and dinner that evening was a quiet one.

Hermione waited until the table had been cleared and dishes moved to the sink— it was Jeanie and
Angus's turn to wash up— before asking for a private word with her Uncle and Aunt. They ended up
convening in their bedroom, as there weren't many rooms in the small house where private
conversations could be had.

While her Uncle sat wearily on his bed, leaning back against the headboard, her Aunt sat at the
foot of the bed, hands folded across her skirt. "What is it you'd like to talk about, love?" she asked
kindly, and Hermione swallowed.

"My parents..." she started, before trailing off slightly. "I know they said they wanted me to come
stay here because they wanted you to supervise me while I was doing my A-Levels via long-
distance learning," she said, finally, looking down at her hands, "but the truth is... the truth is, they
sent me here, because... because they didn't want me. Because they're scared of me. Because...
Because I'm different. I'm a witch."

"A witch?" Uncle Arran said, thoughtfully. "Is that what it is, then?"

"...what do you mean what 'it' is?" Hermione asked, confused by the lack of a reaction and
wondering if they hadn't understood what she was saying.

"You know, how you can make things float, and change colours, and fly across the yard," Uncle
Arran explained.

"And the altar you keep hidden in your trunk, and how you swear by Loki, not the Lord, and how
your hair crackles and sometimes smokes or sends off sparks when you get upset— mostly when
you're on the phone with Richard and Helen," her Aunt Iona added.
Hermione stared at them both. "You noticed all of that?" she blurted out, and Aunt Iona reached forwards to cup her face between her warm hands, palms made hard and calloused by hard work.

"We may not have given birth to you, love," she said gently, "but we're still your parents, in the ways that matter. Of course we noticed. We love you, Hermione."

Hermione couldn't help it; she started crying, stumbling forwards into her Aunt's arms, barely noticing as her Uncle Arran moved up the bed to place a gentle hand on her shoulder. The truth came out in bits and pieces, amidst the tears. Not about Loki; that was precious and private, something only to share with those who shared the faith, but about the visit from Professor McGonagall, about her parents' reactions, about Hogwarts, about the Wizarding World, and about where she had been today.

Her Aunt and Uncle listened with open minds and open hearts, and while she was sternly lectured about her dishonesty regarding her whereabouts that day (something she guiltily tried not to think about, considering how often she lied to them about her whereabouts, or Loki simply messed with time so she was never missing), none of the worst-case scenarios she'd been dreading came true. Nor did they come true later, when she shared the truth with her cousins. Angus, Jeanie and Leana were all jealous that they didn't have magic too, but looking at the stack of reading Hermione had to do before the school year began– or at least she presumed it had to be completed before it began, it made sense to at least have a solid understanding of basic principles before walking into the classroom for the first time– did make magic suddenly a lot less appealing to them.

"This looks worse than chemistry!" Jeanie marvelled, as she flipped through Hermione's Potions' textbook. "Blimey, 'Mione!"

"I don't even know what this word means– what is 'transmogrification'?" Angus asked, from where he was flipping through her transfiguration textbook.

"It means, 'Angus is an idiot',' Leana answered, which had Angus drop the book and tackle her, resulting in a pillow war between the two.

Usually, any sort of tussling so close to her precious books would have Hermione panicking or going into conniptions about them getting damaged, but she was too happy that the revelation about her magic had gone down so well to care. She was just so happy and felt so loved that she felt as if she could just float.

Lying in bed that night, listening to the soft breathing of her cousins in the bunks around her, Hermione remembered when she'd first arrived in Fraserburgh, skinny, grieving and alone, bar from the faith she clung to so tightly in the absence of human connection. Her parents had been such distant entities to her that it was only now, looking back, that she realised her sister had been the only real parental figure in her life. When she lost her sister, it was like she'd lost her mother, father, best friend, caretaker, sister, and her best friend and only friend, all at once. It was no surprise she'd been so broken.

But Loki had built her back up; he'd given her the strength and courage and faith she'd needed, in herself and in the world, to not give up and to keep going. He'd given her the opportunity to have a new family, to find new friends, to realise that life was worth living. He'd saved her life in a hundred thousand small ways, as well as the very literal times when he'd saved her life from actual monsters actively trying to kill her.

Recognising that she was far too awake to try getting to sleep, Hermione slipped out of her bed, Vashti fluttering from where she was perched on top of the window-frame and onto her shoulder
and crept through the house. The hinges of the back door were kept well-oiled so that when the fishermen in the family left before dawn, they didn't wake the whole house, and Hermione had long been taking advantage of the fact.

Together, she and Vashti ghosted through the sleeping town on silent feet, making their way to the copse of trees where Hermione performed her rituals giving thanks to Loki. She wasn't planning on performing a ritual that night, but she loved how the ritual magic had soaked into the ground in the small clearing and found meditating there to be relaxing.

'You feel happy,' Vashti projected, shedding the canary-illusion and fluffing out her feathers to her full, glorious plumage. Hermione stroked the beautiful feathers, admiring how the green of the feathers looked almost black under the moonlight, while the gold seemed to catch the starlight and glow. Vashti crooned, rubbing her head against her palm and Hermione tickled under the sharp beak.

"I am happy," she said, laying back on the grass, letting Vashi perch happily on her stomach, continuing to stroke the silky-soft feathers of her plumage. "I feel... I feel like there was a hole in my life that I never really noticed, but now that hole has been filled and I feel happy."

'Good,' Vashti declared, 'you should be happy. You are sister-of-my-soul, we deserve the best.'

"If you say so, it must be true." Hermione agreed solemnly, and Vashti preened.

'Exactly.'

Smiling, Hermione went back to stroking Vashi's feathers and gazing up at the stars, her eyes fixed on Lokabrenna* where it glittered above her, brightest star in the night sky.

::*Reminder from an earlier chapter: Lokabrenna is another name for the Dog Star, Sirius, Brightest star in the night sky. It's named after Loki.*
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Warning: graphic description of animal (dragon) abuse ahead. If that makes you uncomfortable or you'd prefer not to read it, please skip the second paragraph. Otherwise, enjoy!

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN:

Fifty-one dragons.

From the seven Gringotts Banks across the world, Gabriel had rescued a total of fifty-one severely underweight, horribly scarred, ravenously starving dragons. All of them had stunted growth, decaying teeth, bones that had set badly after being broken and healed wrong, they all suffering hypothermia, all deprived of sunlight, all blinded; some missing horns, or chunks of their tails, claws, toes, some even had a hacked off foot, and all had scarring from stab wounds, lashes from whippings, scales torn from their hides, open, weeping sores and abscesses, and skin infections.

Gabriel had a special loathing for animal abusers, and after spending a hundred years chained underground himself, denied sunlight, a tortured prisoner, he couldn't help but take the condition the dragons were being kept in personally. And he was furious. Deep, deep underground, even deeper then the hundreds of miles underground where the dragons were chained, tectonic plates shifted in the face of an archangel's rage, making the Earth's surface shudder, and Gabriel had to take deep breaths, had to focus on the bright, enthusiastic glow of Hermione's bubbling joy to contain the urge to destroy and instead focus on rescuing and healing.

Vengeance, justice, would come later.

Getting the dragons out of the underground tunnels and caverns of Gringotts with no one the wiser until it was much later, far too late for any additional defences that might make things any trickier, had been no easy task, even for an archangel. As magical beings, the natural defences the dragons' minds had meant it had taken an age to convince each dragon Gabriel was there to help them, not hurt them. Thankfully, his immunity to fire had at least made them curious enough after their initial attempts to roast him on sight that they tended to hear him out after he emerged from their flames unscathed. Less thankfully, healing had never been something Gabriel had excelled at-- it really was one of those times he wished he was still on speaking terms with Raphael and could ask for their help.

Raphael had always been Heaven's best Healer, their skill in the art far outclassing every other angel in the Host. Even after the first War had forced his sibling to assume the mantle of General, at their core Raphael had remained a Healer, the quicksilver touch of their grace able to heal even the gravest of wounds, of the body, the mind and the soul. Gabriel could manage to heal the body just fine, but in anything else he knew only the basics that Raphael had taught him, so long ago.

He hadn't been the best student, but Raphael had been determined that he learn, determined that every angel should know at least the basics of healing, and with admirable patience had sat with him and gone over and over the skills until Gabriel would have been able to perform them in his sleep if angels needed sleep. At the time he'd thought it a waste of time, impatiently flying away once Raphael had finally declared the lesson over. Now he wished he'd stayed longer, that he'd asked more questions, been more curious, that he'd had a greater appreciation for the knowledge Raphael had been so eager to teach him, the skills that they had wanted to pass on.
Gabriel's lack of skill in mind and soul healing meant that even once the dragons were physically healed, they still remained half-feral; there was a deep, burning hatred in them for goblins and humans both, the only two scents they recognised outside of their own kind, and would forever associate with the pain of their existence up until that point. He knew without doubt that rehabilitation was a fool's dream— they'd tear any human that got within reach of them to pieces in seconds, or more likely burn them to ashes before they could get close. He didn't blame them either; they'd experienced unspeakable horrors and torment, they deserved their peace, and he swore that the goblins would pay for how the dragons had suffered so grievously.

In the end, Gabriel decided that the best course of action was to take the dragons to Múspelheimr, the dimension known in Norse mythology as the realm of fire. Much like Purgatory, Hell, Heaven and Avalon, Múspelheimr existed as a separate dimension to Earth and was inhabited by its own non-human population. Gabriel found himself grateful for the recent boost to his strength that Hermione and Fleur's ritual had given him, as although travelling between the dimensions was easier than travelling in time, travelling between the dimensions with fifty-one dragons after having stolen said fifty-one dragons from seven different banks across the world, with all of said banks having been heavily guarded against thieves, and then healing all of those afore mentioned fifty-one dragons from grievous bodily harm, was frankly exhausting.

In the face of the sheer joy he could feel, however, from the dragons as for the first time they took their first, tentative steps under the burning skies of Múspelheimr, he couldn't help but think the exhaustion was well worth it. The fiery realm of Múspelheimr was a dangerous one, mostly uninhabitable to living beings, but it was perfectly suited to creatures such as dragons. It fit the stereotype of how humans imagined Hell to appear, all fire and brimstone and sulphur, with the landscape dominated by towering craggy mountains from the peaks of which great floods of lava endlessly flowed.

Múspelheimr also happened to be where his vessel's wife had lived, and where his vessel's two daughters still did live.

Gabriel had met the original Logi*, brother of Aegir, Kári, and Rán, when he first left Heaven. Aegir, Logi, Kári, and Rán had been old for pagan gods, even when he'd first met them; much like tulpas, pagan gods came to be through the belief, and the early ancestors of the Norsemen had believed in an old creation myth that predated that of the Aesir. This creation myth consisted of a triplicate of ancient, primal elements, the Sea, Flame, and North Wind, which together created and shaped the world of the North. Thus; Aegir, God of the Sea; Logi, God of Fire; Kári, God of the North Wind, and later Rán, Goddess of the Sea, Sister-Wife to Aegir and mother of their nine daughters came to be, long before Odin and the pantheon he ruled had come to be.

Logi was on the edge of death, having been dealt a fatal wound, when Gabriel came across him with his brothers and sister. Gabriel, still a good little angel despite running away from home (and currently using a crow as his vessel, a vessel that he was already burning through, more and more feathers sizzling up and falling to the ground with every passing minute; he had to turn his grace inwards to keep from burning up in seconds, and the pain was almost unbearable), had offered to try and heal him. Aegir, Kári, and Logi had been suspicious but Rán, so mesmerisingly beautiful with her long, deep-blue tangled hair that fanned out behind her like a net for her to use to catch mortals who fell into the unforgiving depths of the seas for her to feast upon, begged that he try.

Logi's wounds had proved beyond Gabriel's ability to heal, particularly as limited as he was by his vessel at the time, but he had tried anyway. And for his kindness, Logi had offered him a kindness in return, giving consent for Gabriel to use his body as a vessel once he'd passed on, as the crow
was little more than charred, bloodied skin and feather over frail, hollow bird bones by that point, barely held together by grace and willpower alone. Pagan gods had no soul, and once Logi had died, surrounded by his family, Gabriel had gladly shed the crow's body as a vessel, though he would never forget its sacrifice, and taken Logi's as his own.

It was Rán who re-named him Loki. Aegir and Kári, Logi's brothers, had taken longer to accept him, finding it difficult to be around one who wore the face of their brother and had the memories of their brother but who was not their brother, but not Rán. Rán had loved him and treated him as a brother to her from the very start. It was Rán who taught him how to be a pagan god, Rán who taught him how to shed his angelic morality in exchange for hedonism, chaos and debauchery, and Rán who took him to Múspelheimr, to explain to Glöð, Logi's wife, and his two daughters, Eisa and Einmyria**, the truth of what had happened to Logi, and who he was now.

Although Glöð wished him no ill-will for what had happened to Logi, she still had no wish to see him wearing the face of the husband she loved, and Gabriel had respected that. Eisa and Einmyria, however, had been far less willing to cut ties with him altogether. And although that had actually made him more uncomfortable then Glöð's willingness to never see him again, he'd felt that he owed both them and Logi for the gift that Logi had given him, and he ended up becoming 'Uncle Loki' to the two girls.

Centuries later, after Gabriel met Odin and the pair started travelling together, 'Loki' stretching his (not-so) metaphorical wings away from his 'brothers' and 'sister', while Odin was making a name for himself through conquering realms (with Loki's help, though the myths liked to forget that part), he returned to Múspelheimr for a very different reason. Múspelheimr had been ruled back then by the fire giant Surtr, an oppressive tyrant to the core, and he and Odin had defeated the fire-giant together in what had been a glorious battle, "freeing" the realm from Surtr's oppression (and trading it for Odin's own).

At the time, Odin's rule had actually proved less oppressive, if only because Odin was much less present, only requiring annual war-tithes, and Odin had been well aware that Loki was protective of that particular dimension, even if he wasn't aware of the particulars why— Gabriel hadn't trusted Odin as much in those earlier days, and he only wished he'd remained that wary, instead of letting the pagan arrogance go to his head.

He'd never spoken with Glöð again, after that first time when he and Rán had had to explain that Logi was dead and someone else now wore her dead husband's body, but he'd remained on good terms with her and Logi's daughters, his nieces, and the only reason he hadn't brought Hermione yet to meet Eisa or Einmyria was because of how incompatible Múspelheimr's environment was to humans— the choking smoke, leaping flames, toxic fumes, and devastating heat would melt, char, poison, and possibly even disintegrate her lungs the moment she tried to take a breath.

After he'd finished releasing the dragons, who he knew unlike humans would positively thrive in Múspelheimr's fiery climate, Gabriel spent some time resting (and recovering, not that he liked to admit it), watching as they tentatively, and with rapidly increasing excitement, discovered the joys of freedom. An odd melancholy mixed with the fierce pride and happiness he felt at the sight of their growing confidence as they rediscovered, or in some cases discovered for the first time, the joys of flight. It reminded him of watching the fledglings in Heaven learning how to fly, and it made something inside him ache fiercely.

He'd never taught the fledglings himself; despite his efforts in teaching Hermione self-defence, his laziness in tweaking her brain to help her learn faster should be a good indicator that he wasn't exactly the teaching type. He'd never really been involved with the fledglings in Heaven, teaching them had never interested him the way exploring his Father's Creation had. It had been Michael
and Lucifer, his older siblings, both strong and beautiful and oh-so protective of their family, who had taught the fledglings to fly, coaxing them into the skies where they'd teach them how to dip and glide, to weave and swerve, to duck and dive, and to avoid collisions with asteroids, comets, and other matter floating about, often saving more then one clumsy young angel from being sucked into a blackhole in the process.

When had they gone from being a family, Gabriel wondered, as he watched one of the older dragons nudge the wing of a younger dragon into a better position for him to launch himself into the sky, into being an army? When had they gone from being brothers and sisters, to being comrades in arms?

(Why couldn't Lucifer have swallowed down his pride? Why couldn't Michael have been a less dutiful son? ...why couldn't their Father have stayed?)

Although the sun and moon were concealed entirely by smoke, leaving the sky a constant blazing reddish-orange from the smoke and fires, Gabriel judged about an hour had passed before the last dragon gently rubbed her scaled nose against his cheek and rumbled a heartfelt 'thank you Loki-god' to him before spreading her once-maimed, now-glorious wings, taking to the skies to join her brethren in the freedom of flight, setting off to explore her new home.

Smiling after her, Gabriel waited until she'd faded from even his sight before he unfurled his own wings and made his way to the Queen of Múspelheimr's castle. Múspelheimr's people lived in houses carved out of the volcanic rock that formed the mountains that were so plentiful within the realm, much like the ancient city of Petra in Jordan. The castle had an entire mountain to itself, and towered high above all the other mountains with the steady streams of lava flowing from its peak cleverly designed to pass around the many arches and turrets carved into the stone, through into a moat-like structure at the base before draining into one of the many rivers of lava.

Einmyria and Eisa met him at the base of the castle. Glöð had long-since passed away; her kind lived around five-hundred years, but his nieces had inherited a pagan god's longevity from Logi and glowed still with youth. Einmyria looked like a living flame; her skin was the burnt orange of a lit candle, her eyes as bright a gold as sparks from a flint and her hair the brilliant, burning red of hot coals. Four slender horns curved from behind her tapered ears and a long, slender, prehensile tail was wrapped casually around her own waist, like a belt for her dress.

Eisa looked far fiercer. Where Einmyria was draped in a dress made of a material resembling silk, Eisa wore golden armour. Her glowing hair, barely chin-length as opposed to her sister's which fell nearly past her knees in a swirling, fiery cloak, was lighter then Einmyria's, more akin to the molten orange-gold of fresh lava. Her tail was thicker, stronger-looking, snapping out restlessly behind her like a coiling, uncoiling serpent, while her horns jutted straight back, thick and sharp.

As he drew closer to them, he was able to pick up on the smaller details– the leaves and vines etched into Eisa's golden armour, the green gemstones on the circlet resting in Einmyria's red, glowing hair– and he smiled.

"Greetings Your Majesty, Your Majesty's Shield," he greeted them, sweeping forwards into a dramatic bow, and both laughed.

"You needn't bow to us, Uncle," Einmyria protested playfully.

"Maybe not," he agreed easily enough, because as a general rule Loki wasn't the bowing type, "but I want to."
He hadn't even realised that Einmyria and Eisa had decided to overthrow Odin's rule over their realm after hearing about what he had done to their Uncle and Cousins until long after the fact. Einmyria and Eisa had allied with Laufey of Jötunheimr, Freyr of Vanahemr, and Hreiðmarr of Svartálfheimr***, all realms that Odin had 'conquered' and expected war-tithes from, and declared themselves as ruling sovereigns, with the majority of their people in support of their claims (and killing most of the dissenters, it had to be admitted), and then, with their combined armies behind them, challenging Odin to come fight them if he wanted to fight for his title as their 'All-Father King of the Nine Realms' back.

Shockingly, he did not.

"You have much to fill us in on, Uncle," Eisa said pointedly.

"And you appear to have brought many new subjects to my kingdom," Einmyria added.

"They're seeking asylum," Gabriel told her, before explaining the entire Gringotts situation, finishing with, "they won't cause trouble, but... they're slightly feral, and they're going to end up being killed for attacking a human if I leave them on Earth."

"They are most welcome here," Einmyria assured him, looking appropriately appalled on the dragons' behalves. "They are creature of fire; my realm welcomes its children home."

"Now stop evading," Eisa demanded, "Why did we hear from Laufey-Queen of all giants that Odin-scum is dead? She said you went mad, and that angels ended up being involved! Do the Host know about you now? I had to talk Einmyria out of storming Heaven when you didn't come to us sooner! She thought they had taken you and were holding you prisoner! If Laufey-Queen hadn't told us you were stopping Baldr from gathering support in his attempts to start Ragnarök in the wake of Odin's death, I don't think I could have stalled her much longer!"

"What the fuck, little spark?" Gabriel demanded, alarmed, turning to glare at the sheepish looking queen.

"I would have taken back-up!" Einmyria protested sulkily, suddenly not looking quite so dignified and queenly with her ears pressed flat back against her skull and her tail dropping guiltily.

Gabriel groaned. "Okay, first off, I didn't go mad-- I have a priestess now, and Odin stole her in order to set a trap. I lost my temper, burned down Ásgarðr, and accidentally caused a few earthquakes and thunderstorms when I saw what he'd done to her during her abduction, and the Host noticed. Zachariah gave orders to have the pagans involved killed, because the disturbance was ultimately too powerful to be ignored. They did a mass-smiting, but I made sure everyone got out alive. Except Odin, obviously-- I stabbed the fucker."

"The priestess must be very good looking," Eisa mused, and Gabriel shuddered.

"Urgh! Urgh urgh urgh!" He groaned. "I'm never getting that out of my head now. She's twelve!"

"Oh!" Eisa said, eyes wide. "That is unexpected!"

"What's her name?" Einmyria asked curiously.

"Her name is Hermione," Gabriel told them, unable to help but smile at the memory of her beaming smile, their connection humming warmly across the link formed by his feather and grace wrapped around her soul, and his nieces exchanged long looks before turning back to him, both with identical thoughtful expressions on their faces.
"You look happy," Einmyria said, like it was a revelation. His kids had acted like it was some kind of revelation too. He hadn't realised everyone thought he was so miserable. (He hadn't realised he was so miserable). "She makes you happy." Einmyria smiled, delighted. "I'm glad– you deserve to be happy."

"Váli said the same thing," Gabriel admitted. "And Fenris. And Jöry."

"Then maybe you should listen to us," Eisa said, exasperated.

"Maybe I should," Gabriel agreed.

"And speaking of listening to us," Einmyria said, mischief sparkling in her eyes, "I have an idea about how to serve the perfect just desserts to those goblins."

Gabriel listened to her idea, before tilting back his head as he laughed, long and hard.

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The Hogwarts Great Hall was near-empty as Minerva sat down at the staff table, a far-sight different to how packed and busy it was during the school term, full of shouting children, screeching owls, and the occasional explosion. Only Minerva herself, Albus, the three other Heads of Houses were present, tucking into a late evening meal.

Minerva was exhausted after the muggleborn orientation tour, always an exhausting occasion as the parents and children had so many questions to ask her– not that she blamed them, of course; in their place, she'd have hundreds, if not thousands, of questions to ask– which had been followed by a staff meeting with the four Heads of Houses and Albus.

As she took a grateful sip of the tall glass of brandy next to her roast potatoes, making a mental note to thank her house elf Dimple for her forethought, Filius spoke up. "You had the tour today, didn't you Minerva?"

"I did, yes," she said, regretfully lowering her brandy back down to the table.

"Oh," Pomona said with a smile, "you would have seen your little pen-pal, then– how was she?"

"Pen-pal?" Albus asked, peering at her with interest. Filius and Severus were also looking over at her now, both clearly curious, though Severus tried to hide his curiosity behind his usual stoic mask, the silly boy.

"One of the muggleborns," she explained to the nosy lot of them, "I've been keeping in touch with her for about a year now. She's an avid reader, really quite an intelligent girl. Her letters truly have been interesting to read; she has some remarkable, startlingly unique insights for a child her age, especially one who's known about the magical world for such a short time as she has. She appears to be quite the academic– one of the other muggleborns mentioned she completed her GCSE's at age 10, and her A-Levels at 11?"

Severus visibly startled, his dark eyes widening, and they all looked over at him in surprise. "Is that good, then?" Filius asked, interested.

"Yes," the youngest Head of House said dryly. "Yes it is 'good'. You could consider it the muggle equivalent of sitting your OWLs and NEWTs a year apart at ages eleven and twelve."

"Really!" Minerva said, astonished.
"Well now!" Filius clapped his hands together, looking utterly delighted. "A future Ravenclaw then!"

"She could still be a Gryffindor yet," Minerva argued, not willing to give up on the idea of Hermione Granger in her House yet.

Pomona, ever the Hufflepuff, had her mind on other matters. "You mentioned that you originally kept in touch with her because of your concerns about her family situation," she said, which had Severus's eyes sharpening, "has that improved?"

"Ah," Minerva sighed, shaking her head, "I'm afraid not. She wrote and asked if her uncle could accompany her today— apparently she's moved out of her parents' house, or she was... forced out, I'm not quite sure, she wasn't clear on the details, but she's moved in with her uncle and aunt. Her uncle..." Minerva couldn't help her cheeks going a little pink as she remembered the roguish, cheeky man, and the wink he'd given her. "He was certainly a friendly one. She seems quite happy with them."

"I'm glad," Pomona said warmly, before sighing and shaking her head. "It's tragic when families can't accept how special magic is," she murmured sadly, and Minerva could see how white-knuckled Severus' grip had turned around his cutlery.

"Yes," she agreed grimly, wishing she'd known the signs all those years ago, "it is. Speaking of which— I was quite surprised to find out this morning that you had taken Harry Potter off my list for the muggleborn orientation today, Albus." She turned her pointed stare in Albus' direction. "I know he's not a muggleborn, but he might as well be and he could have benefited from meeting his peers today."

To her annoyance, Albus just smiled in that knowing way of his, eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles. "I trust that Rubeus would have guided him well," he said, and Severus snorted.

"Not even at Hogwarts and already getting special treatment," he sneered, but Minerva wasn't fooled— there was no true venom in the lad's voice, and his dark eyes just looked sad.

"Speaking of recent questionable decisions," Pomona said with perfect sweetness, like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, "the Devil's Snare is ready, Albus, but I must ask you again— do you really think keeping the Philosopher's Stone in a school full of children is safer than keeping it in a vault at Gringotts?"

Before Albus could reply, several post owls swooped through into the Great Hall in what Minerva would later reflect was almost divine timing, letting out great shrieking cries that caught all their attention. The owls dived forwards, dropping the special print, late-evening editions of the Daily Prophets on the table before them, where the headlines blared 'ALL OUR GOLD GONE!' 'GRINGOTTS IS EMPTY!' 'ALL FORTUNES STOLEN!' 'WORLDWIDE PANIC OVER GRINGOTTS PHENOMENA!'

"Why yes, Pomona," Albus said faintly, as one of the foundations of magical society, that the Gringotts Banks were impregnable fortresses, impossible to steal from, safe havens for their wealth, came crumbling down. "Yes I do believe that the Philosopher's Stone is safer at Hogwarts."

Even when, three days later, the gold mysteriously reappeared (and was subsequently withdrawn from the bank by its owners, ending the burgeoning economic crisis and stirring whispers of another war between goblins and wizards, but also ruining Gringotts' reputation and its ability to operate as a bank forever) it was hard to argue with him.
*I've mentioned earlier that the Eddas know three different versions of the god Loki: Loki, Logi and Utgard-Loki and in this story, I follow the theory that all three Loki's are one, and the "Loki" that Gabriel took over is the same being as Logi (In Norse mythology, there are myths about a pantheon of gods that predate the Aesir. These are Aegir [King of the Sea], Kári [North Wind] and Logi [Fire], as well as Rán, the sister-wife of Aegir). Glöð was the wife of Logi, and had two daughters with him, Eisa and Einmyria. Glöð means "glow" and Eisa and Einmyria mean "Ashes and "Embers"

**in Norse mythology Óðrerir refers either to one of the three vessels that contain the Mead of Poetry or to the mead itself, which grants wisdom. Odin went on this whole big quest for it.

***Laufey, Freyr, and Hreiðmar of Jötunheimr, Vanaheimr, and Svartálfaheimr respectively are the sovereigns of those realms in Norse mythology (and yes, in Norse mythology Laufey is actually female, Marvel got that wrong).

Chapter End Notes

So Gabriel/Loki's backstory is finally explained in full! It's actually been planned in full since about chapter fifteen, but it's taken until now to actually insert it into the story. I had such fun combining bits and pieces of Norse mythology with SPN canon, though this story isn't canon compliant with the whole SPN Season 13 Loki storyline. Obviously. Also, the wrath of Loki has been brought down upon the goblins of Gringotts! (How obvious is it that I'm an animal rights advocate? That dragon scene in the last book was so upsetting to me!) I hope you all found it fitting! (And I hope you all caught the implications for later...) Not long to go now! xx
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT:

As dawn crept closer, Hermione's hopes that Loki would show up that night dwindled and she assumed that rescuing those poor dragons had proven a more exhaustive task then she'd originally expected.

As Hermione abandoned her peaceful stargazing, instead turning her attention towards practicing using her beautiful new wand, Vashti flew over to a low-hanging branch of one of the nearby trees where she started snoozing quite peacefully. The honey-amber wood of her wand was warm under Hermione's touch, and its magic tingled, like sherbet fizzing on the back of her tongue. It was hers; she knew that, in her heart of hearts, to the deepest depths of her soul. But she also knew it wasn't complete. Not yet. Not quite.

Still, even incomplete, it was immediately clear to her that her magic was much, much easier with a wand to channel it. But Hermione liked to think she was clever enough to know that easier didn't always mean better; she had no intention of giving up wandless magic just because magic with a wand was easier. She loved a challenge; she was a polyglot for a reason! To practice, she returned to the old exercises that Loki had started her on, when she was learning to control her magic, including her favourite of sitting cross-legged on the grass and changing the colours of flower petals, an old but much-loved exercise for learning and practicing the control and precision of her magic.

Even with as focused as she was on familiarising herself with her wand, Hermione still felt the welcome surprise in the early hours of dawn of the approaching presence of her god even before he actually appeared in the small clearing, proving her earlier assumptions that he wouldn't show wrong. Ever since that day in Henningsvær, when Loki had done whatever it was that he had done to make sure she could never be hidden from him again, she'd noticed that she was much more attuned to her god's presence when he was near her, and as he neared the clearing, she was already turning her head in the direction she could sense him approaching from.

When Loki appeared, barely a blink later, the first thing she noticed was how badly singed his clothes were. She actually let out a gasp, leaping to her feet so quickly that her wand rolled off her lap, dropping to the ground. It let out a series of angry sparks at the rough treatment, and she winced as a nearby patch of metallic-blue wildflowers was set alight, quickly stamping out the flickering flames with her boots and scooping up her wand, whispering a quick apology and stashing it in her pocket, before rushing over to her god.

"What happened? Are you okay? Are the dragons okay? Did you rescue them all? Did one of them set you on fire? Where are they? Are you hurt?" she demanded anxiously, patting down his sides, checking for injuries. He seemed a bit confused by her concern, before looking down at himself and realising why she was worried.

"Oh, this isn't from the dragons," he said, casually waving a hand, which made all the damage disappear and left his clothes pristine. "I had to find somewhere to rehome fifty-one mostly-feral, human-and-goblin-hating dragons where they wouldn't end up attacking any humans and getting hunted down and killed for it, and Múspelheimr turned out to be the best option— it's climate isn't the best for your wardrobe." Hermione blinked, as she processed that, not sure what question to ask
"Fifty-one—!? They had fifty-one dragons!? And— wait, Múspelheimr, the Norse Realm of Fire, it's real!"

"It is," Loki confirmed, before yawning. "And tiring to get to. Honestly, I think I need an actual nap. I don't think I've needed a nap since we visited a thousand years ago." Loki actually looked a bit surprised at himself. "Healing is really not my forte, and yes, there really were fifty-one dragons, from the seven Gringotts branches located across the world. I paid all of them a couple of visits today, and let me tell you— I was not pleased with what I found."

"Were they really in an awful condition?" Hermione fretted, and Loki nodded, something dark and ancient and furious flashing in his eyes. She shivered slightly as the air seemed to tremble around him; heavy and electric. It struck a primal sort of awe in her heart, but she could never fear her god, not truly, no matter what Mr Ollivander warned.

"Their conditions were absolutely awful," Loki confirmed darkly. "But I've already given the goblins a large serving of just desserts, it's why I'm so late— I wasn't about to let them get away with it, and I didn't want them putting up more defences when they learned the dragons had been freed."

"Good!" Hermione said, fiercely, shuddering at the memory of her own, very brief time in captivity, chained up underground— it wasn't an experience she'd wish on anyone. And some of those dragons could have been there years, if not decades considering how long dragons could live. "What did you do to them?"

"I ruined them!" Loki said, with a viciously pleased grin, like a wolf baring its teeth. "I stole everything from them— everything— and then I dropped off a couple of hints at all the major magical newspapers, with enough family heirloom treasures from family vaults to make it convincing. Oh, I'll return everything back to where I got it from in a day or two, but by then Gringotts will be ruined. They'll never be able to work as a bank again."

"Good," Hermione repeated her earlier sentiment, feeling absolutely no pity towards the goblins. She knew that she probably should feel bad, she knew that her god had just ruined the reputations of an entire species, destroying the livelihoods of hundreds, possibly thousands, and she remembered Mr Ollivander's words— you cannot be all good, if you are all powerful— but she trusted Loki, Loki was good, and Mr Ollivander was wrong. Those dragons had been wronged, and Loki had delivered the just desserts on those who had wronged them.

"Enough about that, though," Loki said, and the heaviness vanished from the air, easing the pressure on her lungs, allowing her to draw a fall breath again. "Tell me— was that your magic wand I saw, casually engaging in some very familiar pyromaniac tendencies?" her god teased, and Hermione blushed.

"I got it today. But..." she hesitated slightly, wondering how to explain the encounter in the wandshop. "The wandmaker, Mr Ollivander, he immediately recognised that I wasn't blessed by Hecate," she admitted, and Loki's gold eyes immediately turned sharp with interest. "He said he wasn't either," she added, "that his family's blessing came from Marduk."

"Marduk," Loki repeated, and he looked surprised. "Now that's certainly a name I haven't heard in a while."

"Have you ever met him?" Hermione asked curiously, and Loki nodded, eyes distant.
"Back when I was still with Kári, Aegir and Rán," he murmured, sounding rather far away. "It was before I met Odin, predating the Aesir pantheon." Loki seemed to shake himself slightly, returning to the present. "That's interesting, though. I didn't realise any gods other than myself and Hecate had given mortals such blessings." He said.

"I'm not sure if Mr Ollivander sees it as a blessing so much," Hermione admitted. "His attitude towards the gods doesn't seem very... positive."

Loki didn't seem offended. "He's right, sweetheart," he said, gently. "If there's one universal truth in this world, it's that the gods are cruel."

"You aren't cruel," Hermione said stubbornly, and Loki laughed. It wasn't a humorous laugh, but it wasn't a bitter one either. It was just sad, and Hermione didn't even try to resist the urge to throw her arms around her god's waist in an effort to comfort him. He gently wrapped one of his arms around her shoulder, the other resting on her head.

"You aren't cruel," she repeated, looking up at him earnestly without releasing him from the hug. "You're kind, and you're thoughtful, and you care, even when it hurts you to care, and you love, even when it hurts you to love. And maybe sometimes you're bitter and cruel and selfish, but that's okay. Sometimes we're all those things, and more. What matters is that you're also good, you are so, so good."

"Hermione Granger, you are too precious for this world," Loki murmured, and then, very suddenly, so suddenly it happened before she could even react, Loki sunk down so he was kneeling in front of her, so that she was the one standing and he was the one on his knees,. She was so short that their heads were practically on the same level, but it was still such a reverse of what it should be that Hermione was knocked entirely off kilter. The cognitive dissonance of it felt like nails on a chalkboard to her brain as it tried to process the sight that her eyes were taking in, but when she tried to drop to her own knees, Loki's steady hands gripped onto her forearms, preventing her from doing so, keeping her upright.

"For your services to me and in my name, Hermione Jean Granger, I do offer you a boon. What do you wish from me, my Priestess?" Loki asked, and Hermione couldn't help the squeaking sound she let out.

"Loki!" she protested, and he grinned at her, despite the seriousness in his eyes.

"I'm not letting you go until you ask for a boon. You have earned one, Hermione. You have more than earned one. So what is it you ask of me?"

"I can't ask anything of you!" Hermione wailed, her face bright red. She wanted to cover her cheeks with her hands, but Loki's grip on her arms meant she couldn't. "You've already given me so much, too much, I can't ask anything more of you!"

"You can and you will," Loki said firmly, "as your god I demand it."


"Your wand?" Loki frowned.

"My wand– it's incomplete," she explained hurriedly. "I don't know how, or why, just that it's incomplete, and that Mr Ollivander said that I needed to pray to my god and that you'd know what to do. That's the boon I ask for. Now please, for the love of you, please stand up!"
Loki looked a bit confused, but he did finally let go of her arms and stand up, thank Loki, and she gratefully handed over her wand to him. Accepting it, Loki rolled her wand carefully in his hands, examining it in detail. "Barnstokkr," he murmured. "And part of one of Jöry's scales. Interesting."

"He said Jöry's scale was willingly given," Hermione said anxiously, and Loki nodded, not looking up.

"It was," he assured her, "you'd be able to tell by the feel of the magic if it wasn't." He looked up then, a smile on his face. "I know exactly what to do," he said, confidently. "Leave it with me."

"Thank you," Hermione said, beaming at him, and he smiled fondly down at her.

"No," he said, "thank you. Now, tell me everything that happened today."

"Well," Hermione said, taking a deep breath. "I finally told my family I'm a witch."

Loki looked almost as surprised as she had been when he had kneeled before her, which was a small revenge, but she vowed to think up a better one as she started to explain everything that had happened since they'd parted ways at Gringotts Bank.

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After Hermione wore herself out talking, eventually falling asleep on his lap, Gabriel tried to remember if he'd ever knelt for a human before. He knew Loki never had. The pagan god in him would never dream of showing any type of submission, especially to a human. The Archangel Gabriel may have bowed to a few, but kneel? He didn't think he'd ever kneeled to anyone but his Father.

But as Hermione had hugged him, as she had told him that he was good, the only one in the universe to really ever believe such a thing, he had wanted to give her a gesture just as significant, whether she was aware of it or not.

Hermione was special; he'd always known that, from the very first time he'd seen her perfect, bright, battered little soul, broken but still beautiful. And now, with his feather all wrapped up around her until it was impossible to remove, she was radiant, glowing; her soul was effervescent. Hermione was a dichotomy of innocence, and the weariness someone who'd witnessed some of the worst the world had to offer; a dreamer, and a realist; order, and chaos; a warrior, and a pacifist; a hunter, and a witch, honest to a fault, and a trickster to the core.

And she was his, Loki's; she knew him only by his crueler, pagan half, yet she trusted him enough to fall asleep in his lap. Trusted him enough to give herself up to him, to let him own every single part of her. Trusted him enough to be his, all his.

Gently gathering her up in his arms, Gabriel returned her to her bedroom before, her wand in hand, flying off to pay each of his children a visit, to ask for a donation of a hair and a drop of blood.

He thought they might be reluctant. A lot could be done with a drop of blood; even an archangel could be bound by blood, even temporarily, if one knew how; blood magic was powerful magic, and it took trust to hand over your blood to another, trust he wasn't sure that his children would have in Hermione, considering both her age, and the fact they didn't know her like he did.

He was wrong.

Each of them agreed; Fenris, Sleipnir, Hel, Váli, and Jörmungandr, from whom he'd only needed
the blood, all agreed. Váli even, with a wistful smile, and a hand brushed over his heart, had given two drops of blood, and two of his hairs, in the place of Nárvi, the identical twin who should still be with them. Who would have been with them, if not for Odin. Gabriel, not quite able to believe his luck, had even visited Hati, Sköll, Eisa, and Einmyria, his grandchildren and nieces, to see if they were interested in donating to the cause too– and they all were.

Somehow, Hermione had earned their trust; either because she had earned his trust, in the case of Eisa, Einmyria, Sleipnir, and Hel, or through her own efforts, with Fenris, Jörmungandr, Váli, Hati and Sköll. He wondered if she'd even realise how special that was, how rare– one of a kind, even. Because his Hermione was one of a kind.

As the finishing touch to the wand, he added hair and blood from his own vessel– he'd decided against adding any grace or parts of his celestial True Form, figuring there was such thing as overkill and, no matter how extraordinary she was, Hermione did still happen to be a child and he was actually responsible enough that he wasn't about to build her a weapon capable of destruction on the scale of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He'd wait until she came of age first before doing that.

It was easy enough for him to deconstruct Hermione's wand, casually pulling apart and rearranging its atoms in order to reconstruct the wand with a new core– a core containing the hair and blood of all his children, not just Jöry's scale. The newly re-constructed wand gleamed a warm honey-amber in his hand, the fair blossoms etched along its handle now glimmering gold under his palm.

Perfect.

It was mid-afternoon in Scotland by the time he returned to Fraserburgh and he found Hermione sitting on the wharf, looking wistfully out at the ocean. The wharf was relatively empty, the fishing boats out at sea for the day while most of the children in the area had lessons.

"Reminiscing?" He asked as he sat down at her side. She turned away from the ocean slightly to smile at him, small but genuine.

"This is the first place I ever saw you," she said softly, looking up at him with that admiration of one too innocent to realise that one day they too may be admired*. "You saved my life."

He remembered that day– she'd tried to save her cousin from a selkie, and while she'd stopped the selkie from making a meal out of Angus, they'd both still almost drowned. He'd answered her panicked prayer then, saving her and her cousin from a watery death.

"You were so brave," he told her fondly. "You barely needed my help at all then. And you wouldn't need my help at all now... which is a good thing, considering that soon you won't be able to get it at all."

Hermione jerked in place so violently she almost fell off the edge off the wharf and into the ocean. Managing to regain her balance, she spun around to face him, wide-eyed and horrified, and looking moments away from pouncing on him, grabbing onto his jacket and refusing to let go. Hastily, he reached forwards and preemptively grabbed onto her hands to prevent her from tackling him. "That wasn't a goodbye, Hermione! I'm not about to disappear on you!" He said quickly.

"You gigantic jerk, you gave me a heart-attack!" She gasped, collapsing backward, her hands going to her chest. He winced.

"Sorry, I could have worded that better. I just... there is something I need to tell you. Something I
"I can't visit you at Hogwarts," he said, deciding to get straight to the point. He'd already left it until the last minute.

"What?" Hermione asked, not understanding and clearly starting to get distressed. "Why not? You did before!"

"Believe me, I want to, but sometime between a thousand years ago and now somebody decided they didn't want my kind hanging around a school full of innocent, impressionable magical youths and warded the place against us," Gabriel told her, technically not speaking a single lie, even as he danced around the truth.

It still irked him, not knowing why Hogwarts was warded against angels, not pagan gods. Actually, it was warded against pagan gods too, he could just easily get around those wards. The angel wards made sense, in a way, if the witches and wizards were afraid of being smote by angels, or of their children being smote by angels, for being witches, but where would they have even gotten the necessary knowledge? And how!? And when!? For fuck's sake, he really did actually want to smite whichever asshole had had that bright idea– they should be grateful they knew wards to hide behind!

"I'll just go to Beauxbatons with Fleur, then," Hermione decided with a decisive nod, pulling him from his increasingly wrathful thoughts. "You'll be able to visit me there. Or if you can't, I'll just homeschool myself. I've come this far doing it, and I think I've done a spectacular job of it, if I may say so myself!"

"Oh sugar," Gabriel said fondly, reaching out to wrap an arm around her, tugging her back over so she was curled into his side and they were both seated looking back out over the ocean. "You've been looking forward to attending Hogwarts since you were seven years old and first read 'Hogwarts: A History'. And you're telling me that you can't figure out a way to get past the boundaries of the Hogwarts wards? I bet it won't even take you a year to figure out a way."

"I bet it won't take half a year," Hermione immediately countered, before realising what she'd said and huffing. He grinned.

"It's a bet, kitten! So, what do I get if I win?"

"A kick up the arse for being such a tricky bastard." She hissed, like a kitten whose tail had been pulled, and he mock-gasped, pressed a hand to his heart.

"Oh, my poor, virginal ears!"

Hermione pulled a face at that which made him laugh, which at least made her laugh too. Leaning back into each other, Hermione snuggling back into his side, and he smiled warmly down at her as he felt her soul nestle in against his grace, where it felt like it belonged. Where she belonged.

"Tell you what," he decided, "if you don't learn how to sneak out of Hogwarts until after the mid-year break, then you have to try out for your House Quidditch team next year, and actually do your best."

Hermione looked aghast. "But I hate team sports!"
"I know," he said, smirking. "But if you learn how to sneak out of Hogwarts before the mid-year break, then I'll start teaching you how to fly– no broom required."

Hermione didn't even hesitate a second. "Deal!" She said, and his smirk softened to a smile as he pictured Hermione flying through the skies beside him, like he'd once flown with his siblings. An impossible dream, considering they'd been celestial wavelengths of energy at the time, but flying in the sky with her, in his vessel? It would be close enough.

"I'm going to miss you," Hermione said quietly. "I didn't realise going to Hogwarts was going to mean leaving you. I don't know if I'm looking forward to it so much now."

"Going to Hogwarts will give you an oppurtunity to spread your wings," Gabriel told her gently, "it will give you time to find out who you are, outside of my Priestess. I believe it will be good for you. But believe me, I still expect you to be causing chaos, as any good Priestess of mine should!"

"I will, I swear," Hermione vowed, solemnly lifting up her hand with her littlest finger extended– because the sacredness of the pinky promise could not be broken.

"And," Gabriel added, "I have this for you– I've fixed it." He slid her wand from his pocket, offering the handle to her. The moment Hermione's fingers curled around the handle, golden flames burst from the tip and Hermione gasped, her head tipping back, eyes shining a brilliant gold until the flames disappeared and she blinked them back to her usual chocolate brown flecked through with gold, which she immediately turned in his direction.

"What did you do to it?" She asked, breathless. "It's perfect!"

"Added a bit from everyone, so Jöry doesn't get all the credit," Gabriel said, with a shrug, which made her laugh.

"What does that even mean?" She giggled.

"It means you're one of us," he told her, so overwhelmingly fond of this little mortal girl. "And that it doesn't matter that you're going or for how long you're gone, you'll always be one of us. You'll always be mine."

Hermione met his gaze, steady and warm.

"I will," she vowed. "Forever."

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* "There is an innocence in admiration: it occurs in one who has not yet realized that they might one day be admired."
— Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter End Notes

Gabriel not being able to access Hogwarts isn't just for the sake of Hermione's character growth, it's actually a relevant plot point for later on. And, yes, oh my god guys, this was actually the last chapter of pre-Hogwarts, but there's also going to be an epilogue, so don't miss it!
Chapter 49

EPILOGUE:

Sam was waiting in Pastor Jim's empty church, sitting on one of the pews, swinging his legs idly. He had a Bible he'd found open on his lap, but the words were really big and hard to read. Dad was talking with Pastor Jim and Uncle Bobby in Pastor Jim's office, having a private adult talk, probably about monsters, and Dean was out in the churchyard somewhere, playing with an old football. He said the church was too boring, but Sam liked it. He liked the way the sun filtered in through the stained-glass windows, how the scent of the wood polish Pastor Jim used mixed with the smell of old books, and how safe and protected he felt within the haven of worship.

"Oh, the sheer irony of this– you're lucky I promised her I'd check up on you," an unfamiliar voice sighed, and Sam looked up, startled, as a man sat down next to him. The man had light brown-blond hair and eyes such light honey-brown that they almost looked golden. He was also holding a bright green lollypop for some reason, and he looked sort of familiar, but Sam wasn't sure where he'd seen him before. He also wasn't sure when or how the man had come into the church without Sam noticing the doors opening.

"Want one, kiddo?" the man offered, waving his lollypop around, and Sam shyly shook his head no. "Hm, smart. Taking candy from strangers, probably not a good idea," the man muttered, before glancing down at the open Bible on Sam's lap and pulling a face. "Urgh, don't read that one– here, my Priestess has a better one, you can have a copy," he said, snapping his fingers.

Sam gasped, his eyes widening in shock as a Bible appeared out of nowhere and fell onto his lap, on top of the one he'd been trying to read before. Alarmed, he jerked his head back up, but the golden-eyed 'man' was gone, as if he'd never been there at all. If it wasn't for the Bible on his lap, Sam would have thought he'd imagined the whole, strange encounter.

Glancing anxiously around, Sam took a deep breath and, with shaking fingers, he opened the Bible the supernatural 'man' had given him. The first thing he saw were a lot of scribbles. It took him a couple minutes of confusion to realise that they weren't actually scribbles at all, instead the Bible had been corrected, line by line, but while the corrections started in English, the further he got in, the more they started to devolve into funny looking squiggles that seemed to vibrate at the back of his eyeballs and make his head ache at the temples. It was only when his nose started to drip blood that Sam stopped squinting at the squiggles.

The door to Pastor Jim's office suddenly burst open and Sam quickly shut the Bible, hiding the strange writing as Dad stormed out, straight down the aisle between the pews and towards the church's exit. "We're leaving, Sam!" he shouted over his shoulder, and Sam flinched as his loud voice broke the calm of the church, shattering the quiet of the sanctuary and ruining the peace Sam had found there in a way that even the golden-eyed 'man' hadn't.

Behind Dad's back, Pastor Jim and Uncle Bobby traded grim looks, and when the church doors swung shut behind Dad, Pastor Jim walked over to where Sam was sitting and knelt down beside him, a warm, kindly smile on his face. "What have you got there, son?" he asked, and Sam hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should tell them about the supernatural visitor. He knew he should, he did, but... but he didn't want to. He remembered what his Dad had said, about nothing good ever coming from the supernatural, but he also remembered the girl who had saved him from the witch. He didn't want Pastor Jim and Uncle Bobby to hunt down the golden-eyed 'man'. He didn't want them to do anything bad to him.
So instead, Sam held up the Bible that the golden-eyed 'man' had made appear. "Is it okay if I borrow this?" he asked, widening his eyes the way Dean had taught him.

"Of course you can!" Pastor Jim said, looking pleased with his interest. "You can even keep it if you want, Sam– I've got more than enough of them around here, after all!"

"Don't know how you can believe in any kind of god when you know what kind of shi– cra– stuff exists out there," Uncle Bobby muttered, but Pastor Jim just smiled.

"I believe because I have faith," he said simply.

Before the two men could continue their good-natured bickering, the church doors were shoved open again and Dad shouted, "Sam! Now!"

Pastor Jim sighed, looking tired, as Uncle Bobby glared in Dad's direction. "You better run, Sam," he said, wearily, and Sam nodded sadly, sliding to his feet and looking around the church one last time. He paused suddenly, noticing something– where he'd been sitting, just moments before, was a bright green lollypop.

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The End Of Part One

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