Blue Gardenias and Poppy Seeds

by PurpleHydrangeas

Summary

Remus grew red in the face. His voice rose as he spoke, “This is illegal. They cannot be made to do this. It goes against Wizarding culture, and centuries of tradition. It goes against common fucking sense. What more will they ask of them? What more, Sirius?”

Harry looked to Hermione as she took the letter. The communication that passed them was swift and silent. They had been through one war, and if fate brought them another, so mote it be. His pulse was steady, and Harry found that the worry and confusion was fading away, giving rise to a need to take action in the face of this unnamed foe.

The confident look on her face faded as she scanned the official letter quickly. Harry didn’t like the fear that bloomed in her eyes.

She looked up, and Harry wasn’t sure he had heard her properly when she said, “I have to get married.”
Warning Bells

Chapter Notes

Sources will be listed at the end of each chapter as they come up. I've never written MLC, and I haven't written Harry/Hermione in about a decade.

This is *very* AU in some ways, but is richly rooted in the Potterverse, if not the cannon storyline. Sirius lived, took guardianship of Harry, got his affairs in order, and put the kid into some therapy with a a competent, well-educated, psychologist-healer to actually deal with things.

Changes continue from there.

Posting will be pretty fast at first. Feedback is much appreciated. I'm sympathetic to Ginny and Ron, so you won't find me bashing them here.

Hermione shuffled her papers as she walked through the library, never needing to look up to maintain her efficient glide. After the Fall of Voldemort, Hermione had made the choice to return to Hogwarts. She wasn’t Head Girl. That dream had gone by the wayside in the fight to defeat Voldemort. She was happy to support the current prefects, the current Head Girl and Boy, who were seventh years by right rather than by circumstance.

Still, Hermione found that the younger students did come to her for help, support, and attention. She did her best to redirect them to the current prefects, but it likely did not help her case when she found herself once again scanning the library, making sure that the ever-changing status quo was maintained as she went about her day.

Some Ravenclaw first years were bunched up together at a wide oak table. Hermione stopped, and considered the fact that they had been there since her stop to pick up some scrolls before breakfast. One looked up and waved at her, as she passed by the tiny little eleven year olds.

Yet another child whispered, “Miss Granger!”

Hermione found herself smiling widely at the little shock of a boy before her as she approached, for his robe was askew and his wide eyes were earnest. His name, which Hermione recalled from her stolen list of first years, was Jacoby Phillips-Merit. “Hello, Jacoby. You’re all studying, I see.”

“Yes, Miss Granger!” Jacoby replied, “But we were wondering. Would you help us with our charms homework? We’ve decided that asking for help is the ex-exemplification-” Here Jacoby stumbled over the word, and Hermione nodded imperceptibly when he got it out on the second try, “-of Ravenclaw’s traits.”

Hermione smiled. In her early years, no Ravenclaw would ever ask a rash Gryffindor for help. How times, Hermione thought, were slowly changing, now that Voldemort was a thing of the past.

She shook off the thought of all the lives that had been lost in that struggle. Tonks was gone. Remus was heartbroken, and even Sirius was somber in the face of his loss. Bill and Fleur were gone. Their baby, unborn, had never even had a chance at life. Dobby, oh Merlin, Dobby.
Still, Hermione forced a smile. “Would you like my advice?”

“Yes!” Amaryllis Carew, a distant relative of the former Death Eater, who was rotting in Azkaban, was so excited that her voice rose. Hermione felt along her sleeve for her wand, avoiding the scars.

Hermione pulled out her wand. She thought for a second, back to that long ago time in Charms, when the wonder of magic, of this whole world, had filled her soul.

Then, she looked quickly at the books piled around the tiny children, and changed her mind. “I’ll tell you a secret, but it must be guarded carefully.”

“Upon my honor as a Carew, Miss Granger.” The tiny pureblooded girl lisped, “We won’t tell a single soul, not even if it means a lower mark, even on OWLS!”

Little, earnest, faces gazed up at her. Hermione knew how easily her peers joy of magic had been taken. She was determined to give that back, somehow, even if she could never feel it again herself. She made a big flicking motion, and a swoop, and cast a tiny muffliato, one that would barely span three feet around. It encircled the table, and that was Hermione’s point.

Their eyes widened as they scooted closer to avoid the buzz in their ears, and Hermione spoke. They hung on to her words, “The best way to learn charms is to study in small chunks of time, and then go and take a break, to allow the information to sink in, often with a bit of physical exertion.” Hermione bit her lip convincingly as she fibbed, “I read it in *Hogwarts: A History*. The 1477 edition, you know. Very rare. But it’s true.”

“Oh!” The first year with long braids and a big smile said, “We can....” Agathe Vilitz paused, “What should we do?”

Not one of the first years spoke. Finally Hermione suggested, “When Harry, Ron, and I were first years, we often raced to the lake, but of course you might want--”

At that, they jerked into action.

Hermione released the spell with a tiny jerk of her pinky. They all felt the shift in the magic, but Hermione did not think the first years really noticed. Like all first years regardless of house, they moved quickly, elbows flying, knees banging, tugging robes, and falling chairs. As Ravenclaws, though, their eyes were on replacing their books.

“I’ll get those.” Hermione offered, already gathering the books into a floating stack hovering over the table. Without thought, they sorted themselves, so as to be put away when she walked by those shelves. The eleven-year olds had taken out piles of books, and those books were what had caught Hermione’s eye in the first case.

The Ravenclaws dashed as much as their innate respect of a temple of learning would allow. Hermione smiled.

Mischief Managed.

She leaned across the table to reach a quill, likely borrowed from Madam Pince, and in doing so, knocked her levitating stack over.

Hermione braced herself for the sound even as she thought, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The book did not float up. Hermione glanced over, surprised, and found that it had been subverted.
It was trapped against a cloaked wizard, pressed against a cozy jumper that peeked out from where his robes parted.

“Thank you.” Hermione said, as Harry extended the book.

“I never thought I’d see the day that you encouraged firsties to skive off.” Harry mentioned, ignoring any semblance of order that compelled him to whisper.

“They’re children.” Hermione modeled good library etiquette, walking past Harry to begin to put away her books, “And there’s time enough for learning. They’d been there since breakfast.”

“The lioness guards her cubs.” Harry quoted softly. Hermione knew he was teasing her with information he’d gleaned from what he and Sirius jokingly called Marauder lessons.

Hermione knew better. Those meetings were the tutelage Harry should have had all his life, training that would enable him to carry on his family’s legacy, and guard the considerable Potter interests for future generations.

“I’m not Head Girl.” Hermione reminded him, stocking back yet another Bagshot title. “And I’m not their carer.”

Quick as lightening, Harry had scooted in front of her, and walked backwards in front of her, taking up the long aisle with his quirky smile, “And yet, you’ve found a whole gaggle of small creatures to cuddle to your bosom.”

“Stop talking about my bosom.” Hermione hissed, as they passed a study table full of Hufflepuffs. Seventh years, Hermione noted.

Great. Just great. She glared, “Would you like Hufflepuff to be abuzz?”

“They’re buzzed anyhow.” Harry muttered, “I actually came to see if you wanted to get out of here.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, shoving another book onto the crowded shelf, now that they had finally reached the charms section. Four and five books went away at a time. Those earnest little first years really had cleared the elementary texts from the shelves. “Term’s only begun!”

“I happen to know a young wizard who misses his My Own when he doesn’t get enough time with her.” Harry put his arm out, blocking the aisle, “And I’m going to go barking mad if I don’t get away...”

“Harry.” Hermione wanted to lecture him. She’d read quite a bit about protracted breakups. She knew him. She knew Ginny.

Hermione paused, though, and took in the set of his shoulders. Lecturing wasn’t going to help him if he wasn’t in a mind to listen. “We’ll go and see Teddy. But please, please, talk to Remus about this.”

“Why not Sirius?” Harry asked, his brow furrowing, his scar hiding amongst the lines that revealed his confusion.

Hermione put away the last of her books, and looked over at the lanky man archly. “Sirius, while certainly knowledgeable about women, does not understand angsty, protracted, breakups, or their aftermath.”
“He’s had a lot of them.” Harry protested.

Right, Hermione thought. He’d had a lot breakups since being released from Azkaban because his bonded had gone and civilly married someone else.

Sirius was complicated, and that included facets of his sexuality. Yes, he enjoyed his time with women. But in truth, Sirius called himself “Remussexual.” Thankfully, the magical community did not share the same homophobia that was common in muggle communities. Hermione made a mental note to do a little historical and sociological research into the differences. It would help when she went to Pride Week in London, this year, as was her plan. “And we both know that’s had nothing to do with women.”

The truth became clear to Harry, and his grin and humor were electric. “Fantastic point, as always, Miss Granger.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Hermione returned formally, inclining her head to keep from laughing at the absurdity of it all. “I’ll meet you at the gates, as soon as I check in with Madam Pince about this manuscript she’s been helping me to locate. I think I may be onto something quite interesting.”

An hour and a half later, Harry paced in front of the empty grate at Grimmauld Place.

“Sit down, Harry. You’re giving me a headache.” Remus rubbed his greying temple with his fingers.

“Moony, Prongslet is much like his sire.” Sirius teased in a supercilious tone as he lounged in front of the fire, “Consumed by thoughts of a flame-haired woman.”

“Except the woman in this case is the one who won’t take no for an answer.” Remus replied, happy to correct Sirius.

“Hermione says that I should learn from Dad, and develop empathy for Mum. Chasing after someone when they’ve said no doesn’t really feel romantic.” Harry said, sinking into the vacant armchair. “But this whole thing with Ginny...”

“Isn’t she shagging that seventh-year boy? Michael something. I don’t know the family.” Sirius asked, “I got a letter from Molly. Very concerned, you know.”

“Sirius!” Remus declared. “Stop reading my mail.”

“Have a chocolate, Moons.” Sirius deadpanned, tossing a chocolate frog at his partner. “Your point is a good one, though.”

“Right.” Remus replied, chewing on his third frog, ripping the head off with wolfish relish, “The thing is, Harry, that the War changed everyone. I just think that Ginny isn’t ready yet, to face those changes. I...I...know.”

“Hell, I’m sorry, Remus.” Harry blurted, raking his hands through his hair. “Here I am. Blaming the war for the reason that I can’t get rid of...”

“No. I made that mistake once.” Remus did not hide the sharpness in his voice, “You always come to me. Always. You are not alone. None of us are, not really.”

“Losing Fleur and Bill hurt Ginny.” Harry allowed, “Hurt us all. I don’t think...” Harry did not say that there was no moving on, not really, from losses like that. Remus knew better than he did, and
sometimes talking about it was somewhere he did not want to go, or take them with him.

The library door clicked open with a bit of magic, flying open ahead of Hermione’s voice, “Go on and show your Papa, Teddy Bear!”

Tiny feet pattered into the room. Teddy, Harry knew, was barely two. And yet, his left eyebrow was a bright orange, and his right was polka dotted. Hermione’s excited voice continued as she followed the wobbly toddler closely, even when he toddled to Remus, triumphant, though he was only picking up on Hermione’s joy.

“He’s isolating his abilities! That kind of complexity and competency is rarely seen in children under the age of seven!” Hermione schooled her features, and Harry could not look away as she shifted into lecture mode, “According to Professor Spleen’s text, *Your Magically Adorable Metamorphmagus*, he shouldn’t be able to isolate body parts like that until much later, and given that they’re his eyebrows, well, I...”

Sirius coughed, after high fiving Teddy. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”

She paused, Teddy staring at her with eerily green eyes, shifting from his usual color in a slow bleed. He reached up.

Rather than being offended, Remus prompted, “Use your words, Teddy.”

“Myowne.” He demanded, “‘ook. Myowne.”

“Fantastic job, Teddy!” Hermione agreed, “Let’s see if we can’t find *Mr. Puckle Finds a Pig*. Did you know that pigs are actually very good house pets, Ted?” She picked up the baby and whispered conspiratorially, “You should ask your godfather for one. You could keep it in the garden.”

“Moony would love a chew toy!” Sirius agreed, “Good idea, Herms!”

Remus sighed, “I do have some standards, you know.”

“Rather low ones, if you ask me.” Harry deadpanned, smiling at Hermione as she looked fondly upon their bickering.

“Watch it.” Sirius ordered, “I changed your nappies.”

“You spelled them away, and gave the kid spell rash on his bits.” Remus corrected, rising to cross the room to his desk.

“I apologized!” Sirius spluttered, “I bought him a puppy!”

Remus had grabbed his glasses, and spoke as he perched them on his nose, crooked from the brutality of his shifts before Wolfsbane, “He was seven weeks old at the time.”

“Never too early to give a boy a dog, Rem.” Sirius declared, his gaze shifting, “Teddy, don’t pull on Hermione’s jumper.”

Teddy let out an ear splitting yell, and glommed more tightly onto his Hermione, who wrapped her spare arm around him more tightly and kissed his hair.

“Or a pig!” Hermione shifted Teddy upwards on her hip as she scoured the tiny child sized shelves in the corner of the library. “Ah Ha! Here we are! *Mr. Puckle Finds a Pig!*”
Teddy babbled something, and his hair began to change, even as his eyes stayed green. Slowly, his sandy hair shifted, became more sable-like, became bushy, rather than wiry.

Harry could not breathe.

Sirius cackled gleefully.

Harry did not breathe until Remus gently redirected his son, “Ted, let go of Hermione.”

“Mine!” He hooted, frowning at his father.

“It’s really all right.” Hermione said, looking slowly up at the scene before her, “I don’t mind.”

Remus broke into the direction of Harry’s thoughts, confused and rushing through his brain. “You’ve got a letter here. Shall I read it aloud?”

Harry wasn’t thinking about mail. He couldn’t hide from the look Sirius sent out of Hermione’s line of sight. It wasn’t like Sirius aristocratic eyebrows suggested, and it never would be. Hermione had never really had a serious relationship, and it was clear to Harry that she did not want to be in one. She and Ron had danced around each other, kissed a little, but there had never been a deepening of their relationship beyond their abiding friendship. He loved her as he always had, and he didn’t wish it was his child in her arms. He didn’t. That was absurd. He only liked how happy she was around Teddy. “Hm.”

Remus scanned the letter. His face went ashen. He made a sound so anguished that it set Harry to looking at Hermione, who had tucked Ted against her and gripped her wand.

“Moony?” Sirius went rigid as he sat properly, “What’s wrong?”

“He’s just a boy, Sirius.” Remus declared, “He is a boy, and I’m not going to take this sitting down.”

Confusion bloomed within Harry. Remus never got upset like this. That was Sirius’s job, who took getting upset very seriously.

“While I would never want to make a joke about you taking anything while little ears are present, I would like to know what has you so riled up.” Sirius stood, reaching for the paper.

Harry shook his head at Hermione in response to her wordless question.

“Remus?” Hermione asked, from where she had settled into a chair with Teddy. Teddy’s hair went shockingly green, a telltale marker for his interest.

Remus’s hand shook, and the paper slipped from his grasp. Teddy hooted, and tossed his book on the floor as he scrambled off of Hermione’s lap. He leapt on the paper, and gave it to Hermione.

Remus voice rose as he spoke, “This is illegal. They cannot be made to do this. It goes against Wizarding culture, and centuries of tradition. It goes against common fucking sense. What more will they ask of them? What more, Sirius?”

Harry looked to Hermione. The communication that passed them was swift and silent. They had been through one war, and if fate brought them another, so mote it be. His pulse was steady, and Harry found that the worry and confusion was fading away, giving rise to a need to take action in the face of this unnamed foe.
Harry reached for it, fear deep in his bones, but Teddy gave the paper to Hermione. All she had to do was smile, and say, “Let Hermione see it, Teddy, please.”

The smile on her face faded as she scanned the letter quickly. Harry didn’t like the fear that bloomed in her eyes. She looked up, and Harry wasn’t sure he had heard her properly when she said, “I have to get married.”

“I...” Harry hadn’t heard her, clearly, because he was laughing. “You have to what?”

“Married, Harry.” Hermione repeated, gesturing with the letter as Teddy shoved himself against her calves. Hermione’s mind was whirling, but she had the awareness to pick up the baby. His softness was a balm to the centrifuge that was her mind.

“The Wizengamot has enacted emergency laws based on the statue of secrecy. To make a long, complicated, story very, very, short, when we ratified the Statute, there were many an addendum added over time to protect wizarding peoples from dying out. Due to the Wars, the birthrate has dropped. Thereby...” she glanced at the letter.

Hermione could barely force out the words, “A new marriage law will but put into force. It won’t require ratification or debate. It will require that unmarried muggleborn witches and wizards marry, and within seven months, enact a Wizard’s Oath stating they plan to begin a family.”

“Hermione, no.” Harry insisted, “No.”

Hermione wanted to give a whole lecture, as none of these addendums were covered in History of Magic, but she figured that now was not the time to give into the hysteria building in her heart. Babbling on would do no one any good. She was seconds away from screaming and running from the room.

She could only bring herself to nod.

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Harry breathed, “Why send me a letter? I haven’t read anything in Prophet.”

“Harry.” Hermione held fast to the facts, “You are a Potter. Moreover, you are Harry James Potter. The Boy Who Lived, and the Man who Conquered. This letter asks for your support in the matter.” Having Harry’s support would be a boon in what was sure to shake the foundations of Wizarding Society.

“I won’t be a part of doing this.” Harry blurted, “I can’t let this happen to you. You fought and bled and sacrificed to save this society, and here they are, so quick to marry you off. You’re the Witch Who Won.”

“Harry.” Sirius warned, and Harry’s shoulders deflated.

His question was earnest, “But why not make us all marry?”

“It’s still permissible to target muggleborns and other minorities.” Remus told him, “It’s even accepted. You defeated Voldemort, not all prejudice. It’s systemic.”

“That said, you’re targeted, too. You’re going to be front and center, as an example of the
Ministry’s competency.” Sirius’s urbane upbringing only served to highlight his fury, “For the Man Who Conquered, this letter suggests you will be ah, let me read this filth verbatim. ‘Naturally, a bride from a Noble and Most Ancient House will help you to move forward in this new era with an eye towards keeping our most sacred traditions alive.’ Utter gobshite. The Ministry wants you trussed up and chained to a pureblood bride with no hope of escape.”

“No...” Harry’s eyes went wide.

“No.” Hermione shook her head. The Weasley family was pureblooded, but they were still considered blood traitors by many, and not politic enough to keep Pureblood traditions alive. Though Ginny insisted that she and Harry were together, and that she was the next Lady Potter, poor Ginny had never truly stood a chance of being picked for Harry by the Ministry. “Astoria Greengrass.”

“Astoria?” Harry shook his head, “Why would anyone think I’d want to marry a sixth-year Slytherin I don’t even know beyond name?”

Hermione felt sick to her stomach.

“It’s not about what you want!” Sirius lectured, “They’re trying to hide that Greengrass was grey! They’re trying to settle a feud no war can end with marriage, and by trying to erase Lily. Think, Harry! Think.”

“No one could erase my mother.” Harry retorted, “She saved their world.”

“Your children, if also Astoria’s children, would be 3/4 Pureblood.” Hermione reminded him, “They would be heirs to both the new worldview, and reared correctly according to tradition. You can be sure than any scion of the family Greengrass would never allow anything less. Your son would ascend the title with every possible political failsafe, no matter how the wind blows, and you would be forced to toe the party line for your wife’s sake.”

As if to soften this blow, Remus gently prodded him,”You are Lord Potter.”

“I am!” Harry agreed, “I can work to overturn this law, prevent it. Hermione, we can, we can if we try. I can’t let you be paired off with Goyle, and Ron with some child bride muggleborn or something.”

“I want to, Harry.” Hermione licked her lips, “I want to spare you this, spare all of us this, but even I can’t do much with what little time I’m given. I am not Nimue, Harry.”

She was a mortal woman, facing a very scary future. She wasn’t going to go down without a fight. If there was only some way to protect herself and save Harry. Upon her magic, she would not be bartered off to go back to the way things had been in the Wizarding World. It needed to change, and she would make it change, if it was the last thing she did. A marriage to a traditionalist of the Sacred Twenty-Eight would do little to help her meet her goals.

“You’re Hermione Jane Granger. You can do anything, you’re unstoppable. We have to try. Others won’t have the choice I’ve got, Hermione. You...” Harry sank to the ottoman, “You are...”

“Don’t you worry about me, Harry.” Hermione knew that right now, she could not consider her own fate, “We’re going to fix this.”

“How?” Harry asked. The law was going to be announced in mere days. The first thing to do Hermione realized, would be to get word to Muggleborns. Maybe she could break into the archives and find a copy of that hateful bitch’s registry. So many muggleborns had gone back into muggle
society, not that Hermione blamed them.

She could not save others until she had a plan for herself. Mums put on airline masks before helping their children in aircraft. Hermione knew that in this case, she was going to be putting on Harry’s mask as she gasped desperately for air. She would never feel right about doing anything else. Still, she knew that once she’d figured out what to do for them, there would be no stopping her in launching a resistance.

Hermione thought aloud, the though coming together as she spoke, “They can’t make you marry someone if you’re already married. Do you know a woman you could stand to be married to while we overturn this, and whom you think would agree?”

Harry blinked. That was a no, then.

Hermione wondered if perhaps Luna could see the merits of such a plan. Luna would understand, quite clearly, the importance of her role. She was their friend, and she believed in the power of change. She was working more with the Quibbler, sure, but she would have to leave her search in Europe to actually be front and center. Hermione was sure that she would do just that, once she understood the stakes.

Just as Hermione was about to mention Luna, Sirius cleared his throat.

Hermione jumped when Sirius winked at her.

Hermione was baffled, “What?”

“If he doesn’t…” Sirius hinted, “I do.”

“Sirius.” Remus was eating a Chocolate Frog with some ferocity, “This is not a time to hatch a scheme.”

“Oh, I think it is, Moony Mine.” Sirius countered, “I do believe I know just the lady. Don’t you, Hermione?”

With a twist of her stomach, Hermione knew that Sirius was talking about her. How could she have been so stupid? Of course she would be ideal. A simple civil marriage would allow them protected communication and unfettered access to each other in a society that was, after Hogwarts, rather segregated by gender. She could work on overturning the law with every bit of support of the Potter estate behind her, if she too, held the name.

He was right. They needed to do this. Marriage to each other was the only way. Hermione knew it in her soul. The future of society hinged on keeping Harry out the Ministry’s clutches. For herself, Hermione knew that a marriage to Harry would be far better for her own soul than whomever the lottery would draw for her, being that it was rigged, “Harry…”

“You’re not pushing Hermione into this.” Harry countered, shoving to his feet, “You can’t. She deserves more than this, and I won’t hurt…” Harry swallowed, “I think you should go to Australia. We’ve got a house there. You should go, Hermione.”

“Harry.” Hermione all but shouted. His eyes swung to hers, “We can get it annulled. I would rather it be you than Malfoy.”

“You’d do that for me?” Harry balked. The ministry in Australia was far more progressive. He was offering to get her out of the firing line, but she would not leave him to face this alone. They had to do something.
“I’d do it for both you and myself.” Hermione corrected, “I’m not an altruistic Mary Sue.”

“Mary Who?” Harry was clearly confused.

Evidently, his literary education had not included a discussion of tropes. Hermione replied, “You, if you want.”

Harry smiled at her joke, and it was enough to stop Hermione’s heart. Harry ran his shaking hands through his hair. “Hermione...”

He sank to his knees before where she was sitting on the chair, and placed his hands over hers. Hermione could barely breathe. The kneeling was clearly, something he had been taught to do by Sirius. It was not the muggle-style, down on one knee, sappy proposal. It was a solemn gesture. It was an ancient custom among Wizarding people, older than wands. He knelt, in part, to show that his magic, his power, would be in service to her will. It had a lot of historical and sociological importance, but all Hermione saw was that their faces were level and his gaze was resolute.

This was Harry. Her best friend, Harry. All the trappings of power and the machinations of a war torn society fell away in that realization. She knew this wasn’t the proposal she’d always dreamed of coming from the heart of a romantic lover, but something told her this moment was more than empty promises. Whatever they faced together, she knew they would have each other’s backs.

“Heaven Jane, will you be my wife? Will you plot against the corruption in our government, install more democracy, and seek justice?” Harry asked, “Will you help me avoid a lifetime as ministry puppet? I am rash, and I am short-sighted in more ways than one, but you’re the woman with the plan, and...” Harry paused, and he stroked her hand with his thumb, “I know you didn’t plan this, but will you let me give all I have in service of a plan we make together?”

It was all Hermione could do not to laugh, or cry. The fact that Sirius, Remus, and Teddy were watching ceased to matter. Hermione knew that was he was offering her, what he was telling her, was worth more than every bit of flattery that she’d ever dreamed up as a lonely young girl.

“For much of my life my plan has been focused on keeping you alive.” Hermione slid her hands to lace their fingers together, equalizing the exchange, in a way that was not customary, but felt right for her, and for their friendship. “I have never regretted, not for one second, the road we’ve walked together. I’ve only ever wished that you knew deep in your heart how lovable you are, not for the things you do, but for the person you are.”

Hermione met Harry’s eyes, refusing to let him deny the truth she’d just told him, “I plan and we end up doing things anyway, and I never regret it. Not ever. I will be your wife. I will, for every day we find something to challenge in the world around us, and for every day that we sit and eat beans out of the tin. There’s no planning this, Harry, but I would be happy to try. I’ll even get a new quill to write it out.”

Harry laughed, honest and watery, “I’ll come with you to buy it.”

“If you’re sure.” Hermione asked, just once, just to be sure. This wasn’t a extra long trip to Flourish & Blotts, after all.

“I’m sure.” Harry leaned against her body and she felt his breath against her cheek, “Anything you think is a good idea is something I’d put my life behind.”

And so they were engaged.

The intimacy of their promises to one another thrummed in Hermione’s veins, her magic
recognizing the solemnity of this moment, even though her brain could not move past the thought that her initials would not change. That tiny detail resonated. She was still going to be HJG, and she would not have to change her monogram. Not that theirs would be a marriage of monograms and china, like her mother had always hoped.

When they both stood, and looked to Remus and Sirius as if to ask what they ought to do now, Remus pulled out a parchment, and with a sly look to Hermione said, “I’ll be keeping this list, if you don’t mind.”

Hermione looked down at Teddy, who was crawling up on her lap once again, and over at Harry, with his tentative smile and shuffling feet, “I don’t. The only thing I ask, Harry, is that we sit down with Sirius, Remus, and my Mum and Dad.” She smoothed back Teddy’s hair, “I couldn’t find the words myself.”

Harry’s grin was crooked, and Hermione’s heart squeezed. Air left her lungs in a hot rush.

“Cheers, you two.” Sirius broke into the moment between them, “Best proposal I’ve heard. Your poor dad couldn’t get the words out.”

“Our marriage is a political alliance, and the commitment of two friends.” Hermione primly patted Teddy who had pressed his way to her again, “Hardly the stuff of romantic lore.”

“We’ve never even kissed.” Harry blurted, glaring at Sirius like any Godson might. Hermione saw a blush rising over his neck and forced herself to look away.

“You’ll have to, for the engagement to be legal.” Remus remarked, all the while scribbling on the parchment.

Hermione did not miss the look of something she could not name crossing Harry’s face. Sirius saw it too. He seemingly knew what it was, whereas Hermione did not have a clue. She felt, suddenly, as though there was more to Harry than even she had known.

Sirius shook his head, “Moony, have you ever done your duty and sat the poor lad down and explained what legitimizes a marriage between a man and a woman?”

Harry shook his head, “What?”

“Sex.” Hermione informed him, covering Teddy’s little ears, earning herself a protest from the toddler and a guffaw from Sirius, “Very heteronormative sex, if texts are to be believed. I’m given to understand that the sex magic...”

“Excuse me?” Harry broke into her train of thought, which was likely good because she did not intend to reveal how much she had read on the subject in front of two legendary pranksters.

“Good Merlin, Harry. You dated a Prewitt daughter.” Sirius scolded, “She never told you why Mummy and Daddy have so many ginger-haired bundles of joy?”

“They...” Harry fumbled, “Wanted them?”

“Actually, that’s only partially true.” Hermione allowed, “Their magic melds. Like found like. It’s why Molly and Arthur are so good at partner spells. They’re soulmates, to use the least complicated term.” She tried to hide a blush, “So, partner spells between two magical cores ultimately ideally suited leads to potency in spell work, like the clock, for example. And other things that require mutual magical efforts, like conception.” Hermione mused, “I guess it’s as well that they wanted them.”
“For you two, however, you won’t need to do anything other than the ceremonies.” Remus set them at ease, “It is your intention to gain a civil divorce, correct?”

They both nodded. In this they were in perfect accord. Hermione loved Harry. She wanted to be his friend, wanted to be there for him, just as he wanted to be there for her. A civil divorce, rather like submitting any paperwork, would do nothing to damage their friendship.

Get married and proceed with a full civil divorce when the dust settled and the law was overturned. In the meantime, well, there was work to be done.

Remus continued, “The most expedient way to do that is to say that, while your magics are well suited, that you have decided to seek romantic avenues elsewhere, and your magical compatibility did not lend itself to sexual interest.” He smiled, “Rather fraternal, if you take my meaning.”

Sirius grinned, “Or sororal, in your case, Harry.”

Hermione did not take their meaning, not at all. A marriage was simply like Bill and Fleur’s wedding, a basically muggle ceremony one might find at a registry office. She was not opposed to another form or rite, but she knew that their magic would have little to do with the arrangement. Their magic was well-suited, after all. No one who had seen them fight would ever buy such a story. Hermione figured they would cite irreconcilable differences. Hermione knew she would ask questions later, once she had taken the time to think them out.

“Right.” Harry cleared his throat. “I’ve got to go...feed Hedwig. She, ah, needs vitamins.” He looked encouragingly at Hermione, “Hermione, didn’t you say you had brewed a tonic for her?”

Hermione had done no such thing as Hedwig was in the peak of health, but she knew an escape when she saw one, “It’s got ginger in it, you know. Very soothing to the stomach...” She continued to babble as they fled the room, Harry following behind her quickly.

When the pair left them the room, Remus asked his bonded, “Are you going to tell them that they likely won’t choose to end up divorced?”

“Oh, every young couple deserves their dreams for their family.” Sirius said, “I’m leaving it to Rookwood.”

“Sirius, you coward.” Remus snickered.

“And you are a bloody shameless liar.” Sirius appraised, fondness coloring his tone. "Fraternal, Moons.”

Remus looked well pleased. “Made Harry think, didn’t I?”

“One can only pray.” Sirius murmured, deciding that they had given enough time to being adults, and stood to suss out Harry and Hermione. “Well, Mr. Moony, shall we?”
Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum

Chapter Notes

"Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum; qui uictoriam cupit, milites inbuat diligenter; qui secundos optat euentus, dimicet arte, non casu."

"He, therefore, who desires peace, should prepare for war. He who aspires to victory, should spare no pains to form his soldiers. And he who hopes for success, should fight on principle, not chance." (Vegetius, De Re Militari, III).

Meanwhile, in the corridor, Hermione turned to Harry. “I can’t believe this draconian law will be legal.”

“Me either.” Harry agreed, “I thought we’d fought all that.”

“I’m starting to think this fight will never be over.” Hermione agreed, “I think we’re going to have to work fast. We can’t let this subjugation take root. It has to violate some human rights law applicable to magical beings.”

“I just want to be Harry Potter for one day.” Harry was tired of feeling like a puppet, or someone’s lamb to be led to the slaughter for the greater good, “I want one choice that was made for me as Harry, and not as some political scapegoat.”

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione bit her lip, looking around the fresh and warmly decorated corridor. “I’m sorry. If you’re not...”

“Hermione.” Harry interrupted, quickening his strides, “I don’t want you to spend the entirety of our engagement asking me if I want this. I think maybe you don’t.”

“It was my idea.” She protested, hastening to keep up with him, “And I don’t give my word lightly.”

“Okay.” Harry affirmed, “Okay.” He opened the door to the den, gestured for Hermione to precede him, shut it behind them, and tossed up a muffliato and a few locking spells.

“Why the need for secrecy?” Hermione had only seen him do that combination of spells when they were hiding from the Snachers.

“Privacy.” Harry corrected, “Privacy. I don’t want any pranks from Moony and Padfoot.”

“Why?” Hermione studied Harry. He looked nervous, full of pent up energy.

“Cho told everyone that I was a bad kisser. And I know it was a bad kiss.” Harry admitted, “It took me time to realize that Ginny was kissing my arse for the Boy Who Lived. Can’t have a hero who can’t kiss. It messes with the narrative. So I don’t know--”

“Harry.” Hermione smiled, “We can be bloody awful together, if you like.”
She closed the gap between them, and put her hand on his muscled shoulder. He was solid, and his body heat flowed into her fingers. Hermione felt the thrum of magic between them, and knew, from the tightness in her belly that their magic, compatible in spell work, would be compatible in other ways, too.

It was a fleeting, foolish, thought. Hermione pushed it away, and resolved to appreciate the moment.

Harry hesitated, pausing as Hermione tilted her head, “This once?”
“This once.” Hermione agreed, guiding his hand to her waist and pressing it down.

And then, before she could blink, Harry’s hand tightened slightly, and he pressed his chapped lips to hers, barely missing bumping their noses together. A rush of fire spread through Hermione, like she’d just swallowed a clarity potion. She was totally aware of the way Harry kissed, and the way he inhaled, tentative and wondrous.

His hands ghosted over her waist, and that same fire settled low in her stomach.

It was over too quickly.

He pulled back, and Hermione knew her heart was racing from a barely there, less than a half-minute, brush of lips. “Hermione...”

“Well.” She broke in, strident and nervous.

Her knees were shaking, and her awareness of herself told her that her magic was skittering against her heart chakra.

She did not want to hear what he wanted to say, not now. Her nerves were too unsteady. She’d hoped it would be like kissing her brother, not that she had one, but clearly their friendship only made kissing better, not worse.

That paltry, dry, barely-there, peck had been the most fundamentally meaningful kiss of her life. She shouldn’t feel so much. “We’re engaged, then.”

“Yes.” Harry’s touch turned tentative, and Hermione knew he was pulling away. She had spoiled the moment. That was her way. She had never not done so, not even with Ron. Just because kissing Harry was different didn’t mean that she had lost all of her foibles.

“Hermione...”

Hermione couldn’t meet his gaze. She’d stared evil in the face, but she couldn’t cope with the emotions in his eyes. Hermione fixed her gaze onto the collar of his jumper.

“You’ve gone shy.” Harry murmured, “Was I--Was I really that abysmal?”

“No!” Hermione cried, jerking her eyes to his, “No, you...” She tried again, “It was...was...”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed, dropping his head to her shoulder, “Me too.”

Hermione made a list, even though Remus had one, too. It was the only way to stay sane. She had to think of anything other than that blasted kiss. It was not something she could process right now. She scurried to her room at Grimmauld, figuring that classes were the least of her worries. She was getting married, she was going to be at the helm of a political outcry, and she had work to do.
She left Harry to handle the fact that Sirius and Remus just happened to be loitering outside of the den as they came out of the room. They had a nice cover story about looking for Teddy’s cup, but not even Harry would buy that tale. Their smiles made it clear they thought Harry and Hermione had been having a messy snog, like a pair of spotty kids. Unfortunately, Harry’s refusal to give into their games, and Hermione’s blush told them enough, not that they’d ever believe that there had been one chaste, but mind-blowing, kiss between them.

So Hermione returned to her room, and began to write. The first thing they would have to have, if their plot was to be fully believable, was a proper contract. They were only having a civil marriage, so their contract would be more like a pre-nup than the more traditional, ornate ducenda.

Hermione had once thought, back when she had first heard about these documents from her roommates, that they were old fashioned and not needed. She saw, however, now, that in writing her own, it was a failsafe, one that she and Harry would need. As such, she made the divorce section ironclad, and made provisions to, after some thought, keep the Granger name.

She knew it would appear to be a slap in Harry’s face in this traditionalist society, but she felt it better to leave that for Harry’s chosen bride, the one he loved, the one he wanted above all others to be his domina.

There was not much more she could give him.

Their first meeting, barely two hours after Harry had pressed his lips to hers, was with Mr. Rookwood, the Potter family solicitor. He met them in the drawing room of Grimmuald Place, a somber, but kind man. Hermione thought highly of him, since his return from America at the end of the war.

He placed his case down beside him. “I understand you are to be married, Miss Granger, Lord Potter.”

“Harry, please.” Harry asked, yet again, “Hermione deserves far better, but now that she’s said yes, we have no reason to wait.”

“I see.” Rookwood looked at Hermione, “I offer you both my best wishes. You remind me a great deal of Euphemia, Miss Granger, and the House of Potter is indeed fortunate to have you amongst them.”

“Thank you.” Hermione replied, “I couldn’t think of anyone I would rather face this journey with than Harry.”

That was true. There was no one else she would trust with how bad this was going to get. It sounded rather pretty, the type of thing a blushing bride might say, rather than the truth of a warrior preparing for battle.

Rookwood smiled, “How fitting that you should face life together as spouses, after facing down death as partners.”

“We agree.” Harry interjected, leaning back onto the love seat, where he was sitting next to Hermione, look every inch the landed nobleman that he actually happened to be.

“The halls of power will tremble in the face of their union.” Remus added, and an understanding was made plain to Rookwood. He nodded once, and glanced at Hermione with a smile that
revealed much about how much he perceived.

On that same note, he began, “Now, the ducenda.”

“No contract.” Harry decreed, in a way that told Hermione he would not be brought around without a lot of effort.

“There must be a ducenda, Harry.” Remus tried, “I know this is hard. But there must be one filed at the Ministry.”

“I’ve seen them.” Harry pointed out, “They’re awful, and I won’t have something like that binding Hermione.”

Hermione knew what he meant in his vehement refusal. If they had a contract like those of most couples of Harry’s station, she’d refuse it, too. Most traditional ducendae heaped duties upon the bride, even providing her with funding to keep her mouth shut and turn a blind eye. For example, a standard ducenda included spousal support, financial incentives for an heir and a spare, and marital expectations. They were magically powerful, and nothing to fool around with, not even when you could read and vet them. Many brides in decades past had never seen the ducendae they were compelled by tradition and culture to sign.

“But...” Rookwood asserted. He evidently decided that arguing with Harry was not the best way to go about making his point. Hermione admired how quickly he realized that fact.

“You do understand, Your Grace, that the Confarreatio is the only possible ceremony that will provide you with the level of security you have stated as your goal.”

Hermione faltered. No wonder Remus had told them to say their magic didn’t suit. He’d known they would have to meld their magical cores to keep the two of them safe. It was too easy to toss aside a civil marriage. “The Confarreatio intermingles the magic of the participants, correct, via sharing their magical cores?”

There were several types of marriage legal under the law. In her hope to preside over cases as an advocate, Hermione had read a little about each type. In Muggle books, Hermione had studied for comparison, the most common types of wizarding marriages were talked about as the marriages of ancient Rome. It was quite interesting, really.

Of the various types, the Confarreatio was the most magical form, rather than simply a civil wedding, as Remus had shared with Tonks. Those with the Confarreatio could, of course, dissolve their union in the eyes of the law and civilly marry another, but they could not sever their bond. Remus and Sirius were one such example.

“Yes, Miss Granger.” Rookwood replied, “But I am afraid that even in the case of such a fundamental bonding, a ducenda is critical. It is a foundational ceremony in a series that enable you to meld. Furthermore, the financial...”

“If you’re concerned about the money, the holdings, the stocks, and the like, Mr. Rookwood, you shouldn’t waste your time.” Harry shot the other man down, “All those directives that came from me were actually Hermione’s own. She’s the brains of the outfit, or don’t you read the papers?”

“This marriage cannot look like a rushed whirlwind or a flight of fancy.” Remus interjected, “You know in your hearts what this is, but in the face of society, you will need to do this by the book. I don’t care what it says, but there will be a ducenda, and you will sign it, and there will be a ceremony and witnesses as you do.”
If they bound their magic to one another, at least they could both go on with life, go on fighting their battles, knowing their magic was safe against violation. “He has a point.” Hermione said, “And I did…”

Harry’s focus was on Hermione, “You did?”

“Take the liberties of drawing one up.” Hermione pulled out the parchment, “All that it needs is a review, and some signatures.”

It was not at all a proper ducenda, but they could hash it out. Hermione just had to do something to make this as stress-free as possible for everyone. Harry was helping her to forever be independent, by keeping her magic out of the hands of a former death eater, and insuring they could never take her wand. Settling a squabble was a small price to pay.

“And a ceremony.” Sirius insisted. “A proper one. Not one of those modern ones in a ministry office.”

Harry looked to his Godfather. “Only if we know exactly what the melding will be, and only if Hermione consents, as well.” He took the scroll, “Otherwise, I don’t care where you host it.”

Harry began to read it, “Hermione, thank you.”

Hermione didn’t know what he meant by that, really. Her heart should not have fluttered. Maybe he was just compliment her bookish ways. That was nothing new. “For being so smart and forward thinking?”

“Yes, but mostly just for being you.” Harry said, reading the contract, “You’re not just a bookworm, Ms. Granger.”

“I see you noticed that I’m keeping my name. I know the UK has no precedence for morganatic marriages, but I’ve made everything tied into the civil divorce, so I did the best I could.” Hermione found herself back on even footing, “I also put in provisions for the basics, like magical autonomy, separate incomes, etc. etc.”

Hermione had done a good job, she thought. She’d covered everything. Their magic would remain autonomous, even when it became one, meaning that he couldn’t subvert her will and neither could she do the same to him. Their money stayed separate. She’d written it for a clean and neat separation, at least on the surface.

Harry looked up, autofill quill in hand. “Hermione, there’s no bride gift in this.”

“I don’t want a bride gift.” Hermione’s voice was soft.

Wizarding culture put a high value on a bride gift. It was a slap in the face for most witches to not be offered something personally meaningful, and of course, commensurate to about three month’s salary. It was unthinkable to many a wizard’s mind that they would not profess their love for their brides in this way.

Lavender dreamed that she might get a new wardrobe upon her marriage. Typically, a couple bought a home, or was given one, and it was furnished with the bridal gift. It was given from the groom to the bride, or more traditionally, their families.

“You’re going to Uni, Hermione, and you want your advocacy practice.” Harry mentioned, “A bride gift would fund those things, you know.”
“Harry, no.” Hermione shook her head. She looked to the others for input, but they stayed mum. Now would be a time to help her make him see sense, but they were all vacantly looking at her or at their papers, in the case of Rookwood. “That money is for the estate.”

“Fine, look, consider this.” Harry explained, his eyes earnest, “Take the bride gift, and you can be pro bono legal representation for me and whoever else I think needs your help until you feel it’s equitable.”

The wind was knocked from her sails. That was, rather sensible, to say the least. It would be easy enough to do once she started her practice. Hermione scowled, “When’d you get so good at negotiating?”

“I’ve had a good tutor, and one that should have been in Slytherin.” He gestured with his head at Remus and Sirius respectively.

“Alright.” Hermione capitulated, “But please, be reasonable.”

She would not go so far as to name a sum. If she lowballed it, she’d be insulting Rookwood’s management of the accounts, well his management of the manager, and a too high number would come across as grasping. Hermione had no reason to grasp at things that she’d not earned.

“Fine.” Harry agreed, quill in hand over the parchment in his lap, “Just a few other changes.”

Hermione felt her hackles rise, “What’s wrong with my draft?”

“A draft is meant to be edited, Hermione.” Harry teased her with words she used a thousand times when they were doing homework, “You can’t just pass in the first draft as a final copy. There might be ink blots.”

“I do not leave blots. Ever.” Hermione insisted. Her parchment was lovely, and ready to be sent out to be turned into a contract that looked like something out of the Middle Ages, now that they were having a ducenda and not just a standard civil form.

Harry drew a big line through a portion of her text, his quill scratching as he obliterated a point, “You’re not giving back your rings.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked. It was sensible. The Potter rings deserved to stay within the family.

Harry shook his head, like Ron did when he saw a spider. “That’s creepy, Hermione.”

“Fine, I’ll hawk them.” She frowned. How stupid could she be? She wasn’t really marrying him, and she wouldn’t wear the Potter rings. She would be safeguarding his magic, not his line. The rings, she was sure, would go to the domina of his heart. She would likely never see them, even if seeing a photograph of James looking at that very ring on his wife’s hand had been the thing to make her see that she, too, wanted a husband one day. “See if I don’t.”

“Fine, hawkable wedding rings.” Harry scribbled something on the parchment, “I’m not particularly happy with this section.”

He tilted closer with the parchment, and Hermione knew why he had not spoken of it in specificity. It concerned children.

“Why not?” Hermione hissed, “You cannot possibly be worried about that becoming a reality.”

Harry shook his head. He paused, and pointed out, “What if someone reads it and sees that I’ve not
made a single provision for something most people would consider normal? It’d look negligent.”

“Fine.” Hermione agreed, knowing that their contract would be an oft requested document at the Registry office. Hermione was sure there would even be copies made for teenage girls to charm on their walls, like her Albert Einstein poster at home. “Do whatever Rookwood suggests.”

“Rookwood?” Harry raised his voice to include his retainer, “What was in your daughter’s contract for the third section?”

Mr. Rookwood answered carefully, “Why, she and Zebidiah didn’t want money between them. They felt the result was gift enough, dear little lamb that he was, but there was money set aside for renovations. It was quite lovely.”

“I’d imagine so.” Harry blinked again. That didn’t really help them, now did it? “Sirius, if you had a wife, what would have been in her contract?”


“Charming.” Hermione remarked, with a sniff of distaste.

“Hermione,” Harry suggested, “What about a scholarship for muggleborn students at Hogwarts? Or an endowment for mundane children in magical families?”

Hermione actually liked that idea. If she’d ever written one of these things for a real marriage, she would have no doubt suggested some charitable work. It wasn’t as if she needed new clothes.

Remus’s smile was tentative and teasing, “Why don’t you just give her a unicorn?”

Hermione was glad for his support. He knew that a unicorn would still eat out of her hand at the end of their marriage, and he was bolstering her courage.

“I’d think the scholarship would be a nice remembrance of your mum, regardless of the contract. You could call it the Evans Fund, or suchlike.” Hermione added, “And that way you could perpetuate it, no matter what happens.”

If the powers that be wanted to forget Lily Potter, Hermione was determined to make that harder. No one would forget her, not while Hermione lived.

“That’s in there, then.” Harry scribbled, “There’s only one thing, left.”


Harry swallowed, “You forgot one person, Hermione.”

“Who?” Hermione had remembered Remus and Sirius, her parents, herself and Harry. No one else mattered. She glanced around the drawing room.

“How would Crooky feel if he knew he weren’t mentioned in his Mummy’s ducenda?” Harry joked, “Poor forgotten Crooky.”

“I’d never forget Crookums, now would I?” Hermione waggled her fingers at the half-cat kneazle in the corner, who glared at Harry, “We’ll buy him a new basket and maybe he won’t throw up in your boots anymore.”

Harry looked uncertain, “Maybe a few mice, too.”
It was all Hermione could do not to laugh. Harry might own the Foundry, and all of the holdings and properties, but everyone knew who ruled the roost around here.

Crookshanks licked his leg, and waggled his whiskers, as everyone else in the room laughed. Crooky merely ignored them. All this fuss and bother was no doubt infringing on his napping schedule.

Chapter End Notes

I will admit that it's been *cough* a few years since I've picked up a Latin textbook. I spent a few years in fairly intensive study, so I hope I remember something. Anyway, my impression is that a lot of what we muggles know about Roman thought actually contains grains of wizarding truth.

I am quite certain I'm not the first fanfic author to think this, nor one to have a fairly useless undergraduate degree that I'm putting to use via fanfic. Any credit ought to go to the original authors.

Ducenda = Marriage Contract
Domina(ae)= Mistress/Lady/Female Owner (Mea Domina is the phrase where we get my lady. Domina, when used privately in settings of intimacy, can also have relevant connotations. It's not used like Mrs., though. I've seen Mra. used for that, likely because the word for married woman is matrona).
To live outside the law, you must be honest.

Chapter Summary

"To live outside the law, you must be honest." - Bob Dylan

Or, "'Come mothers and fathers, throughout the land, and don't criticize what you don't understand..." 

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mrs. Granger, you must understand that Hermione was the one who suggest the alliance.” Remus tried again, “You must understand our political climate.”

Hermione wanted to beat her head against the kitchen table.

She had been engaged for less than 24 hours, and had come here today because they had a free block after DADA. They weren’t expected back until after dinner. It had been easy enough to keep her plans mum. Most of the people she’d known for years now gave her a wide birth. The only trouble she and Harry had had was evading Ginny long enough to get away.

“What I understand is that, last I knew, my daughter was perfectly happy single, and now she is to marry in days.” Mrs. Granger replied, “You will forgive me if I am stunned, and hurt.”

“Mum.” Hermione pressed, “Would you ask the Queen to leave her people? Did the Queen Mum leave during the Blitz?”

“Oh, God.” Adam Granger breathed, “I’ve raised a fucking Tory!” He slammed down his tea mug, and looked at Harry, rage plain on his face as the hot liquid hit the table.

“Would now be a good time to mention--” Sirius cut off with a unmanly squeak.

Hermione’s fingers itched with magic. A tiny zap wouldn’t harm him. He could stop glaring at her like a wounded bird. Her father did not need to know that the Potter estate was a dukedom. It’s not like Harry ever told people that, though honestly, most people knew.

“I am using an example to assert that Harry is as much a figurehead to the Wizarding people as the Queen, to a great many people.” Hermione snapped, “Do not attempt to assert anything else. Harry has, essentially, more power, and a greater duty to the Wizarding people. That must be protected, as must Harry’s own needs as a person. Or would you have me consign my dearest friend to a marriage of which he has no escape?”

Astoria Greengrass would never be allowed by her family to consent to a divorce, even if the law did only require a civil marriage.

“No one is asking you to be so dramatic.” Helen returned, “It will not help matters.”
“I am a Pureblood, but I have met your Monarch.” Sirius noted, “A very charming lady. Her sister’s great fun. However, I do believe that Hermione has the right of the situation.”

“You’re forgetting something.” Harry observed. He hadn’t spoken much in this meeting, so the fact that he had spoken during a heated moment indicated that he had something valuable to say.

“What would that be, lad?” Adam snapped.

“Dad!” Hermione chided. She looked to her left, and down at her meeting agenda she’d written during class just before landing in the back garden, three wizards in tow. “What could we have possibly forgotten?”

“You, Hermione.” Harry’s voice was soft, but intent, “You. Round and round we’ve gone about this whole thing, and no one has said a word about how horrible a forced coemptio would be for you. I may not be what they want for you, Hermione, but I will never raise my wand or my hand against you, and that’s more than I’d say for Goyle.”

Hermione swallowed. She had avoided talking overmuch about the law. She had made her choice, and the reasons why were her own. She had intentionally not mentioned the realities of marriage to someone of that ilk. She knew her wand would be taken from her as soon as the vows had been finished. It was a fate no witch wished to consider.

Harry looked at her parents, “I don’t care if you hate me. I don’t care about my political clout, or my duty to the people. Right now, in this room, the only goal I have is to be a friend to Hermione. I won’t sit here and--”

“Harry--” Remus started, “I think their fears are justified.”

Harry’s gaze did not waver. Obviously, he didn’t agree.

He gently asked Hermione, “Have you told them the details of the War, Hermione?”

“No, Remus.” Hermione bit her lip, “They won’t hear it.”

An unholy light entered Harry’s eyes. It chilled Hermione. Her mother looked down before looking back up. “Let me make something clear. Hermione is the sole reason all of us are alive. She is the reason we won. Your daughter is the Light.”

“I am not.” Hermione could not take that credit. She was one soldier amongst many, many who had fought harder and lost more. She was not the Light. What foolishness. The Light was a concept, only visible when compared with Evil.

“You are!” Harry protested, “You are emblematic of everything Voldemort tried to destroy. You are my best friend and you called my soul back. You saved me, and you saved our world. I love you, not just because there is no one else I’d ever give my magic and my fate. I want to marry you, and you want to marry me.”

Harry shot her parents a scathing look, “I never had parents to love me, but even I know that love doesn’t seek to belittle the fact that you saved their skins out of spite and hurt feelings.”

“A marriage blanc, you said, Black?” Her father insinuated his doubt with hasty words, and a droll tone.

“Shut up!” Hermione snapped, glaring at her father, and turning to Harry. She just knew his wand
was clenched in his fingers under the table. “Everybody shut up. You don’t need to protect me from my parents, so put away your wand, now. They’re not dementors, just dentists.”

At least Harry had the grace to look sheepish and vanish his wand back to his sleeve.

Hermione fixed her parents with a bold stare, “And you two! You don’t need to act like this man isn’t the boy whom you’ve spent a lot of time with over the years.”

That said, she returned to her agenda, and picked up her quill, “Now. This marriage will proceed, and it will be conducted as Harry and I see fit. What questions do you have about Wizarding customs as it relates to our bonding?”

“Why do you need a contract?” Her father bit out. “Seems a bit patriarchal.”

“The ducenda is for Hermione’s own benefit. She wrote it.” Harry returned, “Next?”

“Would you try to be nice?” Hermione asked, ignoring the way Harry’s eyes flashed.

“I’d like to know what you meant, really, just now.” Helen Granger informed Harry, “You come here talking of friendship and political safety, and yet you make no bones about professing a deep emotional attachment. Why?”

“Hermione, at various times in my life, has been my only friend, my only family.” Harry’s tone was soft, and Hermione knew that he was stripping himself bare for her sake, “She once told me there were more things to life than books and cleverness. She showed me what those other things were, and taught me how to live them. I’ve only tried to honor her in return. Anything else, respectfully, is Hermione’s business.”

Hermione’s heart pounded, and she ached for the little boy who had once been so starved for love and care. Hermione could not give it then, but she could protect him now.

Her father clearly wasn’t able to set aside his dramatic flair, “Would you die for her? That’s what I want for my daughter. That’s the level of commitment she deserves, and if you can’t offer that, then you’ve no right to ask her anything.”

“That is not a fair question. It’s stupid, and patriarchal, and not fair!” Hermione cried, nearly hysterical, her fingertips itching. She still did not like to think about that day. Too many people had not come back, and she could still hear herself screaming Harry’s name, screaming as her soul felt itself being torn apart. Tears threatened. “You have no right to ask that!”

Sirius looked ready to jump the table and spirit her away, and Remus was a calm and steady rock. Hermione followed his breathing pattern.


Hermione knew, somewhere in her heart, that she would have lived mere days beyond Harry. He’d been gone, and the only thing keeping here there was the knowledge that he had to come back, that he could not leave her.

“I have done.” Harry replied, “But that doesn’t matter.”

Her father scoffed and raised his eyebrows.

Harry ignored it, and continued, “You’ve never died, so you wouldn’t know. They’re empty words, until you do it, and you realize that it never mattered. It’s not usually the dying for someone
that proves their importance. It’s a daily choice to live with their best interests in the forefront of your mind that counts. Hermione knows why I came back, and that’s all that matters.”


Harry’s gaze was steady, and full of knowing. Hermione forced herself to ground in this moment. She did not want to go back there.

They were all silent for a long moment. Sirius broke the silence after a time. “I would be happy to guide you in this, Drs. Granger. I know this must be rushed, but circumstances being as they are dictate a fast hold to customs, such as the confarreatio.”

Hermione knew, after long discussions, this was so that someone could not challenge the marriage. Muggle marriages were rarely upheld in Wizarding courts, unless a witch or wizard married a muggle, in which case they were encouraged to file a statement with the Ministry. A coemptio could easily be overturned by various technicalities, or by the machinations of the Ministry. Though this was unheard of in modern times, Hermione would not put it past anyone who sought to thwart them.

By following every possible dictate, those who sussed out the truth of their marriage would have no grounds upon which to challenge it. People could not separate fused magical cores anymore than they could separate the snow and the freshly landed snowflakes.

“When is the wedding?” Mum asked, “Is there enough time for Bunny to have the wedding she deserves?”

“Mum.” Hermione had to resist the urge to snap her quill for the third time, “This is not a wedding. This is, as I have said five times, a bonding. The two things are entirely different.”

Hermione had tried in vain to change her mother’s expectations. White satin and kisses were not found in this religious rite. It was, after all, a spell.

“Oh, don’t worry.” Remus ignored Hermione, “I’m sure we can make Bunny’s wedding just lovely. It’ll be about a week long.”

Hermione power pulsed, and her hair rose slightly. “Remember who holds Teddy’s ear, Remus. One word from me, and nap time can go bye-bye faster than you can say ‘big boy.’”

Harry laughed.

Hermione calmed, and looked down at her list, “Now, we’ll need to go to the Ministry to have the documents prepared before the sponsalia.”

Hermione’s stomach was in her throat.

How could Mum’s attitude have changed so quickly, doing a complete turn about in the last hour? After a discussion of the sponsalia, Mum had begun to sing a new tune. She was so happy and smug.

It was getting absurd.
Hermione thought fast, “Mum, there are some things I need from my room.” She absolutely needed to make her mother see reason, and she could only do that privately, “Would you help me?”

“Gladly.” Her mother rose from the table, grinning widely. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

“We thank you for your time.” Remus confirmed. He seemed to have utterly charmed Mum. “Do Floo Grimmauld or my office at Hogwarts if you want to chat, any time, day or night. I know this is a lot.”

Before her mother could gush some more, Hermione strode from the room with a look of sympathy from Harry. She had to make her mother see reason. She and Harry were not star-crossed lovers, brought together after War, like some bloody Mills and Boon.

In her bedroom, Hermione flopped on her childhood bed and pointed her wand at the ceiling. Before she could fire off a spell to check the time, her mother entered the room, “What was it you wanted to discuss, Hermione?” Her mum sat down on the bed, “You can come to me, you know.”

Hermione felt guilt welling up inside her. She was angry that her parents refused to listen to her. She had tried to tell them everything in Australia, but they had been so angry that they had not wanted to know. Hermione resented that, and the pain welled and festered at every chance. Her mother now asserted that Hermione felt she could not talk to her, but there was some truth to it, as she had tried and been rebuffed.

“I need you to understand.” Hermione stressed, “This bonding doesn’t change our friendship.”

“Oh, Bunny.” Her mother shook her head, “There’s no need to be scared. The pair of you will still be who you are at the end of the day. Marriage in and of itself will not fundamentally change you. Or Harry.”

Hermione could not hold back her truth. That stupid, knee-knocking kiss... “But it already has!”

“Do you mean that Harry would have not defended you so, weeks ago?” Helen patted Hermione’s knee, “Or that he would not be so emotionally honest?”

Hermione sat up, and drew her knees to her chest. “I feel as though there is more, more to us both, than I knew. I hate not knowing things.”

“Hermione, think of this way.” Dr. Granger shifted her weight on the bed, and crossed her ankles, “What has that boy always wanted?”

Hermione didn’t need to think about her reply. He just wanted to be Harry, who ate muggle frozen food and still followed football as avidly as Quidditch. “A family. Safety. Security.”

Mum nodded, “And what do you think he might have subconsciously attached to the label of ‘husband’ in his mind?”

Hermione knew it wasn’t as simple as all that. Harry knew exactly what this was, and wasn’t, going to be, “Those things, sure, but we aren’t really...”

“No buts, Bunny.” Her mother cut her off, “Perhaps, in putting his faith in you, he’s come to see that he will get only so much as he gives. He feels safe with you, Hermione, because your love for him has been the sole constant of his existence. He knows you won’t hurt him.”

“But I’m not really going to be his wife.” Hermione ignored the knot in her stomach, “I’m just Hermione.”
“You’re joining forces to fight a new foe, Hermione.” Mum noted, “He’s scared, even if he can’t say it, and he’s hanging on to the only thing he knows to be true.”

Hermione wondered he knew that she didn’t know. The ground was shifting under feet, and she found herself questioning her most basic assumptions about life.

Mum answered when Hermione did not reply, “His own love for you. I think the fact that you’re Hermione is why Harry is so focused on this being a positive for you.”

Hermione knew that Harry would do anything for anybody. He never sat down in the face of injustice. “He has a saving people thing.”

“He was going to hex Daddy.” Her mother countered, “That’s not a saving people thing. That’s a purely emotional reaction. Maybe he feels an obligation to his people, but you listen to me, there was no obligation in his choices at the table today.”

Hermione sighed, trying once again to rip the scales from her mum’s eyes. “He isn’t in love with me.”

Dr. Granger was silent at that, for a time. Her voice was full of sympathy when she did speak. “Oh. I see.”

“You do not see.” Hermione contested, static electricity zinging off of her.

“Maybe he doesn’t know what being in love is, Hermione.” There was a crackle as her mother smoothed back her hair, “Trust, however, that he does love you as much as you love him.”

“I know.” The fact that they loved each other wasn’t the issue. Hermione’s problem was that she was seeing things, noticing things that she had previously ignored, and her traitorous mind was blathering on about that kiss. It was easy to get mixed up, and Hermione did not like it.

Mum patted Hermione’s shoulder, “It’s not a bad thing to be sexually interested in one’s husband, Bunny.”

Hermione had to, yet again, repeat herself. Why was her mother harping on their love being romantic eros? “I am not sexually interested in Harry.”

“All I mean is that if you find yourself learning new things about yourself, it is okay to talk to Harry about it.” Mum’s face was impassive, “What are friends for, right?”

“Mum.” Hermione sighed.

“I’m not pressuring you to decide anything now.” Mum looked at her, and for the first time in a long time, Hermione felt like her mother could see the emotional turmoil Hermione tried to hide, “You both have all the time in the world. Just don’t close your mind, or judge yourself harshly.”

Hermione let her legs fall over the edge of her bed to sit properly, “Thanks, Mum.”

“In that light, Hermione, you need to be prepared.” Her mum blinked once, “Do wizarding peoples have contraception?”

“Yes, but due to this law, couples likely won’t have unfettered access to it.” After all, the whole point was conception, even though Hermione had found a way to circumvent that violation the law would place on her contemporaries in a dusty old book of potions. She’d been digging during Arithmancy, which offered nothing better to occupy her.
Hermione thought for a second, not sure if she trusted herself to brew such complicated potions for scores of people, especially without raising awareness. “Can you help me get muggle means? I’m not saying we’ll use it, but other couples...”

Hermione could see herself passing out bags full of condoms, somehow. Maybe the House Elves would help her. It would be good to get choices back in the hands of the people. She could pass them around in hidden boxes, somehow. It would be simple enough to keep a steady supply flowing into wizarding hands.

“Let’s take care of you, first.” Helen declared, “You know your options. What do you want?”

Hermione knew that taking steps to prevent pregnancy was only sensible. It didn’t mean that she was going to have sex, or that she planned to do so, but if she found herself leaning that way, at least she would be prepared.

How many times had she told Ginny that very thing? She knew now that Ginny’s hopes had been for naught, but Hermione still felt it best to put her money where her mouth was, especially if she did start a condom campaign.

“I think the pill. Will you get it?” Hermione decided, “I hardly have time to pop into the surgery, and I’m watched by the press.”

“Of course.” Her mother nodded, rattling off a brand, “Shall I owl it?”

Hermione knew an owl might be watched. She still had enemies, supposed peacetime or no peacetime. “I think I’ll Floo home tomorrow, if you can get it.”

“That’s fine.” Mum agreed, and briskly stood, “Now, let’s find you something decent to wear to your prenup party.”

Hermione refrained from telling that it wasn’t a prenup, and the signing wasn’t a party, but a boring process of waiting in a line, followed relatively soon after by a ceremony. Instead, she only stood, and went to her closet. She hadn’t cleaned it out since she was 13, so there had to be something she could transfigure.

Her mother bustled to the door of her closet. For the first time, in a long time, her relationship with her mother felt almost normal. Mum was doing what she could, from her frame of mind, to be there for Hermione. No matter how wrong that was, it meant a lot. “Mum, thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

*coemptio*= Form of marriage that formalized the usus, or the transfer of a father’s authority/household to the husband. Essentially, paying the woman’s bride price to take her to wife. I am fairly certain I recall learning that the coemptio eventually died out once wives realized the benefit of marrying without transferring from their father’s manus. Some elements of Roman marriage were liberal in comparison to, say, their Greek contemporaries. In the later empire, divorce was common.

*sponsalia*=Basically, engagement ceremony. The bride, after this ceremony, will
prepare herself for marriage to the specific man outlined in the ducenda, which is signed during the sponsalia. Details as it happens.
Touch but a cobweb in Westminster Hall, and the old spider of the law is out upon you with all his vermin at his heels.

Chapter Summary

"Touch but a cobweb in Westminster Hall, and the old spider of the law is out upon you with all his vermin at his heels." - Henry Fox.

Chapter Notes

Alright, so lots of notes on this one, party people.

Hermione's robes and dress are modeled after this lovely number. Also, this ad inspired me in the sleeve area. Remember, clothes are a political and social commentary.

The Foundry is a made up estate, as is Ebony Park. I'm trying to draw up floor plans. I do have a Pinterest board of inspiration. I may post images as relevant, if you're into that level of obsession, ah, detail.

The Foundry uses gas lighting because even electricity is clearly not a thing in cannon. And plus, it is in keeping with houses like that. It's not glamorous to live without modern things like electricity and modern taps and heating, but I figure the magic and lack of mortgage would make up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione blew out a breath. Her dress was a little snug in the torso, but magic couldn’t fix everything, and considering this had once been an old t-shirt, Hermione considered this robe and dress a feat. She thought that she’d transfigured this outfit perfectly, but then her mum had always had an eye for fashion and art.

Two days ago, she’d kissed him in the den at Grimmauld, and now she was holding Harry’s hand for dear life as they waited to be seen at the registry office. Just under 48 hours later, her mind still strayed to that kiss.

“Gryffindors Charge!” He whispered, the billowy robe he wore brushing her own voluminous skirts. He looked quite nice in his muggle dress shirt, and trousers, with the robe thrown overtop. It was a balance that was calculated. “But you can do the talking.”

“Lovely.” It seemed her Gryffindor had gained some self-preservation. Still, she knew it was best that she handled this, given that they were next and she knew one wrong word could spoil the whole thing. She was on the one with the Plan, after all. Hermione knew her Stop The Unfair Marriage Proclamation campaign was hinged on getting out of here without being stopped.

Hermione stepped up to the counter, and addressed the witch, “We’re here to file our ducenda.” Hermione spoke the Latin word for the first time, and it felt peppery on her lips. She had avoided using the word up until this moment, and it felt heavy with meaning.
Hermione knew that their formal copy of the ducenda would have been hung above their bed, if they were a typical couple. More old fashioned couples, Hermione knew, left the contract hanging over the husband’s bed, and a charmed spray of apple branches over the wife’s own bed.

Hermione figured that if Harry didn’t hang the ducenda somewhere, she’d put in the library, somewhere behind the main shelves, along the wall that held the Foundry’s small restricted section. She didn’t feel that it needed to be hung in a place of honor, only that it would, one day, live in the archives, and Hermione had a duty to keep it. She knew one day, some day, people would wonder frequently about the short marriage between the Witch Who Won and the Man who Conquered.

“Wands.” The intake witch intoned, looking as bored as any ministry worker might. A small box opened in front of her window. She hadn’t even looked up from her moving crossword. Hermione saw that several were wrong. Hermione did not offer corrections. She did not want to call attention to herself.

Hermione hated letting go of her wand, but she took Harry’s along with her own, and placed them in the plain looking box meant to work like a muggle fingerprint database.

It popped open after a second, and the Witch looked up only when she got the parchment that resulted from the spell and the scan, “Miss Granger, please fill this out, and return it to Secretary Rosell.”

She pushed away from her desk with haste, her crossword falling to the floor as ink splattered on her desktop. “Third floor.” She blurted, before racing away.

Hermione knew that the Witch was getting up to spread the word that the Man Who Conquered was here with the Witch Who Won. They had to work fast. She gripped her wand, and moved quickly to the most private corner she could find, one that would allow them to have only a wall to their backs, with the door to their fronts. Harry followed.

Harry and Hermione pressed their thumbs and their wandtips to the parchment. Hermione only winced a little when blood was pricked from her body. She resisted the urge to stick her finger in her mouth. Harry’s head brushed hers as they waited the requisite ten seconds for the blood to be collected. His proximity warmed her skin under the lace of her robes, and his nearness pressed the silk of her dress and the nylon of her petticoats against her frame.

Hermione might have admired the spell work if they weren’t playing beat the clock. The parchment was sophisticated. A family tree, basic measures of fertility and magical potency, and an STI test bloomed on the parchment as Hermione scribbled in the details of their hastily planned marriage, and affixed a copy of their ducenda to the form.

She claimed the date, time, and place of the wedding was unknown at present, common for couples who intended to have a longer engagement before becoming betrothed, which typically took place over the last half or quarter of the engagement. For many old fashioned wizarding people, engagement was understood to be the courtship phase of a relationship rather than dating. Young people mixed without dating, without romantic attachment, at school. The sexual revolution, and more muggleborn students, had changed that, for the most part. One custom that was retained was the bride’s getting her engagement ring at the Sponsalia, not the proposal.

She refused to study the findings and data, though she gathered Harry’s blush had much to do with the frankness of the report. Hermione did not allow herself to be annoyed that soon, all too soon, the whole of wizarding society would know she was an STI-free, virgin, with off-the charts magical power, and fertility in the higher ranges, in keeping with her age.
Hermione was glad that the test had not registered the first birth control pill she had swallowed this morning. It wasn’t something she wanted to get out. Her loophole was meant for witches trapped by this act. The Ministry would only make muggle avenues illegal if they knew much about them. Hermione hoped she could help witches get access to various methods, because she knew that the pill wasn’t for everyone, and she highly doubted anybody other than a muggleborn wizard would use a condom, and that was predicated on the assumption that he had a wife willing to use them.

Little was said between them, for they were at once aware they were being watched, and also that they were taking a large risk. If they could fly under the radar, they might get away with this and avoid an inquiry. Hermione’s heart was pounding so hard, that she was sure the whole room heard it. The Intake Witch had brought several friends to stand behind her desk, clearly to observe them.

Hermione returned the quill and clipboard to the desk with murmured thanks. She rejoined Harry, who took her hand, let her tuck herself close to him. It was harder to hit a smaller target, and if the person aimed for them jointly, they knew from experience that they could spring apart, and the curse would miss them both. Their robes, hers lace, and his a fine, thin, wool, brushed against each other as they walked. They passed many people they knew in the halls, but nobody stopped them beyond a passing greeting. It wasn’t unusual to see them together, after all, and the robes hid their clasped hands.

They headed up three floors, only to have Secretary Rosell look upon them with sadness. “I’m no longer handling marriages. There’s been a special department set up just this week.”

Hermione looked around the cluttered room, rage blooming in her soul, and thought fast. She could not go to this new department. They would surely be stopped. The marriage law’s mechanism was already being put into place. The speed at which this thing was moving horrified Hermione.

With a steely resolve, she glanced at Harry. This toady man wanted fame, prestige, honor, and well, Hermione wasn’t above a little manipulating those base desires to get what they wanted.

At her behest, Harry offered, “This last one, your last one, could be ours? With your expertise, we feel confident that our ducenda would be in the best possible hands.”

“I’m not sure…” The long fingers attached to a boney arm trembled over his quill, desire and duty clearly at war. Desire won. “Then again, perhaps Merlin has offered me a fitting close to my tenure in this office. I shall not refuse it.”

With a flourish he signed and stamped the various spots needed for verification. After setting his plumed quill down, he muttered a spell or two. The parchment turned gold, and shimmered, much like the base emotions in Secretary Rosell’s eyes. Hermione knew this news would be in the paper by morning. “Your formal copy will be owled to you directly.”

“Thank you so much, Secretary.” Harry replied, “Is there anything else we need?”

When the man shook his affirmed they were all set, and obsequiously wished them well, they left the room. They were, in the eyes of the ministry, engaged, though not yet betrothed. Only a ceremony would break it, and it could only be broken for very specific reasons. There was some surety, now, even before the Sponsalia ceremony.

When they came to the wide corridor that ran along the far side of the building, it was as though weight had been lifted from their souls. The lunch bell had sounded, and every ministry employee, save essential staff, was somewhere eating, unaware that the Marriage Law had been duped before it even began.
Hermione felt a laugh bubbling up. They had bested the ministry, at least thus far. After the war, this was no small thing. It wasn’t funny, but it was either laugh or cry, and Hermione’s tears could not fall, not now.

It was heady to know that step one of S.T.U.M.P. had been completed. At their shared smile, Hermione took off running, and they flew on fast feet through empty back hallways where they had once fought for their lives. Her lace outer robes, made of a heavy lace, did nothing to hamper her movement. The silk of her dress and the fine nylon of her petticoats rustled as she moved quickly. At first, this transfiguration had made her feel overdressed, but also strangely confident.

She knew that their ducenda would likely make the papers, though likely not until morning. She hid and skulked for no one, and this robe and dress would have knocked darling Lav-Lav through a loop. Hermione knew it would also hide shaking knees and would hold up well in moving photographs. It made a statement, too, one that Hermione was not ready to dissect.

It felt like they had won a battle. That same heady sense of liveliness rushed through Hermione. She was glad her hair, though she had left it in its naturally wild state, was held back by a wide black velvet band. It was traditional for women, upon the submission of their ducenda, to wear velvet. As Hermione had vowed, not one tradition would be overlooked. This was her nod to it. Velvet robes were not her style.

Hermione zipped past Harry on the steps, but he overtook her progress with his long legs and athletic body. They were neck and neck as they padded down the final staircase. When they came, slowing and breathless, to the atrium’s apparition point, Hermione spun around, and ended up in Harry’s arms, laughing. He lifted her off her feet as her knees bent, and her magic caused sparks to build under her fingers. Hermione had never felt so incandescent over such a small feat. It was heady.

When she slid back down to her feet, Harry whispered, “We did it.”

Hermione smiled up at him, the shared smile of pulling one over on the Ministry. “We did.”

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“Me too.” Harry agreed. “Though I do think seeing Teddy pee on Fudge was a close second.”

In the space of an instant, they were gone.

The Mr. Grangy did not smile once as Miss Grangy led her parents from the floo in the Great Hall. Fella had stayed out of sight, but she wasn’t sure she liked Mr. Grangy. Mrs. Grangy seemed a gentle woman, not unlike her daughter, even if she had christened the poor child as Hermione Grangy. Fella was not one to judge muggle customs, but she wondered if the name would perhaps be better with another surname, not that such musings mattered now. Soon Hermione would be the Duchess of Potter. Hermione Jane Grangy-Potter, Duchess of Potter was a fine name in Fella’s mind.

Fella had been told that Miss Grangy was keeping her own surname, and while unusual, Fella understood. Miss Grangy was a witch of valor. She would not wish to be anything other than fully herself, rather like Her Ladyship.

All the elves wanted to meet their dear Miss Grangy’s parents. They were hugely loyal to her, and would have done anything for her. Fella had said no, reminded the staff under her charge that
bondings were for families, and they could see the Grangy family all they liked at the singing. As such, not one came to gawk at the muggle couple that had been led from the floo to the morning room, of all places, by His Grace himself.

A few elves had *tut’ed* in disapproval that Miss Grangy should have taken anyone to the morning room after lunch. Still others twisted their ears, gently, wondering if perhaps the dear Miss Grangy did not know that the morning room was only for the morning, and mostly for the ladies who would come to tea after she was once again at home to visitors. They wondered if perhaps they should have told the Miss Grangy, who loved them so. They felt as though they had failed her.

As Fella carried the tray to the kitchens via the back hallway, she reflected upon her relationship with young Miss Grangy. Fella knew better. Miss Grangy loved the morning room, and if preparing for her betrothal there gave her comfort, Fella would hear no criticism of her choice. She had enough to deal with, with that sour father of hers.

Miss Grangy was a smart miss, smarter than His Grace. She had taken the house firmly in hand, once it had been clear to Fella that Fella would have to take Miss Grangy aside and ask her to do so. Miss Grangy could never resist a plea for help. Fella considered that bit of playacting as her finest. She had adopted her best pleading expression with a quiet sigh, rather like Master James begging for a new pony, and had explained all of her burdens to Miss Grangy. She focused firstly, naturally, on the things Her Ladyship would have taught a little girl, and her plan had worked.

Miss Grangy had, of course, wanted to help Fella in any way she could, because Miss Grangy was a dear soul who related to Fella with respect and interest. Miss Grangy had grown under her tutelage, and she knew now, how to arrange flowers, plan menus, work the accounts, and manage squabbles amongst the housemaids, among other things. Fella loved sending squabbling housemaids to Miss Grangy, though she knew that would stop when Miss Grangy had other things to do. She was a knitter, and Fella hoped she would be knitting quite a lot, soon. And that, of course, was all Fella would even allow herself to think on the matter. She had heard from the Hogwarts elves, of course, that Miss Grangy was very good at making hats.

Fella’s plan to help His Grace see how much he loved Miss Grangy had gone well, and now they were to be married. Fella wished they were having a party, as Her Ladyship would have wanted for her grandson, but such things could not always happen. Fella would see that they had big parties when the time came for christenings.

Fella had taken the tray in herself, well aware that the Grangy parents had not taken time to have anything but a harried supper of something they called takeaway. Fella knew little of muggle life, and figured, based on culinary knowledge, that takeaway had to be some sort of French food. Fella didn’t do much cooking of French things. It was too modern. As far as she was concerned, nothing tasted better on bangers and mash than a finely aged helping of garum.

Looking down at the tray she carried away, Fella tried not to take it personally that Miss Grangy hadn’t eaten her stew. The poor dear had a lot on her mind, and Fella resolved that she would spend time feeding her up later. Miss Grangy was good to the elves, Fella knew, sending the reusable food away to be stored with a snap of her fingers, and putting the food left on plates in the compost pile for Valley.

She spared a thought for Lord and Lady Longbottom, still at Mungo’s. She thought they’d get better care at home, but gossip said that his mother, the dowager, who had once been young Lady Gussie Bones, thought it best for her grandson that they were hospitalized. Not, of course, that Fella paid any mind to gossip. The young Marquess had enough to deal with without elves adding to gossip.
Setting aside the tray, Fella entered back into the workrooms only to find the wide room silent, save for the foods on the agas. There was much food to be prepared. She was serving a seating for twelve shortly before 10 in the West Gallery. The West Gallery held various portraits, who would want to see not only the signing, but also her foods. Even in their portrait forms, many came to the kitchens and the dairy, just to watch the food being made.

They did, as did Fella, wonder at the box of Life that His Grace ate, but he said it was part of a balanced breakfast. Fella had tried it, but soggy grains were, in her mind, meant to be cooked and served hot. Maybe Miss Grangy would tell His Grace that he didn’t have to eat those dreadful grains anymore. The treatment he’d endured at the hands of those evil relatives of his set Fella’s blood, green as it was, to boiling. Imagine feeding a child grains from a box, like a horse from a feed bag!

When His Grace married the dear Miss Grangy, there would be no more grain boxes. They would be a proper family again. Yes, Fella resolved, Miss Grangy had changed things for the better. Fella knew she would continue to do so.

Fella congratulated herself on a job well done, and resolved to set out some incense for Her Grace. She knew her mistress would be proud. Even when Fella’s Lord Jamesy was no longer her charge, and his own baby was getting married, and she oversaw the whole house instead of the nursery, Fella was a good nanny-elf. She had stayed on as housekeeper to stay active and involved when the staff had reasonably been downsized. His Grace hardly needed a nanny-elf now, but a nanny-elf always needed her family.

A scant two hours later, Hermione’s knees were once again shaking, this time from sublimated frustration with her father. “This isn’t the wedding.”

She was sitting in the morning room at Foundry, the ancestral home of the Potter family, after close of lessons. It had been so strange to sit next to Parvati, and know that later, she would be cementing part of her magical future.

She’d been sick with worry that the Prophet would announce their impending betrothal, but there was nothing for it. Her stomach had churned every second until they were safely behind the ancient and powerful wards of the Foundry. Its security made her feel safe, as though this was almost complete, rather than just starting. Aurors couldn’t pop into the wards without permission, so at least Hermione felt better in asserting that she wouldn’t be hauled off to Azkaban for using her knowledge of the impending marriage act to work around it. Witches the world over had gone to jail for far less.

Secretly, she loved the Foundry. It was a world within a world, held over from a time when estates had been relatively independent. Hermione loved the outer buildings, the vacant stables, the magical farms bordering the estate’s extensive gardens. Hermione loved the greenhouse that Neville kept going because he said Harry couldn’t keep a bean plant alive.

Hermione loved the Foundry itself. The kitchens were toasty, the dairy rooms were cool, and the attics were dusty. The first floor held rooms typical of a manor home. There were, in keeping with its size and role as a Great House in the area, countless rooms that Hermione had yet to explore. She had been told that there were upwards of 200 rooms in this house. She spent most of her time in the library, and the study she’d commandeered as her own when she was recovering after the War. The Foundry had been last Harry’s Grandfather’s home, and James had never wanted to live here. He’d, according to Remus, wanted to keep it safe from even the risk of damage. It was literally that sacred.
“Remus explained it, Hermione.” Mum said, gently, carding her fingers through her hair, “It is rather like neopaganism, correct?”

“Well, only minimally. You see, this ceremony opens our magical cores, among other things.” Hermione disagreed. Before she could continue, her father’s muttering stole her hard won composure.

Adam pulled at his tie, “Rushed, if you ask me.”

He cast a dark glance around the morning room. Her father hated the house. He’d muttered as she’d led them to this room. Hermione resolved that his attitude would make clear to Harry why she had never invited her parents here, despite Harry’s urging. She sincerely did not want her father to ever see Ebony Park. He’d stroke out, but then again, the Black family did have a flair for drama.

Though it was coming towards evening, Hermione found the room calming. She needed calm, desperately. The morning room was defined by a large bow window that faced East, to catch the morning rays, overlooking the East lawn, with its wide vistas. It held a large fireplace for heat, around which comfortable victorian furnishings were arranged.

Behind those clustered items, there was a small tea table that was pushed closer to the window when not in use. Hermione frequently worked there, or read, lounging on the overstuffed armchair nearby. Gas lamps the elves called modern gave the room a cosy feeling. The colors of the room were feminine and light, but there was nothing insubstantial about the room.

In stark contrast, the drawing room was wide, formal, and currently housed people she was forbidden by tradition to see. The swooping curtains that dropped to the floor in the drawing room were a pain to keep dusted, the chandeliers shook at the slightest provocation, and Hermione was always afraid to eat in there, for fear she might drop something on the patterned carpet, or spill tea on the wood that had been there since before Henry VIII had broken up the monasteries. There were several portraits there, too. Hermione often made conversation with them, but could not rest there, because they always wanted to chat.

“I didn’t, and anyway, there has to be several days between the betrothal ceremony and the bonding. We don’t have a choice.” Hermione repeated, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get dressed.”

Hermione didn’t know what on earth to wear or how to transfigure something suitable, but she was going to figure it out. Make do and mend could be translated as transfigure and charm, even she knew that. She’d lived out of beaded bag for months, but this required more than a washing spell or a mending charm.

She exited the drawing room, leaving her parents to their privacy and the rest of the overflowing tea table that Fella had not cleared. On quick feet, Hermione wove towards the grand staircase, passing by flowers charmed in vases on warm tables. She crossed over the inlay in the great hall, and, with soft footfalls on the Aubusson rug, passed the great fireplace with its pot of floo powder on the mantle, and looked up towards the stone archways that made up the first floor above her.

She loved this house. It hurt that her father did not see it as a place of tradition, community, of belonging that Harry desperately needed. He should have ridden his tryke along these halls, and built snow people on the lawns. Hermione saw the grandeur, sure, but she mostly saw the touches of countless Potters that lived on in this house, in some way, for Harry to come to know.

She stepped up the countless stairs, and paused only when greeted by various portraits. They knew
her name, and most greeted her warmly, save for a few Holbeins. She stopped to drop a modest curtsy to a 18th century Duchess of Potter who resided in a huge frame over one turn in the staircase. It amused and humored the dear lady to still be afforded the recognition of her station. Dorothea, as she insisted Hermione call her, told her to fix her hair, and hex whomever had upset her. It was sensible advice all around.

Once on the first floor, she raced through the gallery and down a corridor, stone floors becoming wooden once again. She passed two elves, Grissa and Horatia, who were walking through the vacant parts of the house, turning down the gas lamps still used by the landed of wizarding society. When she passed them, Hermione’s heart continued to pound. She did not stop to chat as she normally might have done.

Hermione rushed to the guest room given to her by Fella, the head house elf. Free, Hermione knew, and bound by choice with the Potter ancestral magic. All of the Potter elves were free, and all had chosen to stay. Hermione knew they loved Harry, and stayed on his account.

The room was wide, and faced West, so as to avoid early morning sun. It also had the added benefit of being relatively near to the upper floor of the library that ran the length of the house. A common shortcut Hermione used was to go into the library downstairs, use the library staircase, exit upstairs, cut through a few of the vacant rooms, and find herself mere doors from her room.

Hermione never apparated in the Foundry. It was grand beyond measure, and she still hadn’t seen the whole thing.

She loved this house. For a time, she would be its domina, only to have to hand her role over to some girl, likely with silken hair, a tinkling laugh, and fluff between her ears. She likely wouldn’t even know how to liaise with the farmers, or how to assist Neville in the greenhouse. Clearly, she wouldn’t know when it was time to throw Harry out the back door with a ball or a broom. How would Hermione bear it, not knowing every day, if the house was loved, if it had what it needed?

She shut the door with force behind her, and covered her face with her hands. “What am I doing?” She looked at the furry body sitting on her bed, and asked anew, “What am I doing?”

She longed to draw the curtains around the bed, and hide there, until Harry came to find her with a tray full of snacks, and crawled into her bed, just to sleep, and feel not quite so alone.

“It looks as though you’re about to get yourself a sponsus, my girl.”

Hermione startled, grabbing her wand. Hermione barely escaped pointing her wand at the woman sitting in the reading chair by the grate, though she did pull it out of her sleeve.

“La--” Hermione began, looking at Neville’s grandmother, who was sitting on her chair with the poised ease of a woman whose spine never met the back of a chair.

“Augusta, lamb.” The woman Hermione had come to know only generally replied, “You and I need not stand on ceremony.”

“Why are you here, ma’am?” Nobody was supposed to know about their Confarreatio. To stop in the middle without a resolution would leave them both vulnerable. Those still loyal to the Dark Lord would stop at nothing to interfere. Anyone knowing could foil this entire thing, and Hermione could not think beyond that thought. And yet, they were bound to be in the morning paper. Hermione’s stomach turned.

“Remus floo’d, as well he should have done.” Augusta replied, standing up. “Hermione, did you
know that Longbottoms and Potters have been united for centuries? It was no accident that my Neville was the one to wield power in Harry’s stead. Had things been different, they would have been raised as brothers.”

“Their bond is strong.” Hermione allowed, “And I love Neville dearly.”

“He cares for you, too.” Augusta affirmed, “I’m here not only as Lady Longbottom, but as your friend’s gran. You need a Pronuba to guide you through the rituals.”

Hermione nodded her thanks, adding, “I’ve read all about the ceremony.”

“The ceremony!” The older woman scoffed, “My dear girl, there is much for you to learn.”

She addressed an elf in the room that had just entered Hermione’s line of sight, “Petra, please go and fetch Mrs. Granger.”

Hermione had met most of the elves of the Foundry, but never Petra. She supposed Petra worked for Lady Longbottom. Hermione smiled in greeting, and found herself happy to see the gesture returned. She hoped Lady Longbottom was a fair employer.

The elf nodded, “I will get Miss’s mother, posthaste, ma’am.”

“I have never met a muggle in such an intimate situation, but I’m sure we’ll know each other well eventually.” Lady Longbottom spoke as soon as the elf had popped away.

Hermione had never really gotten to know a pureblooded matron outside of Molly. She chose to answer diplomatically, because she hear nothing negative in the woman’s voice. “Thank you for your open-mindedness.”

“I think you’ll soon find that we ladies of the First Houses aren’t milkwater misses.” Augusta promised, “For you shall soon be one of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm making use of the trope where elves call her 'grangy' to make the point that, a) elves aren't always as seen in cannon for reasons I'll explore and b) somewhere they were told that Grangy is her actual surname. They're too polite to ask, and Hermione's too kind to correct them. It's mostly a joke so that I could give her a voice. Fella also has a limited understanding of things like take away, and cereal, but it's indicative of her life in an isolated society. She also highlights the role loyal servants played on estates, even if a transition from nursery senior nursemaid to housekeeper is highly improbable.

Now, a note on titles. Neville is the Marquess of Valley because his father isn't dead. Valley comes from bottom, which can also mean valley rather than bum. Neville holds his father's next, more junior, title. It's only a courtesy, though he can use it in any way any other marquess might.

His Gran is the dowager because Alice, the current Duchess of Longbottom is not dead, either, merely incapacitated. If Frank had not married, she would not be the dowager until he did. It's not like Mrs., so there cannot be two Duchesses of
Longbottom. I struggled in selecting the titles and ranks. I didn't like making them dukes, trust me. I tried working it out as baronets, but various reasons in the Potterverse made that nearly impossible. You'll see why, soon.

Hermione is not Lady Hermione, nor will she ever be. She'll be styled Hermione, Duchess of Potter. I struggled with Augusta. My head cannon in this verse is that she is, in fact, Lady Augusta Whatever by birth. Hermione doesn't know that, though, so in her mind, she's Augusta, Dowager Duchess of Longbottom.

It doesn't much matter. The titles only exist because they have to, for reasons, not because I find any value in waxing rhapsodic over heredity that, for the most part, would come off as boasting if Augusta were to blather on about it. Another point here is that yes, they are known to the Monarchy, and as with many families, earned their titles via service to said Monarch. Which one? Not saying, yet.

The name 'Foundry' comes from an obscure term foundry-goods. It's a nod to the fact that 'Potter' comes from puttering around.

As an aside, I do wish JK had given the sacred 28 alternate names or something so that I could given them a surname and a title. I took some solace in this exchange, which I think, for my own twisted purposes, shows that Malfoy knows that Harry is, and will one day know that he is, Potter.

I promise next time there will be fewer notes. I'm sorry for going on.

Sponsus= groom
Pronuba= a matron who had been married only once. Technically, her husband would still need to be alive in Ancient Rome. For our purposes, she only needed to have the Confarreatio. It's not very common in the Wizarding community. Would you want to fuse your magical core with somebody? I wouldn't.
And why should I be cold, my lad?

Chapter Summary

Please, read this poem. Read it out loud. The stanza says something about Hermione's thoughts, I think. I read this poem last night and suddenly realized, "Bananas! She's wondering that!"

And thus, this chapter had a title.

Before that, it was a Brian May quote.

Here we first see poppy seeds and blue camellias, but not yet the gardenias.

Chapter Notes

There is a lot of magical and mystical symbolism in this chapter, often in the herbs and flowers mentioned in the ritual bath. It's rooted in Wicca and naturalism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione certainly felt as though she were a milkwater miss when Augusta accompanied Hermione and her mother into the bathroom attached to her room. Hermione felt a strong cleansing spell wash over her as she entered the bathing room. It was clearly Victorian in style, with marble floors and exposed pipes. There the resemblance to the small loo added somewhere after plumbing entered the house indeed.

The small sized en suite had enlarged to house a huge porcelain tub without spigots in the center of this new and cavernous room. The room was completely dark save for hundreds of white candles everywhere, though Hermione was sure it was not a fire hazard due to magic.

Hermione heard Mum gasp.

Hermione agreed with that sentiment. Sometimes she forgot how awe inspiring feats of magic could be, even in the act of lighting hundreds of candles. They were pure white, no doubt made here at the Foundry. The pillar candles were of all sizes, nestled all over. Hermione knew the Foundry would not need to make another candle for a decade.

The room was really breathtaking, and not just because of the heavy scents in the air. In the distance, Hermione heard a slow drip of water as though a earthenware pot was being filled. The marble floors were shadowed in the candlelight, but Hermione could see purple flowers dotting the walls, and vines climbing to the ceiling. It was still her en suite, then, and they hadn’t left it via the door.

Augusta lit one candle with a long match, without the aid of magic, and demanded she strip and step into water.
“Ideally...” Augusta murmured, the light and shadows mingling on her face, “You would have scads of girl friends, sisters, and relatives your own age to do this, but I’m happy to relive my girlhood. I won’t be plying you with alcohol, as is customary.”

Hermione shared a look with her mum as they door they had entered through shut with a sharp click.

Hermione recognized the sound not as a locking spell, but as a ritualistic sealing spell. With that, they were plunged into semi-darkness, as the remaining natural light from the windows was blocked by a very clever spell on the windows. Hermione thought it would be great for days she needed sleep after studying all night.

Hermione’s gut twisted anew. Her best friend was Ginny Weasley, Ginny Weasley, who wanted to marry Harry, who would know these rituals like the back of her hand. Hermione had not been very close to Ginny lately, and in this moment, she felt very alone.

Hermione resolutely allowed Augusta to tug gently at the snug sleeves of her robes. They covered her arms to just below her elbow, and met in the front of the dress with three fastenings, as sort of a cutaway to reveal the dress underneath, the deep vee of the bodice only coming together at the fastenings. However, the sleeves and bodice were snug and she was glad of the help.

“Thank Merlin for that.” Hermione muttered. A drunk Augusta, Hermione guessed, would be horrifying.

Hermione gripped her wand to perform a shielding spell. Before she could get the words out, she was disarmed. Hermione was so shocked to feel a spell come her way in this calming place that her wand clattered to the smooth marble floor. It hit the marble with an a resounding sound that shocked her to her core.

“Naked!” Augusta insisted, frowning, “How else am I to assure myself as a matron that you’re a young lady?”

‘Lady Longbottom.” Mrs. Granger cried. Hermione grabbed her wand and shoved it onto her hair, which she wound into a topknot.

Hermione handed her mother her lace robes, her skirts rustling in the semi-darkness.

“You can’t sully purified water with spells.” Augusta gently stood her ground, “This water is magical, Hermione.”

The spell and rituals were important, even if Hermione had never read about this one in detail. She knew that she had done worse for less. Hermione pulled her hair over her shoulder, and presented her back to her mum, who undid the zip, and lifted the dress at the hips slightly so that Hermione could slip it down her body, the sleeveless bodice only giving her a bit of trouble as it moved towards her hips on the way down her body.

Hermione stepped free of the silk, the yards and yards of skirts pooling at her feet after she kicked off her flats, leaving her clad in nothing but a silk slip over the rest of her underthings. She had worn a slip underneath her petticoats merely because she hadn’t wanted the nylon to stick to her skin and bunch. She shoved her sheer tights down along with her knickers, and kicked them free.

Her toes chilled against the floor. The sensation focused her attention and was as shockingly real as the kiss they’d shared.

Hermione unclipped her bra, and yanked it free without divesting her slip, though the fabric did
little to guard her modesty. She glanced at the tub again, her resolve wavering.

The air around her swirled with Jasmine. Hermione recalled that it symbolized a friendship-based love, one not formed in lust, but rather a bond rich in inner-beauty. Basil tickled her senses. The water was scented thickly of roses.

Hermione looked down at the steaming surface, and pushed the emotion and the magic welling up inside of her down through her feet. The candles danced with a rush of wind her grounding had produced, and Hermione pushed back tears.

This could not feel real.

She would not let it.

This was a bonding, not a marriage. She was sharing her magic, not her life, and not her heart.

Hermione sucked in air, and pulled her slip over her head. She dropped it onto the pile of clothing. Counting to three in her head, she entered into the warm tub.

Augusta beamed as Hermione sank down into the almost too hot water. Mum just looked as confused as Hermione felt as Petra stepped forward and poured pink salt into the water, as Augusta chanted something in an old language Hermione could not place.

Thank God the glamours hiding her scars held.

The air was heavy with the scent of innocence. “Why are the windows blacked?” Her eyes felt sharp in the candlelight.

Augusta stepped forward to toss something in the water. Hermione knew they were balancing the elements in the herbs used. Earth. Air. Fire. Water. “This is traditionally done at the last night in your mother’s home. You would greet the sun as a girl, end it as a bride.”

Mum finally spoke, “A bath does seem restful.”

“Mrs. Granger.” Augusta began, “You are not magical, but you know the power of a mother’s love.”

Hermione forced her eyes open. This was a step in the ritual, then. Mum bit her lip.

Augusta continued, “Take the poppy seeds, and toss a handful into the water.”

Hermione’s lungs froze. She felt them skittering into the water, felt them float down over her belly, some falling to the floor of the tub, some others sticking to her thighs and her belly.

Poppies were not a spell, weren’t a potion. They were only a blessing, an intention. She would never have that, she realized. She would share her magic with Harry, but her life would be her own. In some ways, she mourned that solitude.

"Blessings be upon you, in the name of Nimue, the Source of Magic within you, and Eve, the Source of all life which unites us.” Augusta spoke where her mother traditionally would have done, but there was no lack of feeling in the words.

Hermione shoved her thoughts away, and relaxed into the water. Silence reigned, as she was able to ignore Augusta and Petra and her mum. Hermione focused on her battle plan for S.T.U.M.P., weighing the planned use of the media. A bond was step one. This was step one of step one.
A long time passed. Hermione was handed a brush, and told to scrub. She did. Her mum washed her back, the bottoms of her feet, behind her ears. She was then handed a fine rag and a bar of soap, and told to repeat the process. She washed three times, all told.

Hermione scrubbed her hair, washing once, conditioning, and washing yet again. At the final wash, she was given a pot, and applied a body scrub with the same pink salt. The soap was still in her hair and the salt was thick upon her skin when Petra pulled her to her feet in the tub. The poppy seeds were pressing into her freshly exfoliated feet.

Hermione could not bring herself to care about her nakedness as warm water sluiced down her body. The water, Hermione glanced up, was coming not from a wand, but from Romanesque pottery suspended above her.

When Hermione was soaked and spluttering for breath, Augusta noted, “Every Potter bride has been cleansed with this pitcher for 2000 years.”

Hermione wanted to study it, but more water came pouring down before she could study its ornate design. A warmth rushed through her as her body felt clean and warm, even as she stood, completely and totally naked in a room with strangers and her own mother.

“The Potters were once potters, I take it?” Mum asked, extending to Hermione her wand.

Hermione nodded as she stepped from the tub, fumbling in the semi-darkness as she dripped water everywhere. When she went to reach for a towel that had been piled on a Victorian chair, the towels vanished.

Hermione dripped water on the marble. She squeaked, “Wh--?”

Before she could get the whole word out, Petra was by her side, holding out a shift for her to slip into.

Hermione knew then, that drip drying was the order of the day. She hoped there was fire roaring in her grate. With a thought, she lit the logs she knew to be resting in her fireplace.

The shift was not charmed for warmth. It was lovely, crisp, linen, as fine as it might have been years ago. Hermione dated it as being Edwardian. Augusta had the good grace to blush as she said, “Traditionally, the bride’s mother would provide her a shift for the rest of these rituals.”

She looked again at Mrs. Granger, “No offense was intended, but I doubt your family held onto a chemise such as this.” Her tone turned strident, “I never had a daughter. Dear Alice had her own, of course, but I would be gratified if you would take this one. Bring it into your marriage as a symbol of all the wonderful things, knowledge, and experiences you take with you into this next step of life.”

“You’re very kind, Lady Longbottom.” Mum spoke gently, and Hermione knew her own soft movements as Petra helped her to down the shift was clear. Her heartfelt and silent acceptance of the shift had been understood.

Hermione was bade to brush her teeth, and under the critical eye of her favorite oral and maxillofacial surgeon, did just that. She was also handed several pots of creams and tonics by the ever present and ready Petra, who at one point made so bold as to scrub Hermione’s face when Hermione realized she wasn’t doing it up to the elf’s exacting standards. Her skin was red from the
attention, but was instantly soothed and cooled back to its normal paleness with a final cream that smelled once again of roses.

After Petra had released her face back to her own control, Hermione went to tie up her hair. It would be a relief to get it out of the way.

Petra grabbed her wrist. “No, Miss. You must not bind your hair. Not until your wedding, and you are married.”

As they exited back into her bedroom, Hermione could not hold back the question. “Why?”

“You hair must be unbound, Hermione.” Augusta unclasped a case Hermione hadn’t noticed sitting on the dressing table, “And if you can’t think why, you are not the brightest witch of the age.” Augusta looked curious as understanding dawned on Granger faces.

Hermione sat on the stool, as she was bidden, and found herself meeting the gaze of a curious Lady Longbottom in the dressing table’s mirror. “How do muggle brides symbolize their status?”

“Veils, or a white dress.” Hermione lectured, “Though white clothing has more to do with wealth and the ability to own an impractical dress. Virginity is best understood as a social construct of subjugation to non-magical people, as it has no bearing on their magic.”

Petra was standing to the side, looking through bottles Hermione had not placed on her dressing table. The bottles were glass, unlabeled. Petra shook one over Hermione’s head, and Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as it fell into her wet hair. Petra made no bones about squeezing Hermione’s hair to distribute the stuff, whatever it was.

“A veil?” Augusta was aghast, as she poured something that felt like lotion onto Hermione’s hands, and told her to rub it in before continuing. “For us, married women covered their hair. Some still do full-time, though most do so selectively.”

“Your virginity lends you value, H.J.?” Mum asked sharply, not at all liking that implication. Hermione herself had once made that misconception. She’d gotten into an awful row with Ginny about it. The idea that a witch’s personal choices for her own body and life should matter in any fashion to anyone else was unfathomable to Hermione.

Ginny had shouted that it had nothing to do with choice or stigma, once she had learned what those things were, only that finding someone with whom your magic could stand to be that close to was a challenge. Fortunately for Ginny, it had been a challenge she had met with ease. Hermione had not been so lucky in her hopes for companionship, not that she’d had the time or inclination for such things during the war.

“No, mum, no.” Hermione hastened. “I am given to understand that finding someone with whom your magic can mesh well enough to have se--” Here she glanced at Augusta, not sure if her frankness would be labeled crassness, “...such an experience...with can be a challenge. Most relationships...”

Mum filled in her silence. “Don’t even get that far?”

“Right.” Hermione continued on, trying to put her own limited experiences into words, “When people say something just isn’t right, it’s typically their magics, their energies, that just don’t mesh. So typically, and only just typically, wizarding peoples go into marriage with far less sexual experience than non-magical people.”

“How can you tell?” Mum asked, ever the scientist.
Petra stepped in again, and applied some kind of product to Hermione’s wet curls, her hands working skillfully. It smelled like lemons.

Mum was curious. Hermione hated that she didn’t have an answer. She had only known when things were not right. It was, with Victor, a clanging in her gut that made it hard to even dance with him. With Ron, it had been a nagging sense of wrongness that had made her unable to commit to a relationship him. A kiss of passion did not go well between them, and after that, it had been clear to them both that they weren’t fated to be anything more than friends.

“I don’t...” Hermione had put her feelings with Ron down to her youth. Perhaps, in time, she would have put aside her misgivings in favor of the logic that had led her to want to want to give the relationship a try. Somehow, that didn’t seem a good answer to give her mum. Hermione brushed lint off of the fabric sticking to her damp chest.

“Auras.” Augusta intoned, unbuckling the case that Petra had moved to the bed, “Most of us can see and feel them when we choose to look. That, and how a man’s magic feels around ours, is a critical indicator of magical, and thus, intimate compatibility. Things, even living together, can be uncomfortable, so it’s easy enough to spot.”

“Do you have that necessary affinity with Harry?” Mum asked. “I only want you to be happy, Bunny, magic and all.”

Augusta laughed outright, and even Petra colored as Augusta spoke. “Oh, I’d say they have that in spades.”

How could Augusta make that determination?

Hermione stifled a gasp.

The tent. They had lived together in the tent for ages, shared a bed. They sometimes did, even now. Hermione thought of Ron, and wondered, for the millionth time, why he had been so uncomfortable there. Had it only been the horcrux, or had it been something else, he too, had been trying to ignore? Perhaps a bit of the question had been answered.

Her blush was hot against her pale skin as she spluttered. “It isn’t...Mum!”

Again with the the fairy tale ideas Mum had about this bonding. Nothing Hermione could say would dissuade her.

Hermione watched via the mirror, as Augusta handed her mother the comb.

She admonished Hermione, “Enjoy it. After today, your relationship will change, as it has changed before. You will never again know the ease of being a child in your mother’s care.”

It sounded harsh, but Hermione saw the tradition in it. Many young women went to marriage, even in today’s wizarding culture, without ever having struck out on their own. Even fewer entered a bonding after surviving torture, warfare, famine, political machinations, and the widespread prejudice of her community. Hermione knew she had not been an innocent child since the age of 11. For Harry, she doubted his innocence and childhood had lasted barely a year.

With a whisper, Augusta added to her mother, “Break as few of the strands as possible as you work through her hair. I tell her she has grown and will leave you, but I am telling you, also, at the same
moment, that she will always be your little girl.”

Hermione pretended not to hear her, and pretended not to see the tears in her mother’s eyes. She dropped her eyes to her shift-clad lap to hide her own emotions. She did not mourn what she was leaving, only what she had lost long ago.

Mum picked through her waves and curls. Her hair was a defining feature, with a myriad of brown and honey facets along the twisting and bending locks that came together to give her hair the color of a cup of tea. Her hair was soon a curly, damp, riot of waves reaching down past the small of her back.

With the comb, Mum pushed gently on the end of her hair. Hermione’s eyes filled with tears. When she was a little girl, she used to ask how long her hair was, and her mother would only tell her once it was combed, mostly by pressing down on the spot where her hair ended.

“Thanks, Mum.” Hermione ventured.

The moment seemed to go on forever, and to end before Hermione could capture it in her heart. Hermione knew she was never going to have this again.

“Love you, bunny rabbit.” Mum replied, pressing a hand to her shoulder, meeting her eyes in the mirror. “Even when I couldn’t remember you, especially then, I knew a piece of my soul was missing. I would see little girls in the park, or coming home from school in those boater hats, and I would think, ‘where’s mine?’ I would wake up in the middle of the night, only to realize now I’d been dreaming about you.”

“I—I’m sorry.” Hermione had not known there could be that part of her mother, some part that resided in her mother’s soul, and not her mind.

Mum shook her head, and fixed a corkscrew curl. “I’m only telling you this so that you know that not even magic, not even the brightest witch of the age, can change how much I love you.”

For a long moment, Hermione pressed herself against her mum, and tried to keep the tears at bay.

There came a knock at the door. Fella passed a box to Petra, who flew to the door leaving aside decorum to move with anticipation. Her plain blue skirt, and white blouse looked well against the pale leafy tint to her skin. She had a watch pinned to her chest, and a small mobcap covering her head. Hermione knew that her haste would never appear to be as effortless and as calm as Petra’s own movement to the door, and back again.

Clearly, this was a tradition that would have had, if Hermione had such people in her life, all of the girls to calling out and twittering in excitement. Hermione thought of Luna, and wondered if there were nargles dancing around the box. Her heart felt heavy.

Petra placed the box in Hermione’s lap as she spun around on the stool to face the women still with her. Her curls bounced around her as she moved. “Do I open it?”

“It’s for you, Hermione.” Augusta informed her, before Hermione saw the intertwined H&H on the box. They, oddly, put her in mind of poor Katherine of Aragon, who had loved her husband, done her best by him, and yet had found herself tossed aside. The monograms had been fleeting, but the stood the test of time as a single instant, a tiny moment, of unity.

Hermione knew the box would go in the recycling.
Unaware of her macabre thoughts, Lady Longbottom gushed, “A groom provides a garland for his bride’s hair. It is an adornment that only nature can provide, and a statement of the groom’s sentiments. Let’s see what Harry chose for you.”

Hermione lifted the lid. Nestled in the box, amid tissue, was a garland of ivy and blue camellias. They were as fresh and as beautiful as if they had just bloomed. Clearly, the blooms benefited from Neville’s aptitude. They were unlike anything Hermione had seen, and she oversaw the countless vases here at the Foundry. “They’re beautiful.”

“Hermione.” Mum asked, after a moment in which Hermione drew her fingertip over the intricate coronet. “Have you ever studied the meaning of flowers?”

“No.” She reached out to touch the soft petals. Fella picked the flowers, or a gardener did, and Hermione found them on a tray, ready to be arranged. “Should I have done?”

“Ivy means friendship and marital love, and blue camellias mean ‘You are the light of my soul.’ That put together is, ‘Your love is the light of my soul.’” Hermione’s mum met her eyes, “You are the Light.”

Hermione’s hands shook. Nobody but Harry would have put flowers together to say that to her. She gripped the box tightly. The fire popped behind her.

Augusta noted, “Blue is an unusual color. Brides wear yellow on their bonding day. Typically, a groom will send yellow flowers today. I wonder...”

Mum spoke, “Muggles always have something old, new, borrowed, and blue at their weddings. Harry would know this.”

“He’s trying to make this special in a way that would have meaning for me.” Hermione blurted, “I’m...” Hermione tried again, “He...”

“Knows you.” Augusta filled in her bewilderment, “And values you for you, for who you are. Many girls would not be so lucky. How good it is to marry a friend.”

“I don’t have anything to wear.” Hermione murmured, unsure what to say in reply, or how to voice her innermost thoughts, “Mum, I can’t wear my dirty dress. Maybe between us all, we could transfigure something.”

“I did a little shopping, Hermione.” Mum soothed, “It isn’t every day your only child gets betrothed, you know? Since Daddy and I can’t give you a wedding, we decided to buy your clothes. I’m sorry you couldn’t come with me, but I figured you could spell anything you didn’t like and change it. I didn’t dare ask you to skip school.”

With that, Petra appeared holding a dress bag. Mum unzipped it to reveal a beautiful dress. It was white, with fine sheer fabric creating a scooped neckline, and 3/4 sleeves. Hermione was instantly charmed by its lightness, its sense of whimsey. The skirt was soft, and fell in a shock of fabric with unadorned lines, to the floor. The delicate appliqué on the bodice matched the detail on the edges of the sleeves.

“It’s beautiful.” Hermione breathed, reaching out to touch the defined waistline with her fingertips. “I couldn’t have chosen better.”

Mum looked pleased with her reaction, “It looked just like you. I couldn’t leave it in the store.”

Petra handed clean underclothing she kept in the small dresser to her, and Hermione slipped behind
the screen in the corner of the room to put it on, her skin dry from the warmth of the fire in the grate.

Hermione then donned the gown, with a tight stomach and shaking knees. Petra and her mum helped her into it, crowding around her to help her step into it and do up the buttons in the back. Petra snapped her nimble fingers, and the dress tightened to fit properly, pushing up her breasts gently, and caressing the gentle curve of her torso.

After it fit more correctly, Mum put her hand on her arm and turned her round to face the cheval glass. Hermione didn’t know where to look. She looked...she looked...unlike herself. She didn’t know where to focus her eyes, or how to calm her racing heart. The color drained from her face.

Even with Petra’s talents, the gown was inches too long and had to be hemmed. That, even with magic, took a few moments. Hermione spent the whole of it, staring into the charmed mirror, her face bloodless. This wasn’t right, none of this was right.

“What am I doing?” Hermione blurted, “I don’t--”

“If you want to back out, Hermione, Harry will not blame you.” Mum assured her, “This is fast, and this is a lot. I wouldn’t blame you. No one would.”

Augusta was silent.

The dress was beautiful on the hanger, but on her, it looked as though she was dressing up for a fancy dress party. Hermione shook her head, “I told you I didn’t want a wedding. This is too much, too much, like one. Mum, the dress is--” She exhaled, “I don’t know what it is!”

Mum exhaled raggedly, “So it’s the dress that’s too bridal for your tastes?”

“Yes. I love it, Mum, I do.” Hermione did not want to throw her gift back in her face, not when things were just starting to get better between them, “But it looks like some girl’s dress, and not mine.”

“You have a wand.” Mum smirked, “Are you a witch or aren’t you?”

Reaching out so far that she almost fell over Petra, who was adjusting the hem, Hermione pulled her wand off the side table.

Petra stepped back, and Hermione took that as permission to begin. She watched as the hem rose to end at the base of her knees. A knot loosened in her stomach.

Hermione smiled. The appliqué on the sleeves vanished with another flick, and the floaty, sheer, sleeves tightened to encase her arms more snuggly, ending just below her elbows. The bodice stayed as it was, but the neckline rose with a small swish to cover the swell of her breasts.

Hermione tapped the end of her wand against her teeth, and sought Mum’s silent approval. She tapped her wand against her thigh, and the skirts loosened to become textured with a darker appliqué, and slightly more weighted down in a new fabric, as did the bodice. After a final swish, the bright white shifted to a gentle color somewhere between dark ivory and champagne.

It would be okay. This was her. This was Harry. If nothing else, they were not alone. If nothing else, they could put each other first and know that, no matter what they decided, that they weren’t alone.

“Well, how do I look?” Hermione ventured.
“Begging your pardon, miss, but you look like a goddess.” Petra asserted, “You’re glowing.”

With a sudden snap of her face back to the mirror, Hermione realized that, in truth, her magic was nearly visible to the even to nonmagical pair of eyes around her.

“Oh, Bunny Rabbit.” Hermione could hear tears in her mother’s voice.

Augusta stepped forward, charmed the circlet, and placed it firmly on Hermione’s head. “I have never seen a girl look so natural in her robes at this moment.”

Hermione blinked, needing desperately to focus on S.T.U.M.P and not the thumping of her heart, “What happens next?”

Augusta took on the role of educator once again. Hermione remembered hearing that, in her younger years, she had served as a finishing governess to girls of her set before her marriage. She was, Hermione realized, very good at it.

“You and Harry will come to the Altar of your own free will. The ceremony will proceed.” Hermione had read about that, though she herself had never dreamed or even thought that she would have a ceremony like this, one that, in effect, lasted days. The more modern rites didn’t take more than an hour, such as Bill and Fleur’s wedding, but then, those were less spell and more government recognition.

“After that, you and Harry will have a few moments to eat the meal after changing.” Augusta stepped back from arranging her loose hair down her back. “Don’t expect to fill up, you won’t have time. You’ll sit together. He will serve you first, then himself.”

Hermione felt a chair behind her, and sank gratefully into it. Augusta seemed so in charge, but the whole thing seemed more daunting than the battles Hermione had routinely planned over the last few years.

She passed Hermione a pair of matching flats that had been charmed to go with her altered dress.

Mum passed Hermione a pair of sheer tights. Hermione put them on the non-magical way, knowing that they were more likely to roll at the waist if charmed. She didn’t dare take off the dress, knowing that if she did, she might not have the nerve to put it on again.

Hermione did not ask what she would wear then. This dress seemed such an extravagance for such little wear. “You’ll then be in the signing location, which is in the West Gallery, and you’ll have your portrait taken, and your documents will be solemnized.”

Augusta spoke as if that was run of the mill stuff. Once she had fluffed Hermione’s skirt so that it laid perfectly, she opened the door and added, “You will be expected to show your ring if someone asks. For today only. After that, it’s gauche.”

Hermione shared a smile with her mum. “Heaven forbid we should be gauche.”

“Wait until I tell Cousin Millie she can’t grab your hand and squeal.” Mum added.

“You’re cruel.” Hermione giggled, pausing only to thank Petra. Petra just smiled like there was some joke Hermione did not understand.
They walked as a group down the hallway together, the portraits empty, in difference to her privacy. Mum pulled her gaze away from a tapestry that Hermione also loved, and finally responded, “You had to get your ruthlessness somewhere.”

As they moved toward the stairs, Augusta paused, “Speaking of gauche, I feel it necessary to tell you that, after Sunday, you will be known as Hermione Jane, Duchess of Potter, Countess of Willard, among the lesser titles, as well as the Welsh and Scottish ones. In all your dealings, you will be Hermione, Lady Potter, the title, not the surname, never Lady Hermione.”

“Is there a difference?” Hermione asked, gripping the wood of the bannister gently.

“You’re assuming the role at the helm of the family, and you want to know if there’s a difference between the name and the title?” Augusta sniffed as though she had never met a more stupid girl in all her days.

“Wouldn’t it be Harry’s title, and Harry’s business?” Hermione returned, not angry, only uncomfortable with the direction of the discussion.

Augusta wasn’t quelled. “My dear girl, the boy doesn’t butter his toast without your input and approval.”

“I think you mean to say that the title is the job, the role.” Hermione ventured, “And the name is just the man.” Hermione thought for a bare second, “I’m bonding with the man, not the title.”

Augusta blustered, “They are one in the same, at the end of the day.”

“In some ways, perhaps.” Hermione mused, disagreeing in her mind. Hermione looked at her mother’s day dress. “Don’t you need to shower and change?”

Mum patted her shoulder as they left the staircase, “I’ll do that when you’re with Harry.”

“You’re leaving me alone with him?” Hermione asked, glancing around the great hall as she was led to a smaller ante-chambers that was a relic from when the Foundry’s state rooms were in use, “Is that proper, Augusta?”

“Hermione, you fought a war with the man.” Augusta gestured to a stone bench that had not been there upon Hermione’s ascent to her room, “I am quite sure your virtue is safe.”

Hermione blushed. If only Lady Longbottom knew the truth. “I only meant to ask if it was correct.”

“Entirely so.” Augusta stepped back, and gestured for Mum to arrange Hermione’s skirts, “This is a choice you’re making as adults. You final deliberations must be your own. In recent years, couples have preferred to do this together.”

“I see.” Hermione rather liked the feminist sentiment found therein. “How will I find him?”

Augusta took Mum’s hand, and led her away. She moved out the doorway, and turned around to pull the door shut. When the door was half-shut, she paused, and carefully met Hermione’s gaze and said, “You’ve done all you can do on your own. Harry must meet you halfway.”

Hermione was then left in silence in the ante-room filled with windows. She spent a good five minutes staring at her hands as they rested against champaign fabric. These was the last few moments, she realized, before a ring would be placed upon her hand.
She hoped she could bear the weight of it.

Never before had she wanted her mother with her so deeply, and that included months living in fear for her very life.

Chapter End Notes

Poppy seeds, as you might have guessed, are related to fertility and are used in many types of magic in that way. Also in some literature, the poppy flower is a symbol of love. Demeter, it is said, loved Mekon. When he died, she turned him into a poppy. The pink salt is just a cleansing ritual. It's meant to rid the user of negative energy. The other flowers in the bath have relevant properties, and you can google those if you're curious.

Hermione's Shift

Unbound hair was a thing in Medieval England. This book is pretty good. I have it, but you can read a small relevant segment.

The meaning of the flowers are generally accurate. Here you can see the monogram Hermione mentions. All credit goes to the artist, naturally.

I'm not the first person to have the Granger parents call Hermione 'bunny' or 'rabbit' or 'bunny rabbit' but really, what else would you nickname your two year old who was quick, curious, bright-eyed, and had rather large front teeth?

It's entirely unlikely that Augusta would have been a finishing governess, as said positions (at least in victorian/edwardian era) while not servants, were rather uncommon for women of Augusta's station. I rather think she liked, however, working, earning her own money. Never let it be said she's not smart. Socially minded society minded ladies are often sharp as iron and scary as fuck.

This dress is akin to what Helen bought. It's a Sarah Janks.

This is more along the lines of Hermione's changes. It's an Anastasia Romontsova. They're approximations, but I think it's neat to see.

The coolest thing is finding suitable dresses and outfits after writing them. It's so gratifying. All credit of actually pulling my ramblings together and doing the hard work of creating actual fashion rather than vague fanfic goes the to designers.

"Because I love a dark head that will never be mine…" The Betrothal, Edna St. Vincent Millay.
What the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies.

Chapter Summary

What the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies.

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury

This chapter could have also been called, "I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." -JA, P&P.

Chapter Notes

I've always loved the story of Cranmer's first wife, Joan. His detractors called her Black Joan of the Dolphin. I think, truly, though we know little about her, that they were a love match. His second wife was a Lutheran. There was a story about her escaping in a box, just like that story about K. Von Bora escaping in a barrel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry heard a tapping foot as he made his way through the state rooms towards the ante-chambers that led out to the Hall, and grinned. He’d kept Hermione waiting.

Harry rounded the doorway, freshly showered and quickly dressed in a muggle suit, with robes worn on top. His glasses were still askew, he realized. “Her--”

He stopped, nearly biting through his own tongue when Hermione looked up.

Remus, Sirius, and Neville had done all they could to prepare him for the roles he would fill tonight and in the coming days, but nothing, nothing could have prepared him for this moment. Hermione was...she was...wholly Hermione.

She was beautiful.

She was always beautiful.

He always knew she was beautiful.

Her beauty was a fact of his existence. He'd never looked at her once, and thought, for the first time, that she was beautiful. He’d forgotten what it was not to think that she was beautiful every time he looked at her, every time he heard her laugh, or primly and happily educate people, or cuddly Teddy, or rage at some injustice as he was left to watch her carefully dismantle it.

How could she be anything else, when she was smart, kind, and warm, when she was Hermione? But like this, with her hair soft and unbound, and her magic a nimbus around her, Harry was at a loss to put the feeling into words. He suddenly missed the girl who wore jeans and jumpers, who wore her messy hair in a knot.
The ink on her hands was gone. Harry missed it. “Er, hi.”

“Did Neville come to help you?” Hermione asked, curiosity dancing in her eyes.

Harry drank up her eyes like a man long denied water. “Yes. Remus, Sirius, and Neville were all there for me.” He shoved his hands in his pockets to avoid reaching out, “How was Augusta?”

“Very helpful.” Hermione stood, “Did you know she was a finishing governess for her friend’s sisters and relatives before her marriage? She needed every bit of her skill to scrub me up. Felt a bit like a film.”

“I hadn’t.” Harry murmured, not caring at all about the fact that he had no idea what a finishing governess really did. He didn’t tell her she hardly needed to scrub up. After the Yule Ball, he’d learned that sometimes, and just sometimes, she liked to dress up, just for herself, just for the way it made her feel about herself. “So, Remus lectured me.”

“Oh, I missed a Remus lecture.” Hermione made an inarticulate sound of jealously, which bolted down Harry’s spine, “What did he say?”

“I’m supposed to ask you if you have any reservations, promise to put aside any mistresses, which thankfully I do not have, so please let me keep breathing, ‘Mione, and inform you that I talked to Adam.”

There had been more. But she didn’t need to know that, not yet.

These things, Remus and Sirius had said, were to inform Hermione that he had sought to anticipate her needs, to promise her privately that all was well to her proceed. Any discussion of reservations needed to happen now. Once they began this, Remus told him, there was little hope of return without equal magical output.

This series of rituals and rites that would end in the Confarreatio, Harry had been told, was nothing like non-magical marriage. That was fine with him. All of his exposure to Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had rather painted a sour picture of that institution. Two days ago, Harry had been certain he would never marry.

Now, he couldn’t imagine anything other than being bound to Hermione.

Hermione snorted, “I’m sure that went swimmingly.”

“We were both gentleman.” Harry glanced at his shoes. The conversation had not been easy. He had but all been locked in a room with a man who loathed him. It hurt, because Adam Granger, as recently as four days ago, had been one of his closest male role models. He’d been a part of his life even when Sirius and Remus could not be there for him.

His disaffection hurt, but Hermione had to come first, and she always would be first in his priorities. Harry had made it clear that Adam could hate him all he liked, but that Hermione was blameless and did not deserve her father’s anger. “Though I think he wanted to hit me. I wouldn’t blame him if he had.”

“I would have done!” Hermione interjected, leaping to her feet. “No one should put their hands on another person in violence. Ever. If anyone ever hurts you, you’re have to promise me that--”

“Hermione.” Harry took two steps forward, and suddenly, Hermione was standing between him and the wall just to the side of the stone bench Hermione and her skirts had previously occupied.
The doorjamb was near to her back. Harry gently stepped to right so that the wooden frame wouldn’t dig into her back.

Hermione echoed his movement.

What he had intended to say flew out of the window, though the ante-chamber lacked them, and was lit instead by gas lamp sconces on the wall. He watched the words leave, leaving him with nothing but honesty. “I’ve thought about nothing but kissing you again since we left the den.”

Harry watched as the air left her lungs in a whoosh. He felt her inhale. “So kiss me again.”

“Can I?” His fingertips ghosted along her waist. The dress was so delicate that he didn’t dare touch it, though he loved the way she felt pressed up against him in it. “Please?”

“I think I might die if you don’t.” She smiled, and tilted her head, “Isn’t that funny? I never once let myself think about kissing you before then, and now...” She licked her lips, “Now I just want...” She tilted her head, as if to ask him wordlessly, if he knew what she did not say.

Harry swallowed. Remus was right. It was his job to start this journey off with the full truth. There were things about him not even Hermione knew. “Hermione, want to know a secret that no one else knows?”

“Wha--?” Hermione began.

Harry cut the word off, knowing that he had to tell her. He had to tell her when she was looking at him with something soft and unfathomable in her eyes. He owed her this vulnerability, this trust. She had never abused him before with his soft spots. She had only protected them, protected him, loved him, even as she had spent years working on his rough edges. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since I was twelve.”

Hermione’s eyes blew wide. Beyond the peace of speaking out his truth, Harry knew the pleasure of, for the first time in a long time, shocking her with information.

Slowly, a smile grew on Hermione’s face. It lit her tea-brown eyes. Harry felt a spark or two of magic zing off of her nimbus of hair, and resound with small thunks on the wall behind them.

Her magic thrummed underneath her hands when she reached out, and touched him, “If you waited this long, it seems I’ll just have to take initiative.”

Harry whispered along the shell of her ear. It was all he could do not to take the lobe into his mouth. He settled instead for pushing her hair off of her neck, and holding fast to her gaze, “Perhaps you should.”

“Hmm...” Hermione murmured, considering her choices with a languid ease and an impish smile. Harry realized that she was flirting with him, “Good things come to those who wait.”

Harry felt her sigh in every cell and atom of his body. He could do not to take the lobe into his mouth. He settled instead for pushing her hair off of her neck, and holding fast to her gaze, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Hermione.”

She forced her smiling lips into a frown. It didn’t hold. “There is that.” She agreed, “Far be it for me--” She broke off, “You know what? Just kiss me. I’ve decided.”

Never one to do what he was told in any exact fashion, Harry smiled. He’d just decided where to start kissing her when he heard a thunk from the other side of the door. Hermione arched against
him.

Harry weighed their options. Smoothing his hands down over her hips, he bent again to kiss her. The time for games and teasing was over. She was right. He could spend days, later, pressing kisses to the curve of her eyebrow, the pale curve of her jaw, the gentle furrows between her eyes, the graceful slope of her nose. Now, though, now, he just wanted above all else to give her what she wanted.

“Here we are at the main hall, Dr. Granger!” Sirius’ voice boomed, “I do think we will find Harry and Hermione in just under a minute! Yes, I do believe that we will see them as we cross the room and open that unwarded door. I daresay it’s about 15 steps, yes?”

Harry stepped back, dropping his hands from her body, biting back a curse.

Hermione laughed.

Harry mouthed, “Witch.”

Hermione’s eyes grew bright as she twirled her wand and whispered, “I could ward the door.”

It was too late. The door was opening.

Quick as lightning, Harry pressed a kiss to Hermione’s temple, and turned away to greet her father. Adam was still glaring.

Great.

Harry looked over at Hermione, who had thankfully pushed herself away from the wall. Her bearing was regal as she fought with her hair, and said, “Shall we, gentleman?”

Sirius replied, “I imagine the sooner you can put up your hair, the happier you’ll be.”

Hermione sniffed, and left the room, practically dragging her father with her. He clearly understood what Sirius had implied.

Harry passed Sirius in the narrow doorway, “Are you trying to get me in trouble with him?”

“You’re doing that well enough, I think.” Sirius replied, pulling the door shut as the left the ante-chamber behind, “You should have seen Hope’s face when she opened the door at Ebony Park. Remus was--”

Harry knew better than to listen to this sort of stuff. He hastened across the Hall, nearly tripping over the rug as he called, “Hey, Hermione!” She and Adam were almost to the door, almost to freedom from Sirius and his horrible stories. “Wait up!”

Hermione’s mind spun with thoughts and magic. Sirius was talking. She had to pay attention.

“...after the bit with the grand wizard, whom you shall just adore, you’ll get some time to change. Today, you’ll sign the ducenda and the tabula legitima.”

“Sirius.” Harry bit out, “We know. We’ll sign your documents and smile.” Harry was on edge, his body tense. Not for the first time, Hermione wondered what had gone on with Harry while she had been groomed within an inch of her sanity.

“He forgot dinner.” Hermione cut in, tapping her wand to cast a warming charm over herself. It was too cold to go out in a dress and little scraps of foundation garments, but she had done exactly
that. The cold seeped into the bottom of her light shoes as she stepped down the stone stairs at the
front of the Foundry, towards the perfectly manicured pathway to the chapel.

The sun was gone from the sky. It had to be after eight o’clock. If it got any darker, they’d need a
lantern. “Is it time to get on with this?”

“Did my parents have to do this?” Harry added, unbuttoning the clasps of his melton robes. He
dropped it over her shoulders gently, but without ceremony.

Hermione smiled in silent thanks, and lifted the hem from the ground with one hand. Her eyes
catched the engraving on one button. It read, *Eskhatos ekhthros katargeitai o thanatos*.

A light wind blew Hermione’s hair to and fro, but there was nothing for it.

“Are you serious? No, you can’t be. I’m Sirius.” Sirius joked, as they walked towards the chapel
on the grounds, “Your parents had a civil marriage. It drove your grandfather up a wall. He ranted
for days that it wasn’t even Catholic. Your grandmother was beside herself, spent a week doing a
novena and pleading. But your father insisted.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, knowing this walk would be endless without conversation.

“It was the 70s, darling.” Sirius lisped, likely just to annoy her father, “Things were much more
loosey goosey then. We did what we wanted and fucked the man. Or the wolf.”

“If it was good enough for his father, it should be good enough for him.” Dad inserted.

Hermione was incensed, but Sirius cut her off. He looked every inch the Pureblooded scion laying
down the truth, “I loved James, but James is not Harry. Harry is not James, and Hermione is not
Lily.” After a second, he concluded, “They are different people and these are different
circumstances. My son will have every advantage the law can provide him, as well you should
want for your daughter. No one will question this marriage, Mr. Granger. To do so after these
ceremonies would be to question the will of Merlin.”

Dad spoke before Hermione could advise him to keep such assertions to himself. “He is not your
son.”

“He is.” Sirius corrected. Whereas he had looked seconds ago like the the sophisticated man he
typically was, now Hermione knew they were facing the man that had lived in hell for over a
decade, and come out stronger. “He is, and question that again, my good sir, and you will find
yourself at wand point.”

Hermione did not have the energy to insert herself into this argument. She shared a glance with
Harry, and knew that he was hanging on to every word. Hermione had a good idea as to why he
looked so floored.

Hermione came to a dead stop when Harry looked around. She instantly reached for her wand.
Harry glanced back, almost as if he still expected to see Ron at his six.

Her father went to speak, but Hermione squeezed his arm, ready to throw him to the ground if the
wards had been breached.

Hermione stepped forward, unsure what foe they were facing. Her hand fisted in Harry’s cloak.

Harry exhaled, “Where are Teddy and Remus?”
“Well...” Sirius drawled, “I did wonder when you two would get around to asking about them.”

“Sirius.” Hermione scolded, shoving her windblown hair back behind her head. She had been forbidden to charm it into place. She spat out a long strand.

“Well...” Hermione began, as Harry quickly looked away, pretending obviously, to see something in the distance. To busy himself, she handed him his robes back. He shrugged them on as she addressed her father, “I can’t pretend that your unhappiness will change my path, but it has made it much tougher.”

“Hermione.” Her father drew in a breath, “I am watching my daughter, whom I have just remembered I love more anyone in this world, enter more deeply into a society I cannot via customs I do not understand. I don’t even know how to say goodbye to you.” He shook his head, “You cannot understand my pain, either of you, but I beg you, try.”

Hermione swallowed thickly.

Harry stepped onto the landing, and took Hermione’s hand. “We will not forget, sir.”

“Potter.” Hermione got the idea that her father was using the title and not his name, “If you clip her wings, I will end you.”

“Teddy’ll be there, Hermione.” Sirius assured her, “You two are supposed to be prayerfully contemplating your souls.” Sirius intoned, as they went up the stone stairs of the chapel.

He pulled open the door that had runes carved deeply into the wood, and added, “Go stand in the center of the circle when you’re ready. Touch nothing.”

“Your Moomy is with Dr. Mrs. Granger.” Sirius shot a look at her father.

Hermione silently begged her father not to give in to the taunt. She stopped once again as they came to the smaller stone staircase of the chapel. It had been built by Hardwin Potter when he had renovated the estate. “We can’t get betrothed without Teddy. It isn’t right.”

He pulled open the door that had runes carved deeply into the wood, and added, “Go stand in the center of the circle when you’re ready. Touch nothing.”

“Daddy--” Hermione began, as Harry quickly looked away, pretending obviously, to see something in the distance. To busy himself, she handed him his robes back. He shrugged them on as she addressed her father, “I can’t pretend that your unhappiness will change my path, but it has made it much tougher.”

“Hermione.” Her father drew in a breath, “I am watching my daughter, whom I have just remembered I love more anyone in this world, enter more deeply into a society I cannot via customs I do not understand. I don’t even know how to say goodbye to you.” He shook his head, “You cannot understand my pain, either of you, but I beg you, try.”

Hermione wanted to cry out that his soul was not black. He was not dark. And yet, she held her peace, knowing that she was seeing a mere echo of the conversation they’d had earlier.

Her father’s jaw worked. Finally, he nodded.

Hermione threw her arms around her father. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, H.J., more than you will ever know.” Dad replied, before stepping back, “I’ll go inside with Mum, now.”

Hermione brushed away her tears. Her heart broke. Harry would never again, never again, question if he had a family that loved him. “I only wish you had been able to...”
“Hermione.” Harry cleared his throat, “Sirius called me his son, in front of your father.”

Hermione pushed to her toes and kissed his cheek, before slipping in through the doors.

Hermione felt a sense of calm wash over her. She knew it wasn’t magical, only the calm of being sure of her actions. Magic and candlelight was thick around them. Hermione entered in the circle as Harry entered from the opposite boundary, staring at her face as though he’d never seen her before.

To still her pounding heart, Hermione sat on her stool in the center of the circle, and snuck a look at the people slowly coming to formation around them. Rookwood, Sirius, Remus. Her mum, her Dad. Teddy. Neville. Augusta. After a long moment, Winky popped in, as proud as a peacock in a freshly pressed dress, brown wool with a little tatted lace collar.

Harry was sitting beside her, so she nudged him, and mouthed against his ear, “Winky!”

As though she knew she exactly when their eyes fell upon her in observation, Winky waggled her fingers at them. Hermione felt, absurdly, a laugh bubbling up in her chest.

To their left, the crowd parted, and Professor, no, Hermione corrected herself, Headmistress McGonagall entered the circle. Harry blinked at her, and Hermione tilted her head slightly to mutter in his ear, “Grand Witch. Officiant.”

It hurt to think that somehow, when thinking about this, Hermione had seen Dumbledore at the altar with them. For all her issues with Dumbledore, she had loved him, and he was missed in these big moments as much as she missed seeing him daily at breakfast in garish robes.

Unbidden, Hermione felt Harry take her hand. His palm was sweaty. His robes brushed against her, and she considered that he was likely roasting his muggle suit and robes. Hermione only wished her hair would stop flying everywhere.

McGonagall smiled at her, and Hermione knew all would be well, as long as Harry’s hand was in hers.

Something shifted in the air, and McGonagall spoke, “The sponsalia is not required under law, and yet it is one of our most sacred marital customs.” McGonagall was a teacher, bent on educating, “This is because as nova petantur, or a newly promised couple, Hermione and Harry will spend the remaining days of their engagement as a betrothed couple, focusing intently and seriously on each other as they prepare to become a family. This is the first step in opening their minds, magics, and hearts to one another.”

McGonagall paused, “At this time, I call upon the loved ones of Harry and Hermione to affirm their desire for and suitability for the institution of marriage.”

She looked to Hermione’s parents, “Helen and Adam, do you vow before these assembled that your daughter is of age to enter into marriage, that she is free of commitments to another, and there is, between you, a mutual accord to grow your family by welcoming Harry as you would a son?”

Hermione froze.

After a moment, her parents spoke as one, “We affirm these things with glad hearts.”

Then, in the same fashion, McGonagall looked to Sirius and Remus. “Remus and Sirius, in the stead of the beloved gone on before you, do you vow before these assembled that your son is of
Hermione felt a happy sense of surprise when, after obtaining their vow, McGonagall continued, “Typically, we do not involve minors in any facet of a sponsalia. However, it is clear to me that Hermione and Harry would never proceed without the express blessing of one Edward Remus Lupin.” Breaking with tradition, McGonagall looked towards Teddy, who looked alert as he rested on his Padfoot’s hip.

Smiling, she addressed him. Hermione felt no compunction about leaning into Harry to better hear Teddy’s small voice. “Edward--”

“Teddy!” He called out, primly correcting his future headmistress and occasional babysitter.

“Teddy?” The headmistress was chastened properly, “Do you understand that Harry and Hermione love you very much? Do you know that, because they are getting married, you and Papa and Padfoot will be a part of their family, always?”

“Yes!” He called out, having clearly rehearsed this, “Crooky, too.”

Hermione gathered by the laughter that began with Remus, that Crooky had not been part of Ted’s practice. Hermione could not help but laugh.


“As the blessings pour out upon you, now is the time for you to affirm your consent to one another.” McGonagall addressed Harry and Hermione.

McGonagall stepped aside to stop obstructing the stone altar that was normally in front of the room when the chapel was in its normal Catholic configuration, where it normally rested up a flight of stairs behind rails.

“Thus this place has been purified for a rite of sponsalia.” McGonagall, then, had done these rituals. “Come now Hermione Jane and Harry James to this altar to declare faithfully before God and those assembled that you willingly give your consent to this union.”

At McGonagall’s behest, Harry stood, placed the bouquet of lilies that Remus handed him onto the stone altar. From Sirius he took a stick of incense, and lit it with the sacred flame on the center of the altar. After a moment, he spoke, “Upon my magic, I declare that I do willingly consent to take Hermione to be my wife.”

Hermione noted, as if having an out of body experience, that his voice was clear and strong. Hermione jolted when it became clear that he’d turned to stare at her with magic and emotion in his gaze. The flame glinted in the lenses of his glasses. “Come now, Hermione, with your consent, that this accord will not be shamed. Let it not be lawful for us to willingly separate without equal accord and assent.”

Hermione stood, her spine rigid, her magic crackling in the air.

And then Augusta was there, a firm hand on her arm after she had risen. From Hermione’s mother, she took a bouquet of lilies, and passed them into Hermione’s arms. Hermione smiled when she lit them aflame. The insolence that came from her father was laid next to Harry’s smoldering incense. For good measure, she crossed the sticks.
Hermione exhaled. She looked at her left hand, and slowly, with purpose, held her hand just above where the flame danced in the chalice.

As she spoke, she felt the heat on her hand above the flame. It was almost uncomfortable, but wasn’t searing. It was a test of her truthfulness, bound to her magic. No witch stuck her hand over a ritual flame without honest intentions, lest she go up in flames. “Upon my magic, I, Hermione Jane, declare that I do willingly give my consent to take Harry James to be my husband.”

Hermione never once worried she’d go up in flames. She wanted this, wanted Harry. She was worried that she wanted more than he wanted to give, but their interactions in the ante-chamber told her, that perhaps, and just perhaps, they both were changing their minds, independently, and yet, together.

Hermione sat again, her knees jelly.

McGonagall removed a veil from a scale that had been on the altar since their entrance. Her father stood, and Hermione watched with interest as he entered the circle to stand before them.

He first handed Harry a coin, an old coin that Hermione was certain had no actual value. He handed her a second coin as soon as Harry had palmed his own. Finally, he hesitated, and then handed Harry the third coin.

Hermione handed Harry her coin, and watched as McGonagall led him to place them one by one on the scale. When the scale tipped, Harry handed her her own coin, placed his on the alter, and handed her father the final coin.

Hermione understood why her shoes had no straps when her father offered her his hand. Hermione took it, and this shift in her weight allowed Harry to slide, once again, to his knees, and divest her of her right shoe. Hermione felt his touch with a hot blush as he put the coin in her shoe. Hermione felt him whisper a word, and knew what it was when she stepped down, and the metal coin felt like a pillow.

Cushioning charm, then.

Dad extended Harry a hand, and symbolically helped him to his feet, marking him as worthy. Seemingly satisfied, her father stepped back. He then reached out towards a bundle Mum held in her arms. It was a stuffed animal Hermione had owned for ages. It was not a beloved one, but it was one she remembered.

She heard Sirius whispering to Teddy to cuddle his Padfoot. Hermione knew then that the ugly stuffed animal was going up in flames. It was not something anyone wanted a toddler to see. It would be like burning up his own stuffed bear.

It did just that, even as her father lit the creature with a long match. In days gone by, the toy might not have been lit. For magical people, the fire was an intention that held power. Her father was affirming her transition from daughter to bride.

Her father again reached out to her mother, who stepped into the circle and handed Hermione a small spindle. Hermione squeezed her mother’s hand. There were no words for the symbolism in these moments, both personally and in general.

Remus stepped forward again, to pass a scroll to Mum, who passed it to McGonagall. After casting a spell that opened the scroll and made it rigid, McGonagall spoke, “The tabula legitima will now be signed by both Hermione and Harry, as it has affirmed by their families as being free of errors or
coercion, signifying their intent to marry in due course. This document is merely a document of intent, and is an act of good faith and a symbol of the mutual accord we have cultivated tonight.”

Hermione took the golden quill that was floating in the air. It was a charmed quill. The ink would not flow unless their minds and hearts were in agreement with the document. Balancing the spindle in her other hand, Hermione signed. For the first time in her life, she left an ink blot as she wrote, for one of the last times, Hermione Jane Granger.

She knew in that moment that she had to talk to Harry about a small change the contract. There was a lot they needed to talk about, but if things went as she hoped and prayed they might, the more morganatic elements of the bond might not be so fundamental.

She wanted to be the person of her heart. She wanted to be the woman who had grown from the love and support she’d been blessed with tonight. Irrationally, she wanted to sign her married name as Hermione Jane Granger-Potter. Well, Hermione Jane Granger, Duchess of Potter. That, however, would require a discussion and some thinking, but Hermione was set on hyphenating.

After Harry quickly signed the document, as simply Harry James of Potter, he turned to her. Hermione let him brush a strand of hair out of her eyes, and her heart grew three sizes when Teddy toddled over to them with a simple wooden casket. It opened as it floated up to Harry’s side.

McGonagall took the ring before Hermione saw it, and spoke in Latin, her brogue coming out. Hermione did not know what she was saying, and frankly, she did not care. Augusta came forward, and took Hermione’s right hand. She turned it upward, and back again, and then placed it into Harry’s right hand.

Something jolted in Hermione’s lower belly. It felt like magic, like light. Blindly, she realized her chakras were all open, and her magical core was bubbling with emotion and energy. Part of what she was feeling had to be Harry’s own magic.

Remus had to pull Teddy into his lap before he grabbed her skirts, but Hermione thought it was sweet. Harry then took her left hand more firmly, as they stood, both hands grasping, a circle within a circle within a circle.

His own hand was trembling slightly as he accepted the ring from their former head of house, though Hermione saw a bald honest and resolve in his eyes. “To thee I pledge my troth...”

Hermione wanted nothing more than to hug him, to burrow into his arms and let the emotion of this moment settle between them.

She wanted.

She wanted.

Hermione forced herself to look away from his eyes, and watch the ritual. Hermione had the shock of her life when she looked at the ring. It was a slim, delicate, platinum band. Upon the band, there rested an unmistakable ruby. The setting was different now, the band was slimmer, the diamonds arranged differently around the center stone, but Hermione knew without a doubt from where this ring had come.

Hermione realized suddenly that she had asked for hawkable wedding rings. She’d said absolutely nothing about the origins of her engagement ring. Harry had, it seemed, found a way to do what he
wanted. Hermione’s heart filled with a new hope, deep within the wonder of the magic and the solemnity of the moment.

Harry first put the ring on her index finger, whereupon he said, “in body and mind,"

And then he slipped the ring free, and slid it slightly upon her middle finger, “soul...”

Finally, he slid it gently home on her ring finger with the final words, “And magic.”

It magically tightened to fit, though the change was so slight that Hermione barely felt it. Her heart was pounding and her focus was wholly on the feeling of Harry’s hand in hers and the weight of the ring on her finger.

“Nubo.” Hermione intoned softly, feeling each of her chakras open wider still as magic flowed between their clasped hands like electricity on a wire. A great deal of magic filled the circle, and Hermione relished the feeling of their magic, intermingled, around her.

McGonagall was again speaking, blessing them. Hermione heard nothing. She only felt her heartbeat, and knew that Harry’s matched hers perfectly.

After a moment, Hermione closed her eyes and let the magic flow around them. She knew she would never again have a moment like this, not if she lived for a thousand years. This was, without a doubt, the start of their bond, so fundamental that it defied categorization as an act of romantic love. It was so much deeper and more unshakable than that, even at this first brush of their magics.

As her eyes fluttered open, Harry turned over her hand, and Hermione watched, enthralled, as he placed his lips upon her open palm.

Hermione’s mouth fell open. Sparks flew from her fingertips. Her toes curled.

The simple action was so filled with a sensuous grace and the promise of future intimacies that Hermione’s previous understanding of what it meant to be one flesh seemed to be fleeting shadows in the face of this knowledge.

She reached out to do...something, when she felt a firm hand on her shoulder. It was her mother. Her mother.

What was she doing here?

Hermione shook her head.

She spoke sternly, “Hermione.”

At the same time, Sirius had gripped Harry, and was tossing an arm over his shoulder. All Hermione heard him say was, “Not now, not yet.” Sirius stressed, “Do you hear me? Not. Yet.”

Hermione jolted, forcing her gaze away from Harry’s eyes.

The circle was broken. The women, even McGonagall, were looking at her expectantly.

“I can’t...” It was all too much. The thought of walking away was unfathomable. Her magic had marked this place. It was hers, and Harry’s, theirs together.

Harry reached out to her.
Hermione tried to brush past her mother.

“Granger!” McGonagall barked, “Potter! You will do as you are told. Or I vow, you’ll be scrubbing Longbottom’s cauldrons with Filch even after your grandchildren have left my care. March!”

Harry laughed, and Hermione knew it would be okay.

It seemed a fitting end to this ceremony.

She went back to her room, although she did not march. She stood limply, feeling invigorated and blissful, as the dress was removed gently from her body and packed away in stasis. Hermione could not resist touching it, one last time, as Petra folded stasis-enhancing tissue paper over the transfigured dress. The box lid, Hermione noted, bore another H&H.

“You see why you need to change, my girl?” Augusta murmured, smoothing her crackling hair back from her face, “Your magic is within the fibers, now. To wear it out now would be profane, a violation of your sacredness.”

Hermione felt a pale blue Hugo Boss number slipping over her head. Suddenly, a question came to mind. It seemed very important. “It’s permissible to cover my hair now, correct?”

Both witches in the room faltered. Her mother was looking at her as though she was Fluffy’s long lost sister. Hermione didn’t care. She only felt...felt...

The mirror on the dressing table shook. The cheval glass creaked as the coverlet from Hermione’s neat bed rose into the air. The gas lamps flickered.

McGonagall gently considered her, “Your magic is pouring out of you, isn’t it?”

Hermione only knew she felt better when two of the windows shattered. Hermione did not notice the shield charm protecting them all from the shards of glass.

McGonagall moved into action without waiting for a reply, “Gussie, ward the room.” Hermione swayed and papers flew from her desk hitting the wall with enough force to crack the plaster. She added, “Ward the bloody wing.”

Hermione gathered that it was her or their magic that was swirling around them, making the lights flicker, glass shatter and fly everywhere, and the curtains dance. Her heavy hair was finally being lifted from her sweaty neck and a breeze from the shattered window flew around her. “Hm. Feels good.”

The lights went out with finality, and Hermione heard the flood of water spilling from broken pipes in the hall. Hermione crumpled into a chair like a as the warded doors and windows shook. A brick from the fireplace flew free, and shot clean through one of the windows that hadn’t shattered.

Hermione felt the crackle in her fingers, in her toes, and knew why married women covered their hair. Her magic was one with the Universe in this moment, reaching out for Harry's own magic, and it was escaping through her crown chakra. Had she looked, she knew she would have seen her hair floating around her on end in a halo of power.

Hermione knew nothing but the rush of energy that consumed her.

Urgently, she felt a cold rag on her face. “Hermione, visualize that magic that’s calling out, right
now. I want you to put it all in a box.” McGonagall’s brogue had returned, “Every bit of it. Then I want you to take that box, and I want you to wrap it up in a fabric that feels comfortable to your soul.”

“I can’t.” Hermione cried, watching her bed curtains ripple as if blown by a wind, and the decanters Petra had placed on her dressing table rattle and clatter. Her body shook. “Please don’t make me.”

“We’ll do it together, you and I, hmm?” McGonagall patted her sweaty hair. Hermione vaguely felt her mother monitoring her heart rate, felt her dumping icy water over Hermione, heedless of the brand new dress she wore.

McGonagall led her through a visualization, step by step, and when they were done, Hermione was shaking from the force of her will. Mum was still there, her face calm in what she thought to be something of a medical crisis. Hermione could always trust her mother to be strident in the face of something others would find terrifying.

Hermione smiled, and realized that the wind shaking the very furniture around her had slowed.

After another long moment, it halted. McGonagall spoke, “Sit for a moment, Miss Granger, and breathe.”

“What’s wrong with my daughter, Augusta?” Hermione dimly heard her mother speaking as she rested, with her eyes closed. “Her physiological responses were…”

Hermione faded, and floated, hearing no more.

McGonagall looked away, and whispered, “Like found like. Merlin help us.”

“That’s good, right?” Mrs. Granger said, “It means glad tidings for them.”

“It is clear that we have vastly discredited their combined power. What you just saw was a small sliver of your daughter’s magic I didn’t dampen at the close of the ceremony. It was meant to begin, slowly and quite superficially, in keeping with their intent for their marriage, begin their union.” McGonagall noted, “It is a bloody good thing their wedding is in mere days.”

Augusta was puzzled. There was nothing superficial about their will, nor their power. What did Minerva mean? Whatever their stated intent, Augusta was certain that Merlin himself was at work between the couple.

Never had she seen such a bond. It could only be fate.

An hour later, Hermione felt totally cool and composed. Her dress, left in the capable hands of Petra, had been refreshed back to new.

Heeding Augusta’s warning, she was very careful not to touch Harry. She had been told that in eons past, couples were forcibly removed from the first ceremony and did not meet again until they stood before each other at the altar once again.

She understood. But mostly, mostly, she was glad that she had the chance to talk to Harry. It was less than ideal to do this in a room full of people that seemed intent on interrupting them every five seconds, but Hermione knew they wouldn’t be allowed to leave the gallery, alone or together.
From the second the circle was broken, the both had chaperones.

Harry looked at her as though he wanted to swallow her whole. He had placed a plate of food in front of her. Hermione forced herself to swallow a few bites before putting her fork down. “Was it hard for you?” She whispered.

Harry’s gaze was honest. “Remus had to hold me down. Before I could get control, I blasted a few holes in the walls.” He swallowed thickly, “I’m sorry, Hermione.”

“Don’t...don’t you...” Hermione could not force out the question. She could not, would not, give voice to the questions in her heart, not at once. This needed to be a conversation, not an interrogation.

*I think we’re soul mates. I don’t know how I ever doubted it. Will you marry me, really, really? Can we grow old together? Can we build a future, one based on commitment and choice?*

Finally, Hermione settled on a question. It was badly worded, she knew, leading. “You don’t think we are blessed?”

Lady Longbottom had kissed her forehead and told her as much. Some totally irrational part of Hermione believed it when she had once again looked into Harry’s eyes.

“Blessings in my life have always turned to curses, Hermione.” Harry said thickly, “Why should this be different?”

Hermione felt a rage and a pain in her soul unlike any she had ever known. Her eyes filled with tears. She fought every urge to run from the room. Instead, she sipped her tea. Harry was so close, and yet there was a wall between them. She ached.

Harry’s eyes had also filled with tears.

“What do you mean? I--” Hermione knew part of being an adult was being honest, come what may, so she said, “Harry, you need to know, before you say anything else that I--”

Suddenly, then, there was a chant around them, as then people in the room gathered around the small table. “Dei fortunam apportent!”

*God is bringing good fortune!*

They called, laughing and joyous, “Dei fortunam apportent!”

*God is bringing good fortune!*

Hermione colored brightly, anger welling within her. She needed to talk to him, they needed to go away, because her thoughts were not to be borne, not for one second longer.

“Dei fortunam apportent!” They called.

*God is bringing good fortune!*

Augusta broke something over her head, and took her hand and passed it to her mother. In tandem, as the room filled with chants, Harry too was pulled to his feet. They were led in a complex pattern across the wide span of the west gallery, in sight of one another, but never close, not touching. The movement of their feet was meant to be rhythmic.

Hermione had no idea what she was doing. This dancing, moving, ritualistic, processional had
never been mentioned to her, nor covered in any volume she’d read. Unlike Harry, with his seeker’s grace, she stumbled once or twice as her feet crossed over one another, as she was spun in a circle of women. Augusta kept her on her feet, as they moved faster, faster, and faster.

Faster. Faster. Faster. So fast that she was panting and nearly falling over with every turn. Her chest heaved against the confines of her dress. Spinning, spinning, spinning.

Hermione was panting when they slowed, and their final chant of, “Dei fortunam apporrent!” echoed in her ears. The whole group of people gathered around, pressing around her until she was nearly pushed forward over a small, dark wooden table.

She looked ahead then, and saw Harry, looking bewildered, at the other side of the small table between them. The table was carved with runes. There was a magical carving in the inlay of precious materials that read: *Toujours Pur.*

Hermione stood, staring at Harry, as Sirius Black signed their ducenda. Harry’s expression was unfathomable, filled with pain.

Her father took the quill, and without the benefit of years of practice with a quill or magic to fake competency with the implement, he signed his name. Then Remus signed. Finally, her mother signed it.

On and on this went, as each person in the room affixed their signature to the document, either as the Grand Witch, or as a witness. Winky looked so very proud to be asked to be a part of their witnesses that Hermione’s heart burst.

When Teddy reached out to make his own mark, Remus covered his tiny hand with his own, and guided Teddy through his name.

Finally, finally, after so many looking at her with bright eyes, all eyes were on Harry as he very correctly took the quill. Hermione watched him dip the quill and watched him scribble with his usual ease onto the parchment.

The ornate document rotated. Hermione scanned it, its gilded edges and letters looking as though it had been made by a monk who was friends with Hildegard of Bingen. Hermione saw the blank line with her name printed ornately underneath it.

Hermione saw that Harry had, for the first time she’d seen, written his name with his titles. He was Potter. Hermione felt an icy dispassion race through her veins. They were doing this to save one another. The fact that she had, somehow, fallen in love with him over the years and only knew it now didn’t matter.

More fool her for believing it to be real, be a bonding for the right reasons, for even a single moment.

More fool her for dreaming of trips to the Library of Alexandria, and whispered words of love that still rang true after a 150 years together.

More fool her of thinking about debates over politics, and what to name their babies, and where to send them to primary school.

More fool her for wanting a slobbery labrador named Churchill, and for dreaming of changing the world, together.

More fool Hermione.
“Blessings in my life have always turned to curses, Hermione.” Harry had said thickly, “Why should this be different?”

Hermione knew him too well to be ignorant of his meaning. This might look and feel like a blessing, but in Harry’s mind, the illusion would fade away, and they’d be left staring at a curse. The curse of being bound, irrevocably, to one another.

Silence echoed in the room.

Hermione did not know where to look. Was she doing the right thing? Was her salvation going to damn her to a living hell of loving a husband who never intended to love her? Was being soul mates, being soul bound, to a man who believed their present happiness not something to be cultivated, but something to watch fade, expecting it to die like flowers after the frost, her own private hell?

With dawning realization, Hermione signed her legal name carefully, and watched as the parchment glowed.

Her heart was torn in two in her chest as she, very correctly, faced Sirius and Harry, who were, as custom dictated, standing alone on the other side of the table. They had stepped to the left as the parchment glowed. With effortless ease brought on by years of practice at her Nana’s knee, Hermione dropped into a wordless curtsy.

It was not a muggle convention. A muggle might only curtsy to the Queen. Most didn’t even know how to do it properly. Hermione’s Nana had bemoaned that fact, and insisted Hermione learn. Witches, however, witches in this blasted society, whose fate hinged upon what man they married, curtsied to their titled husbands as a matter of course.

This gesture was the province of witches. She bent her knee, but refused to drop her gaze.

She thought, “If I am a curse, then damn you to hell with me, Potter.” No doubt the thought echoed loudly, if Sirius was listening for it.

Sirius looked shocked. He’d heard her, then.

Harry looked...

Hermione did not know, and she did not care. After a slow five-count, she rose to the exclamations of their witnesses, “Dei fortunam apportent!”

Harry stepped forward.

Hermione fled through the door behind Sirius as it burst open with a push of her magic.

Hermione, once she had exited the gallery, flew on pounding feet and rustling skirts to her room. She made no bones about dashing to the library, in through the side door, and running down the wide room, running as fast as her feet would carry her. She found her way to the double staircase in the library, and ran up the the carpeted stairs, tripping over the landing and nearly falling to her knees.

Hermione was a warrior, and she remained standing. She ran until the floor shifted from wood to stone, to wood once again.

Hermione bolted into her room. She knew it was cowardly, not to sit there with him and listen to
the speeches that extolled upon the virtues of marriage that were customary after the signing. She knew it was cowardly to walk away. She knew it was missish to run.

She knew that, later, later, they would have to talk and put their cards on the table, painful though she knew it would be. She resolved that, no matter how painful, there would be no secrets between them.

Not now. Not now. Now, all she wanted to do was mourn. All she wanted to do was mourn the loss of her dreams, the loss of her hopes. He had taught her a painful lesson, one she had never known before.

Once she curled up on the center of her bed, she buried her face in Crooky’s fur, and sobbed as her heart broke anew.

Hermione Granger was in love with Harry Potter.

That love, Hermione realized, was cursed, not because it would end. It was cursed because, in any way that really mattered, it had never been allowed to begin. It wasn’t something that was left to the fates. It was something they made, together, something they chose, together.

Without hope, trust, and a good deal of work ethic, love was nothing. Nothing.

And yet, Hermione knew that, even without these things, she loved him still.

More fool Hermione.

“What in Merlin’s name happened?” Sirius blustered, the fire in the library to his back. “She destroyed an entire wing of the house with her power and her will, and not two hours later, she looked like a battered church mouse!”

Harry was shaking as he paced behind the chairs in front of the fire. “Why would she do that? That...” he waved his arms about, thinking of that curtsy, “Wasn’t Hermione. She’d spit in somebody’s eye before bending her knee to anyone.”

“Gentleman.” Remus inserted, before the discussion again grew heated, “Hermione is not one to act with good reasons. The question is, what was her reason, and who gave it to her?”

“She hardly said two words to me. She asked me if ‘it’ was hard for me.” Harry continued, “I thought she meant all of the magic opening up, so I told her that I’d busted out some walls, and that I was sorry.”

He paused for a second, “Then she told me that she needed to tell me something before we went any further.” Harry’s voice dropped, “I think now that she was asking me if doing this was hard. Not the bonding we began, but the fact that we started it at all.”

“Oh.” Remus followed up, “What did you say then?”

“I was shocked.” Harry sank to a chair, “I want her in my life, so much. So much. And when I felt her magic when she sat down, it was a thousand times more intense than any spell work we’ve ever done, and better. God.” Harry breathed.

Sirius and Remus both knew well what he meant when he said, "For the first time in my life, I knew that nothing was missing, or ever would be once the bonding is done. She’s been the missing pieces of my life, my soul, and I never saw that because she’s always been there.”
He looked at his lap, “She’s going to leave me. She’s going to overturn this law. And then she will find someone she loves...and...” Harry looked up with tears in his eyes, “It isn’t me. But I’m Harry Potter. I get two moments of happiness, and then I spend the rest of my life paying for it. Blessings turn to curses. That should be my motto.”

Sirius put two and two together, and, frustratingly, came up with four. “Tell me, for the love of your muggle Christ, Harry, that you did not tell your sponsa, merely an hour after your Sponsalia, that you felt the blessings in your life become curses?”

“Wh--” Harry spluttered, “I can always be honest with Hermione. She’s Hermione.”

Sirius’ voice was inscrutable. “Do you know what your promised bride was thinking as she bent her knee before you?”

“Sirius, tell me you weren’t listening.” Remus sighed.

“It was a good thing I was, Moony, because Hermione looked Harry in the eye and thought, and I quote, ‘If I am a curse, then damn you to hell with me, Potter.’”

The revelation shocked the inhabitants of Harry’s study.

“I didn’t tell her she was a curse!” Harry swore, “I never would. Hermione knows...”

Remus interjected. “What exactly started the conversation, Harry?”

“She asked me if I thought we were blessed.” Harry revealed, “And I said that blessings in my life always become curses. I told her that I didn’t think this would be any different.”

It was true, too. His time with Hermione was nothing short of blissful. It would end, though. It would end, and Harry would once again be left standing with only the tatters of a life. He knew the indescribable joy of having a family, and paid for it with war and yet more death.

God only knew how he would pay for this. Likely by loving her, and being alone in the depth of his love. Harry rather thought he’d rather face a cadre of death eaters.

“Oh, Harry.” Remus smiled, “You can’t understand what was all around you tonight, can you? You don’t think it was your magic that broke those windows?”

“Sure, you said it was.” Harry shrugged. Remus never lied. He was like Hermione like that, always trying to use his knowledge to help people.

“And it was, to a point, just as the same holds true for Hermione.” Remus began, “But the real backlash of power was not found in you as individuals, but your combined power and your free choice to begin to develop a shared intent and united will.” Remus smiled sadly, “Weren’t you listening to the Headmistress when she finished the ceremony?”

“No.” Harry admitted, “I couldn’t think...”

Sirius snorted, “You still can’t, Harry.”

“What?” Harry’s gaze jumped from his lap to his Godfather. Now was the time when he needed parental support, not censure.

Sirius explained, “Your sponsa, your best friend, your Hermione, was trying to tell you that she knows your marriage is blessed by Merlin, Circe, and the Blessed Virgin, and you tossed it her
face and told her it was cursed."

"Hermione’s logical.” Harry began, “She doesn’t...”

“She does.” Remus corrected, “With you. Her faith is unshakable. Her faith in you is unshakable.”

“I don’t—” Harry began, shaking his head. He had never known how to handle her loyalty, except to try every moment that he lived to be worthy enough of it. He had never felt that he truly could.

“Circe’s knickers, Harry.” Sirius exclaimed, “She loves you.”

“Of course she loves me.” Harry agreed, knowing they loved each other, even if it was no longer the same kind of love. He thought it could be, but Harry just didn’t know if his heart and soul could survive the risk, “I love her, too.”

Sirius sighed, a smile tugging at his lips. “How do muggles say this, Rem?”

His own bonded replied, “I believe you’ve forgotten the operative word, Pads.”

After a long moment, Remus offered it up, leaving the joking aside. “She’s in love with you, Harry. She even wants to marry you. Imagine that?”

Harry could. He really, really, could. In that moment, he knew what Hermione had been trying to say, and how much his inability to let go of his fears long enough to see what was in front of his face had hurt her. He knew how much his words must have cut into her.

She had been trying to tell him that she was in love with him, and he had, once again, stuck his foot in his mouth because of his hangups.

“Well, you didn’t have to be so blunt, Moony.” Sirius spoke when he did not, “Our boy is young. He’s processing. Obviously he can’t possibly know if he loves her enough to want to accept his soul mate in the fullness of their bond or not. Better just call the whole thing--”

“You have made your point.” Harry ground out, “I’ve got to talk to her.”

Harry raced for the door, his tie flying over his shoulder as he did so.

Sirius spoke as they heard Harry’s footfalls flying down the corridor toward the back staircase. “Moony, I put Teddy to bed. It’s your turn to go after the children.”

“I’m not telling him she’s enclosure.” Remus looked at him over his glasses as he had for decades, “You tell him. You’re the one who insisted on a customary wedding.”

Sirius considered Moony’s words. Discretion was the better part of valor, after all. He made no move to leave, “Ten galleons on him breaking the enclosure within 24 hours?”

Remus shook his head, “He only has two days to do it.”

“Well, I’m giving him a bit of extra time.” Sirius put his boots up on the table, and scooted over to make room on the chaise. “It’s going to take him a while to figure out that his beloved is not at the Foundry.”

Remus plopped down next to him. “Augusta is taking her to Snoedyn?”

“I do believe so.” Sirius carded his fingers through his Moony’s hair, feeling scars along his skull
that he would go to his grave regretting that he had not been there to prevent them.

After a long moment, Sirius sighed, “We are two old men, Remus.”

“Maybe you are.” Remus returned, not moving from where he was leaning against Sirius’s shoulder, “I’m assured by a very formidable toddler that I am not yet 5 years old.”

“Twenty years ago, we’d already be naked.” Sirius noted, though really, there was something unfathomably better about sharing the day with him, about finally being at peace long enough to squabble over the chocolate frog stash, and take walks with Teddy, and give Harry a future that looked bright, and filled with things Sirius had never truly had for himself.

Remus never missed the opportunity for a joke. “I don’t think the Drs. Granger would have approved of a sky clad bonding.”

“Remus.” Sirius nudged him under the chin, his tongue laving along the five o’clock shadow Remus could never quite escape, “Remember what we did after our Sponsalia? I almost feel bad for them. Sneaking out of the speeches was the best part.”

“I’ll go rustle up some chocolate.” Remus smiled, lost in a memory that time had not tarnished, only made more precious. “You go and check on Teddy and find Harry before he obliterates his house.”

Sirius flopped off the chaise, and hopped to his feet. “This is why we need a nanny.”

Remus wasn’t the one who had always refused a nanny. The blame therein lay entirely with Mr. Padfoot. Dora, bless her, had agreed with Sirius. He missed her, and wished, even though they had been happy in their way, that he’d had more to give her. She had deserved more. “And have them like someone else more than they like you?”

“Impossible.” Sirius was filled with a bravado that Remus knew wouldn’t be there once he’d cuddled Teddy again, “Moonies and all the derivatives thereof are genetically inclined to like me best.”

“And Potters?” Remus asked, as they exited Harry’s study and began to walk down the hall.

They both knew full well that Remus was asking Sirius how he was holding up. This was a change for him, for them, too. The Grangers were understandably upset, but Remus knew that they could never know the ache that came with watching a boy that had once been so emotionally abused stepping up to take a risk on love.

“Well, I suppose he can like Hermione best.” Sirius was so magnanimous that it made Remus smile, “Until she nags him too much.”

“Are you serious, Sirius?” Remus returned, pausing only to turn down the gas lamps, “He loves to hear her nag.”

Sirius sniffed, taking his hand once again, “The same does not hold true for Blacks.”

“Sure it does.” Remus corrected, leaning against his partner as they walked.

Sirius pursed his lips, “What do you mean?”

Remus had been saving this tidbit for the bonding day, when he knew Sirius would need a pick-up, but now seemed as good a time as any. The next few days were going to be hard for Harry, and
they would need every bit of their resolve to help him through. “Well, doesn’t Hermione remind you of someone you know?”

“She’s nothing like Lily, I’m sorry to say.”

“No...”

Hermione really wasn’t much like Lily, not beyond the superficial. Lily had been smart, but not anything like Hermione’s own insatiable genius. Lily had been social and graceful, even her early years, keen for fun and surrounded by friends. All of those things had been stolen from Hermione, and had left behind a serious young woman, made regal by the secrets carried and the duties she held.

“Moons!” Sirius got it in one. “He married a girl just like his Moomy.”

Remus was suddenly filled with sadness. He hoped that the young couple filling their thoughts would learn from the mistakes of others. They would need every bit of insight they could get to survive the coming days.

Anyone who said being soul mates made things easier was a liar. Remus thought back over their mistakes, the first of which had been a lack of communication. He was pleased to see that, maybe, just maybe, the kids wouldn’t make the same mistakes.

Still, he knew they would make their own, and learn from them in their own way. “That he did, Merlin help them.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I’ve defined all of the Latin so far except Dei fortunam apportent. It means, literally, "God is bringing good fortune."

The processional with the spinning was totally made up. Well, not totally. But I borrowed it from other cultures because it does have meaning. Imagine, for example, that other couples would have laughed and danced. It just made Hermione dizzy.

I promise that their communication issues are not exacerbated. Anyway, they’re both committed to communicating. Ever heard the saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder?

Also. Head cannon. The Potter family is Roman Catholic. This is important-ish, later. Hermione’s family is likely CoE, don’t you think?

This is an overview of the process. I changed some things, so it’s not Gospel.

This page of the same site provides translations from which I happily cherry picked from to create the wizarding versions. I claim fair use, as I’m not making money, and this is an academic attempt at exploring what such ceremonies might look like in modern culture, wizarding though it may be.

This site is a more general discussion of customs in very readable English.
"If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you're misinformed" - Twain

"The best fiction is far more true than any journalism.” - Faulkner

Wherein Harry finds knowledge in books, and well, Hermione finds a power the dark lord knows not in a society matron.

Also. NEVER trust the papers. Especially the Ministry run rag known as the Daily Prophet.

Harry was frantic when his DA galleon warmed against his skin. He pulled it out, knowing that it had to be Hermione. He’d already tried to floo Snoedyn, and to apparate to Hermione’s location. He’d been unable to do either, and had been, since then, trying to owl her. Hedwig was refusing to take the letter.

He fumbled with it, only to realize that the chicken-y scrawl was Ron’s handwriting, and not Hermione’s neat hand. The coin read, “Emergency. Burrow. Now.”

Harry apparated before the coin had cooled. In a swirl, he landed near of the sofa in the cozy home that he’d first known as a happy place, and saw Ron, Fred, and George sitting there. “Is Hermione here?” Harry demanded, pushing his glasses up his nose, “It’s just after midnight.”

“Believe us.” Fred began,

George continued, “We know.”

Ron hadn’t returned to Hogwarts this term, instead entering into the Auror training program. Sirius and Remus had put their paws down on that, and insisted he finish his program at Hogwarts. They had their sights set on university for him, and for the first time, Harry had felt like he’d had parents to listen to, and he had done so with joy.

Of course, he did politely complain about it behind their backs, for Ron’s sake. Having somebody looking out for you was actually, honestly, kind of nice. Harry still couldn’t get over it. The first time Sirius had forbidden something tiny, something stupid, Harry had been angry. He didn’t even remember what it was, honestly.

The first time he had sat down with Harry and said, “You need to go back to school. Moony and I
want more for you than what we had. There’s time enough to join up with the aurors if that’s what you want after uni.” Harry had glowed.

He’d made excuses to Ron, only to realize that, according to Ron, he was supposed to have been angry at Moony and Padfoot. He couldn’t possibly be angry. They loved him enough to want more for him, enough to look out for him.

Ron didn’t see that, though, because Arthur and Molly had always done it. Ron couldn’t see what he had always had, and it was just easier to agree. Ron liked to pretend that he had defied his parents to join up, and it didn’t hurt Harry to agree, even though they both knew Molly and Arthur were happy and had come round once they saw what being in training was doing for Ron.

He was making a name for himself, as himself. He was standing on his own two feet, no longer lost in the shadows of being the youngest Weasley boy, or Potter’s best friend, or Granger’s sidekick. He glowed with the hard work of accomplishment. Harry missed being with him day in and day out, but he knew that the space was the best thing for Ron.

Harry knew now, after having been around Remus and Sirius, that this sort of hard-won, contented, happiness was all parents really wanted for the children they loved. Vernon’s and Petunia’s indulgence of Dudders hadn’t been love, or anything like it. Harry knew that, now.

Ron was clutching an issue of the Prophet in bloodless hands. “How could you?”

Harry saw, suddenly, the moving pictures on the front page. “But how...?”

The front page, above the fold, read: *Potter Proposal Marks Post-War Change*

Ron’s voice was scathing, “When ‘2/3 of the Golden Trio is seen filing a ducenda, and then is seen...” Ron’s voice cracked, and he continued with scorn, “and I quote, ‘embracing in the atrium’ don’t you think that’s bound to be a special edition?”

Harry felt like he’d been crucio’d. He had never, never, wanted to hurt Ron. They had, in truth, been trying to keep Ron out of the firing line with his job at the Ministry. “Ron, we couldn’t tell anyone. It had to happen fast. It had to happen as soon as possible.”

“Do you mean to tell us, Potter, that you got Hermione Granger up the duff?” Fred’s voice was cold, and there was no mirth or joy in his eyes.

“No!” Harry tried to explain, but before he could issue anything more than a blanket denial, George had stepped forward. Harry did not step back.

It was an odd picture. Harry, dressed in a muggle suit, his jacket lost in his dash to find Hermione at the Foundry, and his sleeves rolled up to expose his arms, was a stark contrast to George, who wore a concert t-shirt and muggle sleep pants.

George’s voice was fire where Fred’s had been ice, “Because if you’ve hurt her...”

Ron spoke into the void of shocked silence. “He hasn’t.” Ron changed his mind, likely based on the expression on Harry’s face, “Well, he has. But in a normal Harry way. Can you stop defending Hermione like you’re a pair of maiden aunts, please?”

“Ron.” Harry tried again, “There will be a law. A marriage law.” He explained everything, outlined the whole thing, leaving the part about fleeing Ginny being the reason he’d initially left Hogwarts, “I was going to come in the morning and warn you. I swear it. But I couldn’t hand Hermione over to Malfoy. Or Goyle.”
Harry paused, “When I thought about her with anybody else, it felt like I was being ripped apart. I had to do something.” Harry finished, “I couldn’t let that happen to her.”

“Did you ever think that if you had come and gotten me, let me in to the plot, that Hermione could have married me?” Ron asked, “If what you say is true, you know they would never force you to marry anybody.”

Harry looked at his shoes. He wasn’t about to say that seeing Hermione married to Ron would have killed him. It would have killed him. What was done was done, and Harry wasn’t going to add fuel to the fire. He swallowed. “I can’t change what I did. I’m sorry. I know it hurts.”

“Why not even think of me, once?” Ron asked, “Why not think about how I’ll feel when I hear about my best friends getting married in the bloody paper?”

“For once in our lives, Ron, Hermione wasn’t the sidekick, wasn’t the girl with the books and the knowledge.” Harry insisted, “She was the center of it all, and every bit of my soul was screaming at me to protect her.”

“I could have protected her!” Ron yelled, slamming his fist on the side table. “And this is Hermione! She’s nobody’s damsel.”

“You’re right.” Harry agreed, “She’s smarter, and braver, and faster than the two of us put together on our best day. She’s got a huge heart, and is loyal and kind, and she likes defenseless, ugly, creatures, and a horrible half-kneezle, because her soul is dazzling, even now it fills every crack in my heart, and she sees good everywhere. But there’s one thing you’re wrong about, Ron.”

Ron scoffed, “What’s that?”

“Ron.” Fred inserted, from where he was now sitting in the cozy chair.

His twin followed up, sitting in a matching chair, “Just leave it. It’s done.” His voice was toneless when he added, “Dei fortunam apportent.”

Ron insisted, “No, I want to know.”

“Ron.” Harry thought about his words, unsure as to how to put something that had only become clear, standing here, just now. “She’s not just our friend. Not anymore. She’s my wife. I know it’s hard, but if you can’t be civil to her about it, then you need to stay away from her until you can. She doesn’t need to be made to feel guilty, for once in her life, for thinking of herself and not of you or me.”

“Oh, Harry.” Ron mocked, “How stupid can you be?”

“What?” Harry asked, for once not caring if Ron thought he was stupid. He knew the truth, and nothing would change it. Nothing could.

“She proposed this plot to keep her precious Harry safe.” Ron posited, “She sacrificed herself at the altar of your safety.”

Before Harry could even issue a calm denial, Fred spoke, “Ron, that’s not--”

He sent a look to his twin.

“Ronnikins.” George said gently, “You can’t do what they did without pure intent. You can’t swear upon your magic that you consent to take a person as your spouse unless you mean it for any other
reason outside of wanting. Safety wouldn’t hold.”

That’s not how a marriage ceremony works.” Ron insisted, “Only a fool would swear anything upon their magic.”

“We did.” Harry confirmed. “We’re going to finish the Confarreatio in a few days.”

Clearly, the other three men knew what that was, even if they had not taken part in it. Fred and George, after all, had guessed it, somehow. Harry had never used the word, or named a rite. The rite they used was no one else’s concern.

Clearly, each of the Weasley men had their own opinions about it.

Ron’s face crumpled, splotchy and red, “You’re dark. Darker than Voldemort.”

“Why, Ron?” Harry’s voice was soft, “Why? Because I have the gall to love my wife enough to want to share our magic, the core of who we are?”

“She is not your wife, nor is she yours to love!” Ron insisted, pain clear in his eyes.

“She put her hand over a sacred flame and swore she was, is, and will be, Ron. Don’t steal her agency.” Harry tried again, “Don’t belittle her choices because you don’t agree.”

Ron pulled out a single fact out of the story Harry had told him, “She has a divorce codicil.”

“I know.” Harry nodded, “She’s free to walk away. But she’s also free to stay, Ron, and if you can’t respect whatever choices she makes, then you haven’t the right to call her a friend.”

Ron opened his mouth to speak.

There came a rap on the door. Harry was thankful for it. This conversation was hard.

Harry turned and strode to the door, opening it. “Hermione?”

“Neville, actually.” Neville stood in the door, sheepishly looking around Harry and calling down the hallway. “Sorry Weasleys. Harry’s a hard man to find.”

“We’ve got a silencing charm on the whole floor!” Gred, or was it George? called out.

Harry stepped back, “Uh, come in? I think?” Harry found himself apologizing, leading back to the living room and the cozy fire he’d left. “I’m sorry I ran out on you, Nev. I have to talk to Hermione. I have to find her.”

“Find her?” Neville’s confusion cleared. “Oh! Nobody told you. You know loads about protocol, Harry, that sometimes I forget you didn’t grow up with Gran like you should’ve done.”

“What didn’t they tell me?” Harry hastened, looking back at Ron. He didn’t find support there. Harry guessed he should not have expected it. Still, the lack of it hurt.

Neville informed him, “Hermione is with my Gran, her Mum, and some of the elves.”

“Good, then you can take me to her?” Harry knew his conversation with Ron wasn’t over, but he knew that things with Hermione needed to be settled. Well, as settled as they might become at this hour, “We can side-along?”

“I can’t, Harry.” Neville shook his head.
“I know it’s late, but I have--” Harry was not above begging. The wards were set to family only, or 
something, because Harry had tried in vain to get past them.

“Potter, your sponsa is in her enclosure.” Neville informed him, “You cannot see her until your 
wedding.”

Harry was baffled. It was late. He was tired. The world was falling to shit around them, and all he 
wanted was Hermione. “Why?”

Neville insisted, “She’s planning her wedding.”

Harry knew better than that. He and Hermione had talked about all of the ceremonies. With rituals 
like this, there was little choice left to the couple, but there had been some, and they had made 
them. Together. “We did that.”

“Look, I don’t know what girls do when they’re locked in a suite for days.” Neville admitted, “All 
I’ve ever known is that no men go in, and no men come out. It’s a space of the sacred feminine.”

“Well, can’t she just come out?” Harry ran a hand through his hair, “She’s not likely to, though.”

“Fair warning, as the man who’d be stuck with the estate if something happens to you, you don’t 
want to go anywhere near that wing right now.” Neville warned him.

Neville wasn’t his heir. He simply would see over things until it was proven he had no heirs, and 
then the title would fall into abeyance. He would also be responsible for bringing up his child until 
they came of age. Harry had made much the same promises to him, as had generations of their 
respective families before them.

“Well, if she kills me, just make sure you follow my will.” Harry knew Hermione wouldn’t kill 
him. She was a hyper-rational person. He couldn’t apologize properly if he was dead, though the 
jury was out on his actual mortality. He sometimes had nightmares that he would never die. His 
mind healer said fears like that would pass as he dealt with his wartime trauma. “Also--”

“Harry! You won’t die.” Neville’s voice dropped in volume and rose in intensity, “You will be 
rendered unable.”

“Unable to what?” Harry asked, “I don’t--”

Neville was bright red. “I’m saying this because I love you, but you’re the stupid one, not me. If 
you go near that wing, you’ll never give Teddy anybody to play with, is that clear enough? It won’t 
be a problem on Hermione’s end, either.”

“We’ve agreed not to...” Harry began, slowly putting two and two together.

“Tell me that next year this time.” Neville rolled his eyes.

Raising his voice, he called out, “Ron! Now that the news is public, you should come to the 
Foundry. Hermione wants you at the wedding!”

Harry missed the rage plain on Ron’s face. He was too busy realizing that he had, in fact, tried to 
brake the enclosure. Twice. He hoped the medi-wizarding profession had solutions to this potential 
issue. The idea of never...well, the thought terrified him.

He was, after all, a wizard not yet in his twenties. Hermione was going to kill him if he’d tried to 
brake the enclosure. He wouldn’t have to worry, because she’d hex it clean off.
At that moment, there was a werewolf patronus bounding up to Harry. “Home.” Remus’ voice demanded, “The law’s been announced, and it seems we’ve unwittingly played right into the Ministry’s hands. Home now. Say nothing to anyone. Bring Neville. And Ron.”

The Wireless droned on, and on, and on, “The law has gone into effect as of midnight. In a stunning display of leadership, Harry Potter has officially and legally ascended to his title. He has done his duty by his people, and has complied with the Ministry’s wisdom in his Match. Who else but the soon-to-be former Miss Hermione Granger would be--”

“Turn it fucking off, already.” Ron snapped, from where he was sprawled in a chair in Harry’s study, “It’s two in the morning, what else can be said?”

“I’ve proof the wanted me to marry Astoria, not Hermione, and now they’ve turned it around.” Harry sighed, “Somehow I’ve become the poster boy for this new law, and Hermione will be hated by the very people she wants to save.”

“But at least you’ll be happy.” Neville tried, once again looking over the pile of letters that had come in from various media sources over the last two hours.

It seemed no witch or wizard in the whole of the UK was sleeping. Hell, Harry knew there were requests for comment from America, Canada, Australia, among other countries. A housemaid popped in with another tray full of letters, which Remus took, filtering out the howlers and the things that were basically threats against Hermione.

“That’s not enough for me.” Harry snapped, wanting to rip the letter he was reading in half, “And you know this will break her heart.”

Neville considered the matter, “Luckily, she can’t get news right now.”

‘Hermione, cut off?’ Ron snorted, “I’d like to see that. I’ll get one of the elves, they can take a note to her.”

“No.” Harry repeated himself, after making up his mind, “No. She deserves a few days of peace before all hell rains down upon us both.”

“You’re not serious.” Ron’s mouth dropped open.

“Do you honestly think the last few days have been easy for her?” Harry asked, “She’s not eating, she’s not sleeping. It’s been hard on her, Ron.”

Ron faltered.

Harry rolled his eyes, “What?” Harry asked, “You thought we wanted to get bonded like this, without time to breathe, without time to just be, or to worry about school, or even tell you?”

“Well, Neville was here.” Ron hastened, as though that invalidated Harry’s point.

“Jesus Christ, Ron!” Harry forced out, “Jesus fucking Christ. This is not the time to be petty because Neville was with me, and you weren’t.”

Ron huffed.

“Hermione wanted to keep you safe from censure in the auror office.” Harry informed him, “We both knew we were risking Azkaban, being basically exiled, public scorn.”
What Harry did not say was that Neville could have withstood censure. He could have, if need be, thumbed his nose at everything and everyone who came his way. Harry didn’t like it, but it was the way of the aristocracy. As Valley, as the Longbottom regent, could have looked down his nose, and tap danced around an inquiry. Neville never would, but Ron didn’t even have that option.

Ron grumbled, “You could have just married Astoria.”

“Now you’re just being an arse, Ron.” Harry rubbed his eyes, “You know I couldn’t have. Just try and grow up.”

“Boys.” Remus sighed, “Why don’t we try and get some sleep?”

“Good idea!” Neville agreed, standing up, with a kind smile to Remus.

Harry stood up from his desk, looking down at the pile of work that would face him in the morning. “Got any dreamless sleep, Moony?”

“No.” Remus denied him, “You have to be up in a few hours. We need to meet with Rookwood. I’ve already sent him an owl. He’ll be here at nine.”

Great, Harry thought, left to face the firing squad on seven hours and without Hermione to figure this out.

Rookwood made no bones about spreading every headline and article over the table. Overnight, the news had spread like wildfire. Harry couldn’t even read German or French, and he could suss out what they were saying.

No matter the language or the paper, the headlines ranged from informing the public about the new marriage act, to going on about Harry and Hermione. Their pictures, some no doubt sold from nosy ministry employees, or ripped from the security feeds, were splashed across every front page. Sadly, Harry realized, most articles combined announcing their betrothal with announcing the marriage law.

Harry scowled, and read out, “Hermione Granger, 8th, G., has been matched with Harry Potter, 8th, G., Officials at the new Partnership office say that all applicable witches and wizards will be just as carefully matched. One spoke off the record as saying, ‘All relevant parties will be matched very carefully. We will make efforts to see that each and every person is matched as ideally as Harry and Hermione. After all, haven’t they been together for years? We would never split up loving couples.’”

Harry leapt to his feet. “This is utter shite.” He began to pace, “I never thought they’d use us like this. Stupid of me, wasn’t it?”

Neville swallowed his tea, “Listen to this. ‘They were just glowing when they came to fill out their paperwork.’ It goes on about her robes, her robes, Harry! Like they’re trying to distract people. Same as when Voldemort took over the Ministry, and that bitch, Umbridge.” He shuddered, “Distract you from evil and hellfire with kittens and pink.”

“I hate pink.” Ron muttered, “Worse than Voldemort, she was.”

Harry had had about enough of this. “Rookwood.” Harry bit out, “What are our options?”

“You could issue a statement, asking for privacy, and say nothing. You could come out wands blazing and threaten lawsuits for the leaks. You could publish your proof, publish remarks of
discontent.” Rookwood paused for a moment, “You do have options.”

“I can’t...” Harry began, “I can’t do this without Hermione. What would she do?”

Harry shared a look with Ron. After a long second, the answer was clear.

Harry informed Rookwood. “For now, say nothing. Ignore it. We hold our heads high and keep our cards close to our vests.” Harry added, “Right now, I need to research. I don’t have enough information to make an informed decision.”

“Very well.” Rookwood stood. Having been here for a long time, he was clearly eager to go. “Please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

“Thanks, Rookwood.” Harry shook his hand, and escorted him to the floo. When he turned around, he found Ron staring at him.

That was nothing new, so Harry sat back down, knowing Ron would speak when he was ready.

“That’s exactly what Hermione would say.” Ron ventured, “Can you hear her thoughts, now?”

Harry blanched. Could that voice in his head that always sounded like Hermione, actually be Hermione?

“Remus?” Harry asked, “That’s not...” Harry tried again, “That doesn’t happen, does it?”

Remus chuckled. “Not typically, no.”

Harry visibly relaxed. That voice was just his own inner voice, then. It had always sounded like Hermione, even before their relationship had changed. That was nothing new. Thank Merlin. He had been having trouble keeping his thoughts clean, and the idea of sharing some of those with Hermione, mentally, well...

That might be fun, actually. Later. Consensually. Temporarily. For specific reasons. He really needed to find that book on sex magic Hermione had but refused to discuss.

He didn’t want to be inside her head. He didn’t want to hear her thoughts.

He only wanted to know what she wanted to share. Well, that wasn’t true, not really. He wanted to know everything that fell under the heading of Hermione, what she thought, what she felt, what she believed, what she knew. He knew, fundamentally, that he didn’t want to hear her thoughts, and not just because she deserved her privacy and her autonomy.

The truth was simple. He knew Hermione, and so he felt safe assuming a few things. Her mind moved too fast. A Voldemort headache would be less painful than trying in vain to keep up with her mental processes.

After a beat, Remus added, “Though, honestly, Hermione always knows what you’re thinking. It’s not magic.”

Neville snorted.

“Hey!” Harry protested, “I’m not stupid.”

Remus grinned his Moony grin. “No, but Sirius has needed the brain bleach for quite some time.”

“Shut up, he has not.” Harry returned, “You’re supposed to be helping me plan political dissent. I
needed your brain, not humiliation.”

“Fine.” Remus decided, “I’ll do my level best.”

The three other men in the room shared a look. Harry didn’t know why Remus was vigorously clearing his throat, and making funny noises.

He adopted a strident tone. “They can’t do this! It’s illegal. It’s irrational. How would they ever know to match us up, Harry? They wouldn’t! We didn’t even know! Our reasons are our own!” He paused, coughed, “I’ll not stand for this. Get me a quill, I’m writing a letter of dissent.”

Remus cleared his throat, back to talking like himself, and leaving behind his imitation of Hermione. “Did that help?”

“A little bit.” Harry allowed, “I wish you had something about reading something, though. It would have been better.”

Remus grinned, “Next time I’m called in to be Hermione’s understudy, I’ll keep that in mind.”

"In the meantime, I'll obliviate us all.” Harry muttered. That had been creepy. Helpful, but creepy.

“Wait.” Ron interjected, “Where’s Hermione’s logbook?”

“Ron, you’re a genius!” With that, Harry went tearing from the room, through the connecting door to the library.

He sped across to the library, and pulled a thick tome out of the restricted section. The front looked like a muggle cookbook. He put the second charmed book on the desk. It was charmed to mirror the copy of this same book Hermione kept with her, no matter where she went.

Harry tapped it twice with his wand in a complex pattern, talking all the while. “After the war, Hermione wrote down every book she’d ever read.”

“Of course she did.” Remus mused.

“Well, she hardly had time during the war.” Ron added, “She said that she didn’t ever want anyone to have to do the legwork she did.”

“Expecting a Dark Lord?” Remus asked.

“Funny.” Harry returned, knowing full well that several of those articles had suggested Hermione might be carrying the next of Heir of Slytherin within a few months. A few had gone so far as to say she was gestating said child as they wrote.

Harry had tossed those in the fire. Hermione would have gone absolutely mad. People said she defended him, but give her a small, defenseless, blameless, child to avenge, and she would be a bear. The fact that the child was nonexistent didn’t matter. It was, in her mind, about the principle of the thing.

Harry focused on flipping quickly through the pages, but the book, charmed to be compact, kept offering up new pages and new pages and new pages, even as Harry thumbed through them as quickly as he could, “She kept it up after the project was finished. Said it kept her from buying books she already owned.”

He paused, “What am I looking for?”
He had forgotten. Ron and Neville shrugged.

Remus just looked amused.

After a second, he added, “Oh, right.”

He tapped the corner of the page with his wand, and scribbled. He first looked up the marriage section, and then broadened the search to include everything she had read in the last week. This tagging thing Hermione had done to the index was amazing. After a second, the books on the page shifted, and Remus looked over the desk.

“Everything about the emergency statutes?” Remus asked, “Do you think they hold the key?”

“I don’t know.” Harry admitted, “I only know that Hermione thinks there’s something there.”

The pattern was clear enough that Harry could see than an exploring of the statutes was where she was placing her focus. She had laid the breadcrumbs, and for now, all he could do was follow her lead, “It should be enough to hold us over and help us until she gets back and can take over.”

“What could she possibly be doing?” Ron asked. He had never gone through a traditional bonding, and even though he knew about it, some of the customs, especially those known really only to women, baffled him.

Remus groaned. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Harry realized, that yes, yes he did. He couldn’t wait for Hermione to get back and tell him about it.

Well, honestly, he just wanted her to get back so that she could take over again.

He just wanted her to come back and hold her.

He just wanted to come back and tell her that it didn’t matter what the ministry said, because he would always choose her.

He didn't even care if that made him a ministry puppet.

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Hermione slept the first day of her seclusion away. Her mother had led her to a big bed at Snoedyn, and she had fell into it, without brushing her teeth. Normally, she knew her mother would have protested. The whole situation was not normal.

Hermione woke on Saturday around midday. Luckily, Hermione had an en suite, and after completing her needs and swallowing her pill, she found herself looking in the mirror. Her wild hair was a total rat’s nest, and her face was at once pale and splotchy.

Hermione scrubbed the sleep and the dried salt away with cool water that flowed into a basin that would have been a muggle sink if it hadn’t been charmed with moving flowers around the bowl.

Hermione noted a bit of a rash on her face, and grimly applied aloe to her blotchy face.

Exiting the loo, Hermione resolved to find her host or her mother. She stopped short when she saw Lady Longbottom’s lady’s maid, the elf Petra, pop into the room with Hermione’s Hugo Boss dress.

She herself was wearing a pale pink shirtwaist in serviceable cotton, with pearly buttons, and a
black skirt. She, as always, wore shoes and her mobcap, with her trusty watch.

“Good afternoon, Petra.” Hermione began, “I hope my being here hasn’t added more work for you.”

“Of course not, Miss.” The elf replied in perfect English. Her English was likely posher than Hermione’s own voice.

“You will let me know if that changes?” Hermione asked, feeling the worst kind of guest when she reflected upon her words, “Or Lady Longbottom, that is?”

Petra turned slightly to hang the dress, and shut the wardrobe. “Lady Longbottom is host to me in the same way that she is serving as a host to you, Miss. I do not serve the House of Longbottom.”

Hermione realized that, no, of course she didn’t work for any Longbottom. Petra hadn’t done a thing for Lady Longbottom. “Please don’t tell me that your position comes with Harry.”

“Not at all, Miss.” Petra winked, “My position has been historically attached to the Countess of Willard’s rooms. The earldom is far older than the dukedom, you know? You should know that, but it isn’t exactly correct to discuss such things.”

“Uhm.” Hermione thought fast, trying to avoid using her nails to peel off her itching skin. “I’m happy to have you working with me. You helped me so much yesterday. But I must ask. Are you paid?”

“Yes.” Petra informed her, gently, “But at present my salary or lack thereof is not your concern.”

Reasonably chastened, Hermione followed the next line of her interests, “Did you know Lily, then?”

“Regrettably, no.” Petra peeled back the covers on Hermione’s bed, and began to open windows, “I was last employed by His Grace’s grandmother, and her husband’s mother before her.”

“I would like to know more about them.” Hermione replied, “Perhaps you will tell me?”

“In time.” Petra agreed, “There are more pressing things for you to learn. You are expected in fifteen minutes in the sitting room. You must bathe, Miss, and eat.”

“I have to feed Crooky.” Hermione protested, looking around for her feline companion.

“I have seen to your young man.” Petra said, “We have reached an accord of sorts.”

Hermione showered, dressed in a dress that had come from her room at home, and was shoving a muffin into her face when Petra ushered her into the sitting room, “Miss Granger, Ma’am.”

Lady Longbottom smiled, “Thank you, Petra. Good afternoon, Hermione.”

“I apologize for oversleeping.” Hermione said, accepting the chair that Lady Longbottom offered to her, “Augusta, I--”

“Yesterday was trying, Hermione.” Augusta poured tea for her, “Nothing need be apologized for, or explained away.”

Hermione had been, after all, embarrassed to allow her mother and Lady Longbottom to find her in abject misery last night. Augusta had passed her a hanky, Mum had listened to her mutter
apologies, and Petra had appeared, travel bag at the ready. Hermione had been whisked away before she knew what she was about, and it was only later that she’d realized that there would be no time to talk to Harry.

Maybe, Hermione realized, that was for the best. A lot of this situation, her emotions, weren’t about him. They were about her, her own feelings, her own fears. In truth, the time to work through them without having to voice them or explain them, or even work on them, might help her to communicate more openly with Harry when the time came.

Augusta smiled as Hermione took the offered tea, “You are not the first young lady to cope with emotions after discovering that she has come to love her intended husband at the end of her betrothal, though I feel your circumstances are unique.” She smiled, “After all, you did not approach the altar as strangers, but as comrades and one another’s champions.”

Hermione understood Augusta’s meaning very well. “Thank you, Augusta.”

“I hope you will not take offense when I say that your groom is one of the thickest men on the planet.” Augusta offered. Hermione knew she was simply trying to commiserate with Hermione. Even if it was at Harry’s expense, Hermione was touched.

It had been so long, so long, since Hermione had indulged in that little luxury, much less had anyone with which to engage in it.

“In some ways, yes.” Hermione agreed.

She knew full well that Harry loved her, and knew, too, that he was likely in love with her, but he needed to admit it for himself, and that he had his own issues to work through before he might do so. A good night’s sleep had helped her to see that fact, and that was a balm to her soul.

Hermione wasn’t able to stop herself from defending him, just a little. After all, he was still her best friend. “But he’s a brilliant warrior, with a huge heart, you know?”

“That much has been clear to me for years.” Augusta replied, “Hermione, I have been thinking long and with much focus upon something that troubles me.”

Hermione made the mistake of sip on her tea, before Augusta spoke. Her reply came out along with a bit of a choke on the hot liquid, “I-yyes?”

“It troubles me that you are, aside from your mother and I, alone on this journey.” Augusta began, “If not for the war, you would have countless cousins, aunts, and other relatives to celebrate the joy of your enclosure with you.”

Hermione knew full well what she was saying. If the Wars hadn’t happened, Lily would be here. Harry would have no doubt had at least one sister. There would be cousins, because clearly, Sirius and Remus would never not have had a family. Hermione liked to think that Lily and Petunia would have patched things up.

But it was more than that, too. If not for the War, Hermione might be a little more open to the people around her. She might have been a little more accessible to people, not seemed so cut off. She might have had more time for friendships, with women like Katie and Angelina, and Tonks. She might not have been so single-minded, so focused. Needing to fight to survive did that to a woman, though, and Hermione knew she wouldn’t change who she was, not even if it meant sometimes feeling lonely and isolated from others.

It was only now, being cut off from her world, that Hermione realized how little she had allowed in
it. She gathered most women, in their own enclosure, would be reaching the opposite conclusion.

Augusta spoke anew, “I understand the need for secrecy, believe me, but it hurts my heart to know that you walk this path, as you have so many, alone.”

Hermione felt the need to explain, “You see, the only girl I could trust, well, she...”

Ginny was her closest female friend. Hermione had long ago learned, however, that Ginny had notions about the way things ought to be. She was intent on giving back Harry all the things she felt he had lost, which was an admirable goal. It was. Hermione lauded Ginny for it. It was a goal rooted in love. How could Hermione not respect her and her intentions?

She loved Ginny.

Except. Harry’s life was not James’s life. He didn’t need a beautiful, vivacious, wife and a cadre of relatives to be happy. Ginny had gleaned from stories a very rosy idea of what the Earl and Countess of Willard had lived like before James’s parents had died, and that idealized representation was what she was going off of in her notions of what Harry needed.

Harry was never, not really, going to lead a carefree life of weekends playing Quidditch with the family, and of big potluck meals. That had been James’s life, but only at Hogwarts. If James and Lily had lived longer, they too, would have been in a position to take over the estates, the management, the politics. Fleamont had lived long enough to give his son time and space away from his obligations, before the War had changed everything. James and Lily would have had the world on their shoulders, just as Harry did in his own way.

Harry’s life was fundamentally one of duty, a deeper duty than the Boy who Lived crap that the Ministry tried force on him, just so the Ministry could control the Potter name, the Potter legacy, and Harry's own future. Ginny didn’t know that, though. She just couldn't see it. It wasn't her fault.

He had been born to be Potter, and with that privilege, came duty. With that power came responsibility. The time for a carefree childhood had passed before Harry had had one at all.

Harry knew it. He just couldn't put it into words.

“Wanted to marry your Harry.” Augusta assumed, “Yes, I do see. And I know from what Neville has said, that you are loathe to call Luna away from Transylvania.”

“Well, she’s got a lead...” Hermione wasn’t going to bust up Luna’s life for her own needs. For the first time in a long time, Luna was happy. Luna was not fighting for her life. She was reaching for the nargles, and landing amongst the exploding snabberwitches.

“I know. It is not my intention to bring you shame.” Augusta nibbled a biscuit. “You know that Harry’s grandmother was one of my dearest friends. We hated each other for most of our early lives.”

Hermione was intrigued, “Why?”

“If you will forgive me, I am not bookish. Euphemia was, and we were always compared unfavorably to one another. She resented me because I was a belle, and everyone praised those factors in me, whereas she was top of Ravenclaw house. I failed my Charms OWL. People praised her as smart, and brilliant, and clever.” Augusta reminisced.

“And you resented each other.” Hermione murmured, “I understand. I’ve also felt that way.”
“And so when we came out, we were determined to ignore each other, as we had been unable to do in school.” Augusta sipped her tea, “Back in those days, wizarding society was very segregated by gender, and we saw each other at countless teas, and other engagements.” She paused, with a laugh in her voice, “Imagine when we began to be courted by two men who were all but brothers.”

She paused, smiling, “Once, we were all four going skating, and Euphie and I got into a horrible row. We shouted at each other. After years of passive-aggressive behaviors, it was freeing.”

Hermione knew where this story was going, “And at the end of it all, you laughed and were friends.”

“Oh no, that came later.” Augusta replied, “We quite enjoyed squabbling once we figured out how to do it. It would have been a crime to rush it.”

Hermione laughed.

“My point, dear, is this. You know that my Neville is courting Hannah Abbott. I would, with your permission, like to invite her here in the hopes that you will get to know one another. Hannah is keen to know you, and Hermione...”

Augusta, so self-assured, hesitated.

“Yes?” Hermione prodded, wanting her to know that it was more than alright to continue, despite her reluctance.

“I deeply value your work.” She was solomon,” But you do know that parts of our society are very traditional? I would not change you for the world, but you do need, I believe, a friend who walks a similar path.” She paused for a long second, “Though you may be very different women, you have chosen very similar men, and I feel a true friendship would be possible between you, on your own merits as witches of valor.”

“I would welcome the company.” Hermione replied, knowing that it was not easy for Augusta to be critical of her community, “Hannah has always been kind to me, even when she had cause to revile me.”

Augusta smirked, “I do believe, Hermione, that she has long hoped to call you her sister in magic.”

“I’ll have to ask.” Hermione paused, “Augusta?”

“Yes, Hermione?” She set her teacup back in the saucer with perfect grace.

“Thank you for being so honest with me.” So few witches and wizards had ever been forthright with her, always seeking to mold the truth to their own ends. Far too many people only sought to get the Witch who Won on their side, “You’ve been forthright with me, and I will never forget what a gift it is.”

“Well, I...” She cleared her throat, “My regard for you is based mostly upon your own personhood. You are a gift, Hermione, in and of yourself.”

Hermione blushed.

However, I took the role in guiding you for several reasons.” Augusta took another biscuit, obviously settling in for a good monologue, “Firstly, it is my honor and my duty as the Lady Longbottom. You are, in effect, my granddaughter in magic. It behooves me to train you properly.”
Hermione tried not to laugh. That sounded so like the proper society matron she had once assumed Augusta to be, though now she knew that there was too much depth to Augusta to so narrowly categorize her.

“Secondly. I have long wanted to know you, because I am not of the persuasion that what we do not know is to be feared.”

Hermione knew that to be true. Augusta had been nothing but kind to her, allowing her to present herself as she chose. Augusta waited to know her to form opinions, rather than assuming anything on the basis of Hermione’s massive reputation. Too, she had been nothing but welcoming to her Mum. To involve a muggle in magical rituals was a gesture of respect that even Hermione could not quantify. That it came from a pillar of society said so much about the woman truly was, and Hermione was awash in gratitude.

“Thirdly, when Euphie lay dying, I promised her with everything within me that I would love Jamie and Harry. She knew he was coming, and it killed her to never hold him.” Augusta patted away a tear, and cleared her throat delicately.

Hermione felt for her, and wondered how differently life might have been for Harry if he had been raised by this compassionate woman, who mourned a friend she had once hated.

“Dumbledore stole Harry from us all, against the express wishes of his mother, from what he should have had by rights, and left him to be abused. There can be no excuse for that act alone.” Augusta made plain her remaining emotions on the subject, “I determined when this little boy that should have called me at least Aunt, if not Gran, knew me only as a stranger, that I would return him to the bosom of his family, one day, somehow.”

Hermione found that they were in accord. It did no good to speak ill of the dead. For all his faults, Dumbledore had lived for the greater good. It was merely that, after a lot of thought over the years, Hermione thought that their definitions differed. Raising children was different at the turn of the century, and while that was no excuse for Dumbledore’s actions, she couldn’t bring him back and ask him if he would have done it all over again.

Augusta reached out and patted her hand, “You have given me that, and I am profoundly grateful to you.”

The accord passed between them, noted, but unspoken. After a moment of staring at Hermione, she added, “Finally…”

“Yes?” Hermione asked, giving the once again tentative Augusta a smile.

“Oh, you will laugh.” Augusta hesitated, “Fie. I shall tell you anyhow.”

Hermione demurred with a smile, “I pray I am worthy of your trust.”

“Oh shush.” Augusta held back a genuine laugh, “I cannot wait until I die, and I get to tell Euphie that I was the smart one! After all, I educated the smartest witch of the age. I was the one to launch the smartest witch of the age into society.” Augusta’s eyes grew wistful, “I got her in the end.”

Hermione laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

Hermione found that once she was in Augusta’s clutches, she had a full schedule. Augusta lectured for ages on the Potter family history, the history of the Foundry, the various historical properties, and all manner of information she deemed needful, information Hermione had never seen in books.
Hermione had to charm a pair of quills just to take adequate notes.

Most of the stories were about Cousin this and Aunt that, but Hermione knew what they were, truly.

Hermione knew. Augusta was giving her a legacy, a lexicon to enter into discourse that had long been denied her. She was being given connections to the social, political, and economic history of the wizarding community. She might have married Harry without it, but this information was the key.

It was the key to knowing things that the pureblooded elite used to judge insiders from outsiders, and it was, thusly, the key to beating them at their own game.

Hermione was enraptured. This information, contextualized in little on-dits, was power.

It was, in a way, a power that even Voldemort had known not. He himself had been cut off from his mother’s family, a half-blood raised as a muggle, with a deep envy of those who belonged and who didn’t question their place in wizarding society. It echoed in even his choice of styling. Hermione felt, as Augusta lectured, that she better understood her enemies.

She could win. Armed with knowledge, she could win. And, come hell or high water, she would win.

They had moved on from family history and estate management and were entering into political history, in which Hermione listened and got in a question or two when Augusta paused for a scant second to slake her parched throat, or nibble at a candy, when Petra entered.

Hermione had never been so glad to stop learning. The information was fascinating, but there was so much of it. Hermione just needed to think. There was a plan percolating here, a plan to change everything. Hermione only needed the time to sit, and think. There was something here, she just needed to figure out how to wield this weapon.

“Your Grace, Miss, Dr. Granger has packed all of the trunks.” Petra informed them, “I’ve taken the liberty of clearing the dressing rooms.”

“I’m not taking my clothes off again.” Hermione asserted.

Petra blinked at her, clearly horrified, though her expression betrayed little.

Augusta leveled her with a stare, “Indeed you will, if you don’t want to wear the same dress for your entire married life. You will do so now, in fact, as it does not do to keep your mother waiting. She has done the work that would have been yours alone had your circumstances been typical.”

Hermione understood that, when Augusta turned to go her own way, that she had been dismissed and chastised.

Hermione stood, and sensible witch that she was, followed Petra to the hall. “What normally would I have done?”

“You would have solely been responsible for going through every item of your clothing and preparing your clothing for your transition to your married life.” Petra informed her. “After it was all ready to be sorted, your mother would step in then, and offer you insight and guidance. She
would also arrange fittings for your new clothing.”

Petra knocked on the after a short walk through the wing to another door. It opened with a cheery greeting coming from inside the suite of rooms.

“Mum!” Hermione exclaimed, dropping down on the chair that wasn’t blocked by trunks and boxes and bags, “I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve learned too much today. My head is spinning from it all.”

Mum laughed, “Hermione, have you a fever?”

Hermione realized what she had said, and smiled. “I’ve been told I must take my clothes off again...” Hermione paused, glad to see that Petra was not in the room, “Mum, who is paying for this whole thing? Those dresses weren’t BHS.”

Mum recoiled, “Since when are you a devotee of BHS?” She unzipped a suitcase, and Hermione saw that it was filled with casual tops she wore to clean or sleep.

“Mum, there wasn’t supposed to be expense or fuss.” Hermione shot to her feet, suddenly feeling uneasy, “I rather had thought we’d do the magical equivalent of the registry office, and here we are, with you buying me clothes, and me hitting myself in the face with Lily Potter’s engagement ring.”

Not that she wanted to give back the ring, of course. Augusta had told her something that, even now, interested Hermione. Hermione’s ring was different from Lily’s, and yet, it was the same ring. Hermione had learned today that it had been Henry Potter’s gift to his bride, as her engagement ring. When it had been handed down to James for Lily, he’d rearranged the setting to suit Lily. Harry, Augusta had said, had done the same. He’d changed it back.

Hermione wondered if he would know how much historical accuracy mattered to her, or what exactly the gesture meant to him. She wasn’t sure why it amused and interested her, but it did, just the same.

“You stop.” Mum earnestly grabbed Hermione’s hand, “Your father and I feel strongly, very strongly, that we have a right to do this for you. These clothes will help you as in the courtroom, or whatever wizards have, as well as university, and they will prove to the entire wizarding population that muggles aren’t some ignorant sub-species.”

“After all, what sets us apart from other primates is our ability to accessorize.” Mum grinned, “Plus, I’ve always wanted to insist you dress properly, and now I have a perfect sociological and anthropological validation to do so.”

“But the cost--” Hermione ventured.

“We sold the house in Australia.” Mum reached for another suitcase, and Hermione decided to do her part. She reached for her wand, “I’ve been at the top of my profession for nearly twenty years, as has your father.” Mum sniffed, “Do you mean to say that you feel we can afford to give you an unlimited book budget, but that I cannot assign a reasonable sum to your professional wardrobe?”

“I should buy these things, but most of my money, even money from the Order of Merlin, went to war efforts and postwar efforts.” Hermione confessed, “And I can’t imagine Dad wants to buy me heaps of clothing. He’s not happy with me.”

“Leave Daddy to me.” Mum assured her, “He loves you, Bunny girl.”

After a long few moments of setting to work, Hermione spoke. She was waving her wand to
unpack the suitcase in front of her, “Mum?”

“Yes?” Mum watched the clothes float out of the case and land in neat piles.

Hermione asked the question burning in her soul, “Why did you never tell me my book budget was unlimited?”

“Two reasons.” Mum revealed, “One, I wanted to raise a careful shopper, and two, I wanted to see what you valued enough to purchase at the exclusion of all else.”

Hermione felt relief. “I thought you might say you thought I’d buy out Flourish and Blotts.”

Clearly, her mother knew that she was mature, and could practice restraint.

“Oh, no.” Mum waved her hand, “I know you already own most of it.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh.

As they laughed, Petra entered, and snapped her fingers. The clothes flew from the bags, boxes, and trunks, and arranged themselves on rolling racks around the edge of the room. It was an awe-inspiring sight, to see every bit of clothing she owned, even her things from Hogwarts, sorting itself into categories and arranging itself elegantly and effortlessly onto the hangers.

It was no small feat of magic.

Hermione snuck a look at her mum, who was gaping at the dazzling efficiency. Hermione enjoyed seeing magic through her eyes. She mouthed, “Wow.”

Hermione patted her hand, “Swish and flick, Mum.”

Hermione found herself missing Harry deeply.

He would have understood the joke.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter weeks ago, and I just found out today that BHS is completely liquidated. The reference still works for the time period of the story, but it still struck me as poignant.

Also, while this conversation heavy, Harmony-free chapter might not be my favorite, this reference is one of my favorite out of the story. I know there are issues with the representation of health in the movie. But as it is based on one woman’s story, and we all know that one person cannot speak for everyone, I appreciate it for being funny and meaningful.

Back to Harmony world-building tomorrow! I promise. This independent growth had to happen.
Chapter Summary

"I dress to kill, but tastefully." - Freddie Mercury

or

"The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for." -Bob Marley

In which Hermione finds some unexpected allies, and Harry learns that brotherhood means being able to lash out in the heat of the moment, tell the other man you love him, and, sometimes paradoxically, mean both.

Chapter Notes

This is my favorite scene so far.

If I had magic, one of the first things I'd do is find myself a Diana and go absolutely insane. No more jeans gapping at the waist. No more standing for ages to hem a dress. No more looking at a photograph of an outfit, and thinking, "Why don't they make that anymore?" No more feeling to fat or too this or that to pull off an outfit.

Glorious, isn't it?

It could also, like most things, be hellish. What in Merlin's name do you wear if the world's your oyster but you live in a society that embraces conservatism in some areas and flash in others? Also, what do you wear to plan a non-violent coup d'état?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione soon found herself welcoming Hannah Abbott into her enclosure. Traditionally, Hannah would have been sealed with her, Mum, and Augusta, but Hermione was glad they were bending the rules so she could be here now.

Hermione had always known Hannah to be kind, the first to speak out for someone’s better qualities, and sweet.

In short, Hannah was the softness over steel Hermione herself was lacking. Hannah had a bright smile, and it was not absent when she entered into the sitting room. After greetings had been exchanged, Hermione moved to pour tea for Hannah.

When it was ready to be passed to her guest, the conversation between the other ladies fell silent. “Hannah, thank you so much for joining me. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Oh, Hermione.” Hannah took the tea with a slight wobble to her grasp, “You’re welcoming me into a sacred time of your life. I know I’m not, well, I’m not Luna or Ginny, but I’m happy to
support you in any way I can. I hope you know that you’ve always been a friend of mine, Hermione.”

“Hannah. I’m glad you’re here, and that you’re you.” Hermione was firm, “Fighting for our lives rather erases petty house rivalries. I have nothing but respect for you, and it’s my hope that we’ll have a lot of time to get to know one another.” Very decidedly, Hermione added, “Personally, I’ve always admired your loyalty and your sense of justice.”

“And they say you should have been in Ravenclaw.” Hannah offered, “For one, I never agreed. You would have been a grand Hufflepuff. You’re a hard worker, even when no one thanks you, and you stick to your goals.” Hannah moved to include her mother in the conversation, “What house do you think you would have been in, Mrs. Granger?”

“I’m not quite sure.” Mum mused, “Augusta?”

“Oh, Helen. You’re a Slytherin through and through. You bleed green and silver.” Augusta replied, “After all, you have sneakily and quite skillfully gotten your lioness of a daughter to sit for hours doing nothing but going through clothing, and choosing yet more.”

“Mum says it’s a sociological and anthropological research scenario.” Hermione primly joked.

“Definitely a Slytherin.” Hannah agreed, “Now, are we going to start? I just love clothes. The fibers, you know.”

“Hannah is a very gifted herbologist, Mum.” Hermione informed her mother as she stood up and moved the chairs aside with her wand, as Augusta was doing with various other pieces of furniture.

“Herbology is akin to botany.” Mum posited, “Is this correct, Hannah?”

“I can only claim a passing understanding of botany, but as I understand it, herbology focuses more on medicinal and magical properties, rather than a specifically cellular study, as botany might.” Hannah summarized, “For example, I’d like to be a healer. I just don’t know about all the exams.”

“My mum is a doctor.” Hermione offered, “And a dentist.”

“I’m afraid I...” Hannah, Hermione realized abashedly, didn’t know what those terms were.

“Oral healer.” Mum simplified her job title a great deal. As an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, Helen Granger actually held an M.D and a D.D.S. She focused primarily in major trauma and reconstruction. “I’m just dreadful at exams. All that rote memory and pressure.”

Hannah considered this information, “The magical education system focuses on these things. Doesn’t the muggle system?”

“Sometimes.” Mum allowed, “There are other ways, though.”

Hannah brightened, “Really?”

Hermione couldn’t help but feel that her mum had made Hannah feel more at ease in thirty seconds than she had in eight years. It was disconcerting. Hermione wondered, if just perhaps, she had written Hannah off by being narrow minded.

Hannah and Mum spoke a little about her work and muggle education as Hermione pulled out her party dresses. She had very few, and they were easiest to go through.
The blue yule ball dress robes were her best party clothing. Leaving those well enough alone, Hermione began with old dresses she no longer needed. Mum had indeed packed her entire wardrobe, from the time she was thirteen and had last been forced to clean out her closets. “I think I’ll donate these.”

“You have been reading!” Hannah noticed. “Would you like me to keep an inventory for you?”

“That’s very thoughtful.” Hermione agreed with alacrity.

Soon after they settled onto the plush seating left behind after they’d rearranged the room, with Hermione’s scant amount of clothing around them, Petra led another person into the room. Hermione shared a look with her mother. This svelte witch was totally unknown to her, and very obviously, to her mother. The same could not be said for either Hannah or Augusta.

Hannah smiled gently, and added, after introductions had been performed. “Mrs. Granger, Hermione, Mrs. Phipps did my sister’s wardrobe before her marriage. I know you’re in the best hands. If Diana can make Miriam look as well as she did, she’ll have no trouble with you.”

“Miss Abbot.” The comfortably dressed woman smiled, “Your ringing endorsement means the world to me. I trust your sister is well?”

“She’s recovering slowly.” Hannah replied. Hermione knew that Miriam Abbott-Church had lost a leg to the war, and had suffered severe burns.

Mrs. Phipps inclined her head. “We have much to celebrate, do we not?”

Hermione’s stomach twisted. It was all she could do to keep her face blank. Poor Hannah had lost her mother. And yet, this woman stood there and counted Hannah’s loss as small? Hermione swallowed a protest as Diana Phipps turned slowly in the center of the room the room.

“I see you have already begun, Miss Granger! Your reputation proceeds you, and rings true, I do believe.” Mrs. Phipps removed her cloak and draped it artfully over a rack that Hermione had not needed. “However, that’s likely best, as we have much to do.”

“What, exactly, are we doing?” Hermione asked. She had been told that Mrs. Phipps was a dresser, but she didn’t know what her role in this was. “I welcome you, but I don’t know why...”

Augusta answered her query, “Traditionally, Hermione, you would have weeks preparing for your enclosure. You would have worked with Mrs. Phipps to develop a wardrobe that will help you transition from Hogwarts girl to wife, or in your case, wife and University student.”

Mrs. Phipps must have easily misunderstood expression, “Miss Granger, Hermione, if I may?”

Hermione nodded, her lungs tight.

“Hermione, you must not worry. We can and we will complete this task in the time allowed.” Mrs. Phipps looked to Mum, and back at Hermione, “And we will enjoy it, I do assure you.”

Mum took over for Hermione, who had begun to stare at the Burmese ruby on her left hand. “Thank you, Mrs. Phipps. Let’s begin, shall we?”

Hermione was told to begin anew under the watchful eye of Mrs. Phipps, who only asked her to show her things that she liked amongst her clothes. That edited out a great deal, and Hermione found that with every item Diana altered, she could breathe better.
That wasn’t to say that the process of cleaning out her wardrobe and perfecting what she kept was easy. As her style ran to denim and jumpers and the occasional bit from Madam Malkin’s, Hermione soon ran out of things that Diana, even with all her skill and insight, could refashion and approve.

In fact, it only got harder. Having gone through her daily clothing she wore during off time at school, and her existing wardrobe, Augusta asked her to bring her day dresses out again. Including the Hugo Boss, she only really had three others.

“Well…” Augusta finally said, “Hannah, make a note of that gap, please.”

Mum looked to the dresser in their midst, “Mrs. Phipps, what would you suggest for Hermione?”

In asking that single question, Mum opened a floodgate.

Diana pursed her lips, and the real work began. “I am so glad you asked, Mrs. Granger!” Diana waved her wand, and her small handbag levitated to land gently upon her lap. “I think we’ll start from the ground up, shall we?”

Hermione squeaked.

Diana waved her wand, and so many things happened in tandem that Hermione didn’t know where to look. Fabrics were enlarged back to their original size, a whole storeroom coming out of Diana’s small handbag. There were measuring tapes flying everywhere. Notions, like buttons, trimmings, lace, and threads, stacked neatly on a table next to a fleet of magical treadle machines.

Hannah pulled out another list. Hermione happened to see the text from where she had scrambled out of the way. This list must have held a thousand types of clothing, from day dresses to tea dresses to robes suited for daily work, to swim dresses, to hats and gloves and cloaks and shoes. There were terms there that Hermione had never seen, and it was labeled as a template for a basic wardrobe.

Basic. Hermione promised herself she’d stop after no more than five outfits.

A whole barrage of books flew to the tea table, and landed neatly in piles before Hannah.

Mum joined Hannah at the small table. Diana encouraged her mother, Augusta, and Hannah to look through the countless pattern books that had spilled forth from her book. Hermione tried to reach for one, but Augusta directed her, with a small glance, towards Diana.

There, in the front of the room, Diana had erected a cream silken tent. The curtain was pulled back, and Hermione saw that it was a rather large changing room.

“Oh!” Diana cried, “How could I have forgotten?”

She waved her wand again, with a quiet word, and a whole series of mirrors flew out of her bag, along with a platform. Hermione’s stomach sank. “Shall I...?” Hermione began, “Look at the books?”

“No, no.” Diana said, “I’m quite set up. Just pop into the changing room.”

Hermione entered the tent, and found that, in its own, way, it was rather like the Weasley’s tent. There were rooms aplenty behind her, one that held several sewing machines from what she saw, in addition to the five set up in the smaller dressing room behind them. That room, Hannah had told her, was meant to be a shoe closet.
Hermione stopped snooping and looking around when heard Diana summon her measuring tape. She scrambled back to the dais near the semi-circle of mirrors. Thus, Diana joined Hermione behind the silk barrier. “You’ve got a lovely shape, my dear.”

Hermione blanched. She was pear-shaped, and her body was ravaged by the effects of war. Malnutrition had worked its own magic upon her, and Hermione was afraid that the slimness of youth would one day leave her roly-poly. Her weight went up and down with the slightest provocation. It was, Healers said, after effects of war. She was now at a higher risk for things like osteoporoses, among other things.

Near starvation, torture, and stress were never a good combination in a person’s teens. Her mother fussled, even without knowing the whole story. Hermione resisted going to a muggle specialist. The scars on her body would raise questions, and Hermione didn’t feel she had any right to worry about her body when so many people no longer had one.

When healthy, she was given to a thicker set of thighs than she might want, and she was far too short to carry off any sense of grace. Her breasts took up too much of her torso, and would ideally be smaller. Her brown hair was bushy, and her skin was too pale by half. “But you are wearing the wrong size of foundation garments.”

Hermione soon discovered that no magic wand could replace the use of a fitter’s own eyes and hands as she was fitted for a properly sized bra. Hermione soon learned to look at the ceiling and simply allow Diana to get it over with, as expeditiously as possible.

Hermione did not know what size she ended up being, as Hermione heard the clack-clack of a magical sewing machine, and knew that the bra now supporting her torso was custom to her body.

Once her bra was properly fitted, and taught to do the swoop and scoop, Hermione had to fight to not appreciate the properly fitting underwire and silk against her body. Grinning, Diana slipped out of the dressing area and left Hermione to stare at the changes fitting lingerie could make.

Diana stuck her hand through the curtain and passed Hermione yet another garment that had just rolled off the assembly line of her magical machines. It was a slim, light, and very flexible panty girdle.

“A patterned day dress with two sets of coordinating robes followed, followed by a dress with a solid black skirt that ended just below her bust line, and a bodice that was checked in black and gray. When the grey dress, wool and very serviceable, settled onto her body, it was Hannah who suggested, rather than buttons running down the front, that the buttons be paired down to stop at
the end of the bodice, and the skirt be shortened. Essentially, Hermione was left with a very slim and sporty dress, albeit one that covered her knees.

After voicing her suggestions, and seeing the dress change before their eyes, Hannah ventured, “Do you like it?”

Hermione nodded. “You’ve got a great eye.” Hermione thought for a second. The dress needed texture. “I’d change the buttons from jet from velvet.”

Hannah grinned. “Also, I think no pleats. Maybe four gores.”

Without effort, that took place, and Diana approached with a pair of stylish flats, and velvet headband that Hermione could not help but adore. Outfit complete, with an easy set of robes, the ensemble was praised by the ladies, accepted by Hermione, and went to join the other dresses in the hanging trunk.

On and on it went. A black jersey dress was paired with a jersey robe, with red, black and grey striped blocking. With a word from Mum, Hermione soon had an additional grey dress to go with the robes. It surprised Hermione, but they soon moved away from dresses suited to the coming winter, and kitted her out for spring in pastels, pinks, greens, blues. There were yet more patterns and robes to consider. Not one detail was overlooked.

The process continued, moving from dresses she might wear under school robes, to tea dresses, and skirt suits, to casual skirts made of serviceable fabrics with a coordinating blouse and sweater. Tweeds, twills, and all manner of cotton and rayons danced in front her, making her dizzy and sick feeling. There were countless configurations, all whipped up on Diana’s machines, with proper fitting undergarments, and shoes, and various accessories.

When Diana was tailoring a floral patterned circle skirt with a critical eye, she paused to ask, “Will you be covering your hair?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione replied. Some part of her wanted to do it, because she knew it helped to guard her crown chakra, which seemed very open and emotive lately. Still, Hermione knew that that could change. Most married women she knew only covered their hair when doing powerful spells.

“Well, why don’t we make you up a starter wardrobe of possibilities, and you can play around?” Diana’s suggestion sounded reasonable, and so, a little bit carried away with the fun of it all, despite her resolutions to treat this process with dispassion, Hermione agreed.

Hermione could not get over the level of detail on each item of clothing. The plaids always matched, the seams were always finished. The details were totally in keeping with the intention of the outfit, and in keeping with Hermione’s shape. The ties, for example, on wrap dresses were always perfectly placed at exactly the right spot. The never twisted or bunched up under her chest. It was, literally and figuratively, magical.

Hermione learned her seasonal coloring, whatever that family of colors was meant to do for her, and also that her body was more suited to some styles than others. She was told, and shown, that it was not her job to fit the styles of clothing, but rather, it was her job to make the clothing suit and fit her. Hermione learned basic clothing charms, and all she could think was that these would have helped when she was living on the run.

Outfit after outfit after outfit piled into the trunks. Hermione noted a camera taking picture after picture after each item had been pronounced finished. She didn’t know how many outfits she ended
Hermione honestly and truly lost count. The fabrics were dazzling and as soon as one outfit was
gone, be it a skirt set or a dress with a matching robe, another took its place. There was a cleverly
textured teal dress that did wonders for her skin, and showed off her waist in a way that made
Hermione feel trim. There was yet another dress that put Hermione in mind of summer, with its
light, airy pattern of flowers and leaves.

Mum did a lot talking, and it seemed that the clothing just piled up. Hermione rejected any number
of items, but more often, the offending issue was refashioned in some way to suit her. Hermione
felt at once enchanted and sickened. She tried to say no, but Mum put her foot down. Hermione,
after Mum’s help over the last few days, felt duty bound to give her her way in this.

For every robe, there was at least one dress or suit or skirt and blouse set to coordinate. With that
outfit, whatever it was, there was often a slip or some other thing that went along with it.

Hannah had scrolls littering the small table where she had taken up office. When the last dress, a
polka dotted dress with a twirly hem that suited short blue robes with half sleeves, floated along to
the trunk along with a pair of white flats and navy espadrilles, and a parasol, Diana stood back.

“Well.” She smiled, “We’re done with that.”

Hermione tore her gaze away from the floating shoes that Petra was conducting away to yet
another trunk. After a few hours, Hermione had learned a great deal about wizarding fashion,
mostly that it was different from muggle fashion in so many ways. The rules of good taste,
Hermione found, were somewhat different than on the high street. Diana did not recommend
trousers or shorts, for one thing, and certain fabrics were not to be used in certain ways. Elbows,
outside of certain outfits, were nearly always covered, even if it was simply with a sheer robe.
Hermione had only, among countless sets, perhaps half a dozen outfits that exposed her back or her
shoulders. Absolutely nothing, nothing, exposed her middle or her knees, unless there were tights
involved.

There were other differences, too. There were few trends or seasonal designs that were introduced.
Maybe one or two colors were popular per seasons, Diana said, but the true mark of wizarding
fashion, she said, was that each wardrobe was fundamentally suited to the wearer, and not some
arbitrary rule of what seemed in fashion. The magical community had a long memory, and
something that seemed to Hermione to be right out of the 1930s or even the 1920s were still, by
and large, considered cuts and style suitable for a young bride.

Hermione found the ending to be anticlimactic, but welcome. “It was so great to work with you.”

“Hermione.” Hannah broke in, with dawning realization, “This isn’t over. You haven’t even got
cloaks or coats or a mac or proper boots or even a single nightdress.”

Hermione looked at Mum, who was holding up a pattern book. “Look at this mac, bunny. It’s
much nicer than your black one.”

Hermione blanched. There was no way, short of storming from the room, to make her Mum see
reason.

Diana just laughed, and led Hermione to a chair, where she herself cut Hermione a slice of cake.
Handing her a fork, she said, “Don’t let your blood sugar get low.”

As she ate, and they formulated the next series of pieces to be tried on, Hermione asked, “What
should happen if, in a few years, none of this fits?”

“Diana has an office on Diagon, Hermione. Across from Flourish and Blotts.” Hannah sipped her tea, “It likely escaped your notice.”

Mum chuckled. Hermione was forced to admit that she had never even noticed it.

“Yes, my workrooms and staff are based in Devon, but my showroom is in Diagon.” Diana agreed, “But I will be happy to come to you for whatever you need, even if it is only a few things.”

“Are you planning on gaining weight, Hermione?” Mum asked, the question phrased in such a way that Hermione knew what she was truly asking.

“No, no of course not.” Hermione insisted, knowing that her body was still recovering, and she would continue to yo-yo. But there was no doubt that Mum wasn’t asking about that, “I’ve my education to think of, and my career. It’s simply that this is an investment I wish to take care of properly.”

“Oh.” Diana murmured. “If something doesn’t fit properly, given time, you can owl it to me or have Petra bring it, and it will be promptly adjusted.”

Hermione ate the last bite of her cake, and looked to the blonde sitting next to her. “Well, Hannah, what should I try on next?”

Hannah’s eyes brightened, “Outerwear. Oh, and I found this cardigan, too.” She fumbled with the pattern books upon which outfits could be based, and modified from there, “That I thought would be a really great coat if we use big buttons, thick wool, and add a hood. Maybe you could even crop it.”

Hermione sent the plate over to the tea tray, and decided, “For Christmas I’m getting you your own Barbie doll.’

Hannah found the page she was looking for, and passed it over to Hermione, asking, “What’s a Barbie doll?”

“Something you can dress to your heart’s content, and she won’t talk back.” Mum informed her, with a small jibe at her daughter.

“Oh, what’s the fun in that?” Hannah returned, “When I get married, Hermione, I’ll be calling on you to return the favor.”

“I am quite sure, Hannah, that Hermione will relish the chance to get you back.” Augusta smiled, “But please, do give me more than four days notice. I fear there are some feats of magic I can only execute once.”

Having given her promise with a tinkling laugh, Hannah looked to Diana and asked, “Now, about outerwear, I have some thoughts on fabric compositions.”

The clothing selection went on and on for hours. Hermione drew the line at anything more than five evening dresses and eight cocktail dresses. She ended up with just that, though Diana fashioned up small accessories that could change the tone of the dresses easily. One was particularly nice, with thin straps and floral fabric over a black background. The sheer robes that went over it hinted at more than Hermione was actually comfortable showing, and in that dress, for the first time in a long time, she felt almost alluring.
Hermione learned that, despite her experiences with off the peg clothing, wizarding design was about quality construction, attention to details, and fit. Any witch after second year could change the color of a dress to anything she might fathom, but it took an expert like Diana to understand the understated details and execute them properly. Those things, Hermione realized, were the things that set the sturdy work robes Diana made her apart from something she might pick up. No person without training and a good eye could copy these designs, for they were suited to Hermione alone.

Finally, the last cotton nightgown slipped over her head just as her own clothing dropped back over her. This nightgown had pleating around the neck, but flared widely until it hit the bottoms of her thighs. The smocked nightgown had no sleeves. It was roomy, designed for the heat of summer. When it was packed away, Hermione caught her Mum sharing a look she did not understand with Augusta.

Hermione sank to the couch for the first time in hours as Diana packed up her fabrics and books. “I cannot believe…” Hermione sighed, feeling her magic crackle along her scalp.

“Hermione, lamb.” Augusta settled to roost on the chair across from her, bringing Diana along with her, “There are a few more ancillary topics we must touch upon.”

Mum brought Hermione another cup of tea, and patted her shoulder. As Diana lectured Hermione gently on hair care and skin care, Hermione stared at the trunks in the corner of the room. There were so many pieces of the set. Some were typical trunks, others still were rolling ones with hanging bars. There were countless rounded trunks that broke up inside to reveal hatboxes, and silk lined portions for underthings.

They were all made from a warm wood, charmed not to imbue the clothing with anything other than a scent keyed to Hermione’s body chemistry. Hermione recognized it as the same scent that had permeated the air during her ritual bath.

The trunks, no matter their style, had a charmed plate categorizing their contents. Above that, the plate held her initials, and shockingly, the title she would assume upon her marriage. Harry had once told her how strange it was to see those words inscribed on things, and now she knew exactly how he felt.

Strange did not begin to describe it. Hermione sighed.

Later still, after promising never to again to take a bristled brush or anything other than a comb to her hair, Hermione was arranged very properly in a new outfit on a chair by the window. Her photo was taken by a charmed camera that had been floating around the room all day. Hermione had assumed it was for Diana’s no doubt extensive file on her newest client, but now she wasn’t so sure.

It was only later Hermione would recall seeing similar portraits in the Foundry. They hung in the West Gallery, husbands down one wall, chronologically, wives down the other. Hermione wanted desperately to protest, wanted to say that she had to talk to Harry before they went so far as to stick her on the wall next to Lily. She tried, but she was told to hush, close her mouth, and keep her hands still. Her left hand was arranged, of course, on top of her lap, with her body barely touching the chair.

Hermione glanced at the clock and saw that it was well past eleven in the evening. The passage of time made Hermione want to scream. The excess of these gifts were unfathomable. For Hermione, it was like going back to war. She’d lived for so long out of a beaded purse that she had no idea what it was, not anymore, to have more clothes than one could be wearing or currently washing.
There were people still in Mungo’s, people still dealing with the effects of war, and their world was still in shambles were the rebuilding effort had not yet touched, and here Hermione was, surrounded by excess and luxury. She had, now, bags that she could have sold to finance books for an orphaned student. She owned more shoes than she might ever wear, shoes that could have gone to people who were volunteering across Europe to rebuild magical Britain in the eyes of the world.

After a small dinner and bidding Hannah good night, Hermione excused herself and barricaded herself in her loo. She was so on edge. She warded the room, and screamed herself hoarse. She shattered everything she could, and put it back together again. She screamed, screamed out for those she had buried, for all the sins and sorrows the war had left upon her soul.

After screaming and fighting her truth, Hermione knew what she had to do. Here she was, playing the bride picking out fabrics with her mother and her friend, and in four days, she would once again be on the front lines. Hermione was not one to hide, and she hated that that’s what she was doing.

Resolutely, Hermione threw the hairband across the room. It was like a stupid training bra, when she wanted the real thing. The one snood she’d tried to swipe had been all but yanked out of her hands. She bound up her hair on the top of her head. It wasn’t what her magical core needed, but it was enough for what she needed to do.

She went to her desk, shoved the new makeup and hair bodkins off of the workplace, and set out pots of ink and three quills.

Hermione had a coup d’état to plan.

Some three hours later, ink smeared on her palm, Hermione realized Augusta and her mum had given her a powerful tool with each dress they’d placed on her back. Hermione also realized that, as well as being a new friend, Hannah Abbott was a powerful ally.

Smiling, Hermione went back to her planning.

Sirius tapped gently on the edge of the door, “Prongslet, Ron’s here.”

Harry looked up from Hermione’s desk, and saw Crooky on the corner of the desk. The half-kneezle seemingly scowled, and emitted a sound he seemed to be making morning, noon, and night. Crooks dropped down off the desk into his lap, claws extended.

Harry hissed as Crooks pulled his claws from Harry’s flesh through his trousers, “I know, Crooks.” The half-kneezle seemed all house cat as he plopped down on Harry’s lap, as if to say, “Well, you’re not Mummy, but you’ll do in a pinch. You may pet me, servant.”

Harry complied. He understood Crooks’s feelings. He missed her. Being in here made him feel closer to her. He knew that they’d be together in days, but it was small comfort right now, when he needed her for so many reasons.

“He can come in here.” Harry rubbed his eyes, “Did I miss dinner?”

“If you don’t come and eat, Fella’s going to stage an insurrection.” Sirius noted, “Having Ron along will help. He’ll eat enough to make even her happy.”

With Crooky sitting in the center of Hermione’s desk, Harry went to the small dining room, because Fella refused to put out dinner anywhere other than a proper dining room. He found Ron there waiting for him, already sitting in front of a plate of food. “Hey, Ron.”
Ron had clearly just floo’d in from a long day of work. He looked rumpled, and when he loosened his robes as he sat to drape over the back of his chair, Harry saw a splatter of ink on his trousers. “Hey.”

Harry felt a little funny. Ron and Hermione had never been a couple, not really. Beyond some angst and some flirting, some consideration of the other person, nothing had really happened. Harry knew of one kiss, one that Ron had described as flat, and Hermione had brushed off. They were better friends than they would ever be lovers. And yet, what if Ron still wondered?

He didn’t like thinking that his best friend was in love with his wife. He didn’t want to live his life hurting the people he loved. He would still marry Hermione, but if Ron loved Hermione, Harry wasn’t going to rub it in. He’d do level best to stifle the words he wanted to yell out for the world to hear. Ron didn’t need to hear the obvious.

Still, if they were going to have words about this, it was they hashed this out now, when Hermione wasn’t around to be drawn in the crossfire and so that this didn’t damage her friendship with Ron. They each needed to come clean before the hurt festered. Harry picked up his fork and stuck it in his mash. They were having roast beef, potatoes, good bread, gravy, and vegetables. There was baked apples and all manner of toppings for the mashed potatoes.

Ron had loaded down his plate, as had Harry. They ate for a long while, in companionable silence, until Harry spoke. “Ron?” Harry began, “There’s something I need to know.”

“Yeah,” He said, swallowing a forkful of meat dripping in gravy, “Ginny knows.”

“No.” Harry corrected, “I want to ask you...” He paused, “It’s not my business. And if you do, it won’t change anything, but I need to know.” He forced out a breath, “Are you in love with Hermione?”

“I love her.” Ron admitted, “But...” He thought for a second, “As much as I wanted to be in love with her, I’m not. I’m sorry I said--”

“Ron.” Harry shook his head, “It was late. We were tired. You were surprised. I was stressed. You said I was dark. I called you rash and selfish. It wasn’t the worst we’ve ever said to each other.”

Harry picked up his spoon, and turned to his baked apples.

“No.” Ron blurted, “No more secrets.”

“Okay.” Harry set down his spoon. He knew Ron wanted him to really listen. Harry wasn’t always very good at it, but he was determined to try. He looked at the man he’d long called his brother across the small table.

“It isn’t that I wanted us to be a couple.” Ron admitted, “It’s just, that with me, she was indifferent.” He looked at his hands, and then back at Harry, “It wasn’t that she was cold. But I never asked her out, even, because she just seemed so focused on her books, on her school work, on her projects.”

Ron exhaled sharply, “I told myself that she just wasn’t interested in being with me. In being with anybody. I told myself that Hermione just wasn’t like other girls.”

On that they would always agree. Hermione wasn’t like other girls, and other girls weren’t like her. There didn’t need to be a comparison or a competition for Harry to know how special she was, how wonderful. Hermione’s gift was her ability to teach him, daily, how to see people as complex individuals. She wasn’t a swotty bookworm, just like Lav wasn’t an airhead with her head in the
clouds because she focused on tea leaves. “She isn’t.”

“No.” Ron agreed, “But I told myself that the problem wasn’t with me. It was just that Hermione didn’t want a romantic relationship, that she was just not there yet. I told myself that maybe she just didn’t see men in a sexual...”

Ron trailed off. Harry recalled that pureblooded families, pureblooded men, almost never discussed female sexuality. They might make off color remarks, but insofar as women actually having sexual preferences and needs, it just wasn’t in their lexicon.

Gently, Harry tried to help Ron, “Are you saying you thought Hermione was gay?”

“No.” Ron shook his head, “More like her passion was focused on her books, her mind. I thought maybe--”

“Oh.” Ron had clearly thought Hermione totally uninterested in relationships other than those of the mind, or those that allowed her express maternal feeling. Ron had seen her drive, her focus, her rationality, not as a part of her nature, but as her defining trait.

“So.” Ron said, “When I saw those pictures, I just couldn’t lie to myself anymore.” He cleared his throat, “It had never been her or me. It was us together. It was just us. And it made me angry, because I didn’t want to take my share of the responsibility for always just assuming that Hermione would want, one day, to be with me.”

“I--” Harry tried.

Ron kept going on. “She’s not a pitiable creature, or pining, or something. She’s never been hard up for dates or famous Bulgarians thinking she walks on water.” Ron sighed, “She’s so special, and I know that. It’s not like it’s the Yule Ball, and I just figured out that Hermione was pretty. It’s just that I was shocked when I saw her look at you in those pictures from the Ministry.” Ron continued, “She’s in love with you.”

“Yeah.” Ron grinned, “I know I haven’t been around much, Harry. I know I’ve been busy with work. But I’m done assuming that you’re going to be there, that Hermione’ll be there. I’ve got to do my part, haven’t I?”

Harry was with him on that thick bench. He’d had to be legally betrothed to Hermione before he’d thought that maybe it was good idea to try and tell her how much he loved her, only to screw it up, badly, when she had beaten him to the punch. “Me too.”

“I--” Harry tried.

“Love her, too. You don’t need to worry that she’s alone in this.

“And I realized, she’s looked at you that way for years.” Ron finished, “And I was angry, because once again, I was thick Ron, too stupid and blind to see what was in front of his face for years because I had my head up my arse.”

Harry would have. He’d had to be legally betrothed to Hermione before he’d thought that maybe it was good idea to try and tell her how much he loved her, only to screw it up, badly, when she had beaten him to the punch. “Me too.”

“I--” Ron grinned, “I know I haven’t been around much, Harry. I know I’ve been busy with work. But I’m done assuming that you’re going to be there, that Hermione’ll be there. I’ve got to do my part, haven’t I?”

“We all do.” Harry agreed, “I’m sorry we tried to protect you. We should have given you a choice, asked you if you wanted to know.”

“I would have.” Ron said, “I love being an auror, finally. It’s all I ever really wanted. I finally feel special without needing anyone else. But as much as I love that, you two are my family. I wouldn’t be Ron Weasley without you two. If I ever have to choose, you know where I’ll be.”

“I can’t get bonded without you.” Harry blurted. “Hermione’s broken up about it. She won’t say it. But you know her.”
“Yeah.” Ron murmured, “Don’t tell her we talked, please?”

“Ron, you don’t want Hermione to know you might be a tablespoon now?” Harry joked, vowing in his heart that he would repeat nothing.

“No.” Ron said, “There are some things we all need to figure out on our own.”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed, knowing full well what he meant. Telling Ron these things, no matter how true, wouldn’t have done him any good. Just like Remus and Sirius telling him Hermione loved him hadn’t been the thing that had sent him tearing from the room. No, no, what had sent him flying from the room had been his reactions to their assertions. Hearing it was one thing. But sometimes, just sometimes, you had to figure out the big stuff in life on your own.

Harry ate a green bean, and Ron scooped up another spoonful of potato and roast commingled on his plate.

“So. Listen.” Ron asked, “Is the gossip true? Is Hermione really pregnant? Because the papers—”

“Ron.” Harry barked, “Shut up before I decide you’re a teaspoon again.”

Harry buttered his bread, and pointed the implement at Ron. He was too hungry and too tired for this conversation. He’d help Ron work through a crisis of self any day. He’d step to the plate and take responsibility for his role in the arguments they routinely had. But this?

“I just thought it would be nice is all.” He returned, “Me, the fun uncle.”

“You, the dead Ron, if Hermione hears you.” Harry warned, scooping up some roast.

Ron was not daunted, “But you could name him Bilius—” Ron broke off, “You know, I’ve always liked Hugo.”

“Ron.” Harry warned. He was tired, hungry, and abjectly lonely for Hermione. The table with just the two of them seemed empty without her. They wouldn’t be the Golden Trio without her, and he knew that Ron, too, felt her missing from the room.

Right this moment, he just wanted her to hex Ron. Gently. A small hex. Just one to make him shut up. Possibly, he also wished she were here so Crook would stop following him around and screeching in outrage.

“I’m a Weasley, all right?” Ron shrugged, “It’s what we do.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah.”

And somehow, he couldn’t be angry. He knew what Ron was saying. He was a Weasley. He was Ron Weasley. No matter how annoying he could be, he always managed to teach Harry about loyalty, about brotherhood, and mostly, about what it felt like to be loved and accepted for who you were, and not what you or anyone else wanted you to be.

Even when you didn’t see eye to eye on things like baby names. Hugo, really? And footy. How could Ron call football ‘muggle quidditch?’ They were totally different.

But. But, where it counted, Harry knew he and Ron would always be united.

From the doorway, he heard a yowl. It was not a happy yowl. Crooks, apparently, still couldn’t find his Mummy, and his servant had deserted his post.
Harry turned to said animal and said, “Crooks, you're not supposed to be in the dining room.”

Crooky sauntered into the dining room, climbed to the end of the table, and proceeded to vigorously clean his bits.

“Crooky!” Harry scolded, “I'll tell Hermione.”

Crooks blinked up at him, clearly saying, “Ah, but so will I, peasant.”

Harry understood, and turned back to his pudding.

Ron sighed, “That cat should be --”

“Ron, I’m begging you.” And Harry truly was, “Please, shut up.”

Ron did, and, predictably, Crooks stopped grooming himself only long enough to let out a mournful yowl.

Harry didn’t know if it was because he couldn’t get Ron now, or because he missed Hermione.

Harry sighed, “I know, Crooky.”

Nothing made sense without Hermione around. He was happy to be on solid footing with Ron. But, somehow, without Hermione, it felt a little empty.

Chapter End Notes

Now, about Hannah. In my mind, she's a pureblood. Originally, in JKR's notes, she was. So she will remain so. I didn't change Jane to Jean for the same reasons. She's got a sister. Mostly because I think she does, not that I've got a basis for it. I just kind of started writing, and there was Miriam.

I think she's pretty darn smart. She has a different learning style, and anxiety stemming from living in a world that only values rote memorizations and big exams. I think she may also have GAD, or possibly combat related PTSD. Maybe both.

This is only our initial impression of her. I like to think she's shy. In my mind, she's uniquely suited to Neville because they both experienced years of people saying, "You're not smart. You're not X,Y,Z..." and then they learned how to stand up and take ownership of their gifts, and basically not give a flying fuck about what anyone says. They're also just, I don't know, fundamentally nice.

Of course, this note is incomplete without Hermione's clothes were based upon. This is the basis for the patterned robe, and this is the black party dress that makes her feel alluring. I see her as a fan of Claire McCardell and also having something of a timeless sort of style. Nothing too fussy. Lots of good fabrics in simple cuts. In old age, I imagine she'd tramp about the Foundry in 30 year old barbours and a hand knitted lumpy fair isle.
As a general announcement related specifically to this chapter, I base my descriptions of our characters off of the books, not the movies. Except Neville. Neville is just M.L., and I can't change my mental picture back.

Ron did indeed get wrapped up in work and in feeling special. He is, but it isn't a job that makes him so. Our boys are growing up. They're learning how to say, "Dude, I fucked up. We're still good?" It's what separate the tablespoons from the teaspoons.
If I get married, I want to be very married.

Chapter Summary

"If I get married, I want to be very married." - Audrey Hepburn

or

“What lies behind us, and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

or

When it's your wedding day, and you wake up to the news that your government is using your impending happiness to manipulate an entire population, what do you do? Well, if you're Hermione Granger, you don't get angry, you bide your time, safe in the knowledge that only fools trifle with you. And then after you plan insurrection, you put on your tunica recta, and you do this thing.

Insurrection is always best orchestrated at a wedding reception. Everyone knows that. But first, the ceremonies.

Chapter Notes

We're here! *screams* Lots of links today. You might want to look as you read.

Here is the video of the Seni Crines. It also covers the bridal outfit.

Please note again that I modified the information and script on this site which we've used before. Any Latin you see in the vows is not mine. I only checked the translations, and found them to be solid.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning of her wedding day dawned bright.

Hermione had only slept again for a scant few hours again. She prepared for her marriage during the day. She soaked up everything Augusta could teach her, and made lists for future research avenues. She learned so much about Wizarding culture and history that she had begun to see the numerous flaws in Hogwarts: A History. These were books she had once taken as gospel, only to discover that they had been written and edited with a certain worldview in mind, a worldview the presupposed baseline knowledge that no muggleborn could possibly have.

At night, Hermione researched the plan for S.T.U.M.P. She plead that she was working on schoolwork to Hannah, and said nothing to Mum or Augusta. They hadn’t had reason to ask. Hermione gathered they knew something, or at least guessed. It was exhilarating to know that a plan had actually begun to form in her mind. Hermione wasn’t ready to put it into words, but the pieces were lurking in her mind, just waiting.
Hermione looked in the mirror, and spat out her toothpaste. She blinked the sleep away. That could not be. She touched her face. It was her wedding day, and she had a rash. All. Over. Her. Face. Grasping the neckline of her nightdress, she peeked down to see that same splotchy red rash all over her chest and neck. Hermione was horrified. How was she going to concentrate on the rituals, if she itched?

Hermione was in a panic. She had a ton of Latin to remember. Augusta had quizzed her and quizzed her and quizzed her, but what if this terrible itching hampered her recall? What if she said the wrong thing and ended up promising Harry the wrong thing?

“We have to get you ready.” Augusta stood in the open door of the loo, “In to the shower-bath with you.”

Hermione loosened her robe, and draped it over the back of a wooden chair that habitually lived in the corner.

Augusta made a very undignified noise that sounded something like a strangled shout.

In unison, Petra called, “Miss!”

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked, quickly, looking around for the danger.

Petra looked horrified, “Miss!” She pointed with a slim greenish finger, with perfectly clean and cared for nails, “Your back!”

Hermione looked over her shoulder as best she could, and saw that the thin straps of her nightgown revealed an angry rash on her back. That explained the nagging itch there, then, “I guess you’d better get my mum, please, Petra?”

Petra had popped away before Hermione had finished asking the question, and was back with her Mum in less than two minutes. Mum lurched when they appeared, “That feels like you’re being sucked through a straw.”

“Better than flying.” Hermione mused, “I think I need a steroid cream.”

“Which one of us is the doctor, miss?” Mum asked, peering carefully at her skin.

“The rash isn’t in my mouth, Mum.” Hermione teased.

“It’s bridal nerves.” Lady Longbottom announced. “I’ve seen it countless times, but I never expected you—”

“It’s not bridal nerves.” Hermione cut in, “I’m fine, truly.” Hermione soothed, not feeling very fine at all.

“You’ve had an allergic reaction.” Mum announced. “Did you eat anything new yesterday?”

Hermione did not announce that she had barely eaten. It was a challenge to eat unless she knew Harry, and to a lesser degree because he was living at home with Molly, Ron had eaten. It was a carry-over from the days when it had mostly fallen on her shoulders to get food for the three of them. Often, this duty meant confounding muggles so that she could steal food.

Of course, once Lady Longbottom was involved, there was no stopping her in her quest to call her healer. Hermione thought it quite a waste of time, but frankly, if magic could work more quickly than her current options, Hermione was all for it. She did not, her pride be damned, want to be a
spotty, itchy, mess while completing these rituals. Accuracy was critical.

“Hermione.” Mum said, when Lady Augusta left the room, “Were you having a reaction yesterday or since...?”

Hermione heard the words in her silence perfectly, since you started The Pill.

Grimly, Hermione knew what she was asking. Her reluctant nod told her mother all she needed to know. “How can you have a reaction to a hormone your body produces?”

“It could be something used to make the pill.” Mum said, “We’ll switch your brand. In the meantime, get a magical remedy for the rash.”

Hermione understood what her mother was advising. She wasn’t to mention anything about how she had come about getting said rash. “I understand.”

“Mind carefully what you sa.” Mum advised, “There is no medical need to tell them as long as you stop taking that pill.”

Hermione had always been told in no uncertain terms to keep nothing from a medical professional. Now, her mother was going back on her own professional ethics. Why?

Hermione wanted to know what her mother knew that she wasn’t telling Hermione. Mum had been systematically removing the paper from each room. Hermione hadn’t even found a wireless in any of the rooms of the suite. She knew it was common to limit contact during the enclosure period, but the removal of every wireless was a bit extreme. In truth, it made Hermione nervous.

The healer that arrived was not who Hermione might have expected. She was a bright and strident woman, with silky, dark hair, and a comfortable manner. She was, of course, Lady Augusta’s own healer, come at once. Hermione knew that the fearsome Lady Longbottom would stand for nothing but such haste on today, of all days.

“Miss Granger...” Emmaline Ewing, asked, after a careful assessment of the rash covering much of Hermione’s neck, face, and chest. “Did you, perhaps, take anything? A new potion? Anything?”

“No.” Hermione lied, very unsure that she could trust this woman. “I don’t take any potions.”

Healer Ewing was undaunted. “Pills, then?”

Hermione shook her head.

“Hermione, I’m muggleborn.” Healer Ewing revealed, “I’m not going to have kittens because you took something. You’ve got to be under a ton of stress.”

“I’m only doing what I can.” Hermione backed away from any credit. Others had done so much for the War. To complain about her lot would be a slap in the face to their sacrifices. She was alive, and she was in a position to make choices. Others could not make the same claim. She had to do what she could to help others be able to make choices. She was no freer if others could not access the same liberty.

She, therefore, had a duty to keep her mouth shut. She also, conversely, had a duty to take a risk which was was not tenable to others. She could get information about birth control that could help other muggleborn witches. She could not scorn the opportunity. Augusta trusted this woman. It would have to be enough.
“Birth control.” Hermione blurted, “It’s the only thing I’ve changed in months. I--” Hermione bit her lip, “But nobody can know. I have to...”

A look of complete understanding passed between the two women, and Hermione knew instinctively that she had placed her trust correctly. If nothing else, the war had honed her instincts to a finely sharpened blade, upon which she could teeter between life and death with each choice she made.

“You may be a woman, Hermione, but you’re also a witch.” Healer Ewing finally said, “Our physiology doesn’t respond well to mundane medications.’

Hermione had heard that, in Potions, with Snape. He’d said that, but never about birth control. Thyroid medications. Cancers. Growth Disorders. Wizarding people, especially in schools, didn’t discuss birth control.

Hormones. And what was a birth control pill? Hormones. Desperation had blinded her to the most cursory of research. If Snape were here, he would kill her himself. She was, no doubt, in his own words, the worst sort of dunderhead. God, this solution would be so much easier to find if she had Snape’s knowledge, or his library.

Hermione felt that desperation under a new worry. She had, she realized, to protect not only herself, but Harry, too. She wasn’t stupid. She knew where this was going. She knew what she wanted out of their relationship, and she wasn’t ready for anything else. “Isn’t there a potion you could give me?”

“I’m sorry, Hermione.” Healer Ewing shook her head, “I’ve just gotten word that all such potions are banned unless a couple gets a registration number from the ministry, because of the...”

“The Marriage Act?” Hermione breathed, “It’s in force, then?”

Emmaline Ewing nodded. “But surely you knew, Miss Granger. You’re on the front page.”

Hermione’s stomach sank, even though she had expected this. “Which one?” Hermione asked, “Is there a bounty on me, again?”

“A bounty--” Healer Ewing broke off, “Which one? You’re on all of them. They say you’ve been matched with Harry Potter. The news has been 24/7 for at least a day.”

Hermione clamped her mouth shut. The Ministry wanted to play dirty, did it? They wanted to go toe to toe with Hermione Granger again. They hadn’t had enough? They wanted to make Harry a poster boy, who fell on his sword, while turning her into a lamb led to the slaughter?

Well, then. She might not have started this war, but she wasn’t going to be used as a tool to their ends. She hadn’t started it, but she’d end it. “Oh. How interesting. That’s news to me. I didn’t know I had a match.” Hermione smiled at the Healer’s confusion, “You see, I’ve been in seclusion. I’m getting married today.”

Hermione made up her mind, “Well, let’s get this rash handled, and balance my hormones.”

Healer Ewing nodded, “I’m going to do some research into what might work for witches. I trust you’ll want to be informed.”

Hermione nodded, not bothering to say that she would be conducting her own research process. There were more important things to consider right now. Hermione had never expected to play right into their hands, but of course they had. The Ministry would do anything to make their ploys
and plots look good, even manipulating the media to make an act of defiance and protest appear to be an act of submission and support.

Healer Ewing pulled out two potions. Hermione knocked them back, and felt entirely better, except for the calm and cool rage in her soul. She thanked the healer for her time. As she packed up her medical bag, she paused. Carefully, she pulled out her own small purse. She unzipped it, saying, “These are highly regulated, now.”

Hermione shook her head as the Healer handed her four foil packets. “But what will you do?” Hermione asked, “You could be...”

“Miss Granger, whatever are you talking about?” She smiled, pressing the packets into Hermione’s hand, “These can be used to waterproof a cast before showering. They work wonders with an impervious charm.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.” She promised, “I’ll buy more. One can never have enough water balloons.”

If the Ministry thought they could block something simply by banning it, they had another thing coming. After all, there was a Boots on St Martin’s Lane.

Hermione scowled. Purebloods making laws that impacted only muggleborns made her blood boil.

When Hermione, with shaking knees, got out of the shower, her skin once again normal and pain-free, she was again put in the shift with her mother’s sure hands, and bade to sit at the dressing table.

She had nothing to say about the announcement, but she knew full well now why she hadn’t seen a paper or heard the wireless in two days. Hermione was too focused on her own day to worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow, she was going to take up her sword, and fight. Tomorrow.

Today, however, she was focusing on keeping calm and carrying on. Her mother, after doing so much these past few days, deserved that much, as did Augusta, and Harry. Belatedly, Hermione decided that she, too, deserved a bonding day that was about the moments happening now. She deserved a wedding day that focused on the choices she was making now.

The Ministry could make life harder, but she would not allow it to take her wedding day, her bonding day, from her. It was the principle of the thing.

And really, later, she could get an IUD.

Did they really think they could outfox her, or stop her from telling every muggleborn witch in the UK about her rights and choices as a human being? She had a duty to disobey a corrupt, immoral, government.

Hermione felt invigorated. She had kept Harry and Ron on track in school while fighting Voldemort and the systemic prejudice in her community. Now that Ron was settled and Harry was doing his best to take his schoolwork seriously, she had plenty of time for recreational activities like plotting insurrection. She even had her own office now, which really did beat her dorm room.

With much ceremony, a wizened elf came into the room, and looked upon Hermione critically, “Seni crines.”

Hermione greeted the elderly elf, thinking that must have been her name, and said, badly, “Salve,
The elderly elf paused, and looked upon her thoughtfully. Hermione felt the power in her gaze, “Æquabit nigras candida una dies.” She brushed her fingers along Hermione’s pale cheek, “Expectada dies aderat.”

The other elves in the room broke into song. They sang their song in rounds, and Hermione thought better of interrupting them. It was strange to see elves, beings she had once assumed had little command of English, sing flawlessly in the Latin of Ovid and Cicero. They gathered many items, and made up her bed. As they sang, they opened every window, heedless of the late October chill, and placed burning incense at every window.

A stately female elf pushed Hermione’s head to her chest, and began to section her hair as they continued to sing, yanking without remorse on any knots they found. Hermione glanced at the dressing table as they worked, glad that she had had the foresight to put her plans and charts into the beaded bag before putting out the candles and falling onto the bed.

When the elf stopped sectioning her hair, Hermione was able to glance about her, and saw that the elves had laid the fireplace. Hermione tried to glance behind her, to more closely observe their activities, but all she could see was...

Hermione’s head was forced forward with a sure hand. There were four short dowels on the table, along with two ancient combs, a red cloth that was thin, but long, and a pointed tool that almost looked like a stylus, save for the point on the end. Hermione knew that that was the very tool that had been used to part her hair, for she had felt it moving along her scalp. Hermione had no doubt that these tools were Roman.

Hermione prayed the combs were charmed so that they didn’t break in her thick hair.

Just when her curiosity began to eat her alive, Augusta began narrating the process. “Brides wear the seni crines.”

Hermione now understood this to be a hairstyle.

Augusta continued, “The tool Gilly is using is called the hasta caelebaris.”

Hermione fumbled with the translation, “The spear…” She was confident about that bit, “The celibate spear?”

“Well.” She confirmed, “The braids will be wrapped and tied.” Gilly let down a section of hair she had charmed with a sticking charm, and began to braid that piece tightly, “The spear is symbolic.”

“Please!” Hermione jerked as Gilly pulled her hair with force to keep her in place, “No more. I can guess.”

There was a new laughter in the voices of the singing elves as Hermione cried out.

“How fortunate for you, I should think.” Augusta said, “I’ll go again and check on your mother. She’s preparing your outfit.”

Hermione looked at the mirror as Gilly took two sections of the braids she had made and, eventually, knotted them together, and again, and then wrapped them around her skull and knotted the ends again.
Gilly spent ages, even though her fingers were sure and true, working on Hermione’s hair. In the end, it shimmered, and not just from the red fabric, which Gilly called a vitta, wrapped in her hair. The braids were tight around her skull. Hermione felt the magic of a long-hold sticking charm fall over every square centimeter of her head.

The elves crowded around her as their song finished, calling out, “Sponsa! Sponsa!” They cried, “Talassio! Talassio!” That too became a round they chanted as Petra arrived, and surveyed the work that had been done. With a smile, she pulled Hermione to her feet, and led her to the corner of the room.

There stood a small altar, and a padded kneeler. By now, Hermione had been prepared well, and she knew what to do. Calmly she pulled up her shift to kneel, and with wandless, wordless, magic, she lit the stick of incense, and knelt for a moment in silent repose. She did not pray. She did not even allow her mind, so jumbled up with thoughts, to bring one to the fore. Instead, Hermione allowed herself to breathe, and focus for a long moment on how she felt.

There was so much to consider emotionally that Hermione closed her eyes. Finally, she found the thread of one emotion that was fundamentally at the center of it all. Hermione infused it with her magic, and felt the absolute trust she felt for Harry bloom in her chest. She knew it strongly, so strongly, because the trust between them was mutual, of equal value to each of them. She trusted Harry, and he had never let his own trust in her falter.

It was enough to still her rolling mind. Hermione poured out the wine in the dish, and waved the incense in a runic pattern above the small portion of wine. Lastly, she took a scale she had pocketed long ago, and left it on the altar. Buckbeak would, she knew, be glad to have been with them in spirit. Hermione resolved to visit him, soon, and thank him for helping them shape their lives so profoundly.

Hermione wondered if there were such beings as Vesta, and even Juno. If there were, she hoped they were with her today.

Within the hour, Hermione was ready to be dressed into a simple white dress robe. Her mother slipped it over her head, and adjusted the seams so they were flat and comfortable against her body. Underneath the robe she wore a slip, and Hermione was glad to have been provided these, very warm pants and a bra. They had been designed by Diana’s capable skill.

The most curious and captivating element about her outfit, Hermione decided as she looked in the mirror, was not the matching shoes she wore, or the seed pearls dotting the hem of her dress robes. Rather, she derived the most curiosity from the belt that was wrapped around her waist to create a bloused effect with the robe.

It made the robe look like hers, like it suited her shape, was meant for her body, rather than a shapeless sack. Putting it on had not been easy. The knots were square knots, two tied together. The cord was silk and very fine, but Hermione knew it would be a challenge to undo. When she had said as much as the three worked upon her outfit, Petra had blushed. Hermione had, she realized, spoken without thinking.

Hermione did not allow herself to connect that belt, and her attachment to it, to her lack of sexual experience. That would be disgusting, base, and untrue. Rather she knew she liked it simply because, before being transfigured, it had been a comfortable sweater that Diana had declared to worn to keep, and Hermione had declared it too favored to summarily discard. It was a statement of her individuality, her tenacity, her foremost commitment to herself. It might look like silk, but Hermione knew it was wool. In this, it was only her truth that mattered.
Her mother pulled her from her thoughts when she placed the coronet of blue camellias and ivy once again upon her head. Mum was so beautiful in her dress robes, navy blue and very finely made. Hermione felt the fabric rustle against her as she moved to adjust the coronet. Fleetingly, Hermione wondered how the coronet that Harry had given her looked so fresh and new as it was placed on top of the coils of braids wrapped around her skull.


Of course it was.

She felt her power zing off of her fingertips. Hermione pushed it into the mental box Mcgonagall had helped her to make. Hermione’s focus shifted to the breathtaking fabric in her mother’s arms. The colored veil that her mother was handling with care shimmered when light hit the threads. It was a yellow so deep that it was nearly a golden orange.

With a serious air, her mother kissed her cheek, and, with Augusta and Gilly’s help, arranged the veil over her body. It wasn’t draped over her head like a muggle veil. Rather it was so long that it first wrapped around her torso, like a pashmina, and draped over her arms. It was then, with her mother’s sure hands, crossed over her body, as though protecting her, and, lastly, pulled up over her head.

Yellow and orange were not her colors, normally, but Hermione felt beautiful. The fine flammeeum fell over the robes, almost covering her knees. It floated around her as she walked, as she was led through the door, each elf who had worked with her pausing to fold back her flammeeum just so, until the senior elf nodded, touched her cheek, and said, “Talassio! Talassio!”

The elves began to sing a new song as they followed along.

Hermione led the way down the hall, towards a pair of large oak doors that took up the entire wall. They hummed with magic. Hermione felt it in her veins. Hermione knew from Augusta’s many lectures that she was exiting her seclusion, and in doing so, was affirming that she had made the choice to continue with the wedding outside of, and free from, patriarchal pressures.

The journey towards the front door was not very long. Hermione stopped short, relief bubbling up in her soul, when, along the way, she saw her father. He stood mere steps from the door, but he was there. Hermione knew he had little role in the coming moments, but she desperately wanted him there. As she moved closer, she rose on her toes, and as she had before with her mother, kissed her father’s cheek.

“You’re beautiful.” The words were full of tears, “I couldn’t miss this.”

“I wouldn’t have moved from the hallway until you came.” Hermione pressed her hand against his, and reached out for her mother. They stood for a long moment, Hermione sandwiched between her parents, who knew of her darkness, and loved her still.

Hermione was the one to wiggle away, and fix her veil, so lovely that it defied category.

“Remember, Mum.” Hermione smiled, “You have to hold me firmly. You might do well to insult Harry once or twice.”

Mum giggled, “I’ll just use some phrases your father developed.”

Hermione laughed. Mum was clearly erring on the side of caution. Dad might be more emotive, but Mum could flay Harry alive and strip him bare if she chose.
She walked to the window, and pushed aside the curtains. Outside the door, Harry was standing in the garden, looking nervous in his robes.

Hermione’s heart ached when she looked at him, deep within the rush of warmth that filled her heart. This whole ceremony was completely silly, but at least Harry was there to laugh about it with her. The details could be worked out later. Even if he never loved her, and Hermione was almost certain he did, Hermione suddenly realized that she was not facing this void alone.

Harry stopped pacing, and looked directly at the window. Gently, he lifted a hand in a surreptitious wave. “Hi.” He mouthed.

Hermione returned the greeting. She mouthed in return, “Charge, Gryffindor, Charge!”

Harry laughed outright. He held up a finger as if to say, “Wait.”

He then reached, to Hermione’s curiosity, behind the tree trunk and pushed a person out from behind him. Hermione could not believe her eyes. It was Ron.

She waved.

He waved.

Her heart felt light.

Deciding to risk it, she mouthed, “Side door.”

Harry nodded, and took off. Hermione waited. Ron was still standing there like a complete idiot. Did she have to do everything? After a second, she mouthed, “Go!”

He looked around for a second.


Ron called out to Harry, and went running.

Hermione grinned then, and felt the lightness of their laughter washed away, at least for the moment, the issues she and Harry needed to work out. The Golden Trio was whole again.

Behind her, Augusta spoke, “Hermione, what’s out there?”

“Nothing!” Hermione let the curtain fall back into place, “It’s a nice day.”

“I’m sure there are interesting things to see in the garden.” Augusta agreed, clearly not believing her for a second, but letting it slide, “But you need to go light your torch.”

“I’m just going to stop at the loo.” Hermione jerked her head toward the hall, which led past the tiny bathroom to the back door. She’d used it when working in the greenhouses with Neville. It was clearly meant for staff, but what could Augusta say?

Evidently, she could say nothing, but she could do a lot. “I’ll come with you you, so you don’t damage your tunica.”

“No, really.” Hermione tried to refuse, but there was nothing for it. She marched down the back hall, wondering if she ought to bolt to keep her word.
She never got the chance. She had just decided to play along until after exiting, while Augusta waited outside the door, when she heard Augusta mumble something and stride away, her heels clicking on the flooring. Hermione waited with baited breath.

She didn’t have to wait long. She heard the back door open, and while sending out a quick prayer that Augusta wouldn’t eviscerate them, she heard Augusta say, “May I help you, gentleman?”

Harry started, “Ron! This isn’t the front door?”

“Oi!” Ron played along, “Would you look at that?” He must have been addressing Augusta, for he said, in a joking tone, “He’s at sixes and sevens, that one.”

“Front door.” Augusta intoned, “Two minutes.” Hermione heard them stepping away, heard Augusta shutting the door. She paused partway, and must have called out, “Potter!” After another second, she added, “Helen is quite prepared to keep her.”

Hermione tried not to laugh. She flushed the toilet for good measure, and stepped out just as Augusta was walking up the hall, “Oh, was there someone at the back?”

“You are a horrible actress.” Augusta sniffed. Hermione would never tell, but she saw Augusta biting back a smile.

Back on task, Hermione said the prayers and lit the torch that she would place in the hearth tomorrow when she did her morning ritual with Vesta. Hermione did so with the fire that had been laid in the great hall at Snoedyn, and charmed it to not burn her or anything else, until she reached the hearth at the Foundry. Carefully, she passed the torch to Augusta, who told her father to open the door.

Hermione tried not to laugh as, just inches from the door, her mother wrapped an arm around her. Harry looked scared witless. Ron and Neville were within earshot, not too far behind him. Reinforcements, then.

Hermione looked anew, as her mother nudged her in the ribs, and realized that he, too, was holding back laughter.

“Dr. Granger, I have come for the honorable and virtuous Hermione, that she might assume her chosen role as my domina.” Harry said, hands clasped behind his back, in a wizarding gesture of peace and nonviolence. “I beg you release her into my care, knowing fully that she is, without question, the light of my soul, and my heart.”

Hermione’s heart pounded. She could not see any of his tells. He had never before been able to fool her with a lie. She wanted it to be true so badly that she saw what she wanted to see, she guessed. It was not something she liked about herself.

No. Now was not the time for self-doubt. It had to be true. She knew he loved her, was in love with her, but was this how he was telling her? When she couldn’t even speak?

Dad opened the door, enabling Harry to see her, and of course, Mum. “Be gone, Potter!” Mum called strongly, “Empty words, prettily said, will do nothing to sway me in my resolve. My daughter is a witch of valor, a warrior amongst her people.”

Good one, Mum! Hermione thought that very well said, and knew that, even though she was speaking to Harry, that Mum was also reminding her of these things, and issuing her a warning she would do well to heed.
“I cannot leave.” Harry said, as Hermione knew he had no doubt practiced, “She is my sponsa, given by her own consent and with your blessing. We have pledged ourselves. I’ll not, nor will I ever, abandon her.”

Here, Harry took two steps forward, and placed a hand on her arm, “We must go.”

Mum shoved his arm away, and pulled her back. “I will not consign my only child to a marriage devoid of what is hers by rights.”

Oh, God. Hermione blushed. How utterly wrong she had been to confide in her mother. Hermione knew that her mother had known her heart from the first, from the first time she had written a letter home from Hogwarts ranting about Harry Potter and his wasted cleverness. However, the fact remained that her mother didn’t need to repeat what she knew, the know-it-all swot.

Oh, when she could speak. When she could speak, she would hex her mother for bringing up what she had, muggle or no!

She just wished her mother would shut up. Hermione stepped on her foot.

Harry addressed her mother, but looked squarely at Hermione. There was a faint blush in his ears. “If it is within me to give her anything she seeks, she will have it, in the full measure of my regard for her.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open. She wanted to hex him. He was telling her in front of her parents that he wanted her, wanted to give her everything, and they all bloody well knew he wasn’t talking about buying a book at Flourish and Blotts.

This was so inappropriate that she wanted to scream. He was talking to her, through her mother, about marriage. Could he say anything more intimate?

“You do not convince me, Potter!” Mum’s grip tightened almost to the point of pain, and she pulled them one half-step away, “You have said nothing that makes me deign you, after days of inner reflection, as worthy of such a partner in life.”

Harry looked slightly frustrated. She wasn’t allowed to speak. He knew nothing of frustration. If she spoke, they would have to start this again. Harry would be booted out the door, and they’d be back to square one. No doubt Mum would delight in making him repeat word for word what he had previously said. It was better to let this play out, and get the information she so desperately wanted without having her heart thrown in her face for a second time.

“It is not from you I seek understanding and forgiveness.” Harry looked away from her mother, and met Hermione’s eyes. “My words in recent days have often been thoughtless and false.” Harry said, “But as I have sworn before God upon the magic within me, my comrades, and my lady, it is solely your daughter’s love and eternal fidelity I seek to spend my life earning.”

Evidently, he could lay his soul bare in front of her mother. Hermione was lost. Hermione gasped as Harry’s intense gaze met hers, as she felt his magic, his energies, intensify his gentle grip on her arm.

With some force, her mother shoved her, literally shoved her, into Harry. The herb coronet he wore was knocked askew, as were his glasses. Thank Merlin he was a seeker, because he caught her just before they stumbled. The press of her body against his was fleeting.

“The blessing of this house upon you.” Mum concluded, happy to have her role as adversary behind her.
Hermione snuck a glance at her face as she righted herself.

Mum looked quite pleased with herself.

Hermione was going to roast her over a spit.

She hadn’t made up her mind about what to do with Harry, whose words were emblazoned on her soul.

Hermione knew that in days gone by, there would have been a large and festive procession to The Foundry. Hermione was glad that this ancient tradition had bowed to modernity in some small way. Her tunica recta blew in the wind on Snoedyn’s wide steps, her mother before her, standing with her father, countless elves, and Augusta. The elves sang songs Hermione was glad she could not translate, for they mentioned something akin to chastity every other word.

Hermione broke protocol, not for the first time, and threw her arms around Ron as the elves finished their singing and they waited to disapparate. He stiffened but relaxed into her touch. Hermione whispered before she let go, “I’m so glad you’re here. So glad.”

And his smile, in that moment, was everything she needed. After a soft word to Harry, he popped away.

Hermione shared a look with Harry as the last notes rang out around them. They were as ready as they ever could be.

Hermione, in unison with Augusta and Harry, closed her eyes, and side alonged her parents to the grounds of the foundry. They got there without anyone splinching, which was good luck indeed. She was still tucked against Harry’s side when the world stopped spinning and Hermione was able to reach out and steady her father.

With a gentle squeeze, Harry popped away, and Augusta came forward to fix her tunica recta to exact perfection and step into formation behind her. Sirius, Remus, and an adorable Teddy waited on the stone stairs of the Foundry. Ron and Neville stood on the opposite end of the same two stairs.

Magic rippled around them. Hermione felt it within her stomach, felt it in her very body. Harry was making very complex movements with his wand, and she knew full well what her response must be. She only hoped she had gone through the process in her mind enough.

Harry stood on the middle of the of the stairs, and let his voice ring out for all to hear, “Carissima mi, the wards are down.”

Hermione felt the ancient wards around The Foundry fall, felt them drop fully as he gave the command. It felt like the world was spinning and the bottom was dropping out, like she had just flown a loop de loop on a broom while being driven over Scotland’s hills in a speeding bus.

The force of such an act stole her breath. Hermione knew, through simple math alone, that the wards around this ancient place had not been lowered for almost two generations.

And yet, the power, the choice, now rested at her feet.

Hermione palmed her wand. She focused on every bit of magic that had built up inside of her, and for the first time, set the wards in the place she hoped she would live, and die. The awesome feat of magic sent a ripple of wind soaring down the main driveway, last used by vehicles when wizards
used carriages on a regular basis.

Behind closed eyes, Hermione visualized the layers of protection that would guard this place and those who loved it falling around the boundaries like a blanket covering an impenetrable wall. She gripped her wand, and pushed her magic to fruition around her, bringing her intentions into reality.

Thunder boomed around them twice, a signal of atmospheric change as she set the wards. Hermione thought fleetingly that there was also lightening. They wards visible behind her closed eyes. Satisfied that there were no weaknesses in her wards, Hermione opened her eyes.

Hermione felt a total rush of awareness and warmth, and knew now that the Foundry was sentient, much like Hogwarts. The house felt grand, and Hermione knew that she would forever be connected to this place. The connection thrummed with rightness, with satisfaction.

The wards would hold. Hermione panted with the force of her magical intention.

A cheer went up around her as song broke out, once again Latin rounds. Every elf in the United Kingdom had to be packed onto the balconies.

“The wards are set.” Harry confirmed this, as was his duty, “Salve, domina.”

With that, Harry took off at a less than sedate pace down the stairs, and towards her. Hermione blushed, for some reason, to the roots of her hair.

The elves cheered again, amid their singing. Boldly, Hermione looked up, careful to make sure her flammeum did not fall, and waved at the assembled magical beings.

Surprisingly, Harry scooped her up, easily holding her against him. Hermione let them get far enough from Augusta before she broke all protocol and spoke, “I thought Remus or Ron was supposed to do this part. You know--”

“How.” Harry did not have the protection of a veil or the ability to hide his moving lips against his own body as she did, so his lips barely moved as they passed Remus, Sirius, Neville, Ron, and Teddy, “We need to talk, but there are some muggle traditions that are better.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, “I liked what you said to my mum. Only if it was true.”

“I meant it. Took me two days to decide how to say it.” Harry whispered, setting her on her feet, just before the threshold.

Before Hermione could reply, and promise him retribution, Augusta was there, with a frown that could only be termed fond. She handed Hermione a cask of oil that had been a gift from a very talented herbologist. Hermione nearly dropped her wand in her fumble to take it.

Augusta whispered, “The spell.”

Hermione took the oil Hannah had given her, and smeared it on the stones of the doorframe, and on the wooden door, speaking as she did so, “Exi! Si hodie casa, si ante casa. Si hodie creat, si ante creat.” Hermione pressed the oil into the right of the door, her fingers scraping along the ancient wood, “Hanc pestem, hanc pestilentiam. Hanc viduitam, hanc vastitam. Hanc siccitam, hanc calamitam, hanc intemperiem.”

She finished with the left side, “Hac religione evoco educoexcante de isti casam.” As she poured the last of the oil from her jar onto the front of the door, she called, “Exi!”
Remus all but shoved Harry through the door, and, with Ron taking her by one arm, he took the other and lifted her over the last step inside the house. The werewolf squeezed her in a gentle hug, and gave her hand to Augusta.

Hermione saw Neville handing Harry a Phoenix feather a crystal that would be, if Hermione used it, very useful in bringing together a potion. They were symbols of fire and water. After a long moment of simply staring at one another, Harry cleared his throat.

Hermione dropped her gaze, and only looked at him again when he spoke, “I offer you the fire of my hearth, and the waters of my cisterns.”

Hermione smiled. They didn’t have cisterns, anymore. But she knew full well what he was saying. He was asking her, in this part of this ceremony, to live with him, to abide with him. Hermione wondered how they’d manage that in the dorms, but then again, she knew how to disable the staircase.

Hermione replied, thinking more of Ruth and Boaz than anything else. “Ubitu Gaius, ego Gaia.”

Hermione then took Augusta’s hand, who led her to simple wooden chair, not far from the altar where McGonagall waited, alongside a ritual table. Hermione tried her level best not to think about that awful Muggle tradition where the groom stuck his hand up the bride’s skirts. Hermione had been horrified, and a little scandalized, at her cousin’s wedding two summers ago. Wizarding people did not do anything like that, ever, for which Hermione was glad.

Harry manually carried a basin of water over to where she was seated in the great hall. The simple chair stood in stark contrast to the carving in the floor just behind Harry. It, once again, read *Eskhatos ekhthros katargeitai o thanatos*.

As he walked carefully towards her, Hermione snuck a look around at the hall she loved. The only visible changes were noticeable. The flowers she normally had placed around had been replaced with candles. Though it was daylight, there were candles everywhere. They were the same candles, she knew, from her ritual bath.

Another change struck her as beautiful. There were portraits cramming into frames of various scenes everywhere. Even portraits, like that of the former Duchess over the stairs, had obviously volunteered to share their space with painted beings from the other galleries. Hermione smiled at them in greeting.

Hermione lifted a foot to help Harry as he divested her of her shoes, and held up her tunica recta as he placed her feet gently in the charmed water. Hermione laughed gently when Harry’s glasses fogged up from the soft steam, and reached down to take them from his face while he completed the ritual.

Hermione fought with her impulses as his fingers found every sensitive spot in her feet. Apparently, he didn’t need his vision fully corrected for that bit of non-magical magic. Hermione wished she was ticklish rather than just sensitive. It was hard to stifle her responses, or the curl of her toes as the tension bled from her body.

Hermione held onto Harry’s glasses, and bit her lip when he put her feet in his lap to dry them. She couldn’t shove her feet into her shoes fast enough. With a renewed grace, she extended her hand to help him rise.

“Repairo!” She whispered, and handed Harry his cleaned and repaired glasses.
He smiled gently. So as they had begun once, they began anew, Hermione thought, satisfied.

Hermione gripped her spindle. From the side table, she spotted a key and knew what was coming. It was odd to her that grooms still gave brides a key. No wizarding home really used them, not with wards like those found here.

Harry rose, and Hermione looked up at him. For a fleeting moment, she saw the boy he had once been. He shifted. His smile was crooked and genuine, and Hermione returned it. Though he spoke to her family, his gaze never left her face.

He spoke, “I commend to you the good fortune of this your daughter, Hermione Jane, whom has blessed me with her consent to be my wife. I call you to be witnesses.” He took the key, and held it visibly, “I say this that you may hear, and forever know that I entrust Hermione with this key to my house as I have entrusted her with my heart.”

Hermione gripped his hand with her left hand as he passed her the key. Hermione saw the tag, and she knew her smile had overtaken her face. It was a library key. The library key to the two storey library here at the Foundry. A shiver went down her spine as Harry’s fingers brushed her knuckles, and her engagement ring.

Augusta attended her as she stood, though really she only saw Harry. She was led again to the same altar that had been in the chapel, and indeed belonged there, but was now in the center of the great hall. There were two chairs there, and with a stately speed, Augusta led her to them. Hermione placed her spindle on the chair that had a Harry’s seal on the back.

Augusta stood just behind her like a muggle bridesmaid, and Harry came and stood beside her, like any couple might before their wedding altar. Once again, now that the basin of water had been moved, the table near the stone altar was covered in liturgical cloth, and held symbolic items, ready to be used in one of the most important rituals. Hermione shivered, and hoped they didn’t blow a hole in the ceiling.

McGonagall smiled gently at them, and with her clear voice, began what was, essentially, a long spell requiring multiple participants. “Make now your magical intentions clear to those before you, that they may witness and hold you firm in your vows.”

From the small table, Hermione took a small spool of golden thread, and slowing her steps, followed Harry around the altar in a clockwise fashion three times, all while Minerva chanted. At the close of the final turn she placed the thread on the altar.

Harry spoke this portion of the incantation. “‘Heavenly Father, in making this offering to You, I pray with good prayers that You watch over us and our household; may this thread be a physical representation of our destiny, our fate, knitted together here by our will and Your blessing.”

Hermione felt the air shift around her. Candles flickered, but held. Clearly, that part of the spell hadn’t caused much change. Hermione privately thought that her fate had always been tied to Harry’s in some fashion, so of course this part of the spell merely affirmed what they knew. The gentle wind was a celestial acknowledgement of their truth.

Hermione watched, then, as Harry approached the altar with his right hand facing upwards.

Hermione then passed him small transparent bag. It was closed with runes, and had been sewn by her own hand. She wasn’t much in terms of sewing, so the edges were lumpy and at times uneven,
but it was the contents that mattered. It held a small chunk of umbalite, rose quartz, kunzite, goshenite, chrysocolla, and Dalmatian Stone. Hermione knew most brides chose two or three stones, and focused their spellwork around those, but those women weren’t entering into marriage with the same goals.

Hermione knew that, with her coming words, their magic would intertwine deeply, to the root of their very souls. Hermione felt her energy shift, her energy and conciseness elevate, as though her very spirit was expanding, rather than merely sharing the same spaces with Harry’s own soul. “In making this offering to You, I pray with good prayers that You look favorably upon us in marriage and bind our magics as we bind our fates in our wedding vows; may this offering I make clearly begin a path that is of honor to You.”

Hermione led them anti-clockwise as Minerva chanted the next portion of this very complex spell. Three times they moved around the altar. When they came to their starting positions for the final time, Harry placed the crystals on the altar. Hermione felt the air around them shift as their magic inched closer together still. The very molecules in the air seemed to increase in charge.

A powerful gust of warm air blew down the staircases behind them, and Hermione saw the wards she had so recently placed, glow. Fleetingly, she felt and saw greater presence amongst them. Hermione did not know who or what it was, but it felt sentient and sacred. Hermione turned to quickly face Harry, to question if he had actually seen what she had glimpsed.

In that moment, as she turned to face Harry, with Minerva standing between them and the altar, Hermione felt like a bride. The twig that Augusta handed her was rough and prickly. The ends of her tunic was blowing against her, and the air danced with magic. The flame behind McGonagall blurred in Hermione’s eyes, glittering behind the veil of visible emotion in her gaze.

Harry held his pine twig along with her wand, as Hermione did with her twig of juniper. His wand felt exactly like hers in her grasp. They had long been able to use each other’s wands, but to not to be able to readily feel the difference was alien to Hermione. It was the very thing that made her know, allowed her to believe, that the spell to bind their magics was actually working.

McGonagall spoke as she lifted the flame high for all to see, “Eternal Source, I call You to bear witness.” Her eyes fell onto Harry and Hermione, “In good faith, before those assembled here and upon your own magic, make now your vows.”

Their hands met as Harry extended her his twig of pine and her wand. As Hermione dropped the twig into the sacred flame McGonagall held from the altar, she said, “To me, by my own magic, for as long as I may live.”

Harry took her left hand, which Hermione had extended, palm up. He gently turned her hand over, and, brushed along her fingers with his fingertips.

McGonagall handed him a platinum band, with runes, which Hermione felt come alive as he slid the ring onto her finger. Her magic recognized the runes, and the ring sized to fit in an instant. Hermione knew that her ring could never be forcibly removed. She would have to relinquish it of her own free will. Her magic could never be torn asunder from his, but their union was forever a daily choice.

Hermione watched as Harry sacrificed the juniper as she had the pine, and presented his hand in the same manner. Hermione felt a sense of rightness and peace in her soul when Harry said, “To me,
by my own magic, for as long as I may live.”

In much the same manner as he had done for her, she took a matching, though thicker, ring from Augusta, and placed it on his hand. The magic that formed between their clasped hand caused a bit of visible static, almost like a small bolt of lightning, to form between them.

Augusta then placed their right hands together, and they slotted their fingers together. Augusta intoned as she completed her duty, sacred above all, "Now join hands one to the other, and seal your pledge to live together as bonded."

At this point, muggle couples in some cases might kiss. Witches and wizards instead raised their wands and sent up sparks. Unlike most couples who had adopted this tradition from this sacred rite to suit civil ceremonies, the magic that came forth from their wands came from both of their magical cores. They both felt it, equally. They were, in one of the most elemental ways, one.

The walls began to tremble around them, shaking the very foundation of this ancient house, though it passed in a long moment.

Augusta handed her the feather and the crystal, and Hermione broke their hold only to place these things on the altar. She then handed Harry the coin she’d gotten out of her shoe when he’d ritually washed her feet, and the coin her father had given her at the sponsalia. He mixed his own coin in with hers, so that they could no longer tell which was his and which had been her own.

Harry set them on the altar as she spoke, “I call by this statement of unity, that every Potter, living and dead, accept me into your family. Safeguard these tokens of fire and water presented to me this day by my husband, Harry James, and that you may wish our household with perpetual abundance and joy.”

McGonagall acknowledged her, and asked, “Please, be seated as one.”

Harry took her hand and led her to the small, ceremonial table that was now devoid of offerings. Heat pooled low in her belly at the barest touch of his hand against hers. Already, his wedding ring had absorbed the heat of his skin, and Hermione couldn’t resist running her fingers over it as they walked.

Chairs had been arranged there. The small table held wine, bread that was covered with an ornamental cloth, and a single chalice and bowl. Augusta served them this spelt cake and wine with great ceremony.

McGonagall stood to the side of the table, so that everyone could see this critical point in the ceremony, “Take now the wine and drink, as a symbol that your blood and the magic in your veins is now mixed as one.”

“May this honor you.” Harry took the chalice, poured some off into a tiny bowl, and sipped from it. Hermione watched his throat work as he swallowed, and her mouth went dry.

No sooner had the rim of the chalice left his lips than he was passing it to her. Hermione felt that slow burn in her belly unfurl.

“May this honor you.” Hermione poured out a bit of the wine into the same bowl, and sipped the wine. It was dry and tart, but a fire rushed through her body. She held a shiver at bay.
McGonagall directed them, “Take now the sacred bread and eat, as a symbol that your bodies are now joined together in life as one.”

Harry broke bit of the dry and crumbly spelt bread off onto his hand. He offered it to Hermione, who took it with a loose grasp in a cupped palm. She, using her right hand, broke off a similar piece and passed it to Harry in the same ritual. In the next moment, the bread she’d placed in her mouth was thick on her tongue.

For a long moment, the foundation beneath them rumbled and shook. It was a fractional representation of what was sliding into place in their souls. Hermione heard Winky gasp, and Teddy pulled his Papa closer to where he was sitting on his Padfoot’s lap.

Hermione felt a sense of wholeness that was, she realized, what she had wanted and needed since the moment McGonagall had opened their chair. The candles all around them lit as another gust of preternatural air swirled around them.

It was done. In the most fundamental of ways, they were one. It could never be undone.

Minerva completed the spell they had woven. “Et toniturcaelum omne ciebitur.”

And so the spell was done. A sense of eerie calmness fell across the great hall. Hermione glanced at Harry out of the corner of her eye, her veil covering most of her eye line, leaving only a small sliver of his face visible to her. First the first time in a long time, the tension had bled from his body, and his thigh was warm against her own.

After a moment, she continued, “You are joined together forevermore in matrimony. Together forever after are you intermingled as the abundant clouds. Before these witnesses, by your magic, are you now joined together. Not by this ceremony have you been merely wedded as temporary lingerers in a transient role, for by this is constituted a superior marital union of magic and soul, and certain to last into all posterity.”

Augusta broke a portion of the cake over Hermione’s head. It crumbled over her in a heavy blessing.

McGonagall began, “May God always preside over this couple’s lives together, and so may their mature choices always bring happiness into their married lives. May God bless them abundantly with children—”

As McGonagall spoke, Hermione shook some that had fallen into her lap, and hidden by the table, threw it at Harry. He earned a glare from McGonagall as his bark of a laugh interrupted her. With a glare, she quelled him. Hermione swore she heard him say, “Sorry, Professor.”

Mollified, McGonagall repeated the portion of here blessing that his laugh had obstructed, “and bless them abundantly with children.”

She looked softly at Harry and Hermione, “May God bless you and keep you. I wish you love and happiness, companionship and passion, but most of all, I wish you the peace of finding a port in the storm within a shared embrace.”

She left them to stare at one another, and looked beyond them to address the small crowd that had witnessed their joining, “It is done. Join now, all of you, in welcoming Harry and Hermione, together in society as bonded, as husband and wife.”

Preternaturally, at that very moment, every candle in the room went out. Outside, the heavens broke open, and a unseasonably warm rain fell, thunder crashing comfortably as the crowd
illuminated them with celebratory sparks from their wands.

Chapter End Notes

Æquabit nigras candida una dies.= One single bright day will equal the black ones.
Expectada dies aderat= The longed for day is at hand.
Salve, amica= Hail, Friend, hello, friend.
Talassio= Old, even for Romans, saying at weddings, also part of the ritual singing the elves do. Cry for good luck and blessing. See that book I linked for historical context.

Carissima mi=(lit. my dear), a term of endearment, very powerful. As we know, translations sometimes suck at conveying details. It's a term of intimacy. The native speakers, and those schooled in the language, know what Harry is saying to Hermione as he puts the safety of his estate and his people at her feet. It's a term reserved for the closest to our hearts.

Salve, Domina (Hail, Lady.) = In this case, Harry greets the new Mistress of the Foundry. It's symbolic. In setting the wards, she has taken a role of leadership. This acknowledges her power, her status.

"Exi…Exi!" = A blessing taken from the link up top.

Ubitu Gaius, ego Gaia= Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia. This is taken to mean, because Gaius is understood to be Joe Bloggs, "Where you are man, I am woman." More on this later. See more here. It's a good book. If you see it, you should give it a read.

Eskhatos ekhthros katargeitai o thanatos. = The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. I think this is the Potter family motto. In this verse, it is, anyway. We've seen it on L&J's tomb. It comes from the KJV. Fits, also, with my present representation of the Potters as religious.

Headcannon alert: the wand sparks end every wedding, like throwing rice or blowing bubbles. However, the rain and thunder are not typical. Nor is the Foundry trying to crumble despite McGonagall, Remus, Sirius, Winky, and Augusta doing their level best to ward the house. It should, with that level of magic, have not moved for eons. I do wonder what might have happened without those wards?
Life Isn't a Love In

Chapter Summary

"Life isn't a love in, it's the dishes and the orthodontist and the shoe repairman and... ground round instead of roast beef. And I'll tell you something else: it isn't going to a bed with a man that proves you're in love with him; it's getting up in the morning and facing the drab, miserable, wonderful everyday world with him that counts." --Henry Fonda as Frank Beardsley in Yours, Mine, and Ours (1968)

Or

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent." —Madeleine Albright

Or

Every wedding night has a wedding morning.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has sexual content, and has several pretty big discussions about consent using words like rape. Mind your triggers. Also, do you know how hard it is to write sex without actually writing about it explicitly, using actual terms for actual body parts? It is difficult, and I still don't know if these scenes work.

But hey, let me know. Other chapters will be different, I'm sure.

You remember when Sirius asked Remus, if he had ever sat Harry down and explain what legitimizes a marriage? Breaking the knot, and tying it again? Well, don't read this bit if you're not keen on Cuddly!Harry and BAMF!Hermione. This chapter has that combination in spades.

Don't worry, this isn't the end of the story. Nothing is ever as easy as it seems on paper, but Hermione is on the right track and she's happy. Really, though, if anyone had told Augusta, she would have had the law thrown out before it got off the ground, because she knows all kinds of ritualistic and cultural information. However, if we had, we would have had no plot. This'll be important later.

I'm just taking a bit of a break from every day posting while I edit the first part of their post-honeyymoon life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What was the point of having a dinner if she wasn’t allowed to eat any of it? Hermione knew every single person in the room, there were only ten of them for Merlin’s sake, and not one of them would leave her alone long enough to put her spoon to her lips.
Furthermore, what was the point of fusing their magic if she and Harry weren’t going to be left alone long enough to talk? The whole point of this was unfettered and protected communication.

Well, it had been, Hermione noted Harry’s gaze, until she had realized that the fact that their magic had always been suited to one another meant more than just political expediency. Now was not the time to discuss it.

Hermione glared, and speared her food with her fork. Augusta and her mother were mere seconds from converging upon her, “I swear I got to talk to you more when I wasn’t in possession of half your magic.”

Harry agreed, “I tried to break the enclosure.” He noted Hermione’s shock, and added, “Twice.”

Hermione gasped. “Didn’t anyone tell--”

“They did.” Harry replied, keeping one eye on the fact that Dr. Mrs. Granger had roped Sirius into standing up, “Didn’t matter. I had to explain--”

“Later.” Hermione hastened, “But--did..” She tried again, “Merlin, are you--?”

“No.” Harry’s face was completely red, “I checked.”

Hermione didn’t know what spell someone might use to verify... Oh! How foolish of her. She was too reliant on magic. A spell wasn’t needed.

Her mother waved her over. Hermione stood, and replied before swanning away, “Well, you’d better be careful with such experimentation. You haven’t much visual acuity left to sacrifice. Remus should be able to help you if you find you need a good depilatory, though.”

Harry’s strangled choke followed her the short distance to where her mother stood. Thankfully, the Flammeum covered her heavy blush. She knew full well there were no such consequences from it, but it had always been fun to shock him.

Hermione balked, “Merlin!”

Her mother and Augusta were the only people in the room, and it hardly signified if she cursed.

The bed was charmed, clearly, to become a bower of violets in the middle of the bedroom that was meant to be Harry’s own. Her new bedroom was just off the shared sitting room. Hermione was glad to say that the bed in there, though smaller and less ornate, didn’t look like a haberdashery had vomited on it.

Violets clung to the bed frame, the posts, hung off of the wispy chiffon canopy. The bedding had been changed. Hermione had never seen this room, obviously, but she rather felt safe in assuming that Harry had not requested to rest his head routinely against saffron dyed silk.

“Hermione...” Augusta soothed, “You did wonderfully today. Never have I been prouder to serve a bride.”

“Thank you.” Hermione meant it, “But...” She looked around the room. It was huge, but nothing was unusual but the bloody bed, “But...” She gestured delicately towards the bed, “I cannot possibly...” *sleep on that horrible thing.* There were little charmed bees, buzzing amongst the flowers.
“Now, now.” Augusta spoke quickly, her pale blue robes swishing, “When Harry presses his suit, you must tell him no. Firmly, and resolutely.”

“He won’t.” Hermione assured her, “And if he did, I’m not sure it’s your business if I refuse him or not, Augusta.”

The very idea of discussing the whole thing near this bed that looked like it had fallen out of some Mills and Boon was not to be withstood. Really? Were those actual petals falling on the bed from the flowers on the underside? Hermione bit back a groan.

Augusta looked dismayed. Hermione had done everything she’d been told to do to the letter, and so Hermione knew that she would not call the wedding a success until tomorrow after lunch. “But it’s tradition!”

Hermione knew that that was one tradition that didn’t make any sense. Augusta had to be mistaken. Before Hermione could stop her frustration from spilling forth, sighed, and tried to explain, “But if I say no, he won’t ask again.”

Hermione implored her mother with a silent look. This was, by far, the most nonsensical thing Hermione had ever heard of, and that included a ritualistic period of dancing in front of a hearth calling out, “Vesta, Vesta!” At least brides no longer had to fly their sheets from their windows or a bailey. Hermione thought that perhaps this private humiliation was also horrible in its own way.

Mum, as always, was a voice of reason in a high stress situation. “I think we may be hitting a cultural barrier, ladies.”

“Please do explain, Helen, for I cannot imagine...” Augusta wrung her hands together, and looked down her nose.

“In Muggle society, when a spouse says ‘no’ it is understood that their refusal means to stop and not ask again for the foreseeable future, until a discussion can be had. It might mean, no not now, no, never, or no, not like that, and each is acceptable. But no, whatever the reason, remains no, and a discussion is not required. Even so, most marriages are healthy enough to foster communication, though it’s often best to wait until the passion of the moment has passed to approach the subject again.” Mum explained, as she had many times to Hermione over the years, “Harry is not unaware of this, and is, well, a very moral young man. So if she were to say no as you suggest, well, she would find herself...”

Hermione blushed. She would find herself with yet another interpersonal issue to discuss. And anyway, she wasn’t going to mess with Harry’s head, or say something she did not mean. Consent wasn’t a game or a joke. Ever.

“I see.” Augusta allowed, “It is much the same for us, given that so many potions can interfere with consent, we also hold it as sacred.”

Hermione had not always found this to be true at Hogwarts. The widespread use of love spells was one such example, as was the WonderWitch line of products, but perhaps this was not the case for wider Wizarding society.

“But in this regard, Hermione, you would simply be setting up a moment where you will repeat your consent as you did in the ceremony. I do not care how you do it, only see that it said this night. Without that final incantation before morning, the validity of your marriage could be contested, and Harry could be brought to trial for coercion.”
“That’s horrible.” Hermione’s eyes blazed. “How does it normally work, again?” Hermione could not imagine anything other than ‘yes’ being taken for consent. Hermione added ‘sexual consent’ to her ever-growing list of things to research.

“Hermione!” Mum cried, good humor lighting her eyes, “We’ve covered that time and again.”

“Not that!” Hermione blushed, “This absurd bit.”

“Never you mind.” Augusta sniffed, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

Hermione paused, consideration plain on her face, “That’s actually the first time I’ve heard that.”

Interpreting Augusta’s look properly, Mum smiled, “We were very progressive parents.”

“One more thing, Hermione.” Augusta finished, pressing a kiss upon her cheek.

“I’m almost afraid to ask.” Hermione sighed, “I don’t have to do the bit with Vesta until tomorrow, right?”

“Before the brunch, yes.” Augusta reminded her, “I simply want to remind you, dear, that this space is now your own. Never again will another person outside of servants or your own husband cross the threshold of your bedroom, and even then you must grant permission. To breech that boundary is to desecrate your privacy, and your marital confidences.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll remember that.” Did this mean that she never again had to sleep with other people snoring in her ear?

Whatever it did mean, though, Hermione knew that now she had a culturally accepted way to hide in her bedroom and read when she didn’t want to see people. It would come in handy. After all, Harry came into her room, after tonight, with only her permission. And, naturally, if she wanted to read in peace for a few hours, she could simply tell Harry to get lost, and there wasn’t a thing anyone could say? It sounded glorious. Maybe now she would get some of her reading list actually accomplished.

“Now.” Augusta smiled, “I’ve talked your ear off. I’ll leave you with your mother. Helen, do pull the door shut when you go. I’ll delay Sirius and Neville, shall I, by being perfectly dotty?”

The door shut with a click. Hermione threw herself backwards on the bed, her legs hanging off the edge. “Mum.” Hermione’s body cried out for the first time in days, for a restful sleep.

“Well, Bunny.” Helen Granger patted her knee as she perched beside her, “You’re married. How do you feel?”

“Tired, hungry, and I want to hex everyone.” Hermione closed her eyes, to avoid looking the canopy, which was calling her to cast up her accounts. “So, normal. Good. Thanks for being there with me. I know these customs are strange.”

“They’re beautiful in their own way, just as you are.” Mum replied, scooting farther back on the edge of the bed, “There won’t be a divorce, will there? Your magic is fused. I didn’t understand when you tried to tell me at home, but your magic is in your soul, isn’t it? Your magic, Augusta said, was all but already bound. I don’t understand...”

Augusta had said nothing of the sort to her. Privately, though, Hermione didn’t doubt it.
“We could get a civil divorce, but no, our magical cores won’t willingly separate.” Hermione allowed, “Do you feel misled?”

“No.” Mum allayed her fears, “You explained. Dad and I weren’t listening. We’re not going to do that again, Hermione.” She vowed this, “We almost missed out on something beautiful because we didn’t want to see it. We’ve learned our lesson, bunny-girl.”

Hermione’s throat felt tight. “Oh, Mum.”

“You’re a beautiful bride, Hermione.” Mum stated, the truth of her reality saw it plain in her voice. Hermione wondered if, perhaps, she would be able to make someone feel as special as her mother had always made her feel, “I can see why Remus was so adamant that such a law violates the foundation of your society. He meant the concept of bonding, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” It was not something widely discussed in society, but the concept of having a sou--of finding someone with whom your magic could meld so fully that they commingled and coexisted was rare, even on a statistical level, “You can’t force it or fake it.”

Mum considered her daughter. It hardly seemed possible that this woman, who had once been no bigger than a loaf of bread in her arms, who had thrown fits in Waitrose, was undisputedly the most powerful woman in her society. And yet, Helen knew the truth. It was strange when your only child was, by her own merit, more powerful and influential than the PM. “You’ll be, as you have been, a formidable force in this society.”

“I’ll haul it by the ear into the 20th century.” Hermione affirmed, only joking, truly.

Mum laughed.

“First thing to go is the marriage law.” Hermione yawned, “After that, I’m waging a war against specisism, and finally, the supposed impropriety of married women wearing trousers.”

Mum laughed anew. “I imagine you’ll wear denims as often as you like.”

Hermione muttered, “I hate shaving my legs.”

Mum titled a glance at her. “Well, aren’t you a witch?”

“It’s just not the same.” Hermione asserted, “And besides, it’s the princi--”

There was singing and shouting in the hall. It was growing louder, with each passing second. Oh Merlin. Was that Ron? Ron singing? He actually had a nice voice, deep and comforting, underneath the countless elven voices ringing out.

Hermione figured that singing was a custom for house-elves. She knew they didn’t sing while they worked like some silly film, but they did sing in times of joy, and sadness.

Hermione remembered that Dobby had only had Winky to sing for him, when she heard of his death.

That memory was a kick in the gut. Why should all these elves sing for her when they hadn’t been there to sing for Dobby? Why had the world, his community, passed over his death as happenstance of war, as of one elf in a million? Hermione resolved that one day, the world would sing for Dobby, somehow.

Mum misread her expression, “Hermione?”
Hermione forced herself back into the present. “I’m fine.” She assured her mother, “Just memories, you know.”

“May this be the start of many happy ones.” Mum blessed her with these intentions. After a second, she grinned.

Hermione dreaded what she might come up with now.

Mum joked, “First thing I’d do, if I were you, Hermione, is get Harry to break that knot.”

“It’s just magical tradition, Mum, it doesn’t keep its significance for anything.” Hermione’s eyes were furiously narrowed. “Besides, it’s charmed.”

“I have it on good authority you’ve married a wizard.” Mum stood from the bed, “And if he can’t manage his wand properly, I’d advise you to educate him quickly.”

Hermione tried to remove the words from her ear, before they entered her brain.

Mum must have seen her pained expression, because she grinned as she grabbed the doorknob, and added, “Swish and flick, was it?”

“Mum.” Hermione insisted flatly, “Get out of my room.”

Helen laughed, and advice imparted, slipped out of the room via the dressing rooms to meet Augusta on the opposite side of the house.

Harry looked harried as he escaped into the room through a crack in the door. He warded it quickly, shutting out all of the shouting.

He sat down on the bed, and flopped down next to Hermione. They sighed. “I guess we can’t pass out here.” Harry mused, looking at the bower she had avoided by closing her eyes. “This bed is awful. Did you pick it?”

“Arse.” Hermione got right to work on her first duty as the Lady Potter. She issued her counterpoint an order, “Move so I can fix this horrid bed.”

Hermione sniffed primly, waving her wand with intention and force. “And you’re stuck with me, so now I can do what I want.”

Harry accepted her strident teasing, “Does that go for me, too?”

“No.” Hermione paused in her wand work. He still needed his NEWT scores, after all. Hermione had no illusions about her role in that process. She paused for a moment in the transfiguration. “Cotton or flannel sheets?”

“Cotton?” Harry suggested, cracking his elbow joints as he stretched. “I’m gonna go grab the loo.”

Hermione waved him off as she finished fixing the bed. The bed frame was freed from the trappings of a bridal bower, and the plain blue coverlet was now dark navy, and quilted. Hermione had elected to conjure plaid sheets, a nod to the flannel she had considered, in a fine cotton. The plainly covered down pillows were encased in matching solid and plaid pillowcases.

It was heaven. Hermione hastened to pull down her veil and change now that Harry was clearly doing the same, and found that it was stuck. It didn’t move. Grabbing her wand, Hermione tried to remove the sticking charm and had no luck.
A cresting wave of horror sent her fleeing into her dressing rooms.

The lights rose around her as she faced the mirror.

She wasn’t the one who could remove her veil. It was implicit in her pledge to prepare for wedding.

Nubo. I veil myself. I veil myself.

For you. For marriage.

For se--

For the cons—

Sensibly, Hermione knew that there was nothing to peeling back a thin layer of flame-colored fabric dyed with egg yolks, but it was still unnerving to have to ask him for help when they hadn’t even discussed the reevaluations of the day.

_Harry I meant to ask, do you love me? Yes, fantastic. Good. No? Oh, okay, but first, before I brain you with a book, will you undress me?_

Hermione spun around in a circle. She needed, first off, a nightdress. Diana had left behind at least two dozen, but Hermione didn’t know where they were stored in this massive closet. She certainly was not going to call for Petra. But it was Petra who treated this room, these rooms, Hermione mentally corrected, as her domain.

Hermione didn’t know where anything had been put away. She supposed she should start looking. After digging five drawers that held only underthings, Hermione let out a frustrated screech.

“Find a boggart?” Harry asked, leaning against the door that led to his bedroom.

Hermione looked up, sheepishly, “It’s more what I can’t find.” Hermione paused, “I don’t dare accio anything and risk messing up a drawer or something.”

“Want some help?” Harry offered, “I’ve never been in here.” He peered around the wide room that connected their bedrooms, “This room is massive.”

Hermione revealed the contents of the drawer she’d pulled open. “I am now the proud owner of at least five bed jackets. We’re closer.”

Harry pulled out the next drawer to her left, “Here you go. I’ll just let you...”

“Don’t!” Hermione cried, blushing.

Harry’s expression shifted.

Hermione kept her chin up. “I can’t take any of this off myself and this tunica is starting to itch.”

“Right.” Harry summarized, taking her by the hand, “Well, come on.”

“Come on?” Hermione cried, as he led her from the dressing room. “Harry!”

“If I get one shot, I’m not wasting it.” Harry lowered the lights in the wide bedroom, leaving them cast in a soft glow. Hermione’s pulse hammered as she found herself backing against the bed and sitting down. “The last few days without you have been hell, Hermione.”
“I cried.” Hermione admitted, “I never cry. I also drew up a schematic for S.T.U.M.P. But I had myself a good cry, first.”

“I count your tears, Hermione.” Harry whispered. He was beside her, then, in the middle of the wide bed, “I should have broken the seal.”

“I wouldn’t have let you.” Hermione was absolutely certain on that point. She would never have let him past those doors, not if she had to hex him to keep him away. A broken leg could be healed with half of a vial of skele-gro.

Harry was hesitant. “Didn’t you want it?”

They had both been here before, and now, it seemed, they were being given a chance to make a different choice. They had created this choice, Hermione realized, together. She would not waste it with half-truths or without building complete understanding between them.

“I did.” Hermione swore, “I nearly jumped from the window and appariated on my way down.”

She had done, too.

She had gone so far as to grip her wand and shove open the window in her bedroom. She had thought about how good it would feel, to have the wind in her hair, and Harry by her side. But, with a sigh, she had stepped back, latched the door, and gone back to studying the Latin books Augusta had given her, which covered every bit of the marriage ceremonies, from the first ‘nubo’ to the final prayer to Vesta. These things were largely condensed in civil ceremonies, because they weren’t soul bindings, but the core of what made marriage marriage was there.

The consensual union between two people, who by mutual accord, decided to walk their paths together. Hermione, for the first time, put her marriage before her pride, and asked, “But do you know what stopped me?”

“What?” Harry was right there, his knees bumping into hers, his gaze soft and open in the low light of the dimmed gas lamps.

“I don’t want a single person to question our marriage. Not even Malfoy Sr., from his cell in Azkaban.” Hermione continued, “I don’t want to question it, either.”

Harry studied her, “What do you mean?”

“Harry.” Hermione twisted her engagement ring, and trusted his actions. She trusted now, what she knew he’d been saying in that gesture. She trusted what he’d said to her Mum. She trusted the look on his face when their magic had fused fully together. More than that, she trusted herself to know that she had placed her trust in the right man. She trusted that, no matter what came their way, he would always be her friend.

He was Harry. She could always be honest with Harry. It was the very foundation of their bond.

“I want a real marriage. I want to build a life with you. I know we didn’t plan on that, but I really do love you, I know that now, and...” Hermione, took a leap, knowing that she had to trust him with the truth, “The idea of being half your soul but not half of your heart seems--”

“You’re not half of my heart.” Harry insisted.

Hermione swallowed her pride. She swallowed the urge to scream. She swallowed the urge to cry. She knew she would do it later. But for now, she did her best to accept his honesty. It was better
that he was honest. Still, she thought that maybe, just maybe, they had a choice to make here. They didn’t need to fall in love. They could build it.

Hermione put the first brick in that wall, “Well, I know I’m not now, but maybe if given time, you could--”

“Hermione.” Hermione forced her mouth to stop moving as Harry reached out with to still her voice with a gentle finger brushing against her lips, “I can’t give you half of my heart when you already have all of it. You can’t give it back. It’s been yours for almost a decade. I wouldn’t know what to do with it, now.”

“Just love me.” Hermione fell into his eyes. “That’s all.”

“That’s all, she says.” Harry’s voice was thick. “I love you so much. I just didn’t know how to tell you, or how to let you see it.”

Hermione’s smile wrinkled her nose. She leaned her head against Harry’s hand, which had moved from her face to rest along her shoulder. It seemed that once she’d started touching him, she didn’t want to give it up.

Hermione saw it now. She saw it in every moment that he had supported her goals, been there for her, had put her needs first. Hermione saw it, too, in the ways that he had always sought out her opinion and her ideas.

Hermione had another. She thought he might like this idea. “Well, you might start by taking off my veil if you want a practical way of showing me.”

Harry sobered, “How?”

Hermione took his left hand, and drew it up to the top of her head, letting his fingers brush the top of the fine fabric that had been freed of crumbs ages ago. “You’ll have to take it from there.”

He quirked a smile at her as he pushed the fabric down behind her head, and drew his hands evenly down her arms, pulling the fabric with him as he went, leaving it in a pool around where she sat on the bed.

Hermione felt gooseflesh rise on her skin. Everywhere the fabric had been, his fingers had covered, erasing the feeling of the silk against her body with the perfection of his touch.

Hermione looked up, pulling her gaze from where his hands still rested on her elbows. There was less than a space for breath between them, and Hermione knew that it still wasn’t enough. “The coronet’s charmed, too.”

Something new, something Hermione had never really seen, swirled in Harry’s eyes. The intensity in his green eyes made her feel nothing short of venerated. She wasn’t a goddess, though. She was just a woman. Just his wife. Just Hermione.

And Hermione always had a plan. Hermione bent her head. Harry pushed up to he knees on the soft mattress, and gently picked the coronet of flowers and ivy free. He gently sent it flying over to the dresser where his own coronet sat.

She shuddered when his breath ghosted the upper shell of her ear, “Can I take down your hair, ‘Mione?” He played with a lock that had fallen free at some point, and softly added, “No charms, now. Only if you want it.”
Hermione placed her hands on his torso to hold him where he was, and arched her neck to meet his gaze. Their eyes burned into one another’s gaze, “Please.”

He worked slowly, too slowly. First, he carefully unwound the knot of braids at the base of her skull. Then, he followed each pair of braids, with delicate, searching fingers, back to their source at her scalp. Hermione arched against him when his fingers dipped, skittered, and caressed the strands of her hair, methodologically unraveling each braid and letting the freed hair flow over his fingers.

Over and over and over he repeated himself, until Hermione was nearly gasping and was totally mesmerized by his touch.

It was at once too much and not enough.

When Hermione reached up to pull the final pair of braids loose from her hair with haste, Harry made a small sound of censure, and kissed her hand as he moved them back down to rest on the quilt. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t!” Hermione insisted, as a large section of hair fell free from the braid as Harry worked, and Harry threw the last bit of string sectioning her hair behind them. “Harry.”

Even in the low light, Hermione could see the blush traveling up his neck. “Your hair is beautiful.”

“It’s awful.” Hermione wondered if his glasses had fogged up again. Hermione felt so relaxed that the simple correction lacked her usual force.

“It’s beautiful.” Harry disagreed, running his fingers along the final section of hair that loosened, and fell into place. He brushed the bulk of her hair over her shoulder, and settled back to breathe along the shell of her ear, “Almost as wild as your soul.”

His words were heat inside of her. She clenched down on his neck to keep him in place, when he his tongue met the edge of her earlobe, “I should know. It fills all of the broken and empty places in my heart, Hermione. I feel it every time my heart beats.”

Hermione was through being passive. She put her hand on Harry’s shoulder, and pulled his hands down, where they came to rest on her hips. She missed the heat of his words against her body, but she needed his focus, “I swear, I will bat bogy your--”

Hermione’s impassioned teasing skittered to a stop when Harry kissed the hollow of her throat. How did he just know where every sensitive spot she had was located? Maybe, Hermione thought, it was his touch that set her aflame. It had to be because, Merlin--

“No you won’t.” Harry responded, pressing a kiss to the other side of her throat, “Because if you did, you’d end up sleeping in your tunica.”

“I’d figure out...” Here her hands boldly shoved up his shirt, raking her fingernails gently down quidditch honed muscle groups. They fluttered against her touch. His body thrummed with magic under her hands, magic and man, all together in one configuration that could only describe Harry. “How to untie the knots myself.”

Hermione realized that he’d understood what she’d implied when his fingers stilled where they were skating up the slide of her bent calf. “I’d like to watch that.”

Hermione panted when his fingers dipped into the hollow behind her gently folded knees, “Not tonight.”
“No.” Harry agreed, hand skating up, and around, and down. He had some pattern, only Hermione couldn’t figure it out. Just when she expected to find his touch here, it was there, and it all made complete sense.

Not half as much, Hermione thought, as her choice to pull his hand from her leg, and very determinedly, lead his fingers to the knots that she desperately wanted him to untie. Hermione shuddered her fingers brushed under his shirt, “Let me.” She pressed, “Get--”

And before she had finished, the shirt was gone, and her head was leaning back to meet the pillows. And then, then, then, Hermione watched as Harry’s fingers dipped and gently pulled along the knots. Hermione's breath stuttered in her lungs, her pulse growing rapid. She was transfixed, watching as the knots came slowly undone under his ministrations.

Hermione’s heart pounded as Harry nimbly ran his fingers along the transfigured silk. She grinned as the last knot came undone. “You know, legally we just consum--”

Hermione’s stomach jumped as Harry’s fingers gently dipped into her navel, the barrier of her tunic and slip feeling at once flimsy and far, far, too thick. “You were saying?” Did Hermione mistake herself, or was his breath as ragged as her own respiration?

“According to various sources--” Hermione sucked in another breath. She reached up, and touched as much of him as she could reach. It was not enough, but the sparks flying off of her fingertips zinged against his powerful frame. “as well as the law, we have just consummated our marriage.”

“Interesting.” Harry murmured, finally, bringing himself properly next to her, “And to think, you haven’t even kissed me yet.”

“Well.” She pretended to consider the matter, even though her heart was pounding, and his face was right there. “How remiss of me.”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed, his gaze never wavering. “Getting ahead of yourself, huh?” The joking stopped. "Please kiss me, Hermione.”

“And then?” She asked, just because she wanted him to know that he didn’t always have to be the one to ask, and because if she didn’t ask, if he didn’t tell her right this second where he wanted to stop, she might not. She might not.

“And then, I’m planning on peeling every last bit of clothing from your body, as slowly as I possibly can, and kissing every inch of you,” Harry admitted, “I’m open to revisions, though. I know how you feel about first drafts.”

Hermione shook her head, drawing his lips to hers. She knew this time, it would be short, and awkward, and possibly a little bit uncomfortable, but they had every intention of learning, and it was good, because it was them, and they were together, and clearly, Harry knew that sex didn't end with the male orgasm.

But his lips on hers…Hermione couldn't describe it.

The sensation was perfect. It was heady, and exhilarating, and she couldn’t believe they had waited this long. She couldn’t believe that the simple pressure of their lips as their mouths slotted together made every other sensation building in her body seem all the more real. It was just what she needed to push her ever closer to the edge of a precipice she had never before experienced.

After a few long moments of the commingled sensation of lips against her own, and reverent hands gliding along their bodies, and magic building up inside of her, Hermione pulled back just enough
to say, “Ubitu Gaius, ego Gaia.”

Harry kissed her again, “What does that mean, Hermione?”

“It means if you don’t stop bloody thinking, I’m going to scream.”

“But thinking’s good, right?” Harry grinned against her, nudged her calves with his feet, like some part of him had to be touching some part of her. “I can even translate Latin. It means...”

Hermione arched under him. “Yes.”

Hermione was somewhere between anticipation and frustration when Harry pulled his mouth from hers. Before she could demand he continue on, or ask what was wrong, he was pressing his lips to the arch of her eyebrows, “Ubitu.”

Then his lips drifted down to the juncture where her jaw met her ear, “Gaia.”

Hermione swore, her pulse thundering and her blood pooling.

Then, he was but a puff of sweet scented air on her face as he kissed her between her eyes, just where her third eye would be, Hermione realized, “Ego.”

He met her eyes, and let his mouth drift to the bridge of her nose. His faintly chapped lips brushed a dry kiss there. He spoke, “Gaius.”

With the first brush of his fingers against her as the last word left his mouth and slanted against hers, Hermione’s world shifted on its axis.

Harry woke with the distinct feeling that he was being watched. It wasn’t Hermione. She was curled up to his right, sprawled out, hogging the bed and the blankets. No, this observer was an altogether different person, one Harry was wary about facing. “What, Crooks?”

Crooks sank a claw, a single claw, into his exposed calf. Harry had to stop himself from kicking the pain in the arse cat. “I thought we’d discussed cohabitation. You agreed.”

Crookys walked up his body, putting a paw anywhere it might hurt. He looked directly into Harry’s eyes, as if to say, “I said you were a suitable mate for Mummy. I did not say you could keep her in your bed.”

Harry did the only sensible thing. Crooksy had been lonely and cold in Hermione’s bed, and really, Harry could imagine how awful that would be. He found, even in the span of one night, he’d woken up to reassure himself that she was there, and was comfortable.

He scooted over, and let the half-kneazle curl up in the warm and coveted space against Hermione’s heart. Harry tried in vain to get comfortable. It wasn’t all that possible. He was left with a sliver of the bed, and only enough of the blanket to cover himself, in difference to Crookys claws.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait long. Hermione woke slowly, with a twitch of her toes, a mutter, and then all at once, her brain fully awake and her eyes bright. She patted the bed once, her fingers curling into the untucked sheets, as if to test her memories against their rumpled state.

Before Harry could get a word out, Crooks began to purr and butt his head against Hermione’s hand, “Crooksy, you silly cat.” She muttered, petting the animal, who looked over at Harry, victory
and satisfaction plain in his smug expression. “Was he good for you?”

“He missed you.” Harry admitted. “Wondered around yowling about how lonely he was without you.”

“He was good company, then.” Hermione sat up, dragging blankets with her. She scooted up against the headboard, and somehow ended up with her chin on his shoulder. “What did you do while I was gone?”

Harry stifled a frown, “Do you really want to talk about this now?”

“You know political dissidence is my Dryden.” Hermione said, “Tell me everything. And then I’ll tell you my ideas.”

Harry slowly complied, figuring that he might as well use this time to cuddle. Hermione ended up running her fingers through his hair as he told her everything that had taken place while she was in seclusion. He finished, saying, “And then there you were.”

“And then you told me things and I couldn’t even speak.” Hermione corrected, “I never did promise you retribution.”

Harry leaned his chin on the crown of her head. “I’m putty in your hands, ‘Mione.”

Hermione snorted. “Liar.”

Emboldened, she shifted way, and Harry missed her closeness, until her knees were bracketing his and there was so much to see that he didn’t know where to look. Hermione caught his eye, and grinned.

Harry’s fingers fell to sliding along the vertebrae in her spine. Even with only one night of practice, kissing her was like breathing, that simple, that exhilarating, that totally necessary. Harry kissed her properly, because he could, because Hermione was his wife, his soul, his bonded, and there was a mirthful look in her eyes.

How could he not kiss her? When drawing unfettered air became necessary to the continuation of this very pleasant break in their conversation, Harry ran his thumb down her temple, pausing near to her expressive brown eyes to ask, “What’s this, then?”

“Retribution.”

And that sounded nice, very nice. Hermione kissed him again, and in the midst of her struggling to get the blankets and sheets that had pulled up from the bed out from between them, Harry felt a bottlebrush tail slide against him as the blankets moved, but the animal attached to the tail did not.

Harry glanced towards Crooky. He placed one last kiss against his wife, Merlin his wife, as his fingers went lax against the alluring softness of her exposed chest. Merlin strike him dead. Hermione Granger was naked and willing in his lap, and he was saying, “Hermione, we can’t.”

“Behind the lamp. Last one.” She murmured, continuing on with her task. The sheets and blankets were a horrible barrier between them, but at least it gave him the wherewithal to say, “No, not that.” Harry corrected, soothing back her wild hair, “Crooky.”

“He doesn’t mind.” Blankets gone, Hermione was undaunted.

“It might scar him.” Harry posited, dropping a chaste kiss to her shoulder. “I’ll put him out.”
Hermione blinked. And then, she tried her best to stifle a laugh. She failed.

“You do realize, of course, that...” She sobered, watching as Harry shrugged on bottoms just to pick up the half-cat, and deposit him gently in the doorway to her dressing rooms and mutter something for Crooks’s ears only before shutting the door. If he wandered, he’d end up in one of the corridors.

Harry turned around and found her watching him intently. Her hair was everywhere around her bare shoulders. The laughter in her eyes faded as she considered him to the exclusion of all else. “You love him.”

Harry shrugged, grabbing the small box behind the lamp, and pushing it more to the front of the nightstand. “Of course.”

Hermione protested, once again pushing him gently against the pillows, “But he’s horrible.”

“Hermione.” Harry laughed, almost horrified to hear her admit that her pet wasn’t perfect. Crooks was horrible, but to hear Hermione say it, he was an angel incarnate.

Hermione shrugged, her mind on divesting him of the bottoms that had found their way to the floor sometime after her tunica. He complied happily with her singleminded focus, lifting his hips easily, “I’m not blind to his faults.”

“Yeah, he might be a bit of a grump.” Harry agreed, running his fingers up her ribs, ”But he loves you. He really does. And you love him. Of course I’d love him, even if he were Nagini.”

Hermione pressed her mouth to his, the action full of joy, and the happiness, “You say the nicest things.”

Harry stepped up his game, because really, “You’re a vengeful witch.”

“Oh, I am.” Hermione agreed, earnest and bright, laughter bubbling in her eyes and behind her voice. She rose up on her knees, and pushed the blanket free once again. “But...” She glanced down between them, “I think you must like that, rather a lot.”

Harry found that his hands, secure on her hips, slipped only a little bit, when, in one fluid movement, her hands were everywhere, sure in her movements.

Harry had expressed curiosity at that, the first and second times. She’d grinned and told him that her parents were doctors and believed in comprehensive education. After that, he’d no reason to ask.

This time he didn't think. He hardly had the brain cells. And then, with only a little bit of fumbling, she was everywhere around him and there was, slowly and incrementally, less and less space between their bodies. Air left his lungs in a strangled rush, “Hermione.”

She lifted her hips, just a small amount, and Harry had to close his eyes at the sensation of it. She panted in his ear, “Page 26, diagram B.”

Just before Harry let his train off thought go off the rails, he thought to himself that he really, really, had to find that book.

When he said as much, Hermione laughed.

Vengeful witch.
Damn, he loved her.

Two hours after they forced themselves out of bed, and Hermione had had the presence of mind to put on that nightdress she hadn’t needed last night before calling for Petra, the wedding was officially over. Everyone gathered to watch Hermione ritually lay out some wine and incense in remembrance of his, and now her, ancestors.

Then there had been a meal. This time, though, when Hermione got up and walked out, they let her leave. Nobody so much as said a word, or even paused in their conversations. When he got up not five minutes later to follow her, nobody said a word. Remus, who had been giving them a hugely wide berth for some reason, nudged Sirius, who glanced at Harry and rolled his eyes fondly.

Harry knew he’d find Hermione in the library. He found her in the back corner of the large room, near the small restricted section, where she kept the valuable parts of her own library. Well, actually, the whole thing was hers. Harry grinned as he came up beside her, careful not to startle her. You didn’t startle a combat-ready witch, ever.

He watched her for a few minutes. She was frantically flipping pages, and letting her wand do the work in searching out other sections in other books. She was cross-checking at least ten volumes. He knew better than to interrupt her. Watching her mind whirl was breathtaking. And anyway, it wasn’t like there was a time limit on his favorite fantasy. Hermione Granger with her skirts hiked up in the restricted section had just gotten a whole lot more vivid.

And better, actually. Aside from the fact that his knowledge of her body now went beyond went pure fantasy, her name was Hermione Potter. And Hermione Potter had a whole library in which to do anything she might wish.

Harry was content, just watching her. It took him by surprise, when she gave a cry of jubilation and grabbed one of the two dozen books. Harry stared after Hermione, as she spun around, clutching the book to her chest. Is this what she did when people weren’t in the library to see her?

“I did it!” She screamed, “I did it!” She jumped. “I can’t believe it.”

Harry glanced around, trying to see the cover of the book she was holding. Was that the sex book? “Er...”

Hermione cradled her book. Harry saw the spine. It was merely a codex of the legal code. “You know how Augusta said that sexual consent is sacred in wizarding society?”

“Er...” Lady Longbottom hadn’t said a thing to him about sex, and Harry was glad. He could live for a million years without ever wanting to talk to Neville’s Gran about sex.

“Well, look.” Hermione hastened, bringing the book over to him and pointing at some big blob of words that didn’t make much sense to Harry, not that he could really read before Hermione was once again cuddling her box, and explaining, “I never once thought to follow that thread, because I just assumed that the entity of the wizarding community is like Hogwarts and the consent was mere form. It isn’t!”

Harry smiled, “It isn’t?”

“No!” Hermione affirmed. A few strands of her hair escaped from the very careful style Petra had done after her shower, wrapping Hermione’s abundant hair in an almost black lace thing. The fabric sort of went with her pink dress. She’d looked like a Goddess at the kneeler for the morning
rituals, her skirts spread out along side of her and behind her, resting on the floor, and her hair restrained.

Harry had had no trouble seeing the rumpled woman who'd left his bed in that prim Madonna's eyes. He found that he found her even more fascinating, now that he saw yet another of the 1 million sides to Hermione.

The dress rustled about her calves as she nodded and stepped back, “It’s punishable by time in Azkaban or even Dementor’s Kiss to rape anyone. People can go to Azkaban for conspiracy to commit, as well. And also, you can’t force a betrothal, because of how it includes a promise of sexual exclusivity and unity. Families can arrange the time and place for a marriage, but that’s only because you’ve gotten the couple’s consent.”

“Well, that’s good.” Harry said, “But they’re not trying to betroth people…”

“The Ministry shot itself in the foot. Nubo!” She cut him off, “Nubo! Do you remember where you first heard it?”

He shook his head. He knew nubo was essentially consent to a betrothal. In the more modern ceremonies, it took place right before the vows, but couples did have a betrothal, even if it only lasted half a minute.

“At Bill and Fleur’s civil wedding.” She reminded him. He hadn’t remembered much about the day before the attack. And honestly, it hurt to think of Bill and Fleur. They should have had more than life had given them, “Right at the start. It’s in the civil ceremony. Nobody thinks about the Latin parts. You just say it so you can do the vows. It’s like when we say the ABCs. You say it so much you forget what it means until you stop and need one of the letters to alphabetize something.” Hermione cried, “You can’t force it!”

“What exactly are you saying?” Harry was happy to listen to her, but he knew she was trying to make him come to her conclusions on his own, and he knew that wasn’t going to happen.

Hermione elaborated, “The marriage law is based on an obscure bit of the Statute of Secrecy, but the criminal code trumps that, meaning that the law isn’t worth the paper it’s printed upon. To try to force a betrothal would be akin to attempted rape.”

“So all you have to do is present this to the Wizards’ Council and it’ll be done?” Harry clarified, taking two steps forward.

“I don’t have a seat on the WC.” Hermione slanted a gaze at him, “But you do. So, when I get this together, you’ll present it as a block.”

“I’ll do that.” Harry promised, “So it’ll be that simple?”

“Oh, no! Is anything ever simple?” Hermione paused, “They’re going to try to rewrite the civil ceremony. And I’m sure there will be months of political maneuvering. It’ll take ages.”

Harry looked at Hermione’s face. She was standing in front of one of the narrow but tall windows in the library, her eyes dancing with triumph. “You look almost happy about that.”

“I am.” Hermione agreed, “After all, if there’s no ceremony for these arranged marriages, they can’t enforce them, and anyone who wants to get married still may. In the meantime, well, I have a plan, step one of which is offering my research expertise to Healer Ewing.”

“Hermione, this plan…” Harry only had one question, “Does it include me?”
“Of course. You’ve got to bring everything to the WC, and you know I’m going to need you to help me finish writing my new curriculum for Hogwarts. I’m going to ask Minerva about it later, but I haven’t had the time.” Hermione agreed, “You still owe me a trip to Flourish and Blotts so I can get a quill to write out our new objectives. You should make a list, too.”

Harry laughed. Leave it to Hermione not see an easily repealed law as an excuse to put her feet up, but as a reason to keep making progress. He loved her for it. He would even be a ministry puppet, once she was Minister for Magic.

Harry gave it thirty years, tops. He knew she could do it in less than that, but Hermione had a very clear idea about how involved she wanted to be when Teddy was still little, not to mention that he gave it five years before Hermione was putting Fella back where she most wanted to be within the house.

She whacked him on the arm with her book, “You laugh and I won’t stop at Boots on the way home.”

“Wait.” Harry paused, “You want to go today?”

They weren’t supposed to leave the house. They were supposed to be bonding as a couple for the next 48 hours, which Harry had assumed meant very little need to get dressed and go anywhere.

Hermione leveled him with a look.

Right. Boots it was, then.

As soon as they shipped everybody off to the respective houses, and figured out why Remus refused to come anywhere near them, that was.

Harry heard small feet running through the library, and just like that, the impish smile on Hermione’s face faded, and she opened her arms to the oncoming Edward-sized Metamorphmagus missile.

“Teddy Bear!” She called, scooping him up, “How are you?”

And so, Harry thought, their wedding ended in the best way, as it had begun, with Hermione reading a book to Teddy. When Sirius came to find Teddy, Harry had only one thing to say, “You know what, Sirius?”

“What?” Sirius asked, keeping his voice low to match.

“You may tell Mr. Moony that Mr. Prongslet saw right through his little ploy last week.” Harry grinned.

Sirius spluttered. “You did not.”

Harry leaned against the bookshelves, “Of course not, Sirius. I hadn’t any idea what I would want to say to Hermione if I had a shot to propose. It just came out.”

Of course, he’d never intended to pressure her for a real marriage, but he was glad, so very glad, that they’d made the same choice, independently. Loving her and having her friendship within their marriage would have been hell.
And this, this was as close to heaven as Harry thought he'd ever get.

Harry left to go find the Grangers, leaving Sirius to go in search for Remus. Had Mr. Prongslet really been fooling him by letting him think that Harry thought himself to be oblivious to his own feelings? He was so confused. Harry had outwitted him, somehow.

He just wasn’t sure how. God damn this marriage law.

Wait. He and Rem were still legally divorced. He’d gotten divorce papers his first week in Azkaban. Moony was still widowed. Bonded or not, what if they were next? What if they wanted Remus to marry some blonde chit?

He saw Remus coming down the corridor to the library. Remus stopped when he saw the look on his face, “What’s wrong?”

“Remus. I--” Sirius began, not sure how to get these words out, “I--”

“Oh, don’t tell me saw them shagging.” Remus wrinkled his nose and sniffed the herbs stuffed in his sleeve. “Where’s Teddy?”

“Reading a book with Hermione.” Sirius blurted, “I have to get married, Remus.”

Remus laughed. “Pads--”

Meanwhile, back in the library, Hermione kissed Teddy on the top of his head, and said, “Let’s go find Papa and Padfoot and tell them that My Own is going to overturn the marriage law.”

Teddy considered this option. After a second, he shook his head and pulled out a copy of his favorite book, and held it up.

Hermione figured a delay couldn’t hurt.

Cuddling Teddy closer, she began to read, “Mr. Puckle was in a bit of a pickle...”

Chapter End Notes

Harry's a bit of an idiot. Her dress isn't pink, it's cranberry, and it's based off of this dress from a designer I like. Hers is shorter, naturally, and the sleeves are different, but I find the cut and the lines to be pretty.

Her hair covering isn't a random thing, it's a lace chapel veil that's wrapped like a tichel, but leaving some of her hair visible. Most tichels cover the hair completely, but the use of the mantilla is twofold. A) they're pretty and B) they have more historical roots in the wizarding community as I see it. #This is the style I mean, but the fabric would look more like this.

Hers is black, because traditionally, Roman Catholic women covered their hair with black coverings pre-Vatican II, and girls used white ones. Many still do in various
trad-catholic circles, but you can get them in colors and styles. It's only needed in Mass in the 1917 Church cannon, but being that in this verse, a lot of witches cover, I figure they'd keep them on. I know women who are religious who do all the time, regardless of their specific faith.

Remus is in agony with his werewolf nose. Poor Remus! I think he might marry Mr. Padfoot and make an honest man out of him.

"Hermione Granger with her skirts..." is taken from this poem, which you should listen to. NSFW. Trigger warnings. Love this poem though.
I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.

Chapter Summary

"I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it." --Maya Angelou

Or

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind.” --Bernard M. Baruch

Or

Four months on, the law is overturned, right along with Hermione's perceptions of the world around her. Change will bring her full circle, because life isn't linear.

Chapter Notes

Before you send me howlers, YES there will be flashbacks as we go along. Things might be a bit wonky, but I swear, there's a point here.

Not much Latin. That comes next chapter, when Hermione makes a slight addendum to her holiday plans.

And I did quote Audre Lorde. Read the quote in full there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four Months Later

December

“I heard she’s having Voldemort’s baby.” A voice confided, as she primped her hair in front of the mirror. “And that she knew the Marriage Law would be overturned, so she trapped him as fast as she could.”

Hermione had been going about her day, and had stopped in the bathroom to have a moment’s peace. She felt like a first year again, hiding in the loo. She had just wanted five minutes away from the speculation and the censure swirling around her. The only place she could find it, it seemed, was in the actual stall.

She was shocked, though she gave the girl points for using Tom Riddle’s name. These girls had come in, congregated by the sinks, and fell into conversation about her from the very start. Of course she looked pale and worn. She was tired. She was trying to balance, and schoolwork and politics were not an easy pair to reconcile. Especially not when the Gryffindor Know-it-All hated her coursework with a burning passion but had no recourse but to hide her emotions and plow onward.
Another voice Hermione could not place well spoke. They had to be at least two years behind them if she could not place them. “Perhaps he used her ill and Potter...”

Hermione’s blood boiled. If they were going to speculate about rape like it was gossip fodder, at least they ought to call a thing a thing and not hide behind pretty words.

“Raise the baseborn child of his mortal enemy?” That first voice replied, “No man is that noble. And if she were having a baby, she would have had it by now. No, what I heard is that she wanted the security of a good name. I heard...”

Hermione just bet she had heard a lot of things, but she wasn’t about to listen to it.

Hermione came out of the stall with her head held high. She even washed her hands, watching as the three Ravenclaw girls primly fixed their faces, as though they hadn’t been discussing her or her life. Hermione did not let herself feel rage for a child that did not exist. It was to their benefit that there was no baby, because Hermione would not have been silent in the face of an insult to her baby, even if the Devil himself had gotten her with child.

To malign an innocent child was indefensible. Hermione herself had withstood worse from far better.

She heard them giggling as she let the door shut behind her.

Hermione marched along the corridors, gripping her books tightly, but never once lowering her head. This was, without a doubt, one of the worst experiences of her life. Classes were dismal, and where they were not dismal, they were dull. In the aftermath of the law, she had gone from at first being someone her fellow students tolerated to either a conniving bitch who had trapped their beloved Boy who Lived, or a pitiable creature who was stuck in a marriage she could not, for one reason or another, dissolve.

It was hell. Hermione had overturned the law for the sake of those very people he scorned her. She had thought about, for every long night or tough day, the very people like those girls in the bathroom.

She had done her best by them. She hadn’t expected a parade, but she did desperately want some peace. It had taken her almost four months to overturn the law, and it had taken the people in this castle far less time to make her life a living hell.

Oh, things hadn’t been easy upon her return to school, with Harry in tow.

People had at first thought it a grand joke. Then they hadn’t known what to think, but as the Hermione worked slowly to dismantle the law, people had slowly but surely turned on her. Her press was a good representation of how she was treated at school, where snickers and words like ‘grasping slut’ and ‘greedy whore’ were thrown at her like hexes.

All the while people smiled to her face, commiserated about that dreadful law, and professed gladness at its proven illegality.

She could no longer take it. She stepped into the floo in Remus’s office, and called out, “Granger House.” With a puff of smoke, and a woosh that she felt in her belly, she was gone.

Helen Granger heard the clatter in the fireplace, and left her study, to see Hermione standing there on the hearth rug, on the verge of tears. “Hermione, what’s the matter?”
“Oh, it’s awful!” Hermione cried, feeling the full force of her emotions as she gave voice, for the first time, to the truth, “I’m going to snap my wand. I’ll do it. I won’t regret it.”

“It does rather put the kibosh on your plans, though, doesn’t it?” Mum posited, and Hermione glared at her.

She grabbed a seasonally-themed decorative pillow and hugged it to her torso as she sat down. “Well.” She sniffed, “You needn’t be dramatic, mother.”

Helen waited. Hermione would speak on her own good time. She had always done everything in her own way and on her own timetable, from her birth, to walking, to reading. She would do it when she was good and ready, and when it happened, look out.

Hermione began to speak, and unburdened herself for a good forty minutes. Helen nodded at the right moment, and provided small responses when they seemed prudent.

Otherwise, she just let her daughter talk, until she finally came to her point, too worn out and too tired to say anything well, “I hate school. It’s slow and stupid and I have things to do and now when I can’t write two extra feet for some stupid essay because I’m trying to save their society from rack and ruin, I get snide remarks and cruelty.”

Helen, for the first time in a long time, had become a confidante of sorts for Hermione. They weren’t friends, but they were on friendly terms. Hermione had lost her support system, for many reasons. She had turned to her mother.

As much as Helen mourned that Hermione had no one else to confide in, after all that she had done, it was some comfort to her that Hermione talked to her. With the ups and downs of these last few months, Helen knew that she needed someone just removed enough from the situation so that Hermione felt safe in coming to her, and just biased enough that Hermione didn’t have to worry about competing for her loyalty.

Hermione confessed, “I’m tired of it. It doesn’t matter if you can recite the 407 uses of a stunning spell, unless you can use it, and know that a stunning spell can also be modified to help re-fire tendons and blood flow in injured muscles. And—”

Hermione wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, rage giving way to hot and angry tears. She had done this to help them. Those Ravenclaw girls would never know the pain of having few choices in life. It was logical, Hermione thought, that at the very least they should acknowledge her intentions and leave her alone.

Sadly, though, the Ravenclaw girls had been among her kinder detractors. Her own house thought her marriage was cowardice, and considered her to be spineless, though Harry could do no wrong. Even Parvati looked at her like she had six heads. Hermione thought privately that there was a gulf between them, a gulf that only Ron, Hannah, Neville, and surprisingly, Lavender seemed to be able to cross it, or even meet her half-way.

“Hermione.” Mum held up her hand, “Do you know what I hear?”

“What?” Hermione sniffed, hating herself for crying. She should take comfort in knowing that she had done the right thing and made the world a better place, and yet, it was not enough. It was cold comfort in moments like these. “Because I’ve made list after list, and I just don’t know.”

“You’ve grown up.” Mum gently passed her the box of tissues. “You’ve begun to see that you have preferences and talents. You’ve begun to move past the stage in life where a school room benefits
you, at least in terms of secondary school. You’re ready to move on. In my day, we called it being burnt out.”

Hermione spluttered, “But there’s so much yet to do!”

“Is Hogwarts the best place to do them?” Helen pressed, trying very much not to provide her daughter with unneeded opinions, but rather to ask her questions in the hopes that Hermione would find her own answers.

“Mum!” Hermione was aghast, unmindful of the tissue she dropped on the floor, “Are you encouraging, or suggesting, that I leave school?”

“Bunny, listen.” Mum replied, “I just want you to consider your options. You could get your NEWTs today, and beat every score on the books. You could hire private tutors and earn your degree and certifications before most of your class even enters Uni. You could pop over to any Uni in the world and do your coursework in anything you chose, wizarding or muggle.”

Helen continued, as the thoughts lit sparks in her daughter’s eyes, “You could enter politics directly, and lay the foundation for your run as Minister for Magic. You could take a gap year, work with Minerva to implement your curriculum, and spend your downtime knitting and organizing your library.”

“Why are you saying these things?” Hermione cried, not sure how this day might get any worse, “You always said doing well in school was critical so that I could have options in life.”

“Hermione Jane, what do you think those options I always demanded you make for yourself were?” Mum returned, “The world’s at your feet. You can’t hide from it, and I’m sure you don’t really want to hide in the girl’s toilet.”

“Rotten cows.” Hermione muttered, twisting her engagement ring.

“I know you have a meeting with Minerva later.” Mum patted her uniform skirt-clad knee, “Just consider what I’ve said before you make any decisions. You might also consider having this same discussion with Harry.”

“He’s trying, he is, but I can’t make him understand that I’m frustrated and bored.” Hermione revealed, “He knows I’m frustrated, but he still thinks I ought to go along. I’m just so tired of going against what I want for what’s right. I’m just so tired.”

“Just do what you think is right.” Mum advised, “He’ll support your choices.”

“I know.” Hermione revealed, “I’m just so unused to political machinations not turning into bloodshed and torture that I find myself lacking the falsity and veneers to play the game.”

“Don’t beat them at their game.” Mum stood, “Beat them at yours.”

Hermione smiled. Her plan was still coming along well. There was hope, still. Hermione knew that her cultural lessons would rock the wizarding world on its foundation, if only she played her cards correctly. She spent every second she could find working on it, and yet, there never seemed to be enough hours in the day.

“Now, do you want to help me do these facial reconstruction models?” Helen asked, “Rajeesh asked me to look over some things and I just needed to work it from the bottom.”

Hermione nodded, “I always feel better after a good jaw modeling.”
Helen laughed. “Just stay behind the tape line on the carpet. I don’t want to buy another computer quite yet.”

Harry brushed off his tie, earning a glare from a horsey looking woman, having gotten bits of cauldron cake on his overcoat. He brushed them off as he walked along, having the Tube ridden from Grimmauld to Westminster because he had the day free of school for what he thought of as playing Little Lord Fauntleroy.

He sometimes missed being a part of muggle society.

Cauldron Cakes he broke up in his pocket to look muggle notwithstanding.

It was windy and freezing, a light snow blowing all around them, but a warming charm kept him quite snug in his transfigured robes. He thought the overcoat he’d transfigured was quite nice, though not quite as nice as his favorite coat. Hermione had declared it unsuitable to the elements, and put it away for warmer temperatures. Harry knew better than that, though.

She hated the coat because it was ugly.

He only made a fuss over it because it annoyed her.

He blended into the crowd, and glanced at his watch. He had a meeting later with McGonagall. Hermione had been pushing herself to the limit looking for things to add to her outline, as she wanted it to be comprehensive, but Harry thought that there would never be any way to get through all of that in seven years. He’d said that they would need to keep on an eighth year, just for Lady Potter’s lessons.

Hermione had laughed, called him absurd, and gone back to digging through the dusty books she loved, muttering and mumbling and scribbling notes.

After doing so, she’d woken him up at two in the morning to lecture him about various customs being sacred to wizarding culture, at least to the traditionalists, and that her best advice was to hold fast to that line if anyone questioned him on her goals. No one could blame the Lord Potter for suggesting a strict interpretation of tradition in his household after being raised by muggles, she’d primly asserted, nor could they blame his muggleborn bride for seeking to model herself after her betters.

Hermione had rolled her eyes as she’d said it.

Harry thought that very transparent and laughable.

Hermione said that her lessons looked very traditionalist and staid. In reality, though, they were an introduction to political advocacy and social activism on the part of marginalized groups. She knew, of course, that the master’s tools would never demolish the master’s house, but she also balanced that knowledge with the understanding that knowledge was power. She was putting the same tools in the hands of all students, not just the ones with privilege.

Harry moved through London, feeling the weak sun and the sounds of the City in his very bones. He had enough time, so he stopped to walk through St. James’s park. The tourists were thick around him as they shopped for the ever-closer holidays, and not a single person felt bad about pushing into him in a casual bump in the press of people.
No one glared. No one bowed, or curtsied. Not a soul stared at him like a deer in headlights. No one turned and walked the other way. No one wanted to brush against his robes or shake his hand. No one spat in his path, unless he counted that guy with the wad of tobacco in his mouth, which Harry did not.

For a long moment before walking towards the underground entrance for the chambers below the Lords, Harry Potter was a man in a suit and overcoat avoiding the chill, among countless others.

Here, he held no power, and yet, he felt as though he were a king among men.

“That’s absurd!” Hermione cried, shooting to her feet, “I refuse to sit here and listen to such--”

“Hermione.” McGonagall soothed, “You must understand that what I am saying is not a personal inditement against you or your marriage.”

“How can they even think that I, that my relationship, is destroying the classroom environment?” Hermione asked, “How is my marriage any more intrusive than any dating couple’s relationship? It’s not like we pass notes and giggle.”

Hermione thought of the snide looks in the classroom, darkly. They were jealous of a relationship that didn’t require that sort of distraction, that sort of silliness. Hermione knew that one day, they wouldn’t be so jealous and suspect of relationships they didn’t understand. Her relationship didn’t look like theirs, so it was wrong, in some way.

“You’ve never giggled in your life.” The Headmistress agreed, “The concerns have mounted, Hermione.”

Hermione’s rage cooled. She would simply get to the root of these concerns, and very calmly squash them. She could defeat illogic with logic. After all, there was no baby. That shot the rumors of her carrying the spawn of Tom Riddle right out of the water. Nevermind the fact that he hadn’t held an erection since 1981, it was clear that simple things like counting to forty weeks was beyond these people. Why should they think about Tom Riddle’s actual ability to father a child? Hermione drew the line at talking about Voldemort’s anatomy.

Idiots, all! “From which quarters?”

“It is not your business who has concerns, or who brings them to me.” Minerva insisted, breaking her stern rebuke with a gentle sigh, “Defense is a huge problem. I should have foreseen it.”

“So we can’t duel.” Hermione scowled, “It’s not like we need the practice with each other.”

It wasn’t like they had made a big fuss of Harry’s wand locking on the dueling platform. It was only after a moment that Hermione had connected the dots, squared her shoulders, and fired a stinging hex past his shoulder, aiming for the wall and not the man before it, satisfying the limitations of their shared magical cores. The duel was thereby concluded. She’d later wondered why such things could not happen with muggle guns, so as to lower rates of spousal abuse and needless gun violence.

Oh, no. It was her they targeted.

Apparently, that wasn’t the incident McGonagall was recounting. Hermione knew Remus wasn’t a snitch, but she gathered it had to be someone in the class. After a second, Hermione realized that it literally could have been anyone. People talked.
Slytherin, surprisingly, was leaving her alone. She was a wife, and they had been taught from the cradle to value the role women could choose to play as wives and mothers, and to tolerate, if not respect, their elders. Hermione, in being married, was now a domina, even if she was young.

Other houses lacked their honor. Her own, it seemed, was particularly vicious. Circumventing a law was cowardice and not cunning when the law turned out to be false.

Poor Hannah was no doubt working to compel the Hufflepuffs with feelings of loyalty and duty, but she doubted it was working in any real way. They seemed determined to go with the group. They weren’t sheep, but it seemed that Hermione’s marriage was suspect because it was tainted with the marriage law. The Ravenclaws saw her lack divorce as a lack of a plan. Love for its own sake was not very logical, and there had to have been some motive, they said.

Minerva’s lips pressed together. Clearly, she wasn’t about to allow Hermione to ignore the situation any longer. “He has to leave the room whenever you are involved in practical demonstrations, and you need not prevaricate and say that your magic hasn’t unconsciously shielded him whenever Harry duels with anyone who isn’t Neville.”

Hermione felt the need to defend that statement. It wasn’t entirely true. She was working on the shields. They were unconscious, but she had learned to feel them, and was trying to stop them. She was able to do so, in fact, a good 62% of the time. It was a vast statistical improvement. “I—”

“Hermione.” McGonagall sighed, “Your lessons need to be done separately. I have begun to think that--”

Hermione felt compelled to remind her, “I need my NEWTs to get into university, and Harry does, too.”

Minerva asked a question that she had a thousand times before. “Are you sure that a muggle university...?”

Hermione was tired of defending her plans. Uni was a perfectly reasonable choice. It was something she had always wanted. Just because wizarding culture valued working in existing institutions within firmly defined existing schools of thought did not mean that there was no value to actually working to change things. Uni was the foundation of doing so, for Hermione knew now that there was a wider wizarding community in the UK outside of Hogwarts.

Hermione, despite her exhaustion, tried anew, “You know that there are wizarding labs and institutes affiliated with many muggle universities. Just because we don’t have the population to support something like Oxbridge on our own, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t cooperate with them to...”

“I know. I’m not being critical.” McGonagall patted her hand, “Hermione, I asked you here in advance of Harry’s arrival because I knew you would need time to choose.” She paused for a long moment before explaining her reasoning, “If you are upset, Harry will not rest until you are vindicated. This cannot happen.”

Hermione was resolute. She had a right to her emotions.

Minerva was emphatic, “For the good of your work with your curriculum, you cannot waste time fiddling about here.”

Hermione could not believe what she was hearing. She had been breaking her back to balance her research and her studies, and now, with mere days before the end of the term, McGonagall was
telling her that she was wasted here? Hermione could not believe what she was sitting here and saying.

She likely tried to soften the truth with more information, “I once had thoughts of asking you to stay on as my apprentice, but you know all I can teach you, and what facts you do not know, you have the skills and abilities to find them more efficiently without this process slowing you down.”

Hermione was just so tired. She was just so tired. Even so, her mind was sharp. Something clicked firmly in Hermione’s mind, “You talked to my mum, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes. The choice is, and will always remain, yours.” Minerva answered, “I beg you, understand I am not asking you to withdraw from the school. I’m asking you to consider your own highest good, and suggesting that it may no longer be found behind these walls.”

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears. If she wasn’t a Hogwarts student, she was unsure what she might be. The unlimited possibilities were terrifying. She had predicated her every understanding of herself as a witch through her enrollment and belonging at Hogwarts.

Her beloved former Head of House seemed to understand these feelings, “You are, without question, the brightest student I have ever known. You are a formidable witch. You are wasted here. Get your NEWTs, Hermione, at the winter break, and spread your wings.”

“But what about--” Hermione began. It wasn’t so much her classes she would miss. Lately, her focus had been her outlines and booklists and lesson plans. She would never give that up. They had the potential to create true and lasting change in the community. Hermione would never let that potential die. If she could facilitate cultural literacy, there was no saying the long-lasting changes her generation might make. They only needed education, tools, and support.

Minerva seemed to anticipate her next question, “We will meet in January to discuss your progress with your curriculum and make a concrete plan then. I promise to do all I can to help you meet your objectives.”

“But graduation!” Hermione had no real attachment to it, but the idea of saying goodbye to these walls, as sick as she was of being in classes, was unfathomable.

“I know you are conflicted, but consider this.” McGonagall’s question held up a mirror to Hermione’s soul, “Did you truly have any intention of putting on dress robes and making a show of celebrating qualifications you would have, all things being equal, passed four or even five years ago?” Minerva asked, “Does it feel like finish line, a goal met, or an expectation?”

Hermione knew her choice was made the second she internally answered the question.

Minerva smiled, knowing just what Hermione had realized, as the the stones opening the staircase moved aside. “I will not forgive you if you put yourself through months of wasting time to give into the urge to become conventional.”

Hermione made up her mind. “I’ll pretend, shall I, that you didn’t say that, just now?”

Minerva laughed.

Sticking his head round the doorway, Harry asked, “What’s so funny?”

Hermione shook her head, sobering, as he entered into the office. “How was the WC?” Hermione slid slightly to the left on the sofa, giving Harry enough room to sit down.

She reached for the pot of cocoa on the small coffee table between the sofa and the chairs as he
replied, “Awful. I’ll tell you later. I wanted to punch Burke in the face.”

“How very muggle of you, Potter.” McGonagall smirked, “He would have had a fit, I do think.”

Harry grinned, and took the cup from Hermione with thanks. “That was the idea, professor.”

“Well.” McGonagall changed the subject, “I am fresh out of lemon drops, but I do need to speak with you, Harry, on a matter that has been the discussion of many a staff meeting.”

“Did Filch catc--” Harry started to speak, but Hermione cut him off with a well placed glare. Sex in that closet had been his idea, but if he thought she hadn’t warded the door to make them more unpalatable than the temples at Stonehenge, he had another thing coming. “How can we help you, Minerva?”

“Nice save, Potter.” The Headmistress remarked.

Hermione did her best not to blush as she continued, “I’m afraid I’ve forced you both here to discuss what you two plan to do. This situation cannot go on as it has, and Hermione has reached her own conclusion as to a resolution.”

“‘Mione, what is she talking about?” Harry hastened, setting down his chocolate, “You weren’t serious about leaving, were you?”

She had mentioned several times wanting to go, wanting to move forward. Never before had she honestly thought that to be an option. Some part of her, however, must have known that her situation here was not sustainable. She wasn’t happy. She didn’t feel fulfilled. She wasn’t even getting anything accomplished. “It’s best, Harry.”

“It is not best!” He burst out, “Best for who? Those stupid--”

“Me. It is best for me.” She cut him off at the quick, “I’m running myself ragged. I can’t sit in the classroom day after day and learn nothing, finishing nothing, accomplishing nothing. It is killing me.”

And in truth, it was. Day after day, she thought about the good she could be doing. All the while, she was forced back to her books like an untrained witch, when her wand had done more than half of the class combined. Hermione was thankful that Remus had come back for Defense. Hermione knew that she would have afforded a professor who hadn’t fought in the Wars no respect.

Hermione did not launch into a further explanation, not with McGonagall in the room, “There are better things for me to be doing, Harry, and with or without your support, I’m doing them.”

Harry looked floored, “I’ve never known you to turn cheek and run in the face of schoolgirl taunts.”

“You’re stupid if you think I care one whit for anything they say. This is about me.” Hermione returned, “This about what I need, and if you can’t see, if you don’t know, that I’m more than some swotty little girl who sees nothing of value in life beyond good marks, then we will be revisiting this later.”

“Hermione, stop.” Harry frowned, “You’re working yourself up into a snit.”

“Why is it that every time I have a problem you don’t agree with, your first reaction is to say that I’m in a snit?” Hermione asked, “Because I-”
“I’m sorry, all right?” Harry returned, “Just because you’re coping with a situation I don’t understand doesn’t mean it’s any less real. I know that. But Merlin, Hermione, if anyone should go it’s them.”

“I’m not leaving on their on account.” Hermione replied, knowing his apology to be sincere. “I am graduating earlier, because--”

McGonagall coughed. Hermione’s words halted.

Their gazes turned quickly to the Headmistress, “If I may, I think our time together is better spent crafting a workable plan.”

“Well, I’m going home.” Hermione declared, knowing in her soul that she wanted to be in her bed at the Foundry by bedtime came, “I think it would be best to withdraw now, with the stated intention of intensive review and revision before my NEWTs.”

“And I’m supposed to just stay here without you?” Harry returned, “For five months? Supposing, that is, I get a pass to go and pay a visit?”

Hermione hadn’t even thought about how awful living apart might actually become, even within the span of days. She hadn’t, she realized, let herself even consider it.

She’d grown accustomed to Harry always being right there, always understanding when to just let her be, or when to hold her. She would miss him, and not just sexually. She would miss his comments when she corrected the errors in the paper before he read it, and she would miss him teasing her into leaving the library to go and visit the Hogwarts elves.

“This isn’t Azkaban, Potter.” The Headmistress’s dry remark cut the tension in the room.

She saw Harry swallow, and knew, as he did, that he was making a choice.

He wasn’t choosing where she might go, or what she might do, because he didn’t have that power. He had the power to choose to respond. The way that he wielded his own power, the way he responded, told Hermione everything she might ever need to know about the kind of man he was, and how powerful their bond truly was. “It’s going to hurt, Hermione. But if it’s what you want, truly want, we will absolutely make it work.”

Hermione nodded, almost overcome with the depth of his love and support. He didn’t understand her choice to leave, and take her NEWTs now. He didn’t agree with her choices, or her plans. And yet, he backed them with every bit of himself, with every intention of giving up things and moments he valued, without anything more than a knowledge of her own choice.

“I think I may have a solution.” McGonagall smiled her tabby cat smile. Hermione could almost see the ball of yarn she was tossing about in her mind, so replete was she in her satisfaction. Her focus on Harry was nothing short of feline, “How would you like an apprenticeship?”

“Why me, and not Hermione?” Harry asked instantly.

McGonagall had a ready reply. “Because you still need, desperately, to complete coursework to prepare for your exams.” Minerva smiled, “Fortunately for you, Remus is not opposed to your assistance in teaching the first and second years in their lab practicals and maintaining the dueling club, as these class slots get in the way of theory-based education and higher level tactical training and take a significant portion of his time. How fortunate that, come January, these sections will not conflict with your own schedule.”
Hermione saw where this was going.

Dumbledore had asked all staff to live at Hogwarts because of the wards during the War. That had not always been the case. At one time, in the distant past, Hagrid’s hut had been one in a row of many cottages. They had been homes for staff, and their families. In later years, employees had been allowed to live out, if they were not hired as Head of House or dormitory staff. That ended with the Wars.

Hermione pressed, “And staff and trainees are still allowed to go home?”

“Oh, I do encourage it.” McGonagall mused.

“Wow.” Harry blurted.

The idea of being able to live away from Hogwarts seemed heavily. A life away from prying eyes, from gossiping students, and the ability to separate their private life from their work was so very welcome in Hermione’s mind. Her soul ached for the comfort of her own wards.

“Harry.” Hermione mouthed his name quickly, urging him on.

Harry wasn’t stupid. “That is, I accept. Unpaid, even.”

“How generous.” McGonagall’s comment was clear. Hermione knew she’d had no intention of offering salary. This offer of a place for Harry was a boon for Hermione, not Harry. And besides, why did they need a salary? It would only go in trust for future generations.

Harry added, “Professor, really, thank you.”

Hermione continued, “We understand what you’ve done here, and while I am sad to be making this transition, I am happy to be going with your blessing and support.”

Nothing more needed to be said.

They quickly formalized a schedule for this transition. Hermione was pleased that her departure was entirely at her leisure. Harry was to begin his position in January, but would be allowed to go along with her, provided he came to his classes.

Hermione felt as though she was floating as she packed her trunks, left a note each for Neville, Lavender, Hannah, and the Heads, and stepped through the Floo just as the entire castle was settling down to a long pudding after dinner.

McGonagall was a devious planner.

Hermione vowed never to forget it.

And so, Hermione found herself stepping through the floo with Petra at her side well before the students at Hogwarts had finished their meals. She set down her trunk in the Great Hall, and saw that Fella, naturally, was already on hand.

Hermione smiled at her. “I’m very glad to be home, Fella.”

“We’re very glad to have you home, Your Grace.” Fella replied, “May you have no cause to leave again for some time.”

“Let’s hope that to be true.” Hermione agreed, “Would you like me to come to your sitting room
later on to discuss things?”

Hermione knew there was a lot to discuss now that she was home, the least of which was the fact that Augusta would no longer be floo’ing daily to lay out incense and keep the flame going in honor of Advent. Hermione would be doing that herself, now.

Fella nodded, “I’ll be available all evening. Merely stop by when you wish to, and I’ll be most happy to discuss anything.”

Hermione bid her a cheerful farewell, and began her way up the stairs. She came to the first landing, and bobbed gently to the Duchess on the wall. “I trust you’re well.” Hermione asked, “Is there anything going on you feel I should know?”

“That dreadful horse is rampaging through portraits again.” The stately lady who ruled the portraits with as much care as she had once ruled the Foundry, “I shall have him shot if he goes to the billiards room.”

The men in those paintings no doubt had pistols. Hermione sought to avoid painted bloodshed. There would be a war amongst the paintings if a horse from a bucolic scene was shot, and Hermione did not want to have to negotiate treaties between very opinionated flakes of paint, “I’ll put the word out that all painted beings must stay in their frames unless invited as a guest.”

“Oh, do.” She agreed, “They listen to you frightfully well.”

Hermione grinned. “I think they don’t want to get blasted off the wall like our dear Walburga.”

“I never did get along with that chit’s grandmother.” The Duchess mentioned, “You were sensible to blast that girl. Perhaps you’ll keep that horse in line similarly.”

Hermione doubted it. In the first place, she would not hurt an animal, painted or real. In the second, she knew that blasting a painting off the wall in this house and cutting it beyond repair would also ignite a war. She had no intention of fighting a war she’d never win.

Finally in her sitting room, Hermione found Crooky consuming a late dinner. She slumped on the sofa, and, for the first time in a long time, fell into a solidly deep sleep.

Hermione woke when she heard footsteps advancing through the bedroom. Her heart pounded. The person was whistling, what was it?

Oh, oh, God. Weasley can save anything... Weasley is our King, Weasley is our King...

Harry, then. Hermione shifted, and felt herself floating-- “Hermione?”

“I’m listening. I’m half-asleep, but I’m listening.” Hermione drew up her knees, and reached for her wand, which was slipping into the sofa’s soft pillows.

Harry sat down on the end of the sofa, where her feet had once been resting, and spoke, “I’m worried about what this means for your goals.”

“Right now, my only goal is sleep.” Hermione yawned, “Mobilicorpus me to bed, would you?”

They sat silently for a few minutes, Harry running his hands soothingly over her stockinged feet. Hermione was almost asleep when she heard him sigh, “I’m not being fair to you.”

Some part of her compelled her not to reply. It seemed as though he was testing his words aloud,
not quite ready to really talk to her.

“I’m pushing you when you need rest.” Harry decided, picking her up off the sofa.

Hermione nestled against him, careful not to open her eyes.

This was nice. Hermione sighed. Rest sounded good. Harry moved them both easily through both rooms. Hermione did not feel him cast a featherlight, but she couldn’t be sure. Her pride said that he hadn’t, though that was vain indeed. Muggle brides got carried over the threshold, but this witch got carried to her bed after a long and trying day.

Harry deposited her on the bed, and gently pulled the covers on the bed up to under her chin. The fire crackled in the grate invitingly, and Hermione, in this moment, didn’t miss the modernity of central heating or a furnace.

“Sleep, ‘Mione.” Hermione felt the blankets settle around her as everything but her warm flannel slip vanished. Hermione rolled over, deciding that even if he had vanished everything to the floor, it was better than sleeping in her clothes.

Hermione spoke then, “Love you.” She pulled a hand out from under the covers and reached out, “Stay, please.”

Hermione’s last thought was how warm Harry’s body was against her own.

Hermione woke hours later, adrenaline rushing in her veins. She knew someone was in her room, and reached for her wand before she knew what she was doing. The action was honed to the point of instinct.

Hermione dropped her wand as she saw the housemaid frozen in the doorway. The poor elf looked terrified as her gaze jerked quickly between the doorknob she was grasping, and Hermione’s wand.

“Araceli! I’m so very sorry.” Hermione tried to still her rabbiting heart, “Good morning.”

Hermione reached for the dressing gown that Petra had set out on the bedpost, and shrugged into it.

“I woke you, Your Grace.” She blurted, “Begging your pardon. It’s only that I always do the rooms at before noon, and no one told--”

“No one informed you I was here?” Hermione belted the dressing gown tightly around her waist, “I’ll look into why that happened. I’m sorry.” Hermione added, in the face of the elf’s confusion, “You have a right to know when your working conditions are changing, and to work where no one points wands at you.”

“Oh, no, please don’t--” Araceli shook her head so quickly her mobcap shifted. “I’m sure it was just oversight that I didn’t know.”

“Perhaps.” Hermione agreed, just to ally her fears and set the elf at ease. “Would you might sending Petra up, now? No need for a breakfast tray.”

Hermione watched her wink away, and hoped that asking her to do some small task had helped Araceli to feel more at ease. For her part, Hermione ran her hand over her eyes.

The day was not off to a good start.
After laying out the morning incense and making sure the Advent flame burned in the chapel, and going over her plans with Petra, Hermione shuffled through the mail, stopping with some curiosity at the single muggle envelope in the stack. It was rare to get muggle mail.

Anything muggle related to business ventures went to one of the people who managed that sort of thing, or to Harry himself. Rarely did she see anything muggle in the house, which told her how very easily people could choose to isolate themselves from the wider world. Isolation lead to fear, and fear to misunderstanding. It was an easy hop from misunderstanding to hatred, one Hermione hoped her work at Hogwarts would help to prevent.

She noted the the was from the Diocese, and opened it, thinking that Sirius had perhaps had told them of her soft heart and love of social justice work. The letter was very cordially written, asking for a telephone call to the secretary, to arrange a meeting. The priest who had hand written the letter seemed very warm.

Hermione decided, with the light snow falling outside, to walk to the phone box that was at the edge of the long drive. It was hidden in a former guard post, and was charmed to keep all muggles, except ones in trouble, away. Hermione had changed that ward not long after their marriage, knowing full well how easily someone without a SatNav or a point me spell could get lost and into danger out here. It was too rural to take any risks against anyone’s safety in the name of privacy, though the house and other buildings on the grounds were heavily warded unless you were invited.

Hermione stood, brushing brownie crumbs off of her skirt, and pocketed the letter. “Petra?”

The elf popped into the room, writing pad and quill in hand, “Was there something else you wished to add to your schedule, ma’am?”

It was an apt question, considering that Hermione had spent the bulk of her time since rising making a new plan for her time. Petra, as always, had proved herself invaluable. Before their honeymoon seclusion had ended, Hermione had found herself growing quite spoiled by Petra’s help.

“No.” Hermione shook her head, “I’m sorry to call again so soon, only I need a coat and muffler.” Before Petra could ask which one she wanted, Hermione informed her, “I’m only walking to the phone box.” She looked down at her comfortable shoes, “Maybe a change in footwear, I suppose.”

Petra clearly knew which items she thought were most suitable, because she was back in less than a minute with a grey coat and thick woolen muffler, as well as pair of snow boots. Hermione wrapped herself up quickly, glad for her woolen skirt, tights, and petticoats. It was no easy thing keeping this drafty house warm, even with magic and ample fireplaces. The layers and layers of skirts were far warmer than trousers. Hermione had learned that the hard way, one Sunday.

Hermione stepped outside through the front doors, her boots crunching in the snow. Along the way, she checked the bird feeders and saw a comforting smoke rising from the laundry. Hermione resolved to stop there on her way back, and try her best to pitch in.

The elves used magic, but they still needed a place for all of the washing tubs, indoor hanging lines, and other such things that their magic powered. Hermione thought the laundry a glimpse into the past, and had offered the elves any upgrades they had wanted. Reus, the head of the laundry, had made it clear that neither he nor his staff wanted anything so newfangled as a wringer washer.

No, they said, all they wanted was more wash to do.

Her walk was brisk, and gave her time to think. She knew, of course, that taking her NEWTS now
was only sensible. She wanted to go study, but simply considering the idea of revising left her wanting nothing more than to go back to bed. She knew it would be a few days before she touched her books, notes, or outlines. For the first time in a long time, her timetable no longer seemed to have such control over her wishes. She was so glad to be working on her curriculum, seeing to the running of the Foundry, and waiting for her first Christmas.

And yet, despite her gladness, she was overcome with this deep, deep, bone-level, tiredness. It was as though she had been fighting a war to hold onto her own expectations for her future, and now that she didn’t have to fight and claw to hold her head up at Hogwarts, all the desire to fight had left her.

She was tired. She wanted to sleep. She wanted to rest. She didn’t want to leave the Foundry until the new year. She didn’t want to rush, and jump through hoops, and preform like an organ grinder’s monkey. All her life she had been under immense pressure to be Hermione Granger, to be the brilliant doctor’s daughter, to be the bright child, to be the swotty lioness who should have been a raven.

She wasn’t surprised to find herself so weary. It wasn’t that she was sick, it was simply that she had been, she realized, carrying a huge emotional and mental load. Now that it was gone, she felt like her soul was surfacing for air after being held under water for a long, long time. Inside, it felt like she was heaving for air.

All of her energy seemed to focus on the act of inhaling, and she was glad to be alive, content to have what so many others would never experience: the luxury of having some time, even if it was just another day, another minute, to be, to breathe, and to figure out what she truly wanted. It wasn’t a gift she was willing to rush. It might only come once in her lifetime.

Harry would never understand this sort of sentiment coming from her, and Hermione was loathe to approach the topic again. He was so earnest in his devotion to helping her meet her goals. She loved him for it, but she wondered, truly, if he would still love her in quite the way he did if she wasn’t the embodiment of her driven, goal-oriented, outwardly-striving, self.

Would he still love her if she decided that she wanted to work on her curriculum, teach part time, and putter around the Foundry? She wasn’t sure that she wanted to do that, but in truth, it didn’t sound so bad, at least for a little while. It wasn’t that she doubted his love for her, but to lose his respect, his admiration, to sink somehow in his estimation, would hurt her terribly. To live her life wondering if he missed the girl she used to be would be torture.

She knew that his good opinion couldn’t define her choices. But she desperately wanted his support and his involvement all the same. It was his choice. There were some things she knew better than to seek to earn. These things had to be freely given, without an awareness or evaluation of merit, or they would feel empty and tenuous.

The door to the phone shanty creaked gently when Hermione opened it. The sun slanted inside windows that had been made for archers and their arrows. Inside, there was a rotary phone attached to the wall, with a small table and pad of paper, with a pencil. Ink would freeze, and a quill would attract attention. The only hint to who owned the shanty was the runes carved into the stone floor.

Hermione pushed her muffler back, and used her teeth to haul off a glove. It was freezing. Even with the warming charms cast liberally over her person, it was a brutal winter here. It had been milder in Scotland, though perhaps that was Hogwarts, and its ambient magic. Hermione dropped her glove on the wooden chair that lived in the phone box.

The black receiver was icy and heavy in her gloved hand. Hermione carefully dialed the rotary
phone, and waited for the person on the other end to greet her. Wandlessly, Hermione cast a warming charm around the small phone box. It was solar powered, put in by a muggle company. They couldn’t have technology anywhere near high levels of ambient magic, and she, like other magical people, fried anything computerized when she tried to work with it, beyond quickly using the chip and pin. The old rotary phone was mechanical, and so they were able to use it freely, and close to the body.

A person picked up after two rings, and greeted her, to which Hermione replied, “Hello. I hope I have the right extension, but perhaps you might help me. I’m calling in regards to a letter that came this morning addressed to the Duchess of Potter. I’d quite like to see that a meeting is arranged.”

“Naturally.” The cheery woman said, “Father Smithson would be happy to see Her Grace at any time. When would she like to come?”

Hermione thought. She had nothing better to do, and laundry would be well on its way by the time she got back, giving her quite a bit more to do. “Would now suit? I understand, of course, if he is not available, but I did find his letter quite interesting.”

“Would you care to hold, ma’am?” The lady asked, “Fr. Smithson is in his office now. I’ll be glad to ask him.”

Hermione agreed, and found that he would be happy to see her at any point today. Hermione let the person on the phone know that she would be along shortly. She let the lady assume she was in the area. Hermione wasn’t, but that was nothing magic couldn’t fix.

Hermione noted from the address on the envelope that there was a wizarding run cafe a few streets over. It was connected to the floo, no doubt.

Hermione dashed back to the great hall, kicking the snow off of her boots before crossing the hall. Naturally, she found Petra there, awaiting her. “Petra, do I look muggle enough?” Hermione blinked, “I don’t quite...”

Hermione was struck, for the first time, just how Wizardly she looked. Her hair was glossy, her curls wild, but contained in a delicate twist, covered underneath her muffler by a delicate black floral snood, which matched her outfit. It was entirely Wizarding in origin. Her skirt was a fine corduroy. It was serviceable, but warm, worn with layers of petticoats. Her blouse was a knit top, worn underneath a chunky black cardigan. It was hard to heat the Foundry, its name notwithstanding.

Her skirt might have been suitable, but, though Hermione vastly preferred it, muggle fashion had marched on by this style over five decades ago. Her court pumps were still nondescript enough not to raise questions, unless one knew anything about heel design.

Hermione thought, for a long second, and waved her wand. She looked down, and bit her lip. There was something about the quality and tone of her clothes that hit the wrong note. She understood, now, why so many witches and wizards stuck out in the muggle community. It wasn’t that they thought muggles dressed strangely, it was simply that their cultures had completely different wavelengths and ways of thinking about clothes. Even for Hermione, it was hard to judge when faced with something she had never done in her childhood.

She waved it again. This time, she had merely made her skirt into a back jumper dress, and
morphed her coat into a black and red plaid. She looked muggle enough, Hermione decided, having not seen a fashion magazine in, well, ever. Her hair she left alone. There were things she had chosen for herself that she would change for no one.

Petra looked mildly approving, and so Hermione told her of her plans, asked her to hold lunch, and stepped into her fireplace to floo off to the cafe.

She exited the floo, dusted herself off gently, and because she had used their floo, bought a cup of seasonal blend tea. The bright burst of peppermint invigorated Hermione, and she looked forward to her adventure. On foot, Hermione walked over to the stone building and vanished her tea before going inside.

Hermione found the energy in the building to be full of warmth and a stately comfort. She passed statues and flowers in vases, and made her way to the correct office with little issue. Once there, she waited for a few minutes, thinking all the while about why he might wish to see her, and carefully practicing her story to omit any mention or allusion to her community.

The man who came out to greet her looked to be in his thirties, perhaps, blond and pleasant looking. He approached her, and said, “It was very kind of you to make room in your schedule to meet with me so promptly, Your Grace.”

Hermione smiled, “I am known to be a very curious person, Father. Your letter interested me, so I ap-popped, right over.”

Hermione hoped he did not notice the stumble over her mode of transportation. She really needed to work on blending in more. She was a muggleborn, for Merlin’s sake. She had only made the mistake because she had been trying so hard not to say anything.

He seemed to pay her no mind, “My office is this way. Might I offer you some tea?”

“No, thank you.” Hermione refused, walking down the hall. He led her into a small office holding a desk laden with papers, and a small sitting area. It was there they sat, and Hermione divested herself of her coat, hanging it over her lap.

“Well-” He began, “You may be wondering why I’ve asked you to come.”

“I’m very keen on philanthropy.” Hermione sought to make his introduction easier, “And so I’m always interested in learning more about what people do, and how I might help them.”

He smiled. “Ah. I see.”

“And it is Christmas.” Hermione blushed, “Well, Advent, if one wishes to be technical. In any case, how may I help you?”

“When I accepted this placement, it came with a vicarage.” He began, “The vicarage has been closed to me since my appointment as the property has been unavailable. Some three months ago, I was informed that these duties might begin again, to which I can only say that I am glad. Yesterday, I was given leave to make inroads to once again begin the steps to fill my duties at said vicarage.”

“I see.” Hermione murmured, though of course, she did not see much of anything at all. “Is your placement very far away, Father?”

“Oh, I’d say the Chapel at the Foundry is very easy to find. You just pop over.”
“I beg your pardon?” Hermione quickly scanned the office for anything remotely magical, and found nothing. There was even a phone on the desk, the sort with all manner of functions. Hermione felt her wand in her sleeve. Had this been a set up? Had some supporter of blood purity polyjuiced this muggle man, or Imperio’d him? Hermione resolved not to kill the poor priest. He had likely been victimized.

Quickly, Hermione scanned the room again, this time feeling out the space for a magical signature. Nothing.

“Of course, my predecessor did live on the grounds.” Father Smithson noted, “Do you still have the apiaries?”

“I--yes.” Hermione nearly jumped, “We lead a quiet life, but the farms in the area are just breathtaking.”

“One might also call them magical.” Father Smithson smiled, “Dumbledore did go on about your bees during detentions.”

It was then that Hermione noticed the owl perch near the window. But how...? “Dumbledore?”


“I hadn’t--” Hermione fumbled. She hadn’t known a magical person might be a priest, but that was indeed foolish.

Remus had converted in his teens, Sirius was Catholic from the cradle, as were the Potters. Sirius, once he’d been cleared, had gotten Harry to his First Holy Communion and Confirmation without delay. Luna was a member of the CoE, and worshiped regularly in a very High Church sort of way. The Weasley’s were secular, and proudly so. She knew at least five Jewish families at Hogwarts, and several Muslim students. Her roommate was Hindu.

Hermione didn’t know why she hadn’t thought of there being magical clerics.

“Your Grace, we’re everywhere. In every profession.” Father Smithson seemed to understand her confusion, “Even magic cannot explain the wonders of Faith.”

“And so, Father, you wrote to ask--” Hermione ventured onward with a confidence she did not feel. She had no idea why she had been contacted, even now.

“If I might begin again to offer services for Wizarding families using the Foundry Chapel, yes.”

Hermione had never realized that the Foundry had once hosted an active congregation, though now the Chapel’s design as separate from the house made far more sense.

“I don’t think my husband will have any objections to it, and I know Lord Black will be pleased.” Hermione said, “Despite his reputation, he is very devout.”

Father Smithson understood what she was saying. Twelve years in Azkaban was not easy to survive. “I imagine his faith has given him solace and hope in very trying times.”

“Yes.” Hermione said simply, “And there is little I would not do to foster that for him.”

Hermione would even have the Devil to dinner for Sirius’s sake. Not, she thought anew, that such
an idea could be dismissed out of hand. After a moment of contemplation, Hermione asked, “Would you care to come to dinner tomorrow?”

Chapter End Notes

Hermione's grey coat and her red coat

I had a jumper like this in 1996, though maybe slimmer in the skirt, in that whole grunge but cute pathos. Mine, as Hermione's own, was a solid black. See it here. This one is from the 1950s, though, so it fits with the whole wizardingmuggle problems.

Also, yes, there are more ancient Roman holidays coming up, as is Teddy in reindeer antlers.
In the past, I always used to be looking for answers. Today, I know there are only questions. So I just live.

Chapter Summary

"In the past, I always used to be looking for answers. Today, I know there are only questions. So I just live." --Sarah Brightman

Or

“Christmas is doing a little something extra for someone.” — Charles M. Schulz

Or

Wherein Hermione realizes that being smart means not only having the answers, but asking the questions that lead to creating the answers in her own life. She hosts a wizarding ritual, plans Christmas with Harry as her sidekick, and grapples with change in her life.

Chapter Notes

Hermione's blue dress inspiration.

Inspiration for the red dress here, and here which is, yes, a nod to St. Lucy. I always liked St. Lucy's service as a kid because candles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione was sweaty from working in the laundry. The elves had brought her a chair, and placed a pile of cloth napkins before her on the ancient wooden folding table before her, and told her to fold them, beaming at her when she did like she was a genius for matching corner to corner. Hermione had done that, and then had joined in on the minding of the big copper pots. It was not easy work, but Hermione wasn’t a poodle to be pampered. The manual labor helped her to think through some of her work.

After leaving the laundry, Hermione went to the kitchens to remind Fella that Teddy, Remus, Sirius, and Father Smithson were expected as their guests for dinner tomorrow, though Remus and Sirius hardly counted as guests. Teddy certainly didn’t, at least not according to the elves, who doted on him with great zeal.

Finally, Hermione found Harry tossing a cat bell for Crooky. Hermione sank down next to him on the sofa, “I invited a priest to dinner tomorrow.” Hermione explained, quickly, the letter and her visit with Father Smithson.

Harry didn’t seemed too interested, even after seeing the letter. “Hermione, I don’t know...” He glanced at her gently, “I mean, Remus and Sirius can’t want to have to explain to Teddy why the guest at dinner thinks they’re evil.”
“Not all religious people are like that, Harry, and besides, the Wizarding church is generally pretty accepting of reality.” Hermione returned, “Don’t you think it would be nice for Sirius and Remus to go to Mass with Teddy without having to charm his hair, without out having to think of way as he grows up to tell him to hide his magic?”

“I’d rather he hid his magic than be judged for loving the men who’ve raised him in a place he’s supposed to feel loved and safe.” Harry noted, tossing the ball again for Crooks.

The half-kneazle pounced after it, rolling about the floor of the sitting room with abandon.

Though Hermione agreed fully, she asked, “Don’t you think he has parents to decide for him? How do we even know what the choices are? We know nothing about wizarding churches. Yesterday, I didn't even know they existed.”

“Did you even ask them before shoving this new church down their throats?” Harry asked, “Or--”

“Okay!” Hermione cut him off. This conversation was clearly no longer about Teddy. “Why are you being so nasty and unsupportive?”

Harry fired back, taking the ball from Crooky, and tossing it again, “I’m not angry, Hermione.”

“That’s good, because I didn’t ask you why you were angry.” Hermione forced eye contact Harry seemed to want to avoid, “I asked you why you’re being nasty and unsupportive.”

“I’m not.” Harry denied. He bent to the pick up the ball from Crooky.

Hermione wouldn’t let this conversation end. The fire crackled behind them as she spoke, “Well, I say you are.”

Harry threw out, “And you’re always right, of course.”

“Excuse me?” Hermione recoiled almost as though he had hexed her. She could not believe him. Just as she went to speak again, to say something, anything, to clear the charged air between them, he spoke.

“You left school, Hermione!” Harry bit out, “You left school, packed your trunk like you couldn’t wait to go, and now all you do is sleep and read. There’s got to be something wrong.”

“You think I’m sick.” His attitude clicked into place. He wasn’t angry. He was scared.

Nevermind the fact that she had only been home for one day, nevermind the fact that she hadn’t even found her feet again, it was clear that Harry had reached his own conclusions.

And he was scared.

“I--” Harry began, “After the War--”

After the War, she had slept for days and days and days, when the numbness began to wear off, and the world was rubble around her. It was her only option when her body was shutting down from stress after the panic dissipated. Harry hadn’t left her.

Hermione realized that that time period was when Ron began to pull away. She also realized that, though she didn’t remember much of those days, that Harry must recall them vividly. But this, this wasn’t the same thing. It did feel a little bit like that same exhaustion, but at least this time, she only wanted time to live, and not time to die.
“Harry.” Hermione paused, trying very hard to be honest about emotions that stung her pride, “I’m tired. For upwards of eight years, it’s been exam after battle after exam after battle after exam. For years, there’s been nothing in my life but pressure and expectations that I felt I had to meet.”

Harry swallowed.

She didn’t want to make him feel guilty. Hermione sighed, “And for the most part, I was happy meeting them. But it just wasn’t enough anymore. I’ve proven myself to myself. I don’t need to prove myself to anyone else.”

Hermione didn’t give Harry the chance to respond. She needed to get this out, or she never might. If she wasn’t totally honest now, she knew the half-truth would mushroom between them, leaving no room for total honesty.

“I tried telling you that I couldn’t cope anymore, not when Minerva gave me a choice. It didn’t seem worth it, and I just--” She fumbled for her words, “I just don’t want to live my life fighting to prove myself to people who don’t matter.”

Harry tried, “Hermione...”

“Accept me as I am in this moment, or don’t.” Hermione concluded, “The choice is totally yours.”

“This isn’t about accepting you.” Harry clarified, turning to see her more directly as they sat side by side, “This is about wanting you to want what’s best for you, what makes you happiest.”

Hermione made her point softly, “I’ve fought enough battles, Harry, don’t you think, to be able to make those choices for myself?”

He wanted to be understood as more than the Boy Who Lived, and so did Hermione, in her own way. He of all people should understand and respect that desire.

“But you don’t even--” Harry broke off, running his hand through his hair.

“Seem like me?” Hermione guessed, “Maybe I’m not. Maybe we’re not always going to be who we were. Maybe I’m changing. But maybe I’m finding myself. Who knows?”

This attitude seemed to surprise Harry, “You don’t?”

“No, but I plan to find out.” Hermione assured him, hopeful that he would join her on that journey.

Harry quirked a smile. “I guess I...”

She pressed, “You...?”

“Your desk is empty.” Harry stated. Hermione thought that Padma would have moved into her seat already, for she had long wanted that spot. “And every time I look over to see you, I have this momentary feeling of...”

“Loss?” Hermione asked, “I haven’t...”

She hadn’t even thought that Harry would regard this change as loss, but of course he might. Hogwarts had been his first home, and she had been one of his very first friends. This change must have left a gaping hole in him. So many people had left him, by choice or by fate. Hermione didn’t want him to think her one of those people.

Harry spoke. His voice was soft and the pain ripped into Hermione more than any shouted anger
might have, “No, but an era’s over, and we’ll never be the Golden Trio anymore, not even with Ron not there.”

Oh. This. This Hermione understood. She missed Ron, too, missed being with the both of them day in and day out. She knew that perhaps their school days were over, but they would always, always, be a unit. They would always be parts of a greater whole. They had all three vowed to hold their bonds sacred. Harry knew this, but Hermione told him again anyway. “Do you want Ron to come, too?”

“He’s got a work thing.” Harry told her with a shake of his head, “And Hermione?”

“Hmm?” Hermione asked, content to know that, finally, finally, they were communicating properly again. She hated it when they couldn’t at least see what the other person was saying, and the last couple of days had been challenging. The last few months hadn’t been easy in that regard, either.

“It’s not loss.” Harry told her, “It’s more like panic. What is the world, if Hermione Granger isn’t dominating the classrooms?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione admitted, “Want to find out?”

His smile told her everything she might ever want to know about his reply.

Hermione leaned against him, and they were silent for a long while, content to sit by the fire and watch Crooky play and groom himself as his fancy struck him.

A little while later, Harry’s arms were wrapped around her, his body cradling hers as they cuddled on the sofa. He asked, “Hermione?”

“Yes?” Hermione replied, tilting her head backwards to look up at him.

His green eyes were dancing with mirth, “Can you imagine Ron at dinner with a priest?”

“Oh, God, no.” Hermione laughed, “Forget I offered. Please.”

Harry kissed the top of her head.

The next morning, Hermione was working on yet another lesson plan, this time on the various beliefs and cultural practices surrounding pets, when Fella knocked on the door.

Hermione knew it was the housekeeper by her simple, unobtrusive knock.

“Come in, Fella!” Hermione greeted her as she entered the study, “How are you? I’m sorry we couldn’t meet yesterday.”

“I’m well, ma’am.” She replied, not making so bold as to ask after Hermione’s own health. “I have opened and aired the attics. Would you like me to bring the Advent items down for you? Perhaps you would care to have Father bless various items before dinner.”

“No need to make extra work.” Hermione stood, “I’m more than keen for a break anyway. Would you mind showing me there now?”

Quickly, Fella popped them to one of the attics. The attics were wide and spacious, and the exposed beams were polished and gleaming. Fella stepped away as they landed.
Hermione saw before her countless boxes. She noted that the Advent boxes had been pulled down from shelves, and a tea table and chair had been set there for organization. The bits of an Advent wreath rested prominently on one shelf.

Hermione approached the first box, the wooden crate thrumming with something Hermione could not name. “Where would you start, Fella?”

“Well...” The elf tilted her head as she thought for a second, “I think I’d start with the Crèche. Her Grace did always take such joy in laying it out.” She added after a second, “Perhaps you might ask Father to bless the candles, if you intend to have a family wreath.”

Hermione thus found the box marked ‘Nativity’ and opened it with a bit of wandless magic. Nestled in fine packing materials, she saw a large stable, and any number of figures. In fact, she soon saw several buildings. Hermione spent a good hour unpacking the finely made handicrafts, her fingers brushing the Virgin’s face and the Oxen’s pointed horns. It felt as though she was touching history, finding a place for herself amid something bigger, something far older and more meaningful.

This, then, was the lesson she had been trying to learn. She had said over and over that, in the Wizarding world, the best lessons were not always found in the books. It was often the things that the books did not say that said the most about something. Hermione understood, in this moment, that, had things been different, Harry would have grown up with Christmases full of love, full of joy, tradition, and continuation. He would have understood why the books did not talk about Christmas, and Easter, and the hidden traditions with Saturn and Juno. The books assumed that such facts didn’t matter because you already knew of them.

Hermione knew that change in the wider world was meaningless unless the change happened on a personal level. The political had to be personal, and vice versa. Mind made up, Hermione stood. She thanked Fella for her time, and told her to please have every item for Advent cleaned and brought down to a salon. Hermione would work from there, she decided.

Hermione dashed to her loo, and was in the middle of trying to figure out how to work the taps on the claw-footed tub, when Petra came dashing in, her mobcap askew. She gently pushed Hermione aside, and filled the bath quickly, with a gentle word of censure for Hermione.

Abashed, Hermione replied, “If you could set out something for me, please. I must call on Lady Longbottom as soon as possible.”

It was getting late for morning calls, which took place in the afternoon. If Hermione did not go presently, she would need to wait until Thursday, which was Augusta’s next at home day. Those hours seemed too precious to waste. Hermione had to hurry.

Petra nodded, and her shoes clicked on the marble as she exited the bathroom. Hermione made quick work of washing away the dust from the attic, and was out of the tub and into her dressing gown just as Petra returned from laying out her clothes. Hermione dried herself in a flash with a quick charm. She accepted every bit of Petra’s help to dress, not even protesting the shapewear the elf routinely insisted upon. Hermione put on her wool slip overtop her base layer, and allowed Petra to drop the blue sweater dress over her, gently.

Hermione slipped on her t-strap flats, and sat promptly for Petra to do her hair. She ended up wearing her hair in a sleek bun that took but seconds to dress and charm. Hermione’s cream snood in a matching fabric pulled the outfit together, and suited the simple gathering of her hair, which filled the snood. Hermione refused outer robes, knowing full well she’d only take them off when in Augusta’s sitting room. The floo was stuffy, even if the rush of air as she moved to her destination
was chilling.

“That is not wise.” Petra asserted, “You are paying Lady Longbottom an afternoon call. You will not rush in there, arms akimbo.”

Hermione pursed her lips.

After a second’s reasoning, she took the robes. What if she got lost on the Floo and ended up somewhere with no coat? Hermione let Petra fix them properly, and hastened to the fireplace in the Great Hall, calling out, “Snoedyn Hall.”

She stepped out of the Floo in Snoedyn’s entry hall. It was much the same as the Foundry’s, and yet had a charm and a design all its own. Hermione greeted the Hall Porter. “Hello, Eyerum.” For the first time, she felt uneasy, “I suppose I’ll just leave my card. I did want to see--”

Hermione reached into the pocket of her robes for one of her calling cards. It was a simple, cream card with black ink that gave her name and her at home days. Hermione had to order new cards, for presently she had no at home days listed. She knew that there were reams of people wishing to pay her call. Hermione knew the social whirl would not be escapable come the new year.

“Your Grace.” He bobbed, “Her Grace is always at home to you. May I take your robes?”

Hermione divested them, and followed Eyerum to the drawing room. It was a Regency Period room, done up in yellows and greys. Hermione waited, as Eyerum announced her. Augusta, Hermione noted, was working on some letters for her various charities.

She put them aside without any regret, and bade Hermione to join her for tea. “I’ve just been arguing via owl with the most dreadful woman.” Augusta declared, “I need tea and cake before I lower myself to sending her a howler.”

Hermione smiled, taking the other seat at the table, “I hope you will forgive me for barging in--”

“Hermione, you have done Mrs. Whitby a deep favor.” Augusta said, as the tea tray arrived and Augusta began to pour, “Suppose we skip apologies you’ve no need to offer, and get on with evaluating whatever plan you’ve formulated. I’ll know presently if it’s a good one.”

Hermione’s sigh was small, though she knew there was no heat in Augusta’s words, “You still haven’t forgiven me for not telling you about the law, have you?”

“Forgiven, certainly.” Augusta sliced herself a handsome portion of the rich chocolate cake, “But to forget would be foolish.”

Amid taking tea and eating ample amounts of cake, Hermione explained the whole of the past two days from waking up at Hogwarts, to seeing the attics, “As you know, I gave permission to Fr. Smithson to open the Chapel, and I have been doing the daily rituals for Advent.” Hermione further explained her adventures in the attic, “And now I feel like I want to have a proper Christmas at the Foundry, only I don’t know how. I’ve read a bit for my lesson plans--”

Augusta added, “Naturally.”

Hermione finished stating her case, “But I know now that books only tell part of the story. The political must be personal. I must know that which I seek to teach.”

“Indeed.” Augusta smiled, “Well, my girl, if you’ve come to ask how to give a proper Christmas, I shall, of course be glad to guide you.”
“Thank you, Augusta.” Hermione bit her lip, “If there’s ever anything I might offer in return, you only need say the word.”

“In good time.” Augusta absolved her, “Now. I don’t suppose you’ve any background in the liturgical year, do you?”

When Hermione replied that CoE used a liturgical calendar, Augusta smiled, “Well, mine’s been in use since Rome was the capital and Peter was Pope. We’ll start there.”

Hermione laughed outright at Augusta’s gentle teasing.

Augusta was once again happy to be in her element as teacher. Hermione charmed several quills, and simply let Augusta talk. Hermione decided that it would be a good research experience to participate as fully in the season as was permitted. Hermione did not know exactly how she felt about religion in her own case, but she knew that it was a powerful force.

She knew, too, that to understand it, and to be able to do the rituals, would help her to educate others. Hermione, as she had with her wedding, promised herself that she would observe every detail. This way, next year, she might more fully decide what worked best for her, and what she and Harry wanted to continue for their own family.

Now, Hermione decided, was the time to do these things. She sincerely did not want her children to know anything other than the joy of having two parents who were unified in life, even if it was something as small as the day on which Father Christmas visited. Hermione was rather surprised to note that in Euphemia’s family, Father Christmas had not come until Twelfth Night.

There had, Augusta added, always been a small toy delivered on The Feast of St. Nicholas. Hermione thought that perhaps she would suggest to Harry exchanging their smaller gifts with her parents on Christmas Eve. Naturally, they would pop home for Mass, because Hermione wanted to see the Midnight and Dawn services in their fullness.

When she said as much, Augusta laughed outright, and began to talk about the day that most wizarding families celebrated and made merry. Saturnalia was quite large in more traditional families, a bright spot in the middle of the smaller Lent that was Advent.

Hermione was confused, “But Advent is a time of anticipation, correct?”

Augusta nodded, “Indeed it is so, and it is on Saturnalia that we celebrate and anticipate the days when the last shall be first. Typically, families with elves cook and serve the elves luncheon, and give presents to one and all. You’ll also have to cut Saturn’s ties, and there’s a ceremony for that, as well as one for binding him back up on the 18th, one of the Embertide fast days.” Augusta paused, “Do you see this comes together?”

That was actually her problem. She read about all of the rituals, all of the feast days and the fast days, but she had no understanding of how they came together to create a cohesive whole. “So, basically, magical religious people are also worshiping Saturn?”

“Hermione!” The word was a scold if Hermione had even had one, “Saturn was a wizard, much like Juno and Vesta were witches. Muggles made them Gods in their ignorance. We honor our forebearers, and we worship our God.” Augusta inhaled, “We are not, despite what you may have been taught, idol worshipers or pagans.”

Hermione sought to explain herself, “There was no judgement in my question.”

“No, but there was grave error.” Augusta said, “Part of what you must understand, something
which I gather not commonly addressed in muggle communities, is that no person, magical or mundane, is totally one thing or another.”

Augusta gestured to herself, “I am a witch, and I am religious. I turn my back on neither. To do so would be a slap in the face to my God, who created magic as surely as he made muggles, and it would be an act of self-hatred against the magic that forms the core of my being. In my daily life, I honor both, each in its own way.”

There was a wisdom in Augusta’s words which suggested that these were personal realizations Augusta had worked long and hard to make for herself, allowing herself to feel comfortable in her own life and in her own skin. “I see.”

“To honor each in their own way, Hermione,” Augusta continued, “Neither negates or belittles the other. In fact, in respecting fully who we our, we bring greater understanding and reverence to the connections between things.”

“I do understand, really.” Hermione apologized, “I did not mean to be narrow minded.”

“You’re learning.” Augusta replied, “There will be times when you bump up against the walls of your own mind, such as your continued aversion to anything other than practical footwear. But I digress...”

Hermione laughed. “I like my flats. And I wore heels yesterday.” Actually she had kicked them off under her desk and tucked her feet up under her skirts, but the point stood, “Petra keeps me well in line.”

“I shall endeavor to pick my battles.” Augusta concluded, “And praise God for Petra, else I should not sleep for worry of you.”

“Or my shoes, rather.” Hermione joked.

“Quite.”

Hermione made a large calendar with all of the dates Augusta had given her, and had magically cross referenced her notebook created from Augusta’s lectures and her research to pull up all the relevant details she would need for that day. Hermione used a sticking charm to affix it to the wall in her study.

After some thought, she added some traditions her own family had fostered, which Hermione herself valued. Christmas cards were one such thing, as was her Granny’s Christmas pudding. Hermione fondly remembered going out and finding and cutting and decorating the tree. This, too, was placed on the calendar. Hermione, in a fit of inspiration, transfigured a big bow and stuck it over the calendar on the wall.

That done, she checked on things in the kitchens. The elves looked at her fondly, and humored her needless questions. Just as they began to offer her extra food, and Hermione was trying to refuse, she felt the wards ripple.

Hermione felt very clearly who it was, and left with haste. She didn’t want Harry to see his Christmas present before she had a chance to present it to him properly. Hermione found Harry in the hallway walking toward the back door of the library, which led to her study.

She pretended ease, as though she had not run clear from the kitchens. “Hey.”
“Hey.” Harry hefted his satchel and swung it around his body, “Charms was killer. Hannah gave me a note for you.”

Hermione took the folded note that was charmed shut, and bit back a smile. “So. I have an early Christmas present for you.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, “What is it?”

Hermione smiled, feeling very mischievous indeed. She backed up, leaning indolently against the wall. “Oh, I think you’d best guess.”

Harry bracketed his arms around her, as she had hoped he might. His hands found her waist, and gently caressed her hips. His words contradicted his actions, until Hermione remembered that the must still be discussing his Christmas gift. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I’ll give you a hint.” Hermione felt Harry’s nimble fingers toying gently with the edge of her snood. His fingers were in her hair, and Hermione felt her pulse quicken.

Insufferable man. He knew the carnal direction of her thoughts. He grinned. Just when Hermione thought she might kiss him and allow his gift to wait, Harry’s lips quirked, and he said, “Right, go.”

Oh, that man! Hermione sucked in air, and blurted, “It’s not a book.”

Pressing a scant kiss to his lips, she pulled away quickly, and before he could make his intentions to ask her to stay plain, she ducked under his arm, and took off running to the study.

Harry followed behind after a second, calling, “That’s not a hint. It could be...”

Hermione rounded the door, and perched herself on the edge of her desk, hiking up her skirts and hopping to do so. She ended up sitting on a book, and pulled it free just as Harry rounded the door, “You cheated.”

“I distracted the seeker, within the rules of the game.” Hermione declared, “It was very well done of me.” Hermione felt no need to smooth down the skirts that were hiked above her knees.

She watched Harry’s smile fade when he saw the big bow. “Hermione...”

“For Christmas, I’ve decided to give you a proper Christmas.” Hermione explained, “A really magical Christmas.”

Harry still didn’t say anything. He stood there, something uncertain and shocked on his face.

Hermione tried anew, explaining about her visit with Augusta. “Seeing your Grandmother’s things, well, it just made me think that you deserve a real Christmas.” Hermione said, “And really, what don’t you already have? So I’m giving you Christmas. Later we can decide what we like, and go from there.”

Hermione watched as Harry’s eyes filled with tears, and felt her heart break. Hermione could do more except open her arms as his tears dripped onto her shoulder, and run her hand over his back soothingly as he brokenly whispered her name.

Hermione, in retrospect, was glad that her NEWTs were all but formalities. Her formal education was complete. Beyond a passing sense of relief, Hermione felt only that it was off her plate. She
had much to do. It was Advent, and for witches of the First Houses, it was a time of reflection, duty, and obligation. For most people, it seemed that Advent was little more than a lead up to Christmas wherein they either tried to force themselves somber and reflective, or they threw themselves with abandon into Christmas.

Advent was different this year for Hermione. She had the obligation to keep the flame on that altar burning, and the lighting the incense to burning in the morning. She had missed, of course, the first week of Advent. Augusta had popped over and done it for her while she was at school, but Hermione knew that her duty could not be abdicated now that she was home.

On the 8th, Fr. Smithson celebrated the first Mass in the chapel since the early days since the first War. Hermione was almost shocked at the warmth of the chapel. It was bedecked in white, which Hermione knew related to the Virgin Mary. Hermione found herself appreciating the Latin rite. It was interesting, Hermione thought, to see the progressivism of the Wizarding community’s faith meet it’s staunch adherence to some traditions.

Sirius and Remus weren’t the only same-sex couple in the small group gathered that followed the service far better than Hermione herself. Several other families, both homosexual and heterosexual had children, too. Teddy was excited to see other children, and his hair flashed once he realized Papa or Pads wasn’t going to stop him from shifting in church.

Hermione enjoyed watching Fr. Smithson face the altar, on top of the few stone steps in the chapel, from where he conducted the service within the altar rails. She thought it was interesting to see something that had been so personally meaningful to her in one way take on meaning to others in another.

It would have seemed almost Muggle, except that the statuary included more prominently saints who had been wizards, and were known mostly to the wizarding community. The runes in the stonework were visible, and no one did anything to hide their clothes, their wands, or their ways of being. Teddy’s hair flashed colors. Hermione knew he was happy to worship his God while being allowed, and encouraged, to be fully himself.

After the Mass celebrating Anne’s conception, every witch paused to say something to her before greeting Fr. Smithson on their way out. Hermione resolved to do something about it, if the ladies continued to feel the need to greet her. This first time, though, it was nice to meet the people that would be making a valued part of her home their religious home. It was for this reason that she wanted to know them. In this small way, Hermione felt she was developing a community. It was new and precious.

Hermione had moved the Advent wreath that she had started from the Great Hall to the Chapel. It seemed only fitting, and Fr. Smithson approved. It wasn’t in the nave, as it was a family wreath, but it decorated the narthex quite nicely. Stopping on their way outside, Hermione asked the fairies who were dancing around the candles to come to the house and see the people any time they wished. These beings understood the invitation was enabling them to feed off of the ambient magic in the house.

Following their exit from the chapel, Hermione brushed Harry’s hand as they walked along. Holding hands in public wasn’t something they did, but Hermione did appreciate his hand on her elbow. He wasn’t stupid, and pulled her far closer than totally needed as they walked.

He’d done his bit and greeted the men as Hermione had done for the ladies present, “Thank you.”

He considered her for a long moment. “You were right. Teddy was overjoyed, and you brought people together. It would have been horrible to miss it.”
“Harry...” Hermione didn’t want him to do anything she wanted him to do just because she wanted it. She wanted him to choose for himself, not to feel as though she was forcing him.

“I...” He paused, “You’re trying to start traditions, aren’t you? Ones that are ours.”

“Yes, I want that for you, want to do that with you, because you should have had these things all along.” Hermione wanted nothing more than to see him happy. “And I want our family to have those things, the things we choose together.”

She also had a personal reason, one that went beyond research, one that went beyond trying new things, “I also want it for me. I spent so many years thinking that I had to prove myself to belong, and now I’m starting to see that I can do things in my own way. I don’t need to prove my right to belong to anyone. I only need to feel it for myself.”

Harry accepted her truth. They walked for a moment before he asked, “How’d I end up with such a smart wife?”

“You jumped on a troll’s back.” Hermione reminded him, “That, and you noticed her more on any given Tuesday than when she poured a vat of Sleekeazy’s on her hair.”

Harry frowned. “Huh?”

“I noticed.” Hermione shrugged, “You never treated me any differently, no matter what I wore or what I did. It was a point in your favor.”

He’d not been too bowled over at the Yule Ball, and if he had been, it hadn’t changed his actions toward her. He had always treated her with respect, and acted as though she was herself. Later, he’d told her that she was always beautiful. Hermione believed him, illogical as it was, because she knew he meant it, truth or not.

“Interesting.” He murmured, as though filing that away for future exploration.

Hermione skirted a patch of ice, “I think the fact that you turned out to be her actual soulmate was pretty much the clincher.”

“There is that.” He grinned. After a second, he sobered, “Hermione?”

Hermione sensed that this was now serious, and paused, pulling him to a stop. Harry turned to face her as she asked, “What?”

He ventured, his gloved hand reaching out to rest on her arm, “You know what I’ve always wanted to do?”

“What?” Hermione leaned closer, because she knew this was a secret. He was sharing something with her, something he had never told anyone else. Hermione counted it as precious.

He shared, “I want to make muggle Christmas cookies.”

“Really?” Hermione’s smile was so wide that her nose crinkled.

“Yeah. Aunt Petunia never let anybody help, and even when she made them, poor Dudders got them all. And I wasn’t about to ask Sirius to bake with me once I went home.” Harry smiled, “So, if you can wrest control of the kitchens from Fella...”

Hermione knew she would do just that, though she couldn’t help but wonder how much it would
mean to Fella to talk to Harry. Then again, Fella would more than likely produce dozens and dozens of cookies, and ply them upon His Grace with abandon. “She might listen to you more.”

“‘Mione, I don’t get so much as a slice of cake without her making it clear that it is your house.” Harry nudged her gently, and they resumed walking to the house, where Sirius and Remus and Teddy were waiting to eat, “And she warns me to keep in your good graces, or I won’t be fed.”

“You will always have food.” Hermione vowed to have words with Fella, and willed her blood to cool, “Always.”

“I know.” He soothed her, “So, kitchens?”

“On the 23rd.” Hermione agreed, “Make a list of the kinds you like. We can even go to the shops.”

Harry grinned, and boldly grabbed her hand in front of the people still chatting on the snow covered green. Hermione stifled a laugh, and raced along with him into the house.

Thusly, they were both on board for Christmas, with a shared vision between them. Hermione spent a good portion of the next three days either working on her lesson plans, setting up the massive nativity scene in the drawing room, and preparing for the magical elements that she would need to undertake on the 13th, St. Lucy’s Day, which was also, according to many old calendars still in use in the Wizarding world, considered the Solstice.

Augusta was happy to provide her with information, but the bulk of the work fell to Hermione. She visited the storerooms for supplies, and gathered them up, allowing incense to burn around them for a purification ritual.

The Second Sunday of Advent dawned brightly, the weak sun’s rays pushing Hermione out of bed. She had a lot to do. The gas lights weren’t going on tonight, so anything she needed to see well to do, she needed to do now. Hermione went about checking on her preparations, and made sure she went over her Latin, with every spare moment she had. By the time she died, Hermione figured she might be close to fluent.

The day passed too quickly, and by the time Harry came in racing just before dinner, having gone home with Teddy after Mass, Hermione was standing in her dressing room, Petra lacing her up. He, finding the process interesting, lounged against the doorway to the bedroom, and ate an apple.

Hermione sucked in air as she worked the strings. “Remind me, again, why I need this?”

Petra yanked carefully on the strings, “If you want to carry the dress, ma’am, you need it.” Petra pulled on the strings again, her actions contradicting her promise, “I shan’t lace you tightly.”

Hermione sighed, and found that her ability to breathe had changed. Hermione forced herself to stand up and breathe deeply, and found that, having done so, her respiration was fine.

“Be glad you have your figure.” Petra advised, letting the laces fall against her as she pulled every other row. Petra said that quite a lot when enforcing her idea of proper dress. Had Harry not been present, she might have added, as she usually did, “For you won’t always.”

To say that in front of His Grace, no doubt, was unthinkable. Hermione internally rolled her eyes.

“Did you know?” Hermione addressed the room at large, “That once upon a time, women went completely naked under their dresses to light the yule log?”
“In December?” Harry asked, “Wow.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. They’d had warming charms, too, same as they did now. With one final tug, Petra tied what was left of the laces.

Petra stepped back, “You’re laced, ma’am.”

Hermione found that, despite her protests regarding the victorian-style corset, she could still breathe and move. She just had to stand up, and had vivid memories of her Nana tapping her shoulders and her bum in an effort to force some posture into her short, stumpy, self. Petra slipped a silk petticoat over her head, and tied it over top of her corset and corset cover as Hermione spoke, “You promised to go get Mum and Dad, remember?”

Harry finished eating his apple, “I’ll go now, all right?”

Hermione wanted to throw the core at his head. He’d take fifteen seconds to get dressed, and look like he was born in what he was wearing, he wore it so effortlessly.

“And Ron is still coming?” Hermione pressed, excited to really spend some time with Ron. He was so busy, but he was forever popping in on weekends when they could get home. Hermione hoped he’d be around more now that she was home.

“Yes.” Harry paused, “Hermione, I said he could bring a date.”

“I know.” Hermione paused, letting Petra help her find her way through another petticoat. Hermione wiggled as the fabric fell over her torso. She spoke through the fabric, “Who is she? An auror?”

“He’s bringing Lavender.” Harry informed her, as the petticoat fell into place. “And I tried to suggest...”

He glanced at Petra, and Hermione understood his hesitation. It wasn’t right to talk about personal things. Petra wasn’t a lamppost, and she deserved a professional working environment. Then again, maybe Harry should not have been here at all. Hermione hoped Petra had not been made uncomfortable by his arrival.

“Harry, why shouldn’t he bring her?” Hermione watched as Petra left the room. She was likely going to come back with her dress, but everyone knew why she was leaving, and pulling the door behind her as she went.

Harry lowered his voice. “She’ll gossip about the Foundry.”

Hermione did not talk about her home, and neither did Harry. For all anyone knew, their home could be a two-up, two-down, with a bathroom on the back.

“I lived with her for eight years.” Hermione reminded him, “I’m not at all worried. She gossips, but it’s never cruel.”

Hermione paused, noting the look on Harry’s face, “Well, not anymore. And if I ask her not to say anything, she won’t.”

Harry frowned, “Since when is she your friend?”

“Since I realized that, after living with her for so long, that I actually miss her snoring.”
Harry laughed, and went to get her parents. Hermione, in his absence, finished dressing, and let Petra torture her within an inch of her life to get her hair to look as near as perfect as possible.

Lavender might not gossip, but she might tell a few friends, and Hermione wanted her to have something nice to take back with her. It was worth being held up by boning and silk, and not having room for dinner between her compressed innards.

Hermione reflected, once her guests had arrived, and that had gone into dinner that Remus and Sirius made quite the dashing couple, but it was Teddy who stole the show. He clambered up Hermione’s body the second he stepped from the floo, and refused to be parted from her.

Hermione greeted her few guests with Edward Remus Lupin upon her hip. It was not an easy thing in this corset, but his small dress robes and his comforting hug made her feel, and look, far better than she had, at least in her own estimation. Teddy Bear gave her confidence, and an ease of movement she might not have had without him to hold.

Naturally, of course, Fella had outdone herself. There was a candle illuminated dinner, featuring hearty foods that were arranged to their greatest compliment. Hermione didn’t have the room to eat it, but she knew leftovers would be grand. Lav tucked in, and made no bones about it. Hermione blessed her for it.

When the meal was finished, the table was cleared in an instant. They had dined at a suitably sized round table for a reason. A red taper appeared at each place, with a larger red taper candle in the middle of the table where the candles for the meal had once sat, which was surrounded by garlands.

The room went totally dark as the countless dining candles went out in the space of a single spell. Teddy clapped with glee, and Hermione saw his hair turn neon.

Hermione, next to her, felt Harry take a long match. There were some things that could not be done magically, and this was one of them. A person had to put effort into the things they were symbolizing, both physically and mentally. They sat in quiet reflection for a long moment.

Striking the match, he lit the candle in front of him, and stated, “Kindle the Light of Peace.”

He tipped his candle towards his right, to Ron, who met his taper to Harry’s, and said, “Kindle the light of Love.”

Ron’s candle met his Lavender’s in the same fashion, who said, “Kindle the Light of Joy.” The light grew again as the chain of candles began to resemble an arc that would complete part of the circle.

Lavender met Mum in the middle, with her graceful movements, and Mum’s surgical precision. Though she could not really see it, she knew that, between the two women, the movement would be fluid and artful. Mum’s own flame flickered and grew strong as she spoke the words Sirius had told her, “Kindle the light of Hope.”

In turn, Mum met Dad in the middle. As his own candle lit, Dad added, “Kindle the light of Patience.”

The circle entered its final arc when Remus added, “Kindle the light of Kindness.” Teddy, who was secure in his Papa’s lap for this portion of the evening, repeated the fruit of the Spirit with the joy of a toddler.

With a smile in his voice, Sirius spoke, “Kindle the light of self-control.” He ran his hand over
Remus’s upturned palm on the table before leaning his candle over to Hermione.

She gripped her taper carefully and stuck her wick to the flame. Fire jumped, and her candle was lit. Finally, Hermione added, “Kindle the light of goodness.”

As a group, they stood and brought their candles to the center of the table. Hermione couldn’t lean in her corset very well, and ended up needing to put a palm on the table. Each separate flame came together to light the large taper in the center of the table.

After Harry helped her stand upright with a gentle hand on her elbow, Hermione spoke, hopeful that she had memorized this ritual properly, “Rejoice! Rejoice in anticipation of the Light in the Darkness. Rejoice, and go forth, a light unto the world.”

“Rejoice!” They called.

“Rejoice in unity.” Hermione answered.

“Rejoice!” They replied.

Hermione gripped her candle carefully. “Rejoice in hope.”

“Rejoice!” They called, again.

“Rejoice, and go confidently forward, knowing that the Light within you can never be snuffed out.” Hermione repeated from the memory of writing this portion herself, as each woman might, “The light within you, as these candles, is the light by which you thrive in the dark of winter.”

“Rejoice!” They called, ending the chant, “Rejoice and let light beget light!”

Carrying their candles, the group gathered around Hermione, who passed her candle to Harry, and took the largest taper. In a stately fashion, meant to match the internal reflection they were supposed to be doing, led the group outside. On the front lawn, there rested a large bonfire, ready to be lit, and ready, in turn, to light the Yule log that would burn in the hearth at least until the New Year. Hermione felt a warming charm fall around her as she carefully led her way down the stone stairs.

She looked back quickly to see Ron holding his wand in his hand gently. He pointed at Harry, who was also pointing back at Ron.

Hermione tried not to laugh, and, thankfully, succeeded.

Hermione was glad that the timing had worked out. As they lit the bonfire, the first of St. Lucy’s Lights would be streaking across the sky. Approaching the big pile of sticks, bedecked with herbs and garlands that would burn safely, they formed a circle around the bonfire. There was a small table near the bonfire, holding her ceremonial torch, first used at their bonding.

Harry cast the circle with some amount of ceremony, and, with Sirius’s support, led them in a song. It was in Latin, though Hermione could not help but translate it as best she could, singing the Latin, “Lux, ecce surgit aurea/pallens facessat caecitas/quae nosmet in praeceps diu/errore traxit devio.”

As they sang, Hermione lit the bundle of kindling with the large taper, and watched as the sky, illuminated by the movement of the Geminids, further formalized the fire that grew along the long sticks and branches that were bunched together. She stood for a long moment, listening to their voices join together in song as the fire consumed the branches. There was something magical,
magical beyond what flowed in her veins, in this moment of unity.

As Harry and Sirius began the second hymn, Hermione carefully took the torch from the table, and bent to light her torch from the fire. As the torch lit, the words Hermione sang seemed most fitting, though they were in Latin, “Thou drivest darksome night away; We know thee as the Light of light, Illuminating mortal sight.”

Hermione led the group back inside, careful not to let her torch fall or to catch anything on fire. The song, sung with much detail, ended just as she lit the the yule log in the fireplace in the Great Hall. Hermione saw that Teddy was making a dash for it, and grabbed him before he could fall into the fire.

He hollered in protest, but did not deter the final “Amen” in any way. Teddy in her arms, Hermione surveyed the fire of her hearth, and the people gathered around it, and was glad.

Lavender had been on her best behavior all night. Hermione knew she was itching, just itching, to say something to her hostess. Hermione felt slightly on edge, as she knew she could no longer politely avoid the conversation she knew was coming.

Mum swanned away to go get more cake, because she could eat and breathe without restriction in her muggle gown, and Hermione saw no escape. Running away, when it looked like running away, was not an option, not in her own house. She was dying to go over and toast things with Teddy, but Padfoot and Moony seemed to be having a moment.

Lavender looked beautiful in her deep purple robes. Somehow, everything she wore, she wore to perfection. Hermione, no matter the effort she put into things, felt like a lump in fine cloth next to her.

“Hermione!” Her former roommate gushed, “Your mother was telling me all about muggle cosmetics. I’ve always wanted to, and suggested that we might take a shopping day.”

Hermione blinked. “Well--”

“But really, Hermione, I don’t want to talk about cosmetics.” Lavender said, “It’s an ice breaker, but I don’t think it worked with you. I should have read something.”

“Lavender.” Hermione cut in, “You don’t need to be polite to me. It’s strange.”

“And rather uncomfortable, yes.” She agreed, “I have a question. It’s very serious.”

“Okay...” Hermione braced herself.

“I really need to know where you got those robes.” Lavender said. “If you’d dressed half as well at school as you do at home, Pansy would have been knocked down a few pegs ages ago.”

Hermione burst out laughing. It was all she could do to quell it when people started looking her way. Hermione was in the Twilight zone. “Maybe we’d have gotten points for it.”

Lavender smiled. “Good comportment is part of the rules.”

“I know.” Hermione agreed, “You know, Lav...” She paused, “If you promise we can stop at the bookstore, I’d be happy to go with you to any store you’d like.”
“Really?” Her former roommate asked, “I did foresee a trip into dangerous territory, so perhaps this is it.”

Rather than making her feelings about divination known again, Hermione merely agreed. Ron was looking over at them, and when Hermione caught his gaze and smiled, his answering smile swallowed up his whole face.

Really, Miss Brown wasn’t so horrible. She was happy and gushing and emotional, but the traits that annoyed Hermione were the very things that balanced Ron’s own natural melancholy.

For their sakes, Hermione would brave even Selfridges.

She would do anything for her boys.

Just out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry wink at her.

She smiled back, knowing that in a moment, she would excuse herself from Lavender, and go back to where she most wanted to be, amid the people who loved her most, and whom she loved. It might be St. Lucy’s Day, and the Old Solstice, but, all told, her world seemed fairly bright.

One ritual down.

About another dozen to go.

But first, a cup of chocolate.

Chapter End Notes

Keeping the flame in the Chapel alive is a nod to Yule. Saturnalia can be read about here. More details as they come.

Yes, St. Lucy's day was once on the Winter Solstice, before the calendars changed. See here and here and here.

I have adapted this fact to suit my own purposes, using the showers. Learn more here. Also here and here.

The 'Kindle the Light ritual came from here. I added fruits of the spirit, and built the Yule log and candles ceremony based of Vestal ceremonies and this site.

The first hymn can be heard in English Link text here. The background info can be found on this site.

The second hymn can be heard, in Church Latin, here and in English, with background info here.
She felt as though she had been there, on that bench, for an eternity. For an infinity of passion can be contained in one minute, like a crowd in a small space.

Chapter Summary

“And she felt as though she had been there, on that bench, for an eternity. For an infinity of passion can be contained in one minute, like a crowd in a small space.” — Madame Bovary

Or

“Every moment is a moment of decision, and every moment turns us inexorably in the direction of the rest of our lives.”
— Mary Balogh,

Or

The last four months, in the space of time it takes to brew a potion.

Chapter Notes

So the layout of this chapter is unorthodox and choppy. It's meant to be that way, as I hope you will understand at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hermione was the brightest witch of her age, by all accounts, even those who were still lambasting her in the press. And yet, it was the Daily Prophet that was telling her things she should have figured for herself days ago. She did not like figuring out things about her own life with that damn waste of parchment as the impetus. And yet, the headline stopped her cold.

She had gone shopping with Hannah yesterday. The note had been an earnest plea for company Christmas shopping, and Hermione had been happy to accept via her DA coin. They'd met at the Leaky, and spent the day rushing about London. With the help of magic, they'd visited Honeyjams, Floris, New Look, a few bookstores, among others, one of which had been a tiny upscale baby store.

Hannah, come the summer, was going to be an aunt. After the loss of her mother, and her sister’s disability, the baby was a very welcome bright spot on the family’s horizon. Hermione found wishing and hoping with all of her might that Baby Abbott-Church would be here without fuss. She knew how desperately Hannah’s entire family wanted that baby. Hannah had already told her that, if the baby was a girl, it would be named for her mother.

Right now, though Hermione was gathering ingrients quickly and preciously for her potion. She selected her elements with the careful ease of one who knew how to make this potion with her
hands tied behind her back, and with the tensity and hesitation of the person who would be cutting her own body to use the potion.

Hermione's hands shook, as she set down her gathered ingredients in the upstairs lab at the Foundry. She'd all but snuck out of the pantry, avoiding Fella’s gaze. Now in the lab, Hermione relaxed. She carefully collected a glass cauldron, and set it over the burner, regulating it with the twist of the knob. The gas clicked on with a hiss, echoing in the wide silence.

The silence around her put Hermione in mind of a tomb. Hermione realized she had not planned this well, at all. She should have waited for Harry to finish whatever he was doing with Remus. She stared back at the people staring at her in the common room, her heart pounding so rapidly in her chest that it had to be both visible and audible. Hermione nervously went to tuck hair behind her ear, only to recall upon touching her ear that her hair was covered.

A loud yowl from Crookshanks in his case broke the silence. Hermione bent and gently freed him from the confines of his travel case. He bounded towards the stairs of the girl’s dorm. Hermione heard the fire crackle. She glanced down, and saw the papers everywhere. In the two days since their marriage, the press had gone wild. The Quibbler, in Luna’s absence, had also run a story. Or three, Hermione noted, looking at the different covers.

“Hello, everyone.” Hermione ventured, “It’s crowded in here for a Hogsmeade weekend.” Hermione felt the weight of all of the unanswered owls in her bag.

Hermione looked around, hoping for some sort of reaction from someone. Finally, Neville spoke, “Lots of homework, I think. Do you have yours done? I could use some help on my potions essay.”

“Oh, I’d be glad to help.” Hermione replied, thankful to him yet again, “Let’s grab a table. I recently read--”

The students gathered around exploding snap and chess boards went back to their games. The common room, especailly in the lower years, now seemed happy to go on about their lives. If Longbottom was asking Granger for help in Potions, how different could things possibly be?

Hermione inwardly sighed, and approached Neville with a smile. He knew full well what he had done for her just now. Without worrying about her trunk, because she had no idea where their new rooms were, Hermione found an unused work table, and began to ask Neville where he was on his progress.

Just as she had picked up his parchment, the two girls that had been staring at her wordlessly, finally approached. Hermione was happy to get this over with, and wanted it behind her.

She smiled tightly in greeting, but did not Lavender laughed, “Oh, Hermione!” She twittered, “How did you get everything to prank us? I knew it had to be a prank or a ploy.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Hermione’s voice was cool. “Neville, do you have an extra quill?”

“Yes, Hermione.” He passed the quill over carefully, and Hermione began to make notes in the margins, mostly for revision.

“I don’t think you’re really married, Hermione.” Lavender asserted, “It makes no sense. Everyone knows Harry’s going to get back together with Ginny.”

Hermione gripped her quill, but otherwise said or did nothing that might give them satisfaction.
“Funny.” Neville interjected, “If he were with Ginny, he’d be dead, Lavender. They had the confarreatio. I was there. So was Ron.”

Lavender’s expression shifted from smug looking to downright confused. Hermione did not spare her another look. The war had changed them both, but Hermione knew how easy it was to fall back into old patterns you’d disavowed when conflict came into the picture.

Neville’s words had hit home, then. No pureblood, no wizard raised by Augusta Longbottom, would invoke the name of the confarreatio without it being true. It was an old superstition, but the rites used to bind people were rarely named, as they were considered sacred, and nothing to invoke casually, even in the discussion of it. Hermione saw shock flicker over Lavender’s face, and wondered at her thoughts. Nothing shocked her. She was too happy and cheery to let things sink in, lest the mar her joy.

Parvati looked smug, as she looked down her nose at her former roommate. “Well, my mum said the papers were rubbish because it doesn’t work with muggleborns.”

“Magic is magic.” Hermione noted, not allowing herself to be hurt by this sudden venom from a girl she had previously considered mild mannered.

“Parvati, I’ve never before raised my voice to a woman, but I’m considering it.” Neville informed her, leading Hermione’s suspicions to be confirmed. She and Harry were the talk of the tower, and had been for days. “Stop spewing ignorance and go read your tea-leaves.”

To cover her blush, Hermione looked down at Neville’s notes. “Well, when considering dicing, the trick is to…”

Hermione made sure her cauldron was even over the magical burner, and took the first root from the tray of ingredients she’d taken so as to employ mies un place. It was green and pungent. Hermione drew her sharp knife across the leaves at an angle, expressing every bit of liquid with the sharp edge of her knife.

"And so, My Lords, I present to you irrefutable evidence regarding the legality of this law." Harry concluded, "We cannot allow this gross abuse of power to pass by us uncontested. To do so undermines the very values upon which our society is founded."

Harry returned to his seat just as the Wizards’ Council chambers deep below the Lords erupted in chaos. Harry's first official act as holder of his hereditary seat had been to present Hermione's case to the other twenty-some men and women in the chamber. Harry had only hoped that he'd done Hermione's weeks of work justice.

She had been ecstatic on the day of her discovery. It had been the final point she’d needed to find to really pull together a litany of objections and conflicting statutes on something that outweighed the SoS. They’d spent the next two days going over her research, and further weeks plotting and planning.

Harry only hoped he'd done her efforts justice in being a mouthpiece.

He snuck a look up into the gallery. There, on the bench that ran along the balcony, sat Hermione. She smiled.

Harry took some comfort in that gesture as he looked around. Lords and Ladies were yelling out
their opinions one on top of another, vying for the floor.

In the midst of this chaos, Sirius patted him on the shoulder, and spoke in an undertone, "She did good, Prongslet, and so did you." Sirius observed, "I hope you can think on your feet."

Sirius stood, "My Lords will surely recognize the efforts that have gone into our newest member's legislation."

Bulstrode shouted, "The Lord from Mayfair will certainly recognize that any objections to this law must be understood as objections to the post-war recovery."

Sirius stood his ground. "The criminal code is the very foundation of our society."

"Lo, this is not so." A voice called out, "The criminal code guides behaviors in the context of a society based on the statutes. The Statue must be held as sacred. No magical being on in these British Isles can deny our rapidly dwindling population."

"Stable marriages must be created." Another voice cried out, "We must create a community in which children are wanted, fed, loved, cared for, not just created for the sake of greater intakes at Hogwarts come eleven years."

"We cannot trust just anyone to raise a child properly." Burke called, "They must be guided. Laws must be put into place to bring a child up properly, especially in the cases of muggleborn mothers. These girls need direction! This law will provide that input."

Sirius unfolded himself from his chair, "Not only does My Lord Burke’s rhetoric stink of sexism and classism, he also forgets that this law as is it written harms witches and wizards who are of non-magical parentage."

"The Most Noble Lord Black cannot claim personal affront to a simple statement of facts." Burke returned. "Be seated, do. We must understand that we ourselves are at risk. To pretend otherwise is absurd. Action must be taken."

Harry shot to his feet, "Action must be taken, I agree."

Heads recoiled.

Harry used their surprise to move in for the kill. "We must educate the whole of the wizarding community about marital customs. We must strike, but never react. If given the chance, they’ll see..."

Lord Travers, brother to the Death Eater rotting in Azkaban called, "Our young lord speaks with the idealism of youth."

Chuckles spread through the chamber.

"I speak with the full and, yes, recent knowledge that our most sacred rights are just that, a sacred gift." Harry forced himself not to look up at the balcony, "If we can make it known to the ministry that..."

"We are Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Wizards’ Council." Here Lord Flint called out, "We do not scrape and supplicate to Her Majesty’s Minister for Magic."

"The Lord acts as though I have no experience with the Ministry. Such an assertion is contrary to facts." Harry exhaled, and continued, "I move forward to suggest we educate the wizarding public."
“They will not back a law they know contrary to their natures.”

“The letter of discontent must be voted upon first.” Sirius called out, “Table! I move to table the letter of discontent as proposed by the Gentleman in the blue robes.”

“Not Content!” Harry called out, recognizing this as last ditch effort to keep Harry’s objections in the center of the agenda.

Longbottom, Prewitt, Weasley, Yaxley and Abbott followed suit, along with a few other formerly dark houses like Yaxley. It seemed a few pureblood families did not want to risk their blood being tainted, even now.

“Not content!” Cried Sirius, “Not content!”

Still, such a minority of the twenty-eight could not stop the motion from carrying.

Sirius stood again, “I move that the young lord who has spoken with such a passionate understanding of this matter draft the letter of opposition, to be reviewed next we must.”

Harry blanched slightly as the roar of the contents all around him filled the chamber. For some reason, Sirius had made Harry the fall guy.

Again.

When Sirius sat, he was wearing his Padfoot grin.

After some moments of thought, Harry realized just who Sirius wanted writing the letter of discontent. It was certainly not Harry.

He glanced up at the balcony. The witch in the grey robes already had a bit of parchment balanced on her lap and a quill in her hand.

Hermione watched as the leaves and their extracts wilted when they came into contact with the heat of her glass cauldron. Hermione pushed up the sleeves of her thick jumper.

After swinging the burner away, Hermione diced some dried herbs, slicing carefully along the diagonal. She carefully put the leaves into the cauldron, stirring 280 times clockwise, adding moon purified water at three equal intervals.

"Harry!" Hermione called, rushing down the steps of Hogwarts. The quidditch pitch had been a welcome respite for him, she knew, but she could not delay this announcement, not when it had been personally delivered by elf. "There is an official writ here. We are summoned to the Wizengamot."

"We're not going." Harry's jaw was painfully set. "You're not at their beck and call. And neither am I. If they've questions, they can arrange a meeting or come to my chambers. I've homework."

"No." Hermione insisted. "We're going. We're going to play nice, but give them nothing. Nothing. And then..."

"It will look to everyone as though we might be conceding." Harry stated, wondering, "What good might that do?"

"It's not about what good it might do now." Hermione smiled, “It’s about how we can spin it later.”
“You, carissima mi, are a scary witch.” He smiled, kissing her cheek, “Brilliant, but scary.”

“Aren’t I though?” Hermione grinned, leaning into his frame.

Hermione finished adding the water at three minute intervals, and stared into the mucky color of the potion. It had waited the requisite forty seconds, and stirred it three times anti-clockwise. Satisfied with her progress so far, Hermione gathered her next ingredient. She took up the stems of the flowers, separated them out into bunches, and put the first batch into her mortar and pestle. She began to grind the flower stems to a fine paste. One, two, three, four, five...

“Lady Potter!” Fudge’s favorite undersecretary hooted, “I know you wrote this letter! You have interfered with politics of which you have no direct knowledge.”

That toady soulless being sat slightly to the left at the wide table running along the wall. Behind them, a portrait of Merlin and Arthur stared, unmoving, down at them. This meeting was evidently so secret that even portraits were frozen. Several other faces stared at out them.

“I must not tell lies, Secretary.” Hermione returned, “I did not write out the letter of dissent.”

Umbridge colored, “Indeed, you did, ma’am. Indeed you did.” Hermione thought she might have a stroke, she was so red in the face, “I know full well your writing style. It is clear that you are still, despite my best efforts, a no—“

“You will not insult her, Madam.” Harry insisted, “File charges on this line of inquiry, or move on to the next point.”

Dolores glared, “I am not finished, Potter.”

“Finish.” Harry snapped, “Or name your second, it’s all the same to me.”

Umbridge gasped, laying her fleshy hand against the cavern where a heart would be in most humanoid beings, “You would not duel a lady.”

“Now, let’s not be hasty.” Yet another lady, a distant relative of the Bones family, hastened. Her name, Hermione thought, was McKinnon.

“Shacklebolt, this is absurd. The letter was published in my name, under the auspices of the WC. The Wizingamot has no jurisdiction there.” Harry glanced at Umbridge as he spoke to the Acting Minister, “Why have you summoned us to a closed door meeting that puts me in mind of the, ah, inquisition?”

“You know full well that you were never meant to be matched.” Shacklebolt revealed, “We must ask you to name your source.”

Harry insisted, privately glad that the letter had been burned at Remus’s behest.”My sources are my own.”

“There is a leak!” Shacklebolt stood, “Someone in my government sought you out and warned you. I don’t care why, but I do care about the who. I’ve worked too long and too hard to rebuild, and I won’t have rats in my building.”

“If you were truly rebuilding,” Hermione offered, “There would be no need to spin things, or to worry about leaks. Our government is meant to be transparent.”
“Internal affairs must stay internal.” McKinnon insisted, “We may not all agree with the law, but we all support its end goals.”

“The ends, your ladyship, do not justify the means.” Hermione insisted, “Nevertheless, I understand your concern, and commend your willingness to share your opinion.”

“The source of the letter is unknown to me.” Harry revealed, as it was true.

“Potter!” Umbridge croaked, “We will be dosing you with—“

“We cannot allow that.” Hastings, a more liberal member on the tribunal broke in, “We are all gentleman here.”

Harry couldn’t be dosed with any potion that compelled his testimony. As a hereditary member of the WC, to do so was a slap in the face. It was to call into question his position and his integrity.

Shacklebolt sighed, “You must be frank, Harry. We cannot allow you to skate above the law on your name and your fame.”

“We were comrades in arms, Kingsley.” Harry stood, “And I was quite prepared to work with you, but I see now that this has changed you. I will not allow it to change me.”

Hermione dropped the last of the stems into her cauldron, and turned to the petals, slowly dropping them one by one into the boiling brew. The first pink petal landed in the center of the bubbles, and a pungent aroma hit Hermione’s nose. She added the next petal, thinking of the moment she’d placed this flower into the vase.

Hermione stuck the flower into the vase, on one of her rare Saturdays home. The floo opened, and Augusta stepped out of the fireplace.

She stopped striding across the hall when she spotted Hermione, just stepping forward to greet her. “How dare you!”

“Excuse me?” Hermione asked, glancing up at the portraits who were suddenly crowded with new beings as the news of an impending disagreement spread.

“Do not stand there, and lie to me.” Augusta’s rage was soft, so soft, that Hermione knew it was deadly. “You invoked one of our most sacred rites to outwit the Ministry? Are there no limits to your madness or your stupidity?”

Hermione stood there, well aware Augusta had to say her piece.

“And worse still, you involved me in it. You asked me to stand there, to bless your union with my own, without my informed consent.” Augusta’s words were like a whip, “I laid my most sacred bond at your feet, and you ran roughshod over it. I let my Neville bless you, and you laughed behind your hands. You have turned my duty into a farce.”

“Augusta.” Hermione knew Augusta would understand, if she could just get a word in edgewise. Water dripped on the floor as Hermione held the flowers, uncaring of her previous task.

“I have come to inform you that you are struck from every possible hostess list.” Augusta’s edict was laid down without flinching. Hermione knew that to Augusta, this was the worst possible punishment any woman might face, “You will be removed from the Register. Every door in good
society will be closed to you.”

Augusta continued on, as though Hermione was too stupid to understand what she was saying, what such actions would mean for the rest of her life, “You will be in disgrace. And you have earned every bit of it, and more. You and that feckless boy.”

“Augusta, do listen.” Hermione smiled. She knew she could explain things to Augusta.

“Was any of it real? Was I the only fool in the room not to know?” Augusta sniffed, “I do not know why I came, except to tell you that you are not welcome at my upcoming card party, nor to our weekly game, and to force you to face the consequences of your actions. You, in so cunningly saving yourself, have turned me into a joke. You bear the shame of this, Hermione, because the joke’s on you.”

This statement surprised Hermione out of her planned speech, “Excuse me?”

“I could have told you that the law could have been overturned with only a few arguments, had you bothered to ask, to involve me, before using me.” Augusta smiled, “The law violates the criminal code, Hermione.”

Hermione swallowed. “I know.”

This revelation quite knocked the wind out of the matron’s sails. She twisted the gloves in her hand, “Well, then—I…”

“I can only tell you that I regret not letting you in.” Hermione apologized, “But you were the only one who…gave me the space to feel like my marriage was for all the right reasons. You were the only person who, in believing in what you saw, helped me to see things I didn’t believe could be true.”

Hermione would always owe Augusta a debt of gratitude for her actions, for her faith. That faith had been the moment that pushed Hermione to confront her own feelings, and had given her the courage to reach out to Harry.

Augusta blinked, “What are you saying?”

“You were the reason I realized I loved him.” Hermione remembered that pain with a certain fondness now, for it had helped her to grow. “Your support, your actions, helped me to be brave and face the truth.”

Augusta summoned a chair from along the wall, and sank down into it. Her spine did not meet the back, naturally, and her ankles crossed effortlessly. “Do you mean to tell me that your marriage is not a farce?”

“At the start of our engagement we agreed that it would be, but that lasted all of ten minutes.” Hermione revealed.

“What changed it?” Now that her worst fears had been dispelled, Augusta was clearly settling in for a good visit, even if it was in the Great Hall.

“Well.” Hermione grinned, sniffing the bloom in her grasp. “Did anyone ever tell you what makes an engagement legal?”

Augusta’s grin revealed the direction of her thoughts. “Ah, so Harry…”
Hermione glanced away, feeling sly now that she was the one to surprise Augusta. “Well, I’ve always been a stickler for the rules, you know.”

The look on Augusta’s face was priceless, and well worth the dressing down.

Hermione finished adding the petals. They sank to the bottom of the smooth liquid, and Hermione continued to stir. She stirred in a figure eight motion until all of the bits of petals integrated into the potion. Carefully, she put the stirrer on the rest.

Hermione took the sterile kit, and, modeling herself after her own mother, spread the sterile cloth over the work table, and cast a quick spell to fully sterilize the instrument. Taking it, carefully, she sliced a knick into her palm.

Hermione watched as the blood rose to the surface.

“Lady Potter, you cannot address the assembly.”

“I am addressing the courts, as is my right.”

The blood welled on her upturned palm.

“In closing, I have a heard from a well respected panel of international leaders that they are likely and willing to sanction magical UK for violations of international statutes.”

“We thank you, Lady Potter, for addressing the joint assembly.”

Hermione turned her palm over the beaker.

“Recent reports have suggested that this law was the brain child of Madam Umbridge. She is facing a ministry inquisition for her lack of research. Millions of galleons, as per Lady Potter’s report, of postwar monies have been wasted on the implementation of a baseless law.”

The blood dripped, one drop, two drops, three drops, into the beaker.

“According to a new survey 4 in 5 members of the magical community object to the law now that the full bill has been released to the public.”

Hermione did not heal her cut. Instead, she merely charmed a bit of cotton with a sticking charm, and placed it on the cut.

“There are ongoing riots in muggle London as more details of the Marriage Law come forward. Officials are calling these protests a danger to our very secrecy. Aurors were dispatched to control crowds and manage muggles.”

Using a dropper, Hermione measured the needed amount of her own blood.

“Secretary Umbridge is not to stand trial for at least a year. Harry, Duke of Potter, has yet to release a statement regarding the validity of his marriage. Sources close to the couple have said nothing publicly. Still it remains questionable, given that their marriage was the only union to be put into place under the law.”

She checked the amount of blood in the dropped before holding it over the cooling potion. Hermione released one drop.

“Hermione, I love you.”
The second drop fell just as quickly as the first.

“I heard she’s having Voldemort’s baby.”

The third drop rolled down the stopper and fell off of the tip like a tear.

“Sources indicate that Harry Potter is standing by his marital vows. He rebuked a reporter from our own station when asked about the subject during a committee meeting for the Magical Creatures Committee. Interestingly, that same day, he spotted in muggle London with the Granger family.”

The drop of her blood hit the surface of the potion, and sank to the bottom.

Hermione shut her eyes.

2:00

Silence echoed in the room around them. Ginny’s eyes burned into her face. “I wish you very happy.” Hermione had replied with her thanks, and Ginny returned, “My mother raised a witch of valor. Just stay away from me, and we’ll be fine. Just stay away.”

1:58

“Don’t you see, Harry, I’m damned if I do, and damned if I don’t! I’m fighting for what is right, and what do I get? Hexes in the mail.”

1:55

Hermione scrubbed at her face as she hid in the potions supply closet. One nasty word no longer had the power to hurt her. She had learned to let go of mudblood, let it roll off her back. She could let go of this word, too. Still, when Harry had kissed her that night, she’d pulled away. When she’d closed her eyes that night, the word had echoed in her mind.

The next morning at breakfast, she’d gotten an owl, unmarked, with one word on it. Whore.

1:53

“Breaking news: we sent our own Roxane Hewitt over to the registry office. After weeks of requests, we have for you the first public copy of the Potter ducenda. One clause seems relevant. The Potter wedding bands, made from platinum from one of the Potter vaults, are to be melted down at the end of the marriage. What can we make of that wording? Send your feedback by Floo to the Wireless Studio, North London.”

1:52

“Hermione, it doesn’t matter what they think or they say. Haven’t you always said that to me? Now I’m saying it to you.” Harry whispered against her skin, “It all just goes away when it’s just you and me. That’s all that matters.”

1:48

Harry’s hands ghosted over her body. Hermione felt incandescent. When stars exploded behind her eyes, she believed him.
“Hermione, you will always have a friend in me, and in Neville. We love you. We’ll always stand by you. Come to dinner with me, please? You can come back to the library later.”

Back Room Votes

By Rita Skeeter

“...The Marriage Law faces a revote tomorrow in a joint session of the WC and the Wizingamot. Both houses are expected to hold a closed door session. Several members of the WC have cleared their public schedules for a full two days. No one responded to the Daily Prophet’s request for comments. When pressed as he was exiting a bistro with Lady Hannah Abbott, Neville Longbottom, Lord Valley, only responded that he would devote as much time as required to “do [his] duty by the people, and uphold the values instilled in him by his family and his country.” A very politic response, but not one given to much information...”

Hermione found herself standing stock still as she. She’d polyjuiced herself, using the hair of a muggle woman she’d met but once. Hermione had spelled a few pounds in her purse after picking the stray hair off of her sweater in Dublin. She waited with the crowd, amid the groups of protestors, those who thought the law should continue because of the money and manpower that had been put out, and those who wanted the law struck down and Kingsley impeached. He’d trusted the wrong person. Hermione did not know how she felt about him. In that moment, more than anything, she mourned their friendship.

“We interrupt your regularly scheduled hour of HouseWitch Hints to inform you that the Marriage Law, after nearly 18 hours of closed debate, and seven ballots, has been defeated. The prospective sanctions of our government by the ICW have swayed all but the most stalwart of supporters. We will update you.”

Hermione stayed polyjuiced until the rioting broke out as people screamed in the streets, and the aurors came out. Hermione saw Ron in the crowd, and sprinted away just as she threw a shield in his direction, blocking a stinging hex from hitting him. As she ran, she thought she saw Ron turn around and yell her name. It was impossible to know, though, as many people were doing just the same. When Harry came home two hours later, Hermione smiled. He’d never known where she’d been. They never talked about the small crowd burning her in effigy. His arms had been tight around her that night, even in sleep.

The Marriage Worth Millions

By Rita Skeeter

As the marriage of Harry and Hermione Potter was the only marriage to be carried out by the law, its total cost can be estimated to £34 million. Not many brides can dream of that costly a wedding, now can they?
“In our last show, legal experts weighed in about the recovery from this law. Our eye has been blackened in the face of the world. We are facing political distrust from every ally, even the American government. Our special relationship seems to have chilled. The United States Secretary of Magical Affairs has distanced herself politically from our joint efforts.”

What say you, readers of Witch Weekly? Is Hermione destined to be Duchess? Or will everyone’s favorite Man Who Conquered soon be back on the market, now with an ancient title to recommend him? In last week’s poll, 87% of people questioned in Diagon Alley agreed that they believe the marriage to be a sham. 92% worried that the marriage was dissolved with the repeal of the law.

“Hermione, love.” Mum pushed back her uncovered hair, “You’ve got to eat something.”

Hermione heard the Floo open, and yet another howler drop through. The wards weren’t strong enough here. Hermione pulled the pillow over her head to drown out the screaming.

“I don’t really care if you don’t agree, ‘Mione.” Ron repeated, “Harry’s got to do something. If you were my wife…” He blinked, “I would have been in enough duels now to settle the matter with blood. You can’t ask him to stay silent. Not anymore. He loves you, and it’s killing him to pretend what people say doesn’t warrant comment.”

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

POTTER MARRIAGE LEGAL

A legal panel has reviewed all relevant documentation and found the marriage of Harry James and Hermione Jane of Potter to be completely legal. The following summarizes their findings. Any and all relevant questions should be addressed to Rookwood and Rookwood, London.

“Today, dear listeners, we’re critiquing the fashion of Hermione, the Witch who Won. Since her marriage, she hasn’t been very visible to the public, but what we have seen of her suggests that she’s trying to erase her hardscrabble past with wizarding fashion. Witches in the know suggest that she has been frequenting the salon of Diana, whose name conjures up images of understated elegance. Of course, her attendance comes at a price few can afford.”

Hermione looked at the parchment handed back by Professor Sprout. Her flowery handwriting in the corner read, “E* though perhaps not up to your usual standards. I trust you are well.”

“Well, it’s my opinion that she’s smarter than all of us. She knew what she was doing.”
Harry chased Teddy over the lawns of Ebony Park, Teddy’s laughter floating over to her. Hermione breathed in, and counted the minutes until the next weekend would begin.

1:00

“Your Grace, you must eat. I can’t take these dresses in again.”

0:52

“‘Mione, I hate to quote George, but really, the kids at school are the idiots. You’ve a right to do whatever you want.” Ron shoveled in more food, “But I think you should tell Harry how much you hate it.”

0:48

“Oh God…” Mum muttered, “Can’t even go to Waitrose, my poor girl.” A camera flash went off, and Hermione knew that the desperate press had followed her to a predominantly muggle Crawley. Hermione only felt a slight satisfaction when her mother gave the man what for, knowing that even her mother’s defense of her would end up in the papers.

0:45

Harry’s face was bloodless with rage. “How dare they write any of this shit? How dare they!”

0:42

“Last week, Hermione Potter was seen in the muggle hometown of her muggle parents, carrying bags to the charity shop. Supposing His Grace cut off his spendthrift wife?”

0:39

“You know, Hermione.” Lavender was near tears, “The things they say about you aren’t true. You’re a good person, and you of all people deserve love. If you’ve found it, then be free. The cards are bright.”

0:35

Hermione glanced again at the History of Magic paper she’d written. The grade at the top read, “O-. Stick to the prompt, next time. Your lack of excess words was noted.”

0:32

Hermione let the crowd in the Great Hall swirl around her. She stared into space, wondering how she had woken up here, again, when she wished to be anywhere else. She hated her classes. She didn’t even care. Let Padma soak up the glory of her waning education. It mattered to her.

0:22

“My girl, you look peaky. Have some more tea. It’s your turn. Aces trump.”

0:19

Black Blasts Back

by Rita Skeeter
Sirius Orion Black, Lord Black, has recently drawn interest due to his impassioned defense of the former Hermione Granger. During his chambers hours, the period in which appointments may be made to visit with a member of the WC, he spoke in no uncertain terms about his experiences with the press. Rather than focusing on his conviction and exoneration, he strangely focused on the experiences of the wife of his Godson. Just how close are the families?

“Today’s news centers around the deadlock in the houses. Since the defeat of the Marriage Law, tensions have been high, and progress in post-war recovery is at an unprecedented stand still.”

“I don’t understand why you just don’t tell them to shove their broomsticks up—” Harry stopped at her hasty chastising look, “I’m just saying, Hermione, if anyone should go, it’s them. What did they write on that parchment you just got?”

That night, Hermione burned the parchment. She knew who was sending the notes. She burned them. Hermione knew that keeping calm and carrying on was the best way to handle things, but sometimes, sitting before the fire burning things long after Harry had fallen asleep in their school-issued suite of bedroom and sitting room with bath, Hermione wanted nothing more than to scream.

“Hermione, lamb. The best advice my grandmother ever gave me was to wear good stockings every day. It doesn’t matter what others try to do, as long as you feel good. Nothing helps a lady feel best like a good pair of fairy silk stockings. I know you’d like these. Look, look, they’re sustainably and ethically made.”

The parchment read, “O-.” There was a note underneath. McGonagall, who was still teaching transfiguration to the 8th years, “See me after class. Tea and cake.”

Hermione burrowed into Harry. Ron stood there until Hermione looped her arm around his neck and drew him closer. They stood there, finally, finally. Hermione felt some measure of peace. They knew the war she still fought, because they had fought it, too. They fought it still. Harry focused on plowing forward. Ron ran, building himself a new life. Hermione held the fight at bay, pushing them on with a smile, all the while know that the wolves still growled at their door.

His mouth on her body was electric. Hermione felt his arm over her waist, a band of corded muscles pressing her into the bed. The magic cracked the air around them, and a chunk of plaster by the fireplace shattered to the floor. Harry grinned against her as her fingers curled in his hair, and the sweat on her body sizzled in the magically charged air.

“I love you so much.”
“I shan’t lace you too tightly.”

The reason charms are not foolproof is because they are an act of will. If a witch were to use a charm, and want a different outcome in her heart of hearts, her own magic will at times override the charm in service to her greatest will. Do not use a charm.- EE, MD.

Hermione filed away the note with her research, glad that she had never given thought to using a charm. It explained the high rate of unplanned pregnancies before the widespread available of non-prescription potions, though.

“It’s so nice coming home to our own home. I—” Harry cleared his throat, “I had no idea it was possible to love another person as much as I love you. You taught me what love is, Hermione, from the second I met you. You still are.”

Page 36, diagram B.

Page 7, diagram A.

Harry’s laughter against her hair.

Her body slick against his.

Their hearts beating as one as the fire died out, and they fell into a sated sleep.

Teddy’s soft body was safely cradled in her arms after a long day playing at the Foundry. Hermione kissed the top of his head, sure that she could never let him out of her sight. She had looked away for a single moment, and his trousers were already short. No doubt Sirius would enjoy taking his son out for another shopping trip.

The bags from Floris, New Look, Paperchase, Honeyjam, and the magical and mundane sections of Hatchard’s were heavy in her arms as she and Hannah entered the tiny upscale baby shop. After leaving her bags with the shop assistant, Hermione admired the soft blankets and the tiny bonnets as she helped Hannah to pick out a gift.

The flash of the cameras from the windows had shaken Hannah, and they’d spent the afternoon talking about how certain Hermione was that the media wouldn’t touch the story. The shop assistant had closed the curtains within the second, well used to famous people, but quite unable to place this one or find anything out about a bushy haired woman.

Possible Potter Pregnancy?
by Rita Skeeter

The Duchess formerly known as Hermione Granger was spotted at an upscale muggle baby store. The pictures above show her admiring bonnets and clothing with her new girl friend Lady Hannah Abbott, long time companion of Lord Valley. An engagement is expected any day from the young couple, but the press is left wondering just what Lord Potter might expect under his Christmas tree, though this particular present is more likely to be a birthday gift.

0:02

Augusta shared a look with her mother that she hadn’t quite understood as the last of her roomy summer nightgowns had been packed away. Hermione understood her expression now. Like had found like.

0:01

Like had found like. Hermione pictured Harry’s quirky smile.

0:00

She opened her eyes.

The potion was blue.

Chapter End Notes

I know you've guessed what the potion is testing in her blood. A lot of the quotes are people or the Wizarding Wireless. I hope you can tell who is speaking without too much context, but let me know. I wrote this chapter months ago and have been nervous about it.

Now I hope we see why I had to introduce part of December before going back. The time was a factor.

Please do let me know your thoughts.

Also: blue doesn't necessarily mean one thing or another. That's to be discerned in the next chapter, which should be a few days. My new computer is set to come in within that span of time.

Thanks to my sister for allowing me to borrow a computer.
The greatest thing in family life is to take a hint when a hint is intended-and not to take a hint when a hint isn't intended.

Chapter Summary

"The greatest thing in family life is to take a hint when a hint is intended-and not to take a hint when a hint isn't intended."
Robert Frost

Or

"My mother did this for me." And the delayed gratitude will wash over her as it does each generation and she will make a Mental note to call me. And she will forget.

But I'll know, because I peeped it with Your God eyes."
-Tina Fey, A Mother's Prayer for Her Daughter

Or
In which Teddy wants a brother, and Remus says that Father Christmas won't be able to give him what he wants, because werewolves do not come with wombs, despite the porn on the internet, not that Remus tells his two-year old about porn. Teddy ignores him, because is confident that brothers come from unlikely sources, which Hermione and Ellen Brown know to be true, different chromosomes notwithstanding.

Chapter Notes

In which we get some much needed insight into Helen Granger and Harry Potter, though the eyes of a woman who loves them both dearly. In the same vein, we get some much needed insight into the childhood of Hermione Granger via two often overlooked sources.

Read that poem here. And sob.

And yes, I'm quasi-dating the story, and myself, though I reserve the right to play with anachronisms. For your listening pleasure: this, and

this

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione stared at the potion as it congealed on the worktable.

Blue. Blue meant that there were detectable levels of hCG in her blood.

Detectable levels of hCG in her blood meant that she was pregnant.

Blue. Blue meant she was pregnant.
According to her *Advanced Potions Vol. 2*, this shade of blue indicated at least eight weeks.

Hermione wished she had waited for Harry. She hadn’t been sure, and so she had run through the test mostly to give herself the satisfaction of proving the *Prophet* wrong. And yet, some part of her must have known that they had hit upon the truth. After all, hadn’t she cut her hand in the traditional place, the place that witches the world over looked upon as the first visible change their pregnancy would have upon their bodies?

It was a sacred thing. She would not have cut herself on the outer palm of her hand unless she had known the truth. She would have never allowed herself to potentially have a scar that meant nothing, not when her body was laced with them, each one telling its own story.

As she scrubbed down the cauldron, she wished she had waited for Harry. Charms only went so far in keeping the small cut dry in the water. She didn’t want to take that moment away from him, though. She thought it was a dumb tradition, and then had almost healed her own hand.

Then, unbidden, the memory of Tonks running her finger over an invisible divot in her hand that time and Remus’s magic had healed perfectly put paid to that idea, mostly because it was one of the few memories she had of Tonks and Remus referencing a tender moment. Their marriage had not been an easy one.

Hermione scrubbed her face in the lab’s sink, and wandered back down to her private sitting room. The first thing to do was find herself a healer. Hermione wasn’t stupid. She knew her body had been ravaged by war and stress. If she wanted to keep this baby, she needed to do everything she possibly could to give it a good start, and even then a successful pregnancy was still a statistical gamble. She couldn’t trust a soul at Mungo’s, and she didn’t know if a mundane doctor was in the baby’s best interests.

So, step one was finding a suitable medical professional.

This was going to be a medical nightmare. Hermione only had a vague idea of the consequences of the war, and she knew she was going to have to face that reality head on. Hermione knew Fella was going to monitor her diet for vitamins and minerals, and healers would want to put her on potions. It was something Hermione had strongly objected to, in the past, because she believed that she would survive, or not, on her own merit. She had not believed in wasting resources that could have helped others far worse off than she had been or presently was.

But now, now she knew she would stop at nothing to have this baby. She wanted it so much that the thought of not having it was suddenly and completely unfathomable. If she went back now, if she lost this child, there would always be that person missing from her life. Staunchly pro-choice, Hermione made her own choice, illogical as she knew it was. Sometimes, not being sensible seemed the only sensible thing. She knew it was the right one for her.

It was more than wanting it that drove her thoughts. She had always wanted to be a mother. But it was different, somehow, now. She found herself thinking of the specific clump of cells rapidly deciding inside her body even now, and wondered who they might be, if they would ever know how much she loved them. She found herself being foolish and thinking about governesses and the baby's primary educational plan and how she would manage their lessons, and how Teddy was going to have a baby to play with now, and how desperately she wanted Harry to want this baby for his own sake.

They hadn’t talked about starting a family so soon. Hermione had posited that they’d likely wait until they were finished with Uni. It hadn’t been what she’d wanted, but it had been sensible, most logical. Well. That couldn’t be their plan now, though Hermione knew that they could make this
work. Still, she knew they weren’t expecting this news. Hermione wanted to keep it to herself for a while, wanted to just be happy. She wanted to protect this child with everything inside of her.

That wasn’t fair. She would tell Harry as soon as he came home. Thankfully, today he had planning with Remus in the morning and office work at the WC in the afternoon. She didn’t have to worry about telling her husband he was going to be a father after he’d come home from school. That set Hermione’s mind at ease a little, even though she knew that this timing could not possibly be worse.

She wasn’t going to live her life in fear of the press. That way was madness. No. The day she gave them power over her choices was the day she abdicated her control over her own life.

Hermione got up from where she had been staring down at her normal abdomen on the sofa, and headed to library. There had to be a copy of What to Expect When You’re Magically Expecting or something somewhere in the library. Hermione found a few such books, and before she could stop and grab just one, she grabbed the entire lot, a book of blank parchment, and a handful of charmed and manual quills.

Hermione wasn’t a coward. She knew her marriage was stable. If they could handle people throwing rocks through the window of their townhouse in London with slurs painted on them, they could handle an unexpected pregnancy.

She stuck her fork into her rice. Fella thought rice was very modern. Hermione thought it was a calorie dense food that was vitamin enriched. “You were saying that you met with the Italian attache today?”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed, “This coming week is going to be completely full. I’m glad we’re on holiday now, though I won’t get much time off.”

“That’s probably better because your schedule will lighten when you start working with the kids.” Hermione ventured. “If you could make sure to clear an hour or two, though, it would mean a lot.”

“I won’t miss seeing your cousin, Hermione.” Harry promised her again, “Not even if I have to bring the Italian attache along with us.”

“I don’t think he’d want to go to the healer, Harry.” Hermione remarked, before she thought the better of it, “Best leave him safely at the WC.”

The cut on her hand ached.

Harry set down his pumpkin juice. “Is this a routine thing?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione returned, “I have no idea what I’m doing. I looked at the books this afternoon, and they all say something different, and even when I cross-checked them, they couldn’t reach a cohesive consensus. I’m scared I’m going to spend the rest of my life plowing through conflicting data and making choices on gut instinct while waking up every night at two in the morning, wondering if I made the right choice because the books have no answers, but their cautions are all to one extreme or the other.”

Harry stood, and came around the table, placing his napkin on his chair as he turned away from his seat. Hermione let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.
Really, she was glad he was closer. She had only meant to tell him this way because she hoped that, one day, somebody would want to see the memory of this moment, and Hermione wanted to give them a memory that was suitable for them to see. She wished she could find the right words.

Hermione stood, too. She really did want him to hold her. “Hermione…”

Hermione gave into the urge to rest against him, letting her senses fill with her awareness of him. In this moment, there was a rightness, a wholeness, that made the entire world make sense. So the timing wasn’t great. So what? They couldn’t get more married if they’d tried, Hermione wasn’t expected back at Hogwarts, and they were literally soul mates. They had money, and tons of help when it was needed, and she loved him and he loved her, and she loved their baby.

And yet, even though she knew in her heart without question that he would love their baby, she wasn’t quite sure he would be in love with the idea of said baby’s arrival. It wasn’t fair to assume things. This would have been so much if they’d had a discussion entitled, not What I Want to Do if I Get Unexpectedly Pregnant, but How Will You Feel if I Do? At least, Hermione thought, they were on the same page when it came to her options. It didn’t seem like enough.

“You’ve a right to feel whatever way you do. Just.” Hermione paused, looking up into Harry’s green eyes, “Just don’t say anything unless you’re absolutely sure you mean it. I want you to know your own mind, but I’m…” I’m trying to make a memory for a person that doesn’t exist, and I don’t think I could get your hasty words out of my mind.

Hermione stopped talking, because Harry’s eyes were full of something bright and happy she didn’t want to trivialize with something as banal as the feeling words she might use. Wordlessly, he caught her left hand from where it rested between them.

Before she could explain, his lips pressed against the small cut on her hand. A warmth spread on her hand. He was healing her, wordlessly, wandlessly, with just the brush of his lips against her body. Hermione laughed, and to her surprise, her laugh was waterlogged, “Show-off.”

“How did you—” Hermione was baffled. “You couldn’t possibly know—”

“The first place I looked for you when I got home was the library, Hermione.” Harry revealed, “You left Baby’s First Pensieve open on the table. And coupled with your careful consumption of your vegetables and your casual mentions of the date, the weather, and who the PM is, well…”

Hermione laughed. “I wondered why you’d brushed your hair!”

“For the record, both your own and the pensieve’s, I love you, and I want this baby.” Harry’s tone was soft, but Hermione heard the truth resounding in it. “Now close your eyes, and break the chain.”

Hermione did as she was told, putting a separation in her mind so that she would know where to end the strand for the preservation of the memory. After a second, she opened her eyes and saw that Harry’s own eyes had filled with tears.

Oh, how she loved him.

He’d held back his emotions for the memory that, someone, someday, might potentially, possibly, want to see. He’d done it for that someone they didn't yet know, but both desperately loved.

She internally cursed Petunia and Vernon.
He was a good man, who carried the world on his shoulders. Rarely did he let her see his burdens from those early years. She reached up and brushed his tears away, “Oh, Harry.” Hermione promised him, “You are going to be here. You are. Nothing will take you away from us. I promise you I won’t let that happen.”

“I just…” Harry shook with the force of his emotions, literally trembled in her arms. “I can’t…”

“You can promise me that. You can and you did.” Hermione countered, knowing full well what he wanted to say but couldn’t find the words to express, “You are going to be here to hold them when they’re sad, and to laugh when they’re happy, and to wonder if they’re getting all their vegetables, and you’ll be there, with me, on the platform, when they go to school. You will be there, in every possible way.”

“What if we’re not?” Harry asked, his face bloodless. “What if something should happen to us both? You know that if one of us dies traumatically, the other is…”

“I don’t know what will happen. We need to update our wills, make that decision when we can.” Hermione admitted, “But I imagine they’d go to Sirius and Remus. That’s what I’d want. Or perhaps Hannah and Neville.”

Hermione did not want to put her own parents through the pain of raising another magical child.

Harry rested his head on her shoulder. The way he folded his body to do so always seemed to Hermione to be uncomfortable, but it was a comfort-seeking gesture she would never deny him. He was in pain, hurting, and he found solace in her. How could she possibly turn him away? She never would.

His voice was muffled against her shoulder, “I’ve never been so terrified in my whole life.”

“Look at me.” Hermione gently demanded this of him, and Harry complied. When she was satisfied that he was both looking and listening, she added, “This baby is healthy. The potion was very blue. I’m going to do everything I can to make absolutely certain both the baby and I stay healthy. There is no need to worry. Everybody is safe, that I promise you.”

“I just…have a lot to deal with, I guess.” Harry sighed, and it was very nearly filled with tears, “I love you so much, Hermione.”

Hermione nestled into Harry, and pulled his arms tightly around her. “I love you, too.” Hermione grinned, “I have it on good authority that the baby loves you, too.”

“Hermione, they don’t have sentient thoughts, yet. Let them be a blob of cells.” Harry admonished, biting his own lip to keep from smiling, “Hermione, my God.”

“Take me to bed, Harry.” Hermione decided, “I want a cuddle.”

“Demanding.” He teased, scooping her up gently. Hermione waited for the pull in her lower belly to haul them—

“Wait!” Hermione cried, “I can’t apparate.” She couldn’t, not until after the baby was born. Women who were pregnant ran a much higher risk of leaving their uterus in Bristol when they went to Manchester. Magically, life became life at the moment a mother acknowledged her child as a welcomed life. Hermione had done that, long before even opening her eyes. She knew she’d end up tearing out her own innards and leaving them in the dining room if she so much as popped upstairs.
Harry seemed unfazed by her announcement, already heading for the door to the corridor. “That’s why God invented stairs, My Own.” He teased her, as though he were Teddy, explaining something he thought she ought to know.

Hermione huffed. She was shaken from her good humor when, as they crossed into the corridor, Petra was walking up the hallway. Hermione buried her face in Harry’s chest. Leave him to explain this, as she was certain they looked like escapees from Thornfield’s attic.

“Petra,” Harry spoke as though there weren’t tear-tracks on his face, and Hermione wasn’t biting back laughter. “Please clear Her Grace’s timetable for the evening, and tomorrow morning before noon.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Petra spoke, and Hermione did not look up at her lady’s maid. She knew that tone too well. Petra knew full well she had the night off.

When Petra slipped into the dining room as though she had been heading there all along, Harry ran. Hermione couldn’t hold back her laughter. Harry’s expression made her laugh all the harder, as did imaging poor Petra’s explanations to her obligations.

“What’s so funny?” Harry demanded, taking the main stairs up past the portraits.

As they passed her, the Duchess on the wall winked. Hermione waved her hand gently behind Harry’s neck in silent greeting.

“Poor Petra has to back out on a card party tonight. I’m sure Augusta will be cross.” Hermione knew that she wouldn’t be annoyed, not really. She was forever after Hermione to rest more. Augusta had been a huge support lately. Hermione loved her as she did her late Nana.

“I’m certain she’ll approve.” Harry insisted, his footfalls moving confidently down the hallway, “Really, why is our bedroom so far from the dining room?”

“Is that a remark on my figure?” Hermione returned. She knew it wasn’t. Harry, too, was concerned about her fluctuating weight. Her dresses had been taken in too many times, lately. They both knew that had to change. She thought that if Harry could have forced her to stay at Mum’s and eat like Mum insisted for a few weeks, he might.

Harry froze and Hermione regretted her hasty words. After a long second, Harry exhaled.

“Hardly.” Harry admitted, “More like an observation. Next time, remind me that that dining room table is solid oak.”

Hermione blushed, but filed that bit of information away, all the same.

“You cannot tell anyone.” Hermione insisted, after Petra left the room. Hermione examined herself critically in her dressing room mirror. She looked alright, she hoped, for meeting Ellen. She had very carefully considered her options, and gone casual.

Hermione smoothed her hands over the seat of her denims. Her dark wash trousers were a slim-boot fit, which Petra had said was popular in muggle style now. Hermione had to keep her boot fit slim because she was too short to carry off the style otherwise. Evidently, her elf had taken it upon herself to subscribe to high-end muggle fashion magazines. If her mistress was going to insist on things like trousers and trainers, Petra likely reasoned, she was going to do it right.

Hermione could not complain. Her jumper was a very nice, though privately Hermione had thought
it ought to be. The label boasted a Royal Warrant, and was British made, with ethical production processes. The jumper was a comfortable cable knit in ballerina pink. She couldn’t stop touching the Shetland wool.

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was doing up his cuffs on his tattersall shirt, having brought his clothes in here to finish dressing. He didn’t have a valet, and he couldn’t match to save his life. “I’m not going to say anything.”

Hermione didn’t want to worry him, but it was too early for her pregnancy to be made public. She wanted to tell her parents, and Remus and Sirius, but beyond that, she wasn’t planning on saying anything to anyone. Well, Ron. He went without saying, her point stood. Anyone with eyes would figure it out, and she wasn’t going to tempt fate.

Hermione caught Harry’s gaze as it fell upon her, and she sighed. It wasn’t words that would give them away. Still, she didn’t want to be harsh. He was happy, stupidly, stupidly, happy. Hermione was too pragmatic to give into the urge to be awash with joy, but it was nice to see that so openly pouring from Harry. His energy, his very magic, felt shimmering with hope and joy. Being around him right now was liking be surrounded by champagne bubbles. It likely explained their sojourn in bed, not that they ever needed an excuse for that, given that there never seemed to be a reason, or there were a million and one very good ones.

Hermione watched as Harry adjusted his tie, and slipped into his own pullover. His sweater was a dark olive that did wonders for his eyes. Hermione couldn’t help but tease him, “You look nicer than me.”

Harry looked at her askance, and held up two jackets. Hermione offered her opinion. “Go with the blue one. It’s warmer, and you’ll just take it off when we get there.”

Harry draped the Barbour over his arm, remarking as he put the other option down, “I thought you liked my tweeds.”

“If you were going with Sirius, sure.” Hermione agreed, “But my Dad already has opinions. It doesn’t serve to reinforce them.”

“Hermione, love.” Harry grinned, pulling the closet shut behind them, “Posh is your father’s pet name for me. You just have to look to see it.”

Hermione snorted. You had to look deeply to find the love in her father’s mocking of Harry’s situation in life. Very deep indeed. “You’re a Spice Girl.”

Harry muttered, annoyed that a very enterprising wizard’s company had put The Spice Girls on records perfect for their Phonograph. Hermione was not immune. “All the bands in the world, and you have to like that one.”

“They’re catchy.” Hermione asserted, walking over to the Floo.

Harry paused, not following her into the widened fireplace. “I think we should take the car.”

He wanted to take the car? The car they only had because Sirius had a fetish for things with engines and leather interiors, and Remus had put his paws down and said no to his latest impulse buy? The car that Harry had only learned to drive legally so he and Ron could disillusion themselves and go racing over the private lanes on the estate? The car she refused to get into, because the damn thing was a death trap on wheels? Okay, so she had gone once, and it had been fun, but she had been careful to properly admonish Harry and Ron after her turn. It didn’t do to ruin
her image over a car.

Even if they flew, literally, there was the matter of landing, and parking, and getting to the car now and making sure it had petrol. There wasn’t a petrol station for miles, and she doubted they had any on hand. “Harry, if we take the car, we will miss dinner.”

She knew that would work. He loved her mother’s cooking. “But.”

Hermione’s heart swelled. She understood his hesitation in that single word. Actions spoke louder than words, after all, even proposed ones.

Hermione stepped from the floo, and took Harry by the arm, keeping a firm grip on his elbow. “I appreciate the concern, but Floo-ing is safer.” She tossed the powder, and called out clearly, “Granger House!”

Within a minute, the fireplace at her childhood home was opening to admit them. Hermione stepped out crisply, with a small smile at Harry. “Magic.”

“Witch.” He whispered, stepping out into the living room after her. As the fireplace shrank down to its normal size, Hermione took his Barbour.

Harry headed for the kitchen, knowing full well that Mum was setting about getting dinner on the table. Her father was likely at the station, picking up Ellen. Hermione hung Harry’s jacket, and smoothed back her hair.

Very carefully clearing her expression, Hermione entered the kitchen. It was as cozy and as homey as it had always been, complete with her mother’s orderly, efficient, way of cooking. Harry was already at work washing salad greens.

Mum greeted her, and soon, Hermione too was at work. Hermione was tasked with grating cheese. After years of potions making, cheese was a bit of an insult to her knife skills, especially since her mother handed her a plane grater, and wouldn’t give her a knife for fear she might cut herself. Hermione did not let herself think of all the enemy combatants she had stabbed or otherwise carefully maimed. “Mum, you do realize a knife would work just as well. I’m very good with blades.”

Hermione had repeated herself mostly for her own satisfaction, and the joy of rehashing an old protest that had long ago lost its heat. Mum took the same joy in it.

“I’m sure you are.” Mum returned, “Harry, would you please take the kitchen scraps out to the compost bins when you’re done there?”

Harry agreed, shutting off the water as the last bit of the greens had been checked for bugs and trimmed for slicing. “Sure.”

He looked significantly at Hermione. Right. She needed medical advice. When they came back in, they planned to tell her Mum together.

Hermione began as the door closed behind Harry. “Mum? Could I ask you for some advice? In a professional capacity?”

“I suppose this means I can’t tell Daddy?” Mum clarified, taking up the greens and facing Hermione as she worked at her chopping board.

Hermione glanced down. “It would be rash to mention this to him.” Hermione exhaled, “I think I
need to find a good doctor who might have some knowledge of non-mundane physiology. I don’t know where to look.”

“Wouldn’t you know better than me?” Helen Granger posited, “St. Mungo’s doesn’t inspire confidence in me, but perhaps a private physician?”

“St. Mungo’s is out, totally and completely.” Hermione insisted, “My medical records would be on the front page by morning.”

“It would help if”—

The front door was opening. She knew it was her father and Ellen from their footfalls and Ellen’s cheery voice as she entered the house. Hermione quickly turned away, her courage gone, and went to greet them.

Ellen Brown set her bags down in the entryway of her maternal Aunt’s comfortable home. The whole house smelled like food, and Helen knew she was starving after that packed train ride. Aunt Helen’s cooking was so very good.

Aunt Helen came out of the kitchen, looking as sharp as ever, “Ellen!” Her aunt folded her into a hug.

Ellen returned the gesture. She had always felt so welcome here. Aunt Helen and Uncle Adam had been a huge support when Mum and Dad had split up, and Dad had packed off to France with his latest lady-friend. Aunt Helen had always been there for her, when she needed to get away. Slowly, her random escapes from her own house had become regular visits, predicated on love and not a desire to run. Switching from being a day girl to a boarder at her new secondary had helped give her life some stability, as had Mum’s strength in rising above Dad’s abuses.

Rather than say what she was feeling as Helen let her go, she quirked a smile, “A very nice looking man asked if he could take my bags, Aunt Helen. He was digging in the rubbish, though.”

Uncle Adam was hanging up his coat as he said, “Sorting the recyclables properly, no doubt.”

“Dad…” Ninny sighed from the kitchen door, “Being environmentally aware is fundamental to earth’s future.”

Ninny’s hair was completely the same, totally the same bushy mane she’d always had, and yet it looked intricate and artful rather than a mess. Great big hanks of hair were pulled back at her temple, and met at the back of her head, held by a large, sturdy barrette. The curls fell to the lower part of her back in a riotous tumble. Finally, someone had taught her how to do her hair.

Ellen rejoiced. At first glance, she looked different, seemed different, somehow. Last time Ellen had seen her, Aunt Helen had said she was sick, so maybe that was the change.

“My dear madam.” Her father returned, “I was alive in the 60s. What I know about recycling would boggle your mind.”

Cousin Ninny laughed outright. Helen swore she glowed with happiness. “I’m being rude.” She stepped closer, and added, “Hey, Ellen.”

Ellen returned her hello. “I guess that was your…”
Ellen felt a pang of guilt and shame. Ninny was weird. Ninny went to some strange school in Scotland that nobody, nobody, knew anything about, not even the librarians at school, or the house matron, who knew everything about boarding schools in the UK, and could tell anyone who asked why theirs was better, and her specific house was the best. Now that Ellen reflected upon it, the one librarian had seemed sort of shifty. He’d changed the subject when she’d started asking about specialized schools in Scotland.

As children, Ellen had been so confused by Hermione. Even as they grew into teenagers, was forever breaking electronics, and walking around with her head in books that Ellen swore had no text. She never knew anything about TV, and even the biggest events seemed not to resonate with her. It was like she lived on Mars. She never got any phone calls, and she had two boys as friends.

So, when the news had come that Ninny had gotten married, married of all things, Ellen had worried incessantly for Nin. Mum had sent a perfectly terrible bland tablecloth, and Ellen had begun to worry. Ninny was such a kind person. Sure, she was forever in her books, and was prickly, but she had a kind heart. She knew very little about men, and Ellen worried that somebody had played upon her sense of justice and taken advantage of her. Ninny had never professed a desire to know romantic love, though Ellen bet she’d once had a crush on that dark-haired friend of hers, so Ellen was terrified that she had resigned herself to a loveless marriage out of sensibility.

Ellen wanted so much more for her.

She wanted Nin to find real love, real companionship.

Since this morning, Ellen had been so confused by Hermione. Even as they grew into teenagers, was forever breaking electronics, and walking around with her head in books that Ellen swore had no text. She never knew anything about TV, and even the biggest events seemed not to resonate with her. It was like she lived on Mars. She never got any phone calls, and she had two boys as friends.

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“Ellen, may I introduce Harry to you? Harry, this is my cousin Ellen, come to stay for a few days.”

She looked back at Ellen, adding after they’d said hello, “I think you’ll have a lot in common. Harry’s in politics.”

Before she could stop herself, Ellen blurted, “I dislike politics.”

Ninny’s husband grinned, “Me too.”

Ellen didn’t know what to make of that statement, or of the man before her. Aunt Helen asked Hermione to check the roast and the roasted vegetables, but before Hermione could step closer the oven, Harry had taken the duty upon himself.

Ellen was confused, but smiled at the obvious regard he held for Ninny. Ellen had always felt bad that no one had ever taken the time to get to know Hermione. Their whole lives, she had always been so isolated from others, and it wasn’t totally her fault. When you knew her, she was a great person. They’d argued something awful as children, but they had a bond made all the stronger because of it.

“Why devote yourself to something you don’t love?”

“They put my name on the back of the chair.” Harry stated, lifting the roast from the oven. He added, once he set it on the counter to rest, “It seemed horrible to let them go to all that fuss and not do my part.”

Ellen didn’t exactly get his point, but in the interest of pumping him for information regarding Ninny’s present and future welfare, she asked, “Well, what would you like to do?”

“I’ve always wanted to teach secondary students, actually.” He admitted this sheepishly, with a glance at Ninny, who bolstered him, it seem, with just a glance from where she was counting out plates for the table.

Ellen smiled. Maybe, just maybe, she didn’t have to hate Hermione’s husband. Ninny was strange, but that didn’t mean she deserved to be taken advantage of by some old goat or some gay man who couldn’t face his truth. And really, him turning out to be decent and not the scum of the earth did free up quite a lot of her timetable. It appeared that Harry was at least bookish, which was a point in his favor. She couldn’t picture Ninny with some man who was always nattering on about sports.

Expertly, Ellen pegged Harry as a rower. Possibly horseback riding, as well. Whatever it was, he had a hobby that required balance, quick movements, precision, and good endurance. He moved around the kitchen, stepping in before Aunt could ask, as though he had been born in a kitchen.

When asked, she worked with Ninny to carry out the plates to the table. As always, Ninny was the expert at setting the table. Ninny was the expert in nearly everything cerebral, not that she bragged or boasted. Their work gave Helen the chance to chat mindlessly and evaluate Ninny’s outfit.

She scanned her up and down, noting the expert weave of her sweater, the quality of her boots, and finally, the understated fit of her denims. “Nin, where’d you get your trousers?”

“I don’t know.” Ninny revealed, more focused on the way she was perfectly laying out each bit of silverware. “I just put them on this morning.”

Ellen sighed, suddenly very worried for Ninny. “Those jeans are…”

They weren’t expensive at all, but the brand was very, very, niche-market. Her fashionista friends
swore by them. They didn’t cost the earth, and they were made in the UK. Someone knew what she was doing in buying those jeans, and it wasn’t Hermione, who had let Aunt Helen pick her clothes for ages because she’d claimed to too busy with primary school.

Aunt Helen had paired down her closet weekly so that everything was suitable to the weather, and all the uniform pieces went together. Hermione had other things consuming her mind, even then. Ellen had stepped in when she could and forced Hermione to execute her opinionated nature on party clothes. It was a great arena to be definitive and decisive.

Hermione began, “I just—” Hermione busied herself setting down the last of the silverware.

Ellen was fully prepared to press her, but the door opened, and Hermione was saved by the sound of two male voices greeting Aunt Helen, Hermione’s husband, and Uncle Adam. Before Ellen could process what it meant, a little voice was hollering, “My own! Where?”

Hermione brightened. Oh. Harry had a little brother, then. A tiny little boy wearing a beanie hat and a peacoat zoomed into the dining room. “Teddy Bear!”

Hermione greeted the little boy, who began to babble all about his day. He talked so fast that Ellen couldn’t understand him. He found his way to Hermione’s hip with a practiced ease, and cuddled into her.

“Edward.” Hermione interrupted formally. He quieted as Hermione faced Ellen.

Hermione began, “Ellen, this is Edward. Teddy, this is my cousin, Ellie. She likes to color, too.”

“Hello, Teddy.”

The young boy was at once as formal and correct as his age would allow. He extended a tiny hand to meet her own. She’d thought he’d high five, but he took her hand in a small but firm grasp, and said, “Edward Lupin. Teddy, please.” After that though, he was once again a tiny boy against his beloved My Own, for he rested back against her and eyed Ellen questioningly.

Hermione chatted brightly to Teddy as she exited the dining room, and a greying, slim man coached him through hanging up his own coat. Meanwhile, Ellen was introduced very properly to the very dashing Sirius, and then to his spouse, Remus. Ellen thought that Harry looked rather like Sirius, but Ted was clearly more like Remus in looks. He seemed more like his Dad as opposed to his Papa when he warmed up. Ellen berated herself for speculating on something as base as biological paternity, but the whole thing seemed obvious.

As everyone settled in to their dinner, Ellen was far less worried about Ninny. She didn’t think Nin knew it, but Harry took his eyes off of her only rarely. Mr. Darcy was an apt appellation, Ellen thought. The man wasn’t demonstrative, but then again neither was her cousin, but it was clear to even Ellen that Harry Potter’s universe rotated around Hermione Granger.

She wasn’t totally sold that he was good enough for her only cousin, but undying devotion was a start.

Hermione surveyed the table. Everyone seemed to be enjoying their meal. She busied herself with the green beans, not really hungry, but eating anyway. She had to keep an eye on her intake.

Teddy and his parents had totally set Ellen at ease, which was something Hermione had never been able to do. She loved Ellen, and they were close, but that didn’t mean they understood each other. The conversation had been lively, allowing Hermione to take an observer’s role.
Ellen was laughing as they finished their mains, “So that’s enough about me.”

She zeroed in on Harry. Hermione knew the power behind that gaze. Ellen wasn’t magical, but she had this way of getting to her point without realizing what you were after. It was a gift that Hermione, with all of her magic, could never even begin to wish to possess. “Where did you go to school?”

“With Hermione.” Harry allowed, “Didn’t she ever mention Ron or me to you?”

“Oh!” Ellen blurted, “You’re one of them. That makes so much sense. She did, of course, but I’m not allowed to tell you what she’s said about you. It was all very complimentary.”

Hermione wanted to stick her face in her plate and die. She’d been thirteen. “Ellen.”

“I’m mortifying her.” Ellen glanced around at her captive audience, and then back at Hermione, “I’ll behave. Promise.”

Hermione gently chided her. “At least try.”

Conversation moved along, and all went as well as could be expected when you put two prankster wizards in a room with a muggle who knew nothing of magic. Jokes and double meanings flew, but it, interestingly, drew a smile from Dad. Their fun was harmless, and they did find ways to twist their meanings again to include Ellen, so it all worked out.

Mum rose to her feet to go and get the cake, and Hermione rather enjoyed the look on Ellen’s face when the aforementioned gentlemen rose easily to their feet. Even Daddy.

Hermione glanced at Ellen, “You do get used to it.”

“You abuse it, Duch.” Sirius quipped.

She hoped that Ellen would not catch onto that silly name Sirius had given her since she had quieted the entirety of the joint assemblies with a single glare. Explaining her political situation would be far easier than explaining her social role.

Hermione demurred, “I can’t think what you mean.”

Remus corrected Sirius, as was his wont, “Our Bunny’s a very energetic girl.”

Hermione glared. Just for that, she had no intention of admitting that yes, when vexed, she sometimes played jumping jacks by scooting to the edge of her chair as though preparing to stand. It was petty, manipulative, and actually quite fun to see how long it would take them to catch on.

“Hey, Ted.” Hermione began, enjoying the look of sheer panic on Remus’s craggy face. She enjoyed it so, but Teddy did need his naps. Instead, she asked a banal question, “What do you want Father Christmas to bring you?”

He tilted his head, “Brother.”

“What?” Hermione pressed, “I don’t understand. What do you want Harry to bring you?”

“No, Hermione.” Sirius corrected, “It seems that young Hestia Prewitt is getting a little brother for Christmas. Father Christmas is bringing it. Isn’t that right, Rem?”

“Hestia’s new brother is, indeed, the talk of playgroup.” Remus agreed. “I’ve explained to Ted time and again that there will be no little brothers, but he believes in Christmas miracles.”
“Yes!” Teddy cried, “I know.”

“Wouldn’t you like a bear?” Hermione asked, noting the look on Sirius’ face, “A nice cuddly one for your big boy bed.”

Teddy considered this, and offered a compromise, “A bear and a brother.”

Hermione very carefully sipped her water, kicked Harry under the table, and pressed her lips together. “My very best wishes working with Father Christmas. May I suggest a puppy?”

Sirius’ face was priceless.

Harry added, “You could name it Junior, even.”

Hermione could not hold back her laughter.

Hermione was finishing up her portion of the washing up when her mother called out, “Hermione, would you please come and help me for a moment?”

Thinking nothing of it, Hermione shut off the taps and headed towards the study. It was her mother’s domain, so Hermione thought she might have hidden Teddy’s Christmas gift there. Instead, when she got there, she found her mother leaning against her desk.

“Hey, Mum.” Hermione began, unsure of her purpose.

“I’ve got a list of OB’s here.” Mum handed Hermione an envelope. “That is what you wanted, naturally. I gather you can cross check them. Augusta would be glad to lend you her input, I’m sure.”

Hermione paused, not taking it. She made a squeaking noise. How…?

Her mother read her expression like an open book. “You kicked me when Teddy was talking about wanting a brother and Harry was utterly consumed by his roast. Never have I see a man so consumed by my cooking. At first I thought it was a compliment, but then, I paused.”

“And what did you consider?”

“Well, adding together your poorly executed attempt to needlessly remind Harry to hold his tongue, his fixation on his roast, the way he’s hovering, your dogged determination to eat more than I’ve seen you eat in recent memory, and your questions earlier, I came up with one conclusion.” She paused, “For what it’s worth, I think Remus and Sirius might have also be suspect, but clearly, they’re not as observant.”

“It’s so early. We wanted to tell you together, earlier.” Hermione whispered, “And I’m scared I won’t be able to carry this baby to term. My body…”

Mum whispered as she heard Hermione’s voice crack. She’d not cried once when recovering from what Helen knew to be curses that caused her muscles to contract for extensive periods of time, until they relaxed in a seizure-like process. “Oh, Bunny.”

Hermione pushed her tears away. She sat down carefully on the lounge chair. “And Harry needs me to be so positive because he’s terrified that he’s going to die and leave the baby an orphan, and any mention of anything happening to me petrifies him. The one time I mentioned my weight, he froze, and looked terrified. He wants this so much.”
“As do you, I know.” Mum assured herself.

“I’ve tried to tell myself for months that I wouldn’t want this, but I really, really do.” Hermione revealed, “I know I’m young, but I just need your support, Mum. I’ve got too much to figure out without worrying about what you and Dad think.”

“Well, I think this is a wonderful prospect.” Mum promised, folding her into a desperately needed hug from where Hermione sat. Mum’s torso was a comfortable place to take refuge. “Because you will be a wonderful mother, and you deserve every happiness. I only wish you a child half as wonderful as mine, and you’ll be a blessed mother indeed.”

“I’ve got a good example.” Hermione replied, feeling at once very much like she had never understood her mother before this moment. To know that her mother loved her, loved her far more than she could love her own baby at the moment, made Hermione’s throat clog. “Please just tell me I’m not alone in feeling this, please.”

“Never, Hermione.” Mum held her as her tears spilled forth, kissing the top of her head. “Never, never in a million years.”

“I’m so scared something’s going to happen to this baby, that I won’t be able to protect them, that the press…” Hermione dissolved into tears, “I’ll snap my wand before I let my baby face what I did at the hands of those people.”

“Bunny girl, how I wish I could have spared you their hatred. These past few months have been illuminating in so, so, many devastating ways. Had I known what I know now, I would have pulled you off of that train and found your private magical tutors.” Mum confided, “But I didn’t, and I didn’t. You can make different choices for your baby that I could for mine, and that is all I’ve ever hoped should you ever choose to do this. You know better, so you will do better.”

“I don’t blame you.” Hermione insisted. Her mother had done her very best. She had, Hermione realized, given up her child into a world that she herself would never see. She had given her child over to a world that pulled her child away from her, that had taught children just like hers to view her as subhuman, and she had done it with a smile, every time the train had chugged away from King’s Cross.

The realization that she had likely ripped out her heart and stopped on it to do what she thought best for Hermione caused Hermione’s tears to flood her eyes anew. Her mother had done something Hermione knew now that she never could. Nothing, nothing, would take this child from her arms. It would kill her. And to think she had only known about the baby for a little better than a day.

“I blame myself, Bunny.” Her mother pushed back her hair, “It comes with being a mother.”

Hermione’s rush of tears faded, and she realized that the things her mother blamed herself for were not things that Hermione could forgive. Hermione knew her mother would have to find absolution in herself. Hermione could not offer it, but she could try to show her mother that she had raised a strong person. “I’m sorry I cried during your dinner party.”

“That hardly matters.” Mum stepped away from the lounge chair. “I’m going to get Harry, and a cold flannel. You’ll wipe your face. Tomorrow, you’ll go and see an OB friend of mine with an ultrasound machine. You can get a cursory muggle check up while you figure out your magical care.”

Before she stepped from the room, she asked Hermione information Hermione hadn’t thought to
Hermione laughed, “Happy Birthday, Harry. Here’s a squalling baby and an exhausted wife.” I think he’d be better off with a new broom.”

Mum smiled, “Somehow, I don’t think he’d agree. He’d probably give up his firebolt if you asked him to do it.”

Hermione smiled. Mum had been talking to Sirius, then. Even then he had loved her. They’d fought, but he’d understood her reporting his broomstick, and despite Ron’s bafflement, he’d shrugged. He knew he’d get it back, and if it set her mind at ease, he’d said, it was worth it.

Helen excused herself gently from her office, and headed to the tiny bathroom off of the kitchen, put in when Hermione was toilet training and couldn’t make it upstairs because she could never tear herself away from her activities in time. She took a flannel from the cupboard above the toilet, and soaked it.

Harry was looking around as he paid half-attention to the conversation flowing in the room. Helen noted when she saw his expression that he could feel Hermione’s emotions when they were strong, as she could feel his own.

Harry looked at once as though he were a puppy left out in the rain, and as though he was ready to AK anyone or anything that had hurt Hermione. He crossed the room, excusing himself politely, before she had even begun to catch his attention.

She passed him the flannel, and stopped him from going to Hermione with a gentle hand on his arm, “I know you wanted to tell me together. I’m afraid I meddled. Let me meddle just a little more. Sometimes, when you love somebody so much you think you could burst with it, the thought of anything happening to them, well…”

“It paralyzes you.” Harry finished, as Helen knew he would. “You think all the time about something happening, and not stopping it…”

“And in doing so, you spend the entire journey looking ahead for something that might be there rather than seeing what’s really right there.” Helen let go, knowing her message had sunk home. “Trust the certainty of your love, not the uncertainties of fear. Neither of you are alone anymore.”

Harry smiled, “Thanks, Helen.”

Helen did not reply. Sometimes, a person needed someone they saw as maternal to tell them things they already knew.

As he walked away, Ellen called out, “Aunt Helen, where’s Nin?”

“Oh, she’s getting ready to go.” She shared a significant look with Remus and Sirius, “Won’t you help me in the kitchen?”

Remus and Sirius knew what she was implying. Hermione needed unobserved access to the fireplace, and thus, the floo. There were limitations on an expectant witch’s mode of travel. However, they said nothing. Helen thought that wise. If they wanted one, the kids deserved a nice memory of telling their loved ones about the joy coming in their lives. Helen wasn’t going to take that from them. For herself, Helen was simply glad that she could be with her daughter in moments of doubt and fear.
It felt like a second chance to be the mother she should have been the first time around, made all the better because she had that chance with Hermione.

It felt like atonement.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, Hermione was supposed to have a younger sister. JKR couldn't find the space in the narrative, allegedly, but the idea of Hermione having a close female relative age-wise has always stuck with me. She's always seemed so bossy in that older child way. But then I wondered, what if her cousin were a peer? What would she have to say about her cousin? And if the cousin knew Hermione not as the Witch Who Won, but as a gawky young girl desperately out step with the world around here, what would she say?

Ninny isn't an insult. It's an old pet name that stems from Ellen not being able to say her name Hermione tolerates it only from her. Her-My-Oh-Ninny. What, did Krum think he was the first person to try to sound out her name? And no, nobody ever called her knock-kneed-ninny at primary school.

Or so Hermione says. I just want to hug them all so badly right now.
He threw a fireball at me. I threw a chimney stack at him - that's the London way.

Chapter Summary

“He threw a fireball at me. I threw a chimney stack at him - that's the London way.” -- Ben Aaronovitch

or

"For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.  
Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and caldron bubble.”
— William Shakespeare

Or

Wherein Ellen thinks she's being cheeky by hauling a reluctant Hermione to the Palace of Westminster, and ends up learning more than she ever thought possible. In which Hermione is who she is in more ways than one. Hermione wants to see Freddie the Kitchen Porter go after the paps with his cleaver.

Chapter Notes

For your contextual delight: one of Sirius's jams.

And yet another, which I think he liked to blast at Grimmauld when his mother was in residence. She loved it. /Sarcasm.

Okay, so basically I just picture him blasting muggle music and wearing glitter and shit, because the 70s, and he would want to throw his appreciation for muggle music and the fine, fine, werewolf-ly specimen that is Remus John Lupin up in her muggle-hating, gay-bashing face.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione finished her breakfast tray quickly in the unlit sitting room, hastening to her bath. She shivered as she put aside her nightdress, even though the fire blazed in the grate, popping gently in time to Harry’s gentle snore. It was still dark outside, but there was much to be done.

Today was the first ember day of December, the day before the bright spot that was Saturnalia. Today, there was a fast, intended to ensure that a witch or wizard respected and honored the abundance of nature, and also to ensure that their hearts were focused on the blessing of having, when so many people did not have in such abundance.
Hermione had made the unilateral decision to stick with a liberal interpretation of fasting. She needed to eat, Harry whinged when he was denied food he knew they had, and it scared her to not put out food. For so many months, she rationed to the point that eating became challenging. She had scrimped every morsel of food until she could think nothing of food. After the war, she hadn’t been able to eat for weeks without vomiting or cutting her portions in half with the intention to save them.

So, Hermione had decided that vegetarian breakfasts and dinners defined fasting, with meat at lunch, which would be the largest meal of the day. Dinner included the Italian ambassador, so she rather hoped he liked vegetarian food. It was perfectly in line with tradition, and wasn’t gruel and tepid water. Harry had to eat lunch with the Italian attache, and Hermione knew Ellen would want a good fry up if they went to that restaurant she liked. It was a sort of cozy place that never changed.

They still had a photo of George VI on the wall. Granted, there was an anarchy sign above it, so at least The Queen was there.

Fr. Smithson was offering confession this morning, and a service later. Though neither Harry nor Hermione took him up on the offer to unburned themselves as she wasn’t Catholic and neither she nor Harry held with confession, Hermione knew the grounds would be busy with people who did.

She wanted to be sure that she wasn’t caught in her dressing gown as she went about her day. Many ladies paid her call when they came for confession, by virtue of her house being on the same grounds. Hermione had assured them they had no need to do so, but they continued to stop and leave their cards. Even the most modern of witches used them once they left school. Hermione thought perhaps they would not call on the first Embertide day, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

As such, Hermione wanted to get her candles and rituals tended to before the possibility of interrupting anyone else who wanted to make use of the chapel arose. She therefore, dressed sensibly, mary jane shoes with thick tights, a skirt made of a warm wool, and a blouse with a cardigan. A coat quickly went overtop this outfit, after Petra wound her hair into a soft french twist and covered the whole lot with a soft covering. Hermione made quick work of dressing and was out the door before Harry noticed she had slipped from their bed.

Hermione crept through the Great Hall, noting the snoozing portraits. She made her way to the Chapel, carefully, picking her way over the ice that had formed overnight, spelling it away as she walked. The ice cracked and melted around her. This bit of magic amused Hermione.

In the Chapel, she went to the Sacristy. As she did most every other morning, she checked that the elf who ran the Sacristy for Fr. Smithson had enough firewood and that his kettle was on the boil. At the sink there, the one that bypassed any septic systems and went into the ground, Hermione washed her hands, so saying, “Purga mentem. Purga carnem. Purga animum. Ita est!”

Her hands clean, and ritually purified, she slipped back out of the cozy room. She noted that her flame was still dancing on the altar, and satisfied, opened a creaking wooden door with the slightest bit of her magical intent.

Hermione entered the room that gave the Chapel its name. It was called the Chapel largely due to this room, which held a small stone altar, a multitude of candles, and statuary. In front of the small altar, there was two kneelers. Hermione set her supplies on the small table, and put her hand on the kneeler. As usual, she lit the candle as spoke, Translating the Latin she had come to know by rote, “Salve lar familiaris.”
“Be thou well, family lars.” She pressed her right fingers to her lips and extended her hand over the altar, her body twisting slightly from left to right to encompass more of the space with her hand.

Again, she repeated the adoratio, so saying in Latin, “Be ye well, Di Penates.” These were the magical beings that watched over the home, as the Lars were those that oversaw the family itself.

Hermione concluded the ritual by remembering the people that had gone on before her, ”Salve Gen Patris Familias.” and also by remembering Vesta, who was to be remembered as a magical family member, and adored as others venerated Nimue or Merlin. Vesta was seen as a personal, home and hearth, being, where Nimue was much more academic. “Salve Vesta Mater.”

Concluding the fourth adoratio, Hermione touched the altar, and sealed her magical intentions. “Ita est!”

She stood, turned south in a clockwise motion, and, driven by emotion, lit one more candle. This one she placed gently on the altar without words. Her heart was too full. This candle was not for her and Harry. Rather, the tiny flame was representative of her prayers and hopes for the tiny spark of life below her heart. “Salve. Salve.”

Be thou well. Be thou well.

Amabo te. Amabo te.

Te amō.

By the time Hermione found herself back inside, the sun was making its way up into the sky. Hermione hurried along, smiling at the confusion of the groundsmen, who were all trying to compliment each other for doing the walks to the Chapel before they had gotten to doing them.

She had quite a lot to do to prepare for Saturnalia, and set about checking over those preparations. In addition, her main focus was on service to the community. Many people focused on the needy, but Hermione wasn’t going to put an emergency shelter through dealing with the appearance of of a bossy woman who came with her own retinue of nosy press. Instead, she was giving her time in a new way.

She was playing hostess to Ellen, as Mum and Dad both had to work. Next year, she hoped to do something in the community.

It wasn’t wise this year. It just wasn’t wise.

Leaving the preparations in Fella’s capable hands, Hermione floo’d to Mum’s living room just before Noon, when she knew that Ellen would upstairs getting ready. She walked quickly to the front door, opened it, and closed it after a second, calling out, “Ellen! I’m here.”

“I’ll be just a minute!” Her cousin called back, from upstairs.

Satisfied that her mode of transportation wouldn’t be remarked upon, Hermione sat on the armchair, and looked at the lights on her mother’s aluminum tree. This room was so cosy. Hermione found herself drifting off to sleep.
“Hermione!” Ellen’s voice broke into a very pleasant, floaty, dream. Hermione blinked, and, instantly awake, barely resisted grabbing her wand. “I’m ready.”

“Right.” Hermione pushed herself to her feet. She realized suddenly that her tiredness wasn’t just her body adjusting to being less stressed. It was also her body compensating for the baby. Hermione fought to keep from touching her lower abdomen as she looked to Ellen.

Ellen smiled, “Where to?”

Hermione hated that Ellen always played this game. “You’ve got an idea of where you want to go. Can’t we just get on with doing your choice?”

“You’re supposed to advocate for yourself, Ninny. I say, ‘I want to go to go play tourist in London for a lark.’ and you say, ‘El, that’s absurd. I want to go have tea in Bath with Jane Austen.’”

“I thought we could just go to lunch in Crawley.” Hermione admitted, not having planned on anything else. She had actually been looking forward to being in a safe place. The owners would go after anyone who bothered any of their customers with a meat cleaver wielded by the 20 stone KP.

“What’s the fun in that?” Ellen asked, “To London we go! Come on, the train leaves in twenty minutes.”

Hermione sighed. Even with magic, they’d have to run. She was only glad that she’d changed her dress. Petra had stood firm. One did not go anywhere, anywhere except perhaps a walk on the grounds, in what amounted to a work version of tweed. Hermione had relented, knowing the days of maternity dresses would come soon enough. Let Petra have her fun while she might actually fit her into the dresses.

In keeping with the season, Hermione wore a coat and dress, casual by virtue of it being an simply cut a-line dress with a single button coat. The dress coordinated. Surprisingly, Petra had offered her flats before Hermione had even needed to talk her down. The coat was sharply cut, and made of the tartan of the senior Scottish title Hermione held by virtue of her marriage. Hermione thought it a clever amusement, because no one would know.

It made her feel better about having taken off her engagement ring. She hadn’t thought it wise to wear it, mostly because she had charmed it invisible at dinner. There was a chance, too, that Ellen would grab her hand today, and feel a ring that wasn’t there. Such a thing would be hard to explain, harder to explain that how a couple still in school could have afforded her ring.

On the Tube, Hermione smoothed her outfit down gently, and remained standing in the crush, mostly so she could get off or whip out her wand if spells started to fly until Ellen had demanded she sit down. Hermione had done so, figuring it was only sensible to stay off her feet if they were going to be in London. She had just been there the other day, it was true, so Hermione was weary of the whole idea.

London at the holiday was horrible.

By the time they arrived at Victoria Station, Hermione noticed that, despite her hyper-awareness, only narrowly avoided nodding off on the train. She’d gotten up too early, that was all. She hated the idea that she was only noticing her pregnancy now because she knew about it. She was blaming it, she guessed, because she felt she ought to do so. She so desperately wanted some sign to cling to, even if it was subjective. Her general tiredness and queasy stomach could have been the baby,
but it also could just be her.

The only thing that set her at ease was the fact that she had left her parent’s house with a muggle, used muggle transport, and had no intention of going anywhere near wizarding London. Victoria Station was bustling with all manner of people, and for once, Hermione felt herself blending into the crowd.

It was soon clear that Ellen had a mission, though she could not figure out what it was. Ellen smirked, which Hermione found worrisome, and led them through the crowds to another line, and herded Hermione onward before Hermione realized they were heading towards Westminster.

The train lurched, and Hermione grabbed onto the pole, jostling some businessman in a suit worth more than her entire wardrobe, which Hermione felt was saying a lot, considering she had literal rooms devoted to nothing more than hanging her clothing. Petra ruled those like a dragon ruling her horde. “Where are we going?”

“I fancy a walk round Westminster.” Ellen said, hamming it up for some reason that only confirmed Hermione’s suspicions. “Don’t be such a ninny, Ninny.”

That statement had gotten Hermione in trouble so many times in her life that she would have ran away had she not been on the Tube, rapidly progressing towards Westminster Station. Hermione fumed the entire time they made their way to the street.

When they were finally outside, and Hermione could face Ellen, she said, “What, truly, truly, is your plan?”

“I’ve booked us for a tour of Parliament.” Ellen said, looping her arm under Hermione’s and moving her left foot toward Whitehall.

“I told you I hate politics.” Hermione insisted.

“No.” Her cousin did not let up. Hermione saw men with cameras everywhere, and she wouldn’t put it past one of them to be a muggleborn who knew just how to blend. “Harry hates politics. He told me all about his work. You love it. You’re going to be the PM one day.” She fixed Hermione with a stare, “Or have you committed the cardinal sin of changing yourself for a man?”

“Of course not!” Hermione insisted, huffing and going red at the very idea.

Her cousin simply grinned. They set off towards Whitehall, Hermione kicking herself the whole way as the slush of the city crunched in the traffic beside them.

Hermione was terrified she was being watched, which was of course, a reasonable fear. They were waiting in the queue to get inside, meaning that they were going to be going through security. Such checkpoints still made her rabbity.

Hermione knew her nerves were drawing looks from the German school group, the French artist, and the American mum who was hauling her special snowflake kids through a tour not meant for children because her blog mom friends said that anyone who took their children to London took them to Parliament, or little Aiden wouldn’t get into Harvard and poor Aspen wouldn’t get into Smith or Sweet Briar. Hermione vowed to herself never to be that mum, though she knew full well that she was going to be very educationally focused. Her track record with trying her best to manage Teddy did not spoke very hypocritically of that mum’s choices.
“Would you quit it?” Ellen hissed, and Hermione noticed that her main problem hadn’t be the soldiers with the guns, it was the security officer approaching, “You’ve gotten us pulled for further security!”

Hermione had to remind herself that Fudge and his ilk were no longer in power. When the man came over to them, Ellen began to apologize, but Hermione cut her off. “Is there a problem?”

It was only when Ellen nudged her that Hermione realized that she had not called the man ‘sir’ or ‘officer’ or anything. She had been too direct, too used, she realized, to being in charge. She had been too afraid to act as though she was anything but herself.

“Ma’am, would you come this way, please?” With that, he led them away from the line, Ellen glancing back at her and glaring the entire way. Hermione wanted her engagement ring and its portkey more than anything. If things happened, she had very little plan for getting Ellen to safety. She had left her shoulder bag, with its extra portkeys at home.

The man opened a side door, and led them into a sparsely furnished office with all manner of monitors, one of which was very clearly focused on the spot she’d just been standing.

With a smile that seemed out of place, he said, “I.D.’s, please.”

Hermione offered her muggle I.D., which thank God, said Hermione Potter. As a matter of course, their surname was borrowed from the name of the territorial designation, much like the muggle aristocracy. It turned out that there was a place named ‘Potter’ upon a small portion of which The Foundry dwelled.

Her magical ID simply read ‘Hermione Jane.’ The lack of surname was a holdover from when wizarding aristo families had believed surnames to be common. The title, they’d insisted, would do them quite well, thank you. Hermione thought that quite toffee-nosed, but at least the Potters had advocated for muggleborns and not hated muggle people in a time of great prejudice and fear.

He checked their cards, and omitted the pat down, though he did lead them both through metal detectors with an apologetic look. Hermione understood. This man, somehow, knew who she was, and was trying to preserve good relations between their governments by being diplomatic. Hermione smiled when she stepped through, so as to assure him.

When they came to the next door, he said, “Enjoy your day, ma’am.” Hermione was rattled. How many muggles knew about her? Then again, perhaps a higher up had simply told this man to lead them through, which he did, right past the check point, bypassing the lines.

Ellen wasn’t phased. She grinned. “I knew these knickers did wonders for my ass.”

“Ellen!” Hermione chided, simply glad to have a reason not to fumble for a reason or play stupid. She wasn’t very good at playing stupid.

Her problems only got worse. Within seconds, there was a tour guide there, introducing herself. Later, as Hermione prayed she wouldn’t, the very astute guide showed them the various points that would have been of interest to Hermione, had she not been forced to playact as though she didn’t know why this woman was being so differential, or why she had never been asked for her £20 entry fee.

Ellen was suspicious. Hermione was on edge. They were in the Lords Room, and Hermione was annoyed that she couldn’t enjoy her tour. She had to play stupid, and couldn’t react when told that a Peverell had done this or that, long before the separation of their societies. When she heard
Italian, Hermione should have listened to her gut, and run like hell, dragging Ellen and Casey the Tour Leader with her.

Ellen was on that sound like a pig on excrement. Hermione prayed, but naturally, there stood the bloody Italian attache with one Harry James Potter. Hermione shot him a look that spoke volumes.

Ellen blinked, "What are you doing here?"

Hermione wanted to know the same. She’d thought he’d be deep underground right now. Hermione stood stock still as Harry spoke, "Hermione, Ellen, may I make Luca Abanto known to you? Mr. Abanto, my wife and her cousin, Miss Ellen Brown."

Boldly, Hermione extended her hand. "Mr. Abanto, I hope you are enjoying London."

Hermione watched as he took the hint, and did nothing more than take her hand with a sly smile. "Indeed, Y—" He paused, and Hermione knew that if Ellen asked, she’d pass it off as a misunderstanding of the linguistic sort. "Ma’am. I am very much looking forward to my time in your fair country."

"We welcome you." Somehow, Hermione got the idea that he knew she was speaking on behalf of her estate, her community, her family.

Hermione attempted to look breezy, "Well, we won’t hold up our tour. Shall we go, Ellen?"

Ellen looked between the attache and Harry carefully. "Mr. Abanto, you must forgive my cousin. She is rather surrounded by history. It was lovely to have met you."

"Miss Brown." To Ellen, he executed the perfectly courtly gesture, and it was nothing short of perfect. Mr. Abanto made Ellen feel like a queen, flirted with her, and let Hermione’s badly pasted on disguise stay in place, all in one motion.

Casey the Tour Leader emerged from wherever she had vanished to at the moment they’d spotted Harry, and carried on, the professional all the while. In the aftermath of bumping into Harry, Hermione began to relax. She could handle any issue that came up. She was a witch, and a powerful one at that. She relaxed as they finished their custom tour. Hermione got to see all sorts of non-standard, neat, off-the-beaten-track, places. It was so much fun.

When Casey escorted them to the exit, and offered to hail a cab, Hermione shook her head. "The snowfall is perfect for a walk. Your tour was the most fun I’ve had in months. Thank you so much."

"We were very glad to have you and your guest, Ma’am." She smiled shyly, "Do let us know any time you’d like to visit the library."

Ellen looked at Hermione as they walked away, "Just who are you?"

"Ellie…" Hermione sighed, "Would you believe me if I told you my best friend was a Duke?"

"And I’m a long lost York sister." Ellen quipped.

The truth, Hermione thought, was often far easier than a lie, especially when no one believed it.

It all went to hell in a hand basket when they were walking toward the station to go home.

Hermione knew those people, but she didn't know how they'd found her. They hadn't seen her yet.
Hermione gripped Ellen’s elbow, and whispered, “Do not look at those men, whatever you do. Keep your head down and walk.”

Ellen quickly glanced to her left, naturally assuming that Hermione was talking about a group of cat-callers. Girls grew up quickly knowing what to do. Show no fear, but show no interest. Be there, own your space, but do not be noticed, and get gone.

Their hasty strides as they tried in vain to blend into the crowd were not enough. She’d been spotted by a group of wizarding journalists of the lowest sort. Carefully, she turned, and began to walk back towards the exits once again.

Ellen whispered, “Should we just walk right past? There’s a huge crowd! Can’t we just tell them off?”

“You do not want to talk to those men.” Hermione made a quick turn down a eerily vacant road, gripped her wand inside her sleeve, and calculating in her head, asked, “Are they still back there?”

The wizards had put a notice-me-not on this entire portion of the road, so as to corner her away from the muggles. It was as bold as they had ever been. They smelled a story, Hermione guessed. She wasn’t going to give them a pound of flesh for it. There would be no blood in the water today.

“Yes.” Ellen looked quickly back towards them. “What’s going on? Why are they following us? Have one of them hurt you, Ninny?”

“Not one of them has touched me.” They didn’t dare. She was fast and lethal with her wand, and even if she had taken mercy on them, Harry wouldn’t hesitate to throw the book at them and hand them over to Ron’s custody. Or, worse yet, Harry would kill the bastard and Ron would make the charges go away, with the help of his buddies doing the investigation. “Don’t ask questions, just walk.”

They walked, and as they did, Hermione heard the snaps of analog cameras. She spotted a red phone booth, and knew she had no choice. Her fate was sealed when the one man called out, “Your Grace, would you care to make a statement to the paper? Is there a reason you’ve removed your engagement ring?”

Hermione’s grip on Ellen grew bloodless. She couldn’t get them to safety. She had only one choice. She had to seek refuge in the Ministry, which made Hermione’s blood boil. She would rather die than go...

Hermione sobered. Never, never, would she risk this baby, and she’d taken off her engagement ring to hide it from Ellen. It had an emergency portkey that would take her directly to Harry. How she wished she had it.

Ellen cried, “What’s he talking about? Hermione, why are we running from him?” Ellen’s glance said it all. They think you’re someone else. You’re not a duchess.

Hermione walked faster, avoiding Ellen’s eyes. The phone booth was directly ahead, albeit a ways away.

Another added, boldly, “Hermione, would you care to confirm or deny your pregnancy? Is your husband displeased? Is that why you’ve removed your ring? How does he feel about the baby?”

Ellen gasped, and tried to turn around. Hermione wouldn’t let her. She hissed, “Say nothing!”

They were almost back to the crowds that were bumping up against the notice-me-not's barrier.
Shoddy spellwork.

Hermione knew if she could get there within the next minute, she would be okay. Her mind was focused on her goal. If they could just get to the end of this road, she could make up her mind on the best course of action.

The third man called out, “Who is your friend, Your Grace? What’s your name? What’s your name, love, turn round!”

He tried to get around them, to get a view of Ellen’s face. Hermione wouldn’t let them get Ellie. Not Ellie. Ellen was good and kind and believed the world was a fun place to be, and Hermione would let nothing, nothing, take that from her cousin. Certainly not a cretin from the press. Hermione all but ran, pulling Ellen along.

Hermione shoved Ellen, hard, first into the booth, and entered, feeling the locking charm and the notice-me-not fall into place as she fumbled to slam the door. The press knew where she had gone, but at least she could do this in broad daylight with hundreds of muggle about the area.

Breathing hard, she picked up the handle just as she felt a photographer brush up against the booth, and say, “The door’s got to be here somewhere.”

Hermione pressed the numbers 62442 in quick succession, and pressed her own access code after that, knowing they wouldn’t let her go to the atrium with a muggle aboard without special access. The booth dropped.

Hermione sighed in relief as Ellen screamed.

When the door opened, Hermione stepped out, and Ellen screamed, “What the bloody fucking motherfucker shit is going, Hermione?”

People in the hallway stared. Ellen had put every bit of profanity laced invective she could in that statement. Hermione carried it off, and simply smiled, “Not now.”

The same people that had been staring jolted into action. Some looked away. Some stared directly on, slipping quickly out of her way. Most nodded in differential greeting. And yet, behind her back they gossiped and mocked. Hermione held herself as though a valkyrie queen.

She fisted her hand in her skirts, and led a seething Ellen towards the WC block. Sirius was likely in his office. She didn’t know where else to go. Hermione knew Ron was on assignment, and he’d go ballistic if he knew. The press had been almost nice today, given that they hadn’t asked her if the baby was Ron or Sirius’s child. But coming after Ellen was the last straw.

Looking every inch a Duchess, she sailed right past the security, with a soft nod to the wizard at the desk, and led Ellen with only a few gawkers to Sirius’s office. She stopped in the ante-chamber. “I’d like to see Lord Black at once.”

Ellen squeaked.

The secretary, a new one, because Matilda was off on holiday like a sensible person, looked down her nose at the muggle-dressed women before her. “I’m afraid he’s detained. You’ll need to make an appointment. He’s several openings in May.”

She reached for her book, and smiled smugly. She knew who Hermione was, what she was, who she was to Sirius, and still, she treated her with worse manners than Hermione had ever treated anyone.
Hermione did not want to pull her wand and scare Ellen further, so she simply said, “I’m going back now. Do come along, Ellen.”

The secretary spluttered. She blocked the door to Sirius’s offices. “You cannot do that.”

Hermione had had just about enough. She sighed. “I will explain this once. My name is Hermione Jane Potter. I remind you that I am the Witch who Won. Witches far better than you have cowered on their knees before me, and still others run at the slightest mention of my name.” Hermione smiled, “Now. Will you move yourself, or is your seasonal job worth a scandal?”

She scowled, “Well, I never.” She stepped aside, all the same.

Hermione smiled, “Io Saturnalia.”

She led Ellen from the room, and, facade falling away, bolted to Sirius’ office. The man in question was hard at work. When Hermione opened the door, he called out, “Dolly, I told you I am not to be disturbed!”

Hermione stepped inside, urging Ellen on. “They came after Ellen.” Hermione seethed, “Those amoebas came after my b—” Hermione stopped herself in time, though she saw Ellen’s eyes go wide, “Family. I just need to hide out a while, and I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You’re always welcome here.” Sirius affirmed, “Please, girls, sit. I think we may require reinforcements. I’ll…”

“No!” Hermione insisted, “Harry’s got to get on with the cultural attache. I can’t interrupt him. He’s worked too hard to leave him to listen to his wife cry in a corner.”

“Let him choose, Hermione.” Sirius left the room with those words, the door clicking with finality behind him. They all knew, even Ellen, that there was no choice to be made in Harry’s mind.

Hermione inhaled a few times, letting her pulse slow.

After a long few moments, Ellen looked at the person in the chair across from hers in the sitting area of the Lord Black office, which was not to be confused with the sitting room in his chambers. “Hermione. Is now the bloody time?”

Hermione felt resignation. She had, for so long, wanted to let Ellen in on the truth, but Ellen’s ignorance had been her safety for so long. Hermione had, for so long, prayed it would be enough to keep her from Death Eaters. “Ellen, to make a long story short, I’m a witch. I have magical powers. I’m theoretically one of the most powerful people on the planet.”

Ellen ventured, as though she shouldn’t be running from the room and screaming. “And you’re pregnant?”

“I just found out.” Hermione hastened, knowing that that lack of sharing had the potential to hurt Ellen the most. She knew the whole magical freak might be a forgivable secret, but keeping her other news from Ellen might not be so easily understood, “Literally just.”

Ellen looked positively green. “I’m going to throw up.”

Knowing full well of Ellen’s accuracy in predicting that outcome, Hermione summoned the paper bin from Sirius’s desk. It was empty. Hermione took it from where it floated before her, washed it wandlessly and silently with a quick cleansing spell, and passed it her cousin, “I know the baby is a bit shocking, but I’m really happy.”
“You think I want to vomit because you had procreative intercourse?” Ellen stared at her, “Hermione, I want to kill you because of that lift from hell.” So saying, she did just that. Hermione was glad breakfast had been hours ago, because Ellen brought up everything in her stomach and yet more bile.

In between retching, she looked up at Hermione, eyes watering and face green, “Are we in an alternate dimension?”

“Don’t be silly.” Hermione soothed, “There’s no such thing as alternate dimensions. We’re only underground. Under the Palace of Westminster, actually.”

“Silly!” She cried, “The witch who can move bins with her brain thinks I’m silly for asking about alternate dimensions.”

Here, Ellen retched yet again, and then said, “Next you’ll have me committed for asking about Werewolves.”

“Oh, were-people are very common.” Hermione reached into her clutch, and removed a tiny square of fabric, which she enlarged and watched as it became a flannel monogramed LER, with a tiny duck on it. Finally taking her wand, she soaked the cloth gently with a silently focused aguamenti. “Remus has a potion, it’s all very calm.”

Ellen set the bin down by her feet. The poor girl looked washed out, but not longer green. Quickly, Hermione banished her cousin’s regurgitation. “Your father-in-law is a werewolf?”

Rather than explain their complicated family, Hermione primly folded over the flannel she carried around for Teddy’s sake, and passed it to her cousin, “Harry calls him his Moony.”

Ellen’s jaw went slack. With a smile, Hermione wandlessly sent an air purifying spell around the room, returned the bin to its location, no worse for the wear, and admonished her cousin, “Wash your mouth, El, before that flannel goes cold.”

Ellen took it, touched the cloth to her face.

It was still steaming.

It was clear that when Harry came into the room, Ellen was looking at him in a new way. It wasn’t that Hermione blamed her. Before, she had met the slightly strange cousin-in-law. Now, she was meeting the warrior who was on alert, and the husband who felt genuine worry for his wife, to say nothing of seeing a man she had once assumed to be like her, as non-mundane.

Hermione explained their adventure quickly. Sirius’s brows rose. “Hermione, what were you thinking, gadding off to Westminster without a thought?”

“I am entitled to do exactly as I like.” Hermione snapped, “And if I want to swan about Westminster with my hair uncovered and my wand out, I shall.”

Harry rolled his eyes gently, in recognition of her temper.

Sirius lectured like some agony aunt, “You could have fallen, you could have been…”

“It was my idea.” Ellen insisted. “Stop trying to clean up my messes, Hermione. It was my choice, my fault.”
“I chose to go.” Hermione returned, “I had fun, apart from the last bit.” She tried to stand, but was detained by the wizard to her left, “I’m fine now. You’re okay, Ellen, we’ll take a standard lift this time.”

Ellen swallowed.

“Hermione.” Harry cut in, from where he’d perched on the arm of her chair. His hand was running over her back. Hermione didn’t feel she needed soothing, but it was nice. “Don’t run.”

“They came after Ellen.” Hermione seethed, looking around the small group, wanting them to understand what that felt like. It felt like war. It felt like her very life was on the line, but only worse, because it was Ellen at risk. “They came after Ellen. I was so close to keeping her safe. I just wanted her to get through the war, and she did, and now this is the reason she’s not safe.” Tears filled her eyes. “And I just cry all the time, but it’s true. They came after Ellie.”

“Mea Domina, they’re not Death Eaters.” Harry said, letting her burrow into his side, pressing her face into the softness of his dress shirt, “You had your wand. You were safe. Ellen was, too. It was those reporters who should be worried.”

“I didn’t want to pull it.” Hermione swallowed, “I just…wanted to get away. I didn’t want to hurt them, but if I had pulled my wand, I know I would have killed them. They would be dead. I can’t kill again. But for Ellen, I would have done so without blinking.

Hermione shuddered, reigning her emotions in. “They just feel like Death Eaters.”

“I know.” Harry admitted.

Sirius agreed, “We all do, Bunny.”

Hermione wiped her eyes. Ellen didn’t know.

Ellen didn’t.

And Hermione couldn’t keep her safe in the dark any longer. Hermione’s stomach twisted. The light was a scary place to dwell.

Two hours later, Ellen Brown tapped her toes against the floor in Ninny’s private sitting room. There were stacks of books everywhere. The books all looked blank to her, though now Ellen knew that just because they looked blank didn’t mean they were actually so. “Some library you’ve got.”

Hermione sighed. “The library’s that way.”

Ellen had made her swear that she wouldn’t keep another secret, and it seemed to Ellen that Hermione was keeping her word.

So much of Hermione’s life made sense now that Hermione had done her best to explain. Ellen felt sick at the very thought of her Ninny fighting in a war. But she had, and she was the Witch who Won.

She had seen the fire in her eyes, the controlled burn of the fighter, when she’d talked to that secretary. Truthfully, Ellen had almost wee’d herself, seeing Hermione so easily, so naturally, take charge like that, as though the woman was an ant on her shoe, and she knew it.
She’d seen the calm and cool decisive actions in getting Helen to safety. She had seen Hermione then, and believed every word, little as she knew about it, of Hermione’s role in the wizarding war. She had seen her control in keeping Ellen well, until Sirius and Harry returned. Then and only then had Ninny become upset, and not even for herself. It was like she was used to this treatment, as though she believed it when she said that the press had been nice.

Nice.

Somehow, that statement amongst all the others made Ellen’s heart break. Ninny wasn’t stupid. She wasn’t simple about the world around her. She was lying to keep Ellen safe. She had lied for years to the entire family, not because she was strange, but because she had a fundamental fear for their lives. Even now, she tried to downplay her own pain, her own experiences, to shield Ellen from things that no one, least of all Hermione, should have ever faced.

Ellen knew she didn’t have the full story, but it was enough. Hermione sat as though there was a steel rod in her spine, but Ellen knew she was worn, pale, and exhausted. She was about to tell Hermione to go and get some rest, and Ellen would play with Crooky, who was evidently not actually a housecat. She still thought he was brilliant, and now she knew it to be true.

One of the people milling about knocked on the door. Ellen watched as a pale green being, not a human, Ellen supposed, enter. She smiled at Ellen, who was unabashedly staring at her long grey skirt and white shirtwaist that looked like something clear out of *Bramwell*. She had greeted them when Hermione had floo’d home.

“Ma’am.” The being insisted, firmly but not with difference, “Lunch is served. Would you care to eat in the small parlor, or shall I bring it here on a tray?”

Hermione blinked. “Whatever Ellen wants is fine, Petra. I imagine she wants to see something of the Foundry. Just please escort her back when she’s finished her meal.”

Ellen fully intended to object. She didn’t want to eat alone. Furthermore, Hermione had a reason to eat. She was too thin for her frame. She looked so, so, so very depleted in some way that Ellen couldn’t explain.

The green being, Petra, beat her to it. “That would be very unwise, Your Grace. You must think of others at this time.”

“The Italian ambassador is coming for dinner.” Hermione noted, and Ellen did not let herself think of Harry's jokes about his name being on the back of the chair at dinner, “It would be unwise to eat now. For the first time, I actually feel ill, and I’m not sure if it’s my nervous system or not. I’m tired, and, truly, just because you phrase it nicely, doesn’t mean I don’t fully know who you’re referencing. I assure you they have no opinion.”

Ellen was through with this, totally done. “Hermione. I understand your need for space, but you do not need to be alone in your head right now.”

If it was thing her parent’s divorce, and her father’s violence had taught her, it was that fact. Ellen also knew that sometimes, you just needed someone to marshall you. Hermione had done that for her today, Aunt Helen had done it for her long ago, and now, Ellen was going to begin to return the favor.

“Get up.” Ellen insisted, “And show me to this small parlor, because this house is bloody massive and magical travel makes me sick.”
Hermione sighed, and reached for the stick Ellen knew now to be her wand. She glanced at Petra, “Please inform Fella that dinner will be in twenty minutes. I promised Ellen I’d show her my closets.”

Ellen knew that in many, many, old houses, closets were not a thing. Thereby, she figured that Hermione stored whatever she called a complete wardrobe.

“Very well.” Petra replied, as though she didn’t much care, though she knew full that she’d gotten her boss to see sense. Before Ellen knew what she was about, the being had popped away, literally with the soft sound of a bubble popping as she left the room. Well, disappeared.

Ellen’s jaw fell open. “Can you do that, too?”

“Yes.” Hermione informed her, “But you’d hate it. It feels like being sucked through a straw and spat out.” She shook cat hair off of her tartan skirt, “Though there, then.”

Ellen noticed a door on the wall and pushed it open. Gas lights spluttered to life around her, and Ellen’s jaw dropped. There were clothes, clothes, and more clothes, everywhere.

Ellen slapped her cousin with her hands, a flailing motion that was half shock and half chastisement. “You bitch. You’d better let me borrow your clothes.”

Hermione arched an eyebrow at her as Ellen made a beeline for the rack with the evening dresses on it. Clearly, they had entered the closet via the back end, because in the distance Ellen saw all manner of clothing that seemed far more suited to Hermione.

Ellen pulled her hand away from the lace that seemed magical to Ellen. Now that she knew about actual magic, she wondered if said lace was in fact magical. The new sartorial options raced through Ellen’s brain. “What, it’s not like you’ll fit any of them. Seems a waste to buy all these clothes and find yourself in the pudding club within months of your wedding.”

Hermione’s smile turned predatory. “36 days, actually.”

Ellen blinked, “What?” She had to tear her mind away from wandering back towards the farthest wall. Up this way, there were dresses and skirts and suits and God knew what else.

Hermione replied, “You asked me how many months,” Hermione stressed the word, leading Ellen to understand that there had been but one month to consider, “There were between my wedding and conception. It’ll eventually be speculated upon by the press, so you might as well know.”

“Jesus Christ, Hermione.” Ellen shuddered theatrically, “Number one, the press is fucked up. Number two, I don’t ever want to hear anything like that again. I’d rather the good details, thank you.”

“Sorry.” Hermione said, watching Ellen as she took in the closets. “When you want a copy, I’ll try to find you a non-magical version of a very sound reference book.”

“Wait.” Ellen paused, and rotated fully around to face her cousin, “There’s sex magic?”

Hermione’s smile was absolutely horrifying in the depth of knowledge it conveyed, and the sheer delight that danced in her eyes, “Ellie, there’s magic for everything.”

Ellen decided then and there that even if she couldn’t do magic, Ninny could, and she was going to benefit from this stroke of luck. After all, what were cousins truly for, if not to sponge off of each other’s accomplishments and, Ellen looked around the vast trove of clothing, closets?
Under fair use guidelines, I borrowed this Daily Lararium Rite, which also includes links to translations. Find it here.

I have a bit of background info on Ember Days, but honestly? The best introduction? Wikipedia. They include this rhyme which I memorized a long time ago. It was in a textbook I stumbled upon at one point at one of those junk tables at a bazaar. I didn't buy it though, as well as being on wikipedia.

Dant Crux, Lucia, Cineres, Charismata Dia
Ut sit in angariā quarta sequens feria

There's an old English rhyme which is easier to remember, too:
"Fasting days and Emberings be
Lent, Whitsun, Holyrood, and Lucie."

Purga mentem. Purga carnem. Purga animum. Ita est! = Purify my mind, Purify my body, Purify my heart. It is so.

I humbly and respectfully borrowed it from the Roman revivalist group, Nova Romana. It's their purification ritual, and not mine. I also borrowed the idea of a sacarium from the ones I've seen and used. It's technically only for consecrated things, but I feel like Hermione's use of it to clean her hands fits in well with the tenuous relationship between the rituals and the church. Technically, today, the sacarium can be and is used for ablutions, which is what Hermione is technically doing, just for a ritual known only to wizards at present.

Amabo te is one of my favorite latin expressions. They didn't have one way of saying please, and in fact had several, many of which can be learned about via google. Amabo te literally means "I shall love you."
I enjoyed translating it as, "I shall love you, (if) you ___________" but I always got told right off for that because I was a teenager about it.
So perhaps Hermione is at once saying both "Please." and saying, "I shall love you."
Te amō is simply = I love you.
More to the point Hermione means, "I do love you." In other words, the love she feels isn't the same as it will always be, but it is there. She does feel love.
Hey babe, your hair's alright! Hey babe, let's stay out tonight!

Chapter Summary

Title comes from this David Bowie track of awesomeness

or

Tonight, I'm gonna have myself a real good time...

or

IO SATURNALIA!!

Seriously. It's Saturnalia. Grab yourself a pair of headphones, and crank up the volume. There's music in this chapter!! (There won't be again, but you can't write a clubbing scene without some musical inspiration, okay? I don't care if it's not club music. Sirius Black gives no fucks. He likes what he likes, okay?).

Chapter Notes

Lots and lots of links. Clothes at the top today.

Hermione's Hairpiece. This is the closest actual one I could find online. Hers is silver, and metal. Charmed. Etc.

Hermione's shoes. Minus the crystal flowers. Kate Spade's shape was closest to the shoe in my head.

Ellen's dress. White, because yellow didn't go with Grandmother Brown's earrings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione had far too few mornings like this, mornings in which her body woke up slowly, her mind luxuriating in the feelings and sensations of the moment, before her mind focused on the tasks ahead. She was warm and cozy in the cocoon of blankets and sheets. Her nightgown was rumpled from a night of rest, and her body felt heavy against the mattress. It was a heavy, sluggish, awareness of her surroundings, one that she luxuriated within.
Hermione woke fully at Harry’s teasing whisper against her ear, “Wake up so I can love you.”

Hermione swatted her hand towards his general direction, a smiling covering her face.

“Love is not predicated upon wakefulness.”

“Fine.” Harry flopped down beside her again, “Wake up so I can ask you if you want to have sex.”

That got her attention. Well. It was one of the things that got her attention as she reached out for Harry, who was playing with the lace edging on her bodice, staring at her face as though he had really waited for ages just to talk to her. Something too tender to be solely defined as eros swelled in her heart.

Hermione loved slow mornings, but she mostly loved the time they gave her with Harry, time that was theirs and theirs alone.

“I love you so much.” She really didn’t want to wait, not this morning, not now, not when she was cuddly and warm and the only thing that could possibly make this any better was to lose herself in the gentle rhythm they would slowly create.

Hermione made no bones about her impatience as Harry slid his cold hands up her warm thighs, making her shift restlessly. She hissed. “Fine way of showing your affection.”

Harry laughed gently as his hands moved to the satin ribbons that tied her simple cotton nightdress together below her bust. “I thought so.”

Hermione moved, attempting to wiggle her way up to pull him down on top of her. She had to sit up, though, because the mattress was too soft, and there was a pillow under her left hip. The world lurched at her first movement. Her eyes watered, and her stomach heaved.

Hermione broke off, and gasped, shoving away, tripping over the tangle of blankets and bedding that she pulled off of the bed in her haste to flee, all thoughts of sex gone from her mind.

This was it then. Amid the rising feelings of wretchedness, Hermione felt a sense of relief. This was a hateful feeling, but it meant that the potion was right, meant that, as silly as it sounded, that her baby was strong and was in this for the long haul. Blindly, she felt the spot in her heart that had been the baby’s alone from the second she’d suspected her lateness and her mood and her tender breasts meant something, enlarge.

Studies Hermione had found when doing some other research indicated that mothers who had morning sickness were less likely to miscarry than expectant mothers who did not, and those who had both nausea and vomiting were least likely of all to miscarry. None of this information said that those who did would have healthy pregnancies, or that those who did not, wouldn’t, but Hermione took some comfort in this moment.

It was awful enough that there had to be some upside, somewhere, somehow.

Hermione blindly heard Harry calling her name, but the dizziness in her mind overwhelmed her awareness of him. Hermione rushed to the bathroom, thankfully only feet away, and cast her accounts into the tub. The dizziness passed eventually, as she dry-heaved into the claw-footed tub. The marble floor was cold under her knees, which shocked her into some level of awareness.

Crooks had been sprawled on the marble, but even he too scattered out of her path. Cat hair stuck to her legs. Hermione felt a clammy sweat across her back.
She also felt a damp flannel on her face after she looked at the bed-rumpled man next to her, "Gods, fuck me." She felt awful. No. She would have had to have energy to feel awful. She felt like a limp flannel. Five minutes ago she had been fine, and out of nowhere this lorry labeled morning sickness had hit her like she'd been sitting still upon impact.

"You don’t quite seem up to it." Harry murmured, smoothing back strands of hair that had bile and vegetarian pasta in it. "You look like hell, actually."

"Io Saturnalia, dickhead." Hermione pressed her forehead against the cold marble of the tub.

Harry wasn’t offended, not that Hermione thought he might have been. "Do you want a potion or something?"

Hermione shook her head. Even her mother’s friend couldn’t see her for a few days. It seemed pregnancy was a booming business. She thought she’d better not take anything. She didn’t know what was safe at this stage of her pregnancy, and she’d rather see if this was a one time thing before seeking out remedies. Once wasn’t even a conclusion, she knew, logically. "I’ve got to go get ready."

Saturn needed to be untied so that the elves could have their day of singing and Saturnalia could begin. The elves liked to sing. Feebly, Hermione pulled her knees more fully underneath her to stand, but gave up when the nausea swelled again at the slightest movement. She leaned against Harry, and they sat in silence. For how long they sat, Hermione did not know.

Still, she didn’t move. She had to get a bath, but the idea of cleaning up her sick and fiddling with the stupid taps seemed like too much work. Hermione cracked an eyelid, "I really was looking forward to Saturnalia."

Harry stood up, and hauled her to her feet, using both of his arms to steady her. Hermione felt slightly less dizzy than she had moments ago. The rush of water behind her was loud and unwelcome. She moaned and pressed herself against Harry’s bare chest, "I’m sorry I kill all the fun in your life."

With the ease of a lover and the intent of a lady’s maid, Harry undid the ties of nightgown, and let it fall to the floor. Her body tightened in the cool air, the sensation of tenderness she’d felt for days reaching an undeniable point of awareness that passed into pain. Hermione didn’t move of her own volition, except to keep the motion going when he lifted her up, and wrapped her legs around him. Her body lurched and her head spun, but his closeness made it better.

As Harry stepped into the tub, Hermione felt the steam tickling her exposed skin. The hot water sloshed around them as Harry settled her against his chest in the water. With a smile Hermione couldn’t see, but rather heard, he kissed the top of her head, "You don’t kill all the fun. This is fun."

Hermione relaxed against his broad chest, letting the water soothe her. Harry let the tub fill until it nearly came up to her shoulders, and turned the water off wandlessly. They sat in the magically warmed water until they were pruned, Harry’s fingers reverently brushing her unchanged abdomen as though he could feel proof of the life there, his body cradling hers.

The steam was thick around them even when Hermione eventually drifted back to herself, some of the encompassing nausea falling away. Her curls were limp and wet from the steam, heavy over her right shoulder. "I’ve got to go tend the Lars and untie Saturn. The elves watch that bit." She sighed, "And then I’ve got to get started on the decorating, and gather up Ron and Mum, and get started on lunch for the elves, and…” Hermione let her list of tasks trail off. As usual, the prospect
exhausted her, and she found the ideas daunting rather than invigorating. Why was her list of things to do so long?

Harry kissed the slope of her shoulder, “Let me tend the altar. My Latin’s not as good as yours, but I think I can fumble through. I’ll go get Helen, and Ellen if she wants to come now that you’re out of the broom closet, and light a fire under Ron.” Harry’s breath was hot on her ear, “And then you can go to bed, and sleep, and I’ll think of you, soft and warm and cuddly in our bed, and I’ll wish I was there with you still.”

Hermione’s mouth dried. She literally grew breathless with the want of it. “Stay with me.”

Harry’s chin fell gently onto her shoulder as she snuggled more tightly back against him. “By your will, domina mea.”

Later, Harry was almost glad to leave Hermione ensconced in their bed, clutching a basin and looking pitiful, if only to have something to do to make some effort toward carrying the load around here. Harry hadn’t really spent much time or paid much attention to her efforts at the Foundry. All he’d ever noticed that she had made this behemoth of a house that should have felt like a museum into a home, and hadn’t thought beyond his own joy to think about the monumental effort that went into that fact.

On his way out, Harry had a quick word with Petra, who understood exactly what he was not saying, the unspoken truth of Hermione’s newly arrived morning sickness perfectly clear between them. Then, he headed to Ron’s flat with a pop, passing through both sets of wards easily.

As expected, the flat was a mess, and Ron was still snoring his bed, a bottle of firewhiskey open on the coffee table. Harry hopped over Ron’s piles of dirty washing, and leaned over the bed, yelling, “Good morning, Molly! Yes, Ron’s still asleep! Hello!”

Ron blubbered, and jumped up from the bed, shoving his reading materials away before he knew that Molly wasn’t there. Harry laughed uproariously. One of the witches in a magazine that had fallen open blew him a lewd kiss as she hilariously hiked up her robes, with an absurd wiggle. Harry looked away from her before her robes opened, and laughed some more as Ron turned bright red to clash with his carroty hair.

“Oi!” Ron groused, “Fucking wanker. What has you so chipper?”

“Io Saturnalia, Ronnikins.” Harry replied, thinking of sitting in the bath with his weary wife, doing nothing more thanking the Universe for her, and wondering how he had ever been given so many blessings that were wrapped up entirely in one woman. “Io Saturnalia.”

“Disgusting.” Ron spat, though there was no real venom in it.

Harry just smiled, “Come on, clean up, get dressed. Get a move on.”

“I haven’t even eaten yet.” Ron insisted, bending to dig through his clothing piles, and sniffing randomly at items. “Hermione’s morning attitude is catching. I hope I never get it.”

Harry bit back a laugh. A Ron with morning sickness would be horrible, and Harry knew he’d never get in the bath with him. Well, maybe he would if his best mate were dying, but he wouldn’t attempt cuddling, “You are fundamentally immune from ever catching the Hermione bug.”
Ron just looked sleepy and confused, so Harry prodded him in the best way he knew how. “Hermione’s got food.” There was a spread in one of the morning rooms, with chocolate and pastries, and all manner of nibbles.

Ron was nowhere near ready. He staggered to the loo, and cursed all the while. Harry drew the line at picking out his clothes. They were all in a heap, and the heap was moving. Harry wasn’t fastidious, but there were limits to their friendship.

Even the mention of specific foods did not hasten him. Worrying about catching a disease from the washing he’d bring home to Hermione, Harry wandered out to Ron’s kitchenette, and debated eating one of Molly’s biscuits. He quickly decided against it when he saw the rotting milk next to the plate. One person per family worshipping the porcelain goddess was the limit.

Being ill together was not the stuff of romance or husbandly devotion. What was he to say, I’m sorry ‘Mione, you’re vomiting your guts out for our baby, and I ate a biscuit and I think I’m dying, so please take care of yourselves? It actually sent a shiver of real fear through him. Joking about it internally wasn’t funny, not when he truly thought about it. He didn’t want to leave her, ever, but especially not at a time when she actually needed him. It was nice to feel needed by someone he himself needed so fundamentally.

Ron scrambled out of his bedroom, looking rumpled, but ready. “Alright, mate?”

“Hermione told her cousin Ellen about most everything yesterday.” Harry carefully did not mention the baby. That needed to wait a bit, and everyone who knew was sworn to secrecy. Hermione said 15 weeks, for Ron and their friends, and then later still for Teddy. She didn’t want to disappoint them, she said, though Harry knew there was more to it than that alone. “Might be a bit weird. D’you just want to go home to Hermione, and I’ll get the Grangers?”

“Mrs. Granger loves me!” Ron boasted, “And I want to meet this cousin. Is she like Hermione?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Ellen’s Ellen. Hermione loves her more than she loves either of us, so I’d steer clear of chatting her up.”

“I don’t flirt with every woman.” Ron clarified, “Just the pretty and interesting ones.”

Harry reached for the loo powder on the tiny mantle. He hoped he didn’t bang his head again on this fireplace. Even fully open, they had to crouch. “Well, file this one under the same heading as Hermione and you’ll be fine.”

“Sorry, can’t.” Ron shrugged on a jacket, “Hermione’s Hermione.”

Ron stepped into the fireplace. “Why are we Floo-ing?”

Harry called out their destination rather than explaining that he was trying to get used to the Floo so that he could Floo with Hermione. It wasn’t fair to pop around so easily when she couldn’t. He couldn’t carry the baby, not that he envied Hermione that task, but he could stand in solidarity with her. Or floo, as the situation required. He didn’t count his arrival at Ron’s because the incoming floo was perpetually broken.

Harry’s fears were confirmed by the time they had been at the Granger’s long enough to gather hats and coats. Though he was frequently on-again with Lav, right now they were off-again, going places as friends, and Ron Weasley thought Ellen pretty enough and interesting enough to try to charm her. He knew it was harmless flirting, because Ron was in no way looking for anything serious, but Harry was close to strangling him by the time they got back to the Foundry.
As they were stepping out of the Floo, Harry grabbed the back of Ron’s jacket, letting the ladies exit before them. Ron had just been about to saunter off towards Ellen, crowing like a rooster about all the things she needed to know about the wizarding world. Harry just bet that Ron was offering himself up to be the one to show her.

After insuring their privacy with a spell, Harry spoke his thoughts. “Every time you think about flirting with Ellen, I want you to think about how horribly Hermione will feel when it sours. What would happen when you got one over and then couldn’t face Ellen?”

Harry took in Ron’s expression in the poor light, and offered a bit of advice, “You’re going to be seeing each other a lot, now. Think carefully.”

Ron brushed off his remarks. “You’ve some nerve.”

His expression smoothed as he exited the Floo, until he looked around, and his jaw went slack. “Wow.”

Everywhere Harry looked, there were signs of life and activity. There were elves moving red candles to each of the windows, objects were flying in the air, greenery was being wrapped around the huge railings that dominated the stairs, and above their heads on the vaulted ceilings. There was bustle and activity everywhere he looked, and there was one witch at the center of it all.

Harry saw a certain tiredness about her eyes as he returned her wave. He wasn’t surprised to find her on her feet. He gathered by the lingering scent of olive oil around her, that Saturn had been untied. She came rushing down the stairs from her observation point on landing, “Oh, good, you’re all here.”

“Hermione, Saturnalia is supposed to be about fun.” Ron good-naturedly informed her as he returned her impulsive hug, sidestepping garland and a bevy of candles zooming by his head.

“Fundamentals are the building blocks of fun.” Hermione pertly informed him. “We’ll have fun later. Right now, I need help in the kitchens.”

“Hermione—” Ron began.

Harry saw a look pass between Hermione and Ellen that he could not read. Hermione hid a half-smile. That expression Harry knew well. His Lady had plotted a plot and planned a plan, all in the space of a single glance with her cousin.

“Well.” Ellen said, winking at Hermione, “I love cooking. Kitchens are the best places ever.”

Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at how fast dear old Ronnikins changed his tune.

Moments later, Hermione was at the doors to her her kitchen, tapping her foot. “Fella, I told you everyone has a day off today.”

“Ma’am, you’re very kind, but you cannot expect to feed all the people you’ve coming for dinner on your own.” The former nanny-elf turned housekeeper had no bones about lecturing Hermione.

“We’re going out for dinner, Fella, so that you and all the rest of the staff can feel most free to do as you like. Today is your holiday, too. I’ve been most lenient in accepting the help of the footmen in decorating, but really, I can manage lunch. I promise you won’t hate it.”
“As you wish, ma’am.” Fella put a stasis spell on the bowl of dough she’d been working, and donned her own red hat, which all the elves were sporting. With some level of intent, she passed her pinny to Hermione. Harry noticed that it was, in fact, Hermione’s pinny. The H on the pocket rather gave it away.

Hermione took the pinny, and donned it quickly, letting Fella do up the back buttons. There was so much ceremony in this life that Harry had never noticed. He knew now that he needed to do his part, even if Fella did scare the ever-loving shite out of him.

Hermione felt quite a lot better with her modified bubble head charm as she looked around the kitchen. It was scents and too much movement that seemed to trigger her urge to vomit, so Hermione simply told herself that it wasn’t a big deal and got on with things as best she could do so. The bubble-head charm had helped her a lot when slathering the enlarged Saturn with olive oil, and bending down to untie the ropes around his feet.

She looked to the big chalk board on the wall by the door. It was a menu board, detailing what each group of people were eating, so that the kitchens might plan ahead for the best use of the resources available to them. Hermione had made the menus herself, but found that the date and the row she needed, just to be entirely sure of herself.

“Right. This can’t be much harder than making three tins of food last three days, can it?” She had done that countless times, and had survived. She could show the elves how much she valued them, and how much they should expect as their due. She wanted them to understand that her words really did match her actions.

Jacket potatoes, ham, garum, mixed veg Hermione read, pie and chocolate for afters. Easy. For upwards of 75 elves. Hermione knew that the cooking wasn’t going to be the hard part, it would be the serving. Hermione reminded herself to renew her modified bubble-head when dishing up garum. It stank.

She spoke mostly to herself and missed the gutted expression on her mother’s face as she took off the pinny, removed her jumper, and rolled up her sleeves with a sticking charm. “Right then.”

Ron and Harry scampered off to set the tables in the dining hall, and left Mum, Hermione, and Ellen alone, which was likely better. This way, poor Ellie didn’t have to let Ron down gently, Hermione didn’t have to worry about Harry fussing over her, and Mum could stop making horrible sappy faces when he did.

They got to work. Mum marveled over the kitchens, and their charming late Victorian aesthetic. Hermione didn’t tell her that the kitchens produced nearly everything in the pantries, and were a hive of the house when it wasn’t Saturnalia and the elves weren’t out visiting family or playing some game with a leather ball in the snow on the lawns. They bought almost nothing, except the modern foods Harry and Ron plowed through on weekends. Their milk and dairy products came from one of the local wizarding-run farms that butted up against the Foundry’s grounds. Hermione was simply glad she wasn’t expected to tend chickens, goats, and cattle.

There were over 100 russet potatoes drying on a table in the largest workroom. They, it soon became clear, had been washed ahead of time. The crock of butter with which to dress them sat next to the potatoes, and the salt cellar with which to dress them. Even the pans were stacked right there on the worktable. It would take a fool not to mess that up.

The same could be said for the hams. There were three large hams with their bones, which were already sitting in their roasters, complete with water. All Hermione had to do was add the cloves
and pop them in the large ovens that were already stoked and waiting for the food to be put inside.

As Hermione went through the steps of preparing the meal, or doing her utmost to do what she could, her spirits fell. She didn’t even have to make the gravy or do anything more than put the large pans of breads into the oven. When something similar occurred with the mixed vegetables, Hermione sighed.

“They didn’t actually expect me to do anything, did they?” Hermione asked her mum, who was already sitting down with a cuppa. So much, Hermione thought, for needing her help making up bread for the staff lunch.

Ellen was eating a slice of chocolate cake she’d fetched from the pastry room. That, too, had been expecting them. It had been waiting on a tray, complete with napkins and chilled milk next the forks. “It’s probably a formality.”

“I just wanted to do something nice for them.” Hermione climbed up onto one of the stools. “They do so much for us.”

Mum reached over and patted her hand, “It’s the thought that counts, Bunny.”

Hermione sought the refuge of the staff dining hall when the smell of the ham wafted from the ovens and threatened none too nicely to curdle her stomach. Grabbing Ellen, she left Mum to oversee the cooking food, and stopped by the Butler’s Pantry to load the tea cart down with dishes. Naturally, she did this with a flick of her wand, leaving the cart to roll along behind them.

The tea cart floated down the flight of stairs behind them. Hermione used the main stairs, going around the long way, because she did not want to encroach on the back stairs. She knew that she had a perfect right to use those stairs, but she didn’t feel right doing so, not when nothing she said could convince the lower staff to use whatever flight of stairs they wanted to use. Not even Fella or Petra would use the main stairs unless they had a work-related reason.

Ellen stopped short in the doorway that ended the short corridor, laughter and spell-fire filling their ears. Hermione understood her hesitation, because this room was at once very functional and largely reminiscent of a dining hall, cozy though it was. Along the far wall, there were two doors that lead to the living areas for the elves, which included rooms for the staff that did not have their own suites, the senior staff dining room, and a staff kitchen for a teakettle and any snacks. This, then, was the dining area and socialization space, where elves held birthday parties and had meetings. A fireplace dominated the wall between the two doors. It was banked down, and the room was merely cool. The warming charms only added to the sense of comfort.

Hermione tried not to look at the system of bells on the wall as a spell hit one of the bells and set it to ringing. She was glad she did not pull them. The staff were employed to keep the estate running and functional, not to serve her or hop to her whims. Hermione was united with them in that goal, and she hoped they saw her as a co-laborer.

Her chance to prove herself to them had not been as big as she’d hoped. The pies, for example, were pre-sliced and the chocolate was already on the boil under stasis.

Hermione surveyed the tableau before her. Ron was animating a table cloth, making it dance above them like a muggle ghost. Harry was sending staining spells at the ghost. He’d not yet managed a direct hit, though he was dashing after the goal like Crooky after a cat-treat.

Ron cackled with glee, “You’re getting soft!”
The table cloth ghost dipped and swirled as it avoided Harry’s attacks. Feeling quite left out, Hermione shot a look at Ellen that clearly said, “Watch.”

Having secured her cousin’s attention, she sent a windless staining spell flying towards the moving ghost, anticipating Ron’s movements. Her attempt was good enough to hit the dancing tablecloth over what would have been its heart. She’d been aiming for its head.

Ron called out as he looked for the person who had halted his fun, “Oi!”

He clearly blamed Harry, until Ron caught the direction of Harry’s gaze.

“That, Ellie, is how to use a wand.” Hermione primly led the tea cart over the table as Harry laughed and Ron let his poor murdered ghost float down to the table, removing the stain with a twist of his wand.

Ellen smirked. “But you didn’t.”

Hermione smiled.

“Fun sucker.” Ron declared, watching as the table cloth settled down perfectly over the long table on the left.

Hermione shared a glance with Harry, who grinned.

Hermione couldn’t help it. She just couldn’t help messing with Ron.

It was a perfect opportunity.

She played entirely stupid, and let her eyes go wide. “That’s not what Harry says.” He had said it, too, so her tone and expression were totally impeccable.

Ron couldn’t see the lie because it had actually happened, just for a different reason that the one he assumed. It served him right for going through a delayed adolescence when it came to single and willing witches.

“Merlin, Hermione.” Ron insisted, “Would you stop trying to scar me?”

“What ever can you mean?” Hermione smirked, and let the subject drop, turning back to the tea cart as Ellen laughed outright.

The tables were quickly set, and Hermione levitated the centerpieces she’d made over to the center of the tables, each centerpiece resting every third or fourth place setting, so as to dot the table with Saturnalian themed garland and purple and gold ornaments.

She knew that she could give the elves a good meal, if only they would let her. Hermione figured that decorating both this room and the senior staff dining room was one gesture they had not anticipated, and thus, could not refuse or do for her. That said, she got to work and, despite hiding her gags every time she saw the garum, it was a bright and happy day.

Hermione shook out her skirts, giving a bit of a spin to settle the soft skirts over her thighs. Ellen dashed out of the closet, wearing a dress Hermione didn’t even know she owned. Hermione’s dress was black, with flowers and a slim cut that pushed up her breasts, which Hermione knew for certain were fuller. They had strained against the bodice until Petra’s magic had adjusted it, letting
out the seam to allow Hermione to both breathe and keep her flesh to be contained in her dress properly.

Ellen’s dress was tasteful, because Hermione didn’t own anything that wasn’t, but somehow seemed to walk the line between obscuring and enticing. Ellen looked amazing. “You have to keep that dress.” Hermione insisted, “It couldn’t look more lovely.”

The white was perfectly suited to Ellen’s coloring, and the bias cut did wonders for her figure. Hermione shared a look with Petra.

Hermione, at her unspoken consent, offered, “Let Petra do your hair, please. She’d so enjoy working with hair like yours.”

While Ellen was sitting at the dressing table, Hermione went to the jewelry case and took out her emerald earrings, the art deco ones that had belonged to Grandmother Brown. Hermione gripped the case, and put them on the table. “To borrow.”

She mentioned, simply because she knew Ellen wouldn’t want to keep Grandmother’s emeralds, not when she had inherited the diamond set.

Ellen’s expression said it all. There didn’t need to be words. Ellen had accepted Hermione, wholly, and the lending of earrings so coveted since young girlhood seemed an act of trust only meaningful because they understood the unspoken meaning of the earrings. They shared a history, and now more than ever, they shared a future.

When Ellen’s hair was done, and her jewelry tastefully arranged by Petra, Hermione quickly took her turn. She wore no jewelry beyond her engagement ring and wedding band, leaving the slope of her neck unbroken. Petra defined her curls and left them wild and very lightly controlled, drawing them up into a simple tuck at the back of her head with the help of a headpiece.

It was deceptively delicate, its delicate strands covering her crown, and drawing to the back to come together in a loop anchored by a hair comb. The back of the comb that connected the strands of fairy threads was adorned with the Potter crest.

Her hair looked seconds from tumbling down over her back, but it was only an illusion created by Petra’s artful design, and prevented by magic. It hinted at things, rather than suggesting them outright. Somehow, Hermione looked in the glass and felt almost pretty. She was wholly satisfied in her appearance, having loved this dress from the moment Diana had showed her the fabric that made it.

The clock chimed, and Hermione hastened down the corridors, eager to meet Neville and Ron, who were each bringing Hannah and Lavender, though they were off-again again. Hermione wondered if they’d ever find a balance in their relationship. Perhaps the swinging back and forth between couple-hood and friendship was their balance, though it did not seem entirely steady to Hermione. Fred and George were coming with Alicia and Angelina, naturally.

Hermione had scrambled a bit to think of somebody who would be good enough to spend the evening with Ellen, and had finally settled on just the man. Luckily, her owl had been pleasantly returned, and Hermione had congratulated herself on sound reasoning and a solid stroke of good luck. Hermione expected him to be here any second, and she wanted to preform the introductions herself.

When she came down the stairs with Ellen, shouts of “Io Saturnalia!” came their way from the happy crowd gathering in the Great Hall, milling about the sofas and chairs arranged there.
“Io Saturnalia!” Hermione returned, happy to see that everyone who wanted anything had drinks and nibbles.

Hermione led Ellen over to the gathered crowd of ladies, Alicia and Angelina, Hannah and Lav, and quickly went through introductions. She repeated the process until Ellen was laughing and mixing with the other guests.

When the floo opened for the last time, Hermione did her best to hide her smile from Harry. He extended his hand as he greeted his former roommate. “Hey Dean! Glad you could make it.”


Hermione returned the traditional greeting and got down to business. “Dean, there’s someone I think you should meet.”

Harry and Dean did that strange slapping each other on the back gesture known universally to male creatures, and left Hermione to it, heading over to Neville and the twins.

She led him through the crowd of people, stopping as needed to chat, until they found their way to Miss Ellen Brown, who was laughing gently at some joke Angelina had just told to the loose group gathered around her. Those who knew him greeted Dean warmly.

Hermione waited for a momentary lull, and began, “Ellen, I’d like you to meet Dean Thomas, a roommate of Harry’s and Neville’s, and a very good friend.” She continued, watching the two people watch each other, “Dean, this is my cousin, Ellie Brown. She’s taking her gap year next year. I know you’ve travelled a lot. Perhaps you might tell her about your time in Germany.”

Ellen smiled gently, “I’d very much like to hear about your travels.”

Dean returned her smile, “Shall we go to the refreshment table and get a drink? I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Ellen accepted, and the girls she’d left behind with polite words grinned at Hermione. Angelina spoke what they were clearly all thinking, “Granger, you sly fox.”

Hermione dipped a bob. to the amusement of her friends. “I think they could be good together.”

“And they’d make some lovely babies.” Alicia added in an undertone.

“That, too.” Hermione agreed.

Dean Thomas was, in a word, fit. Above all that, though, he was a nice man who had fought bravely, and, given his background with his own mother’s trials, would understand Ellen’s past and respect her boundaries with empathy and kindness. Hermione did not explain her reasoning for fully trusting that they could very well build something together. It was too soon and the choices were now in their hands.

Hermione had only created the context for exploration.

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After a time, they all went to Elixir, a largely muggle club that, like most high-end muggle establishments, had enough connections to the wizarding communities to serve alcohol and take musical requests, which simply sounded like remixes of overplayed songs to muggle ears. The
firewhiskey simply looked like any other whiskey, and you simply had to know the code words to order. The muggle bartenders never knew anything, unless they had been read in by their own family.

Their table was liberally dotted with bottles and the bar was stocked. Naturally, Hermione stuck to water with a twist of lime. Everyone knew how she felt about anything stronger than butterbeer, so her choice was unremarkable and unremarked upon. The whole group dispersed, once wraps had been checked and protocols agreed upon. Hermione grinned when she saw Ellie heading to the floor with Dean.

She nudged Harry, who was all but glued to her side, and gestured to the floor. “Well, I’m not the brightest witch of the age for nothing.”

He chuckled dryly in her ear, “May I offer you an escort, Your Grace?”

Hermione took his hand, and in reply, led their way onto the floor.

Hermione had never been one for parties. She had never had the time or made the time just to be social. All her life, she had fostered and encouraged her natural inclination to look down on revelry, on parties. She had never been included, and at some point she had simply stopped trying or even wishing to be included, even in the birthday parties in primary school. And while it was true that she still had the most fun learning and working, still felt her best during quiet evenings, Hermione realized that she had missed out on so much that the world could have offered her. She realized now that she had never had any balance in life. There had never been any space between life and death battles and schoolwork for any social interaction that didn’t center around the former or the latter.

These facts had only served to fortify the walls she’d built around herself. She couldn’t remember the a time she had felt average, felt almost normal, felt like one of the crowd. She had always stood alone, and she had prided herself on that fact when she’d had no choice but to carry on. Now, though, Hermione knew she had a chance to see the inside of the world that Ellen and Lav and Parvati had inhabited for so long, a world of relationships and memories to look back upon. She had a chance to grow, to experience with an open mind what she had once written off. Hermione had, for so long, advocated that other witches and wizards do the same, albeit in other areas.

It was clear to Hermione that, for just one night, she might benefit from taking her own advice.

It was not was easy, even with the music and Harry consuming most of her attention. No matter where she was, be it their bedroom or a battlefield, she felt safe with him, safe in his arms. That said, club dancing, which Hermione had never done, was quite intimate, far more demonstrative than any of the ballroom lessons she’d taken as a child, or any of the modern wizarding dancing. There was a lot of touching and brushing and general closeness.

Eventually they just laughed, declared dancing too much like feeling each other up, and went back to the table and ate and tried to play Spot Ronald. Had she not been pregnant, they might have taken shots every time he did something stupid and whoever he was dancing with rolled her eyes or, alternatively, giggled.

She had a lot of fun just sitting with Harry, watching the world go by around them. They had never real done that, and oddly, sitting in this nightclub, Hermione knew that they’d sit on a bench 100 years from now, doing the same and it’d be just as fun as it currently was. Hopefully, though, their great-grand children wouldn’t bring them out for an evening to a club, unless they were escaping from a care home for a while.
Listening to the music was nice, too. She missed pop music, her recent acquisition of a Spice Girls record aside. They eventually took to trying to predict what sort of song would be played next, and watching how many times the muggle guy in the blue shirt would hit on women and be turned down without even breaking his stride.

They laughed a lot, and though their fun didn’t look like the people hopping around on the floor, they were having a blast. That, Hermione knew, was all that mattered.

There was also a lot of jumping around and looking completely daft when Angelina and Alicia pulled her onto the floor after her second loo stop of the night, and tried to teach her to do some silly dance that sent them all into gales of laughter when she just couldn’t do it. Hermione apparently had no rhythm.

Ron tried to show her, even, but it was just a pointless endeavor.

Seeing the futility of their task, they were content to let her go sit back down with Harry, who was nursing a single fire whiskey in an effort to not be pulled on the dance floor by their boisterous friends. Harry played gently with her hair while Hermione told him about the evolution of nightclubs. She’d read a book, and it was really quite fascinating. “…so yes, the hand signals at The Stork Club were quite complex. But interestingly…”

Hermione saw someone new come in, with his arm around another person, and groaned.

Harry frowned as if to ask her what was wrong.

Hermione just shook her head, and watched as Harry noticed Sirius and Remus heading their way. His words were clear, even though he was hard to hear, “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Hermione stepped on his foot, and sat up just as Remus and Sirius stopped at the table. Sirius spoke first, “Rem, look at this!”

“Pads, leave them be.” Remus insisted, “We’ll get a table over there.” He seemed almost apologetic.

Hermione knew that this was one of their nights out without Teddy. Hermione felt as though she had horned in and ruined their night. Who wanted to let their hair down with their soulmate with their kid in the room? Not Remus, evidently.

Sirius just looked beyond amused.

Hermione made up her mind, “Join us! Io Saturnalia.” Hermione insisted, gesturing to the table, “There’s plenty of room. Nobody else has sat down much.” Hermione offered, “Would you care for water? Something to drink?”

“Hermione.” Harry broke in, “They can get their own. Stay off your feet.”

Hermione smiled gently. Her feet looked great in these heels, but she needed a continual cushioning charm to do anything in them. “There’s Ogden on the table, too.”

Bemused, Remus sat down. Sirius was all too glad to do the same. Sirius’s gaze was almost Dumbledorian in its twinkle. He spoke, “You two are the life of the party.”
Hermione rolled her eyes, “At least we tried.”

Sirius looked to Remus as the music changed. "Rem, Freddie has spoken, and the gauntlet has been thrown. Let’s show them how its done.”

They grinned and headed off to the floor, dancing to the DJ’s remix of the song with the languid grace and the goofy joy of two men who didn’t give a damn about what anyone thought about their moves, and the confidence of two people who danced well anyway. Hermione gathered that Mr. Moony and Mr. Padfoot were no strangers to the club scene.

They were so horrible that they caught Hermione and Harry’s gaze, and made beckoning gestures as yet another favorite song played. They frequently played it when being silly in the nursery at Ebony Park, so Hermione understood the sentiment. How strange, Hermione thought, to have a song that made you think of your children that was played in clubs.

Hermione looked to Harry, put another cushioning charm on her velvet heels, and went for it. Teddy would have never forgiven them if they hadn't and he’d learned of their dereliction.

Taking her own advice didn’t mean being like everyone else, being like Ellie or Lav or even Hannah. It meant trying new things in ways that made sense to her. Hermione. Sirius jumped up and down in place, clearly having won a bet with Remus, and Hermione decided she liked that just fine.

After another song or two played, which Hermione suspected Remus and Sirius had magically or non-magically arranged to have played, Hermione went back to the table, and made her point. “Do you want to get out of here?”

Harry looked overjoyed at the prospect, so Hermione brought him along to tell Ellen, and sent a note via the DA coins most everyone else carried. Remus and Sirius promised to make sure that she got home. Ellen whispered that she was certain someone would see her home safely, and Harry muttered that he bet Dean would duel for the honor.

As they walked away, Hermione leaned into Harry, and agreed, “I should stay and watch that. I am the chaperone for the evening, after all.”

“That chaperone you are, carissima mi.” Harry replied, slipping his arm around her waist.

Hermione nestled into his side as they walked. She made a light sound of agreement. She wasn’t much in the way of a chaperon, but she figured their friends finally appreciated having married friends, who could serve as chaperones for the couples that held to those old customs. She had, after all, done so for the few short days of her engagement and betrothal, so evident that qualified her to play the role in a new capacity.

Hermione grinned. She hadn’t seen Neville and Hannah but once or twice, and when they had been spotted, they had been engaging in behaviors on the dance floor that would have had Augusta reaching for her wand and her salts. Dean, on the other hand, had made sure to be visible with Ellen, as though Hermione would naturally expect her cousin to be courted as a witch. It was funny, really.

Hermione didn’t mind being Hannah’s wing-woman, and rather thought Dean’s assumptions about her expectations funny. If he wanted to court Ellen, he needed to talk to Ellen. Maybe he had. Hermione knew she would ask Ellen tomorrow.
Harry added, “Besides, you can’t leave me. Not ever.”

Hermione knew what he was saying, truly. “I’m the very definition of a boring old wife, aren’t I?”

“I prefer you that way.” Harry teased, approaching the cloak desk. He produced their ticket from his jacket pocket, and only let go of Hermione to help her don her wraps.

Hermione liked mornings, Harry knew, liked the anticipation of a bright new day full of things to accomplish and boxes to check. Harry did not share her enthusiasm on most parts of the morning, though he did quite like her marked preference for morning sex. There was nothing he liked better than seeing the sun brighten Hermione’s pale skin as passion rose and was sated between them. It wasn’t every man who had a wife who woke with such a focus. Harry reveled in the tones each morning could take on, set for the day, beginning with the emotions and meanings he found in her arms.

When he was little, he’d liked the nighttime hours, the seemingly endless hours free of Vernon and Petunia and Dudders, safe in the confines of his cupboard. As a schoolboy, he’d liked lunch best, because it was the only full meal he’d been able to eat every day. What growing boy didn’t like food, especially ones that never got enough to eat?

As a man, though, Harry Potter liked the fleeting moments he got to watch Hermione remove the pins from her hair and remove the public persona she had carefully built as a warrior, and relax. He liked to see her put aside her worries, even if it was just a short reprieve, just long enough to remove the pins from her hair, and wash her face and clean her teeth. He liked to hear her soft reflection and chatter about the day, some consequential and some not, all valuable knowing that she was sharing part of herself with him.

When they left the flying car to the care of the barn, Harry watched for his favorite time of day not with anticipation, but with a sort of reverence. He turned on the gas lights himself, the housemaids having been given the night off. The soft yellow glow set their rooms into a shadowy sort of relief. Hermione reflected on their day as he attended to the task.

“And, I don’t know, I think Dean could really see Ellen as a person, and really make her feel safe.” Hermione paused, kicking off her shoes and wiggling her toes in the relief that not even a cushioning charm could provide, “She needs to find a good partner, and find out that a good partner does make you feel safe, mostly by being a person with whom you can show your strength, and share it.”

Harry put his suit jacket down over the back of the chair, and sat to remove his shoes. Doing so, he watched carefully as Hermione approached her small vanity table that was merely the place she left little things, and not the big working one in her dressing rooms that was covered with bottles. She pulled out the comb that held her hairstyle together.

“It’s going to take me forever to comb this out and braid it.” Hermione sighed, running her fingers through her hair, shaking the knot had not yet unraveled. Her rings caught in a snarl, and she laughed she worked her hand free from her untamable hair.

Harry’s mouth dried at that laugh, so open and amused as her curls tumbled down her back, obscuring the thin straps of her dress and the pale slope of her shoulder. In his sock clad feet, Harry
exited the bedroom for the sitting room next door, and put a record on, letting the soft strains float back to where Hermione sat at her dressing table, comb in hand.

Harry leaned against the door as Hermione looked at him through the mirror, “Seducing me, Potter?”

Harry quirked a smile, “It’s possible.”

Hermione fought with a tenacious knot with her comb, “If you somehow are seduced by a weepy version of me who haunts the loo more than Moaning Myrtle, you’re almost assured of your desired outcome.”

“You forgot the vomiting and the, ah, how did you put it?” Harry grinned, “The absurd amount of swelling and tenderness in appendages that were quite large enough already.”

Hermione huffed.

Harry couldn’t help but tease her a little. “You’ll grow into them, I’m sure.”

“How exactly does this scintillating banter fall under the heading of ‘seduce Hermione?’ I’d like to know.” She was biting back laughter as she combed her hair.

Harry could see it in her eyes as he crossed the room to stand behind her. He met her gaze carefully, trying for nonchalance when he felt so much. “Well, you know, despite all of the above, you’re glowing, Hermione. You’re glowing, and you’ve constantly got this small smile on your face, like you’ve got a grand plot in the works, and it’s going to be killer.”

“I hope not a killer, my God, Harry—” Her hand dropped to cover her middle. The baby themselves was not visible there, but her love for them was clear in that small, unconscious gesture.

“Bad adjective.” Harry shrugged, forcing an ease into the movement that he wasn’t sure was entirely believable. “But the point stands.”

Harry took the comb from her hand, and pressed a fleetingly feather-light kiss to her shoulder, meeting her gaze in the mirror, “What makes you think I’m seducing you, Hermione? How could I possibly, when you have thoroughly seduced me?”

The comb fell from his grasp when Hermione spun around on the stool, an unfathomable depth of emotion replacing the laughter he’d delighted in, only moments ago. “I wasn’t trying to.” Somehow it seemed important for her to say this, as though she ever really had to try.

The record continued to play, and Harry extended his hand, “Dance with me, ‘Mione.”

Easily, she took his hand and went to press herself against him. Harry held her hand, instead, in a decorous form known mostly to the polite dancing of wizarding society. He reminded himself to thank Sirius for those lessons.

She smiled, and they moved slowly through the dance. Harry had wanted to dance with her properly all night, wanted to hold her just like this, where the gentlest brush of their hands said so much about the continual yearning he felt for her, and the reverence with which he cherished the things she alone shared with him was seen only in the restraint found in the distance between their bodies. There was an intimacy in this restraint that enabled him to look into her eyes, and speak, knowing the truth existed only between them.
Hermione’s tea colored eyes were as bright as the whiskey he’d sipped tonight. “You exist, therefore I want you in any way you’ll have me. You don’t have to try. It isn’t a question of doing, it’s a question of being. You are, and so I am lost and found within you.”

Hermione stopped, mid-dance, in the center of their bedroom, as the last word left his mouth. Hermione licked her lips, “Just when I think you couldn’t possibly love me more than I know you do, you do something that proves me wrong, and…” she blinked back new tears, tears Harry wanted to kiss away, before they left her eyes, “…and I’m totally….totally and completely…”

Harry knew. He knew, and so he kissed her. Standing in their bedroom, as music played around them, he kissed her, letting his hands fall gently to her hips, his thumbs caressing the cradle of her body, where the reality of his knowledge grew more real by the second.

How could he not know?

She’d shown him that, every day he’d known her.

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Chapter End Notes

Example of a servant's hall.

Saturnalia links. Please do keep in mind that the author may have some viewpoint or begin from a premise that is not yours nor the characters, but these pages did influence my research.

Modern Saturnalia

Academic Text

Blogger who has a unique perspective.
God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.

Chapter Summary

"God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives." --Dietrich Bonhoeffer

OR

"And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”
— Dr. Seuss, How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

Or

Advent, advent. And like, the Sower in Matthew, Rita plants the seeds of her future. Advent and Newsclippings.

Chapter Notes

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor, a theologian, was a spy against the Nazis. He was implicated in the plot to kill Hitler, and died at their hands mere days before the camp was liberated. He left the U.S. on the final steamer bound for Germany, though many urged him to stay. He is honored as a martyr on April 9th by many Lutheran synods.

If you don't know the Grinch, please, enlighten yourself via his TV special here.

The whole chapter is wrapped up in this song, found here in English and here in Latin

More broadly, this page was helpful. Traditions Various blessings that informed the chapter.
I quoted the O Antiphons from here.

Green Dress Inspiration

General style of purple dress, though the color is wrong.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rubies are Forever?

By R. Skeeter

“...[s]een dancing with Lord Black (above), who has in the past defended her honor passionately, and with Ronald B. Weasley, (right), her one time lover.

Where was the ducal couple spotted together? Sitting at their table, nursing a single glass of fire whiskey and water, respectively. Sources at Elixir confirm that the couple was bored, ready to leave, and that His Grace only agreed to leave after the arrival of Lord Black, where he was heard telling his wife that she could ‘never leave him, no matter what...’ Her Grace retorted that she was ‘a boring old wife.’

Her meaning seems clear as a source reports that the whole evening seemed a memorial to a dying marriage, though the Potter ruby was spotted sparkling on her finger (far left), as she took took Weasley’s hand. Articles days ago speculated on its absence from her hand over a two day period wherein Her Grace was particularly close with her muggle family, and was seen ringless (bottom), at the Ministry.

Given the duchess’s past, who is invested in the marriage, and who has set their sights elsewhere is only too plain. Onlookers also commented upon the former Miss Granger’s lack of an appetite and her all too frequent trips to the loo. This coupled with the water with lemon all but confirms her pregnancy, according to our medical experts, who speculate she could be brought to childbed this spring. The question remains, however. With their marriage on the verge of collapse, will the child be recognized as the heir of an ancient legacy, or the reminder of the Law?

Hermione slammed the paper down on the table, rattling the china. “It was water with lime, you bitch.”

She had taken advantage of a lie-in today, her only task on the docket to tie up the ropes on Saturn’s feet, and shrink him back down to sit on the Lars. That had been done under the auspices of every elf about the place, so she’d gone back to bed, in anticipation of her upcoming evening at Grimmauld where the next O Antiphon would be chanted by Sirius or recited by Remus with great fanfare at the top of Ebony Park’s grand staircase.

Shaking with rage, Hermione tore open her letters, slicing through the wax with the letter opener. It was from Healer Ewing. She had been discussing their research for months via owl. Just because the law had been repealed didn’t mean that inquires into better care for witches ought to be abandoned.

H-

The list of healers who double as medical doctors is pitifully small, especially those working in women’s health care. There are a small number of professionals, whom I have listed below. The work of Dr. Smith-Webster is particularly engaging as...

The letter went on in some detail, and Hermione had the information she needed by the end. Dr.
Smith-Webster ran a muggle practice, but was a witch, and trained healer in women’s care.

She took the letter and dashed from her chair to her writing desk, knocking her textbooks down in her haste. Taking up her quill, she made quick work of introducing herself, citing her research with Healer Ewing, and asking for an appointment under those terms. Hermione made no mention of her personal interest in Smith-Webster’s services. She never knew how her letter might be intercepted, or received well even if the doctor did get it without interference. Hermione, despite her love of making notes, had learned never to put things this important in writing.

Thinking of this as a business letter, Hermione folded her letter in a very simple way, locking the letter with a ribbon seal for security. She poked two holes in the parchment and slid a small slip of ribbon through them, to create a small tie on the back. Then, that done, she turned the letter over to check that all was flat. Satisfied, she melted some wax over the flame, and holding it over the tie, she dripped the wax liberally onto it.

Again, this was to prevent tampering. In her personal letters, Hermione’s seal was the same simple ‘H’ she had always used. Now, though she faced a choice. Did she use her own H, the Potter seal, the intertwined H&H she used on letters to Harry, which to be honest were most often letters of the most unromantic sort, or a blank seal? Just last week she had sent him a note at his office which whinged about him eating the last of the digestives she kept safe in her desk.

Regardless, she had a choice to make, and made it quickly. She used the simple ‘H’ knowing that it would draw less attention and set the right tone for the relationship she needed to have with a healer. She quickly dipped the seal into the wax, pressing it down as the wax cooled and solidified. She turned it over again, checked the address, and called out to Petra.

Petra took the letter, and sent it off. Hermione wished Hedwig was not always wherever Harry was, as she would have trusted her most of all. And yet, Hedwig was happiest with Harry, not that Hermione blamed her good sense.

Hermione sighed, and looked at Crookshanks. “Well, sir, we can only hope.”

Crooks rolled over in front of the fire. Hermione returned to revising for her batch of NEWTs, happening in a ten hours. She had something like four exams tomorrow, and the final three the next day. She did not have time for Rita Skeeter.

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**O Root of Jesse, you stand as a sign for the peoples; before you kings shall keep silence and to you all nations shall have recourse. Come, save us, and do not delay.**

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**A Two Tree Home**

**R. Skeeter**

*Today is the traditional day for tree cutting in most traditional wizarding families. Rather than making use of the countless trees on one of their countless estates the ducal couple of Potter was seen this morning at a tree cutting party hosted by none other than the Groundskeeper of Hogwarts School. They were seen bringing home a massive tree, which one can only assume will reside in the Great Hall of their principal estate. This rural oasis is said to boost over 70 bedrooms. Not surprising then, is it, that the ducal couple have separate bedchambers? This fact was confirmed*
by the ducal couple themselves.

A small tree was procured for the Duchess’ bedchamber, sources report. The tiny tree was apparently to be decorated in minute ornaments in keeping with its size. The Duchess of Potter was heard remarking to her husband that the need for a second tree was ‘entirely his doing.’ When crossly asked if he was proud of himself, he replied affirmatively, before pressing his bride for a kiss. Onlookers noted that Her Grace laughed and turned heel quite sharply.

We are left wondering just what this might mean for the pregnancy rumors? Perhaps abstinence does make the heart grow fonder. His Grace’s cross expression (seen below) begs to differ.

“So…” Harry rolled over and looked at Hermione. She’d been reading the evening paper in bed, and now Harry had one question, “Are you going to admit it? They don’t even believe their own rumors.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I should send her a howler every time we have sex.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Bit much, I think.”

Hermione soon fell asleep, the day of NEWTs having worn her out. She only had her final exams tomorrow. She was glad that she had simply decided to face them head on and get them done as quickly as possible. Still, her last three NEWTs loomed large in her mind, eradicating any real urge to seek out Rita.

That girl should count her lucky stars.

O Key of David and Scepter of the House of Israel; you open and no man closes; you close and no man opens. Come, and deliver from the chains of prison those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

NEWTS BOMBSHELL

By Rita Skeeter

It has been reported that the former Miss Hermione Granger, now Duchess of Potter, has taken several NEWTs over the holiday break, finishing her last NEWT just this afternoon. Sources and public records confirm that, over the past two days, she has sat for the entirety of her timetable. The actual exams have been made public due to her having sat them at Ministry offices, though her actual grades are legally protected. Any exam taken under the auspices of the Magical Education office can be requested for various reasons.

A note on her final exam page called Her Grace a modern Mathilda Bagshot, who was the first witch in history to achieve perfect scores. Therefore, we can only guess at the following results. As yet, there have been no announcements made about her education, though these do say it all, some might say.

Arithmancy: O

Charms: O
Hermione's screams and ranting could be heard throughout the West Country. She broke no less than three wizarding wireless sets, when the gossip hens set in on discussing her NEWT scores.

_O Rising Dawn, Radiance of the Light eternal and Sun of Justice: come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death._

Hermione looked her husband, whose tie was rumpled under his jacket and overcoat. He scowled, “I fucking hate them.”

Hermione agreed, knowing there was not much she could say. Harry would have to deal with the men and women on the WC for as long as he held the title, or a son reached majority, and could be his father’s stand-in. Hermione selfishly prayed for all girls. She sighed. Even she could not break the entail, and she would not leave her children with nothing, or leave the legacy to founder. She would love her children no matter what they were. Still, she pitied her eventual son like no other creature. Then again, she knew at least that said young man would have Harry as Harry himself had Sirius.

Hermione slid on her mittens, the cold London air not at all inviting, even in the vestibule of the London house, which stood back from a quiet and fashionable wizarding lane in a gentle crescent shape. Hermione peered through the glass door, knowing traffic in muggle London was always hell. “The bus, then?”

Harry grinned at the prospect. “I’ve my travelcard.” He tucked his scarf back into his coat, having just gotten home to collect her. There was no way she was going alone, and Harry had absurd notions that she would vomit on someone on the public transit and end up having to blast somebody who got in her face to hell and back. Harry yanked on his gloves as Hermione donned her green plaid coat, and did up the buttons quickly.

And so, off they went, making their way to the bus stop with a harried run at the end so as not to miss it. They scrambled up the steps just as the driver was shutting the door.

As they got onto the bus, Hermione realized that they looked very odd together, even within the context of the fact that they were well on their way to Harley Street. She was wearing a green dress under a plaid coat, with a black hat and mittens. Her shoes were sensible flats. She looked well put together, but too thin, and now, with the advent of motion-activated morning sickness, she was a horrible shade of washed out grey.

Harry, though, Harry looked nice, the sort of man she might have once seen on the Tube and made up a whole backstory. She had always assumed she liked him best in his cozy wool jumpers and
cords. Hermione reconsidered her judgement as Harry settled into the outside seat. Feeling rather comfortable, she leaned against Harry, and shut her eyes against the nausea. “If I vomit on your suit before your meetings, it’s your own fault.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Harry agreed, too far chipper and smug. “Fancy that.”

Hermione lacked the energy to slap him upside the head or even to glare.

Dr. Smith-Webster was no fool. Clearly, Hermione’s letter had roused her curiosity. Hermione, after assuring herself of the woman’s ethics and sharpness, came to the crux of the matter. “You realize, of course, that my letter, though sincere, was not my only reason for seeking you out.”

The office was located on Devonshire Place, the doctor’s study itself a warm room full of bookcases and evoking a sense of calm. There was a tea cart next to where they were sitting upon sofas, though Hermione had refused tea. She thought it better considering she had not yet quelled her nausea from the bus ride.

“I had gathered.” The bi-cultural medical professional smiled, and Hermione realized that the questions she and Harry had been asking were rather obvious. “You here seeking my clinical expertise, correct?”

“Yes.” Hermione informed her, “Both Harry and I were raised non-magically, and I find myself unable to trust the system enough to hand over my antenatal care to a medi-witch. And yet, I am magical, and this baby is likely magical, and so the midwife route is not possible for me, or ideal for the baby’s health. There are also cultural complexities to handle, particularly as it relates to the involvement of the father.”

“Most medi-witches won’t look kindly upon it.” Dr. Smith-Webster addressed them jointly. “I understand.”

Then, Dr. Smith-Webster seemed to shift. She didn’t lose her smile, but there was new intensity behind her gaze, as though she were evaluating Harry and Hermione, “But while you have conditions of your own, I will have conditions of my own. It’s best you hear them, and decide from there before details are disclosed.”

“Of course.” Harry replied.

“As your medical professional, Hermione, my goal is your continued health and well-being as it relates to your pregnancy. If you are agreed to that shared goal, you must do as I say. This will likely include a battery of medical tests, a strict oversight of your diet and fitness plans, among other things.”

“I had banked on that.” Hermione revealed. She wasn’t about to say that she had known it, for that seemed arrogant, but well, she wasn’t stupid and even her mother had warned her that this process wasn’t going to be some lark. Hermione had vanquished a Dark Lord with few resources. She knew she could handle one pregnancy and one strident OB.

And yet, she did not want this woman to be an opponent. She desperately wanted and needed an ally.

Dr. Smith-Webster continued on, her bright blue eyes intent and made brighter still by her her crisp blouse. “I tell you this flat out so you understand that I will bother you when I see fit, and within the scope of the patient-provider relationship, I’ve no time for VIP syndrome. Out there, you’re the Witch who Won, and I thank you for it, but in here, you’d be a patient, same as all the others.”
Hermione was so tired of people making her into some prima donna. She was just a person. She didn’t want special treatment, and if this woman thought she did, maybe Harry’s glance was right and they should hit the bricks.

Hermione replied coolly, “Have I asked for special treatment?”

“No.” Dr. Smith-Webster admitted, “But while you may have read the book, I wrote it. We cannot begin without a clear understanding of one another.”

Hermione understood her point in a new way. Of course she would assume that Hermione had done research and would trust her own research. Of course she would warn Hermione that she had to trust the doctor’s judgement if this was going to work.

Hermione nodded gently. She had to become a team with Dr. Smith-Webster, and if that meant listening to the other person, she would do it for the sake of her baby.

“I’ll trust your judgement.” Hermione replied, knowing that she would do the best she could, “I will warn you that I have a lot of questions.”

“It’s best we hammer these things out now.” Dr. Smith-Webster replied, though Hermione suspected that they had just gained a bit of respect for each other.

“We understand.” Harry replied, “But you must also understand our perspective. I am going to have to insist that your staff sign NDAs.”

Hermione was not surprised at this new and explicit focus on security. The barrage of media leaks over the last few months had made Harry value their friends and family, and look very critically at outsiders. Gone were the days that Harry set himself up to be exploited. He rarely insisted on NDA’s, though.

Hermione understood his reasoning as he kept speaking, “It is not asking for special treatment to demand that Hermione is afforded the same respect as anyone else who comes here to see you, regardless of status. The fact remains that we are who we are, and that my wife and child are huge targets. You have your duty, but don’t dismiss mine.”

“It is simply that I don’t want this baby to be consumed and spat out by the press before its even born.” Hermione elaborated, “The last time I went to Mungo’s, my medical records were made public.”

Hermione did not want that to happen in this context.

“No, when I read your letter, I did some thinking. I can guarantee your confidentiality in my practice, but you would be spotted coming here as frequently as I will require. I would be more than willing to come to your home, so long as you’re able to be flexible with timing.”

“We are in accord, then.” Hermione finished. This woman was the best, and Hermione wanted the best for her baby. If she had to deal with an acidic personality, so be it.

After they left Devonshire Place via Harley Street, Hermione took Harry’s hand as they walked along, the temperature having risen enough to make a short walk possible. They headed towards Baker Street, and stopped in a cafe for a something to eat before Harry went back to the Ministry. Though it was nearly lunch time, they had breakfast, and spent the meal talking about the upcoming holiday.

After Harry settled the bill, they walked to the Baker Street Station and went their separate ways.
She was due at Brompton Square to meet Andromeda with Teddy. Teddy had spent the evening with his grandmother so that Remus and Sirius could get the last things done for Christmas away from little eyes.

Hermione was only glad that Andromeda supported her involvement in Teddy’s life. They both loved him, and to Andromeda that was all that mattered. Hermione in no way wanted to, or even could, replace Tonks. She didn’t even want to try. She just wanted Teddy to be able to relate to her as he saw fit, and was glad that Andy wasn’t threatened by their relationship.

**O King of the Gentiles and the Desired of all, you are the cornerstone that binds two into one.**

**Come, and save man whom you fashioned out of clay.**

**Hermione the Housewitch**

*By Rita Skeeter*

Though nothing has been announced regarding the former Miss Hermione Granger’s future plans, it seems all too clear that she, the supposed Brightest Witch of the Age, is not returning to Hogwarts to finish her final year, after abandoning her educational goals last year. She spent only the September term at Hogwarts. Sources close to this paper report that Her Grace was bored, inattentive, and lackluster in her efforts during this period. One student in the seventh year noted that she ‘just didn’t seem like Hermione Granger anymore.’ They add that she missed the last few weeks of the term. Therefore, we are duty bound to report upon this and make clear our concern for her.

We want to know. What are your plans? Has the Lioness Bookworm traded politics for place settings? One can only assume so, as she was spotted in a muggle cookery store with Andromeda Tonks, nee Black, yesterday. Interestingly, as seen below, young Edward Lupin vastly preferred her care to that of his own grandmother.

**O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of the nations and their Savior. Come and save us, O Lord our God.**

*Christmas Adam*

*By Rita Skeeter*

Harry, Duke of Potter was spotted horseback riding with Mr. Adam Granger, The Duke of Black, and Mr. Remus Lupin. Today is a traditional day of gender-segregated bonding and the Duke was not short of company. Mr. Ronald Weasley was spotted joining the group later in the afternoon, along with Lord Valley. The gentlemen were known to have spent the evening around a bonfire at Snoedyn Hall. Meanwhile, where was Her Grace, you may ask? She spent the day with her mother, Lady Hannah Abbott, the Dowager Duchess of Longbottom. The ladies were seen to have been writing out Christmas cards in company.

This author is left wondering. What, exactly, will the Potter couple have to say about their role in
Hermione threw the last week’s worth of papers into the recycling. She had no time for Rita Skeeter. She was almost tempted to demand a retraction about Teddy, but as none of the snaps published had his face visible, she knew Remus and Sirius would simply send a reminder letter. At least they’d learned not to publish his face from the last cease and desist letter. Teddy’s privacy was sacred. He hadn’t been asked to be born into this family, and he couldn’t consent to have his photo splashed in the papers. Remus and Sirius took no prisoners when it came to Teddy.

Today was Christmas Eve, and it was a time of joy, a time of family togetherness. Hermione continued on out the kitchen door, and made her way up the concrete stairs to the walkway that had been recently shoveled, and was repelling the falling snow with the thrum of gentle magic. Hermione pulled her muffler tighter about her face, and looked up at the late afternoon sun.

Hermione hurried to the chapel, and checked on her Advent Wreath. All was ready to move it to the drawing room later. That task complete, she went to the lars, and lit the candles that would burn for the next 24 hours with some ceremony.

That finished, she headed back to the kitchen. The elves were bustling about, tending to stoves and ovens and doughs, and paid her little notice. Hermione made her way to the buttery, and, no real way to help otherwise, took over the pasteurization process from one of the dairymaids. The elves did not process the milk they drank, but Hermione refused to drink raw milk. She made quick work of bringing the milk up to pressure in the large magical pots, and separated out some to be brought down to semi-skim, which, magic or no magic, took time. They couldn’t, after all, completely defy the laws of nature.

Hermione worked for about two hours in the kitchen, having earned a tacit acceptance from the elves. They had grown somehow accustomed to their mistress putting her hand into the work, though many were not exactly comfortable with it. She found it enjoyable, and profitable.

When Fella shoo’d her away to go and dress, Hermione dictated replies to her latest letters as she walked up the stairs. There were several entreaties from charities, several questions from elves overseeing other homes in their absence, and yet more invitations to teas, dinner parties, and other such events that defined the holiday social whirl.

Petra finished reading the list of invitations as they walked down the hall. “Would you like me to send your regrets, ma’am?”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione replied, only to realize that there was no of course about it. When the time came to begin implementing her courses, she would need the support of the very ladies, Augusta’s friends and the other matrons, whose company she was now rejecting, and had rejected for months. She knew from experience that the invitations would soon, all too soon, stop coming.

She had a chance, she realized, to belong. She had a chance to have friends, and not best friends like Ron and Harry, but the sort of friends she might meet for lunch, or see at a charity function or invite to a party. Casual friends, a circle of people who would be happy to be near her without
wanting to be let too far in, or having to confront the darkness in her soul and deciding if they still liked her.

Hermione blurted. “Wait, no. I may accept some. Selectively.” Hermione added, “I’ve got to have a look at them.”

“Very good, ma’am.” Petra nodded, and moved on to the next missive, which thankfully was a political issue and thereby much simpler and understandable.

When they came to her closets, Hermione reviewed her schedule. She had a hectic night ahead. There was mass at Midnight, and after a dinner with family and the blessing of the Christmas tree, as well as its decoration. Before dinner, there was a vigil mass, and in the morning after breakfast, there was yet another mass. Hermione did not know if Teddy waited for gifts or not. She planned to find out tonight. That, after all, seemed her most pressing question. He would get his biggest gifts on Twelfth Night, but it hardly seemed Christmas in her mind without something from Father Christmas.

Hermione surveyed her options. It was only when Petra pulled out different clothing stands that Hermione realized she was to change three times including her pajamas, likely in honor of some tradition she could not place. Just as she was about to ask Petra about it, Harry scooted through the closet asking her if she’d seen Crooks.

By the time Hermione directed him to the library, there were clothes hovering everywhere for her consideration.

Harry dashed out of Hermione’s sight, and sought out Crooky. Like all sensible half-cats, he was found in front of the library fire, thankfully not grooming himself. Harry was not, according to Crooks, allowed to interrupt any and all grooming.

Harry sat down on the floor, and very solemnly began, “Crooks, I’d hoped we could have a chat.”

Crooks popped an eyelid, as if to say, Begin, Human who is not Mummy.

“Well…” He started, suddenly very unsure of himself. “How would you feel about another addition to the family?”

Crooks sat up. I am aware of that which you speak. I will consider the matter when it arrives. We can give it back, if needed. So long as this human baby, as you call it, does not take up Mummy’s time, I shall live peacefully with it.

Harry was having a goddamned conversation with the cat like Crooks actually replied. Not one of his finest moments, but still, it had to be done. “Crooky, no. This isn’t about the baby. We can’t give it back, but you know, just twitch your tail when you feel lonely and I’ll see you get Hermione for yourself for a bit. At least once a day, huh?”

Crooks licked a paw. It’s a start. Continue, then.

“I was thinking your mu-Hermione!” He corrected himself, “I was thinking that Hermione might like a puppy for Christmas, but I wanted your opinion.”

Crooks set down his paw. A canine? In my house? In my library? In my basket? Have you lost sense, man? Whatever do I want with a puppy? And what, exactly, can a puppy do for Mummy that I, wonderfully brilliant kneazle-cat that I am, cannot? This I ask you.
“Well, Crooks.” Harry began, “Look at this way. No one would take your basket, or your library. The thing is, though, the puppy would be nice to play with, and it would give Hermione someone to fuss over. I might even persuade her to put the silly Christmas hat on the puppy and not on you.”

Crooks made a soft sound that Harry translated vaguely, knowing he was talking to the animal like Crookshanks was actually responding, and wasn’t concerned about his mental health. He would much rather pretend to converse with a house pet than speak to a snake.

*If you are set on your course, I suppose the only thing I might do is meet this animal before allowing him into my domicile.*

Satisfied, Harry picked up Crooks gently and set off for the closet, where Hermione was sifting through her collection of dinner dresses. After she rejected a white dress and selected another purple thing for consideration, Harry announced, “Hermione, Crooks and I are going out.”

Hermione turned her attention to her family. “But…” She took in Harry’s expression and seemed to understand that he really couldn’t answer her questions, “It’s cold. Just see that Crooksy wears his jumper if you’re going outside.”

Said animal stiffened in Harry’s arms, and Harry made haste in assuring her they would be perfectly fine. Harry placed Crooky in a charmed messenger bag with as little fuss and as much apology as possible, and set off for the Great Hall.

Quickly, Harry apparated to the place he had visited himself twice in the last week. The car park was desolate, and there was snow blowing everywhere.

Now was the final test. He only hoped that the half-kneazle that was charmed with a notice-me-not in his bag liked the puppy. Harry saw that Crooks was peaking through the flap covering the top of the bag, and Harry advanced on, pressing the red buzzer and giving his name when prompted.

Crooks stiffened as they were buzzed inside, shrinking against Harry as if to say, *What is this place?*

Harry did not reply, obviously, but he hoped Crooky got the idea as they were greeted at the desk, and admitted to a visiting room. The girl at the desk said she was off to get the puppy. When she opened the door behind her, claws dug into Harry’s side just over the top of the bag. Barks echoed as the staff person walked down the hallway.

Once her back was turned, and she was far enough away, Harry insisted. “Crooks, we would not leave you here, ever. You have a home.”

Crooks looked empathetic. *These creatures do not. It is worse than the Magical Menagerie.*

“This is where muggle animals go to be cared for and loved when…” Harry trailed off, unwilling to say that these animals were unwanted and abused. Crooks understood what it was to be unwanted, and he wasn’t stupid.

The door opened, and Harry was saved from further communication when the woman brought in a chocolate lab, who looked at once hopeful and unsure. Harry had met him before, naturally, so he simply waited until the girl had spoken with him a bit and left.

“Hello, Cadbury.” Harry said, crouching down with Crooky now in his arms to get on the dog’s level. His bum wiggled as he scented the air. He approached, a brave fellow.
Harry removed the spell on Crooky as he warded the door to let him know when anyone approached. Harry thought that Crooky might scamper off, but surprisingly, he sat down next to Harry and waited. When the puppy came up to him, he allowed himself to be sniffed, and licked once.

He politely sniffed in return, and butted his head against the puppy. Harry knew he would be putting this memory into a vial for Hermione. Finally, when Cadbury had deemed Crookshanks well sniffed, and hopped up into Harry’s face for attention in the form of puppy kisses, Crooks looked to him.

Harry quirked an eyebrow.

Crooks licked a paw off of the bare concrete. I suppose you might do worse. He understands my role in the household and will be too large for my Comfy Kitty Container in due time.

Harry patted Cadbury, and held Crookshanks as he stood, rendering the cat once again invisible to human eyes as he placed him in the bag against his side.

Harry noted that his ward was glowing, and removed it just as the girl came into the room. “Well, your mind is made up, then?”

“Quite.” Harry affirmed. “I’ve got the paperwork in my bag.” Harry was careful not to jostle Crooks as he pulled out the packet from a front pocket of the bag and extended it to her. “It’s all there, then.”

She opened the door back to the entryway. “So, you’ll collect him on the 28th. We’re closed Sunday.”

Harry felt claws digging into his arms, and grunted. “Yes, of course.”

They were in the car park when lifted the flap of the bag and glared at Crooks. Harry healed his arm, removing a large and bleeding serious of gouges and claw marks that had shredded his skin up his wrist. “What is your problem? I’m fucking bleeding!”

Crooks’ fur was on end. You will not leave him there. Go inside, and get that poor creature.

“I have to wait until they do the checks on my paperwork.” Harry insisted. Crooks obviously did not understand that vet checks and references would have to be contacted before he was trusted with a puppy. “I can’t abscond with a puppy. He’ll just have to spend Christmas…” Harry trailed off.

Crooks made no sound, and Harry swore, nodded.

“Spend Christmas at the RSPCA.” Harry swore, “Fuck, okay, okay. Fuck, I hate using magic on muggles.”

Hermione adjusted her covering, this one a black lace snood that let a few curls escape to frame her face, even while it covered the entirety of her head. Hermione didn’t much like mantillas hanging down in her line of vision, so she went her own way from tradition in this matter.

Remus looked at his watch. “We should just go without him.”

Hermione shook her head. “You go on, all of you. He promised me he’d come.” He’d promised to meet her here before the 5:00 vigil, and if she had to wait all night, she was going to trust his word.
He’d said he’d come. Hermione knew he had never promised her something that he hadn’t made happen. “We didn’t hear the Floo. Maybe he’s still dressing.”

“You checked ten minutes ago—” Sirius cut off, watching as Harry raced down the stairs, knotting his tie expertly as he clattered off of the last step.

Hermione pressed her lips together and stood. She brightly redirected the situation, “Shall we go then?”

“Hermione…” Harry began.

“Don’t worry about it.” Hermione insisted. “It’s not like we can be late. It’s right there.”

The progression of seeing the masses unfold wasn’t important to Harry, but how was she to develop traditions without knowing what was on offer? She cast a warming charm over herself, scooped up Teddy to keep her arms busy, and exited the house.

By the time they made it to the chapel, Teddy had decided to ditch her for greener pastures in the form of his Padfoot, leaving Hermione to tune out Harry’s badly phrased excuses. She grinned at him, suddenly unable to be even the littlest bit annoyed. “You can’t lie at all, can you?”

Harry shook his head, “Should’ve listened to Crooky’s cover story. His was better.”

Hermione was slightly puzzled, but let it go.

By the time vigil had ended, her parents were due to arrive any second. She raced upstairs, and with every bit of Petra’s skill, was quickly dressed in a deep violet cocktail dress with thick straps that she hoped deemphasized her bust. Hermione buttoned the little matching bolero with sleeves twice until she decided that leaving it open was her best course of action. She frowned at the mirror, tugging up the neckline, and frowning when it popped back into place.

Hermione went to the drawing room, her head still stinging from the efforts of Petra with a comb. Her hair was now interwoven with ribbons in a soft bun. The ribbons caught the gas lamps and candlelights, and reflected shimmers when she glanced in the mirror behind her.

When everyone had gathered around the Advent wreath, Hermione began the Christ Candle ritual. Taking the fourth candle, the candle of love, she began the chant:

“Veni, O Sapientia/quae hic disponis omnia/veni, viam prudentiae/ut doceas et gloriae.”

Hermione lit the center candle, as they replied, “Gaude! Gaude!”

Hermione ritualistically snuffed the other candles by adding their flame symbolically to the center Christ candle. Doing so, she continued, “Veni, veni O Oriens/solare nos adveniens/noctis depelle nebulas/dirasque mortis tenebras.”

They replied, “Gaude! Gaude!”

Hermione took the candle, and symbolizing the journey from Heaven to Earth, she led them from the drawing room to the dining room, the light of the single candle guiding their path. As they walked, they chanted in unison. “Veni, veni, Rex Gentium/veni, Redemptor omnium/ut salvas tuos famulos/peccati sibi conscios.”

By the time they had chanted “Gaude! Gaude! Amen! Amen!” the candle was in the middle of the
table, and with the help of magic, other candles around the room had sprung to light, illuminating
the table.

Dinner, as Hermione had known, was seafood and pasta. Christmas Eve was technically a fast day,
and seafood was acceptable to Sirius. Hermione abstained, the very sight and sent of it making her
ill and dizzy. She was thankful that her modified bubblehead charm blocked out most awareness of
it. Hermione ate her plain pasta and vegetables with some concentration and effort. She participated
little in the light conversation, thinking all the while that if she opened her mouth to speak, she
would vomit all over the table.

Finally, dinner was done. Harry excused himself no less than four times during the meal, and so,
when Hermione stood, she noted, “Mum and I would leave you to yourselves, but I know you’re
going to talk about whatever Harry’s up to, and I’m not about to be shut out.”

“Hermione.” Harry blinked at her, “I have Fluffy’s cousin hidden in the morning room.
Crookshanks is keeping an eye on him.”

“Sure you do.” Hermione sighed, seeing no recourse but to take Teddy, who declared the idea of
gentlemanly interaction dull in the face of tea with four sugars, and left them to it. Hermione
looked at her mother, an idea occurring to her.

Mum arranged herself on the sofa, admiring the tables and tables of ornaments all ready to put on
the tree. Hermione promptly served Teddy his tea, mostly so he’d stop tugging on her and asking
about it, and spoke, “It’s a Christmas gift, isn’t it?”

“One would think.” Mum clearly knew something. “He’s probably been working on it for ages.”

Hermione was taken aback, both by his gesture, and by the fact that she had so easily assumed it to
be something worrisome. She sighed, “I’m letting it go, now. Remind me I said that I have.”

Mum chuckled, accepting with grace the mushy biscuit Teddy insisted she take and eat. She made
a big show of eating it, leaving Hermione’s stomach to lurch again.

Decorating the tree was one of Hermione’s favorite things to do. She’d decorated the tree in the
sitting room with her childhood ornaments, and the tree in the Great Hall would hold secular
ribbons and candles come morning. This tree, Hermione thought, surveying the huge tree in front
of the bay windows in the morning room, was special, because it would be the only tree visitors
would see with any ornaments.

Hermione had wanted it to be perfect, and had agonized over its decoration. Fairy lights hadn’t
seemed right, not when the muggle equivalent was seen as casual. She’d needed something that
would hold its own in this grand room, and yet, something that was warm and embodied
Christmas. And so, Hermione had delighted when she’d found hundreds of Chrismons in the attic.
These delicate symbols of faith, like lambs and crosses, and angels, were beautiful. Some, after
years of non-use had been worn and in need of repair. Hermione had done of it by her own hand,
and was pleased with the result.

Hermione sipped ginger tea until everyone gathered, and Teddy excitedly got to move Mary and
Joseph to the door of the inn. Hermione watched as Sirius led the blessing of the Nativity scene,
reciting from memory Luke’s Gospel, beginning with “In those days a decree went out from Caesar
Augustus…”

When he had finished his dramatic and very engaging recitation, Hermione joined in the responses
that were required, her mind elsewhere as she watched Teddy soak up the love and attention. This
ritual was for him, solely for him. Hermione’s heart swelled.

He had two mangers to put out, one here, and one at home. Everyone assisted him in finding the perfect spot in the nativity scene to put the manger, allowing Teddy to carefully decide to place it right near the cow, but far from the chickens.

Finally satisfied with the conclusion of the ritual and the final note of Amen, Teddy called out. “Tree! Tree!”

Hermione thought it was sweet that they had put aside their own tradition of decorating their own tree in order to be here with her. Christmas was a time for family, and it wasn’t every little boy who got to decorate two trees. Hermione was awash with gratitude and love. Her family was truly one unit.

In this spirit, they decorated the tree, laughter and joy spilling forth, even when the tree threatened to topple over on her father. Finally, all too finally, the tree was decorated. It was not yet lit, but it was ready. Hermione stepped back to survey their work. The ornaments were haphazard, organized poorly, and the branches were weighted down by the addition of even the lightest of candles. And yet, in its imperfection, all Hermione could see was love. All she felt was the love all around her.

Harry spoke, “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it let the field exult, and everything in it!”

They continued as a group, “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes!”

Their intonations concluded as the lights began to flicker on the tree, the candles illuminating the Chrismons, and filling the space with a solemn beauty that stole Hermione’s breath. She felt Harry’s hand slide into her own. Hermione saw her entire family as one around the tree, Teddy with his Papa and his Padfoot, and her parents there, together and healthy and happy as they anticipated with joy the child she carried.

This, this, was Christmas.

Hermione was exhausted. She had gone to two masses, held several rituals, listened to Remus read The Night Before Christmas and her mother and father read The Grinch who Stole Christmas just in the way that they always had, and succeeded, just barely, in keeping down hot apple cider. Hermione considered the last a win.

Even so, she could not sleep. Harry, for the third time since coming to bed, had left it again. Finally deciding that enough was enough, Hermione prepared to pull herself out of her warm bed, warning all present beings very sternly, “If you make me throw up, you shall get nothing but coal for decades, do you understand me?”

Hermione gently found her feet, keeping her world upright. The cold floors helped with her mission to keep the nausea at bay. Hermione donned a dressing gown, and padded down the stairs. Clearly, he was in the morning room.

Hermione put her hand on the doorknob, only to hear Harry call out, “Burris! Did you find the alarm clock?”

Burris was one of the under-footmen. Hermione debated her choices. Technically, it was Christmas. She decided to take the risk of invoking Harry’s ire. She opened the door, and replied, “No—”
Hermione stopped short, seeing blankets strewn everywhere. She had to rush to slam the door, for a blur of brown fur was rushing at her. He was wiggly and happy and yapping loudly. Hermione sank to her knees, and the puppy launched himself against her, bestowing happy puppy kisses everywhere he might reach.

“Oh my God.” Hermione reached out with shaking hands to scoop him up. His body was warm and quivery, and his hair was a deep chocolate with sprinkles of reddish hair here and there, “You’re beautiful. Are you lonely in the morning room? Is that it?”

The puppy rested in her arms, lolling one of his legs over her arm. Hermione laughed gently. Finally, she tore her gaze from the puppy, and looked up at Harry. He was holding an absurd dog toy that was shaped like a dog, standing there like he could not believe what he was seeing.

“What?”

“That.” Harry gestured, “Is the first time he’s been calm or quiet since we got back.”

The puppy seemingly glared at Harry as if to wonder why Harry was only figuring it out now. Hermione patted his solid little head. “Are we watching him for somebody or do we get to keep him?”

“Cadbury.” Harry replied, “Meant to be a Christmas present. He’s not very patient, though.”

“Merlin forbid, Harry.” Hermione crossed the room to kiss him. There didn’t seem to be words for this, not really, “He’d never fit into this family if he had even a scintilla of patience.”

Harry kissed her again, Cadbury gently resting in Hermione’s arms between them. When he pulled back, he smiled, “You know, you’re right.”

Hermione snorted as she gestured to Crooks to come to bed, and Harry and Cadbury in tow, made her way up the stairs. Of course she was right. She nearly always was.

But, being as it was Christmas, she wasn’t going to tell him that.

Chapter End Notes

What else can you call a chocolate lab besides Cadbury? Admittedly, my dog has a name found in the 12 apostles, though I did not name him. He goes mostly by his surname, Mr. Moose, or Moosy. Also Moo-Moo. It’s a wonder the dog listens to anything I say.

Next chapter is bulkier, more traditionally written, and CHRISTMAS. Ron shows up for the food.
Nothing changes until people decide to do the things they must, in order to bring about peace.

Chapter Summary

“Nothing changes until people decide to do the things they must, in order to bring about peace.”- Shannon L. Adler

OR

“In three days,” he continued, "I will be your husband. I will take a solemn vow to protect you until death do us part. Do you understand what that means?" "You'll save me from marauding minotaurs?” -- Julia Quinn

OR

Harry faces his inner demons. Hermione fights unseen war. And truths are revealed, because there is nothing, nothing, that they would not do for each other. Would that one had told the other...

Chapter Notes

The pain of Christmas Past lingers.
The joy of Christmas Present shines bright.
The promise of Christmas future is found only in hope.

Hermione's comment about domestically made clothing is a nod to the Princess of Wales, who made it a point to wear UK made and designed clothing for much of her marriage. Naturally, the Queen is big on UK designs and textiles. There is a precedent there, even if modern people don't do the same. It's a way of supporting the economy and the arts and being an ambassador for one's community on a larger stage. I think Hermione would find merit in that goal, especially in the post-war years. She understands that she's in the spotlight and wants something good to come of it, even if it is only magical weavers in the UK getting some more business.

Also, Hermione's not the sort to splash out. Augusta, though very thrifty in the day to day, is much like Nana Granger has an idea of how things are done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione mentally surveyed her gifts with new eyes as she looked at her fully cooked eggs.

She felt slightly uneasy. Her parents had presented her with a note informing her that her maternity clothes were paid for, and she was to report to Diana whenever she felt she the need. Ron had sent two books on defensive spellwork and the history of the auror office. Hannah and Neville had sent a beautiful orange tree for the greenhouse, and a crate of oranges. There were still other things. Ellen had given her a book, cheekily entitled, *Interacting with Muggle Relations: Because Most of
Augusta’s gift, though, most of all, gave Hermione pause.

She too, had made Hermione an appointment for a dress. But not with Diana, and not for just any dress.

Hermione swallowed, “I hadn’t planned on going to the New Year’s Ball.”

Everyone eating what was touted as a light brunch before a eleven o’clock Mass stopped talking to look at her.

Mum sighed. “Hermione, she gave you that gift because she wants you to have it. Stop fussing.”

Hermione clamped her lips together. Harry, of course, had excused himself to take Cadbury outside to do his business, and so Hermione faced this alone.

Damn him.

By the time he came back, Mum would have her totally convinced that she simply had to go to the ball, and that there was no way around it. And, as Hermione predicted, she had done exactly that. Augusta’s New Year’s Ball was important to her, Mum said, and if Hermione wanted to be a supportive friend to someone who had supported her so well, she needed to go.

Hermione scowled and turned back to her fruit. Honestly, she was only focusing on this ball because she had to go to her Mum’s and have Christmas dinner there, complete with crackers and roast and sprouts and Christmas cake. Hermione’s heart lurched.

She missed the Weasleys, missed the happy times she had spent at Christmas ensconced at the Burrow. Christmas was a time for family, and Hermione found herself missing part of her own.

There was no help for her, or it. Things were the way they were, and wishing didn’t make it so. There were no Weasley jumpers under the tree this year, and Hermione didn’t even know what she was going to wear to dinner at her Mum’s. Christmas just felt different this year, which was absurdly funny to Hermione, considering that Christmas had never been the same not after they had been on the run.

During the war at Christmas, it had simply been Harry and her, freezing no matter what they did. Ron hadn’t come back yet, but it hadn’t been long after that she had been tortured. The tent had always been so cold, no matter the effort they put into placing warming charms. There had just been something in the air that felt frozen no matter what they did, and so they had spent a lot of time huddled together, chattering and painfully aware of their physical circumstances.

Hermione looked at her breakfast plate and at the table before her, laden with food. That year, they had eaten exactly one tin of beans mixed with one half tin of stewed tomatoes. She had basically stolen that meagre meal by disillusioning herself and grabbing the cans off of the only shop she could fine that she was reasonably certain didn’t have CCTV. She had left a few precious coins on the shelf, unable to steal on Christmas Day.

They had starved. There was no other word for it. They had starved. She had berated herself for packing tea, but not thinking of food, so very sure she would go back to Grimmauld after the wedding. She had grown too used to food being placed in front of her. Now that food again was abundant, Hermione was unable to grow complacent.

Now, there was too much food. It made Hermione sick, and for once, for the first time in ages, it
wasn’t the baby at the root of her rolling stomach and heaving lungs. Tears filled her eyes, and she
knew she wheezed with the effort of holding back a sob.

She pushed away from the table, unable to consider anything else, and left the room as her mother
called her name.

She heard Remus soothe Mum as she left, “Let her go, Helen. Christmas hasn’t always been the
best of days for them.”

Hermione fled. She ran out past through the music room, along the back of the house until she
came to a stone door that she pushed open, entering the attached conservatory that was meant to be
a pretty space for entertaining, rather than the workspaces of the greenhouses that grew medicinal
plants and her flowers and the fruit trees. Stone steps opened before her, and Hermione rushed
down them, toward the wide windows that provided expansive views of the snow of the ground.

When she came to a landing, Hermione did not turn to follow the staircase. Instead, she continued
on, latching onto the bannister made of the same stone as the stairs and the half-walls. The stone
barriers that broke up the wide conservatory into parts were cold under Hermione’s fingers. Below
her, Hermione saw that the fountain was shut down for the winter, and the plants here were the
hardy sort, welcoming the cold as much as Hermione did.

She gripped the rough stone until her fingers ached and the stone felt like a thousand tiny knives on
her palms. The snow outside was blowing and the landscape seemed as barren and as desolate as
her soul. Hot tears dripped onto her hands. The windows blurred before her eyes. Hermione would
not allow herself to cry.

When Harry found her in the freezing sunroom, she let herself be held. When his arms came around
her, she sobbed brokenly.

She cried for every happy Christmas they had ever had, the happy Christmases gathered around
Molly Weasley’s groaning table, and for every moment they’d run around like schoolyard children,
knock deep in the snow in the Burrow’s front garden.

She cried for the Christmas that had broken that chain, the Christmas that she hadn’t even known
about until she’d woken up and thought that, if she had been with everyone else, she’d have been
eating.

She cried because the baby would never know that joy.

She cried because Christmas was now a day of loss and pain.

Hermione sobbed, her heart breaking anew. “I miss them so much it hurts. They’re there, and I
can’t…”

Hermione sobbed anew. She missed the twins, and that bloody wanker Percy, and Charlie, and
even Ron and Ginny. She missed Arthur and the Molly who had once loved her and the cozy chaos
of their home. She had done this, broken up the first family Harry had ever known, just because she
couldn’t find some way to make Molly understand, couldn’t find some way to make her stop
sending those notes.

Hermione regretted blurting out as much, because Harry tensed against her.

Hermione hadn’t ever, ever, wanted him to know the source of the notes. They had slowed now,
and Hermione recognized them for what they truly were: a very hurt mother lashing out at the
person she blamed for her beloved child’s pain. They had hurt deeply at the start, but time had
given Hermione some perspective. They hurt, but not like this, never like this.

When Hermione’s sobs finally slowed and she came back to herself, she was still firmly held in
Harry’s arms. He kissed the side of one of her eyes, and let his hand soothe her back. “Hermione,
there’s something you need to know.”

“Oh, God.” Hermione felt tears brimming anew, “Not now.”

“Yes, now, beloved.” Harry insisted as they made their way down the final flight of stairs, and
drew her into his lap on one of the small sofas, uncaring about the dust cover and the ambient chill
in the room that had changed little even with the liberal warming charms he was presently casting.

Hermione curled against him, and said nothing.

Evidently, Harry had plenty to say on the subject. “Hermione, I love the Weasley family. Molly
took me in when there was no one else, and loved me like a son. She turned her home into a safe-
house. Arthur never made me feel anything other than welcome. He fed me and loved me. And
there is very little that I would not do for their children. I love them.”

He paused, “But we grew up. I couldn’t be or do what they wanted, and relationships chilled,
starting back when I threw my lot in with Sirius. I was not going to marry Ginny and have you
parceled off to Ron so that our ginger children could all be one happy family.”

Hermione knew, too, that Molly had only wanted that to happen. From the time they were children,
it had been clear where her hopes had been placed. Hermione had wanted to do what she wanted,
because in theory it did seem plausible and the sort of fairy story ending that would only be fitting.
Too, who would want the Boy Who Lived to get the girl in the end? Hermione knew, though, that
they were human beings with rights. Life hadn’t worked out that way, and, even amid her tears and
her pain, Hermione was glad of it.

Harry sighed, “And they couldn’t accept this, not really. The thing about being a Weasley is that,
at the end of the day, I’m not one.”

Hermione hastened, looking away from his jumper up into eyes that, while firm and certain, were
not tinged with the sadness that they ought to display during such a statement. “You know that you
are—”

“I’m not, and you’re not either.” Harry’s voice was firm, “It’s not reasonable to expect that we
would always be clutched to Molly’s bosom. It just isn’t, Hermione. You’ve a right to be around
people who see you as more than a potential mate for their son, and so do I.”

Harry continued after a moment, “You are my family. You and the baby and Crooks, and Cadbury.
Your parents and Sirius and Remus, and Teddy and Andy. Ellen and her mother and sister. Ron.
Nev and Augusta, surprisingly. That’s our family. There is where our loyalty belongs.”

“But I just want…” Hermione just wanted to be back there, back where she had felt a sense of
belonging for the first time. She wasn’t that girl anymore, though, and she knew that she was no
longer welcome in the same way. Molly had loved the girl Hermione had been for her potential to
be what she wanted, and now that she hadn’t met their expectations, they were hurt. Hermione had
spent her life meeting expectations set by people she loved, and the full and visible knowledge that
she had failed to do so filled her with pain.
She had spent the whole morning thinking that an owl might come. None had.

“I want it, too.” Harry agreed, “And if the day comes that we are welcome at the Burrow, I’ll put on my lumpiest jumper and go.”

“You said you wanted me to know something.” Hermione changed the subject to avoid asking about the note of something she could not name in his voice, “Was it that you think you’re not a Weasley?”

“Hermione.” Harry began, “Please don’t think that I don’t love them. Please. But the truth is, they close ranks like no one’s business. They circle the wagons on outsiders and shun their own family who don’t toe the party line.” Harry punctuated his words with a soothing hand down her back, “Percy just wanted his family to be proud of his accomplishments. Yeah, he was a prat, but he just wanted his family to accept that he saw the world in a different way. They couldn’t, and it led to a breakdown of their relationship to the point that there had to be a war to patch it up.”

Hermione knew that, after the War, Harry had gone for drinks with Percy. Harry had wanted to understand, and had wanted to just be there for Percy. They still ate lunch together occasionally at the Ministry. They’d never be friends, but they had an accord Hermione didn’t quite understand.

She finally asked, “‘What do you mean to tell me?’”

“That no matter what, at the end of the day, you and I never were at the center of the wagon train, and we never would be, push come to shove.” Harry finished, “Their flaw is holding their family so precious that the individuals aren’t even allowed to be people. So, yes, cry for the friendships that are broken and damaged, but do not ever make the mistake of thinking you’ve taken away my family or something.”

Hermione felt she was perfectly justified in that fear, “Molly and Arthur were so like parents to you that I worry…”

“I think Remus and Sirius have done alright. Seeing Sirius put Dumbledore in his place and totally verbally decimating Uncle Vernon is one of my happiest memories.” Harry grinned, “Though I have to say, that bit where they were split up because Sirius was in Azkaban taking the fall for murdering my parents and Remus married his bandmate’s cousin was a bit challenging.”

Hermione had never heard him put the complication situation quite like that, and a shocked laugh burst forth before she could stop it. “You’re horrible.”

“Tonks would know what to say to you, though.” Harry replied, sobering.

He was right. Tonks had never, ever, lived her life worrying about anyone else’s expectations but her own. Hermione realized that, while they weren’t discussing it in so many words, Harry saw more of what she was feeling and wasn’t leaving her alone in it.

“She’d modify herself a pig nose and pop on an elf hat and swing by the Burrow with presents for everyone, welcome or not.” Hermione gave a watery laugh. “God, I miss her.”

Hermione sat up, and leaned against Harry, who kissed her hair gently. She didn’t feel exactly better, but she knew that Christmas was for family. She couldn’t be sad because Ron had grown up. He was happy, working on Christmas Day. He was happy as an Auror, and Hermione was his family. She was simply happy that he was happy. Tonks had always been right. Family didn’t mean bowing to other people’s expectations out of love for them. It was knowing that they loved you, and you loved them, no matter their choices.
Hermione revised her entire philosophy about family as she helped to set her mother’s table. Nana Granger was in fine form. As she passed by Harry in the kitchen doorway, who was carrying out the brussel sprouts he leaned into her space, and whispered, “I thought she was dead.”

“She’s immortal.” Hermione leaned in and replied, “I swear she’s actually a witch.”

Harry choked on a laugh.

They were being watched by the elderly woman perched on a chair as she waited for dinner to be set out. Nana Granger snapped, “Stand up properly, Hermione Jane. You’ll get a widow’s hump if you’re not careful, and then where will you be?”

Hermione couldn’t help but whisper, “Watch out, she’s planning on killing you.”

Still, she stood very correctly, and replied, “Yes, Nana, of course.”

Nana Granger scowled when Harry laughed outright and laughed anew as he set down the serving dish in front of Nana. “Mrs. Granger, I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. Only Hermione seems to think that Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without the sprouts. What do you think?”

“We have always had sprouts at Christmas, even during the War.” She informed him directly, “I see no reason why we ought to change now. Hitler could not take our sprouts, I defy anyone else to try.”

“Right you are, ma’am.” Harry agreed, “It won’t be too long, now, will it?”

“How should I possibly know?” She leveled a glance at Harry, “You’re the one in the kitchen.”

Harry bit his lip and dashed for the kitchen. Hermione only looked at her Nana and shook her head, the weight of her restrained curls emphasizing the gesture.

Hermione escaped from her paternal grandmother’s gaze with all possible haste. Mum was putting the finishing touches on the turkey, garnished with bacon-wrapped mini-sausages. The smell was even worse in the kitchen. Hermione took up the roasted potatoes, and mournfully said, “It looks lovely, Mum, but don’t expect me to eat it.”

Even with her morning sickness kicking in at the worst possible moment, and Nana Granger’s very decided opinions on anything ranging from the meal to the weather to being sure to watch the Queen on the telly before even considering eating, the meal was lovely and full of laughter. Hermione missed Teddy and his parents, but they were spending the rest of the holiday in France, at the villa. They would, of course, be back at New Year. Hermione wished she were sunning herself in France, rather than coping with Nana’s acerbic nature.

The Christmas crackers had been opened and pudding served when Nana Granger shocked them all into silence, “I must say, young man, I like you better than I was prepared to do. Your reticence recommends you.”

“Thank you.” Harry replied, his spoon half-way to his mouth, “I think.”

“Of course…” Nana allowed, “I was not consulted on the matter of your marriage…” She set down her dessert fork and turned her gimlet stare onto Hermione. Hermione stared back boldly.

“Mummy, do let them alone.” Adam insisted, “You promised there would be none of this.”
“I am not being critical. I am not asking why Helen was a radical in the 60s, only to allow this to take place as it did. I am not even commenting on Hermione’s very obvious gravidity. I am simply saying that, all told, she could have hitched her wagon to far worse a horse.”

“How kind you are, Nana,” Hermione said coolly, “I promise you that when I want your opinion on horses I will ask.”

“Cheeky.” Nana spared her a look, before turning back to look at Harry. “No, I was quite prepared to find you lacking, although I never make snap judgements, the conclusion seemed forgone. Instead, I find myself withholding judgement. I am not accustomed to accepting anyone into the family without prior vetting, but I do feel compelled to tell you that you have not proven yourself to be unworthy of my consideration.”

“Mum.” Adam cut in before Harry might have done, “Do please eat your pudding. Though I think we ought to have you evaluated…”

“I am in the peak of health, Adam.” His mother glared, and turned to Hermione, “Now, Hermione. Regarding the matter of your impeding motherhood, indelicate it is to discuss it in mixed company, you must see to your diet. As ever, you are much too thin. Have some turkey.” Nana lifted the serving fork, and hefted some turkey onto Hermione’s plate, touching the parsnips.

Hermione dropped her head to her hands, “I would like to be sold to the circus, please. It would be calmer.”

“Ah, melodrama.” Nana Granger intoned, “I have no experience with such things myself, but one would hope, Hermione, that the condition is temporary.”

Harry knew he wasn’t the sharpest blade in the drawer. He’d had years to come to accept that fact about himself. He had long ago accepted his ability to overlook the obvious as one of his many flaws.

He had long ago understood that his ability to be blind in the face of the obvious was a hassle that was simply part of him, one that he would have to work on and cope with until the day he died.

He understood this, but what he could not believe was how obvious facts he had not grasped seemed so obvious in hindsight.

Harry looked down in the letter, one of the first he’d gotten at Hogwarts.

Dear Harry,

Ron is forever forgetting to write his mother, so I’m addressing this to you…

Harry compared it with one of the notes he’d fished from the grate at Hogwarts. It was burned on the edges, but the text was clear.

You ought to be ashamed. How do you go to bed at night knowing what you have done? How does it feel to know that you have brought everything upon yourself? The truth will out, and cowardice will always be exposed.

The handwriting was exactly the same. Harry had at least five notes in the same hand, all hidden away in a packet in his desk, each more vile than the last. Harry looked at them, the words
Molly had been like a mother to him. She had given him a watch he wore with pride, even now, out of love. She had accepted him as her own, and she loved her children fiercely. And yet, she had jumped to conclusions, and now she had done something he couldn’t let slide. It was just like that time with the papers. He could understand her anger then. She had thought Ron to be in love with Hermione. Surely, it was almost understandable to fly up in the boughs over Rita during the Triwizard.

But fool me twice, Harry knew, was a saying for a reason. She had an obligation to ask questions before doing anything. She knew Hermione. Hermione had spent time in her home, had looked to Molly as a model of womanhood, and had respected and loved her. These notes, this harassment, were the actions of an immature woman who had never paused to learn from her mistakes.

Harry empathized with Molly’s thickness. Hell, he hadn’t realized he was in love with Hermione until after the War, and he’d been too stupid to tell her until she was his wife. Where he took issue with her was in her actions. She could feel as she liked, but once she crossed the line and carried on like this for months, well, Harry couldn’t sit down. He never would let Hermione be berated like this by people who were supposed to love her.

This wasn’t love. This was fear. This was anger. This was ignorance. Harry had an obligation to shine a light upon it. Carefully, he put every note back in the envelope. He pocketed the envelope, and inhaled. Harry shoved away from his desk in his study, and resisted the urge to punch the wall. He felt a chilling sense of calm as he put on his overcoat, careful to not let the sleeve catch on Fabian Prewitt’s watch. He checked the time after zipping his jacket, and headed to the Hall.

The Hall was quiet for the elves had their Christmas boxes. Harry hoped each elf enjoyed their gifts. It was Boxing Day, and he was meant to be loafing around the house wishing they had a telly, while Hermione spent the morning working on training Cadbury, whom she insisted was brilliant. Harry simply thought he wanted to please her, an emotion that Harry himself wasn’t immune to feeling.

She wasn’t going to be pleased with him, and yet, a foreknowledge of her reaction could not sway his course. Understanding Molly’s past actions and her potential motivations did not erase the trauma she’d caused. Harry could not sit down as though this knowledge had not changed his perceptions, changed his course of action, even knowing what he did about himself.

Harry knew he had anger issues. He was prone to depressive episodes and angst. He knew himself. Harry swallowed the hot rage, the urge for revenge and blood. He shoved away the pain and the hurt. He didn’t need to deal with that now. All he needed was answers. He had to show Molly that unlike her, he was guided by facts, and wasn’t letting his emotions rule him.

This was what was right, outside of how he felt.

Harry apparated to the Burrow, knowing full well Ron would be there with his family. They had a really secular English Boxing Day, not unlike that of Aunt Petunia, minus the football on the telly and the adverts for sales. Aunt Petunia had made him get up before four for a few years, just to brave the crowds and carrying her shopping.

Rather than apparating inside, Harry appeared on the front walk, and rang the bell. Each step felt heavy, laden with symbolism. Never before had he gone up the walk like this, but boundaries had
been drawn, and unlike others, Harry respected them, no matter the hurt they caused him. Each step felt like part of his soul was being stabbed.

Harry let his face reveal nothing.

He heard joviality and raucous laughter before George opened the door. George, of course, was wearing his jumper.

Harry inclined his head, “Hey, George. Can I—”

George didn’t hesitate, “Yeah, mate. Yeah, of course.” As he shut the door behind Harry in the corridor, he called out, “Harry’s here!”

The entire house fell silent as the doorway to the back stairs slammed. Harry suppose that was all the information he needed. He looked at George with an apology plain on his face.

George rolled his eyes, “If you ask me, and Fred, you should have been here. Hermione, too.” He slapped Harry on the shoulder, “Into the breach, my good man! Freddie, pour the man some chocolate, it’s freezing.”

As they walked into the kitchen and Harry politely refused the beverage, Harry noted that Ginny had excused herself and had gone upstairs. He felt almost badly that he had put her in this position, but he wasn’t going to play games. He had hurt Ginny, and he was sorry for that, but she wasn’t his concern. She should have expected him to come here. He could not yet speculate as to her involvement, but if she was involved, Harry hoped she had known to expect him.

“Hello.” Harry greeted the room at large, “I hope my timing—”

“Shut up.” Ron scoffed, ignoring his mother’s admonishing, yanking out the chair next to him, “D’you want some pie?”

Harry did not spare a look at Molly. Harry shook his head. “Look, I’m sorry to bust in on your holiday, but…”

“What rubbish. I’m happy to see you, and looking so well.” Arthur smiled, and stood to extend his hand. Harry let himself be hugged as well, knowing it could very well be the last time it happened between them.

Harry did not sit. After a moment of awkwardly banal chatter, Harry bit the bullet, and asked the Weasley patriarch for a moment of privacy. With all kindness, Arthur ushered them into his study, and no look Harry could direct his way dissuaded Ron from coming along.

As the door shut, Harry considered his best friend. “Ron, I will never ask you to—”

Ron rolled his eyes. “This is important, if you’ve showed up and without Hermione.”

Clearly, Ron knew that this was about Hermione. Nothing else could ever compel him to do this with such surety.

Errol was cleaning his feathers on the perch in Arthur’s office, and Harry wondered how many times that barmy and beloved owl had been used to deliver his mistress’s words of hate, going unnoticed. How many times had something Hermione loved been used by Molly as an instrument to hurt her?

Harry sat then, in chair next to Ron opposite Arthur’s desk. He pulled out the envelope he’d had
compiled over some time, unsure as to his goal, but knowing all the while that he’d had one.

Harry looked across the desk at Arthur, this man who had shown him so much of what it meant to
be a good father, and Harry knew that he owed Arthur, if nothing else, his honesty. If this were
their last conversation, he would leave nothing unsaid.

“Arthur, you know that I…” Harry continued on, “You know that I have the upmost respect for
you. You know that you all have been more to me than you will ever know.” Harry extended the
envelope. “Had these come from anyone else’s household, I would have called them out publicly. I
would have done it.”

Harry felt Ron tense next to him. Harry regretted the calm truth of his words. Giving into his anger
would serve no purpose. “Harry—”

His father quelled Ron with a single glance and Ron’s jaw clicked together. Harry wondered if he
should have warned them.

Harry saw Arthur’s expression grow confused as he read the first note. His eyes widened further
with each missive. By the time he’d read the sixth, his face was red and his eyes were filled with
something unfathomable.

“Merlin above, Harry.” He set the note down with heavy hands, “I cannot…”

“I don’t want you to apologize or feel guilty.” Harry assured him, “You didn’t do this, and clearly,
clearly you had no idea.” Harry quirked a smile, “I didn’t either. I couldn’t place the handwriting.”

“She…” Arthur spoke. “I know she…”

Ron, fed up with being left out, grabbed the pile of messages and read. By the time he’d made it
through one line, he’d shot to his feet.

Harry grabbed his arm. “Sit down.”

“You want me to sit when my mother, my own mother, wrote that about Hermione?” Ron seethed,
“Wrote that about people she professed to love? I won’t sit. I won’t.”

Harry beat Ron to the door, where they scuffled and scrambled, until Harry got a grip on Ron’s
shoulders. “What good will it do, to yell and berate your mother? It will only justify her. Think,
Ron. You know your mum.” Harry pushed Ron gently back to his seat. “I just wanted your father
to know so that he could, knowing your mother best, reason with her. That’s all. I wouldn’t damage
your image of your mother for anything.”

“Admirable as your intentions are, Harry—” Arthur broke in as Ron tried to speak, “She must be
confronted. You are not in full possession of the facts.”

He rose, and left the room. Ron looked at Harry, with an expression of unfathomable anger. “She’s
been talking, you know, about anything she can think of to anyone who’ll listen.” Ron grimaced,
“We found out the other day she’s been a source of Rita’s. Dad’s beyond angry. We aren’t
speaking.”

Harry’s blood boiled. But Hermione deserved his rationality, his calmness. Giving into a fit of rage
would do nothing to show Molly how wrong she had been. And naturally, when she came in, she
was all hesitant smiles and good cheer.

Arthur explained, his voice revealing little of his emotions, and concluded, “Molly, the only reason
this hasn’t been brought to light is because Hermione looked the other way. The pain you have caused a young girl…”

Her eyes were tear-filled. “You take her side, Arthur, when you know well that I…”

“I know well that you were loved and trusted by Hermione, and your betrayal came at a time when her life was a living hell.” Arthur cut her off, “To see you write such things, Molly…”

Ron would not be silent. Harry had prayed he would say nothing, but he knew Ron too well to think that might ever come true.

“Mum, why would you write any of this?” Ron’s red face fell, “You know it’s not true. You know we never were anything. The things you said, Mum, weren’t just against Hermione. They were about Harry, about me, about our family. Why?”

Molly offered pathetic excuses, and did nothing to sway Harry. Finally, unwilling to listen to false platitudes, he stood. “I won’t ask for a public confession, not because it would shame Hermione, but because it would hurt your family, Molly. I won’t be calling you out, because it would only hurt Ron to be my second. All I want, all I demand, is one thing.”

“You have it.” Ron assured him.

“I just want her silence.” Harry replied, knowing that he could trust Ron, but not Molly. He looked at Molly, “That’s all I want. Even if you never loved me, and I know you did, think of your own children before you open your mouth again.” Harry offered this final advice, “Part of being a parent, something you taught me, is that a parent loves what their child loves. Think of that the next time you consider assuaging your anger in the papers.”

With that, he turned on to Arthur, thanked him for his time and assured him of his good will, and left the Burrow. He didn’t know if he’d ever be back again, if he’d ever really speak to any of them again, but he knew that at least he’d said goodbye. He’d told them what they’d meant to him.

He’d never had that chance before, not with his parents, not with Tonks, not with Bill or any of his friends. He’d never once before had that chance, and now that he had, Harry wondered if it would be enough. He thought at the moment that it wouldn’t be, but who was he to know what closure felt like? He’d never had any before.

With one last look at the window where he’d spent many nights, Harry apparated home, put the notes back in his desk, and went to find Hermione. For the rest of the day, he played with the puppy and watched Hermione, all the while knowing that there was nothing, nothing, he would not do for her, even when it meant confronting his inner demons and subduing his desires in the face of what she needed.

After all, Arthur had taught him what it meant to be a man and step up for his family.

Hermione felt the days slow as Christmas passed.

With each night that she lit the Christ candle on the table and moved the Magi closer in Teddy’s absence, Hermione felt as though she was finally, finally, resting after the frenzy of the holiday.

The whole of the Foundry seemed to be replete with a peaceful joy. She had apparently done something good in the elves’s eyes in bringing home Cadbury, even though Harry deserved the credit for that. They seemed agog and full of adoration that she had seen fit to provide them with an unruly puppy and a baby in the span of a calendar year.
Hermione was not above taking credit for Harry’s Christmas gift. After all, he’d given Cadbury to her. Said puppy was spoiled rotten. He had a dog bed in every possible place, but he seemed to only like the one, and so Greta and Bartus, the two elves that seemed to be acting as Cadbury’s caregivers, popped the one bed around the house, whenever ‘young sir’ gave the slightest yawn. He did not chew on the furniture because Cadbury always had a toy to chew and a willing elf to play with him. Hermione did her best to hide her laughter, when, two days after his arrival a dog agility course appeared in one of the vacant reception rooms.

Young Sir, she was informed very intently, needed to maintain mental acuity while developing his sense of balance. As a puppy, he had none and Hermione could only help but gaze upon his eager joy with fondness and a bit of worry. If this was the way the elves treated a dog, what in God’s name might they want to do with a baby of a similar age?

Hermione looked to Crooks, and patted Cadbury once more before standing, “Crooks, do keep him out of trouble.”

Crooks simply looked at her, as if to say, I won’t eat him. Be good enough to accept that as my best offer.

Hermione once again addressed Petra, “Don’t let him take advantage of the elves, please. He’s not to have more treats today.”

Petra nodded. “All will be well here. Are you sure you don’t require my assistance at your fitting?” Petra asked again, “I do feel that I ought to come.”

Hermione leveled her with a look that would brook no argument as she approached the small fireplace in her rooms. “You’ve been run off your feet for weeks.”

Petra sighed and tossed in the powder. It was the 29th of December, and Hermione knew that Petra could do with a bit of time off before the frenzy of the new year.

Hermione exited the fireplace and lost her breath.

The room around her was opulent in a way that was understated and restrained. Hermione looked up gently and marveled at the moulding and the chandeliers. The walls were a soft cream, and white, covered in detail and carving. There were pale blue sofas dotting the entry way, sofas that begged a woman to indulge in their softness.

Hermione did not get the chance to even begin to sit before a witch in a stylishly simple black dress approached, and said, “Your Grace, we’re so happy to have you today. My name is Vivienne. I’ll be your consultant today, if it pleases you.”

Hermione wondered what on earth Augusta was thinking, bringing her to a place like this. Hermione bit back her hesitation, and smiled. “I’m very happy to be working with you. Has—”

Hermione broke off in her question as she saw that Augusta had indeed arrived, and was headed her way. “Hermione, there you are! I do hope you’ve gotten a good night’s rest for you are in for a treat.”

Hermione returned the greeting and asked, “Where are we?”

Vivienne smiled, “Welcome to Paris, Madame.”

Hermione was thankful for magic, as she soon realized that a process that would take months in muggle sides of the fashion houses, took mere days on the magical side. Hermione was shocked to
realize that all of the haute couture houses all had very discreet magical divisions. Though Hermione was charmed by the surroundings of the vast private room they were allotted, she used the momentary privacy to address Augusta with some concern.

“Augusta…” Hermione worried her gloves in her bare hands, “I’ve made it a point to wear clothes made in the U.K. from domestic materials. My head will be on a platter if I stray from that during your ball.”

Augusta sipped the champagne Hermione had refused. “Had I gotten my hands on you two years ago you would have had a proper Season, and this would be but a small undertaking in comparison to your presentation gown. Be glad I did not, and take your lumps, my girl.” Augusta laughed at her expression, “Think of it as an experiment.”

Hermione resolved to do so. After a second, she blurted, “But the Queen ended court presentations in 1958, didn’t she?”

“That’s what you think.” Augusta replied, and was saved from further questions when a barrage of people returned.

Hermione soon learned that they were working with the atelier’s premiere, the most senior staff. Augusta refused the idea of allowing a pair of models to polyjuice to their figures, demurring that they preferred the hard work of fittings. Later she told Hermione that no lady let another person inhabit her form as an excuse to be lazy. It worked out for Hermione, as she wasn’t about to let some svelte model become saddled with her slowly changing figure. What a change it would be for the graceful model.

Thus, the work began. They were measured and shown fabrics and shown more fabrics and more fabrics and asked question after question. Augusta had an easier time of it, as she knew exactly what suited her and what she wanted, based on previous dresses. Hermione waffled between fabrics, but finally settled on silk taffeta over velvet. She had wanted something light and airy, but Augusta had warned her sternly that she did not need to channel her inner froufrou.

Hermione bowed to her judgement, and found a perfectly hued emerald green silk taffeta. Hermione quickly found herself staring at a drawing of a gown with impossibly wide skirts that, while plain, supported a charming bodice. The bodice had a placket of buttons running down the front, which highlighted tiny cap sleeves attached delicately to a scooped neckline that just covered the upper swell of her chest.

In the span of five hours, Hermione had a brand new ballgown suited to her and only her. Luckily, she felt the dress, even from the first fitting, minimized her bust and made the curve of her waist look far trimmer than she knew it was becoming. While not yet really showing, her body was full of the promise of the changes to come. Harry said he could tell her body was changing, but Hermione knew he was truly the only one able to make such intimate note of even the tiniest changes.

When the hem was being put into place, Vivienne passed her a long pair of black opera gloves. Hermione understood that these were meant to go with the dress. Augusta had long ago completed her tasks, and so she sat watching Hermione with a critical eye.

Every so often, she offered her opinion on some detail Hermione had not noticed. The simple bell of her skirts were not held up by hoops, but by a magical infrastructure that was beyond Hermione. She went with it, though, because the base petticoats kept her warm, and the magical support let her move.
Soon, though, Hermione held out little hope for much movement when she was only shown heels. It was clear that she was meant to leave with a full outfit, her underclothing having been the first thing that they fashioned. Hermione knew that without the right foundation, there would be no dress.

“I’d prefer a smaller, studier heel.” Hermione asserted, knowing she could not risk falling no matter what happened or what it meant for a ballgown. “Something sturdy is practical if I intend to be on my feet.”

Augusta paused in her selection of her own gloves. “If you want flats, Hermione, by all means.”

Hermione tried to be nonchalant, but judging by her careful scrutiny of Augusta, Hermione knew that Augusta suspected something. Hermione thought that, once flats were on her feet, that she was being paranoid.

Later, once the dresses were sorted out, Augusta insisted they have tea at a nearby hotel. Hermione insisted upon paying. After all, Hermione hadn’t put out a single knut for her dress or anything to go with it, including her velvet cape. When Hermione wondered at its necessity, Augusta replied that of course they would be taking transportation, though she did not elaborate.

It was a frivolous tea, and Hermione gorged herself on the delicate bits and bites. The velvet sofas were plushy and delightful, and Hermione relished the time she spent in the atmosphere of hedonistic delights with such company. The harpist soothed even the most frayed of her nerves after hours of being a dress up dolly.

She breezed back home, exhausted, but all together having enjoyed herself. Harry was reading stock reports, and she knew better than to bother him. She’d check his work later. Hermione went off and had a nice soak. It wasn’t her fault Harry was too busy to join her, though Hermione used the time to let Petra slather her oily face with various concoctions that even Snape would have passed with an Exceeds Expectations.

When she emerged from the bath, drowsy and ready for sleep, Hermione felt the wards ripple. Uncaring of her hair in giant curlers, charmed to allow her to sleep, Hermione gripped her wand and lifted them hem of her warm nightdress, heading down the corridors to the stairs, slowing as she came into visibility. She crept towards the stairs, only to see Ron standing in the foyer with a box in his arms.

She hastened her way down the staircase and watched as two elves retreated before Ron noticed them, “Ron?”

“I just don’t want to be alone tonight, ‘Mione.” Ron admitted, “And I figured you’ve got the room, so…”

“You always have a home here, Ron, you know that.” She stopped when she reached his side, and noticed the splotches of red in his cheeks and the tear-stains on his face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” He sighed, “I had an awful row with Mum. She’s all upset that I’m still not speaking to her. She’s been in a fine snit since Harry—” Ron broke off, shifting his box awkwardly, “Well, you know Mum.”

Since Harry, what, exactly? She had learned, though, not to pester and nag Ron for information. Right now, if she wanted to know what her husband had been up to from a third party, Hermione needed to approach the whole thing with frankness.
Grabbing a candelabra off of the table, she gestured towards the corridor that led to Harry’s study. Ron set his box on the table, and raked his hand through his hair. That was the information Hermione needed.

“I think…” Hermione decided, “That you’d best start from the beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

I like to think Augusta and Hermione were at Chanel. You may, of course, substitute a designer of your choice. Maybe Dior? I haven't yet found any photos for dress inspiration and it's driving me up a wall.
It is so obvious when a person is not hiding behind a facade but is speaking from deep within himself.

Chapter Summary

“It is so obvious when a person is not hiding behind a facade but is speaking from deep within himself.” --Carl Rogers

OR

"We are not prisoners of the past.” --Martin Seligman

OR

Hermione decides that she alone controls the direction of her thoughts, Harry realizes that some things in life are fated, and together, they bear witness to the miracle that is the life they share.

Chapter Notes

Discussion of emotional abuse, so mind your triggers.

Harry's safe combination 1-9-9-7-9 is Hermione's birthday. He's the besotted sort. What can I say?

The song Harry hums? This one! He's referencing these women.

This dress gives us a good idea of the general tone. I particularly like the shape of the skirts (minus the train) and the simplicity of the bodice (but Hermione's got buttons, remember, and her shoulders are mostly covered, not dropped). The point is that I went in a decidedly Victorian direction.

This dress is emerald green and it's got buttons, but it's not right, either. Hermione's green is slightly darker, more forest-y, and her buttons are black, and she hasn't got all that fuss with wingtips and bows going on. But I did want to try to share a few things if you're into visual representation.

The whole thing is black tie, and tiaras can be worn. It's more about time of day and occasion rather than rank. I would have done white tie, except I have a bit of a time not thinking of Jimminy Cricket. So many can't pull it off and they end up looking like grasshoppers and I just...just...can't be serious. It takes skill to work tails and a maturity not to think of fictional characters, which I do not possess. I have met a few men who could pull them off, but a scant few.

Hermione's gloves are opera length, and as such, go over her elbows. The shorter the sleeve, the longer the glove.

White and such shades are most traditional. Black is okay. Colored ones are debatable depending on the locale and the context. I don't think they'd fly in the conservatism of
wizarding culture, but then again, they are a colorful people. Here is a pretty good list of basics. Except NEVER wear rings on the outside, or anything really.

That's just not okay. Under the gloves, and if it doesn't fit, at home it stays.

A gaudy bauble on top of gloves is like nails on a chalkboard.
Or self-important men in tails.

More about clothes next chapter. Because what is a ball, except an author's excuse for a tryst in magically warmed garden?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione did not let her face betray her emotions. “Ron.” She snapped, “Go to bed.”

Though Harry had explained his activities on Boxing Day, Hermione knew there was much he had not said in difference to Ron’s presence in his study. Hermione wrapped the jacket she’d taken from Harry’s chair, as the fire had been banked for the night ages ago.

“‘Mione.” Ron asserted, while Harry sat there like a numpty, not even having the good manners to look a little bit ashamed. “You know anything…”

Hermione was fed up, totally and completely. There were things she could not say in front of Ron, not anymore. There were truths that deserved expression only within the context of their marital vows, and Hermione did not want to give vent to her feelings in front of Ron. Molly was his mother, and Harry was her husband. “Ron. Get out, or I swear by every statue on my lars, you will regret it.”

Hermione folded her arms under her chest after he exited. She wasn’t sure if it was her chest hurting, or if it was her heart. Either way, she ached. Hermione simply stared at Harry. He sat behind his desk, where the ledgers were still open before him. He had a small addition error in the third row, though Hermione did not point it out.

She had others things to discuss that were far more pressing.

She thought for a long second, still absorbing everything that had been said over the last hour. Ron and Harry had certainly had a lot to say. It was Hermione’s turn, now. She had no intention of wasting it. “You have no intention of apologizing to me, do you?”

“No.” Harry affirmed, “I’ve done nothing that warrants it.”

“So say you!” Hermione shouted, “I was prepared to show Molly that what she had chosen to do meant nothing! And you took months of my work and made it meaningless.”

Harry pushed up from his desk and came around it, leaning on the corner. Hermione almost wished he would yell, and wouldn’t be so calm. She just wanted to scream and scream until she was hoarse, and the universe wasn’t giving her that chance. “You don’t know what you’re talking about here, Hermione.”

“She was going to get over it!” Hermione insisted, knowing that things might not have been the same ever again, but at least they could have found some way to be civil in polite company. She so desperately wanted that, if only for Harry’s sake. She didn’t want to let Molly into her own life, but she wanted to find a way to welcome Molly into the life that she and Harry shared. She knew that
unless she did, there would be no contact with the twins, with Charlie, with a whole group of people she loved.

“She was abusing you.” Harry continued calmly, even when confronted with her genuinely affronted glare, “Don’t think I don’t know what it looks like, what it feels like.”

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, her mild awhirl with thoughts. Harry seemed to understand the tumult of her thoughts, because he elaborated quickly and gently, “She is doing to you exactly what Petunia did to me, and I know better than anyone what you’ve been telling yourself.”

“How can you think…?” Hermione finally got her question out, at least part of the way.

“How can I think that she was abusing you?” Harry asked, “Because she was, Hermione, she was.”

Hermione’s soul hurt with the knowledge that he could talk about something so horrible so easily. He was talking about this like this was fact, like he could clearly see to the heart of all of this, even when Hermione herself felt so lost and befuddled, unable to make heads or tails of it all.

“And I’m not about to sit back and let it happen to you.” Harry informed her, “I’m sorry that I took the choice away from you, and you should be angry that I didn’t tell you what I was doing, but I am not sorry I did what I did to take you out of her firing line. I’m not.”

“I think you were projecting just a little.” There were lines, Hermione knew, between Petunia’s decades of abuse and neglect and Molly’s occasional forays into illogicality and vengeance, “She’s Molly, Harry! Not…”

Everyone knew that Molly was the embodiment of maternal ideals. Hermione didn’t always agree, but society lauded her. Hermione had tried desperately to keep that in mind. Surely, she had reasoned, there had to be some sort of pure motivation that came from that sort of love. Hermione had realized that, yes, there might be, but for Ron and Ginny. Hermione was not included in that sphere of maternal caring.

At first, that had stung, but sitting around her mother’s table at Christmas had shown her that she had her own family. She did, and Harry was right in that regard. Maybe…maybe he was right in this, too. “She’s not…”

“She isolated you from people who love you, she harassed you because you made a choice she didn’t like, she excluded you and ignored you at the same time, and she made you to feel as though everything she did was right, and everything was your fault.” Harry asserted. “It’s not, and I know what happens to your soul when you start questioning everything about yourself in light of what she said.”

“Harry…” Hermione began, her mind losing track of what she meant to deny, when she realized that she could not deny what he was saying.

Something he said clicked inside of Hermione. Whatever else they were, whatever it meant, Molly’s actions were not okay. They were not right. Nothing justified months of calling someone you said you loved names, nothing justified constantly putting them down, trying to limit them even from afar, and trying to get back at them where it most hurt because they hadn’t done as you had said on a matter of deep personal significance.

“I won’t let that happen to you.” Harry promised. “I can’t watch it happen again. I felt so powerless to stop it when it was me. I couldn’t.”

To hear him say that, to acknowledge the truth of his past, the truth of his pain and trauma hurt.
“But now I can.” Hermione watched the resolve in his eyes replace the memories, and if nothing else, it bolstered her. He alone helped her to see that it wasn’t him who had to end this with Molly, it was her. He was offering up his own experiences, not to do something for her, but to show her simply that it could be done.

He was a very brave man.

He had not let Petunia and Vernon and Dudley define him.

There was life after his time at Privet drive, and there would be a better life ahead for her, “I can, and if you think for one second that I’d ever let you, ever, go through that…”

After a long moment, Hermione realized there were tears on her face. And yet, she felt more empowered than she had in a long time. She didn’t feel the guilt of hiding this from Harry, the guilt of partially believing what Molly said, even when she didn’t want to believe it. All she felt now, was a sense that she should have seen it sooner, but hadn’t. “I didn’t see it.”

“You never expect the people you love to hurt you. No one ever does. That’s why it hurts so much.” Harry reminded her, “And then for so long you spin it so you don’t have to face it.”

Hermione wanted desperately to hex Petunia and Vernon. With sudden clarity, she stared at the man before her, his shirtsleeves folded back and his hair rumpled. She realized now that that same blinding rage was what Harry felt for her. He felt the same blinding rage, but he also respected her strength enough not to go in wand first. Hermione realized that, all told, his actions had been mild. If she had walked into something going on with Petunia, for example, Hermione knew she would have fired first and asked questions later. Harry probably had held himself back, and Hermione saw it for the truth that it was.

“But what she’s doing isn’t okay.” Harry reiterated, “You need to see that, and more than that, draw boundaries that feel right to you. She needs to know that you know that her behavior is not okay, and that you know you deserve better, and are going to take steps to get it.”

“I…” Hermione thought that maybe her plan to ignore Molly wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. Even when the notes had slowed, she had lived in trepidation of the next one coming along. At least now, she could rest a little bit in the fact that there would be no more, if Molly kept her word. Hermione didn’t know if she would, but at least now she didn’t have to dread the morning post.

She didn’t want to live in fear anymore.

In the aftermath of this realization, Hermione felt a sort of desolation. She knew she had lost her footing, lost her grasp on a situation she had never once had under control, no matter what she had told herself in the dark of night.

Hermione felt Harry’s hand on her shoulder, and she looked up to meet his gaze. “I know it’s hard.” And then, then came the apology she had wanted so badly when he first explained. Now, though, Hermione didn’t really want it. It came all the same, in all sincerity, “I’m sorry I pushed you to face it. I know you weren’t ready. I should have really tried to talk to you, first.”

“It had to be done.” Hermione replied, pushing to her feet in an effort to still the swell of emotion within her. “And I’m glad it was you. I didn’t want anyone to know…” Her chin wobbled along with her voice, “I just feel so ashamed that I disappointed her. Isn’t that silly?”

“No.” Harry promised, not giving up his gentle grip on her arm. He seemed intent on holding her gaze, even when Hermione just wanted to let the world pass by her as she found refuge against his
heart, “It’s not. It’s not because you care about her.” Harry reminded her, “But none of this, not one of her choices, not one of the things she said or did, was your fault. You have nothing, nothing to be ashamed of, in anything. Even if you had made horrible mistakes, you still wouldn’t deserve what’s she’s chosen to do.”

Hermione knew it would be a long time until she truly and fully believed it. But for now, when she could not trust her own voice in her mind, she knew she could trust Harry. He’d once told her that her voice was the voice in his head that drove him to evaluate his own plans, to be a better person, to think about things in a new way.

For a while, Hermione knew that he would be in her mind, repeating a simple phase, echoing with truth, until she could believe it herself.

**You deserve better. This was not your fault. What she did was not okay.**

**What she did was not okay.**

**You are not alone.**

Despite the idea that her life would change radically after confronting Molly’s behavior, it didn’t. She still got up in the morning, dealt with her morning sickness, ate whatever seemed least vomitrocious, attended her lars, coordinated the Foundry, worked on her lesson plans, and corresponded with people about potions, philanthropy, and whatever else crossed her desk. She found, however, that what had changed was the way she thought about her thoughts.

When she found herself dreading opening the post, or hearing those words in her head again, she told herself very firmly that she was scared, but that there was nothing Molly could truly do to her.

She opened the post anyway.

She sent an owl to George and Fred anyway. She ignored the Daily Prophet for the first time in months, truly uncaring to see if Molly had said anything new.

When she found herself looking in the mirror, and felt the things words Molly had used against her well up in her mind, she didn’t push them away. She told herself that they were just words on the page, and since when did she blindly accept anything that had been written without evaluation and analysis? She paused, and tried to change her thoughts with intentionality and self-respect. She alone defined who she was, not Molly Weasley. She didn’t let anyone else define her, not her parents, not Harry, so why should she give that power to Molly?

Hermione knew that this wasn’t something she could fix within herself in a matter of days, but she knew that she could try every day to live for herself. When the days came that she couldn’t excise the thoughts, couldn't push them away, she knew that she no longer had to accept them. They were there, but it didn’t mean that those thoughts, out of countless others, defined her.

When Hannah asked her to chaperone her dancing lessons with Neville at Snoedyn, Hermione accepted. She was as fit to be a chaperone as any other married lady, and if it helped Hannah to have a chaperone closer to her own age rather than a poor stand-in for her late mother, Hermione was happy to do it.

She floo’d over a bit behind schedule, her morning sickness not ending at 11:59 like nomenclature demanded of it. Hermione, while Claud led her to the music room, smoothed down her muggle dress. It was a printed dress, which was both muted and enhanced by the cardigan she wore atop it. Hermione had eschewed the belt Petra had offered, privately convinced that cinching her waist
only made it more obvious that she no longer had one. The curve of her body was minimal, but Hermione knew it was there.

She also knew, given her body type, that she had about two more weeks before she had to be more careful about concealment. They had a scan this afternoon, so even though she was happy to be asked to help Hannah, her mind was truly there.

Hermione heard the music floating down the hall, and assured Claud she would announce herself. Luckily, the elves at Snoedyn were well used to the eccentric Duchess of Potter, and Claud left her to it. Hermione used the time to linger in the doorway, and watched as her assumptions about wizarding dances were again changed. She realized, watching Hannah and Neville dance, that wizarding dances were not the two by two shuffle they had learned at Hogwarts, for Hermione knew that was what she was seeing was country dancing.

Her lessons in girl guides were vague memories, but she recognized the dance as a very common one. She waited until the song ended, observing that the once gawky Neville was a fine dancer, and knocked gently on the doorframe.

They were alone save for the dancing mistress and the pianist, and Hermione mentally refuted Molly’s voice in her head. “Hello. I’m sorry I’m late.”

Hermione realized as she entered the room to happy absolutions and greetings, that in fact, they were not alone. When Neville and Hannah’s attention were again focused on their dancing master, Hermione turned her attention to the woman on the nearby chair. Augusta had clearly placed herself on a chair along the wall, a very pale yellow yarn on her knitting needles. “I was happy to get ahead on my knitting.”

Hermione pulled out her own crocheting, and returned to the little hat she was fashioning. “I’m donating this to the aid society.” Hermione whispered under the music.

Augusta’s pale yarn moved quickly as she worked, “I’m not.”

Hermione didn’t quite know what to say to that, so she kept her eyes on her own work. After a short time, Augusta was called away and Hermione assumed her duties. She peeked every few seconds at the dancing pair, knowing full well her presence was ceremonial. And, well, if Neville was holding Hannah slightly closer than was decorous, why should she object? Hannah didn’t.

When they came to a break in the dances, Neville insisted, “Hermione, come join us. Miss Granville would be pleased to partner with you for the purposes of this lesson.”

Hermione knew Nev was apologizing for not having a male partner for her, as though she should by rights have one, too. Hermione refused the invitation gently. She knew she would throw up if she took but one spin around the room. Hermione considered the very strong possibility that she might even faint. She explained nothing of her reasoning, but thankfully they let her be.

Hermione finished the hat by the time the lesson ended. Knowing that Hannah and Neville were loathe to end their visit, Hermione gently suggested, “Tea in the conservatory would be nice. You both must be warm.”

Hermione knew that a bit of cooler air would be welcome, and so she was glad when they took her up on the suggestion. Hermione trailed after them, a few feet back. Playing chaperone certainly gave her a reprieve from being social when she wanted to crawl into bed and wish for the nausea to stop.
Hermione had, over the course of filling in as Hannah’s chaperone upon occasion, seen that the idea in chaperoning was to merely be there if Hannah wanted her to be there, and to fade into the background if she didn’t want a tag-along. Fading away wasn’t a very easy thing for Hermione, but she had a book and her knitting. If Hannah and Neville found themselves on the other end of the conservatory, and paused to appreciate their solitude, all was correct. After all, Hermione was still in the room.

Additionally, it was good practice. Hermione only could imagine the hijinks Teddy would get up to during his courting years. Hermione didn’t yet know if her children would require chaperones, as that would be a choice they made on their own. Remus and Sirius had once made it clear that Teddy, once he left school, would be expected to have a chaperone at the ready if the girl he was dating wanted his side of the family to pitch in during the process.

Hermione quietly had her tea, offering herself to the conversation when it seemed appropriate or she was asked. Oddly, Hannah was very, very, obvious in shooing Neville away. He went along with it with all haste, mumbling excuses about tending to some plant or another just out of earshot.

Hermione realized that she had been set up when Hannah spoke only when they could no longer hear Neville’s footfalls. “I thought he’d never leave.” Hannah sighed, “Hermione, you should have cancelled.”

Hermione set down her ginger biscuit. “Why? I wanted to come. I do apologize for my tardiness.”

“No, no!” Hannah replied, “Don’t apologize. When you are unwell, you have no need to come, Hermione. You are our friend, and we invited you for company, not to sit on the matron’s wall.”

“Oh?” Hermione quirked an eyebrow, “I’ll go fetch Augusta, shall I?”

Hannah laughed, knowing that Hermione would do no such thing. “Well, maybe your marital status is an unexpected boon.”

Hermione agreed, “Go take advantage of it. I’d do the same.”

Hannah stood, “Are you sure you’re well?” Hannah’s expression changed, “I don’t know what I’d do if you were unwell. I can’t face the ball alone, I can’t.”

“You won’t.” Hermione promised, “I’m perfectly well.”

After a long second, wherein Hannah wavered, Hermione smiled, and insisted, “Go.”

Hannah went.

That, Hermione decided, had been far too close.

Hermione looked to Dr. Smith-Webster, reminding her yet again. “We don’t want to know the baby’s biological sex, not yet.”

The doctor nodded. “We’ll just do your date check, then, and check for anything you might want to know about at this point.”

Hermione nodded. It wouldn’t make any difference as to their plans, but if they needed to be prepared for something that would mean the baby needed extra care or support, they wanted to know as soon as possible.
It was only wizarding advances that could reveal the sex now, but Hermione knew that once she knew, she’d be unable to stop herself from talking about the baby, to say nothing of the man standing next to her.

God help Hermione getting Harry to talk about something other than their child, once they could actually debate names and pick one.

She wanted to wait to know until it was time to be slightly more open, even in a society that found the utterance “I’m pregnant” a bit forward and not quite right. Hermione was expected, once the pregnancy was visible, to reference in only the most indirect ways. To do anything else was unseemly and bad luck.

Before they got to the scan, though, there was a lot of discussion to be had. They covered her diet, yet again, and Hermione was still malnourished. She resolved than extra potions were not so bad, not when Dr. Smith-Webster had briefly broached the idea that if she didn’t see some improvements on a larger scale, other things would need to be done. Hermione was going to brew her own potions.

The conversation flowed easily, with the only snag coming up when the doctor had mentioned her birth plan. Hermione had offered, “We talked about it, and ideally, I’d prefer to give birth here.”

It was a matter of privacy, a matter of safety, and also Hermione’s preference.

“That’s fine, of course, barring no complications arise and you don’t change your mind.” Dr. Smith-Webster noted, “But you need to consider alternatives so that you are prepared for the possibility that you or the baby would require more intervention.”

“I won’t go to Mungo’s.” Hermione thought for a second, “Are there any muggle hospitals with magical units? Perhaps that might be possible…”

Dr. Smith-Webster shook her head. “Not as such. But the idea of a private hospital has merit. I could, with your support, assemble a team that would see to your care within the muggle hospital.”

Hermione understood that said team would be like Dr. Smith-Webster, professionals who had a presence in both communities, and were naturally highly skilled. Dr. Smith-Webster wouldn’t waste time with anything less than excellence.

Harry asked, “Which hospital would you recommend?”

Hermione privately hoped she didn’t mention The Portland or Sts. John and Elizabeth, both very trendy places. She hardly wanted to go to either place, as she knew she’d spend the whole time railing on about the place. Hermione was a firm supporter of the NHS, but the idea of having a magical baby under NHS scrutiny was unthinkable.

Hermione relaxed when she said, “I can deliver at Sir Stanley Clayton, the Westminster, and the Kensington Wing, among others, but those are the three I think you’d like best, Hermione.”

She briefly outlined each, and admonished, “If you want to get on the list for any of them, my office will assist you, but I imagine you’ll want to book a tour first.”

Hermione nodded. She couldn’t possibly pick a hospital without seeing it. “We’ll want to meet the team, as well.”

“Of course.” She agreed. She knew that she would be buried in research for the next few days. She also knew that she was going to have to consult with her mother on the general reputation of all
three hospitals. She was glad that Dr. Smith-Webster knew her well enough to only give her three solid options, rather than leaving her to investigate every option in the UK.

The conversation moved along, and soon Hermione was laying back against the raised headrest to watch the magical projection form in the air above her abdomen as an image appeared on a small screen in tandem. There were things both investigations could reveal that the other could not.

And there, that silvery blob, was their baby, healthy and whole, with a steady heartbeat that filled the room. Dr. Smith-Webster narrated what she was seeing, but Hermione barely heard her, the heartbeat the monitor emitted echoing in her ears. She felt Harry’s hand in hers, heard his exhalation that said more than words ever could, and saw the wonder in his eyes when she watched him looking at the first glimpse of their baby. It was an expression she would never forget.

The rest of the appointment sped by, and Hermione was left standing next to Harry as he stared down at a black and white scan picture. Hermione peered down it, “Does it move?”

“Not these.” Harry replied, implying that he had a few that did move in typical wizarding fashion. “These are for your parents. They’ll want to put them on their desks.”

Hermione pushed up on her toes, and kissed his cheek as his free arm came around her. “Look at you, collecting snaps already.”

“Says the woman who hauled out the pensieve the second she realized she was late.” Harry returned.

There was no censure in his fond, abashedly happy tone, though. She knew whose memory of this moment she wanted in the vial. She knew Harry might never say it, not in so many words, but she would never forget the emotion in the soft way he held her for a long moment after she came down off of her toes.

Sirius knocked on Harry’s office door.

Harry was neck deep in some bill, and he hadn’t yet even gotten to the point where he was told what the bill was or what it was about. Reluctantly, he said, “I’m going to have to skip lunch, Pads.”

Sirius returned, “Nobody reads those bloody things, Harry.” Sirius came more fully into the office, “You need a staff and to use your aides. Let Hermione hire them. She’d have fun organizing your life and you’d have a competent secretary.”

Harry shook his head, “Hermione’s busy enough in what little free time she has researching hospitals and getting ready for the Ball. After the New Year, maybe.” It was a good idea, but he wasn’t going to put more on her plate.

Sirius wouldn’t allow him to skip out on him, so they Harry shrugged on his jacket and robes, thinking that a quick trip to the canteen wouldn’t be a huge undertaking. Before Harry could refuse, they were standing in the entryway of Sirius’s club.

Harry scowled, “I hate this place.” He took in the deeply hued wood and the carvings over the dining room, and the leather chairs.

After they seated and their order taken, Sirius retorted, “You’ll sit here and be glad of it, when
Hermione’s in her library and Teddy et al., is running the nanny ragged.”

“We’re not having a nanny.” Harry replied, “And would you be quiet? The walls have ears.”

He slipped an envelope out of his jacket pocket and slid it across the table. “For you and Remus.” Harry wasn’t about to thank Sirius for jogging his memory. He’d take it as license to continue on being indiscreet.

Apparently Sirius needed no such permission, or he considered a peek at the enclosed scans enough of an invitation to continue. “Hermione had a nanny.”

“Hermione went a day creche, I’m sure of it.” Harry replied, feeling badly that he could require no such conversation. He’d just assumed that she’d gone to day nursery.

“No.” Sirius was clearly pleased at possessing information about Hermione’s past that Harry did not, “Helen told Moony that they employed a Mrs. Redmond for a number of years. Nanny Redmond apparently corresponds with Helen and Hermione even now.”

Harry resolved to learn about this Nanny Redmond. It shocked him a bit to realize that there were things about Hermione that he still didn’t know, that there were still things that had not yet come up in conversation. “Well, if she wants to hire a nanny, I don’t have any objection to it. She knows more about this than I do.”

“Hermione knows more about most things than anybody.” Sirius reminded him, “I wouldn’t lose sleep over it.”

Harry noticed that their food was on its way, thankfully saving him from the rest of this conversation.

Sirius, even though Harry was intent on getting back to work so he could call it a day and go home, insisted they stop at Gringotts. Being here made Harry uneasy, but he hid it well enough until he was standing, not in Sirius’ and Remus’ vault, but their own. When Sirius came to a stop in front of the safe-room built into the wall, Harry finally got a word in edgewise, “Sirius, I hope you’re not skint, because I’m not buying you a new car.”

Sirius tilted his glance, and was at once imperious. “Insult me while I’m trying to score you brownie points with Hermione, why don’t you?”

Harry did as he was bid and entered the combination, with a roll of his eyes. As if he needed brownie points.

Harry twisted the dial, 1-9-9-7-9, and tapped the required stones to open the door. It opened with an easy swing. Behind the narrow door, Harry saw lights illuminate a football pitch sized room. They wedged their vast bodies into the room, and Harry took another look at items he’d only once glanced upon.

He ran his fingers over one suite, an emerald set. It was rather ugly, for all that it was opulent and old and very grand. Harry let his fingers fall away from the point of the tiara.

Sirius offered, “That one’s Victorian. Came from Gerrard and Co.” He wandered ahead of Harry, and gestured to another case, “This one is medieval. Made by the goblins, of course.”

Harry understood that he was meant to be picking something for the Ball. “Why didn’t you just tell me what you wanted to do?”
“Because, Harry.” Sirius scoffed, “Where’s the fun in that? Besides, it teaches you a valuable lesson. No woman wants to ask for jewelry, even if it is hers. It’s just something you collect and bring home as her due, without comment, without fuss.”

“I find your lectures on heterosexual marriage highly entertaining.” Harry offered, “That said, Hermione hates jewelry. She also hates displays of wealth and any hint of classism. Ergo, she would not wear a bit of this, much less a tiara.”

Hence, they were in entirely the wrong place. Harry moved to exit the room. Perhaps they could give some of this to charity or something. That thing in the corner looked like the Star of Adam. It could probably feed a million people. This was not something Hermione cared about, and Harry felt certain that she would much rather wear her pearls her mother had given her on her 16th than any of this stuff.

Harry was halfway to the door when Sirius drawled, “Ah, but she also likes history, tradition, and learning the rules only so she knows how best to break them.”

Harry paused. She did like to break rules, he’d give Sirius that much.

Sirius went in for the kill. “She also has a certain fondness for experimentation.”

Harry turned around. “Okay, but if she tosses me out, you’re going to be stuck with me at home again.”

Sirius scoffed, and got to work, muttering about this and that as he moved around the room like a lion stalking a gazelle. Harry felt as though he should help somehow. Harry offered, “Her dress is green.”

“Right.” Sirius paused, heading towards an emerald looking monstrosity with tridents, a slow smile coming over his face. “Wait a minute. While what I pick is going to be perfectly correct and effortlessly on point, your efforts will likely once again find the mark out of sheer dumb luck.”

Harry snorted. He, goaded just as Sirius likely intended, took a new look around. He blinked, “They all look so ostentatious.” There were at least a dozen suites of jewelry in here, and he knew the drawers and cupboards below the glass cases held yet more, “Or like they belong to one of Ariel’s sisters.”

“Who’s Ariel?” Sirius asked, befuddled.

“Muggle movie.” Harry replied, humming a few bars of *Under the Sea* as he looked around. He resolved to figure out a way to get movies into Teddy’s hands.

Finally, just when he felt he would never find one that seemed to yell Hermione, he spying one suite in a case that seemed, somehow to look like her, in some way he could not explain. He went over to it, and, tapping his wand gently to the magical glass, watched as it moved forward.

Harry reached out and touched the tiara. It had a light floral theme and seemed both delicate and full of movement. The flowers were flanked by swoops and swirls of the same silver and what Harry realized belated were yet more diamonds.

Sirius spoke behind him, “Interesting choice. You don’t know the story, do you?”

“No.” Harry noted the gold band at the bottom, which would likely blend very well into Hermione’s hair. “What was it?”
“I once asked your grandmother why she never wore it, given that she had it made from an older tiara.” Harry knew this was a common practice, as tiaras could be broken apart, oftentimes, to be other jewelry. They were often frugal ways to rework and reuse expensive pieces, though people didn’t realize that, “She told me that that tiara was beautiful, not because of the diamonds, but because it made her think of her bridal coronet. She wanted to wear it, but, she said, it wasn’t hers.”

Harry was confident that Hermione would like it, or at least not hate it. And even if she did, well, at least he could tell her that he’d tried, and he’d be happy to let her pick out her own stuff from this massive room anytime she wanted. He rather liked that pink set over there, and knew Hermione would have liked it, too, if her dress wasn’t green.

Harry took the delicate ear bobs and necklace from the case next to the tiara, as well as the other bits that went with it, and put them in the velvet case that he’d summoned.

Sirius continued, “She said it was waiting for a woman who was meant to have it. I think she was waiting to pass it on.”

Harry hesitated. He didn’t want to give Hermione a tiara meant for his mother. She was her own person, and deserved the ability to live a life that wasn’t rife with comparison at every turn. She wasn’t the second coming of Lily Potter. “Mum?”

Sirius shook his head. “No. Euphie was clear about that, after all, she knew Lily. She said she’d never met the girl it was intended for, only that she’d had visions of her, and she knew she’d come along and that the family would never again be the same.”

“Okay, so maybe…” Harry faltered. His grandmother had been something of a seer, he knew that, but he had never heard this story before. She had predicted lots of things, but in a concrete way, not that airy-fairy stuff he’d learned in school. A pity he’d never found any evidence that she had foreseen Tom.

Sirius prompted, “She said she put something on the back to show who it was for, though I wasn’t allowed to look.”

Harry didn’t wait for permission. He didn’t need anyone’s permission, anyway. On the back of the tiara, just behind the setting of one swoop and swirl, there was an engraved H&H. An H&H just like the one that he and Hermione used, just like the one that hadn’t existed until it had been made for them. There weren’t any other H&H couples anywhere in their family tree.

Harry dropped the tiara as his fingers went slack. It clattered towards the floor, only to bounce back up, a charm protecting it from damage kicking in to levitate it gently. Sirius grabbed it and gripped Harry on the shoulder. “You look shocked.”

“I am, a bit.” Harry admitted, not quite knowing what to make of this, this that was clearly, very clearly, a form external proof. He’d known for a long time that they were fated, but to have someone who didn’t even know them, know it too, was a bit flooring. Especially since said person had died before their births.

Harry made up his mind. If his grandmother had had this tiara made for Hermione, and specifically Hermione, then, well, he had to give it to her. It was his duty to carry out the wishes of his foremothers just as it was it duty to guard the same things for future generations.

Sirius chuckled, “Blessed are those who hath not seen, and yet believed, Prongslet.”
Harry had never doubted what he knew. It was just weird to get a message of affirmation from his
dead grandmother. Harry ignored Sirius’ teasing.

As they left the vault and headed for the carts, Harry asked Sirius, “Don’t mention that story to
Hermione, please.”

“Oh…” Sirius assured him, his voice full of his Marauder grin, “I wouldn’t dream of spoiling your
fun on New Years.”

“Shut up, Pads.” Harry glared, stepping into the waiting cart with a greeting to the goblin. “As
ever, your mind is in the gutter.”

Unfortunately for Harry’s objective in getting more work done today, his mind was elsewhere, as
well. For the fifth time since returning to his desk, he shoved away thoughts getting Hermione
alone in the jewelry room, and beseeching her to watch the mirror as he peeled her clothes…

Harry jolted roughly from his thoughts, only to realize that he’d dumped the inkwell all over
himself.

Fuck it, he thought, he might as well go home.

New Year’s Eve was a time of ritual.

Every window in the Foundry was pulled open, and the fires left burning brightly. Hermione was
glad of warming charms, for the chill once darkness fell was pronounced. The shining and
abundant greenery that had been refreshed for the New Year kept an air of warmth about the place,
even when she was compelled to leave the fireside or the windowless loo.

The elves were stocked with wine and garum, and the pets were liberally doted upon. Crooks was
quite enamored with his bell collar, so much so that he flung it across the room and hissed at her, in
what Hermione chose to interpret as gratitude. Cadbury was happy to go chasing after it, yapping
and skidding into the walls in his joy.

She made sure that she had enough offerings for Janus on the morrow, and turned her attention to
the most traditional of New Year’s customs.

The Ball.

Hermione’s dress had been delivered yesterday, and Petra, like a dragon with a shiny new bauble,
had taken the elaborate dress into her care with ill-concealed joy. Hermione thusly, found her hair
being dressed, and couldn’t understand what was taking so long when all Petra had talked about for
days was finally getting her into that dress. Petra was being awfully slow about it, and Hermione
could only ask, “Is there something amiss, Petra?”

“No, of course not, ma’am.” Petra clearly was lying. “It is only that tonight is a very large and
important occasion, and I find myself wondering how to do your hair without—” She wrung her
elfin hands together, “I can only blame myself. And now Gringotts is closed.”

“What are you talking about?” Hermione spun around on her stool, looking to Petra, whose
greenish face was awash with misery. “There’s no need for self-blame. I can fix whatever’s wrong,
I am sure of it.”

“You cannot, and I have failed.” Petra replied sharply, “My only excuse is that I’ve never had to
consider getting it here. But of course neither of you would know, and you cannot fix my oversight
in not having a discreet word with His Grace.”

There came a knock at the door. Petra stood stock still, and didn’t move to open it. Wondering at Petra’s loss of demeanor, Hermione answered her door, and found Harry standing there, a velvet box in hand.

Petra swooped in between them, and took it. Hermione was naturally annoyed, though Harry smiled in question.

Before she lost her temper, Hermione diplomatically stated, “Petra, I’d like a few minutes alone. I suggest you go have a cup of tea and collect yourself.”

Hermione made very sure that she left the box behind, not because Hermione wanted it for herself but because anyone who brought something had the right to give it to the person they chose, and also to receive thanks.

Hermione sighed as Petra, seemingly more herself, exited. “She was on the verge of a breakdown, I think.” Hermione glanced over at him, “You fixed it, somehow.”

Harry sat down on the bench in her dressing room, a sturdy piece of cushioned furniture perpetually covered in cat hair and remnants of spelled away puppy slobber. “In case you’ve forgotten, Hermione, I’m a wizard.”

“Ha-ha.” Hermione deadpanned, “This house is freezing, my maid has taken leave of her senses, and you’re cracking jokes. This does not bode well for the new year.”

“Ron invited us to go on a pub crawl.” Harry offered, “We could do that, if you’d rather.” He gently opened the box, “Though this would look out of place, I think.”

Hermione fought with her brain as she struggled to take in the array of glittering jewels. “Clearly, that’s what Petra was rambling on about just now.”

“This or something like it.” Harry agreed, as though they weren’t sitting here talking about a tiara that seemed impossibly delicate in a way that spoke of expert craftsmanship. What was their life? In all her life, Hermione had never expected to have anyone do her hair who seemed at a loss as to what to do without a tiara, rather than with one.

His expression changed. “I know how you feel about stuff like this, but Hermione, there’s a story here, and trust me, you were meant to have this. But…” He hastened, “If you don’t like it, you don’t have to wear it.”

“What’s the story?” Hermione asked, curiously searching herself. Yes, normally, she thought tiaras were a dreadful display of classism and wealth, but in this moment, she found herself looking at the very tiara Harry was holding on the bench, and thinking: That’s been waiting for me.

It came from somewhere in her magical core, so Hermione knew better than to explore it now. She accepted, for a moment, the truth of her witch’s intuition. There would be time later for exploration.

Harry crossed the room, and put the case into her hands. He dropped a kiss on her hair, and though it wasn’t enough, he stepped back. “It’s a story that’s going to take more than the two minutes we have left before Petra commanders you.”

Hermione accepted this, and was silent. When Harry came to the door, Hermione called out, “Harry?”
He turned around in the doorway, “Yeah?”

Hermione tried to suppress a smile. “Our life is pretty weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He affirmed. “But there’s nothing I’d change. I hope you know that, Hermione.”

He seemed oddly intent, even for him, so Hermione nodded. A reply of anything else seemed too much, or far too little, in the present situation.

Hermione’s mind strayed as Petra did her hair, going over and over what Harry might want to tell her. For a style that seemed so simple, it was elaborate. The abundance and length of her curls were pinned up in an elaborate but neat chignon at the base of her skull, leaving her view unobstructed and enough of a counterbalance for the tiara.

Hermione did not expect said tiara to be so heavy, though of course she had known its weight in her hands. It had seemed delicate then. Not so, she found, once it was on her head. Hermione marveled at its placement. Petra had manhandled her head, albeit gently, to place it properly, and only put it on her head after shellacking her entire head in muggle hairspray. Hermione whispered a prayer for the ozone layer, and coughed, wondering why a sticking charm would not do.

Petra merely replied that the tiara needed grip, and yanked her head back up into proper alignment, sticking another matching pin into her hair. Hermione was suddenly conscious of the diamonds and pearls adorning her hair, no costume pieces these. After a long time, Hermione was freed from Petra’s clutches long enough to look at her hair.

Hermione decided, after some critical analysis, that she looked rather like herself, albeit with some glittering headgear. Hermione reached up and touched the tiara, her fingers feeling the bumps of several diamonds. “It does suit my face, doesn’t it?”

The idea that she could look so splendid, and yet still look like herself, was shocking. Gone was the girl who felt she had erase her curls and hide her pale skin, who had to work to mold herself into something else to be pretty. Hermione knew she wasn’t pretty, and she had long ago accepted it. But this woman, this woman she knew to be herself, was striking, not because she wore a tiara, but because she looked like herself while doing so. She did not need to change to be worthy of feeling good about herself.

“Yes.” Petra assured her, “You have a good face and skull for tiaras. Many women do not. I imagine you’ll grow used to them, and won’t find them as much a pain as some.”

Hermione privately thought that this occasion would only come around once a year, so Petra need not dust off any further tiara placing skills. Hermione held this to herself as she was helped into her dress by Petra and the senior housemaid assigned by Fella to her chambers.

Araceli helped to shift the skirts on her hips. Petra did up the buttons along her spine, and bade Hermione to jump to settle her skirts. Hermione was finally primped and prodded within an inch of her life not long later.

After sliding on her flats and her kid gloves, she determined that practicing with the big skirt and the tiara was the order of the day. She sat down and stood up something like ten times, only stopping when she grew dizzy and Petra fretted about wrinkled skirts. Each time she had a better sense of what to do, and knew now that the thing to do was back up to the chair until it hit her calves, and gently lift the back of her skirts, and then sit, so that her skirts wouldn’t fly up in her
face or wrinkle and squish. From there, sitting was sitting, even if she did have to remind herself not to tilt her head under the weight on her head.

“Really.” Hermione observed, “There needs to be a class for this.” Hermione spun around a few times as she walked down the corridor, watching as her skirts sometimes continued moving when she stopped. Hermione felt like a bell, and placed her hands on her waist and cocked her hips, put in mind at once of Big Ben chiming out the hour. Swish, swish, went the dress.

Hermione tried not to giggle.

Hermione resolved to be serious. She wasn’t a little girl, even if the little girl in her soul relished what she considered a real party dress, and Hermione knew her levity was apparent in her actions. Hermione drew the line at trying to slide down the bannister in a big dress, but the adult her knew just how that would turn out and there were limits to indulging one’s childhood fantasies and inner girl.

Her skirts rustled as she came to the staircase, and put her hand gently on the carved bannister. Hermione placed each foot carefully, her skirts wide and surprisingly bulky. Even with the magical support eliminating the need for hoops, she had to modify her carriage. Her gait had to be consistent and slower than her normally direct pace. She had to keep her feet under her.

Hermione had never been a graceful dancer, but she was glad of the few lessons she remembered from childhood. At least she had decent posture. It was the only thing that kept her from chickening out from going to the ball, and entering the ballroom at Snoedyn, with every eye upon her as she made what she knew was essentially her entry into wizarding society.

At least she didn’t have to wear white, because she knew she’d drop food on it and that would be just another worry. Hermione, be she meeting someone as Miss Granger or Lady Potter, had never been suited to the unassuming white and demure facade of wizarding debutantes. She was sad, though, that she had missed Hannah’s small supper dance, held quietly in the midst of war, before her mother had died.

Hermione made her way down the stairs, and not knowing quite where else to sit, lowered herself to the third stair from the bottom, and tucked her feet up, appreciating the moment as her inner child crowed with happiness at the way her skirts spread out around her. The taffeta fanned out around her, the magical support distributing her skirts in a wide fan, the fabric taking up a great deal of the grand staircase, no easy feat. Like every woman who had once been twelve, and dreamed of pretty clothes and all the books she could ever read and living in a house filled with love and joy, Hermione stared at her dress, wondering how on earth she had actually gotten to a point in life where that silly fantasy was reality, and how it could possibly make so much sense.

Lately, she had been turning in around this time, and her body knew its preferences well. She yawned. Hermione listened to the clock in the hall chime, and did her best not to lick her lips.

Sirius spoke from where he was walking in with Remus. “Nice tiara.”

Hermione flicked a glance over him, “Nice shoes.” His shoes were so polished that Hermione could see them glinting in the gas illuminated Great Hall.

Remus inserted, “Hermione, has your picture been taken, yet?”

Hermione shook her head, knowing that the official camera would be following her about somewhere. Hermione had a grand time sitting down and letting her skirts flow out around her, but now she found getting up to be a bit of a challenge. Hermione failed twice, her glove not providing
enough grip as she tried to pull herself up with the bannister. With these dratted skirts, and the stairs, she couldn’t quite get her feet planted under her. She knew now that she should have lowered herself to the floor with her feet planted under her.

“Look.” She snapped, when both Remus and Sirius hastened to her side, “I am not a blimp, thank you.”

Remus took her by the arm and hauled her gently to her feet. “You’re welcome.”

“Really! I—” Hermione was flustered at getting caught, and intended upon continuing to make the point that she hardly needed that sort of help, only to stop when the dratted camera zoomed into the room, and chirped loudly, its intentions plain. Hermione shook out her skirts gently, fixed her gloves, and paused in her lecturing to smile serenely towards the camera.

The camera snapped and fluttered down to her side when it was finished. No doubt the image it captured was picturesque, a domina in the prime of her youth, the first flush of fecundity in her knowing gaze as she surveyed the world around her. Hermione found some humor in the assumptions future generations viewers might make about her.

If only they knew that she’d spent three minutes beforehand struggling to get off of the floor, because she had given into the urge to play pretty pretty princess in her first real ballgown.

Hermione continued, “Just wanted to see my skirts, and…”

The bloody camera’s bleeping cut her off again as Harry jogged down the stairs behind her, as always looking as though he had been born to his tuxedo. It was hardly fair. He stopped on the step behind her, put his hand on her shoulder, and whispered, “Smile, and then lecture, love.”

Hermione smiled, an obliging trained monkey, and then stepped on his foot. Hard. She heard his grunt, and continued down the stairs.

Harry hopped behind her, “What’d I do?”

“You encourage them.” Hermione returned, feeling much more like herself after a few cross words. “And it’s not fair that you look nicer than I do, just fly in here…” Hermione waved her hands about, and Harry laughed.

“Life’s not fair, Hermione.” Sirius agreed, passing her hooded cloak to Harry, “I did a fabulous job kitting him out.”

“All you do is buy more ties and cravats and tell the tailors how to do their jobs.” Harry countered. “And Hermione, really, you look nicer in that dress than I would.”

Hermione stared at him as he draped the cloak around her. Had he really…?

Harry colored as Sirius and Remus exchanged a glance. “Wait. No. That’s not right.”

Hermione laughed outright and did up the silver clasp on her cloak. “I suppose that’s only fair after stepping on your foot.”

When Harry took her arm, very correctly on his left, Hermione paused to remind herself to glide, and not stride. As they lingered behind Remus and Sirius, Harry said for her ears only, “Pulchra es, carissima mi.”

His gaze seemed to see right down to her soul, which of course, Hermione knew to be true.
He meant it.

Hermione pushed her weight down through her knees, suddenly absurdly light, and walked along with Harry towards the doors. She nearly tripped over her own feet, but was held steady by Harry's strength and his care, when Harry added, “Unanimi sumus, Hermione.”

He'd said that before, and a heated rush of memories flashed through her mind, which of course was exactly what he'd intended. The feelings those memories evoked remained, simmering in her blood and dancing on the nerve endings where his fingers brushed.

Hermione thought for a second, and grinned. “Djuro vos, filii Jerusalem, ne suscitetis, neque evigilare faciatis dilectam, donec ipsa velit.”

Harry goggled, “Did you…” He seemed incredulous as he worked through her words and considered the various implications, “Did you just use the Bible, in Latin, to tell me not to come on to you without backing up my words?”

“Well, it seemed the vernacular of the conversation.” Hermione allowed, a laugh dancing below her words as she swished towards the footman holding the door.

Chapter End Notes

Pulchra es, carissima mi = (lit) You are beautiful, my dear. It's more emphatic in latin.

Unanimi sumus= Our souls are one. We are one.

Again, possible double-entrandre on Harry's part? Maybe. You decide.

Hermione quotes Song of Solomon 2:7 from the Vulgate. She's showing off, and saying, "I adjure you, [sons] of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases."
When you live long enough to see your children begin to look at you with different eyes, and you can look at them not as your children, but as people, it’s worth getting older with all the creaks and wrinkles.

Chapter Summary

"...when you live long enough to see your children begin to look at you with different eyes, and you can look at them not as your children, but as people, it’s worth getting older with all the creaks and wrinkles." --Frannie Flagg

OR

“Whatever happens, they say afterwards, it must have been fate. People are always a little confused about this, as they are in the case of miracles...Just because it's not nice doesn't mean it's not miraculous.”
— Terry Pratchett, Interesting Times

OR

Hermione can't volta, Harry doesn't care because he'd rather pay court to his wife without 500 people watching, and Helen knows she's in the presence of a Queen, even when she's ditched the tiara.

Because Helen knows her daughter, sees her for who she truly is, even when Hermione is too busy living and being and doing to consider the line of her mother's wistful musings.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short, but it covers a lot of ground, sets us up for the next arc. It's Lupercalia!!

But first, we get some insight into Helen Granger's thoughts as she tours maternity wards.

Also: we see an argument that could have been as an analogy that illuminates Hermione's point about fate.

Yes, I'm playing fast and loose with dates, as the movie cited could not have been on home video directly after the War, but Cate Blanchett is so wonderful in these roles that I deliberately chose this over that mess that is Shakespeare in Love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione felt like she could finally breathe and let her body relax, now that she was beyond the crush of bodies in the ballroom. The pleasant din and the magical energy pulsed behind her as she made her way through the crush to the terrace doors, careful not to bump into anyone.
Hermione knew the women watching her from the corner by the window were discussing her, but Hermione only smiled, as if to note that she saw them, and continued onward. She moved through the arches that led to the terrace, and paused for a second on the threshold, filling her lungs.

Though she was happy to be leaving it, the ballroom was crowded and cheerful. Hermione was overjoyed to see Neville in his element. He was so self-assured and so much of a leader. Hermione hadn’t seen his leadership during her absence from Hogwarts, but Hermione had believed it, and saw echoes of it in battle. To see it now told her so much.

She knew, in some way, that she was looking at the future Headmaster of Hogwarts, one that would easily rival Albus Dumbledore for his influence and impact upon the lives of those he educated. Hermione was glad, also, that when the time came for Harry to take up the Defense post, as she knew he wanted to do, that they would be colleagues as well as brothers.

Hermione knew she was seeing her friend radiate with confidence, facing his future with self-assurance and rock solid self-awareness. She counted herself lucky to be a part of it.

The magnitude of his maturity made her think of fondly of a little eleven year old boy who would have died before giving such an eloquent speech and opening a ball, all eyes on him. Hermione knew that somewhere inside Neville, there was a little boy aglow with the knowledge that he’d known he could do it, and content in the knowledge that he had grown up to be more than he’d imagined.

Neville danced with grace, his skill matched easily by Hannah’s own. In comparison to Hermione, most people danced well, and so after testing Harry’s patience in two country dances, Hermione had begged off before the next set had begun.

Having arrived, enjoyed an evening supper, made their entry down the staircase, and danced the two obligatory dances for appearances sake, they were free to mix and mingle. They had done just that for a little while, greeting people they knew and being introduced to people they had not yet met.

Hermione had a pleasant conversation with McGonagall. It was odd, so very odd, to meet Minerva in a social setting. Hermione had taken refuge in her forthright manner, after having eaten seven courses between a very supercilious gentleman and a member of the Bones family, who had little to say once they established Hermione knew Susan. After the conversations that were rather like pulling teeth, Hermione was glad to find such amiable conversation in Minerva.

Hermione had sought out the emerald eyes that were nearly always watching her, and with a slight tilt of her head, made her intentions plain. That had been almost fifteen minutes ago, for it had taken about that long to slip away without too much notice, and also to extricate herself from people who wished to stop for a quick chat. Hermione decided that moving around made her blend in with the various couples.
and people wandering the terrace, and so she leisurely began to move towards the stairs that led to the gardens. Thankful for the liberal warming charms and the longer-lasting runes that had been activated to keep the temperature comfortable, Hermione let the scent of fresh snow fill her senses.

Hermione walked towards the stone railing, and once there against it, looked down into the expansive gardens that were Neville’s pride and joy. Even in the deep of winter, they were breathtakingly beautiful. Below her, Hermione saw that the countless paths were lit, and here and there, Hermione could make out shadowy figures.

The orchestra behind her was playing a tune even she knew, and Hermione couldn’t but help think the words. *The one of them said to his mate, where shall we a breakfast take?*

Out here, the music was nice. Hermione had learned so much over the evening that she considered the whole adventure a success. Wizarding dancing, as she had assumed, was mostly country dances. However, there were a great many dances that did not fall under that definition, for they were dances that were older still. Hermione had learned from McGonagall that these dances were court dances and dances popularized by the aristocracy from the 1500s to the mid 1800s.

Wizarding memory was long, long indeed, and these sort of dances, Hermione realized, was one way that older families kept out new people, who would stick out a mile amongst them. After all, where would a muggleborn learn to do a dance that had fallen out of favor with muggle populations before Elizabeth took the throne? Hermione snorted to herself. The court of Elizabeth I was more known to most people in the room than that of the present Queen.

That aspersion wasn’t entirely fair, Hermione knew, as a great many people in the room were very involved in politics and devoted to advancing the UK in the modern world. Even, Hermione smiled, if she had fallen through a crack in time in the ballroom. Come next week, they’d be back in the WC with their present concerns that dominated their lives. In fact, Hermione had been introduced to men and women tonight who, while famous in the muggle community merely for being aristos and politicians, they were known to Augusta by virtue of being magical.

Hermione considered that she would rather retain her anonymity in the muggle community. She would sooner die than appear splashed on the cover of OK!.

“You wouldn’t believe the line in the refreshment room.” In the span of seconds that had been lost to her thoughts, Harry had ended up standing next to her, glass of sparkling something or other in his right hand. Hermione took his left arm, and let herself be led towards the garden. “Terrible crush, isn’t it?”

Hermione smiled. His diction was so like a few people in the ballroom that Hermione knew him to be mocking them. Hermione joined in on the harmless fun, “Oh, indeed. Can you believe weather? So much nicer in France.”

Harry glanced behind them, joking. “Careful. Some of those old bats in there still think we’re fighting Napoleon.”

“Horrid little man.” Hermione feigned shock, stepping gently down the stairs, Harry’s grip on her arm careful. She got the idea that he was scared she might fall, and she blamed Remus entirely for putting that fear in his mind, with his charming little story of helping her up.

The music behind them changed, and Hermione hummed a few notes. She only knew the song
because she was a fan of all things Jane Austen and had heard Regency music in that context. She did not know the dances. The only dance she had recognized enough to name was the volta, and that was only Mum had made her to watch some Elizabethan rom-com during her recovery.

They were silent for a long moment, enjoying the peace that came from finally being away from hundreds of people. They, without actual conversation, decided on the southward path, down towards the dormant flowers that Neville loved and the smaller greenhouses that doubled as gazebos. Fairy lights adorned the various trees, and the paths were dimly lit. The gravel crunched beneath their feet.

Harry eventually seemed to leave his thoughts, passing her the glass he’d carried after taking a sip of his own. Hermione sipped it, knowing well that he wouldn’t give her anything she couldn’t drink. Visually, the stuff clearly wasn’t champagne. The pinkish liquid was surprisingly grape-flavored and fizzy.

Harry interpreted her glance correctly, “The finest nonalcoholic champagne.” Harry continued, “Got an elf to fetch it from the kitchens. Told him it was for Lady Flint.”

Hermione stifled a laugh. The senior Sylvia Flint was 107 if she was a day, and yet, she was a formidable dragon who went on about the evils of champagne and the excess of dancing to anyone who would listen. Harry was devious. “You are so bad. I can’t believe I missed it.”

“You could have got it done far more easily.” Harry agreed, “No one ever suspects you of anything.”

“It’s my gift.” Hermione admitted, tilting her head back gently to see the star-filled sky. She had to give magical communities their due, their estates had no problems with light pollution. Her tiara didn’t even move of a fraction of a centimeter.

Harry smiled, but was silent. He stared at her, and Hermione was almost disconcerted with the intensity of his gaze. After a long moment, he asked. “Hermione…” He paused, “Hypothetical question.”

This was a game they often played. It was fun and often led to mock outrage and passionate debate. They talked about most anything that crossed their minds, so Hermione easily accepted the offer of such a conversation. “Okay.”

Harry began after another long moment. They turned left, heading down yet another path that would bring them through the dormant roses of all hues and types. In the summer, the space was verdant and fragrant.

Harry offered up his question. “If you hadn’t married me, and you’d had to marry somebody, but on your own time, who do you think you would have married?”

“Weird question.” Hermione admitted, expecting something to do with world hunger or naval history. “However, you have to promise not to ever repeat my answer.”

Hermione had once, as most women did, given this topic some academic thought, mostly in the context of marveling at how different and unexpectedly her life had turned out and being glad of her lot.

“I won’t.” Harry replied, and Hermione wondered if telling him this was perhaps the wisest course. It was idle supposition, predicated upon the idea that a million things about their lives were different. It was so silly, but Hermione had an answer, and she knew that once she told him her
conjectures, he’d have to answer the same question or offer his lady wife a boon.

Hermione caught his gaze as the walked, “Not even to Ron.”

Harry halted, as though he had expected this answer. “Ron?”

“No! Not Ron.” Hermione shook her head, the idea unthinkable.

She answered his wordless query. “Fred. All things considered, I think we could have had something. Not that I ever want to find out.” Hermione sighed, “Why are you laughing?”

Harry was absolutely red and breathless with laughter. He seemed to be having trouble remaining upright as he was practically rolling with laughter, as he sobered enough to ask before giving into gales of laughter again, “Fred Weasley?”

“You asked!” Hermione returned, pulling her arm free and stepping around to face him, “So stop laughing!”

Harry laughed for another moment, likely at her expression, until he sucked in enough air to stop, “Hermione, I know the girls like him, but Fred?”

“Shut up!” Hermione felt a hot blush rise about her neck, “It’s nothing to do with his looks. He’s smart, you know, and not at all as nice as George.”

She could have never made a life with a nice man, not when she knew herself well enough to know that she had a ruthless streak a mile wide.

Harry protested, “I’m nice!”

“No.” Hermione insisted. “You’re kind. There’s a difference.” She paused, “And anyway, what are you on about? It’s a little late for this conversation.” Hermione thought for a second, “Which, oddly, we never had to begin with.”

Hermione wondered if it was perhaps fate, perhaps an awareness of feelings they had not even admitted to themselves, that had prevented either of them from asking the other to consider other options. Aside from an offer to flee, an offer he must have known she’d never even consider, there ad never been even so much of a half-thought of marrying someone else.

Harry shrugged. There was something in that movement that told her all she needed to know. They were approaching benches that formed a perfect place to admire the roundabout of roses that would bloom come spring. Hermione took the opportunity to walk over to a cold bench, fling out a windless warming charm, and sit.

Harry came to stand before her. “I haven’t ever told you this, because I know you think divination is useless.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Just because I think something is pointless doesn’t mean you have to think the same. I just think you were wasted in that class, that predicting your death was detrimental to your mental health, and free will trumps all.”

Harry laughed, almost bitterly. “And yet, what I am about to tell you might make you question how you feel about me.”

“Unless you’ve got a wife stashed away someplace, or you were the one who ate the last of my stroopwafels, I think you’re being a bit dramatic.” Hermione assured him. She considered his
expression carefully, “Did you eat the stroopwafels?”

Harry raked a hand through his hair, and began to pace, “I did not eat your stroopwafels.” He looked at her, “Just let me get this out.”

Hermione inclined her head in assent, suddenly worried for Harry.

“My grandmother, my father’s mother, you understand…” Harry elaborated, as though poor Mrs. Evans should never be implicated in what he was about to say, “Was something of a seer. Names, dates, concrete data.”

Harry turned to her, “From her journals, I think you would have gotten along.”

Hermione had an idea, “Do you think I could give Augusta a copy of her journals?”

“I’m trying to tell you that my grandmother had visions of you to the point that our monogram is on the back of your tiara, that she had that made for you, and…” Harry’s outburst puttered out as he came to stand again before her. “Hermione? Hermione?”

Hermione’s brain fired back up, from where he had shocked her into a stunned silence over one tiny detail. Hermione laughed until her stomach hurt. “I can’t take the bloody thing off to look.”

“It’s not funny, ‘Mione.” Harry insisted, “I’m not joking.”

Hermione stood, and, seeing a pair of lovebirds coming their way, took Harry by the wrist and led him into the heated glass gazebo that held a plethora of Neville’s beloved plants just off the roundabout. Hermione said nothing in response to Harry’s questions as she pulled Harry behind her, and turned and locked the door.

She carefully warded the gazebo, and made it unnoticeable to anyone who might pass their way with several complex spells she had mastered during the ear to the point that they were now second nature. Satisfied that they had privacy, Hermione strode to the first clearing before a table she saw, uncaring of her skirts as they swung with her quick movements.

Turning to face him, she gave vent to her thoughts, “You needed your dead grandmother to come back from the grave to tell you something you ought to have known yourself?”

“Where in God’s name, Hermione, did you get doubt from anything I said?” Harry was close enough that the magical approximation of hoops pushed back against her body, leaving them to bell out behind her, “You were the one who laughed in my face.”

“I laughed, you slug, because the vaulted evidence you seem to so highly prize, is fused to my head with half a can of hairspray and enough diamonds and pearls to open a shop in Dubai.” Hermione insisted, giving him no quarter, wishing she could throw the bloody thing at him, “You’re the one who so desperately values outside affirmation, affirmation that should be readily apparent every time at you look at me, that you made some silly prophecy into some big thing.”

“It’s not silly.” Harry insisted, his gaze falling. “It’s not silly. She knew you, Hermione. She knew you, and she liked you enough to write all this stuff about you, liked you enough to make that tiara, which I think you might like just a little. She said that our marriage would change the universe. She knew you, somebody in my family knew you enough to know that you, simply by being you, define my entire universe. Don’t call that silly.”

Hermione sucked in a breath, as Harry continued, “In one of her last journals, there were two scraps of information. Do you know what they were?” His gaze was consuming, bright and insistent,
“There was a few letters and numbers, and an address.”

Hermione felt the air leave her body and her blood rush as she realized what he was saying. He hadn’t found affirmation in the prophecy of his Grandmother. No, what Harry had found was actually meaningful. He had found the blessing of a woman who should have been there for him as Augusta was for Neville. When he had nothing else, those journals were indeed precious.

Hermione knew Harry wouldn’t be telling her this unless those bits of information checked out, and would have led him to her. She gripped his upper arms. “I wish I could have found you.” Hermione knew with certainty that she would have done anything, anything, to spare him his early childhood. “We cannot mourn what never was, Harry. Do not let yourself. It only steals joy from what will come.”

“I just…” Harry paused, “What if…”

Hermione knew what he was thinking. She, unable to stop herself, was thinking it, too. What would their lives have been like, if Harry had not lost everyone, if Sirius hadn’t spent over a decade in jail, if they had been brought together as children?

“Harry.” Hermione insisted, “Maybe we should have met in a different way, but perhaps if we had we would have been totally Westermarcked.” Hermione suggested this, knowing that her words had done their job when Harry smiled in a sad sort of doubt, “Maybe things should have been different. You should have never suffered as you did, and I could have done with a friend before Hogwarts, but do you know what matters at the end of the day? It matters only that I found you, and that we choose, today, now, to create our own future.”

“You did, you know.” Harry admitted, “I will never know who to thank for that. I sometimes wonder.”

“Harry!” Hermione sobered, searching with her words, “You don’t remember?”

That first train ride was etched deep in her heart. It had given her Harry and Ron and Neville and it had taken her to the first place that had allowed her to fully explore what it meant to be herself in the fullest sense. She still looked back on that day with wonder. She could recall every second of it, and prayed she would never forget it.

Harry shook his head, his wide palm on her back, “All I remember about meeting you is that I met you.”

“Neville lost Trevor, and I came looking.” Hermione reminded him, wondering not for the first time if that toad had been a tool used by something greater than themselves, if that toad had been used to set something into motion. It would have happened anyway, at some point, at Hogwarts, but she cherished that memory.

“And you told Ron he had a smudge on his face, ‘just there.’” Harry reminisced, his eyes lighting up with recognition. “I knew I liked that toad.”

Her plan to throw the tiara at his head had entirely evaporated. How could she be angry when she understood what he had been trying to say? Somewhere out there in the great yonder, somewhere governed by stars, there had been some wisp of them that always was and would be. Some time ago, there had been a woman who should have been a part of Harry’s world who knew this, and blessed it with her anticipation.

Hermione bit back a smile. “I was entirely intent on being annoyed at you.”
“I know.” Harry nudged her gently with his body, and she noted that somehow, she nearly up against the potting table. “We could skip that bit, if you want?”

“It’s just…” Hermione confessed, “Every time I look at you, I know. I know, and I wonder how I ever missed it.” The idea that he didn’t have that same feeling about her was unbearable. She needed to know that he did, needed to know that he felt it too. She needed to hear him say it.

And when he did, when he told her what she already knew, the feeling in her soul outstripped the bubble faux-champagne. He continued, “I’ve decided I like muggle New Years better.”

That wasn’t what Hermione had expected to hear. She goggled. “What?”

His fingers toying with the tight edging of her sleeve, Harry informed her. “Did you know that wizards don’t kiss their wives at midnight? I always thought it was barmy, people going around like that, but it seems odd not to, you know?”

Hermione took a look around her. They were entirely alone in the glass building. “Was it your plan, then, to get me alone?”

“Oh, no.” Harry assured her, his fingers moving to the top button of her bodice, slipping it in and out easily. Hermione was molten. “I’ve got a bet going. I’m not to kiss anybody and if I don’t, I get to borrow Sirius’s secretary to do my duplicating for a month.”

Hermione wondered if Harry had blown up the duplicator again. It seemed likely. The second button caught his attention, and Hermione gripped the table, rather than rushing this, rushing him, as Harry simply stared at the full slope of her chest, as she strained against the rest of the buttons.

His hands fell away, and Hermione panted. Hermione knew that admitting defeat would be totally distasteful and likely to have long term impacts upon his productivity. Hermione didn’t care, not really, because she’d die if she didn’t get her hands on him, and soon.

After a long second, she realized something that made her feel very clever indeed. “This bet, Harry?” Hermione fisted her hands in her skirts in anticipation and the satisfaction of her realization, “Did it say anything about you being willingly accosted in greenhouses by risqué young duchesses with rampaging hormones?”

“You know…” He mused, “That didn’t come up at all.” Harry caught her gaze, feigning nonchalance, “So, you’ve got me here. What do you plan to do with me?”

Hermione bit her lip, to hide the blossoming of a wide smile. She couldn’t quite hold it back. “It’s a pity we didn’t get to argue. We could have had spectacularly good angsty make-up sex, you know?” Hermione mused, undoing the buttons of her gloves with haste that contradicted the ease of her words.

Harry considered this, fitting his hands gently against her ever-changing waist, as one glove hit the brick floor. “Well, you did call me a slug.”

“I did.” Hermione agreed, the second one following suit. “Lucky that, isn’t it?”

Harry was holding back laughter as he caught her by the waist, firmly, his fingers brushing against the place where the full and present knowledge of their unity grew. “You warded the door?”

“We’re as unplottable as Queerditch Marsh.” Hermione affirmed, as she was gently placed on the edge of the sturdy work table. She knew they was plenty of room to put her arms back behind her if she wanted to, and she felt the cushioning charm fall into place around her. For now, though, she
was content to keep her grip on Harry. He wouldn’t always be able to hold her up like this, and Hermione wanted to wrap herself around him while she still could.

Hermione was on the edge of breathlessness when Harry gripped her knees to keep her steady as he stepped between them and her fingers trembled as she reached for his bowtie. She quavered at the barest brush of his fingers against her buttons. Hermione knew he was determined to push them aside, and she relished the feeling of the heated air around her as he made short work of pushing her bodice down. She was entirely lost in the look in his eyes, watching him as he watched her.

Harry grinned against her before she sought his mouth, unable to wait a second longer, “You know, at the risk of sounding like a total jackass, I quite like pregnant you.”

Hermione disagreed, shoving his jacket away, “You like my boobs and the sex.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow. Hermione blushed when he said, “Yeah, it’s totally just me, because you hate or—”

Hermione kissed him mid-word, unwilling to listen to nonsense.

There needed to be less talk, and more action.

First-Foot of the First Houses

Rita Skeeter

In yet another stroke of luck, the first person to cross the threshold at the Longbottom Ball upon the advent of the new year was none other than a dark-haired, lanky, Duke of Potter. He returned from the terrace sans his young wife, looking all for the world as though he had lost track of the time despite the ringing of bells and singing. Knowing his absentminded nature, we are inclined to believe that he was simply lost in the gardens.

We are unable to ascertain if he was carrying any coal. Perhaps if he had been, he might have sent up a flare and returned for the countdown led by his chum, the Lord Valley. It goes without saying, though, that the Duke of Potter carried with him drink and money. This is a harbinger of good fortune in many homes, but it isn’t as if the Longbottoms require such an auspicious blessing, is it?

Still, their ball was said to be the highlight of the winter season.

Sources at the Ball note that the Duchess of Potter was finely turned out in a couture gown, and adorned with a tiara that, according to reports, has never been seen outside of the Potter vaults. The room, it said, was a twitter with the new choice. Her abundant and overwhelming hair, oftentimes larger than her person, was restrained in an up-do adorned with a plethora of diamonds and pearls.

Is it simply that Her Grace prefers new jewelry, an expensive hobby no doubt, or that her husband has declined to offer her the traditional Pottermore tiara? Whatever the reason, we applaud Her Grace for bravely making new sartorial choices. Her classmate, Lady Hannah Abbott was, naturally, seen in the Abbod tiara, which she frequently wears now that her elder sister, the wife of Mr. Church, a promising businessman, has elected to wear jewelry from her husband.
Helen Granger counted herself blessed to have been invited on the initial hospital tours with Harry and Hermione, even if she knew logically that she was brought along for camouflage. The press had no compunction about following them about, and having one’s mother-in-law along did cast doubts onto the purpose of the outing, as did borrowing her car for a trip down to London.

If anyone wanted to follow them for the hour and half, without traffic, that it took to get where they were going, well Helen applauded them.

They were, of course, touring private maternity wards, but no one would speculate on quite so easily with her along. Helen supposed they could always manufacture some minor illness on her part to bandy about until Hermione felt ready to disclose her pregnancy. Helen knew it would have to be soon, but she understood why Hermione and Harry were keeping their knowledge as close within the family as they could. Even Ron, having guessed at Hermione’s condition, was apparently mum. Once the news was out, there would be eons of public interest and speculation.

Helen had once asked Hermione if she had been surprised to become pregnant so promptly in her marriage. Hermione had evaded a response, which Helen took to be a resounding negative. Helen had gathered from conversations with Augusta that finding one’s soulmate was rare enough, and when combined with the rituals they had undergone as a marital rite, conception was almost a forgone conclusion. Hermione must have known this, Helen was sure.

Still, it gratified Helen to know that Hermione wanted this baby, if nothing else. No matter what the press and the people would say, she knew Hermione would be alright. No one got in the way of Hermione having something she wanted, and keeping it. Helen knew her daughter well enough to know that she had a deep and fierce maternal instinct. Helen pitied the first person to come after, even in some small way, their baby. Between the two of them, Helen expected the poor person would be literally obliterated.

They were nearing the end of their final visit. Hermione, as she always was, was turned out effortlessly. She was neither too fussy and fancy, nor underdressed. Petra was worth her weight in gold, because looking her best did a lot for Hermione. She was able to totally forget about her clothes, knowing that she was well dressed, and instead focused on her thoughts and experiences. Helen had tried in vain to make that point to Hermione for years. In the end, she was simply glad to see it hit home at such a meaningful time.

Helen was no stranger to hospitals, even if it had been some years since she had been on our a tour. They were shown the rooms they might use, given a tour and listened as the three hospitals on the shortlist showed themselves off to their best advantage. All the while, Hermione smiled gently and never showed a flicker of impatience Helen knew she felt. She listened intently and kindly until the time came to interject with the questions that mattered, and all throughout she maintained a laser focus.

Of course, the questions that were asked were entirely different than those from a typical expectant couple, given that Hermione, if she needed a transfer or chose the hospital route due to circumstances later in her pregnancy, would be arriving with her own team. Therefore, they were merely there to get a sense as to the hospital itself, and also how well they responded to Hermione asking questions on the fly, and how comfortable they felt in each environment.

Cost, clearly, was a non-entity, and Harry didn’t even look at the sheets that were discreetly provided. He absolutely did not care. For a man whose life motto was ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ and was happiest in his oldest wellies, Helen knew this was an expression of his priorities. In the end, he wanted a living, healthy, wife and baby, and he was prepared to get it. Nothing else mattered.

Helen wished she could say the same of Hermione, at least when it came to cost. She had a chart
that guided her during her decision process. Cost was a category on the board, which Helen knew greatly annoyed Harry. Helen had firsthand evidence of this fact.

Hermione, after visiting one hospital, had privately made some comment about cost being lower there, and higher elsewhere. Harry had borne it with grace until he’d realized she was being serious. He’d muttered as they’d returned to the car after that visit that he’d light the £10k on fire so she would stop fussing about something as insignificant as the cost. Hermione had replied that if he had such a big head that such a sum was insignificant enough to burn without a care for its value, he needed to spend time in self-reflection.

In short, Hermione had lectured, and Harry had met her point for point.

There was no screaming, no yelling. They weren't even snappish or shrewish. Helen knew she would be hard pressed to realize they were in the midst of a disagreement if she hadn't been stuck in the Jag with them. Neither gave any ground that wasn’t fairly and logically won.

This, clearly, was how the Potters disagreed.

Privately, witnessing it had amused Helen. Shortly thereafter a spirited debate on various factors of private maternity care had ensued. They both agreed that private hospitals didn't always offer the best care. Wine lists didn't matter when you were there to have a baby, and a lot of the posh amenities made some places seem more like hotels and getaways for glitterati. hey both agreed that Dr. Smith-Webster was the best of the best for Hermione. So, they knew they would go where said doctor advised.

Hermione was coping with the idea that she wouldn't get the birth she'd always expected if she had to go to the hospital, because she had always figured she'd be just another witch on the maternity ward. Hermione was firmly of the mind that she had a duty to support the NHS, be it magical or muggle. It seemed that Harry understood, but wisely pointed out that they could not risk the Statute, nor was he prepared to risk her well-being over Hermione’s opinions. The NHS wasn’t an option, because her consultant couldn’t provide her care without the freedoms of choice that came with writing a big check in the muggle community, and they both agreed that the magical hospital was off the table. They went round for almost the entire trip, but seemed none the worse off for it.

They actually communicated, and it was nice to see.

At least she knew that her daughter could manage marital discord. In the end, though, Harry won this one. Helen only learned this indirectly, because the cost factor was excised from Hermione’s chart, only to be replaced with a score that was aggregated based upon the amount of public service the ward carried out.

The tours were generally the same no matter the hospital. Harry had a lot of questions about security, and was promptly briefed on security measures in the wards. Hermione herself was concerned with how well the hospital was prepared to cope with the influx of outsiders. She was quite concerned with putting anyone out, until Helen had pulled her aside, and lectured her none too gently about not worrying about that, because it was their job to accommodate her, and that it was not her problem to consider the logistics.

Hermione only needed to worry about herself and her baby. Helen had absolutely zero intention of letting anyone to be anything other than totally warm, welcoming, and accommodating to Hermione. Even if she wanted to book The Portland and redecorate a wing, which she did not, Helen expected that anyone who came into contact with Hermione at a hospital should all be professional and kind.
Hermione was not a diva, and Helen wasn’t going to let her think that advocating for herself was anything other than acceptable and encouraged. She was sometimes too kind, Helen thought, though she did not say it. Helen was quite prepared to have words with this Dr. Smith-Webster should the need arise.

Helen knew, too, that coming along reassured the both of them. After all, she had done an OB rotation decades ago, and had some level of personal experience in the process. Magical or mundane, labor was labor was labor. Most girls, Helen reflected, wanted their mothers involved. It was fun, all told, to be involved in this way. For so long, she worried that she would lose Hermione. It made her weep with joy in quiet moments to know that they were close, even now.

They had been given the grand tour of the final hospital, which Hermione quite liked because it was attached to a very well-performing hospital with all manner of support, and Harry liked because the place was locked down tighter than a Belmarsh or Whitemoor, looking all the while like a cheery and happy place. You were signed in and signed out, and IDs were checked, and wristbands were monitored, and wards and individual rooms were locked with key codes.

When they processed through the exit, and stepped out onto the walk on the discreet side street, Hermione spared a glance for the people across the road. With a murmur of apology to her mother, and a gently insistent smile to Harry, she held her head high as she and Harry crossed the street.

Helen watched from afar, spared a kind word for the people who were clearly waiting to see her. Helen didn’t know how they knew where to find her, but she could guess. After all, there was a radio show on the Wireless that commented upon Hermione’s schedule, which Helen thought, as Harry did, that was little more than stalking.

Hermione shook enfeebled hands gently, kissed babies, and bantered lightly with Harry to the delight of the crowd that had gathered. She accepted the flowers given to her by someone with a genuine gratitude that warmed Helen’s heart.

Eventually, the chill grew and Harry began to extricate her. Hermione made some general speech of farewell, and left. Helen had watched her carefully, and knew for the first time that she was seeing Hermione’s public persona. She wasn’t fake, but she was very careful to keep the conversation light, and made every effort not to let her hand rest on her small bump. In fact, she was careful to hold the flowers she was given in just such a way so as to disguise her body when she moved or the wind blew about her. Her demure and tasteful skirts were weighted down, though Helen could not tell by the hem if this was a magical or mundane action. If there were weights in the hem, they were expertly placed.

She spent all of twenty minutes with the witches and wizards who had popped out to see her, being that it was freezing, but Helen knew that Hermione had made their days. When she came back, she spent no less than fifteen minutes wondering how they might help one woman they’d met, and reminded Harry to remember a little boy to Ron, who was enamored with the furor office.

Helen knew that on the way home, Hermione would pull out her wooden lap-desk, shrunken down in her handbag, and return to whatever she was working on. The first time they had come to London in this fashion, she had been working on her lesson plans and notes for Minerva. The second time it had been some charity appeal to which she had become involved. From previous conversation, Helen knew that Hermione had some general correspondence to work on. Sitting in the back lessened the vestiges of her morning sickness, and gave her the space to work.

Alone with her thoughts, Helen reflected upon the moments she had spent watching her daughter so in her element, so very good at making other people at ease, so very talented at making them each feel special, all the while maintaining boundaries. Helen realized that while many people in
the press mocked Hermione for one reason or another, not one of them questioned her leadership in this society.

Hermione had her eye on being Minister for Magic one day. Helen did not tell her that, to the people of her community, she was unlikely to be seen as a mere politician, even if she did win the election. Helen rebuked herself internally. On Hermione’s final wedding day, she had made so bold as to compare Hermione to the PM. How foolish she had been. She knew now that she had been thinking of the wrong person.

The only possible comparison that Helen could comfortably draw was clear.

There was only one role that Hermione occupied in the hearts of the common wizarding people. Augusta made reference to various mythical women, as though Hermione was fated to stand in the shadows of their power. Helen knew her girl, and knew she was set to best them all. No, to her, such comparisons felt hollow.

As they got into Helen’s car, parked some blocks away, and Helen started it up, she caught Harry’s eye in the mirror. Time seemed to slow for a second as Helen tapped out a few notes on the steering wheel. Oblivious to the exchange going on around her, Hermione continued to talk about some issue that a person had brought to her attention.

Harry grinned, and looked fondly at Hermione. It seemed that Helen was a little late to that party, but to be honest, she hadn’t had all the evidence. Hermione wouldn’t like the comparison, but it was true. Harry agreed, clearly, giving a slight nod before turning his attention back to whatever Hermione was saying about elder care.

Helen finished the stanza in her head, it as much a prayer as anything else.

*God Save Hermione.*

Chapter End Notes

Euphie Potter for the win. She kind of tugs at my heartstrings. Just think how differently things could have been, if Harry had been raised by Sirius, if she had lived, if J/L had lived, if someone had said to the kid, "Hey, there's this girl living in Crawley you should meet."

But Fate had different plans. Or did it? Was the fact that Harry didn't see her prediction always his fate? Were they always meant to meet on the Express? Could they have met sooner? Does it really matter?

I'm not expecting answers, but these are the questions that cross my mind when I desperately want to write a happy childhood AU.

Now, where's the name, email address, and GPS coordinates of all our soulmates, Euphie? I wonder, as Hermione does, if actually having them would make one iota of difference?

(And yes, the backup hospital they choose will be made explicitly clear).

Yes. I snuck Pottermore in there as reference both to the website, and to the Poltimore
tiara, made famous by Princess Margret. I know it had to be sold, but I hope it's sitting in a vault somewhere. To break that one down would be pretty sad. It's a huge tiara as tiaras go, and I think that it would be in line with one from the vaults, though the really oldest and grandest one is a dainty thing, goblin made.
I forget which two.

Chapter Summary

"...I forget which two." -Bob Constantine

OR

“Anyone who ever wondered how much they could love a child who did not spring from their own loins, know this: it is the same. The feeling of love is so profound, it's incredible and surprising.”
— Nia Vardalos

OR

Harry said, on that fateful day, "I happen to know a young wizard who misses his My Own when he doesn’t get enough time with her." But what of the witch? What's her story? What made her a My Own?

Or, rather, who?

Chapter Notes

I wept openly and brokenly when writing this, and again when editing it. My 100lb dog crawled into my lap and my mother expressed concern when we talked later because I looked horrible, she said.

I lied and said my allergies were acting up. She now thinks I need to visit a doctor. Still working on a way to tell her she called when I was editing fanfiction.

Sorry not sorry.

You've been warned.

Hermione knew that the day had come, and felt excitement well up.

She tried to tramp it down, but she knew that she never truly would excise it from her soul, and knew too, that she never would really try. She stared at herself in the mirror before exiting the loo, her hands still damp. Four months gone. Five to go, or thereabouts. Hermione had a busy day, preparing for Lupercalia.

The holiday was a bit different for werewolves, so Hermione and Harry were playing host to one Edward Remus Lupin for the duration.

Hermione was going to have a proper muggle Valentine’s Day, complete with paper hearts and paper chains and chocolate cake and cuddles and a film and sweets everywhere. Harry had been
working on the reel to reel projector, and Hermione was relatively confident that Teddy was going to have an absolutely wonderful holiday, well distracted from the idea that Pads and Papa weren’t there to tuck him and read him his books.

Hermione figured she would do in a pinch, as she had once before. Besides, The Foundry boasted not only My Own, but also Cadbury and Crooks. Crooks was pleasantly indifferent to Teddy, but Cadbury loved him with a zeal that bordered on sycophantic. They were constant playmates.

Within weeks, Teddy would be two. He was growing up so fast. At one moment, she had been sobbing and cuddling a baby in her bruised and freshly scrubbed arms, unable to hold him with blood on her, desperate to promise him that he would have people who loved him. And in the next second, there he was, running from the Floo hollering for her.

Hermione greeted him with enthusiasm, hugging him tightly as Cadbury barked gleefully and hopped up on his hind legs at the arrival of his very best mate. Teddy scampered away with Cadbury, running across the hall, barely avoiding hitting into one of the chairs. Hermione missed the days she could encase his entire blanket in a bubble charm.

Sirius set the small trunk, labeled ELR, on the floor. Hermione had packed that very trunk so many times. Both he and Remus greeted Hermione. Remus felt compelled to thank her, once again. Hermione waved it off. This was what family was for, after all. And it wasn’t like she hadn’t taken Teddy on for much longer than a weekend in the past.

She knew that Remus felt some guilt over that truth, but Hermione was grateful that she had been there for Teddy. They had all done the best they could, and Remus, she knew, had been the best of parents, simply by admitting he needed help, and accepting it when it came in an unlikely form.

Hermione added, “I’ll be saving you a lot of the food, Remus. I even think there might be chocolate cake with your name on it.”

Hermione knew for a fact that there was, in fact, just such a cake in the dairy rooms, waiting to be frosted and consumed. Hermione planned to send it over, discreetly, tomorrow, with a note updating them on Teddy’s welfare. Just because her favorite werewolf was taking a hedonistic foray into ritualistic sex brought on by his dual nature, didn’t mean that he stopped being an active and involved parent. She had kept a journal of Teddy’s growth, and the notes were merely efforts of repetition after making her entries.

“Thank you, Hermione.” Remus said, again, as if she needed to hear it. He paused for a second, and then added, “He’s been asking, a lot, lately about what he was like as a baby. I didn’t—” Remus cleared his throat, “I didn’t know to tell him.”

“Do you think it’s because we told him last week about the baby?” Hermione knew that it was, in fact, exactly because of this explanation, but her point in asking the question was simply to foster conversation. Teddy couldn’t grasp the idea of pregnancy, but he knew what a baby was, mainly through understanding that he was not one. For Teddy was a big boy.

“He might be a little…” Sirius searched for the word, finally settling upon one, “Regressive with you. He told me yesterday quite firmly that he was the baby, who was also a big boy.”

Hermione nodded as Teddy came zooming back on unsteady feet into earshot, laughing and hooting as Cadbury barked and squeaked his stuffed moose. Sirius reached out and scooped up the little boy, who screamed with his glee, and turned his hair into a bright rainbow.

Sirius turned him upright and spoke, “Who is going to be a good boy for Hermione and Harry?”
“Not me!” Teddy cried, causing Sirius, absurdly puffed with pride, to falter and laugh. His accent was so adorable that it made Hermione want to giggle.

Remus was the first one to pull it together. He taught, after all. “Do endeavor to try, Teds.”

But Teddy was already talking in a fast toddler babble, words blurring together as he said something about something about something, finally ending with a happy hoot, screaming, “Trains! Trains.”

Things calmed down as Teddy was bade to give Pads and Papa a kiss and told to remember all the fun things he did so that he could tell them later. Hermione knew this bit was going to be like ripping off a plaster, so she simply and cheerfully told them goodbye, and led Teddy away, just like they were simply having another playdate together. This wasn’t the first time she had done this, after all. Last time, though, she had been on the other side.

And so it went. They had tea, with macaroni cheese for Teddy, complete with the little pot of tea he was given with much fanfare, as a treat. His teapot had a dinosaur on it, and heaven forbid he have to drink tea out of anything else, though truthfully, his tea was watered down fruit juice, warmed slightly. They followed up this big boy treat with a rousing game of naming various colors they found throughout the rooms, which, in addition to being very educational, amused Teddy.

After a time, though, they ended up cuddled together on a chaise in the library, utterly played out. Teddy was nearly two, and Hermione knew he was leaving the days where he would be contented to cuddle her behind. It was in these moments that Ted seemed to be the most talkative, and so Hermione knew she would miss it dearly.

After a little bit, Hermione kissed the top of his head, and put the latest Mr. Puckle book on the floor. “Did you like the story, Teddy?”

“Yes.” He affirmed, “Mr. Puckle have a baby?”

That wasn’t exactly how he said it, but Hermione knew well what he was asking. “Well, Mr. Puckle doesn’t have a baby because…” Hermione struggled for an answer. How were you to tell a child that a fictional character didn’t have any brothers or sisters because it would mess with the narrative, “Because his family doesn’t have a baby. Maybe they will one day, just like you will.”

“Oh okay.” Teddy said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.” Hermione held him tighter for a brief second, nestled to her side as he was on the chaise. “Let’s rest, okay? When Harry gets home we might do something fun.”

“Now?” Teddy prompted, looking around.

“Later on.” Hermione clarified, knowing that Teddy valued time clarifications. He was still getting the hang of them, and so Hermione made every effort to talk about the passage of time in relation to what they were doing.

As Teddy slept, after a bit of chatting that slowly ended, Hermione was lost to a dream-filled sleep.

“Hermione.” The wedding festivities around them were too joyous for this conversation. Hermione wasn’t sure why Tonks insisted upon keeping at it. Tonks was as deadly serious as Hermione had ever seen her, her bubblegum hair as bright as the intensity in her eyes. “I know I asked the right person to be Godmother.”
Hermione felt the weight of the bundle in her arms, a cuddly and adorable baby Ted, and looked back at Tonks, as though she needed assurance, as though platitudes could change this warrior’s perception of war. Hermione could not sway the course of the conversation, so she sought to end it. “You both will be just fine.”

Tonks returned the smile with a desperation that Hermione didn’t understand, “Just let him eat his pudding first, once in a while? And see that he watches Abbott and Costello?”

Hermione had shaken her head, “Tonks. Remus…” would absolutely lose his shit if he knew you were talking like this. Their marriage might not be easy, and they might fight like a cat and a dog, but Remus loved Tonks. Remus lived in fear that something would happen to her. Remus was in a sticky and tricky spot with his soulmate not actually being a killer, but Hermione had never once doubted his respect for his wife, nor his fidelity.

“Is too much of man to be a mother, Hermione.” Tonks asserted, with a roll of his eyes. “And I doubt Sirius knows how to parent. Come on, Aunt Walburga was a full on loon. They’ll need you.”

Hermione was unable to conceive of a world without Tonks in it. Tonks was so full of life. She would survive the war, and be an example to them all, an example of how to live life to the fullest. Hermione had corrected her, “It’s more likely that I’ll go, Tonks.”

Tonks had looked softly upon her, as her eyes had strayed to Harry, who was crossing the garden with a plate of food, waving to Ron, “And should you go, I’ll love your boys like I know you’ll love mine.”

And with that, Tonks had trusted her with her son.

Hermione woke a little while later, roused by Cadbury hop around. Hermione extricated herself from Teddy’s limbs, and visited the loo. She cleaned up the toys scattered around the library, and put away Teddy’s books. Normally, he cleaned up his own toys, or participated while she did the bulk of the work, but Hermione desperately wanted to keep busy.

She had endured a very strange dream, wherein she was watching portions of Bill and Fleur’s wedding, over and over, just before Tonks had gotten her alone. Hermione, as she always was after those dreams, felt oddly unsettled and very near tears. She wanted Tonks here, more than anything.

She needed to ground herself in reality, so she asked Fella to mind Teddy while he slept so that she could take Cadbury outside to do his business, and throw a ball for a time. She tossed it out, and Cadbury went flying after it in puppyish glee and abandon. Hermione found solace in the rote motion of extending her arm, and letting the ball fly.

Hermione was lost in thought of the days following the war. Somehow, she had ended up with Teddy in her arms, and a bottle on the stove. She had ended up with a receiving blanket on her shoulder, and a nappy pail in the bathroom. She had let herself be swallowed up by a sea of nappies and feeds and cuddles and baby tubs. There was a baby needing care, and Hermione desperately needing something to keep her alive. There had never been a question, not with Andy beside herself and Remus beyond reaching. She had promised Tonks.

Focusing her energy on Teddy had provided Hermione with a sense of duty, something to get out
of bed to do. Teddy had to eat, and his mother had asked this of her. When she was lost, scared, and confused, she told herself over and over that Tonks had trusted her with her son. When she screwed things up for the first days, and wanted to die, she told herself that she couldn’t. Tonks had trusted her with her son.

When he cried, and Remus was deep into a potion induced dreamless sleep, Hermione went to him, until she’d finally moved Teddy’s cot into her room. When he needed attention, and Remus was lost in a sea of blackness, staring at the wall, Hermione held the baby and talked to him, telling him tales of the Mr. Moony that had once been, and would be again.

She remembered finally getting into her bed with him, carefully warding him with spells, and crying with him, unable to give him what he wanted, but wishing with all her might that Tonks was the one with him. She would have traded places with Tonks in a split second, just to stop him from crying from a want she could never assuage.

She remembered everything. She remembered the first time he had supported his own head for the first time, the first time he had smiled at her out of genuine recognition and affection, the first time he had rolled over and then cried with the shock and wonder of it. She remembered the first time he had put something in his mouth, and she had nearly panicked, thinking he might choke. She remembered desperately floo-ing her mother, still wondering if she’d pick up, but knowing she would do anything for Teddy. She remembered the first time he’d reached out for something and caught it, the first time he’d sat up by himself. She remembered. She remembered everything.

She remembered getting into her first real disagreement with Molly. Molly had made some comment about the way Hermione had decided to do something with Teddy. It had been over something as simple as sunscreen. Witches didn’t, Molly had informed her primly, put sunscreen on their babies, not when there was a proper charm. Hermione had gone on with slathering the cream over his pale little body, smoothing her hands over his chubby baby legs and down his arms to his delicate fingers and under the edges of his bodysuit.

Hermione remembered affixing Teddy’s sunhat to his little head, and putting him his pram, uncaring of Molly’s words. They were at Grimmauld, and were going to take a short walk to St. James’s Park. Teddy liked the pelicans.

Hermione had applied the charm, too. She wasn’t about to say that, though, and Molly had just gone on and on and on about the right way to do things and so forth. Hermione could have borne it if Molly hadn’t come at Teddy with a flannel.

Hermione had yanked him away, as gently as possible. Molly had begun to lecture and finally Hermione had snapped, beyond thought as Teddy fought once more with his sunhat, “You had seven babies, Molly. Leave mine alone.”

Molly had looked at her as though Hermione had committed some grave sin. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re his mother, Hermione.”

Hermione had swallowed so many responses in that moment. She had wanted to ask Molly why not, when Molly had made that mistake and shown no remorse over it with Harry. She wanted to scream, to yell, ask who the hell else was going to feed him and change him, and love him, when his own father was so deep in a depressive episode? Despite Remus’s best efforts, it was unfair and cruel to both Lupin men to leave Teddy alone with Remus for any extended period. She had wanted to scream.

Instead, she had only looked coolly at Molly, and replied, “His mother entrusted him to me, Molly.” Hermione had wanted to scream that Molly hadn’t been the one to stand in the Burrow’s
garden with Tonks, and promised Tonks she would take care of him. She hadn’t known what she was promising, how deeply that promise would change her when she’d made it, but she intended to keep that promise, with every breath in her body.

Hermione had added, in the same tone, “And now we’re going to watch them feed the pelicans at St. James’s. Feel free to show yourself out.”

Hermione remembered levitating the Silver Cross onto the pavement, and pushing it along, tears in her eyes behind the sunnies she’d swiped from Harry. She had laughed and held Teddy tight as she’d tried to engage him with the world around him, to show him something of the world that wasn’t war and pain and fear and death. The other young mothers at the park, and the nannies, stopped to chat. For the first time, Hermione hadn’t felt like total shit about not being able to always correct their assumptions.

Tonks had trusted her with her son.

The ball hit Hermione on the foot as Cadbury dropped it.

Cadbury was panting and done in, so they trudged inside. Hermione had correspondence to work on, and so she answered five or six rather involved letters, Petra popping in and out quietly, as Teddy slept. By the time Teddy woke, Hermione had made finished her day’s missives, and was more than ready to let Teddy play with paints and sponges and all manner of brushes.

What were cleansing charms for, if not painting? Hermione covered the whole nursery-sized tea table she’d unearthed months ago in rolled paper, and let Teddy have at it. She put a charm on the floor so the rug wouldn’t stain, and offered up all manner of paints and implements. Teddy held fast to her skirts, and so Hermione joined in on the painting, making a horrible mess of herself right along with Teddy.

Teddy was ever the conversationalist, and eventually, he asked, “Books’s House? Remember?”

“Story Hour, Ted.” Hermione corrected gently, “I remember. We went there lots when you were a baby in your pram.”

“I’m a big boy!” Teddy smashed his hand down into a glob of paint, and it took every bit of Hermione’s self-control not to wince, when said paint splattered up on his face. “Zoo!”

Hermione agreed, that yes, his push chair was only for the zoo. She remembered the first time she had taken Teddy to a playgroup specializing in in the under-one crowd. He’d been something like six or seven months old, and Hermione was desperate to get him some sort of human interaction that wasn’t centered on their postwar stressors. He wasn’t changing very much at that time, unless emotionally distressed, so Hermione felt safe in taking him.

He needed to be around other little boys and girls, irrespective of the fact that the week before they had had to spend the night in the safe room. Magical threats from those that still felt the zeal of war were nothing to fool with, and so they were living on the edge of hiding out, yet again, reeling from the possibility of violence.

She’d been careful.

She found a group where no one knew them, where she could blend into the crowd, where a new woman and her baby wouldn’t be remarked upon.
She had taken her wand, her DA coin, fake IDs, and perfected a perfect backstory should anyone ask. Her husband, she would say, was in politics. People never enquired about that line of work. She was gaunt enough to look like some sort of political wife, even if her clothes were awful. She figured then anyone who recognized her might think they’d seen her on the telly and not on wanted posters.

Hermione had tried once, to say that she was Teddy’s carer, but nobody had believed her. He’d been vocalizing, “Mmmmmmmmmmmmm” quite a lot, and though she tried to say that he was only connecting her with that sound because she came, and was called ‘Mione, no one believed her. So she went along with the lies.

She would lie for Teddy. And so, when he asked her about Story Group, she lied again. “Remember, we stopped going there because we went to Scotland? You love Scotland!”

“Sheepses!” Teddy cried, ignoring Hermione when she repeated the word correctly. They had, for a time, gone up to the estate in Scotland. There had been threats, credible ones, and so they had gone. They had passed most of the summer there. Hermione was certain Teddy didn’t remember much of it, or only remembered the stories.

They’d had to pack up and leave within minutes, fighting a war that was supposed to be over, and Hermione had never found the courage to go back to the playgroup once they were in London again.

Remus had pulled her aside that day, and Hermione had been dreading the conversation. “Remus.”

She knew he was doing better. They wouldn’t want her around, wouldn’t want her to come to Scotland, not when Remus was slowly doing better and Sirius was emerging from that shared emotional state with similar speed. They weren’t forgetting, but Hermione was praying they were slowly healing.

So Hermione knew why she was in his office, without Teddy. She knew why. And unbidden, the tears she had worked so hard to still, the tears she promised herself she would never let show, filled her eyes. She cleared her throat, “Ted’s trunk is packed. His Mr. Puckle books are on the top.”

She had intended to be totally detached when this moment came, the moment where Remus stepped up and told her that he didn’t need her anymore. She was glad, so glad, that Remus was here to be the father his son needed, and she wanted that more than anything for Teddy.

For herself, though, Hermione didn’t quite know how she felt, other than this clawing despair. She was glad she wasn’t needed, but all the same, she couldn’t imagine not holding Teddy, not knowing that he was okay. She couldn’t imagine fading back into the corners of his life like the average Godmother.

“Oh, Hermione.” And then, with that, there were two sinewy arms wrapped around her. They were paternal in their comfort. “Don’t cry, Cariad.”

Hermione remembered dimly that Remus’s mother had been Welsh. Hermione drew her tears inward by the force of her will. She shuddered. “I’m fine.”

Desperate to prove it, she pasted on a smile. “The threats, I guess.”

“If you say so.” Remus had agreed, stepping back. “We’re all a little shaken.”

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat, “What was it that you wanted to tell me, Remus?”
“When Dora was…” he cleared his throat. Hermione knew that taking about Tonks was incredibly hard for him, even now. He continued on, showing a sort of bravery and honesty that Hermione had never before truly seen, “When Dora was carrying Teddy, she was adamant about two things. She wanted to call him Edward Remus, and she wanted you for a godmother.”

Hermione had not known any of this, but took no meaning from it as Remus continued. “We fought about it. We fought a lot. I was fine with the name, but I thought…”

Hermione’s heart stilled in her chest.

Remus took in her splotchy face. “I thought we were being unfair to you. It wasn’t that I thought there was anyone better for the job, it was just that I knew, better than anyone, what Sirius had gone through with Harry.”

Remus continued, when Hermione said nothing, unable to make her voice work, “I was prepared to die, Hermione. I wanted to die for the cause. I did not want to saddle an eighteen year old girl with a baby. No one remembers this, but Lily was barely out of her teens when Harry was born. Those days were not easy. And I knew that, easily, so easily, our situation could mirror that of James and Lily.”

Hermione knew it could have done. If both Remus and Tonks had died, Teddy would have been an orphan.

Except. Except.

Except.

Tonks had trusted her with her son.

And if Remus thought she would stop at anything to keep him healthy, happy, and whole, he had another thing coming.

He would have a whole family to love him. He would have always had a home with her where he was loved and desperately wanted, desperately cherished. He would have had Sirius, would have had Harry, and would have been surrounded by people who loved him. He would have wanted for nothing, except, of course, his mum and dad.

When she went to speak, Remus cut her off. “And yes, I know now how foolish I was in thinking that, even for a second. You will forgive an old man for becoming lost in his memories.” Remus smiled gently, “But I was terrified, not for only my son, but for you, Hermione. I love you as a daughter, and to leave you with a baby in your arms, when you were little more than a girl yourself, scared me.”

“Remus, stop.” Hermione knew where this was heading, knew the tone in his voice well. She didn’t want him to castigate himself any more than he already had. “You—”

“But I went and did it anyway.” Remus confided, tears of his own in his eyes, “I tried so hard, Hermione. I tried to want to live, to want to do something, to put myself together enough to feed my son without you handing me the baby and the bottle, but—”

Hermione knew he had tried.

He had been so strong.

The sort of depression he’d been going through was all-consuming. He had mourned his wife,
mourned his friends, mourned the loss of his son’s mother. In addition, he had been awash in guilt that he could never give himself wholly to Tonks. He could not give her the sort of love he’d once promised Sirius, and had never ever been able to kill. Remus had, for a long time, believed that if he had only been a better husband, his exuberant and valiant wife, she who deserved more than the love of fidelity and commitment, might have lived. “

You did nothing wrong.”

“Yes, I know the depression wasn’t, isn’t, my fault.” Remus repeated, and Hermione hoped he believed it, “But Hermione, the fact that I was and am depressed means that I went and did what I feared most. I, alive though I was, left you with him, let you take the load for too long.”

Hermione had only one thing to say in return. She had only one truth. “I love him.”

“I know you do.” Remus assured her, “And so, I want you to know that things will change, Hermione. That’s a promise I’m making you, you and only you, because you love him, because of who you are to him.”

Hermione hoped she prepared herself for this. She did feel joy. She did. It was the sort of joy that was soft, the sort of joy she prayed would be strong enough to endure pain and come out brighter.

Hermione supposed Remus saw a look in her eyes that she could not hide, not from this man who had spent decades and decades subduing his emotions in the face of what was right, “I am not going to take him, leave you out in the cold. I couldn’t hurt you anymore than I could hurt him. Tearing him from your arms is the last thing I would ever do.”

The tears she had been hiding filled her eyes again. “Remus…”

“But we’re all going to do our bit, Hermione.” Remus clarified, “Me especially. You aren’t the only one who can change a nappy and hold a bottle and get up in the middle of the night.”

Hermione did not tell him that Ted rarely woke in the night anymore, unless he was distressed or his routine was interrupted, which did happen quite a lot.

Remus made his point in a firm tone of voice, “None of us are alone. I want you to promise me you’ll go back to school.”

“I can get my NEWTs at home. I’d planned…” Hermione held off on explaining her plans. She had so much work to do. She wanted to get into advocacy, wanted to get her NEWTs behind her in the most efficient way. She had very little intention of going back to Hogwarts. She had a life and responsibilities outside of school.

“To raise Teddy.” Remus finished, articulating something Hermione had never put into words. She didn’t deny it. She was always going to be there when Ted needed her.

Remus continued, with some sympathy, “I know, Hermione. But I’ve already extracted a promise from Harry to go back. Naturally, he’s only going if you go.”

And thus, Hermione was put in the middle. She thought for a long second. Harry was a big boy. He could apparate, could work a Floo. He didn’t need her to see that he had dinner and didn’t fall out of his cot or eat something off of the floor. If he wanted a cuddle, as he often did when nightmares struck, he knew how to find her.

She trusted Remus. Teddy was his son, after all. But the truth was, he was still dealing with a lot, and having a baby dumped in your lap was hard work. Hermione knew. She wasn’t hesitating
because she didn’t trust Remus, it was only that…

Remus took in her expression. “I promise, Hermione, I swear to you, that I’ll do whatever I can to help you. I swear, I will do whatever you ask of me without question, but you need your education, Hermione.”

“I’m so different now, I don’t know if I could…” Hermione began, not knowing if she could be that girl again, not knowing how she would cope. She probably would take to herding around gaggles of first years.

“Hermione.” Remus offered up a part of himself to her, “Sometimes loving someone else means doing the thing you least want in your soul. I didn’t want to cut Sirius out from so much of my life after we hit our rough patch, but I loved him, and soon we…well, soon after I loved Dora, too, and —” Remus petered out, lost in his thoughts.

Hermione knew it took a lot for him to open up like that. His complex and complicated love life wasn’t something he was proud of, though he blamed himself entirely. He viewed, however incorrectly, Sirius and Tonks as people he’d hurt.

After a long moment, Hermione made her choice. “I’ll try.”

Remus went to speak, but the relief in his face never made it to verbal expression.

There came a knock at the door, and the person behind it didn’t even wait for an invitation to enter the room. Harry came in, looking suspicious and quite ready to have words.

He took one look at her and Hermione knew once again that they’d been sensing each other’s emotions. He’d sensed her range of emotions again. It was simply a part of their friendship, born out of knowing each other for so long, and so well.

Hermione applauded him for waiting as long as he had. He was learning that, as they had discussed a few times in recent memory alone, that just because she felt something didn’t mean that he needed to come running to avenge her hurts. After the episode where she’d nicked her leg in the shower, they had determined that knocking was a good thing. He didn’t need to expect her to find her in a pool of her own blood just because the daisy razor hurt like nothing else.

He came to his point, “Hermione’s been crying.” Luckily he did not reveal the truth: Hermione felt like her soul had been sucked out. His unspoken question resounded in the room. What did you do to make her cry, Remus? What have you to say for yourself, Moony?

Hermione forced a laugh and shook her head, “I’m glad you’re going back to school.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not leaving you alone up there, and Sirius said I couldn’t join the Aurors with Ron.”

He’d only decided to do that because she had told him she likely wasn’t going back.

Hermione mopped her face gently to avoid looking at Harry. There was more to it than that, she knew, but as long as he let her keep his secrets, she would let him have his own, too.

She addressed Remus, “Teddy will eat his strained peas.” Very carefully, she added, “He’ll wake up in fifteen minutes and want a nappy and a cuddle before he eats. His dishes and spoons are in the cupboard to the left by the cooker.”

Hermione avoided looking at either man as she stood, “I’m going to get packed.”
They were leaving as soon as Teddy had finished his peas. She wasn’t about to make him eat a meal on the run again. One awful experience in a McDonald’s in Belfast was enough.

God knew when they’d have hot water again, and there were no bombs here, though this house wasn’t suitable as a safe-house, not anymore.

Harry hastened that he would be happy to feed the baby. He often helped her out. Ron was largely indifferent to Teddy’s needs, preferring to make him laugh and giggle, and never mind the grunt work. Sirius did his best, but the emotional transference was profound when you had a bond like they did, so Hermione was left to rely on Harry.

This time, this time, though, she smiled and shook her head, “Remus knows where we are if he needs us.”

She hoped Remus had heard the me that was implicit. Tonks had trusted her with her son.

It seemed that Remus did, too.

Hermione and Teddy cleaned up the paint, wand in one hand and sponge in the other. They sang songs as they worked, because really, it was a good way to learn and a good way to make work fun. They cleaned up their mess, changed their clothes, as well as another nappy, and laughed together at his antics when Teddy tried to run around starkers.

After they were suitably dressed, Hermione let Teddy play with the big that her mother had given him. It was totally a muggle toy, a ball made for bouncing and rolling across wide floors. He scrambled after it, as did Cadbury, with Hermione flinging out cushioning charms and making sure no vases fell over as he did his best to run.

It had been Helen’s hostess gift upon her first visit to the estate in Scotland. It was a magical and heavenly place, but even that had not made Hermione feel any sort of ease regarding the visit. She had paced the center hall and vomited several times the hours before her mother was set to arrive, escorted by Harry.

Hermione had met her mother in the drawing room. Her mother had been full of questions about her plans. Things had been stilted at best, as her parents had only just begun speaking to her again when she’d had to go to Scotland. Teddy had been largely responsible for the fact that going hadn’t severed what little connection they were rebuilding.

When she’d been packing her clothes, she couldn’t help but wonder how it would feel not to know where Teddy was, as she felt a breathless sort of relief to be going along. Where else she would have gone Hermione did not even know, nor had she stopped to consider this.

This time, because of those thoughts, she had decided to take a risk and pop over to the surgery. She had already had her bags in hand, and was going to apparate via Dublin and then Newcastle to throw anyone tracking her off her trail. The strap of her duffle bag had dug into her neck as she’d landed in the thankfully vacant corridor that led past the treatment rooms, and burst in on her mother operating her drill.

Her mother had been annoyed, turning off her drill with clear distaste, “You know better than to barge in here, Hermione.” Her mother had looked quickly to her patient as she’d removed her mask, “I do apologize, Mrs. Law.”

“No, no.” The woman assured her, her mouth garbled by the work being done, “It’s only a little thing. And it looks like she came to say goodbye.”
“Have you?” The chill in her mother’s voice was unmistakable.

Hermione nodded, gesturing to the corridor once a nurse took over waiting with Mrs. Law for a second. Once there, she elaborated quickly, “I don’t have much time. There’s been an escalation in threats, and a bomb was found.” Hermione did not add that there were multiple bombs in multiple locations where they could have been, all set to go off in unison. The only place that hadn’t been touched was the Foundry, and Harry was loathe to put that at risk, “I have to go. I don’t have a choice.”

They were all scrambling to figure out who had done it, and how.

“Oh, God.” Something cracked in her mother’s face. It looked like the same sort of softening that had last happened when Hermione had floo’d, frantic over Teddy. “Is everyone okay?”

Hermione nodded, wanting it to be true, but knowing her mother was only asking about casualties. “I’ll write as soon as I can.”

And she had, with her mother coming up for a clandestine visit not long after. It had been determined that the bombs had been planted with a follower of Tom who had been in Eastern Europe, and though he shared the ideals, had never been offered the Mark.

He was dead. Hermione did not ask how, or who.

She knew better than that.

That visit stood out in Hermione’s memory as Teddy played. It was one of the first times they had cleared the air. Naturally, when Hermione appeared in the drawing room with a baby on her hip, the air had gone totally out of her mother’s lungs. There had been a logical conclusion, one to which her mother had hopped without much delay. She had made this conclusion, Hermione later learned, when her only daughter had floo’d ages and ages ago, with no one else she could think to ask about him choking.

It explained the owl on vaccination schedules and paediatricians, then.

Hermione had ended up explaining Teddy, and in explaining Teddy, had explained a bit of the war. There was much she could not and did not tell them. Later, her parents would refuse details, but this first conversation had been enough to break ice and begin something akin to communication. Having Teddy in the room also meant that her mother could not scream, could not yell, and it meant that an actual conversation had to take place.

Hermione credited Teddy, even now, with bringing her and her mother back together.

Tonks had trusted her with her son.

And Hermione didn’t know who she would be without him, pushing her to be a better person.

Teddy, even though Hermione was watching, tumbled and hit the floor with just enough impact to cause him to wail and cling to an obliging My Own for a scant moment until, properly cosseted and assured of his general well being, he rejoined at confused Cadbury at play, this time tugging his
pull-along, a little Thomas the Train and hollering “Toot!” as he moved along.

Teddy had never been one to let grass grow under his feet, though she supposed that was entirely her fault.

It was a few weeks later, when things were marginally safer, that her mother invited her to come home for a while before school picked up again. Hermione had accepted the invitation once the house was warded to the rafters by every possible person, from herself to Harry to Remus, Sirius, and Ron.

No one else was to know where she was, out of the idea that she and Teddy were laying low while things were fully investigated. The muggle areas were, in this sense, hiding in plain sight. Hermione had desperately needed some time to recover. She had brought along a traveling companion whose favorite food was formula, and favorite hobby was fairly centered around trying to eat his stuffed centipede. Crooks was far more sophisticated, though naturally he came, too.

By the time her father had come home, her old bedroom included a baby cot, and the living room floor had a play mat gym in the center. For a little while, Hermione had drifted around the house, sleeping when Teddy slept, eating when her mother put food in front of her, taking baths when she held Teddy against her body in the muggle tub in her mother’s bathroom.

Hermione knew it was during that period that Remus and Sirius had pulled themselves together and made the first steps back into their relationship, however slowly. Hermione credited Teddy with that, too.

Teddy sort of put things into perspective, made them articulate their priorities. As Hermione understood it, they had had a dramatic reunion after Sirius’s release, and for whatever reason, had decided not to have a sexual or romantic relationship during his exoneration. Hermione gathered that Remus had put every effort into moving forward and building a life without Sirius Black, hard though it must have been. Him suddenly being back couldn’t have hit Remus like anything but a ton of bricks.

In a way, Teddy was also responsible for the straw that broke the camel’s back when it came to Ginny as well.

Contented that Teddy was happy with his ball, Hermione sat down on one of the chairs and let her mind wander back to that day. At the time, she had been almost distraught. Now, the memory made her smile. How blind she had been.

Ginny had come over to Mum and Dad’s, looking perfectly sporty, with her fabulously sleek hair tied back in an effortless ponytail. Hermione had felt like a schlump next to her, but naturally, her best friend had no time for her. That was only to be expected when Harry was in the room.

“Harry!” She had said, hands upon her trim hips, “Mum wants you to come to the Burrow for the last few weeks of summer. We miss you.”

Hermione heard what Ginny did not say. Hermione carried on folding Teddy’s laundry. She clearly wasn’t the reason Ginny was here, for Ginny didn’t extend the same invitation to her. There were countless reasons for that, reasons Hermione was just too tired and worn out to explore. She was too worn down to a sharpened laser focus to care.

Hermione thought she heard Harry sigh from where he was sat on the sofa, reading some book in
preparation for the term. He looked over his pages, and addressed Ginny, “I’ve got my own house. I’m sure your mum doesn’t want a crowd.”

Hermione did not interject that Harry had several houses in several countries, and that he had spent the last few nights squashed into her tiny childhood bed, three feet from Teddy, and very snugly curled around her. Ginny would only become angry, and Molly would only read some salacious into it.

Ginny snorted. “Have you met my mum?”

Hermione knew she had to step in, and so in an effort to keep the peace, she revealed part of the plan that only a few people knew. Ginny liked information. Well, Molly liked information and Ginny liked being her mother’s favorite. “Remus and Sirius are in France, Gin, and they expect us to bring Teddy over in a few days, as soon as things are ready.”

Ginny brightened at this and smiled at Hermione. Naturally, in a pattern that had emerged over the last few months, Ginny didn’t really speak to her in reply. Her eyes were on Harry, and not on the frump in a muggle t-shirt and jeans, who was brewing potions on a muggle stove while she folded laundry.

To Harry, she exclaimed, “Well, you can unload Teddy, and then come to the Burrow!”

Hermione bristled, but it was Harry who spoke first, “I’m sorry?” He set his book down, and inwardly, Hermione prayed for calm. She focused on that emotion, knowing that somehow, Harry would feel it. Their empathy, for Hermione did not know what else to call it, seemed to be getting stronger and stronger and stronger.

Harry’s voice was ice. The emotions that Hermione felt were so very dark that Hermione herself felt a sense of pity for Ginny. She quite agreed with Harry, though. Her words had been totally beyond the pale, “Did you tell me to ‘unload’ a child like he’s a sack of spuds, Gin? Shall I send him down to Mrs. Figg’s then?”

Ginny scoffed, picking up a throw pillow from the sofa and knocking it around in her hands like a quaffle. “You know what I meant. Give him back to his father.”

Hermione seethed. Remus was doing his best, he truly, truly was, but there was more to this than Ginny understood, and Teddy wasn’t a toy to be given away when it suited someone. Of course, Ginny filled the silence with a quote from her ever wise mother, “Mum says, and I happen to agree, that Teddy would be better off with his real family.”

Hermione felt something inside of herself close down. She folded the cot fitted sheet with a precision that sprang from desperation. Those words shouldn’t have gotten to her, and they wouldn’t, so they didn’t. She ignored them. Sometimes she thought Molly was angry that Tonks hadn’t selected her for Godmother. In her darker moments, she thought that Molly was angry that Teddy had a father to firmly keep Teddy away from her, or only expose him within limits. Teddy did not need a mother. He’d had one.

And Tonks had trusted her with her son.

And so Hermione swallowed her angry words/ Hermione typically rolled the sheet into a ball, but now the cotton was warm and crisp in her lap as she folded it with military precision.

“Gin. I’m warning you.” Harry continued, taking a step forward. “You’d do well to think for yourself. Molly isn’t always right.”
Hermione got up and took the laundry basket from the room. She had nothing to do with this discussion. Still, she could not help but overhear the conversation as she took refuge in her mother’s office.

Mum looked at her with sympathy when Hermione hurled her basket across the room, and sat down, satisfied when all of the laundry flew back to the basket in perfect order with a wave of her hand. Hermione steeled her spine.

Mum looked at her with enquiring eyes as she heard Harry say, “How many times have I asked you not to comment on things you don’t understand?”

This wasn’t the first time Ginny had come round for Harry. Nor was it the first time she had expressed her displeasure.

Ginny’s voice rose, “All this playing house with Hermione is absurd. You’ve got to come out once in a while, hit the pubs, play some quidditch. But no!” Ginny emphasized, uncaring of the fact that there were two women overhearing her conversation.

How nice to know that trying to survive and regroup after War was ‘playing house.’ It was so nice to know her friend felt this way.

Harry said nothing and Gin was on a roll, “The last time you did, it was all ‘Hermione this’ and ‘Teddy that’ and ‘Remus and Sirius they’ and I’m sick of it.”

Mum’s eyebrows were in her hairline as a figure gently hoo-hoo’d outside the door. She stood quickly to admit the owl, the tone of Ginny’s voice having sent Hedwig flying down the hall, seeking asylum in the office.

“Ginny, we have agreed time and time again to be friends.” Harry stressed this word, and something inside of Hermione unclenched, “Friends. I’m sorry I haven’t been able to come out much. Hermione and I have had a lot going on. It’s not been—”

Ginny’s voice rose yet again, this time taking on a sweetly strident tone that she had once told Hermione men loved. “Well, then, come to the Burrow and you won’t have to go anywhere. It’s as simple as that.”

Hermione snorted. One day at the Burrow and Harry’d be running for the hills.

Oh, Gin-Gin was laying it on thick, “We can finally have a real summer, the real last summer before our final year…” Ginny continued, “We can have pickup games, and all our friends round, and…”

“I’ve got six meetings in the next week with Rookwood, with the investment firm, and with estate managers, Ginny. I’ve got security measures on three continents to review.” Here Harry spoke gently, “I’m expected in Edinburgh tomorrow, and in Prague next week.”

“And I suppose our dear Hermione is going gadding about Europe with you?” Ginny snapped.

Of course she was going. Harry hated meetings, and she wanted to go to some museums, and Prague was lovely in the summer. Hermione loved Prague. She also had a practical reason for going. She needed to visit some potions shops on Golden Lane. Certain ingredients could only be found there in any quantity, and it made her nervous not to have adequate stores.

After a second, Hermione heard her begin again, imploring. “Harry—–”
A telltale wail cut through the air, and Mum bade Hermione to stay out of the crossfire with a gentle nod. Ignoring Ginny’s put upon huff, and Harry’s stern rebuke, she heard Mum getting Teddy from the cot, and by the time he came downstairs, he was slightly mollified, calling out, “Mu-y-Mu-y-Mu-y-” in a steady chant of demand. This was not, though he liked Helen, the person he expected to collect him from his nap.

Hermione knew he would only squall something horrible if said My didn’t appear. Hermione slipped from the office and walked into the living room, where a sleep-rumpled Edward Lupin was making grabby hands and calling out, “Mu-y! Mu-y!”

Hermione took the baby, happy to see that his appearance had cut off the coming argument off at the knees. “Hi, Teddy! Did you have a good nap?”

As he typically did, he tucked his head against her ample chest, and sighed. Hermione felt his ever growing, sleep-warm body against her with contentment. His eyes drifted shut. Hermione shared a look with Harry.

He understood what she did not say, felt the annoyance bubbling in her soul almost as keenly as he felt his own emotions. He stepped closer, smoothing back Teddy’s rumpled hair, “Doesn’t look like he was quite done.”

There came a soft sound from their left that had all three of them looking in that direction. Four, if you counted Teddy, whose eyes were still closed as Hermione turned gently towards Harry to face Ginny more fully.

Ginny, Hermione realized, looked flummoxed. “Oh Merlin! He calls you Mummy, Hermione.”

“He’s a baby, Ginny.” Hermione corrected, “He can only say so many things. He’s trying for my name.”

There was no need to shame a baby like that. He was trying his best. It wasn’t funny. It wasn’t a joke. Hermione didn’t care what Teddy called her, so long as he knew that when he made that sound that somebody who loved him and would keep him safe would always, always, always be there, would move Heaven and Earth to come to him should he so much as whisper.

Ted began to fuss in earnest, likely picking up on the energy around them. Tears came to his eyes. Hermione shifted her weight, communicating her wishes to Harry in a single half-glance, who responded with a slight nod of his head.

“Teddy Bear, don’t fuss.” Hermione began, shifting him gently onto her hip, so that she could sway back and forth, “Come now, my sir.”

“Here, Hermione, let me show you—” Ginny took two steps forward, reaching out for the baby. The idea clearly terrified Teddy. He screamed. His fingers were talons into her body, and Hermione soothed him with a soft whisper.

Hermione wrapped her arms around the baby, who had outright began to scream without ceasing. “I’ll see you later, Ginny.”

Hermione left the room for the final time, only to hear Ginny call out, “I was only trying to help her, Harry! It isn’t as if she knows what she’s actually—”

Harry said something that Teddy’s hollering obscured. It didn’t sound very nice. His tone alone sent ice down Hermione’s spine, to say nothing of the feelings he was trying to hide from her.
Hermione did not pry, focused as she was on Teddy, who needed a nappy and a cuddle, and perhaps his stuffed centipede, Peaches.

Not even his bellowing could drown out Ginny’s reply, nor the slam of the front door that eventually followed, “Yes, Harry, I forgot! I forgot your cardinal rule. Oh, woe is me!” She mocked, “Merlin forbid I should say anything even remotely critical of your beloved Hermione. Tell me, Harry, does watching her with that orphan baby remind you of your own dead mother?”

Hermione gripped her wand, and the only thing that stopped her was the realization that Harry felt nothing. He felt nothing. He didn’t feel rage or pain. He felt, Hermione realized, rocking Teddy in the chair they’d somehow found in the attic, her own rage subsided, he felt pity.

“I think—” Mum interjected, “That you had better go, Ginevra. We’ll see you soon.”

“You know I always say—” Ginny had begun, only to have Mum repeat herself firmly.

“We’ll visit, soon, Ginny.” Mum insisted.

It was then that Hermione heard the front door slam.

Hermione had cuddled a calming Teddy as Harry had made apologies to her mother, and reset the wards himself.

Ginny hadn’t come again, though there had been yet more meetings and discussions and apologies. Hermione couldn’t make herself forget the sight of Ginny, reaching out for Teddy.

Tonks had trusted Hermione with her son.

Woe unto anyone, anyone, who stepped in the way of that.

After a very casual dinner, Teddy declared himself tired, and was put to bed in his room at the Foundry with all ceremony, replete with traditions almost as old as Teddy himself. There were no less than three elves sleeping in the adjoining room, in case young sir needed anything.

Hermione allowed Petra to help her change, her maternity selections pitifully slim, even in nightwear. She was going to have to go shopping again, damn it. Worse, she was going to have to surrender herself to Diana. She was running out of ways to charm knickers.

When they finally were alone, Hermione turned to Harry with a sigh, and put her head on his chest.

Harry embraced her without hesitation. “You seem so far away, Hermione.”

“I’ve just been thinking.” Hermione replied, the wooden floor smooth against her swollen feet, “About when Teddy was a baby.”

“It was a rough time.” Harry agreed, “But look at him. He’s happy. He’s okay.”

They both knew that Teddy was an adorable, happy, well-adjusted little boy. Moreover, they both knew well the sacrifices that had taken place in order to ensure that this happened. Hermione remembered that last vacation in France. She, in essence, had started to step back then, slowly, not wanting to hurt Teddy, or to even do it, but she had been the one to assert that Teddy needed to live at Ebony Park and that Remus and Sirius had needed to know his routines to help him transition.

She tried not to remember the relief on their faces. She’d only said it so they were spared having to
do it, thinking that they might hurt her. None of this was about her.

She had shown Remus how to do his naptimes, guided Sirius through one bath time and night-time routine, each night and each day pulling back just a little more, handing over a little more of what she had done for months. She taught Sirius and Remus how to properly sing *The Wild Rover* and *Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Turn Around*. She showed them how to give him his snacks in the only way he’d eat them, and let them figure it out when he cried, though it killed her to hear him scream for her.

She had let Remus pick him up when she cried, had told Teddy that she was going out and that he was staying with Papa and Pads, only to go down to beach tremble in Harry’s arms, knowing she was doing the right thing, even when it felt like every word coming out of her mouth was marred by the glass and rocks in her stomach and throat.

Hermione admitted, “He’s done better than I have.”

Harry understood what she did not say, “Why do you think I was always so happy to skip out on school?” Harry’s embrace was soothing, “It is okay to miss him. He’s one Floo away, at most.”

Hermione shook her head, content to rest against him. Teddy was happy and content at Ebony Park or Grimmauld. Sirius was all the things with Teddy that Hermione had always wanted to be, fun and spontaneous and filled with glee. Remus was a wonderful father. Hermione wanted nothing better, nothing else, for Teddy.

And yet, she knew Harry was making a point. That day that had changed their world, that day that had enabled them to face their feelings and create their fate, had happened because Harry had seen signs of her missing Teddy, and had taken pity on the various first years she had clutched to herself, rather like a duck who would take on a gosling. The signs had all been there, right there, she just hadn’t wanted to see it.

Hermione looked to Harry. “How are we going to explain our family to the baby?”

He shrugged, clearly never having thought of this question. It was something that made Hermione morose from time to time. “We’ll tell them the same thing you tell Teddy.”

When Hermione did not reply, Harry added, “We’ll tell them that we’re all very, very, lucky to have people who love us so much. We’ll tell them that there will always be somebody there to hug them when they cry, and laugh when they’re happy.” Harry was clearly repeating her, for she knew she had told him this very thing a couple of times.

Harry continued, searching her face, “We’ll tell them when they’re big enough to be a big kid, that once upon a time Teddy was big like they are, and Mummy cut the crusts off his toast and taught Teddy his letters and colors, too.”

Harry continued, Hermione unsure of the emotions welling from deep within her, “And when the baby cries, and Teddy asks why, we’ll tell him that he cried in just the same way, and his My Own cuddled him just like you’ll cuddle this baby.” Harry had tears in his eyes. “And then you tell me, you tell me, my beloved, what Teddy will do.”

Hermione laughed to hide sob that matched the tears spilling down her face.

“He’ll skip off and play.” Harry continued, “Maybe he’ll even struggle away from the hug you know you’ll give him. But somewhere, somewhere inside himself, he’ll know that, no matter what, his mother loves him, so much so that the hugs you give are so much part of the fabric of his soul.
Hermione knew that he meant Tonks. The whole of it made her cry.

She had trusted Hermione with her son.

She would, looking back now, have told Tonks the things she knew now she had wanted to hear. Instead of assuring her she would be okay, she would have told her that she would love her son as her own, love him so much that she couldn’t think of this baby she carried now as her first child. Somewhere, somehow, she hoped Tonks knew that was the truth.

Hermione couldn’t stop the tears. “And one day, when he’s old and his hair is bright purple, he’ll look at that person and think of that moment when they were just a squalling baby, and think of that single hug you thought he’d long forgotten, and say, ‘Shut your gob, Atholl. You know she loves me best.’”

Hermione laughed though her tears. She sobbed. After a long moment, she forced out the only thing she could think to say, “We’re not calling the baby Atholl.”

Harry bore her off to their bed, and crawled in beside her, tucking the covers up around her. Hermione woke only once in the night, when she felt a small body scrambling up into her bed, and heard an elf calling for him. Hermione had blindly muttered that he was alright, and slept, again, her whole heart in one place.

Chapter End Notes

*rocks back and forth*

Does this song help? I had to play it on repeat to even edit this. I promise not to rip your guts out again like this. Here are some The High Kings as apology. [This one helped.](#)
The most beautiful discovery true friends make is that they can grow separately without growing apart.

Chapter Summary

"The most beautiful discovery true friends make is that they can grow separately without growing apart." --Elizabeth Foley

OR

"A friend is someone who gives you total freedom to be yourself — and especially to feel, or not feel. Whatever you happen to be feeling at any moment is fine with them. That's what real love amounts to - letting a person be what he really is.” — Jim Morrison

OR

Feminism on the half-shell. In which Hermione and Ginny are equally wonderful, equally flawed, and equally incomparable. Remus has a sex holiday that doesn't go all that well, because parenting doesn't come with an off shift. And Harry has had it up to here with the patriarchy.

There comes a time to break the rules, once you know how best to do it, of course.

Chapter Notes

Some in-verse head cannon explored.

Lupercalia is a festival celebrating fertility, just not in the way we typically think of fertility, in a reproductive context, rather it had a lot to do with agriculture and farming and livestock, as shown here. Truthfully, I played with this holiday more than some of the others. I needed it to support the narrative.

I did, however, put a nod or two into the typical wolfstar representation of Lupercalia for Remus. Because, really, that's like a ship trope. I also included poshwhenangry!Sirius, because really, really, that's as awesome as McGonagall's accent peeking out in indignation.

here are a few pictures of the sort of sleigh I mean. Also,here. They're called booby hut sleighs.

Yes, I know picaloulou didn't exist in the 90s, but I really like the brand, and they do, in fact, wear well and look super adorable. I think they're something H. would pick for Teddy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Teddy ran through the halls, tugging poor Thomas along, banging on each stone.

Hermione knew that today was the right day, even though she dreaded the headlines sure to be at the breakfast table. Lupercalia was, at its core, a fertility festival. Today was a good day for such an announcement. Hermione hoped, however vainly, that this announcement would have been overlooked in the merrymaking. She wasn’t stupid, though. She knew.

She knew.

Still, this had to be announced, and it was better to do it on their own terms. She had written the announcement herself, and so, when she picked up the morning paper after settling Teddy and Thomas, she was not surprised to read the headline: *August's Anticipated Arrival!*

The articles were a mere rehash of their written statement, that conveyed the fact that she would be retiring from public life in August for a period of some weeks. Hermione was actually due at the end of July, but it was better to give a month, and she did not want to spend the last weeks of her pregnancy on baby watch with the entire wizarding society.

Hermione put to her fruit, and toast, ignoring the articles that made a science out of looking for a bump. Teddy made a right mess of his eggs, but he was easily cleaned up. Hermione gave him a chocolate heart that sang when you opened the wrapper. True to his genetics, Ted clapped with the song, and tried to stuff the entire heart into his mouth.

Hermione considered the matter. Was his love of chocolate genetic, or was he modeling himself after his father, knowing that chocolate was wonderful and good and amazing because he lived in a house with it in every room? Hermione figured it was about 50/50. Nature and nurture were never easily disentangled.

Harry had been up for a good hour before her, so when he came into the breakfast room to refill his coffee and bid them good morning, he gently warned her, “Do not turn on the Wireless. They’re interviewing bookies.”

Hermine slanted a grin at him, keeping her voice low so as not to involve Teddy. “Anyone hit on the right day, yet?”

Harry shook his head, swallowing his hastily sipped tea. “They seem to be all over the place.”

Hermione nodded, entirely glad that this, she hoped, would remain private between them. Her hope that this conservative society would not speculate was long dead. They hardly needed yet more people speculating on their marital relationship. *Witch Weekly*’s expose on their intimate life had been quite enough, though Harry did think the pack of lies quite funny, and had quoted it for some time. “I did tell them August.”

Teddy was not one to be ignored for anything, especially something as boring as talking about anything other than the goats and sheep she promised he’d see. Hermione tried not to think of Aberforth and how he loved Lupercalia. Teddy cried, “BAAAAAHHHHH!”

Harry turned from his coddled eggs and his consideration of his wife, to agree happily, “Are you going to visit the farms, today, Teddy?”

Teddy agreed that he was, to which Harry replied that he wished he could come along, but that he was certain they’d do something fun later. Fun later wasn’t as important to Teddy as fun now, so, five more bites shoved in his face, he scampered off, his mind gone from his breakfast.
Hermione hurried along, knowing that Crooks could only entertain Ted for long enough for her to finish her fruit. Teddy ended up sitting on Harry’s lap, and quite by accident, smearing butter onto said gentleman’s tie. With a bit of a laugh, Hermione finished her own meal, and gathered up Teddy.

Petra, of course, met her as they walked along. Hermione first went to Teddy’s room, and, housemaid waiting and at the ready to observe should Hermione ask for her, Hermione coaxed Ted into his Picaloulou jumper, and struggled to get his wellies on his feet. When he was dressed, he looked quite nice. His jumper fit well under his coat, and his trousers were well fitted, though helped along with a spell, for her was forever growing.

Hermione might not able to shop for herself, but, looking at Teddy as she carried him down the stairs, she certainly knew how dress a child. She bought 95% of the clothing he actually wore, not the bits and bobs Sirius bought because he declared them needed. What two year old needed a leather bomber jacket? She’d gotten him that jumper for less than £45. It was, of course, entirely British. His whole outfit was domestic and totally casual and perfectly suited to visiting farms.

Lupercalia might be a literal fertility rite for Remus, but for most of wizardkind, it went far deeper than the swats on the bum that had taken place for centuries. Thankfully, those had long, long, fallen out of fashion. Now, slaughtering dogs and goats was replaced by a respectful admiration more in keeping with the central tenants of the festival, those of celebrating the abundance of one’s home, and the aging process that allowed people to mindfully take part in the life’s work that was good stewardship.

Cadbury got treats from most every elf who passed him, and was welcomed into the kitchens for pets and praise. The milk that was spilled upon the land and dripped onto young men and women was freely given. The blood was given from the person’s own body, with their consent.

Lupercalia was about the abundance of community, the agricultural abundance that happened in the places they shared. Landowners were expected to walk the perimeter of their properties, checking on things, maintaining and testing wards, and pouring out milk at certain parts of the boundary and offering up their own blood for its protection. They were expected to honor the transition from hunter/gatherer to agricultural society. The protection of and respect for the abundance of one’s home, one’s place, was the central facet of Lupercalia, seen both in the ritualistic transition to adulthood and the honoring of responsibilities that came with it. It was the fertility of wise resources, the respect for the human-animal bond, that was being honored today.

Lupercalia was about coming of age, growing up in a place, and taking stock of yourself. It wasn’t about apologizing for your failures or limitations, but rather it was about making realizations about your relationships and yourself, making choices and commitments about how you wanted to live in community with others. It was about respecting your own growth, making commitments to others that honored yourself and that growth, and living in within the spaces that had facilitated that growth.

It was only werewolves, in honoring the Lupa inside of them that had formed the basis of the festival’s historical roots, who were concerned with any sort of sexual aspects. There was little written about that, though, as they were typically very modest people about things relating to the dual natures, and Hermione wasn’t about to ask Remus for information about that topic.

Today, Hermione’s focus was on livestock. Livestock were an age-old manifestation of no longer moving from place to place. Without livestock and crops, they would not be sedentary.

Tomorrow, she would turn her attention briefly to Fornacalia, the honoring of cereal grains and crops as opposed to livestock. Tomorrow, she was expected to do other things, mostly home-based.
Today, though, she was doing her bit and visiting farms, the farms that were essentially rented from the Estate. Instead of collecting rent, though, they traditionally were given a small percentage of the items grown, mostly for their own foodstuffs.

Hermione got into her own coat, a princess cut that barely buttoned, and mittens, and pulled her muffler tight around her. It was cold outside even for February, though by noon it would be decent. Anyway, the thick wraps were helpful, as warming charms were best intensified when they had something like wool to cling to and heat. Hermione was glad she wasn’t wearing hoops, and was instead dressed very serviceably when she heard the clop-clop of horses below the stairs.

Petra carried her bag, which, among other things, included toys for Teddy. He wasn’t one to be still in a vehicle, be it muggle car or any sort of wizarding conveyance. Hermione greeted the coachwoman and let the tiger open the door. The covered sleigh was quite warm, thanks to the charms and the cushioned seats. Hermione buckled Teddy into his Britax, took the bag from Petra with a gentle reminder to enjoy her day off on the estate on St. Agnes, made sure her gifts were in the sleigh, and allowed the sleigh to pull away. Petra was an avid animal watcher, and enjoyed the winter weather. Hermione herself was glad to be enclosed in warmth. Nobody could pay her enough to stay outside again, not after spending ages in the Forest of Dean, not more than three or four away. For Hermione, postwar excess was having a roof over her head, and a loo.

Hermione kept up a lively stream of chatter to Teddy, who clapped when he heard the horses nicker and cuddled a freshly washed Peaches. Their journey would not take long, and inwardly, Hermione was glad that she had taken the time to learn about magical transportation before the Ball.

Whereas the Ministry, for whatever reason, occasionally sent cars to people, most wizarding families, if they needed to travel in the occasional way that did not allow for apparition or floo, traveled by carriage. Hermione had been shocked upon designing her dress, for she had learned then that she would need to be able to enter and exit a carriage in it. When Hermione paused enough to think about it, it made sense. Arriving by carriage allowed a visitor to be seen approaching, and was more respectful in this way than just ‘popping by.’

This, Hermione knew, was reserved for places with public fireplaces and public points, who expected such traffic as a matter of course. You did not use a private floo or pop by without knowing people well. Most people limited this invitations to family. There was the option of a middle ground of landing upon the walk, but it was not really widely used. When it was used, it was said to send a very loud and clear message. Hermione did not know why things had evolved as they had. She suspected it fell into the category of tradition, and filed the topic, as she did with anything even remotely shrouded in tradition, away for future research.

That said, she quite liked carriages. They were very much lighter than the muggle versions of days of yore, and naturally the horses were loved and well cared for in their duties and in their time off. She hated struggling with a toddler in the Floo. Holding Teddy fast as they spun was nightmarish. Her pregnancy made apparition impossible.

As Teddy was contented with his toys, Hermione reflected upon the merits of horse powered travel. It was, certainly, less harsh on the environment than petrol. The idea of a witch or wizard having a car was less and less possible in modern times, for most modern cars included computerized components. Being that Hermione couldn’t even go near a PC, she couldn’t imagine trying to drive a car. In cities, it wasn’t a large concern. Out here, the ability to get somewhere required a vehicle.

The Ministry had posters everywhere talking about this concern. They used names and common
slogans with inflammatory pictures like: “John’s magic surged when confronted with the need to slam the brakes.” or “Theodora used her magic to turn the radio dial.” Behind these pictures of said people, were illustrations of large explosions and weeping families.

Ministry melodrama aside, the operation of a car was too risky for most magical people, though the vintage car market was a popular hobby among aristocratic wizards. Sirius O. Black was known to have a weakness for such vehicles. It was frequently in the papers, but Sirius thumbed his nose at it and went on playing with his cars.

Being the eldest, Harry had been given several cars from this collection. Hermione steered quite clear of the car barns, even though that one spin had been quite fun. Such tomfoolery and excess was infuriating. The day Harry brought home a car he’d paid for was the day she packed up the children and took herself off someplace for a few weeks of self-reflection.

Yes, she knew there were drawbacks to carriages. You had to be somewhere away from muggles lest you forgot the charms that made your vehicle look like something else, or they might stick their head out of the window and scream, “What’s with the wagon?”

Hermione had heard stories of one witch angrily calling back, sticking her head out of her window to the consternation of her lady’s maid, who had used her magic to appear human, as elves often did when interacting with the muggle world. “It’s a barouche, you philistine!”

Such cultural issues had to be navigated carefully. Also, the cost of carriages were hugely prohibitive. You could, if you needed to, call for one like one might call for a cab. They were largely driven by private coachmen looking for a little money on the side. This was a common approach if you lived near a family who had a fleet of carriages, or near a person who saw carriage driving as a side job. Of course, when your family had been using the same carriages since the Georgian period, the cost was only found in the upkeep of said vehicles, the horses to pull them, and the staff to care for and use both the horses and the carriages.

It was a complex sociological issue, all bound up in issues of politics and class. Hermione saw the approaching drive, and hoped that she could carry this off. How unfair, she thought, that this was supposed to be something she was taught to do over a period years. A good portion of Lupercalia was a coming of age tradition. Naturally, since she was already of age and had no one to teach her what to do, Hermione was thrown off the deep end. It wasn’t the first time.

Hermione smiled brightly at her toddler, “Well, Teds, we are going to have lots of fun with the Petersons. We must be on our very best behavior.”

Despite her nerves, Hermione was excited to see inside the house of a normal wizarding family. Her understanding of the culture was colored by the context in which she lived. Hermione was excited to leave some of the trappings behind, and see, for example, what a sitting room might look like if she lived the life of a comfortably middle-class person in the country, like Nana Brown. She wanted to see a real house, knowing that it would reveal so much about the culture.

The sleigh slowly came to a stop at the base of a stone walkway leading to a stone house, cozy and comfortable with a cheery smoke rising from the dual stacks. Hermione unbuckled Teddy, and brushed him off, before stepping down from the carriage with a stern warning for him to stay there until she lifted him down. The tiger remained impassive, but he must have seen the look of doubt on her face as she looked onward.
Hermione hated feeling like a stupid lady of the manor. Then again, Hermione reasoned, Pansy Parkinson wouldn’t have basked the biscuits she’d brought along, nor would she have selected her licorice whips herself. Hermione’s fears built as the door opened, and a forty-something woman with deep chestnut hair and a wide smile greeted her with clearly evident reservations.

“I’ve—” Hermione corrected herself, untangling Teddy’s fingers from her curls, “We’ve come to wish you a blessed Lupercalia.”

The woman, Mrs. Peterson, took the box from the tiger with thanks, and set it on the table just inside her door. Hermione then noticed that she was already wearing her coat. Hermione realized that she wasn’t going to be invited inside. This, of course, was something of a disappointment, but was understandable. A wizarding home was a very private space.

And, after all, they were here to see the dairy, to learn about their operation, and the family was taking time out of their busy schedules to welcome her. Mrs. Petersen introduced herself as Susan, and showed them around her dairy. Susan was the dairy farmer. Her husband, it seemed, worked off the farm in business, and they had two grown children, daughters who would one day take over the farm. Susan had about five employees, depending on the season.

Hermione was fascinated by magical agriculture. The barns were ventilated by runes, cleaned by spells, and information about the herd was gathered magically. The cows were moved from pasture to pasture for grazing with the help of wards that formed pathways. Milk was loaded in cans by magic, using a largely automated apparatus.

What Hermione knew of agriculture told her that the whole process was complicated. Susan showed her briefly to the doctoring stalls, where a few cows were being treated. The latest veterinary approaches were used, antibiotics were completely tailored to the biochemistry of the animal and the organism causing illness.

The herd seemed happy, munching away on their grains. Hermione learned that Susan had been in agriculture for decades, her father having run the farm before she took the helm. All in all, Hermione thought Susan was amazing. She was no-nonsense, very willing to educate her, and totally open to questions.

As they toured the farm, Hermione found herself thinking of the farms she had visited in her youth. Hermione asked, “Do you think having magic defines how you farm?”

“Well…” Susan thought for a long second as she led them through her pasteurizing room, “I suppose people have this idea that we wave our wands and forget about the animals, but the truth is, we care about our animals. Farmers spend a lot of time thinking about how to apply magic, when to use it, and when to set our wands aside and use our hands. There isn’t a line, though. Magic is a tool, same as the tractor or the pasteurizer. Somebody’s got to be the brains behind it. We’ll never be able to totally automate the process, nor do we ever want to. You have to love this, you do—”Susan paused, “You’re muggleborn. Think about it in terms of muggle technology. Muggle farmers face the same stigma and ignorance.”

They conversation, and the visit, continued. Finally, Susan dropped a bomb that shook something loose in Hermione’s brain, “At Hogwarts, they teach us theory, but at the end of the day, magic is a tool. The only thing that limits you is how you can think of to use it.”

That information, Hermione knew, was something she was going to have to mull over later. The point of magic wasn’t something they discussed at Hogwarts. Hermione had spent years learning theory, but beyond accepting her magic as a part of herself, she had never asked why. It seemed that in asking questions about the motivations that drove her application of magic, she could
reframe questions that had plagued her for ages.

In retrospect, Hermione was glad Susan’s farm was the first visit she had ever done. Susan had expected that she knew what she was doing, and Hermione had fumbled through, taking cues as best she was able. Susan’s staff had been kind. A few had stared openly, but Susan had gotten Hermione out of their presence without awkwardness. Susan ran a tight ship and not one of her employees was at leisure enough to ask for a picture or an autograph.

She visited several more farms in like fashion. The next few farms were larger, some doubling as commercial ventures known even to the muggle communities in the predominantly rural West Country. It was at these farms that Teddy got to play with goats and other animals, got to engage with the visiting children, and sometimes the children of the staff and the farmers. He was introduced to animals in the petting zoos that many touristy farms hosted.

All in all, he had a grand time. It was a good way to begin to teach Teddy the rituals that would largely define his life. He was the heir presumptive to the Black titles, through Andromeda’s line. Of course, he wasn’t the heir apparent because the assumption that Sirius might have a son of the blood was still theoretically possible. To anyone who knew him, though, it was laughable. He had sons and an heir, sons of the soul, sons of the heart, and Hermione knew she was looking at one of them.

Harry had his own duties with which to concern himself. Hermione would throw herself off the parapets of Ebony Park before ever stepping into the mess that was managing more politics. Sirius threatened to dump the whole thing into their laps when he was in a sulk. He never would, of course. Teddy, she assured herself, would manage just fine when the time came.

Hermione sampled cheddar cheese, felt wools that had yet to be spun, and smiled and nodded and handed out licorice whips and goat candies rather like chocolate frogs, who bleated until you bit their heads off. This, she realized, was her role in Lupercalia. She said nothing of the photographs taken from a distance at the more public farms, though she knew some muggles asked questions of the magical people who knew her. Luckily, the wizarding lanes were at the back and they never saw the sleigh.

Some farms were smaller operations, little more than homesteads that people kept up for the sake of it, even when the worked off the land in offices, producing artisan this or small batches of that. Hermione loved the peeks she was gifted into people’s lives. At every place she went, she learned something about chalk making, or farming, or tradition or innovation. Hermione was exhausted by the end of the morning, and she was lost in her thoughts as the sleigh took them home.

Harry resisted the urge to run his hands through his hair. His chambers were packed. The din of the reporters in the outer chamber was nearly deafening, and secretarial support he’d begged from Sirius’ staff looked about ready to bolt. He urged her gently, “Anybody who isn’t here about the wand restriction bill can shove off. I don’t care how you tell them.”

She did her best, but Harry still had to field countless questions. Reporters were nothing if not savvy. When they realized he was only admitting people who had the sense to mark down topics regarding the law, a countless number of people with steno-pads and cameras rushed to change their Reason For Entry in the book by his door. Harry wasn’t stupid, though, at least in this sense, and made sure to admit the people that hadn’t changed their topic first.

He ended up repeating himself five hundred times, or so it felt like, entirely quoting the press release Hermione had written. Yes, they were thrilled. Yes, Hermione was healthy and well and still on the docket to speak to the joint assembly next month. No, he wasn’t relieved to be
anticipating a ‘son and heir,’ he corrected five times if not fifty, he was thrilled simply to be having a child. The patriarchal assumptions made him rage inwardly, and he knew that his decided iciness would be unmistakable, even in print.

There were a lot of gendered traditions surrounding Lupercalia. Mothers were expected to take their daughters when they paid calls. Fathers were expected to take sons to do the perimeter rituals, but only if the son was above the age of thirteen. Some fathers only took their eldest son, the heir, lording some kind of special treatment over the other sisters and brothers. Hermione had very noticeably taken Teddy calling. If they had daughters, they would come along to the boundary walk, once they were of age to actually consent to slicing their own palms open. Harry knew better than to ask Hermione to come along with him. She was firmly an indoor person in the winter, thanks to the War.

When the chambers were emptied, Harry took in the eerie quiet. Harry realized that he was one of the only people at work today and that the entire wing was deserted. Well, he was one of the only members of the WC actually present, which likely contributed to the absolute glut of people in his chambers. It seemed everyone else was at home, walking their boundaries in their wellies and shooting jackets and smoking awful cigars. Except Sirius. God only knew what Sirius was doing. Hermione was decidedly closed mouth about it.

So, sensibly, Harry closed up shop and found some scrap of some file that would vaguely, possibly, require a trip to the auror office. Excuse in place, Harry went there with haste, sticking to the back corridors. He found his way to the junior auror office, and went inside, knowing he would fool no one, but was nevertheless determined to try. This was his place of employment, after all, though if some of the other hereditary peers heard him, they’d likely look down their noses at poor half-blood Potter, and assure him that they did not work.

Technically, Harry didn’t, either. He didn’t get paid, though he sometimes wished he did, as compensation for the headaches.

He knew most of the people in the room, but had only come for one person. Ron was buried in paperwork, and looked up, smearing ink on his robes. Harry did not let on that he’d absentmindedly done so.

Ron returned his greeting, “Hiding out, then?”

Harry denied it vehemently. Ron knew better. “Look, give me ten minutes to finish this, and then you can buy me lunch.”

Mindful of the others in the room, Harry pulled out his file, “I’ve got a thing I’d like you to take a look at for me.”

Ron grinned when he saw the random form and the parchment above it that read: Quidditch?

Teddy was more than happy to skip the afternoon meal, having been quite well fed by all the nibbles at various farms. Hermione had a lot to think about, but her first stop was a trip to the loo and a quick change into something with an elastic waist.

The house seemed alive with energy.

Hermione thought nothing of the open closet door when she went into the loo, distracted by her immediate needs and the dog and Teddy all jumbled up together as she herded everyone into the loo.
It was as she was preparing to yank up her maternity tights that she heard movement in her closet.

This was what the house was trying to tell her.

Her gaze flew to Teddy, sitting on the floor as he was, being accosted by the dog. Hermione tried her very best not to show that anything was amiss, though she knew in the space of a heartbeat that someone was in her house, someone the wards had allowed but that the house herself did not want there. Sometimes having a bond with a sentient building was helpful, like when she’d left a tap running. Now, now though, it was bone chilling.

Hermione couldn’t do anything that wouldn’t put more people in danger, so she weighed her options. The safest place for Teddy, Hermione knew, was in her arms. She couldn’t apparate, but her engagement ring was a portkey, modified at Harry’s insistence some weeks ago. He thought she’d get stuck somewhere without a way home. Hermione knew that she couldn’t leave the Foundry to fate, but she could and would send Teddy to Harry.

Hermione scooped up Teddy, and locked the dog in the bathroom. Disillusioning them, she tried to make a game of it, and crept toward the dressing rooms, wand out. Hermione swept the first two rooms, her dressing area with mirrors and the tables and her jewelry cases, and then into her actual closets. It wasn’t until she came to the last room, the one that held clothes she rarely wore or would never wear again, that she saw Ginny Weasley.

Ginny Weasley, in the closet, wielding a knife.

Hermione spared a glance for her betrothal gown, and did not allow herself to moved by the sight of it in tatters on the floor. Hermione forced herself to lower her wand, no easy thing when her best friend had a knife in her hand and had shredded, Hermione saw, not only her betrothal gown but also her tunica recta, laying on the ground now, and at least three of her dinner dresses that, while they had made the papers, weren’t things Hermione was likely to fit into ever again. Hermione saw that her beautiful flammeum was singed, a black rag on the floor, scorch marks all around it. Its glass and wooden case was shattered on the floor.

The message was clear.

Hermione revealed herself with a soft pop, removing the disillusion spell with a wave of her pinky. “Ginny…” Hermione asked, “Why don’t you drop the knife, and we’ll go and have some tea?”

Ginny’s eyes were haunted as she took in her friend, not even phased by her arrival as she sat on the ottoman and looked at the carnage around her. She shook her head. “I’m not going to hurt you, Hermione.”

Hermione believed her.

The relief must have shown somewhere, for Ginny gave a bitter laugh, “What do you think I am, mad?” Here her tone turned hysterical and mocking, “Is that what you think, ‘Poor, poor, mad Ginny! What’s wrong with her?’”

Hermione shook her head, quickly, “Nothing’s wrong with you, Gin.” Hermione’s mind whirled. Having been tortured, she knew that the best way to keep the heat off of herself was to keep the aggressor talking about themselves, to keep them distracted. “I can see that you want to talk. Let me give Teddy to a nurserymaid, and we can have a chat.” Hermione offered, “Just you and me.”

“You can’t leave me!” Ginny cried, “You can’t! I can't do this without you, not anymore.”

Something in that statement made Hermione stay rooted where she was. After all, she had a toddler
in her arms and Ginny was enraptured by a wicked looking knife. It was a conjured one, a tool of the moment, but still, conjured knives could stab just as deeply, could injure just as much, as any other knife. Hermione knew.

Hermione hugged Teddy closer, urging him with a soft word to keep hold. The sight of him sent a bolt of sorrow and fear through her. Almost instantly, she felt a thrum of concern in the pit of her stomach, concern that quickly slid from languid to alert as Harry attuned himself to her.

Damn. Hermione had tried so hard to block him out before leaving the loo.

Teddy’s hair was muddy grey. Fear. Accumulation of deep fear. Teddy was deeply scared. His face was buried against her neck, and despite her best efforts to keep him calm, she felt the waves of confusion rolling off of him. She had to get him out of here, and passing him off to one of the senior maids who had been given the task of overseeing the order of the makeshift nursery suite by Fella, seemed the wisest course. After all, Teddy knew them.

But evidently, Hermione had made a mistake. The mention of a nurserymaid sent a shadow of something deeply pained across Ginny’s face. Her speech set Hermione to, with as little movement as possible, pulling her engagement ring off of her hand.

Her hand was, of course, swollen and the ring refused to budge. In the span of a heartbeat, ignoring the pain she caused herself, she got it off her hand. She pressed into Teddy’s pocket, and knowing she had thirty seconds to get it back on her hand or whisper a spell. As the clock in her head wound down, she kissed his hair, watching as the grey faded in that spot, only to be replaced with a bright pink.

*I love you, too, Teddy Bear.*

As Ginny ranted, tears spilling over her face, Teddy popped away. Hermione heaved a sigh, and turned her full attention to Ginny, “Oh, Ginny. It’s really alright.”

The concern she felt in the pit of her belly shifted almost as soon as the weight of Teddy’s body left her arms. The fear was gone. The feeling that slid into its place was telling. Harry felt a focused sense of determination, rooted in stubbornness and grounded in what he knew to be his duty and his privilege.

Teddy was safe. Relief slid through her.

Hermione knew in an instant that Harry was on his way.

She couldn’t let that happen.

The ground was hard and firm below his feet, the snitch zig-zagging above his head, enticing him to get back on his broom, as though it could. A one on one match of quidditch wasn’t the best game, but they limited it to one of each ball, and pitched in to defend their own hoops. It was rather like muggle tennis, with a plethora of balls.

Harry had called a halt to their game minutes ago, and was now shrugging off his gear. Something was wrong with Hermione. All he could feel was a projected feeling of peace and control. For a moment, he felt immense emotional pain that nearly drew him to his knees. That sort of pain only came from Hermione when something was wrong with Teddy.
Harry reached out as if by primal instinct, and caught the toddler appearing before him. Harry screamed, “Ron!” to his friend, who was already diving down.

Teddy was screaming, even as he materialized. Harry tried to settle him as fast as he possibly could, fear deep in his heart. He knew what Teddy was saying, even before the word left his mouth in a wail, “Mummy!” He repeated the word over and over. It broke Harry’s heart.

Teddy only called Hermione that when he desperately wanted her. It used to be all the time. Harry wouldn't be surprised if Teddy went back to it when the baby came. "You did good, Teddy. You're such a brave boy."

Harry tried to take them both to her, but he could not apparate to her side. She’d blocked herself off. Why? Harry felt Hermione’s emotion in reply, a clear projected message. Stillness.

No. No! He would not be still.

He would not be still. How dare she ask that of him?

Teddy was inconsolable as Ron landed next to them, but Ron managed to get the information they needed from Teddy. Hermione was at home. There didn’t need to be more words between them. They had to move fast. He tried to apparate. The wards were closed to him. Dread built in his heart, as Ron tried, and the wards were also closed to him. The wards were closed.

The wards were closed. They had not fallen.

The wards held.

They had not fallen. The wards rose and fell with Hermione.

She was alive. Harry gripped her engagement ring so tightly that the rubies cut into his palm.

Ron, ever cool and at ease under immense pressure, simply grabbed his arm, and apparated them to the phone shanty at the edge of the wards. Trust Ron to be the only one cool under fire.

They landed there in a swirl. Pressing Teddy into Ron’s arms, Harry ran, uncaring that he’d blasted a hole in the carefully designed wards as he ran up the drive, nor that his very skin ached and pulled with the force of his actions. He was barred from this place, and yet he had violated the wards. It would have, had he been anyone else, totally decimated him.

But he was Harry Potter. And he’d move heaven and earth to be at Hermione’s side, be it a battle to the death or a spin around a ballroom. What were wards in the face of their shared intent?

When he came to the steps, he was mystified to find the elves walking around and working. Harry ran into the entry, and slammed one of the buttons hidden behind the porter’s stand. Harry felt the jolt of magic flowing through his veins. It did not pull him to this spot, because he was already here. Had he been anywhere, this button would pulled him without warning to this spot. It was at once modern security and the oldest of traditions brought to life. A man died defending his home, and those in it.

Sirens erupted everywhere. He knew it was a risk, knew it showed their hand. It couldn’t be helped. Shock and awe was the only tool he had at his disposal when so many innocent lives were at stake. He knew not what danger Hermione faced, but he knew it had to be enough to get her to send Teddy away.

Harry knew his wife. He knew she knew he would come, would raise the alarm, no matter what
she said, or what discord it might cause. Harry also knew that she knew how to cancel out sound. If
she didn’t want someone to hear the alarm, they wouldn’t. The alarm had barely sounded for a
second when elves went scurrying with intent and purpose. Some went to the walls. Some raced to
the barns, locking the estate down.

Harry couldn’t slam down the family alarm. All he could do was put the people who were already
here on alert. Harry fired off a point-me, and raced up the stairs as the spell pulled him forward.
When Harry entered their rooms, and saw the coal-red doorknob that led to Hermione’s dressing
rooms, he gripped his wand and charged onward, pausing only to fire off a patronous.

Hermione had to keep her talking. “I’m so glad you’re here, Gin.”

“You shouldn’t be. I just missed you so much. I’ve been trying so hard.” Ginny corrected, “Why
would you be? You’re living—”

“I always need you, Ginny.” Hermione replied, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Do you know what it’s like, Hermione? To grow up, and to build something up in your mind, to
have something pushed on you so much that you never even question it if you want it?” Ginny
asked, “And everyone just assumes you’ll get it. What happens, huh, when you don’t get it and
you’re actually relieved, and the one person you think ought to understand doesn’t?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione admitted. No one had ever really done that to her, outside of Molly…

“Of course you don’t!” Ginny fumed, “You’re Hermione Jane Granger! Ever since I was ten years
old, I’ve had to listen to the litany, ‘Oh, Gin, why can’t you be more like Hermione? She just talks
to the boys!’” Ginny, Hermione knew, was quoting her mother, “‘Your daddy knew he loved me
the second he saw me! I did things right, Gin, I didn’t want to go off and play Quidditch.’” Ginny
added, “‘Ginny, it’s such a shame you’ve got a figure like a broomstick. Look at Hermione.’”

Hermione’s heart broke for Ginny. She had never known. A casual comment could go to the core
of a child. Long after the parent had forgotten it, well, it stayed with the child. Hermione had never
wanted to be a tool to hurt anyone, least of all Ginny.

Ginny began to move around as she continued. Hermione thought she saw something moving
outside the window, but when she looked over quickly, nothing was there. “Somehow, you always
came out better, even when Mum ranted and sold you out Rita. You never crumbled. Your smile
and your poise never wavered.”

Ginny sighed, “And I know it’s not your fault. You didn’t ask to be compared to me. I don’t blame
you, and I’m so sorry that I distanced myself. But there’s this voice in my head, that told me I
could just make my family happy with me, if I could do like they always expected.”

“Ginny, that wouldn’t make you happy. You wouldn’t be happy.” Hermione insisted, “Your
happiness is the only thing that matters, here.”

Hermione had learned this lesson the hard way. If Molly had sent her notes for months in the way
she had, what had she been unleashing on her own daughter, and why? Hermione didn’t understand
Molly’s fixation. She’d thought it long over, the happy musings of a control-oriented woman to
fashion one family she could rule with cuddly jumpers and intimidation.

Ginny grinned, “But don’t you see? Hermione, you’ve got everything my mother ever wanted, for
herself, for me. She should be over the moon. A girl she guided and once loved has the husband, the political clout, the social fanfare, the houses, the title, the money…” Ginny’s eyes filled with tears, “I thought when Mum found out about your baby that she’d finally be happy. She’d finally realize that one of her girls was happy in a way that she could understand and empathize with, and that she’d pat the other one on the shoulder, say, ‘tough luck’ and then I could do what I wanted.”

Hermione knew, of course, what had happened. “She wasn’t.”

“No, oh no.” Ginny affirmed, “My mum, be happy be for you? Ha!” Ginny scoffed.

Hermione let the silence reign. Eventually, Ginny, likely eager to have someone she trusted listen to her, “I was so stupid. She stood there, and she wished you and your baby ill. It was just an offhanded comment. She didn’t mean it.”

Hermione knew that Molly, like the daughter she had raised, was prone to heated statements she came to regret, and never truly meant. “But…”

“I stood there, and I realized that no matter what I do, I will never, never make her happy.” Ginny sobbed, “I’ve spent my whole life trying to make everybody happy to the point that I don’t know what makes me happy.”

“Ginny, you are the bravest and strongest woman I know.” Hermione insisted, “You have so much to be proud of, and to base a whole life upon.”

Ginny was one of the strongest people she knew. Ginny had lost her best friend when Ron went to Hogwarts, but had never let her insecurities lead to her judging Harry and Hermione. Ginny had gone through horrible, horrible, things with that damn diary. She had faced down Tom and won, for he had never stolen her humanity and her love and her indomitable courage and strength. She had gotten over her childish crush, matured with dignity, and come to see Harry as a person. Ginny would always have his friendship, in ways that Hermione never would, for they both understood Tom and understood each other. Even when their brief romance had fizzled, Ginny hadn’t pined and shattered. She had fought and she had won and she had led the castle alongside Neville. She had fought absolute evil with a maturity and a grit that inspired Hermione.

Hermione remembered when Bill and Fleur died. Ginny had been everyone’s rock. Ginny had held her family together with her determination and her empathy. Ginny was the solid foundation upon which her whole family rested. Hermione, no matter the bumps they’d hit over the last few years, would never be anything other than her biggest fan.

Ginny was a total genius when it came to Quidditch, she was easily also better at defense than Hermione, and likely Harry. It broke Hermione’s heart to know that her mother had overlooked all of this, all of these things that Hermione had never been able to match, in order to compare her daughter unfavorably, to make her fit a mold Ginny didn’t want.

Ginny wiped her tears away. “I’m not saying my mum’s evil.”

“She’s a good woman, Gin.” Hermione said, knowing full well that Molly was a decent human being. She wasn’t Tom Riddle. She was enduring a period of hardship, a period of transition, and the dreams that had gotten through the darkness of war weren’t fall to pieces around her. Her son, her firstborn, was cold in his grave with his wife and her grandchild. Hermione could almost understand her hurt, her pain, her anger.

But Molly didn’t have any right to hurt Ginny. Nor did Hermione, she realized, have any grounds to further victimize Ginny by blaming her for Molly’s antics in hurting their friendship. Sure, later,
she and Ginny were going to need to actually talk and sort things out, but now was the time. Now
was not the time to take Ginny to task for entering her house, slicing up her clothes, and having a
bit of a breakdown in her closet. As things went, it could have been worse. It had been worse. If
nothing else, war put problems into perspective.

Thinking of the Molly she had once known, Hermione continued, “She has so many lovely
qualities. But even the best things about her, her mother’s love, doesn’t give her the right to decide
your future, or blame you for failures that aren’t your own.”

“I love her, she’s my mum. But…sometimes…” Ginny shook with her tears, and finally dropped
the knife.

Hermione summoned it and tossed it out the window. Mid-air, she vanished it to the safe in the
basement, all the while listening to Ginny, and whispering soothing words.

When they heard something slamming into the door, Ginny whipped out her wand. Her flight or
fright was on high alert. Hermione slipped from the room, listening to Ginny sob brokenly.

When she came to the outer door, Hermione counted to three and listened to yet another spell hit
the door. She knew who it was. No other person would come when she had tried to say ‘don’t’ nor
would anyone else breach the sanctity of their bedroom.

Hermione opened the door, as narrowly as possible, and slipped out. “Where’s Teddy?” She
 glanced again at the man before her and asked, “You broke my wards!”

“You—” He spluttered, “You gave me a heart attack. What the hell is going on?”

“Oh, just a gab fest.” Hermione offered, her tone revealing what words could not. She did not know
what Ginny could hear. “Now go away.”

Harry stuck up a finger in a most irritating fashion. “Something happened. Who is here?”

“Don’t worry. Just go have a gin and tonic and rest easy.” Hermione stressed, “You’ll feel
mollified.”

“I don’t like gin and tonic…” Harry began, realization dawning as he trailed off, “Oh!”

Hermione stood her ground when he tried to step around her. Pressing up onto her toes, Hermione
whispered in his ear, looking all for the world as though she was preparing to embrace him, when
she was doing the exact opposite, “She just needs time and support, Harry. You’re the last person
she’d want to offer her anything like that, right now. Go cuddle Teddy.”

Harry took her hand and repeated an age old ritual, uncaring of who might be watching. He took
her left hand, and standing in their bedroom, he repeated himself in word and action just as he had
months ago. His words were at once a vow, a reminder, and an apology, leaving the fingers her
ring had encircled buzzing with magic.

To thee I pledge my troth, in body and mind, soul and magic…

Though Hermione knew from multiple sources that Harry was annoyed at her, likely because he’d
locked down the entire estate over this, love and commitment burned in his eyes as he turned her
palm over and pressed a kiss there.

This time, it was a totally conscious choice, a gesture of support, continuity. As it had before, it
turned her knees to jelly and her spine to steel. She was a warrior. She’d not forgotten that, nor
would anyone else.

She was an enigma, a contradiction, a friend and a fighter. Like all people, she contained multitudes.

Ginny soon left, deciding that she would go back to school. She had friends there and upon Easter break, she was going to see about joining Luna in Europe for a bit. She’d promised to write. Hermione left her clothes on the floor, and exited the closet, only to find Remus and Sirius and Harry sitting in the converted playroom attached to Teddy’s bedroom.

Hermione made her apologies to Teddy, who didn’t really care. He simply crawled into what remained of her lap, and put his head against her chest. It was something he’d done since his earliest babyhood, and Hermione recognized it as a comfort seeking gesture. “Oh, my brave sir.”

Hermione did not let herself give into the urge to cry. “I’m so sorry Harry bothered you.”

“Hermione.” Sirius snapped, his accent cut glass, “As you know, parenting doesn’t come with a stop-clock.”

Hermione knew the pain those words caused were worse than the possibility of being actually stabbed. She had a basis of comparison, after all. She would rather Ginny had stabbed her than Sirius doubt her ability to care for Ted. “I never would have put Teddy in any—”

“I am not.” Sirius enunciated, “Talking about Teddy. I am talking about you, locked in a closet and tossing knives out of the windows.”

Hermione blurted, “But I vanished…”

“I grew up here, Hermione.” Sirius’ tone gentled, “I know where things go when you throw them out of windows, and I most certainly know how to get around here without tripping wards and alerting the domina, whoever she might be. A knife is not like a sock in the washer.”

“Dryer.” Remus corrected, “The dryer eats the socks and loses them. Not the washer.”

“Do shut up, Moons.” Sirius sighed, “I am trying to lecture Hermione.”

“Suppose we skip the lecturing bit.” Harry suggested, “And you get to the reasons why you were locked in the closets with Ginny, who had a knife?”

Hermione sighed. She had to communicate. “Look, she got into it with Molly over the headlines. She was upset that we aren’t close enough for me to have told her about the baby, that circumstances forced her to find out in the papers. She’s going through period of self-reflection, and that’s never easy.” Hermione added, “She was only cutting things like I’ve been known smash plates or hex clay pigeons.”

Hermione did not add that she thought Ginny had been slashing away, cutting the bonds of, the dreams her mother had held for her. The destruction of her wedding clothes wasn’t totally personal, but it did hurt. Now was not the time to dwell on it. She knew Ginny was sad to have done it, sad to have missed the wedding, sad to feel so alone. Hermione had been in the wrong, there, in the sense that she had let Molly limit the contact they had. There had been no way to clear the air, and Hermione regretted that fact.

“Don’t make…” Harry asked, confusion clear on his face as Hermione sent him a telling look, “What?”
“She’s finally realizing that she can build her own life, irrespective of what people think.” Hermione remembered a quote of which mum was fond and elaborated, “She’s learning that ‘you might as well do what you want, because as least you’ll be happy’ and that sort of thing.”

“Translation.” Remus smiled, “Molly hit the roof over the baby, and Ginny realized that she’s over the moon glad it isn’t her carrying this baby. When she said as much to her mother, she realized via Molly’s reaction that nothing she ever does will satisfy her mother, because Molly isn’t presently satisfied with herself.”

“Ah…” Hermione floundered, “Were you listening in?”

“How much is that werewolf in the next window?” Remus affirmed, “The one with the really sharp ears, and the fabulous people skills?”

Hermione threw a throw pillow from beside where she was sitting across the coffee table at Remus and Sirius. “What was with the ‘explain thyself, Hermione’ bit, then?”

“We missed a lot with you kids.” Sirius shrugged, “We figured since we didn’t get to indulge ourselves in one way, we might as well in another.”

Hermione did not go there. She did not go there.

“Besides.” Harry added, “It gave me time to string together a few thoughts.”

Hermione sighed, and felt a headache building. She knew leaving the three of them alone in a room to scheme was more dangerous than an emotionally drained teenage girl, and yet, she had done it. “These being?”

“Teddy needs a nanny. The baby needs a nanny.” Harry came to his point, “You—” He corrected himself quickly, “We need a nanny.”

“There are four of us!” Hermione insisted, “We agreed between us when Teddy went to Ebony Park that there was no need for a nanny. I won’t have a nanny raising the children and trotting them out to have a pat on the head before dinner.”

“Nanny Redmond would be so sad…” Sirius offered, “To hear you talking that way.”

“Don’t talk about Nanny.” Hermione returned, in a soft voice so as not to upset Ted. There was no mistaking the lecture she was quite prepared to give, however, “She always said her job was to facilitate parenting, so that I could spend as much time as possible with my parents. They were very busy, you know.”

“And you’re an indolent housewife.” Harry returned.

Hermione did not dignify his sarcasm with a comment. “You’ve got your educational reform work, your charity work, your general political involvement, and a full spate of research on your plate, not to mention all the stuff you do around here.” Harry continued, “Granted, I’m not as busy, given that I only teach three days a week and dabble in politics and estate management on four continents. Oh, and Sirius has his own seat and his international business interests. Remus teaches, and does 90% of the stuff Sirius declares dull, which means estate management, and travels internationally at least once a month to advocate for werewolves.”

“Well, then, I’ll cut back, and you will, too.” Hermione decided, “We all four of us agreed that—”

“We agreed that decisions regarding Teddy’s welfare would be made jointly. We agreed that
everyone would be totally honest.” Remus corrected her gently.

Hermione had done her best to forget that conversation, even though every bit of it was etched into her mind. It concerned Teddy, after all. They had all had a sit down and hashed out how things were going to go. Hermione found it to be very civilized and the best thing all around for Teddy. All sorts of nontraditional families had agreements. Why not them? Teddy came here on a set few days a week, unless his schedule required otherwise, and responsibilities were divided to keep everyone engaged, involved, and active in his life.

Sirius continued, “This family needs a nanny, even if it is just somebody to follow you around while you take over the world, baby bag at the ready, or to take them both for a while when Harry spills yet more crap all over himself—“ Here Hermione noticed that Harry had just sloshed tea onto himself, and smiled when Harry grumbled, “Or to rush after Teddy while I strut about jauntily or Remus must deal with one of his furry little problems.”

Now that he was involved in advocacy, Sirius had expanded his definition of ‘furry little problem’ to include those activities, and the annoying people that came along with leadership roles.

Hermione wasn’t sure. She saw their points. Some support would be nice. And it was Lupercalia, a day about honoring one’s community and one’s physical place and the relationships therein. She was inclined to be generous, and Nanny had been a fantastic person in her life. Still, Hermione wondered at the sort of nanny she could trust in such a delicately balanced lifestyle and intricate family dynamics.

Harry went in for the kill. “Now, beloved, are you going to hire them, or are you going to make us dunderheads do it?”

“You’ll just make a cock up of it.” Hermione sighed, picturing them all hiring some totally inept person for totally the wrong reasons. No, if this was to be done, she was going to have to get it done correctly, which naturally meant doing it herself. “If you are adamant, at least I’ll do what I can to find someone suitable.”

“Wonderful.” Remus praised her, standing to strike while the iron was hot. “I’ll set up a meeting with the agency.”

“You’re coming with me to remodel her suite, you jackrabbit!” Hermione yelled, knowing that no modern Nanny worth her salt would want to live in a room that hadn’t been redecorated since James’s nanny had passed on, some years ago, just before Harry had been born. She had no idea what the nursery would look like, nor if she wanted even to use that part of the house as a nursery.

Hermione knew the next few weeks were going to be nightmarish. “I’ll come.” Sirius offered.

Hermione shook her head, already adding a column to her calendar. “You spend money like water!”

Hermione knew she was going to have to spend some money, no matter what happened. The nursery, though clean and neat and beautiful, needed a fresh coat of paint and some other changes to freshen it up. That wasn’t her main shopping concern, though. Oh no, the shopping trip she knew she was facing was far more grueling.

She almost changed her mind and went to join Harry as he rode the boundary, and spilled his blood, symbolically, for the land. She had no desire to be out in the cold on horseback.

Still, she considered running as she looked at all of her ruined clothing. Ginny had looked shocked
and apologized profusely when she’d realized what she’d done, but the truth was that no matter what Hermione had assured her, magic couldn’t fix these clothes.

Hermione mourned the loss of these clothes. She had become attached to them. Straightening up, Hermione let her hand rest on her bump, and promised herself that she wouldn’t lose the memories just because she could no longer go and look at the outfits, not that she ever really had been the sort to frame her robes like some witches did. She had simply dreamed of a some person one day finding those clothes, when it came time for her junk to be cleared out and auctioned off to offset the inheritance tax.

She imagined that person thinking for a long moment about the totality of her life, rather than just the one role she had played as their mother. In that moment, if nothing else, that person would think, once upon a time, Mummy had been someone completely and totally else than she of the tweed and wool and cotton. Hermione knew there was more to her than the political powerhouse, the advocate, the genius, and she just wanted someone to remember that, even if history would not do so objectively.

It was silliness. Hermione was a warrior. She was the hero, the knight, not the princess in the tower. She was the one who donned the armor and fought by side her compatriots. She had held precious those memories of those battles, both good and bad, happy and sad and bittersweet. Her marriage did not define her, but those dresses had been a testament to her bravery, her served as her armor as she had shown to all her willingness to fight for what was right. They were, in waging this quest, also a testament to a war she had survived, and lived to build a life beyond.

The War would not define her life. In the end, it was one battle amongst others. It would have to be, or else she knew she would lay down and die.

After all, not every war had opponents. Not every battle was on a front. Nevertheless, no matter if she had worn grubby trainers or her wedding dress, a battle was a battle, and every victory over her doubts and her fears was meaningful.

Hermione draped the shredded fabric over the ottoman, and waited. She didn’t have to wait long. Petra puttered in, tying her apron over herself as she prepared to look for mending. Hermione felt empathy bloom as her jaw dropped, and hastened, “There was a bit of a mishap.”

Hermione watched as Petra shoved away the shock that had bloomed on her face. Slowly, so very slowly, she turned to face Hermione, “Yes, of course, ma’am.”

Hermione briefly explained, emphasizing that it wasn’t Petra’s fault and that the wards had been reset to exclude anyone popping by, unless it was a selected few people. Hermione felt so badly that Petra’s beloved domain had been encroached upon that she quickly offered, “I’ll meet with Diana as soon as I can schedule an appointment.”

When Petra grinned, as though she was a dragon who had spotted gold, Hermione added, “Happy Lupercalia, Petra.”

And because they lived in community together, Petra returned the greeting. Hermione hoped that Petra would celebrate what she saw as an outward sign of her mistress’s growth. After all, she had matured enough to willingly go shopping, the mark of a sensible lady in Petra’s mind.

Chapter End Notes
I tried to be super fair to Molly. It just seemed to me that if she's treating one person that way, there's got to be others. I actually think book Ginny was a super awesome BAMF person. She's just not the other half of my HP OTP. There's no crime in that.

Yes, at some point, there will be an actual clearing the air with Molly. She's not a token evil lady.

On a lighter note, we all knew the nanny thing was coming. Also. BAMF!coolunderpressure!Ron Weasley, folks.

I'm editing the next few chapters, and though we're in the middle of a growth arc, I feel uneasy. Do you find Hermione passive, above? I'm dithering. Maybe I meant to do that, just to show the build up to what's she's going to do in the next few chapters. I'm not sure, I'm just sitting here, like, "For the love of Merlin, Hermione, would you just be MFM already?" In any case, she gets more outwardly BAMFy in the coming chapters, so maybe that's why I feel she's sort of less than here, as the comparison seems stark.

*cough* one of my degrees is in agriculture, broadly speaking. I think it shows, a bit. *cough*
This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution.

Chapter Summary

"This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution" --Gloria Steinem

OR

‘The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.’
— Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Hermione's day has come. She's to speak before the Joint Assembly. In doing so, however, she realizes that the struggle for justice and equality doesn't begin and end in a single moment. It is a continual process of growing, striving, and continuing on. Justice and equality is not only the political struggle, but the manifestation of these values in issues deeply personal.

Chapter Notes

I borrowed very mid-century ideas of maternity clothing for wizarding maternity clothes. Then I realized that maternity clothing in the 1990s absolutely sucked horribly, so I made the political personal and the personal political, as all things are in some way. Hermione sets fire to her bra, theoretically.

A woman needs her sisterhood.

I modeled the W&WC after the houses of Parliament, vaguely, with the WC being akin to Lords. I also stole a lot of setting details from Westminster Hall.

The quickening is an actual historical concept. Traditionally, it was the moment of ensoulment or when the baby became a person. In my mind, it used to be seen as the moment in which the baby developed their own magic. It actually was a public holiday for Jayne Seymour. For Harry and Hermione, it's simply a reminder that, even if the throes of revolution, there is never one single role a person plays.

Neville's still a bit afraid of his gran, but who wouldn't be?

Mentally, Hermione reviewed her upcoming schedule for the upcoming days.
This coming Sunday was the last Sunday before Lent, so this week would be busy. She was hosting a rite, interviewing potential nannies, and speaking before the joint assemblies of both the WC and the Wizengamot, in reverse order. She did not have time to think about clothes. She wanted nothing more than to be in her study, with her notes and her drafts.

And yet, here she was, standing on Diana’s platform, looking for all the room as a giant pincushion. Her feet hurt. She was just over exactly halfway through her pregnancy. At this point, Hermione thought she ought to be left well enough alone. And yet, on the couches in a drawing room, Mum and Ellen sat pouring through pattern books. The session had only just begun, and knew that this process would steal precious hours.

She was exhausted. She felt like a horrible wife, a horrible expectant mother. She could barely look at Harry right now, which was really difficult, because she wanted his support. She knew it was there, totally and completely, only she felt badly about asking for it.

What sort of wife, what sort of bride, didn’t care enough to put her own wards on her wedding clothes? What sort of wife, what sort of domina, didn’t even have a strong enough bond with her house to know when her most sacred possessions were being destroyed? All she had known was that there was something vaguely not right, and when she had entered her room, she had assumed that the house had been simply telling her that she had left a door open.

Hermione just couldn’t believe it. She had prided herself on being a good wife. It seemed so old-fashioned, but really, it wasn’t. They defined for themselves their own roles in the marriage, roles based on equality and respect and fair division of labor, and Hermione had long thought that she had excelled in her chosen roles. It was challenging to know that it wasn’t so, and that she had been so very careless.

The truth was, no matter what it said about her as a person, was that she did mourn the loss of her gown, the loss of her veil. She hadn’t even warded the glass case in which it had rested. Petra, she had learned, had assumed without question that this most basic ritual had taken place on her honeymoon weekend.

Now, all she had was a black rag. She didn’t blame Ginny, beyond an acceptance that her wrong choices had caused this. The fault in the end was Ginny’s, of course. However, in the dark of night Hermione could not shake some sense of self-blame. Naturally, Ginny must have thought that she would have warded those things and that, at the slightest disturbance that she would come running. But no, she hadn’t, and so Ginny had been left crying out for help and wondering why she hadn’t come. Hermione was left with tatters where the visible strength of her bonds ought to have been resolute.

What hurt her, and drove her to such throes of guilt, was the simple fact that the disturbance the house had alerted her to, she had totally written off as a forgotten lamp or an ajar door. Hermione had taken responsibility, or her share of it, for the Foundry and the things in it. And now, now she didn’t even have the ability to say that she had put its welfare ahead of other things. Here, Hermione felt that she had let down the unbroken chain of all the women who had filled these shoes before her.

She had let herself down.

And there was no coming back form it. And yet, she had to try to move forward and learn something from the experience. When Diana arrived, the first order of business was to own up to things. She was not the one who had destroyed her garments. She did not mention Ginny, but she knew that Diana made assumptions. What hurt the most was seeing the tears in her mother’s eyes.
Diana asked permission to even touch her gown and her yellow-gold flammeum. Hermione gave it, and realized, as if she hadn’t known, how sacred these textiles were to witches. Most women did not even show these things to their own daughters. Some were even buried with their hair wrapped in their flammeum. Hermione winced at the sight of the damage as Diana lifted the veil delicately from a new silk-lined and heavily warded case.

“I know fixing it isn’t possible.” Hermione had foolishly dreamed that the veil in Diana’s hands had been some sort of decoy, that the real one was safely in the vault. Why hadn’t she put them there? It only would have been sensible. Reality was reality. She hadn’t done a single thing to protect them, and now she had to look into the sympathetic face of her dresser, as she told her the thing she least wanted to hear.

“There’s nothing I can do to fix this.” Diana’s empathy was palpable.

“But you’re magical.” Mum insisted, “You bend the laws of physics. Surely repairing one big rectangle of silk isn’t beyond the realm of possibilities.”

At Diana’s soft reply, Hermione looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. Magic could not solve everything. It could not fix everything. It rarely helped in matters of true importance. You couldn’t call back souls from the dead, you could not mess with the timeline in great ways, and you could not fix everything that hurt in life. Mum had just learned a terrible lesson about the truth of magic, and it hurt Hermione to see this awareness rise within her mother’s face.

Diana spoke, “However, I do know someone at the British Museum who specializes in textile restoration.” Diana made an offer Hermione could not refuse as she looked up again, “I could ask her to take a look at this, in complete and total confidentiality. She won’t ask questions, and I have helped her a time or two.”

Hermione wanted desperately to accept this, but she had to be fair. “I can’t ask you to call in your own favors on my behalf.” Hermione knew, too, that if word of this got out her very reputation would be in tatters. She didn’t care, but the stigma Harry would face, the stigma her baby would face, was something she wished to avoid. The reason these items were so heavily warded was because they were symbols of a bride’s transition to wife, and a wife’s fidelity. Patriarchal traditions to be sure, but in modern times, they carried on in this idea that any wife invested in her marriage would protect the symbols of that union.

She already had a reputation for courting divorce.

Diana insisted, “It’s really something I want to do.” She put the flammeum back in its case, and turned her attention to the betrothal gown. It was a complete and utter mess. Hermione held out very little hope for it. She had already been given more hope with her veil than she had expected.

Again, she asked permission to touch it. Hermione gave it. Hermione felt the thrum of her magic in the fibers, still vibrant and strong, even as the dress itself was not. Hermione let Mum explain its significance to Ellen, who seemed transfixed even by the ruined dress, unable and unwilling to think back to her memories of those moments right now.

“I would offer to make you a christening gown, but…”

Hermione shook her head. She had one of those, one that had been waiting nearly twenty years to be unearthed again. It was very old and very ornate, white with lace and intricate with careful details. It had been worn since the bearing cloth and swaddling had been set aside in the 1600s. Hermione was not keen on changing that, not because she wanted all the fuss. She would be happy with a plain gown purchased or made new. But what she wanted for her baby, more than anything
else, was to felt as though they belonged by rights and had nothing to prove, only everything to
give.

Mum had a suggestion. “What about using the fabric to make the drapery and skirting for a
bassinet?” She continued, “Then the fabric would be used in an innovative way, and you might still
be able to make something worth saving.”

Diana brightened, ideas clear in her mind.

It was all the confirmation Hermione needed in order to agree with the idea. There could be no
going back, but at the very least she could move forward, taking the things she had learned with her
into a new phase of life. Suddenly, she thought of Augusta’s gifting of her chemise, and knew well
now the significance of that gift.

That portion of the meeting taken care of, and Hermione’s tunica and flammaeum packed away in
their cases to be taken with Diana, the appointment turned to the never ending issue of Hermione’s
clothing. She felt quite tired and drained, having slept little lately in an effort to get her speech in
order. Her pregnancy seemed to be a never ending challenge. Her back was sore, even now, and
her feet were easily turned into swollen lumps on the end of her swollen calves. That said, she was
also invigorated by the hope imbued by their willingness to help her make something better out of
the shambles that were her wedding clothing.

Hermione was lost in thought as she was measured yet again, fitted for new bras, yet again, and
handed yet more shapewear, this sort with a big belly panel that made the bump she was still
getting used to appear minimal by the way it hardly stretched the available fabric. Trust Diana to
have maternity shapewear at the ready.

When asked, she asserted that, “Expectation is no reason to leave off your underclothing.”

Hermione was utterly determined to hear her to say the word pregnant just once. She had not said
it once, and Hermione knew the word was likely alien in her vocabulary. Hermione figured that the
prohibition against it was rather strong. However, Hermione thought the avoidance of calling a
thing what it most accurately was to be absurd. Almost as absurd as the sartorial options offered to
her in her increasing state.

Hermione looked down at the horrible smock she was wearing and declared it totally and
completely absurd. She did not know why Ellen had suggested it with such enthusiasm. Only after
Hermione had declared it utterly horrible, and completely corrected it into something better did she
realize that she had been tricked into taking charge of the appointment. Once that happened, she
was not able to shirk back into a passive role.

Diana had once again come to her, the four or five maternity dresses she’d grudgingly ordered via
owl weeks ago no longer enough for the demands on her time. Granted, in her private time she
lived in old clothes that still fit, but that wasn’t possible for much longer, even in private.

The altered smock was quickly replaced by a very nice pink and blue and green plaid dress with a
really comfortable jacket. Hermione nixed the fussy bow, edited the hemline, cropped the jacket
and called it a total success. After this, her family began their tradition of throwing clothes at her.

Ellen, even though this was the first time seeing this process, was an old hand at it. Hermione
considered this her revenge for years and years of avoiding discussing fashion with Ellen. Her
cousin had a passion for it, and now she was finally, finally, able to shove Hermione into a dressing room and shout out, “Try this!” and “Try that!” Only now, with the aid of Diana, she had a magic wand at her disposal to make the ability to alter and suggest and brainstorm utterly possible in ways that had never been before.

The idea behind wizarding maternity clothes, according to Diana was to, “Simply hint at the waiting game you’re playing.”

Hermione liked the swing tops because they were comfortable. She could ditch her new bras, if she wanted, wearing those. At least, she could do so around her rooms. She was on board for the swingy tops and the coordinating skirts and the slim trousers that felt like track bottoms. Trousers were apparently approved of in maternity clothing if and only if your top covered almost all of your thighs. Hermione just liked the fact that nothing pinched.

Where Hermione drew the line were the awful sack dresses. Diana declared them all the rage in beau monde. She looked like an upside down ice cream cone and made her feel saggy and horrible. Some had big buttons over great swirls of her body, or a big bow at the neck, but there the detail and shape ended. Many, Hermione saw, were meant to be worn as part of a set with a matching blouse or boxy jacket.

Worse yet were the floaty tent dresses that made her billow worse than Snape’s robes, with 1/1000th of the grandeur and none of the style. There was nothing to them aside from a multitude of fabric, swathing her from neck to calf. Hermione reasoned that they wouldn’t be so bad with a belt or a wrap or some buttons or something somewhere to make the sack into a dress. Diana was horrified by the suggestion that they add some shape somewhere in the garment.

“Diana.” Hermione noted, pushing the fabric down gently. “There’s no hiding this.” She looked down at herself. There truly was no mistaking this curve for anything other than a developing human. Hermione knew full well that wizarding people were a bit hesitant about the idea of pregnancy, because it harkened back to the idea that somewhere, somehow, somebody had likely seen somebody else naked. That said, Hermione didn’t care.

She didn’t like the tent dresses Diana offered any more than she liked the sack dresses. They floated away and made her feel like she was presently naked. They made her feel huge and shapeless and ugly. She wasn’t wearing something that made her feel ugly and uncomfortable because they were on-point.

“Well.” Diana bit her lip, “Perhaps we might…” She tapped her wand against her teeth, clearly surprised that Hermione had rejected her second attempt so vehemently, “We could…”

**Burn this disgusting pink muumuu.** Rather than give voice to this idea, Hermione gave voice to her idea. It was a step in the right direction, anyway.

“We’ll simply give me a waistline somewhere.” Hermione decided, “Even if it just under my bust. Or maybe a belt somewhere around there.”

“It’s bad luck…” Diana began, “To acknowledge your anticipation in this way.”

Hermione thought for a long second.

She did not want to act like a culturally insensitive, petulant child. And yet, this was her body, her pregnancy, her clothes, and her choice. She had spent months, literally months, hiding every single change in her body, with oversized clothes and carefully placed accessories and props. It had been mentally and emotionally challenging in so many ways. She didn’t want to live like that, not
anymore. She wasn’t saying she wanted her clothes plastered to her like a Regency miss who watered down her skirts, only that she wanted some structure in her clothing.

“Diana.” Hermione figured out a way to get what she wanted while keeping the peace. That was most logical, and highly satisfying to Hermione’s mind. “Why not tweak things a little?”

From the sofa, Ellie offered, “You know, it might spark a new trend.”

At this, Diana was swayed by the idea of her most unwillingly famous client starting a new trend. With renewed enthusiasm, she waved her wand and got rid of the sacks and the floaty kaftans resting on racks and fitting dummies. Hermione saw the possibilities grow behind Diana’s eyes. “You know…” Diana pursed her lips again, and waved her wand.

Hermione nearly went breathless with relief when the duck patterned fabric disappeared right along every bit of equally offensive and childish fabric, like gingham and ric-rac. She was carrying the baby, but that didn’t mean she had to dress as though she was an infant herself. The fabrics that flew from Diana’s bags were just the sort that Hermione had always worn, with some more edgy additions. Abstract patterns, plaids, and silks and jerseys flew around her in a swirl of possibilities.

Hermione sank down onto her chair, and grabbed a pad, ready to make notes and share ideas while she took a must needed rest off of her feet. Hermione watched the fabric swirl, and new trimmings fly from the bag. Hermione mentally bid the teddy bear smock pockets a fond farewell. Those were terrible, and matched with a red polka dot swing top ratcheted the disaster upwards still.

Ellen clapped in outright glee, and Hermione shared a satisfied look with her Mum. She put aside the maternity pattern books with a nod of confidence. Hermione knew that she had made the right choice, and began to edit outfits that were largely based on the styles and designs she liked and had come to prefer over the past several months under Petra’s guidance.

This time, though, Hermione made no secret of her shape. She still covered her back and her arms and her shoulders, as well as her knees. She did what she was comfortable with, knotting her wrap dresses with small ties rather than fussy bows meant to drape over her changing shape. She adopted the gathers so prevalent in maternity styles, but instead applied them to the narrowness of her rib cage and to emphasize her bust, or applied them at the side seams to accommodate expansion in an otherwise more fitted outfit.

Hermione understood these choices to be courting dissension. She accepted these consequences. She neither feared it nor sought it. Rather, she knew it to be part of her life, something that came along with her roles. She did not, in doing this, seek the front page spreads of Witch Weekly or the endless dissection of her wardrobe on the Wireless. Nevertheless, knowing it would come did not change her course.

Hermione focused her clothing choices on the coming Spring and the coming Summer, with a few transitional pieces to get her through the coming weeks until the weather shifted. She focused on essentials. She needed a few things for daywear, a little bit more for meetings with Minerva and public appearances, and a few things to get her through Lent. Her Easter clothing, when public appearances would be totally essential, could wait.

Instead, Hermione ended up with several new dinner dresses, ones that created visual interest around the bust. Her day clothing, likewise, did not shy away from patterns, wraps, waists, or structure. Hermione knew that she was going to be hounded by the press, for her choices went against both prevailing wizening and muggle trends. Maternity clothing in either community had not entered the world of fashion. She did not care.
It wasn’t that she was one of those smug pregnant women who found value and self-worth in a transient state. But conversely, she didn’t hate her body. She wasn’t ashamed of it. So it didn’t look like the ideal female form.

So what?

She was doing what she wanted to do with her body. Hermione liked the simple skater dresses she insisted upon, the dresses that ended below her knees and not on the floor. She was going to wear what made her feel like herself, and not as though she was some blob who had to hide in a sack until her waist was back under a certain inch mark and her breasts were no longer serving their biological function.

She did choose pastels, because she looked good in some of them, but she also went with her favorite colors, blacks and browns and blues and greens. She stayed comfortably true to her love of structure, no matter the outfit.

As Diana was adjusting a jacket’s fit, adding darts in the back of what had formerly been a sack jacket at Hermione’s behest, Hermione added, “I’m speaking to the joint assembly this week. Which of these outfits we’ve designed do you think is most suitable?”

At this question, Diana stilled. She thought for a long second, “You’ll need something that makes a statement. Something that doesn’t hide your changing figure, and yet something that looks eminently professional. I think…” She shook her head, “Not a suit. A dress. Yes. Something…”

“Green?” Hermione suggested her favorite color, with some hope of a simple green jersey wrap dress forming in her mind. She always felt so confident in green.

“But the best idea, I think.” Mum offered from where she sat, “You wear green frequently in public appearances. It might be smart to use a different color to draw a line between your duties representing your family, and your political work.”

Hermione saw her point, and agreed with it. She did not want it to be simply that the Lady Potter was addressing the Joint Assembly in the WC chambers. She had gotten the invitation based on her own merits, and she would retain her right to speak there under her own merit. She knew it was true that her station in society gave her a larger platform from which to speak, but even so, her words would remain her own.

Hermione considered her options. “What about black? A pattern? Something unusual, yet professional and fitting.” Members of the Wizengamot only wore official robes on large occasions or during trials. During their day to day legislation, they wore suits and work robes.

Hermione spotted the fabric, a black and white silk jersey that would make a spectacular dress. Her preference made known, with Ellie’s and Mum’s agreement, she let Diana work her own personal brand of magic, and turned her mind back to her speech.

The day had finally, finally, come. After months of planning, preparation, and meetings, the day that would make or break her work had come. She could not work with the Board of Governors until this was made public, until a bill was written and voted upon by both houses. A bill could not be written by a member unless she presented her ideas. Thus, standing in front of the entire joint assembly and making her speech was the first step to enacting real change.

It was a great honor to be asked. Hermione’s purpose was not inflated or diminished by this fact.
Hermione felt a sense of rightness wash over her. It was her battle mentality, the calm and sharp focus that only came with throwing herself over to what she knew to be right, no matter the outcome. Petra did her hair, and this time, Hermione let her liberally cover the entire twist in hairspray.

She needed to focus on what was in her head, not on what was on it. One way to do that was to shellac every inch of her head in flexible hold hairspray from Boots. In the same way, she had avoided fiddly jewelry, making sure the pearls in her ears were simple studs.

Hermione entered the Ministry alone from the main Floo, as was expected. She needed to be seen by the cameras, needed to provide a narrative, needed to cross the threshold with purpose. Amid the throng of press, she was met officially, with a polite handshake.

She was greeted by the Secretary for Magical Advancement, who led her to the Rotunda, her gait smooth as they came close the magical unity fountain. There, amid a bevy of press, waited the people to whom she would make her speech, as well as the Secretary for Magical Education. Hermione had a pleasant moment chatting with her as greetings were performed and photographs were taken.

Cameras for the papers across the world were present, and it was only in this moment that Hermione internalized how much press this venture had truly been garnering over the last few months. She was always one to ignore what was being said about her work in order to give herself more fully to it. However, in this moment, Hermione knew that the work she was doing, if it was passed, would impact the whole magical community, not just those of the United Kingdom. Hermione knew that later on today, and in the days to come, she would be swarmed by the press. In this moment, though, they faded to the background as she was bade to sign both visitors books with much ceremony.

After the introduction ceremony had taken place, Hermione was given a few moments to collect herself and to attend to any last minute needs, while the governing bodies entered the chambers. Hermione felt the warmth of her DA coin rise with a single message. It was not one of luck, but rather one of faith and abiding confidence. Hermione did not reply, knowing the proof would be in the pudding.

She remembered the long hours, the days without rest, that had gone into this moment. She had spent countless hours with Minerva, with Augusta, with other professors, with archivists, with portraits, with elves and goblins and centaurs, and others, trying to piece this together. She had been one among many.

And yet, now, she stood alone. The work that countless others had done rested in her hands, and Hermione felt the duty that came with proper representation keenly. She hoped that she would do them justice.

Hermione waited, sitting on a plush chair, her feet steady in her sensible flats. Hermione knew what the protocol would be, knew that the assemblies had to gather before she could enter with the official party, merely so the ceremonious motions that would allow her enter could be made and carried. She was a guest, and had to be invited inside.

She heard the members of the WC, in their robes, entering the room. She pictured Harry and Sirius looking rather excited, but trying not to show it as they took their places. She knew Neville, having an intimate understanding of her work, would do nothing to disguise his anticipation.
She heard the other side of the room filling. She heard the people in the galleries, those who had been invited, taking their assigned seats. Hermione visualized the great stone stairs, the carpet that would be under her feet, and the podium where she would stand. She had asked that no crest or monogram be placed there, out of respect for the fact that she came not as anything other than a scholar, a learner, a warrior. The whole space filled with energy.

After a long moment, she heard the door open behind her. Though she was not on as personal terms with members of the Wizengamot, she knew them by introduction and reputation. Naturally, she knew Kingsley, but their personal relationship had chilled somewhat since the war, and they had to be on professional terms, friendly but distant, for the duration of her visit. Hermione did not expect there to be any closeness present in their interactions today, and she was glad for it. She didn’t want the distractions.

Thus resolved to never let her focus stray once she left the room, Hermione relaxed. She knew her speech, and the only thing she had to do was tell the truth. Well, that, and make every person in the room agree that educational reform ought to be the prime objective of the coming legislative terms.

Kingsley entered, as did the Lord Speaker and Mr. Speaker. Hermione did not let herself think of them beyond keeping her focus on her speech and the roles they would play. She returned their greetings, her heart pounding in her ears and her lungs filling her chest. She felt weight of the notecards in her pocket, and did her best to listen to Kingsley’s reassurances that she would do perfectly well. All she had to do, he said, was give her speech. Hermione tried to take his reassurances in the spirit they were meant. After all, he had seen her mettle under fire for years. Kingsley Shaklebolt was a good man, an honorable person, and Hermione knew that they could do more through working together. She knew now, after the anger had died, that he had been trying to act as a barrier between them and Umbridge. She knew there had to be something going on that she did not quite understand, because the Kingsley Shacklebolt she knew would have never, post-war, been in the same room as that evil slug of a human unless he had a plan.

Hermione thanked him warmly. She knew she was in the right place at the right time. Aside from jitters everyone felt at the possibility of giving a speech that would be broadcast, if the motion being made now passed, to millions of wizarding households the world over. The motion passed, and Hermione tried not to think about the floating cameras and microphones that were, even now, being set up.

Hermione knew that she would do her best to ignore the people in the galleries, the press, and focus on doing her job. They had closed the galleries, but she knew they would be filled to the rafters with invited guests and dignitaries that were welcome as a matter of course. She had avoided looking at the guest list or reading printed speculation.

She had already faced the signing of the visitor’s books, complete with handshakes and ceremony and pictures. She thought she had done well, given that she had done this before. Somehow the second time seemed more daunting than the first. In any case, her handwriting had been flawless. She had practiced it over and over and over. She knew that her signature would go down in history on this day, even if no one remembered her speech or the work behind it.

She wanted the people to know that she had done her best to fight for them. Hermione smoothed down the front of her dress as she stood to begin this next ceremony. Her lipstick, so infrequently worn, felt heavy on her lips.

With a smile in his deep voice and on his face, Kingsley Shaklebolt, Minister for Magic, got into formation with the Lord Speaker and Mr. Speaker. Hermione had had them round for dinner at
varying times, and they did their best to put her at ease, though they all knew that they had to be quite serious about what they were doing. Hermione wondered if the people listening on the Wireless would ever guess that the officials who moved about with such pomp and circumstance in their bearing and acted with such ceremony and stuffiness would likely be found cracking jokes and laughing just before the cameras and microphones came their way.

A chime rang out, and a knock came on the door.

It was time. In formation, they exited the chamber and walked through a long gallery, pictures flashing around them. Finally, Hermione spied the magically produced light that was streaming through the stained glass windows that would be behind her as she made her speech. The party went down the stairs slowly, as music compelled everyone to look up and directly ahead. Hermione navigated the stairs carefully, glad that slow movement and wide stairs contributed to a sense of security and projected an aura of stateliness.

Aware of every eye on her, she stood on the second landing from the top, feeling the stone and carpet underneath her feet. Hermione kept her gaze steady, and looked ahead, up the aisle from where she was left to stand on the stairs. From up here, she saw the countless people on chairs facing the stairs. This, she knew, was her government. She had a duty and an obligation to share with them what she knew and believed, in the hope of making collective change.

The room was, as she knew it would be, packed. She saw Neville, seemingly bursting with pride in his round face. Sirius was there, a sly look of accomplishment upon his face. Lastly, Hermione sought out Harry’s emerald gaze, clear to her even with this immense hall between them. All around her was gold, and massive carvings, and the light of great chandeliers. And yet, the confidence and surety in his expression was by far the most eye-catching thing in the room.

With some ceremony, she nodded at the right places, and sat down when appropriate, never letting on that her knees, perfectly pressed together at an angle, felt like calf’s foot jelly.

First, the Speaker for the Wizengamot made some general remarks about the value of education. He was a brilliant speaker. Hermione felt herself relaxing into his words as he addressed the assembled.

He continued, “It is not the mark of brilliance to store up knowledge. Rather, true genius seeks to shares what it knows in new ways for the betterment of the people, and for the continuation of society. True genius seeks not to lord their superiority over others, but rather seeks to model and to educate in the hopes that all people will embrace knowledge as they have done. I can think of no better example of true genius than—”

Hermione saw Sirius in the crowd of men and women who sat on one side of the room. When he noticed her calm gaze upon him, he winked. Harry projected a sense of calm and a sense of peace. He didn’t look worried. Hermione took some solace in the rock solid faith he had in her abilities. She knew she could do this. She had been born to do this, to fight this war.

After some moments, Mr. Speaker finished with her introduction. Hermione heard her name, and stood, the noise deafening as she came to the podium.

“Thank you.” She acknowledged both the kind introduction and the positive cries of those assembled. She repeated these words several times until the room fell quiet. Once it had remained so for a good few seconds, Hermione began her speech in the traditional way, “My Lord Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Minister for Magic, my Lords, and Members of the Wizengamot, I have come here today before you in this place to discuss before you one of the most pressing matters facing our society today, that is, the education of our children.”
In this vein, Hermione continued at length. She spoke of her research, her position at the helm of the children’s war that was The Second Wizarding War, and her belief that all children should be prepared to face the future, not a future of war and desperate survival, but a future of choice, a future of freedom. Hermione balanced this with the idea that all children regardless of species or birth needed skills and competencies that would allow them to enter fully into wider wizarding society as they aged.

“We live, now, in a world full of change and possibility. And yet, the Hogwarts curriculum has remained largely unchanged since 1770s, when Headmaster Viridian changed the potions curriculum to account for shortages due to the American Revolution. At the same time, he enacted new guidelines to govern history of magic, guidelines that isolated wizarding people from other magical creatures in the historical context.” Hermione paused for a single breath to ask a question, a smile peaking through as she answered, “Why? History tells us that he feared greater war and sought to batter down the hatches through a policy of ‘not bothering anyone’ in the hopes that war would not come.”

And so her speech continued in a similar vein, until she came to more modern and personal history, “In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a wartime addendum made to stress defense and practical welfare, and while that work made sense for the time and place, such a focus makes less sense today. As we approach a new millennium, it clear that critical changes must be made to the Hogwarts course of study.”

Hermione outlined her proposed changes to existing classes and the introduction of new coursework, balancing her evocation of innovation with a sense of tradition. Peace, she boldly and clearly asserted, was not merely the end of the war. It was the moment in time which they collectively decided to, with memories in their hearts and purpose clear in their minds, stride forward to build a future that honored the sacrifices of war.

Her speech was meaningful in the sense that only she could give it. From anyone else, this speech would be mere conjecture and platitudes. But as the Witch who Won, as the Brightest Witch of the Age, as a member of the Golden Trio, she was in the unique place of having seen the front lines. Having learned something from these experiences, she was able to enact change. This, she made very clear, she was committed to doing. She did not want her children, nor any children, to grow up in the shadow of war. Rather, she wanted that “the child that even now rested below her heart” and those of their generation to carry a deeply meaningful understanding of history and tradition forward in the spirit of freedom.

It was a calculated move. Just as she was knocking down boundaries by pushing for sweeping reform and increased equality by presenting it as the extension of tradition and duty, she was directly and totally challenging their society’s perceptions of women. She was, she knew, the first woman to speak before the Joint Assembly visibly and publicly pregnant. She was the first woman to stand before them and represent women as scholars, women as innovators, all the while referencing directly her own pregnancy, and making no secret or apology for her upcoming role as a bringer of life.

Hermione found that as she spoke, she did not need her note cards. Her heart did not race. Her palms did not sweat. Full of conviction, she spoke of her truths. Full of application and zeal for action, she spoke of her research. Full of remembrance and homage to the past, she spoke to her hopes for the future. She outlined, neatly and directly, a plan of action that would require the support of every person in the room. The time was past for complacency. Everyone brought something to the table, and now was the time to act.

She spoke for a little more than 90 minutes, never once wavering once she had found her voice, nor
losing her place in her mind when the shouts of approval struck her by surprise. Her voice filled
the majestic hall clearly. Her points were logically presented, even as they came from a place of
deep personal conviction. She outlined a proposed curriculum change, but more than that, she
outlined reasons why she knew such changes needed to be made. The students they educated
needed never to forget their shared place in history, or to forget that they alone were responsible for
creating the future that would one day be remembered. They needed the tools to do this, tools that
were found not only in remembering the countless Goblin Wars, but also found in studying
interspecies relations, and modern politics and protocol.

She concluded, “To pass on the ability to use magic is meaningless, if we cannot pass an
understanding of its context. Without the unbroken chain of history, there can be no foundation for
a limitless and wondrous future. In teaching a child potions, we must remember and build upon the
innovations of the great potions masters, such as Severus Snape. In teaching Transfiguration, we
must remember Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin, whose talent and innovation will never be forgotten. In
teaching new subjects, such as Cultural Traditions, we must remember that these actions deserve
careful study for the role they played as a light in the darkness, even as they serve now as a
bulwark for an as yet to be created future.”

Shouts of approval filled the chamber, as it had in various points in her speech. Hermione closed
her eyes for a single second, praying that she had done this, that she had made her point. With
certainty, Hermione finished her speech, looking out into the assembled great and good, “We must
be able to, in the fullness of our present and future knowledge, prepare our children for a future that
is not built around war and survival but is instead characterized by peace and freedom. Thank
you.”

The room was on their feet, shouting “Hear! Hear!”

Sirius, ever the Lord of the Manor, was slowly clapping. Hermione knew that in the Muggle
Parliament, the tradition of not clapping was relaxed for joint addresses, though it was not used by
MPs in the House of Commons. Wizarding governing bodies never clapped. Many times they
stomped, or simply shouted, as they were doing now. Interestingly, the people most important to
her were silent. Neville had tears in his eyes, likely because she had mentioned his parents. Harry
looked unsurprised, as though he had never doubted for a single second that she would surpass
even her own expectations.

Hermione breathed, catching his gaze, so very thankful that she had not stumbled once, and
inclined her head in graceful acknowledgement of their response. “Thank you.”

After a long moment, she saw the Lord Speaker rising, prompting her to leave the lectern and
return to her seat. Hermione did not hear the closing remarks in his speech of thanks and reply. She
knew, later, that there would be debate on the bills and motions that would come from this
moment.

But for now, for now, Hermione was contented to live in the moment of a plan come to fruition.

She prayed from this moment that still more would follow in time.

As solemnly as she had entered, she exited. Once back in the private antechamber, Hermione
finally let her knees shake and her blood pound in her ears.

She sipped at water, and marveled that her hands did not shake. Now that it was all over, she felt
some level of awareness of the magnitude of what she had just accomplished. She only hoped that
her shattering of barriers would let others through. She did not want to blaze a trial for herself, not
without reaching out a helping hand to others who would join her in this fight for equality and the ending of blood supremacy.

She had been the first muggleborn witch to address the Joint Assembly. She hoped greater witches would follow. Her knees were still shaking when a robed man with wild hair and crooked glasses slipped into the room.

Hermione couldn’t hold back the laugh that spilled forth, “Can you believe it?”

She’d…she’d…

Harry put her spinning thoughts into words, “You did it, Hermione. You just changed the world.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” Hermione hastened, “I proposed changes to the curriculum. I didn’t end discrimination on the basis of species or gender or blood prejudice.”

“No, you didn’t.” Harry agreed, “You’ve only created the tools that will. You created the mechanism that will put those tools you made, the the tools they need, into the hands of the magical beings who will do those things.”

“Harry…” Hermione didn’t know how she felt about the construction he had put on her efforts.

“And who knows what you’ll do. You’re really only just getting started you know.” After a moment, in which Hermione considered the truth of his words. Harry spoke formally, “I’ve come to offer you escort into the joint assembly.”

Hermione hesitated. She was supposed to leave. She was only a guest. She came, gave her speech, and was expected to go on her merry way, letting the government and the WC go through their readings and ping-pong the whole thing into something that would actually help the whole of wizarding society. Hermione had visions of going home and soaking in the tub. Her back hurt from being on her feet so long, and her head was itchy with hairspray.

As she was about to speak her consent, Hermione felt an unmistakable movement within her. She knew what it was, and her breath left her body in the span of a single second. It wasn’t nerves. It wasn’t hunger. This, this was, something far more meaningful. Harry misinterpreted her expression, and spoke as she quickly took his hand.

“In a rare, rare, occurrence, The Marquess of Valley has put to motion the possibility of having a Questioning of a Distinguished Visitor. It passed.” Harry informed her, adding gently, “Only by your consent, Hermione…”

Harry’s eyes blew wide as she took his hand, and pressed it firmly but gently to the side of her abdomen, her name becoming a question on his lips. Though a muggle father would never be able to literally feel the quickening, magic made it possible.

Hermione grinned. “I’d welcome the opportunity to participate.” She paused, silently and wandlessly, she cast a stronger sensitivity charm on his hand from where it rested upon her, “But first…”

He clearly felt that. She didn’t even need to ask.

In eons past, the quickening had been an important legal and philosophical and political for women. For muggle queens of yore and witches of even modern times, it had been worthy of bonfires and sermons of praise. For witches, it had once been supposed and asserted that babies who firmly and unmistakably quickened would be magical. It was all a load of tosh in that sense,
though some witches set store by such old wives’ tales.

Standing in a formal antechamber, after one of the most pivotal moments of her life, Hermione experienced another. That moment had been no more or less special, but this one was private where the other had been public, rooted in emotion and not logic. Hermione was glad that no one save Harry would know of this moment, or share it.

Hermione smiled at Harry’s expression, even as the movement had passed. “Well, today’s been one for the scrapbooks.”

“I think…” Harry posited, “that the baby didn’t want to miss out on the fun.”

“You’re absurd.” Hermione laughed, reaching up to kiss her husband properly, as was her right and privilege.

When they parted, Hermione reminded him to take off his lipstick.

Harry nodded, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. “Smile big for the cameras, ‘Mione.”

Hermione paused only to put a cushioning charm on her aching feet and to reapply her lipstick, glad that there was a spell for that, and she didn’t have to worry about getting in on her teeth. Hermione reminded herself to mark down that today had been her unborn child’s first political act, in the sense that clearly, they had been trying to convey something. Hermione felt a spark of awareness strike off in the back of her mind, and was glad to know that the baby was well.

That done, she very correctly allowed him to take her arm. Arm in arm, they walked toward the next opportunity for political dissidence. After all, the family that engaged in politics together, stayed together.

Or so they said, whoever they were.

In the coming day, media requests poured in. Harry, guided by Sirius, came to take the position that a photo call would be a positive step in the right direction. Hermione was not easily swayed, not liking the idea of standing there with a vapid smile on her face in front of the London Townhouse. She wanted to keep her personal and private life separate from her advocacy, and she knew that any photo call would instantly conflate the two issues. Especially, she posited, since Page Six was forever going on about her pregnancy.

The general opinion of the press was that she was carrying twins, due in mid-August, and likely to give birth at Hogwarts. Why she would be expected to give birth at the school, where the infirmary was not equipped to deal with such cases, Hermione did not know. The papers also speculated that Madam Pomfrey was her medical support, even though the poor dear hadn’t delivered a baby since 1951.

The idea for a photo call and press conference was set aside at her slightest objection, for which Hermione was glad.

She knew that her days of press conferences were coming, and quickly, but she was determined all the same to put them off. Timing was everything. She wanted only to strike while the iron was hot, not to court press.

Right now, she had put her work in the hands of the government. There needed to be a bill, which Neville was going to sponsor. Then, the bill would have to pass in the WC and the Wizengamot, much in the same way that any bill was passed in the muggle parliament. They would also need
royal assent, which was a basically a formality, but there would have to be time for that, as well.

After it passed and a formal copy was archived, which could take some months, the objectives of the bill would have to be implemented by the Board of Governors at Hogwarts, which is where the real work began.

Hermione laughed at her original idea that she could simply present her idea to Minerva and carry it out without delay and without fuss. Hogwarts was the principal educational institute for magical society, along with schools for various species that Hermione hoped to integrate into Hogwarts, and they would allow no changes to be made without the full due process of the law. Hermione considered, from time to time, visiting with the Queen to see what help she might provide, but ER was wisely hands off with her magical government, as she was required by law to be in the muggle government.

And anyway, Hermione was loathe to add more to her plate or to have to add more engagements to her own calendar. The last few years had not been easy for that family, and after the war, Hermione was loathe to go bursting in and putting this in the Queen’s lap. It needed to be handled. Hermione wasn’t afraid to play hardball, and she had the knowledge of magical society to enable her to do that with a certain finesse. Hermione reasoned that she had the whole thing well in hand.

Despite the political waves she had been making, daily and domestic life continued. Just because she now had meetings on the docket with Kingsley in an official capacity, among other things, did not mean that her day to day routines changed in any noticeable way. Petra still fussed over her clothing and her hair and her schedule. Cadbury still had his own cadre of elves following him about, and Crooks was still king of the Foundry.

After yet more discussion, Hermione agreed to go visit the Nanny schools and meet with the attached agencies. She was adamant that if she was to hire someone, it wouldn’t be any of the applications that had found their own way to the desk. She was content to hold some interviews, to try and see if this could be a possibility. She had committed to nothing, and no one had asked it of her.

She did not want the witch with two degrees in child development and a transfiguration mastery thesis that discussed transfiguring ergonomic nursery furniture. She did not want to hire the stern-faced witch that had served as nanny to the Lestrange children, not because of personal dislike, but simply because they disagreed fundamentally on the role of mothers. They were, apparently, only to visit the nursery at agreed upon hours, and only play with the children in ways Nanny allowed. She rejected any number of applications that had been sent to her, all for very logical and sound reasons.

Hermione ranted to a very sympathetic Mum as she explained how hard this whole thing was turning out to be. “All I want…” Hermione stressed, “Is someone exactly like Nanny. Couldn’t I just spring the magical thing on her and ask her to come back and be nanny again?”

Mum shook her head, “You know she’s over the moon in Carlisle. Nanny wouldn’t be able to keep up with the pace of your lifestyle, Hermione.” Hermione knew this to be true. Nanny was getting on in years, and the idea of thrusting her into the center of their life had little appeal.

Nanny Redmond did love her card club and her small house on a tree-lined street. She went out occasionally with friends and was being slowly courted by a barrister with a jolly smile and two grown children from a marriage that had left him a widower. Nanny had given her so much that Hermione didn’t want to take a single bit of her happiness away.
Mum got to the point of the matter, which Hermione knew she would, “And anyway, you need to be an adult in your own household. You don’t need to run to Nanny. You can do this. You absolutely can.”

“I just feel so guilty.” Hermione admitted, “I don’t have a job. Should I just quit and stay home fully?” Hermione asked, “I just…” Hermione outlined her growing feelings of guilt and inadequacy and the reasons behind them, such as her seemingly tentative bond with the Foundry, her lack of protection of her wedding clothes, her growing fears that she would not be the sort of mother she wanted to be. Her mother was a willing and apt listener.

Maybe she was selfish, she posited, to feel that she had obligations. Maybe she was nothing more than a bored aristo with too much money and too little sensibility. So many people couldn’t afford nannies, and they got on with both parents working. Maybe she was coming at this from the wrong angle. Maybe she could keep up her work and devote more time to homemaking and mind the baby and Teddy without a nanny. Perhaps she only needed to take a more realistic look at her circumstances.

When she said as much, her mother scoffed. It was not every family who had the weight of their responsibilities, nor was every family under near constant scrutiny. If they went out in public, they would need an extra wand, someone who was charged with the shared goal of protecting a very prominent and vulnerable person.

At length, Mum continued, “Hermione.” Mum set aside her files, which she had been working upon as they conversed. “Being a mother is not fundamentally about being chained to the Aga, never having an interest outside of your children, or never again nurturing your own soul. It used to kill me to leave you, you know. But…”

“But I was always so proud of you, that you were my Mum.” Hermione cut her off, “You showed me what it was to believe in something, to do something to the best of your ability. I never once resented you working.”

“Yes.” Her mother agreed, “I believe that you and I have a better relationship, a stronger relationship, because I continued working. In moments of doubt, doubt you now know to be almost crippling, I told myself over and over that you loved Nanny, and that Nanny loved you, that you were a happy, well-adjusted little girl.”

Hermione agreed fully, knowing that every family was different. For some families, having a non-working parent was the ideal. Some hated the idea of nursery, some preferred it to the idea of playgroups and nannies. Hermione realized that she would never make anyone else happy, and so she had to do what she and everyone who mattered felt best.

There was no single correct answer, and maybe the answer that worked for a time wouldn’t continue to work, and they would have to make changes then. Her family unit was complex and unlike anyone else’s she had ever seen. Hermione articulated this, adding, “I’m so worried about explaining my relationships with Remus, with Sirius, and mostly with Teddy. I don’t want someone to make Teddy feel different than the baby, in any way.”

“You define the relationships and roles in your family, Hermione.” Mum reminded her, “You have lots of frank discussions, and you model the relationships. The person you’re hiring will have the training to get on in a family of any variation. You simply tell her you have two children, and leave it at that.” Mum advised, “What she reads in the papers or knows from elsewhere is of no consequence to you, unless it begins to impact her work.”

Hermione sighed, not sure that she wanted to have a drawn-out discussion about family dynamics.
“I know what I don’t want in a nanny. I guess I just make a list and grade applicants on the various categories, and then hire the top scorer.”

“Oh…” Mum mused, “It might be more complicated than that. They say nannies are like husbands. You just know.”

“Nobody just knows anything, Mum.” Hermione returned, very sensitive about being teased in this way. After all, she had known Harry for most of her formative years and hadn’t known he was the man for her until he was putting a ring on her finger, or thereabouts. “Everyone has reasons.”

“Just keep an open mind.” Mum’s smile was nothing short of sly, “You might be in the middle of an interview, and realize you’ve met your dream nanny.”

Hermione huffed, and flounced off to the loo. She had to visit it, yet again. On the way back, she got the sorbet out of the freezer. If she was going to bemoan her difficulties and make a list, at least she should have sustenance.

Augusta, over tea at their weekly game of cards, had a different perspective when asked for input on the list Hermione was now revising. “It is critical,” began she, “That you hire someone who can support you in the early days. You might consider a specially trained infant specialist and early care nurse, Hermione.” She sliced her cake with her fork, “And then of course, she will work in the nanny, who will work, when the time comes, with Edward’s governess.” She considered Hermione’s expression, “It does take a village, my girl.”

“Yes, but…” Hermione tried, “I don’t need a fleet of people. They can share a nanny. Harry plans to take some paternity leave, and I’m sure we’ll get on with just one person.” Hermione thought for a long second, “Teddy’s not ready for a governess. When he needs one, well, we’ll cross that bridge.”

“I can…” Augusta sensibly replied, “Recommend someone. Of course you should still visit the schools, but I did hear of a young woman looking for a situation, and I think you might suit. It is a shame that Nanny won’t come out of retirement. She was vital to Neville’s well being in very trying times.”

Hermione smiled, “I think she could only be induced out of a comfortable retirement for Hannah.” With that, she lifted her bone china to her lips, unable to hide a smile.

“Hermione!” Augusta was quite flustered, which quite amused Hermione.

“Oh, don’t be missish, Augusta.” Hermione waved off her shock, “I’ve got my money down on a summer wedding.”

Augusta shook her head, “I don’t think so.” After a long second, she asked, “What makes you so very sure?”

“Oh,” Hermione supposed, not having to suppose at all, “Maybe Hannah made her father a promise she wouldn’t enter a betrothal until after she graduated, and maybe Neville has his heart set on an outdoor wedding reception, and maybe, just maybe, Neville’s been asking Harry about how he balances his seat with his job and a family life.”

Hermione did not reveal that Neville had asked her about how she had adjusted to being thrust into the spotlight. Hermione knew that Hannah would also be expected to, even though her own family was quite old and quite well heeled, to enter into public life in a way that her unmarried status now prevented.
Augusta considered this information, knowing that it did indeed point to intentions that Neville was as yet unable to articulate to his very formidable grandmother. “I see.”

“Of course, I could be wrong.” Hermione admitted, knowing full well that she wasn’t. “Though, I am very rarely wrong.”

Augusta laughed. “At least you have developed some humility over the years.”

Hermione’s point had been made, however. Augusta would do her best to open a conversation with Neville regarding his plans. He might have come into his own quite a lot, but his Gran did intimidate him. Hermione considered it her duty to help him as she was able. That done, she returned to her own problems. “Augusta, if you were hiring a new nanny, what would you look for in someone?”

“Well, looking beyond those fleeting baby years, you want someone with whom you can communicate your wishes, and whom you trust implicitly to carry them out in your stead.” Augusta, ever the practical person, noted, “Of course, you will also want someone to teach and model social niceties, good habits, and public interaction with confidence. You will want a woman of sound moral character, who is, above all else, discreet. Her eyes and ears must take in everything, respond, but never reveal.”

Hermione pressed her for information just as she had done with her mother, and left Snoedyn in a quandary. It seemed everyone had this image in their heads of whom Hermione should hire. Hermione did learn that the young woman Augusta had heard about was in her final year as a trainee at one of the magical nanny colleges, and so Hermione made firm note of her name in her mind.

Beyond that, and a strict list she complied, she was a blank slate. On all fronts, Hermione was unsure what the future would bring, but she was very excited to find out.
My family is big and loud but they're my family. We fight and we laugh and yes, we roast lamb on a spit in the front yard. And where ever I go, what ever I do they will always be there.

Chapter Summary

"My family is big and loud but they're my family. We fight and we laugh and yes, we roast lamb on a spit in the front yard. And where ever I go, what ever I do they will always be there." - Toula, My Big Fat Greek Wedding

OR

“In my family strange is relative.”
—Kate Rockland

In which they find an ally in an unexpected place and affirm the wonder that is love, and choosing to love.

Chapter Notes

This festival is discussed in the chapter. It's technically a part of a series, but I chose not to cover those yet, so we get a peek at the final ritual in a month filled with rituals. A good overview is found in this book.

Denford Park is real place, that yes, hosted a real school until 2003. At the time of the story, they'd still be there. Now, they're in Bath. Their first location was on Norland Place, I believe, in London.

There was a documentary series on about ten years ago that I'm dying to see again but can't find.

Hermione's dress inspiration it's not exact, but it's very close to what I was picturing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione couldn’t quite settle the feeling that she needed to meditate and connect with the Foundry. She carried a lot of guilt over her lack of a connection to the house. Such a connection was inherent in the role of domina, just as it was for Harry.

She wasn’t as bonded to the house as she could be, she knew, and if she had been it would have saved her a lot of trouble.

Hermione lowered herself awkwardly to sit on the floor. She was going to change this, no matter what she did. She owed it to herself to know that she had done all she could to meet the roles she had chosen, and continued to choose, for herself.
She hated meditation, but she knew how to do it. She let herself quiet her mind, no easy feat. She had so much to do that taking the time to do this seemed foolish, but if there was one thing she knew, it was that appreciating the moment was critical. They slipped by far too quickly. Even so, she took a good half an hour to get deep enough to dwell within her mind and let her thoughts pass her by without grabbing on to one and exploring it.

Once she was deeply in a meditative state, she pushed energy out to ask, “Are you out there?”

The idea was to forge a mental connection with the Foundry so that what had happened with Ginny would never happen again. The main objective, according to the books, was to open a mental door, leaving the house to send forth impressions and messages without her mental walls and her magical energies blocking them out. Augusta said it was very simple but very helpful. Once the mental connection was forged, the house would be in the back of her mind, rather like a watched pot simmering on the Aga.

Tentatively, she began to feel a bright warmth within herself. Hermione knew in an instant that the Foundry was nervous about reaching out, though how she knew it was a matter of debate. It was a tiny ball of energy in the corner of her mind, pulsing with emotion it dared not express.

It hesitated in a way that Hermione had never experienced. Early in her marriage, the house had been very forthright and direct, dancing along the top of her thoughts with a certainty and a knowing that embodied every bit of its age and stateliness. Over time, that had stopped with a knowing sadness, and Hermione had done nothing to foster the connection.

She supposed in that sense, she could understand its hesitation now.

She had spat on its first overtures. Hermione knew she would not do so again.

She assured it, “I just want to make sure you’re doing okay.”

She got back a feeling of boredom. That was sort of odd. The house had always seemed so wise and almost all-knowing that this hesitant and soft presence in the back of her mind jarred her. How could the Foundry be bored? There was so much going on here that the estate was bustling even on days of rest. Still, she knew better than to question a sentient house.

Hermione sought clarification, “You’re bored? How can…” Hermione searched for mental words, wondering what the house wanted without blaming it. “What can I do to change that?”

Hermione was shocked when she saw two things behind her eyes. She saw an image of the piano and of a stack of books. “You like to hear things going on?”

Frustration filled her. She saw flashes of Teddy, of Harry, of Remus, Sirius, and lastly, herself. It lingered on an image of her. The house seemed to quite like her. When she felt its happiness, she knew that it was thinking of her. Obviously, it was not things the house liked, but the people. “You want people around?”

After a long moment, she saw a flash of her memories. Harry talking to her, Teddy playing with Cadbury. Remus cuddling Crooks. Hermione talking to the Baby about everything and nothing just so that they would hear her. The memory lingered there. Hermione got the idea, “You like to hear people talking?”

That guess was affirmed. Hermione settled in to have something of a conversation with the house. She tried to ask it various questions. She got no answer when she asked about the windows on the third floor, the carpet in the drawing rooms, or even with the fumigation of the basements. Rather,
the presence within her wanted to talk to her about Crooky’s purring and Harry’s laughter.

With dawning panic, Hermione asked one final question, “You’re not the Foundry, are you?”

A different presence in the back of her mind told her at once that the windows on the third floor were fine, except for the crack in the dormer that needed to be fixed, the carpets in the drawing room were made in Lancashire, and the basement fumigation was needed, posthaste, as there was a doxy nest being built in the wine storage room as they spoke.

Hermione, feeling very clearly the difference between the two new voices in her mind, jumped up. One was clearly the Foundry. It was a telepathic knowing. The Foundry wasn’t a voice, wasn’t an energy that resonated with her in such a close fashion. It simply gave her facts, based in knowing. It had no opinions or preferences as such. It didn’t have communication problems. The house wasn’t responsive, emotive, in the way that this tiny light within her was. It, whatever it was, felt and reacted and wanted, she knew now, to engage with her.

Hermione stared down at herself, smoothed down her dress and felt the flutter of movement within her. Grabbing her cloche hat off of her side table, Hermione jammed it on her head and tossed powder into the Floo.

She had been ignoring her baby. Her baby was bored. Panicking, Hermione threw herself into the Floo and tumbled out into Augusta’s drawing room. It was presumptuous to enter right into the drawing room, but Hermione did not care. She knew Augusta wouldn’t mind, for she had always made it clear that her door was open to Hermione.

She wiped soot off of her face, and looked into the shocked face of her friend. Hermione breathed. “I’m hearing voices, Augusta!” She sank down into the chair that was vacant across from Augusta, “I’ve lost it.”

Augusta sipped her tea. “Two voices?”

“The house, and this other one that likes the piano and the cat!” Hermione cried, explaining the whole morning, leaving out the bit about why she wanted to connect with the Foundry. She concluded, “The baby can’t possibly be sentient enough to demand Chopin, can they? Is it sentient?”

“Of course your baby is sentient.” Augusta replied, “They’ve probably been waiting to talk to you. No wonder the poor lamb is frustrated.”

Hermione blanched. “Can they hear everything?” Harry was already a bit nervous about hurting the baby, which was absurd, but she also knew that telling Harry the baby could hear private moments would likely put a stop to anything private going on for the duration. Hermione would agree with him on the basis of the squick factor, but she was also reasonably certain that she’d also figure out a way to make sure the baby was sleeping.

Augusta laughed outright, “No, dear. They’ve no interest in your personal life, I assure you.” She imparted a bit of wisdom that Hermione had read in books, but no book had really told her to expect that her baby would want to talk back to her, “Expectant mothers are encouraged to meditate and to communicate with their babies, even in muggle communities. There is a reason for this, a reason that is rooted in traditions that emerged before the Statute of Secrecy.”

Hermione let out a breath. “I think…” Hermione searched for words, “They’re fond of me. It’s a bit strange, you know?”
Upon further consideration, Hermione realized that this bond between them was normal. The baby had never seen her, and yet they loved her. It was the same for Hermione and Harry. He talked to the baby all the time, told them about his day, waited like a child on Christmas until she told him the baby was moving, and then would apply charms to his hands, just to feel that movement, even as it was becoming stronger and stronger with each day.

Augusta nodded, “This is a good time to get to know them, though, before they draw their energies inward enough to prepare for birth. As your time approaches, they’ll settle, and the silence is how you’ll know you’re ready.”

Hermione let herself relax against the chair. She knew all of this. She knew, and yet, she had panicked, feeling dual presences in her head. Now, said presence was declaring that a cup of milk wouldn’t go amiss. The Foundry was blessedly silent, even if she knew through that bond that Cadbury was looking for her. “I guess my reaction was a little funny.”

Augusta agreed, “And fortuitous. I was meaning to call this afternoon. I’m having a charity tea next month. You’ll come, of course. How would you like to join the Association?”

Hermione disappointed her dear friend yet again with the shake of her head and a wry smile.

Augusta sighed as she had many times before, “One day you’ll join, and you’ll be the social committee chair if it’s the last thing I do.”

Hermione laughed. “If I join one day, you may install me as your puppet, Augusta.”


Hermione knew this back and forth was a game. It was one she enjoyed, and did not care to end, so she merely smiled.

Mum and Dad agreed to watch Teddy while they all went to the college for their prearranged meeting. They made short work of dropping off Teddy. He declared himself quite happy to play with Helen and Adam, who was going to teach him how to build a play-dough mandible.

Leaving him to it, they headed off as a group took a flying car to a large estate in Berkshire. Hermione, on the way there, reviewed her list and used the time spent in the car to seek input and revisions from Sirius and Remus. She was mostly satisfied with her talking points and her questions and her general sense of the person they were looking for in this role.

They were able to touch down easily on the designated spot just off A4, and drive up through the gates along a winding drive. Denford Park had deep and strong wizarding connections. In the history before the evangelization of Berkshire, the area surrounding the Park had been a holy place for priests and then had been a place of veneration by early Christians, who had coexisted with their wizarding history.

In later years, it had been the home of a very notable family, and then a convent school before becoming the College. Hermione did not know if they had been magical, but Hermione suspected they might have been. After all, she could feel the magic in the air as they crossed the roundabout.

On their way inside, Hermione mentioned to them all, “Did you know this college also trains muggle nannies?” Hermione added, “I think Nanny would fall over dead if she knew I was here.”

“I have got to meet this Redmond lady.” Harry noted, his palm gentle on her elbow as they went up the stairs and were admitted inside by a secretarial staff member.
Hermione shook her head, as they entered. She was not leaving Nanny alone with Harry. “I’ve secrets, you know.”

“Yeah, like your massive obsession with Paddington Bear.” Harry teased, having seen incriminating home videos. Sadly, massive obsession was a bit of a kind understatement. Hermione had been something of a Paddington devotee. She firmly maintained that he was a magical creature, and that Deepest Darkest Peru was merely a place left off of mundane maps.

“Shut up.” Hermione tucked back a few strands that had escaped her silk scarf, knowing that anyone who looked their way would never believe them to be teasing one another. “Paddington is a wonderful, lovable, marmalade sandwich eating magical bear.”

Hermione was prevented from expounding on her position and her devotion to the traveller from Deepest Darkest Peru, because they were met by the head of the agency attached to the school, and ushered into a lovely and comfortable sitting room. It was very clearly a magical room, although she knew that any visiting mundane people would never realize this, just as they would never realize that the vehicle out front could fly and be cloaked fully from their sight.

Ms. Trent seemed a very capable woman. Hermione did her best not to feel nervous, though she knew she did feel some amount of nerves. This was a huge life decision, after all, and this person would become a member of her household, if not her family as time went on. It felt rather like a blind date might, she assumed.

She had come round to the idea of a nanny as a support person in her life, very aware that every family was called to different choices and sacrifices for their children. It might not work for every family, but it was an idea that presently worked for them. If that changed, it changed, but in the meantime she had decided to be open to the experience. She loved her Nanny and wanted for her children every measure of happiness she had experienced for herself. Her life would have been totally incomplete without Nanny in it.

First, they were taken on a tour of the school. Denford Park was stately and large.

Interestingly, the magical arm of the school was integrated into the muggle program, simply by the addition and substitution of various classes. with the muggle girls none the wiser because of the way classes were arranged on the timetable. It was really quite clever. Hermione knew this would not be possible at the primary, junior, or secondary levels, but she thought this coexistence boded well for the educational ethos of the college.

Hermione was very interested in seeing the magical nurseries and ongoing lessons, and so the tour lingered there, with Ms. Trent explaining the training program. It was extensive and very focused. “Naturally, all magical trainees follow the two year program, with a special emphasis on guiding the developing magic of the infant and young child.”

She outlined training modules and allowed them to peek in on an active class. The witches there were learning about hygiene in the nursery. They did not, as Hermione did with Teddy, make use of muggle disposable nappies or nappy wipes. No, these eminently trained witches were taught to use cotton nappies and a single cotton swab at a time to restore their charge’s pristine baby bums. Hermione confessed to occasionally gagging and her eyes watering during some changes, so she planned on handing her nanny a pack of Tesco nappy wipes and telling her to have at it when needed.
They wore sensible flat shoes with laces for safety, and tasteful studs to keep prying fingers from ripping off their earlobes. When changing a baby, they kept the palm on the child at all times, so as to prevent rolling off, even as charms would have cushioned the child from most harmful effects of a tumble. Of course, now, this set was beyond such fundamentals and were instead learning about hygiene in nursery design.

Hermione was quite used to looks of recognition on the part of magical people. Some people froze, some people looked away, some people stared. It was all the same, that same wondering if it was her, and what was she doing here, and there was Harry Potter and the Blacks, too.

At least nobody spit on her much anymore. The gamut of reactions they earned in public was nothing new. It was almost second nature to pretend she didn’t notice and move along. In defense of the school, though, every witch she met was unfailingly poised and polite.

For comparison’s sake, Hermione asked if they might interrupt a muggle class. She rather did want to see what the various differences were, if any existed beyond the obvious. It was a good experience for her work within Hogwarts, after all. If she could further study what happened here, it could inform choices and ideas that she might integrate into her own plans and into the bill Neville was drafting.

Ms. Trent assented, and led them across the building away from the magical block of rooms. They looked exactly the same, although Hermione could feel the shift in the wards and noted small other changes. At the end of the corridor, Ms. Trent stopped, and let them know that the women were working on their final projects for their Display Day.

Hermione relished the freedom of being able to wander around the stations in the textiles workshop without the burden of her position. It was nice to be able to talk to the girls. Although the magical girls had been lovely, Hermione felt as though she could learn more, ask general questions of the student if she seemed interested in interacting, when in muggle classes. There was some blessing to being just another woman visiting the school with her husband and family in tow.

When they were following Ms. Trent, Hermione scanned the room. There were any number of women hard at work. They were smocking, cutting, tracing, sewing. One was making a family of soft dolls that Hermione found to be adorable. Yet another woman was smocking a baby grow with pale green thread, with a level of competency that Hermione envied.

One girl at the back, with dishwater blonde hair and glasses was perched at a sewing machine. When she looked over at her, Hermione realized that the young woman was staring at her. She quickly looked away before looking back again with a small smile of greeting, as though it was instinct to look away before her training and her assertiveness took over.

Hermione knew in that moment that she had been positively identified by someone who knew just who she was, and who she was visiting Denford Park along with, and why. Hermione tried to make approaching her as unobtrusive as possible. She met a few other young ladies first, and made no expression of her curiosity.

She merely said, “Hello. I’m Hermione. I hope you don’t mind my stopping by, but your project looks very interesting.”

The girl blushed. “I’m Eleanor, ma’am. It’s a quillow.” She turned the quilted fabric over and displayed a fleeced back on the lap sized blanket she was edging. The fabric’s design, though a muggle would never know it, was of Mr. Puckle and his friends. He was quite the hit with many magical toddlers and children. To anyone who didn’t know, he simply looked like a nondescript cartoon character. “It’s meant to fold up for travel as a pillow.”
Hermione expressed enthusiasm for it. “My little boy is very fond of Mr. Puckle, though rest is a horrible word in his mind.”

Eleanor smiled. “Naps are dreadful things, aren’t they?”

Hermione went to continue the conversation, but saw that she was once again being called away. She bid Eleanor goodbye, nodded generally at the five other girls she’d spoken to, and met up with her party. Ms. Trent was keen to keep moving through the stately home back to her sitting room and office. Hermione realized that she had spent a good fifteen minutes connecting with these young ladies.

Harry winked. “You take forever on walkabouts.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose, hanging back as Ms. Trent continued on, talking about continuing education provided to graduates with Sirius and Remus. “I like meeting people. They were interesting. I met a mundane girl from a magical family who wasn’t Filch, for example.”

Hermione confirmed her suspicion when they came back to the sitting room. Once they were settled, she asked, “Do you have any mundane students from magical families training here?”

Ms. Trent nodded, “Yes, just one. You met her, I believe. We often find ourselves accepting squibs. Wizarding young people tend to be raised with an understanding of the value of family, and nannying in a muggle home is an acceptable option to many young women in such circumstances. Where possible, they take coursework with the magical girls, and dorm with them.”

Hermione filed this information away for consideration as Ms. Trent began to ease them into her interview process. Hermione got the idea that there was a definite outline that Ms. Trent followed, and so Hermione went along with it, keen to find out what she might discover.

Hermione found herself occasionally lost in thought, trying to discern Ms. Trent’s process. When Harry gripped her hand gently, Hermione focused. She couldn’t spend the whole interview thinking about how hard it must be to be mundane in a magical community, and yet, magically raised in a mundane community. There would be time to consider that another day.

Remus was speaking, and Hermione felt herself free to observe him carefully. His jumper was a deep brown that set off the sandy lowlights in his hair. His jacket had elbow patches. Hermione loved his style. Now that he was a professor, he truly embodied the style. She couldn’t get Harry to embrace professorial style, even as he taught classes. She was working on it.

At this point, it was clear that Ms. Trent was getting an understanding of their daily life. “We are frequently in France for long weekends and short holidays. As a family, longer holidays are spent in Scotland. We have other options, but we are creatures of habit.” He smiled gently, “I’d better let Hermione explain more of the day to day routine, though.”

Hermione addressed Ms. Trent, explaining their general routine and the rhythm of their days. She explained in some detail their routines, noting where Teddy typically spent that given day, and what that day might look like on average.

When asked for a more general overview of the week, she added, “Three days a week he has enrichment activities which rotate by season, and two days a week he spends the afternoon with his Grandmother. On the alternating days, between us we typically keep him busy with cognate activities. He’s still very much a baby, so I try not to overschedule him, and let him find his own fun.”
Right now Teddy’s idea of self-directed fun consisted of chasing Cadbury and laughing when his screams echoed as he rode around on Padfoot’s back. Hermione did not say this, for she knew they were a strange family. Hermione was not about to make any apologies for the love between the best people in her life.

Ms. Trent didn’t bat an eyelash at their lifestyle or Teddy’s living situation, nor did she express any concern about the nanny they hired working directly with them to take care of both Teddy and the next baby. Hermione was glad of this, and found herself releasing an internal breath she did not know she had been holding.

Sirius was speaking by that point, “—it’s also critical for us that the person we hire understands the more delicate aspects of what it is to be in the public eye. The political and social context in which we live requires someone who understands how to make decisions under an immense amount of pressure, and will do so with the interests of the children in mind.”

Harry further added, “We don’t want Teddy to be concerned at this point about the people who come up to him in public, but we do need someone who will draw boundaries and protect his privacy and his right to a childhood on the rare occasion she’s left in charge.”

Ms. Trent expressed a clear understanding of the situation that Hermione felt would guide her in the selection of potential interviewees for their consideration. She would have to be a rather astute woman to keep her job, and to do it at such a level. Hermione rather supposed that Teddy, a metamorphmagus, with two sets of people who were involved in raising him, was not the hardest case she’d ever worked on.

“If we’re on the subject of an ideal candidate, it is important that the nanny be able to blend into mundane situations. My parents are mundane, and my cousin is a large part of my life. I cannot have someone in my home who is perhaps hesitant around mundane people, or even uncomfortable doing some things the non-magical way.” Hermione smiled, knowing full well that her opinion was a unique perspective even in the post war world. “After all, both Harry and I were raised that way, and a great many of our sensibilities as parents were formed during that period.”

As Ms. Trent sussed out their wants, needs, preferences and worldview, Hermione felt that her understanding of the interview process had been skewed. She wasn’t here to ask for a nanny like one might make a list for their ideal boyfriend. Rather, all they really had to do was talk about Ted, talk about their family, and leave the rest to Ms. Trent. It seemed a rather big responsibility, but Hermione resolved to trust the process.

Even so, she could not the young woman with the dishwater blonde hair out of her mind. She seemed to possess a unique sense of humor that Hermione appreciated. Furthermore, Hermione had the sense that there was more to her than met the eye. There was just something about her. What it was Hermione could not articulate.

Hermione saw that the interview was drifting to a close, and took a moment to ask about her circumstances. Hermione came right to the point by holding back what little information she had, “The mundane young woman, what is her name? Eleanor?”

“Eleanor Heulwen.” Ms. Trent affirmed. “She’s at the top of her set, but has had something of a difficult time here socially. Everyone thinks so highly of her, but it is hard to exist with one foot in each community. She does her best to balance what must be a challenge with grace. She’s a shy young woman. I think it likely that she will seek work in a day nursery, and return to her family.”

Hermione slanted a glance at Harry. He already knew what she was thinking. He made Hermione’s objective plain. “If Eleanor is open to the idea, we’d like to interview her.”
Ms. Trent looked dubious. “She does not meet any number of the criteria upon which you were firm. She is not magical. I had thought to steer you towards a witch of some years experience.”

Sirius waved a hand. “The children can be given porkeys. Insofar as I am concerned, the only question I have about this young woman is when we can meet her in a more formalized way.”

Harry smiled quickly at her, as if to say, “See how quickly Sirius gives you what you want, beloved?”

Remus tried to soften the shock Ms. Trent was no doubt feeling. “We are something of a nontraditional family. Perhaps a nontraditional nanny would find herself happiest amongst likeminded people. I certainly feel that Ted would be in good hands with any student trained here, if Hermione has this perception now, and we are in accord after interviews.”

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose. “You may arrange as many interviews as you see fit but I think we’d be remiss not to consider Eleanor.”

Ms. Trent nodded, looking down at her notepad and then around at the group assembled on the couch across from her own chair. “It cannot hurt to explore the idea.”

“Fantastic!” Hermione agreed, “Would you be willing to fetch her?”

Hermione felt that interviewing her now would only help her to figure out if her institution had been right or wrong. She would not be able to put the idea to rest until she determined if Eleanor was in fact the person she seemed to be, insofar as her potential to mesh well within their family.

“Let us not be hasty.” Ms. Trent cautioned, “After all, there are many…”

“If she is willing to give us twenty minutes of her time, we can settle the idea one way or another.” Hermione explained, “And this way, no time is wasted.”

Ms. Trent rose to have her secretary fetch Miss Heulwen. Hermione was quite satisfied to extend this girl an interview. After all, she was as entitled as any witch to work within the magical community. Hermione hoped that her hopes were not in vain. She didn’t relish the idea of telling her mother that she had been right, but she had been right.

Harry was grinning openly at her, having listened to her rattle on about her mother suppositions. Remus and Sirius seemed to be placing bets between themselves. Hermione was happy to give them all the time they needed to catch up to the truth.

An hour later, Hermione was still certain that they had met their nanny, and now she had facts to back it up.

Remus and Sirius were satisfied, and indeed seemed to quite like Eleanor as a person and to agree with her on any number of potentially contentious points. Even Harry, never one to open up to new people very quickly, displayed an ease with Eleanor, and she with him, that boded well for future interactions.

It was, after all, very hard to look beyond the labels and what she thought she knew about them to see the people underneath.

She was a few years older than Hermione, and had gone to muggle schools before taking a gap
year in the American West, working with stakeholders to eradicate poverty in indigenous magical communities. She had no brothers or sisters, but a few cousins who were students of Madame Maxine’s.

She seemed very willing to come and give them a try when her schooling was complete, a few weeks before the baby came. She graduated in May, and the baby was expected in July. This would give her a few weeks to bond with Teddy properly, and get settled in with the family.

In the meantime, they arranged for her to meet Teddy, and to make any specifications about her living situation. Hermione had one final question for Eleanor. “Do you know how to drive?”

Eleanor understood what she was asking. “Of course. All mundane students take driving modules here, and I’m competent. I’ve practiced with a car here quite a lot. We haven’t a car at home.”

“Well…” Remus smiled, “I think that settles it.”

And in some way, perhaps it did.

Hermione was quite thrilled to have the whole thing wrapped up in a day.

On the way home, they stopped at a local pub and had a perfect meal of mushy peas and brownie a la mode, though not at the same time. Remus was in a doubly good mood having gotten word that one of his advocacy projects in the Balkans had been awarded extra funding for volunteers just that morning. Sirius outlawed all discussion of politics, and instead poked good fun at his lunch companions.

Harry got his burger’s toppings all over himself. Hermione laughed and he spelled them away. She was alight with the satisfaction of a job well done and a future path secured. Hermione blinked back at Harry as she chewed, enjoying the taste of salt and sour as it exploded in her mouth. “Do I have something on my face?”

“You hate olives.” He ventured, looking at her very strangely indeed.

“I didn’t order olives.” Hermione informed him, wondering if his glasses needed upgrading. He was getting on in years and he did read a lot.

Before she could expound on her point, Sirius chuckled. He was sitting across from her at their four-top table. “You didn’t, but I did, and I didn’t get any.”

Glancing at the now empty plate they’d had between them, Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair. She hadn’t even realized that she had been eating any of his side, let alone the entirety of the ample portion. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s funny.” Remus assured her, “They’re olives. There’s a giant barrel in the back.”

“I have a pathological hatred of olives.” Hermione explained Ellie’s little sister’s antics during the childhoods, “Ever since my cousin Mille told me they had been beetles, I couldn’t…” She trailed off when a small presence in her mind and in her heart outright laughed.

Hermione paused, listening carefully to what she heard in her inner ear. She could now communicate with the baby using words, only needing images when things were beyond the understanding or expression of a developing mind. Surprisingly, the baby presently understood quite a lot. “I like them.”
“You can’t even taste and you have opinions.” There was no heat in the criticism. “Fine, if I can eat my brownie, you can have more olives.” Hermione muttered, thinking that her morning sickness would have been so much easier if they’d been sentient then.

Agreement came forth from the as yet unnamed source. Brownie it was then. Perhaps with ice cream. Because really, why not?

“Oh!” Harry looked at her excitedly, and then over at his godparents, “Did we tell you that the baby talks now? A very opinionated person, though very witty. No idea where that comes from, really.” He grin grew yet more fond if such a thing was possible as he looked back at Hermione, “Tell them I said ‘hi.’

Hermione voiced the reply she’d been given instantly, adding, “You don’t need me to serve as a go-between, you realize.”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed, shoving half a chip in his face, “I just don’t want you to feel left out. Involving both parents is quite important. I read that somewhere.”

“Shut up and chew your food.” Hermione returned. “Swot.”

“Remus, she’s being mean.” Harry grinned at his Moony, “It’s not my fault I’m not telepathically connected to the baby.”

“You can carry the next one, then.” Remus assured him as Harry took a healthy sip of his drink.

“Is that—” He swallowed his lemonade. “I mean, in theory, yeah, but I’m not sure I—”

Sirius couldn’t hold back his laughter, and neither could anyone else at the table. “Relax Prongslet, you haven’t the right anatomy.”

Harry’s response was forceful and relieved. “I would if I could, but I’m glad I can’t.”

Hermione took offense to that statement, for obvious reasons. Why should he declare that he was glad to not be able to do something, if he considered it so normal? It was meaningless to say that you would if you could, but were glad that you couldn’t? Why shouldn’t a man carry a child? Was Harry under the impression that such a thing would make him, in theory, less of a masculine man? “That makes no sense and is rooted in so much gendered—”

“Maybe.” Harry allowed, “But really ‘Mione, I’ve had people in my head before, and it’s not something I’d care to repeat.”

Hermione breathed, “Our baby is not Tom Riddle incarnate—” She was cut off by the arrival of the server. She was glad that there were no other patrons in this corner of the pub, and so their conversation could be free. That didn’t mean that she could be indiscreet.

“No. But they are very good at getting what they want.” Sirius accepted the plate of olives he’d ordered again from the server with thanks, “Olive, Hermione?”

Hermione couldn’t resist spooning some off onto her plate. “I hate all of you.”

Remus returned, cutting into his meat and adding some sauce to it with the slide of his fork across his plate, “Ah, but the tiny voice in your head loves us.”

“That may be, but my position is quite secure on all fronts.” Hermione assured them all, returning to her cottage pie, “After all, I do the best Mr. Puckle voices.”
Hermione ate an olive in triumph when they all shared a look, but offered no retorts. There was no challenging that truth, was there?

Hermione bustled into the conservatory and down the wide stone stairs.

Everything looked just perfect. The air was fragrant with blooms, and the sun was bright through the glass windows, the wards warming the room to a comfortable temperature. It was the 22nd of February, but it could have been May in this lovely space.

Hermione smoothed down the front of her dress. The soft floral fabric flowed around her, but was drawn together under the bust with a green band, slightly darker than the mint green dress, an alteration from the lower waistline in difference to her figure. The pink flowers dotted the dress in an irregular fashion, and the elbow sleeves added some interest. Hermione felt a bit like one of those witches of yore whose very magic caused spring to pop up in the middle of winter.

They were all going to sit down to eat in just a moment, and Hermione had slipped away to collect her tumultuous thoughts and make sure everything was ready. There were flowers everywhere, thanks to Neville’s green thumb and his passion for herbology. Hermione had never seen the space look more beautiful.

She was so glad flowers were a part of Caristia, the symbolic day in which families set aside grievances and came together for a meal based in their love and their bonds. It was a bit like Valentine’s Day, without the focus on amorous love and far less pink and saccharine emotions. It was a day in which hurt feelings were set aside, and bridges were mended, bonds affirmed in love and joy.

Sorrows were set aside for another day, a day in which the love that had been reaffirmed today would help to resolve.

Small gifts were given. At each place, Hermione had set a flower that made her think of the person assigned to that seat. It was charmed to stay fresh, and was a gift of time, thought, and effort, rather than value. It said that she had thought about each person as an individual and honored them as part of the collective whole.

The meal was traditionally one of comfort foods, and so Hermione had simply asked that Hogwarts food be prepared. It was one thing her guests all enjoyed. Her parents would finally be able to try Hogwarts food in this way, as well. It felt as though Hermione was bringing them more deeply into her lived experiences, and she really liked that feeling.

Hermione took a look at the table one last time. She had an empty spot set for those who had gone on before them, and a spot that she’d set even without an RSVP. It was for this person alone that she waited, unable to let go of the hope that they would come.

She was doing everything she could to delay the start of the meal. She had scheduled it for a brunch so as to allow others to eat with their own families, if they wished to honor both sides of their family.

Upstairs in the drawing room, Fred and George were pulling harmless pranks and being their charming selves to Katie and Angelina. Her Mum and Dad were in talks with Remus and Sirius. Harry was attending to Augusta, who was henpecking Neville and heaping praise upon Hannah as she demanded Teddy tell her everything he had learned lately. Ellie had sent her regrets.

Hermione looked up as she fussed over the centerpieces to see Ron at the top of the stairs. He
grinned, obviously very happy to have surprised her in this way. She knew she wasn’t very easy to surprise, and so Ron enjoyed doing so when he could. Clearly, he had a co-conspirator.

She met him on the landing, “You got the day off?” Hermione returned his hug with enthusiasm. “I didn’t know you’d be here!”

Ron released her, and it was a few seconds before Hermione let go. She missed him so much, sometimes. “Happy Caristia, ‘Mione. I came with Percy and Penelope.”

Behind her, she heard the table being expanded to include a spot for Mr. Ron. She looped her arm into the offered elbow. She had to accept that the empty spot would not be filled, but it would remain. She would not close herself off to hope.

Hermione let her thoughts come around to some very interesting headlines, “So…”

“So what?” He asked, as they walked up the stairs.

Hermione fixed him with such a look. He’d made the papers twice again this week, and Hermione was not above admitting to some curiosity. She wasn’t going to fly to conclusions, but well, pictures did speak a thousand words.

Ron had the good grace to look sheepish for playing stupid. “Hermione, you know it’s a casual thing, okay?” Ron made no apologies for his choices, not that he ought to have done, or that she expected it, “We’re not talking exclusivity or even a relationship. We just know each other and like to spend time together because it’s not complicated and we both get what we want without drama.”

Hermione knew very well what that was code for, and was totally fine with that dynamic. Sex without strings certainly had a place in the world, as did being Friends with Benefits. That was, as long as he was fulfilled by those circumstances with Lavender, and she with him. She had one question. “Are you happy?”

“Here?” He grinned down at her as they wandered toward the happy din of the drawing room, “With you and Harry?”

Hermione knew that today was a day to celebrate small gifts, small concessions in the name of unity, so she let his evasion go. Hermione accepted his gentle squeeze as they reached the end of one corridor. “I love you too.”

Hermione let his warm laugh wash over her. She couldn’t help but feel sad. They were going to go eat any second. In fact, she saw Harry heading her way. He grinned at Ron, and hastened his steps. Likely, the meal was being delayed by their inability to find the domina to announce the meal and usher the guests into the meal.

Hermione’s heart filled with joy, even as her heart broke over the empty place at her table. This was the core of her family of choice, this man she loved as a his wife and his partner and the mother of his children, and this man she loved as a sister of the soul and her comrade in arms who knew things about her that not even Harry could understand. When they stepped forward to embrace, Hermione smiled. No matter what changed, they’d always be together in the ways that mattered.

It would always be enough, even if she prayed for more. She had sent an invitation with the fervent hope that it would be accepted, would be understood as a gesture of genuine love and not as a farce. The thing about Caristia was that invitations were only extended out of love and never out of duty. To confuse the two was to debase the festival.
Hermione felt the Floo open in the Great Hall. The Foundry alerted her to a new visitor, just in time to eat. Hermione broke off of Ron, and went running down the halls.

Harry called out, “See! I told you!”

Hermione felt the joy they shared in her bones, and continued on.

She wanted desperately to trust what she felt, but she just had to see, just had to know. Hermione remembered the last time she had run through this house. The last time, she had been running away from love, running away from the possibility of unity. This time, this time, though, she was reaching out to grab it with both hands, no matter the risk, no matter the pain.

Hermione skidded into the Hall, and slowed to a stop just before she picked up with a sedate pace to go around the corner.

Her heart pounded.

A woman with sleek hair and a hesitant expression stood near the Floo, a book in her hand. It had a crooked bow on the top, one that matched the vivid color of her blue eyes.

Hermione didn’t hesitate. She called out, “Ginny!”

Her answering smile was enough.

It was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Note to self: Don't ever let your HD be brought or sent to you. It's a nightmarish worry.
Don’t begrudge her poppies, crushed in creamy milk And in flowing honey, squeezed from the comb: When Venus was first led to her eager spouse, She drank so: and from that moment was a bride. Please her with words of supplication: beauty.

Chapter Summary

"Don’t begrudge her poppies, crushed in creamy milk And in flowing honey, squeezed from the comb: When Venus was first led to her eager spouse, She drank so: and from that moment was a bride. Please her with words of supplication, beauty," --Ovid

OR

“Sex is an emotion in motion.”
— Mae West

OR


Chapter Notes

Feel free to skip this chapter if the idea of paying homage to Venus in her role as guardian of romantic and sexual love is not your cup of tea. This is about 8k words of celebrating the sacred feminine. Read: sex.

Although, I did try to be very 15/PG-13 about the whole thing. I also tried to avoid purple prose, which I hate because nothing says 1980s bodice ripper quite like flowery prose.

Information regarding Fortuna Virilis.

Veneralia rituals and background.

Ovid that I quoted.

Roman Baths

Info about Venus.
Valentine’s Day was an entirely mundane tradition in wizarding communities. That did not mean, however, that days celebrating amorous love were not held with great honor and expectation. April Fool’s day didn’t register, though of course for the Weasley’s it was special as the birthday of Fred and George.

For most traditional wizarding families, April first was a day in which the children were packed off to relatives, and their mothers venerated Fortuna Virilis and Veneralia. Veneralia was a ritual bath, traditionally of the Venus statue on the lars, and then of the woman herself. The statue was undressed, cleansed, and redressed. The idea was to open up to and explore one’s own sacred feminine and to respect one’s body as a source of wholeness, goodness, and pleasure. Veneralia honored Venus as the changer of hearts, the one who looked favorably upon passion.

Fortuna Virilis was another overarching festival of the day, once of more importance to the plebeians. As the name implied, this festival was intended to allow women to celebrate the relationships with the man in their lives. It was a day to honor one’s beauty and one’s sexuality in whatever way felt good to the woman in question.

In eons past, the holiday had been presented as a celebration of Fortuna, who watched over men as they took an interest in women and in sex. Witches had always known better, and asserted otherwise. The whole holiday was about the power of a women to be agent, not object, in her own life. The manly luck implied in the name was not about a man, but rather him celebrating his good fortune in having a partner whom was powerful, confident, and aware of herself. Some also asserted that the holiday honored the duality between man and woman.

As a rule, Harry and Hermione were the, ‘It’s Tuesday at 7. Fancy a shag?’ or the ‘I kissed you and now I could do with a cuddle in the euphemistic sense. Sound good?’ type of couple. Which was, of course, to say that they hardly needed any further incentives to have sex. Even so, they had been anticipating today with unspoken plans, and shy glances. It was a bit unusual for them, in that the expectation added a layer of want that could not be sated in the preceding days.

She supposed it was their version of Lupercalia.

Hermione woke slowly on April 1st, cognizant of the need for the loo, and Cadbury’s own desire to have attention lavished upon him. Thereby, she stumbled to the loo, and washed her hands and cleaned her teeth. She looked pretty decent, she thought, now that her skin wasn’t as blotchy and overrun by hormones.
Cadbury made his needs known with a hop and a whine as he jumped up on her with his front paws for a few enthusiastic pats. Hermione looked out at the windy morning, and made up her mind. Slipping back under the covers with an inelegant hop, she nudged Harry. “Harry, Cadbury needs a moment of privacy.”

He rolled over, and lifted his tousled head from the pillow, “What?”

“Cadbury needs a wee.” Hermione replied, settling against her pillows, letting the person developing inside of her settle more comfortably on her now empty bladder. “And it’s cold.”

Harry fumbled for his glasses, and sat up. “Come on, you chocolate menace.”

Harry fumbled around for a jumper, and shrugged it on over his previously bare chest.

Said growing labrador hopped up on the bed and off again, flinging himself towards Harry, who was shoving his feet into a pair of loafers. All limbs and joy, he clambered onto Harry, his tail whipping back and forth happily.

He gave a forceful woof of demand, jumped up next to her, licked her face with abandon, and flopped off the bed onto the floor. He looked at the door as Harry took the lead from the top of the dresser and hooked it onto his collar as Cadbury jumped and hopped in his haste.

Shooting a baleful look at Hermione, who had drawn the covers up to her chin, Harry noted, “When I was a kid, all I wanted was a two up two down with a fenced garden.”

Hermione rolled onto her side. “Hurry up before he can’t make it to the garden.”

They didn’t need another accident on the rugs. Even when they spelled it away, several housemaids came running with all manner of soda and vinegar and towels as though a red alert had gone off somewhere in the bowels of the house. Hermione tried not to think about the time Cadbury had taken a giant wee in the middle of the mattress just as they were settling into bed.

Hermione had screamed and launched herself from the bed. Harry, half-undressed, had come running and tripped over a dog toy, giving himself a bloody nose in the process. Two footmen had burst into the chambers, shock evident on their faces, as Her Grace stood screaming and pointing over His Grace, who was bleeding.

With that, she listened to them clatter out into the outer rooms of their chambers that would, eventually, lead to an outside exit. It was a bit of a trek. Hermione noted, “Baby, I just used you to get out of a distasteful chore.”

The baby, wanting to communicate after ages and ages of silence, merely demanded, “Chocolate cake.”

“I’ll feed you later.” Her pillows were quite warm and the potions she’d sipped in the bathroom needed to settle before she could break her fast. “But you’ll get what you’ll get, and I won’t have you giving me indigestion over it. We cannot live on baked goods.”

“Ice cream, then?”

Rather than engage in an argument with a foetus, Hermione ignored the craving, and thumped her pillow.

Crooks found a comfortable spot, and lolled about in Harry’s space.
Harry returned in less than two minutes. He glared at her. “Petra yelled at me.”

“She doesn’t yell.” Hermione returned, as Harry crawled back into their bed, displacing Crookshanks with an apology. “It’s not genteel.”

“She took the dog and chastised me for taking him out myself.” Harry brushed cat hair off of his pillow. Crooks merely yawned and rolled over. “I don’t know how she scolds without actually saying anything other than, ‘Of course.’ It’s scary.”

Hermione voiced her own agreement. Harry cuddled close and let his breath huff over the smooth skin of her shoulder. His lips were warm on her neck, “Your hair is fantastic.”

Hermione privately agreed. It would thin out once the baby came, but right now, her hair and nails were quite nice, thanks to the 26 potions she had to chug in order to keep Smith-Webster at bay with her hypodermics.

She simply pulled her loose hair over her shoulder to provide Harry with more space upon which to work his magic, and returned, “You’re trying to seduce me.”

“Nope.” Harry replied, his actions contradicting his words in the best way, “Today, Beloved, I’m just going to lie back and think of England. You’re meant to seduce me. Hopefully repeatedly and in various situations.”

Hermione bit back a laugh, moving back against him. “England must be very stimulating.”

“Certain inhabitants, surely.” Harry rolled onto his back, and propped up on the pillows, put his hands behind his head, lacing his fingers together lazily. “Well, what are you going to do with me?”

Hermione was never one to resist a challenge. She shoved their multitude of blankets down, and watched as Crooks huffed and wandered out of the room. Smart half-cat. He huffed on his way out as if to say, “I do not understand human mating habits. I’m going to go rest in my Comfy Kitty Container after being so rudely interrupted. Good day to you!”

Harry, with a snap of his fingers, shut and warded the doors. Hermione licked her lips as she considered her options.

She rejected three or four very pleasant ideas out of hand. If Harry wanted to be seduced, she’d show him seduction. Granted, her own approach was generally more direct, but this could be quite interesting. It was not without its merits.

She worried her lip, watching him as he watched her, and gave her reply. “I’m not entirely sure yet. Any preferences?”

“Oh, no. Certainly not.” The humor in his eyes was as evident as the desire there, “I’ve my safe word in case you pull out the scarves.”

Hermione laughed. “You’re absurd.”

His glance lingered on her chest, visible and notable through the cotton of her nightdress. “If you say so.”

Hermione exhaled. If that was how he wanted to play this…

Pushing to her knees, Hermione untucked her nightgown from around herself somewhat
inelegantly. When it was rucked up around her thighs, she let it fall again now that it wasn’t encumbering her movement. Something like interested disappointment flared in Harry’s eyes.

She was on the right track, then. Absence made the heart grow fonder. And well, if he wanted her to take, she’d take. She had no qualms about indulging herself with his body. By the looks of things, Harry too applauded the venture.

Hermione made an a decision and straddled his quidditch honed thighs. “Let me know if I get too heavy, yeah?”

Harry snorted, but made no move to kiss her, or touch her. Hermione vanished his clothes with a wave of her hand. Hermione could feel their heartbeats racing in tandem. She was in no hurry. “This good so far?”

“Assuredly.” Harry informed her, not moving so much as an inch. “Are you a little overdressed for the occasion?”

Oh, so he did want to get her night dress off, then. Well, turnabout was fair play. If he wasn’t going to touch her, well, why give him anything to touch? Looking down, Hermione caught sight of her cleavage as it was amplified as she pressed her breasts to her husband’s chest.

“No…” Hermione drew out her answer, fisting her hands in her nightgown, not to take it off, but merely to adjust it around her. Experimentally, Hermione canted against him, “I’d very much like to kiss you.”

Thankfully, then, Harry was a bit of help there. Her bump made this position slightly awkward when it came to kissing, but they made it work. After a few languid minutes, Hermione arched, and one of Harry’s hands found his way down her back. “Do you want—” He began, already beginning to shift their position.

Hermione shook her head, “Not my back.” Still, his hands smoothed over the muscles there, tenderly and with much affection. Moved by her building arousal and her more tender emotions, Hermione kissed her husband again, “I love you.”

“So much.” Harry agreed, his hands falling to her hips, as her hair fell like a curtain around them.

Beyond further thought, Hermione made her wishes plain. Objectively, this whole thing was a little ungainly, and she needed help to find the right position and set the best pace. Once she did, and her hands were anchored on Harry’s shoulders as she moved over him and he tensed beneath her, the entire world exploded into a billion pieces behind her eyes.

It could hardly be termed anything less than perfect.

Her legs were still shaking when she came back to herself. When she gave thought to her location, Harry was scooting them into a more comfortable position and kissing her sweat coated brow with gentleness that made the preceding moments even more precious.

Hermione kissed his chest before nestling her head there. Harry’s hand fell into her hair, and carded through the disheveled curls and waves. “I need to go tend to the lars and to Venus.”

“I don’t know how you can form complete thoughts right now.” Harry slid his hands under the nightgown she’d never removed and moved his hands worshipfully over the ever expanding planes and slopes of body. “Let alone string words together.”

Hermione grinned. “I have it on good authority that the bathing rooms have been opened.”
Harry cracked an eyelid, his fingers stilling over the nipple he’d been gently and languidly caressing. Hermione nestled against him, and summoned the covers. She thought he might find that an interesting bit of information.

Almost four hours later, after something of a nap and a brunch that included the traditional food of honey, Hermione dressed quickly, every nerve ending on her body buzzing pleasantly.

She still, even with a cleansing spell, felt sticky and warm where the honey had pooled on her skin. She had to commend Harry for his inventiveness and initiative. She supposed he felt honor bound to put his money where his mouth had been, after teasing her with that quip about the scarves. Even if his ministrations had left her feeling a bit covered in foodstuffs, at least she could say he definitely hadn’t left her wanting.

Hermione entered the sacristy in the Chapel, and found Fr. Smithson carrying on with some work. Hermione spent a few minutes chatting with him, assured him of his welcome at Teddy’s birthday party, and went into the side chapel after purifying her hands. It seemed odd to do it in front of the Priest, but clearly he had no issue with it.

Once in the side chapel, Hermione completed the daily rituals, and the rituals that took place because it was the first of the month. Those took some time, but no matter the holiday or day of observance, Hermione carried them out as the witches of her house had done for centuries. Hermione took some sense of obligation and pride from that unbroken chain. As long as the Foundry had a domina, the Lars had been tended.

In addition, she offered wine and incense as the first part in a series of rituals designed to honor Venus in her role as a changer of hearts. Hermione was glad to remember the Latin. One ritual involved offering up incense while saying, “Venus Verticordia, te hoc ture obmovendo bonas preces precor, ut sis volens propitia mihi…”

This was in the hopes and the knowledge that Venus would keep Hermione, her home, and her family in her mind over the coming year, and impact the magical energies around them. Hermione spent a long time tending to these offerings, so by the time she was done she found herself needing the loo and a meal. Harry was occupied with some matter of business she found uninteresting, so she wandered back down to the kitchens, just to check on things.

She was given granola, a bowl of soup with crusty bread, and some salad, and shoo’d away to the dining room to eat them.

Hermione reminded herself that she shouldn’t feel quite so bemused by being kicked out from her own kitchens. Even so, she took her before lunch potions, ate her lunch, and gave the Baby some ice cream. She had never said no, after all. And really, they were a nice baby, and she did want the ice cream. Let it never be said, however, that she was a pushover.

She ignored the craving for cake as she had pledged she would do.

Mindful of the statue in her pocket, Hermione went back upstairs to have her hair done. It seemed rather foolish to have her hair so elaborately dressed, knowing that within a scant few hours, it would be mussed beyond repair. Hopefully. Such aspirations might be a little greedy considering the fact that she had a love bite on her thigh, but still…
As Petra combed her hair, Hermione swallowed her after lunch potions. Hermione knew that malnutrition in pregnancy could have further impacts upon her own health, and that of the baby, especially since she had been largely malnourished going into the pregnancy, and had lacked a good many of the vitamin and mineral stores they both needed for optimum health.

She was very mindful of her diet, and swallowed potions that included zinc, vitamin A, folate, and choline by the vial on a set schedule. They were oftentimes disgusting, but her routine was such that she took her potions by rote without question. Hermione brewed most of them for herself in quadruple batches.

With ease and skill, Petra looped her curls into a pile that wove in and out of a myrtle wreath. The scent of roses held to the leaves, and Hermione let the scent fill her mind. The design made her wild hair seem artful. It was no mean feat, and Hermione was continually amazed by how Petra stepped up her artistry in new ways.

It occurred to Hermione that she very rarely brushed her own hair beyond taking down her hair each night if she turned in too late to comfortably disturb Petra. As her pregnancy progressed, the late nights had tapered off, though, and she found that Petra had been increasingly tending to that area of her grooming as well. She considered the growing body of knowledge that told her she was growing spoiled by giving little thought to her hair and personal care.

Petra, once her hair was done, presented her with a white robe. Hermione thought white an impractical color, and the fabric rather floaty, for washing down a statue. It was then that Hermione was reminded, however gently, that the ritual was one of nakedness.

Hermione blinked. “So, basically, I’m putting this on to take it off?”

“Why else wear clothing?” Petra asked, her elfin smirk very hard to misunderstand.

Hermione did up the buttons on her robes quickly, and replied, “You get a sick thrill out of making me blush, don’t you?”

“Certainly not, ma’am.” Petra lied, “Frankness is merely a trait prized amongst house elves.”

Hermione let the conversation fall silent, and ran through her Latin for the upcoming rituals. Hermione was rather glad that the ritual had bowed to modernity in some small way. While she did have a balneae, it was no longer expected that Veneralia was a group activity shared amongst women.

The idea of selecting ten women by lot from a group of one hundred worthy women was no longer a custom. Hermione was glad that each matron could handle her own statues or not, as she saw fit. The idea of going to a public bath and stripping down was not one she enjoyed. It seemed rather mortifying.

Hermione was glad to be using her own private bath, built on a smaller scale than those in Bath. She had been waiting for this moment with some anticipation. It had taken months to clean them out and restore them, and Hermione had not been able to see the ongoing work. By the time it had been undertaken, she had been pregnant, and thereby unwilling to go into spaces that were quite old. Who knew what could be in the dust and debris?

Harry had peeked in, and teased her about it, only heightening her expectations. He refused to take any pictures or let her into his brain to have a peek. So, either it was going to be really something worth waiting for, or Harry had taken an easy chance to rile her up. With him, the odds were about even.
Hermione headed down to the basement, and instead of turning right to go to the quarters and storerooms, she turned left and headed down another flight of stairs. The corridor was stone, and instead of being illuminated with gas lamps, it was lit with candles dotting the sconces in the wall.

It was akin, in some ways, to going back in time. Hermione heard the crack of a fire in the distance. She came soon to a wide wooden door that took up the entire wall at the end of the corridor. There were runes carved into the door that Hermione promised herself she’d study later.

Petra opened the door, and Hermione had to fight to keep her mouth closed. Even in the outermost chamber of this series of rooms, Hermione was struck by the wonder and the ancient splendor of the space. It occurred to her just how much history the Foundry contained. Even now, she found layers to peel back.

Hermione turned in a circle, looking at the smooth walls and the moving frescos with wide eyes, wanting to etch every detail into her mind. In this room, there were sofas dotting the space, with a table, and of course, places to set one’s things. The whole room was rich and ornate, a splendorous riot of colors, without appearing in any way to be gaudy. In a public bathhouse, still frequented by wizarding people, this room probably would have been the second space, the apodyterium.

Hermione knew that today, she would not be visiting the overly cold or the hot baths. Such things weren’t advised during pregnancy. Still, she poked her head into the warmest rooms, and saw a very large bath set into a lowered floor like a swimming pool and smaller pools flanking it, and a door to the sauna room. The heat that met her made her face break out in sweat, which was chilled by the very coldest of the rooms. There was a progression to the ritualistic baths that she was breaking, but in the end it didn’t really matter.

Luxuriating in a huge pool of warm water seemed indulgent, though at second thought it probably would help to ease the general aches of pregnancy. She’d spent ages on her knees at the kneeler, would have to do so again soon, and a good soak would help her move past that discomfort.

Returning to the dressing room through the most comfortably temperate of bathing rooms, Hermione saw that a lars had been set by the epically large bathing pool in the center of this room. It was not her own lars from her suite, nor the family lars from the chapel. Rather, Hermione saw that it was stone, and the candles and incense pots were protected from an onslaught of water by its clever design. Clearly, this was a lars meant for Veneralia, to honor Venus who celebrated the sexual union between people, in this case the sexuality of women.

Hermione set the statue there, enlarged it to about sixty centimeters, which was larger than normal but gave her working space, and returned to where Petra was waiting. At least she was beyond nerves at Petra seeing her in any state of undress. There was too much of a relationship there to really care about that sort of thing anymore. As such, she let Petra undo the buttons on her robes, and hang them up.

Hermione noted, “Did you know that mundane historians posit that people wore clothes at the public baths?”

“Who takes a bath in clothes?” Petra asked with a shake of her mobcap covered head. She bade Hermione to lift her arms as she pulled the robes gently over her head. “I’ve never in all my days seen that, though of course none of your predecessors went to the public baths.”

Hermione understood that reality very well. Why would they, when they had nicer facilities at home without the hassle of dealing with other people? She herself would never consider doing something like that in public, even with a bathing suit. The press would have a field day with articles like *Daring Duchess Ditches Dress* and *Potter’s Propriety Problem: Pictures Page 6!* The
truth was that she never would consider it, even if the idea appealed to her.

The next room was ornate, with more moving frescos and mosaics. Clearly, Hermione noted, this was where a great deal of anointing and grooming took place. In decades past, this was where her predecessors might have had her hair washed or her legs waxed or any number of such activities. Hermione used a charm on the rare occasions she felt like being finicky about removing hair from her legs, so ritualistic beautifying spaces weren’t exactly her forte. She hardly needed a room clearly devoted to grooming, not when she had ones upstairs.

Euphemia’s monogram was within one of the wall’s many mosaics, a beautiful scrolling E that proclaimed her ownership over the space, as were other letters Hermione placed as the women who had been domina before her. Hermione spied her own monogram now set within some of the restored and repaired walls, a bold H that was at once identifiable as her own. After all, she saw it everywhere.

Hermione knew that her ritual bath before her marriage would have taken place here, if the space had been in working order. After decades of disuse, the space had needed some work. Even refilling the baths had taken some time, though now they were easy to maintain.

The ceilings in this subterranean room were vaulted with wide stone arches above her head. The stone floors were warm here, but they echoed with every step they took. Hermione was called back to attention when she heard the gentle clink of glass pots and jars floating in the air. Petra wasted no time in rubbing various pastes over her skin. Hermione gathered that this was a process of exfoliation and cleansing. Right now, this room was pleasantly warm. It in no way was roasting or sweltering, but it was warm enough to allow the creams and salves or whatever they were to seep into her skin.

After she was throughly coated and then covered in the voluminous folds of a dressing gown, Petra handed her the book she was reading for pleasure rather than research and told her to sit somewhere. Hermione found that, after a while of keeping her feet up on the soft fainting couch, that she was lulled into a half-sleep as she breathed in the pleasant scents building in her nostrils. Hermione eventually let herself nod off gently against the chaise, in the middle of talking to the baby about Roman baths and their historical significance.

Later, well rested and ready to get cleaned off, Petra removed all of the surface creams and dead skin with a pumice and a scraper. Hermione remembered seeing the same instruments on the night of her sponsalia. Hermione knew this altered the order of the baths, but she was unwilling to shock her nervous system or potentially risk the baby in the name of tradition. Her lady’s maid was happy to comply with this objective. Hermione was relatively certain Petra would do just about anything for the arrival she was anticipating with no small amount of enthusiasm, though of course she directly spoke of the baby.

The whole process from the first dollop of whatever Petra applied to her skin to the moment the elf picked up the pumice stone took a few hours, according the light shifting in the charmed windows. This clearly was not going to be an every day or even weekly occurrence in her life. She could hardly imagine devoting time to this on a daily basis. It would eat up the whole day.

Thusly, once the excess was removed from her skin and she felt every flake of dead skin being mercilessly removed, Hermione felt herself as red and dewey skinned as a shucked lobster. Petra hid a snort when she made the comparison and draped her robe over her. It, like her robes, was white and ethereal, in homage to Venus.

Hermione moved into the moderate room, the one that was cooler than the caldarium, but warmer than the frigidarium. This bathing pool was added and adopted by wizarding peoples, who unlike
traditional Romans, found the shocking ends of the spectrum to be too much on a daily basis. It also helped that this room adjusted the temperature via runes in a way that the others did not.

Petra bade her not to rush, and made her promise to call out for any and all help she might want. Hermione slipped around one of the many columns to approach her lars, and, confident she was alone, draped her robe over the bench. She wasn’t about to ruin yet more of her clothing.

The statue stood where she had placed it.

Hermione began the process of magically removing its adornments while reciting a poem that had been written thousands of years ago by Ovid. Setting her intentions for the space, she spoke out, “Perform the rites of the goddess, Roman brides and mothers, and you who must not wear the headbands and long robes.”

Hermione worked as she spoke over the moving water and through the steam further opening her pores, “Remove the golden necklaces from her marble neck, remove her riches: she must be cleansed, complete.”

She took everything adorning the statue off of it. Whereas most statues on the lars were plain, this statue of Venus had a proportional outfit, and bits and bobs of accessories. She was veiled in the traditional fashion, and she held a charmed bouquet in her arms. When Hermione thought about statues in museums now, she realized that they were never meant to be unadorned as they were. However, such was art, and it wasn’t like she could interfere with mundane scholarship.

Next, Hermione levitated the pitcher, and filled it under the running water at the end of the pool. This statue could not be cleansed with still or stagnant water. A bit of magic sent the full pitcher back to her side, and Hermione waved a hand to wash it down, chanting various spells as she did so. It took no less than five pitchers full of water to completely douse the statue.

Hermione then adorned Venus with various oils, her fingers sliding over the marble. By this time, her own body was as soaked and as fragrant as that of the statue. Thanks to the warmth of the room, she wasn’t really aware of it. The idea here was to be as free and as accepting of one’s own body as Venus celebrated her own. She honored her body with celebration and joy, shared it with mindful choice and enthusiasm.

The scent of roses and orange oils bloomed as Hermione poured them liberally over the statue, uncaring when it stuck to her arms or fell into her hair. Satisfied with this work, Hermione let the statue dry. This took some time, but in the meantime Hermione cleaned, via delicate spellwork and cleansing rituals, the various items that Venus wore and claimed as her own.

As time passed, she slowly and carefully adorned Venus’ statue with the things she would wear for the next year. Hermione gathered up the armful of roses, and shrank them down. She placed them in the statue’s arms, knowing they would shrink smaller still when she put the statue down to pocket size. Magic kept things proportional and the flowers fresh.

Hermione spoke as she completed this last act in the ritual cleansing, “Return the gold necklaces to her neck, once it’s dry…” Hermione let the clasp fall flat against the stone neck, “Now she’s given fresh flowers, and new-sprung roses. She commands you too to bathe, under the green myrtle…”

This process of divesting, washing, and adoring the statue completed, Hermione paused to follow the next portions of directives in the poem, offering up poppies crushed in milk, a symbol of marital love and unity, and drizzled honey into an offering plate with ritual when she came to those moments in the poem.
She further made the traditional offerings of wine and incense again, and closed the ceremony, her nostrils filled with the scent of burning incense and the scent of fragrant honey while her skin was soaked with the water she’d used to cleanse the statue.

Magic pulsed in the air around her, thick with relaxation and wonder. Work completed for now, Hermione waded up to her thighs on the stairs in the gently steaming water. It was warm enough to be welcome and soothing but not warm enough to give her cause to worry. Hermione stepped down the marble stairs carefully.

The tub was quite larger than that of the prefects bath, and moved gently as if by a current. The water steamed gently, and had herbs and flowers floating along the surface. Amongst the roses, Hermione spied the occasional poppy. Hermione was glad that these flowers would be dried and pressed after use today. Nothing went to waste.

Keeping to the shallow areas so that her feet might remained planted, Hermione bathed, at once removing the oils and salves from her skin as well as completing various rituals in remembrance of she who came forth from the sea foam, using milk-based scrubs and soaps that left her feeling freshly scrubbed. The words she spoke were largely in Latin, and kept her mind on the simple earthly pleasures of luxuriating in a relaxed and well cared for body.

She did not undo her hair, instead choosing to use this time to refresh herself. She floated gently towards the source of the gentle flow of the water, and rinsed herself in fragrantly warm water that fell over a magical waterfall, careful not to wet her hair.

She found her way to a stone bench built into the wall, impressed a cushioning charm upon it, and sat down, looking over at the normal spray of roses she’d set out for Venus on the lars in the name of the women of her family. She had to wait a few minutes before actively removing the body scrub that, by virtue of magical strength, would not leave her skin unless released.

It was interesting to her that Augusta had told her that women of their station were traditionally more interested in Venus Verticordia than Fortuna Virilis, though she had not hit upon reasons that satisfied Hermione. Privately, she thought the distinction was found in the idea that love marriages had only become possible for women of her socioeconomic status in recent decades, though the Potters had, as far as she knew, always advocated love-based unions.

It seemed to Hermione that Fortuna Virilis was more freewheeling than she would have been allowed to be in eons past, even though Venus embodied passionate love, simply because she also embodied the fertility that, according to tradition, was meant for marriage. That said, Hermione respected both, even though she much preferred a sex holiday versus one of washing down a statue and celebrating her sacred feminine. In this sense she was glad that they had merged over the millennia.

Hermione considered the expansive art on the walls, and began to explain one of interest to her to the baby, who seemed rather interested, if only because they liked to hear her talk. She talked at some length, happy to expound upon what she knew. “It seems to me to be some kind of sylph, which is an elemental creature of the air, rather like a fairy, with a far more airy nature, if such a thing seems possible to you.”

Evidently it did not.

However, despite the request, Hermione was not reciting *Mr. Puckel Buys a Puzzle* from memory.
She did that enough for Teddy.

The topic at hand hardly mattered to the baby, so she continued along. “You should ask Luna about such things when you’re able.” Hermione expounded as she stood to rinse herself off, “She’s studying in Europe and is very knowledgeable. She’s recently discovered ruins…”

Hermione heard the door open, but since the Foundry was now quick to tell her who was coming, she hid her smile and continued talking, as the door to the chamber creaked open, letting in a blast of chilly air that prickled the tops of her shoulders. “…from the 13th century…”

Hermione decided that this lack of clattering was Harry’s way of being unobtrusive. She wasn’t going to let on that she knew he was right there, by virtue of the house. He hadn’t thought to ask the Foundry to not alert her to him. She looked out of the corner of her eyes, and saw him standing on the edge of the pool.

Clearly, this was a thing for him. Far be it from her to spoil his fun. Hermione allowed herself to move slowly, and folded her arms to create a resting place for her chin before she spoke, totally ignoring the magical charge that was building around them.

Hermione tilted her head to the left, and watched as Harry’s eyes tracked a droplet of water that felt from her ear to her shoulder, and went sloping down the upper swell of her breast back to its source. “Petra’s not around, is she?”

“Nobody is.” Harry swallowed, distracted. Hermione pressed her face to her arms to hide a sly grin.

After another second, he remembered himself. “Why? Do you need something?”

“Better take off your shoes before you get caught defiling an actual Roman bath with deck shoes.” Hermione advised, arching an eyebrow, tucking up a loose curl. Did her eyes deceive her, or were his hands tense with the effort it took not to let them tremble?

“As if you real care about her wrath.” Harry toed off his shoes, “I think that’s code for, ‘divest yourself, husband, so that I might have my wicked way with you in the bath.’”

Clearly, they were in accord. However, there was some fun to be had in word games.

“I don’t talk like that!” Hermione replied, pushing back from the marble wall to create a ripple in the moving water, letting her hands catch on a rose. “Though you could be right. I’m not saying you are, I’m merely saying the potential exists.”

“It was the wreath in your hair that gave you away.” Harry informed her, so intent on divesting himself of his clothing that he’d forgotten he had a wand and was instead tugging at the buttons on his rumpled oxford. “Nothing says ‘I am fulfilling an elaborately detailed carnal fantasy’ like fancy hairdos in the bath.”

Hermione filed this bit of information away for future exploration. If a myrtle wreath was any contributing factor to what was revealed before her eyes as he undressed, Hermione considered the idea of taking the Pottermore for a swim. It was research, after all. She could see the finished data set now. Blood Flow as Related to Hair Ornamentation: An Applied Treatise by Hermione, Duchess of Potter.

He clicked his tongue against his teeth as he slid into the bath, “Dead giveaway, that.”

Hermione bit back a grin, and brushed a hand along his arm, watching with some focus as his skin
grew gooseflesh under her wet hand. “I have not been fostering elaborate sexual fantasies you and the bath.”

Clearly, though, clearly he had and Hermione wanted details.

Harry tucked a steam-loosened curl behind her ear. “Just me, then?”

His glasses had fogged up from the steam, and so Hermione took them gently from his face and levitated them over to sit with her robe. His clothes were scattered on the bath’s deck, and that hardly seemed a good place for his glasses.

Hermione prodded him, “You can’t go on about it and then not tell me what it was.”

“Remember the golden egg and the prefects bath?” Harry simply asked, referencing the Tri-Wizard.

“No!” Hermione couldn’t believe his restraint, “You would have said something sooner if you’d…”

“Well, let’s see, ‘Mione. If I was cognizant of a desire to kiss you by twelve, by fourteen I had definitely moved past that benchmark.” Harry grinned, “There was a lot to think about, you know.”

“Hmmmm…” Hermione agreed, pressing herself against him, to rest her head against his shoulder, aware very much of their mutual desire, but wanting instead to foster communication. She liked talking about these things. After all, it was the brain that was the most sexual organ, “Tell me more.”

Harry let his hands fall into her charmed hair, “It was sort of a reoccurring thing after I made Captain.”

“Pity you didn’t tell me then.” Hermione allowed, drawing his hands down to hold her. “I would have done terribly wicked things to your body in the prefect bathroom.”

“Damn.” Harry’s hand skated up her back, pressing her chest more prominently against him. “I forgot I could ask.”

“You’re adorable.” Hermione replied, nipping gently on his ear. She had fresh love bite on her neck that she’d only noticed once she’d been in the bath. She planned to rectify his lack of one by the time she got out of the bath. The steam could only help. And anyway, being magical helped to prevent blood clots, so there wasn’t a worry there. “Truly adorable.”

“Really?” Harry asked, all boyish charm, “Because I was going for debauched and hedonistic.”

“You’ll get there, I’m sure.” Hermione assured him as one of his hands paid careful attention to the weight of her breast in his hand, “I’m amenable to providing any and all assistance towards the goal of mutual hedonism.”

“I’ve yet to figure out how you can do this to me using using words like ‘amenable.’” What exactly he was referencing was made abundantly clear against her body, so further words were not needed. Hermione relished in the glow of her appeal. She might have the shape of a manatee, but evidently, very evidently, there was some appeal there.

“Probably because I’m talking about mutually pleasurable activities.” Hermione wrapped herself around him, glad for the buoyancy of the water allowing her to move in ways that her changing body had heretofore prevented.
Hermione pressed a eagerly reciprocated kiss to her husband’s mouth. He’d cleaned his teeth after his own lunch. The mint mingled with his own taste, and implored her to seek out the flavor in the recesses of his mouth.

When she was satisfied that she had sought out every bit of he contrasting flavors in the textured warmth of Harry’s mouth, she pulled back to note, “And also because I’m wearing an elaborate hairdo in the bath. Neon signal, isn’t it?”

Hermione’s breath left her lungs as, with a bit of shifting, they became one flesh in the way she most wanted in this moment.

Harry’s movement slowed, as though he couldn’t get enough of this, either. “Fuck, you’re so warm and wet, you have no idea.”

“That is the point of a bath.” She breathed, over the rush of the bathwater and the roar of her pounding blood, fighting to keep higher brain function going when the world had narrowed down so quickly to a haze of pleasure and the movement of their bodies.

There would be time for a slow and leisurely exploration of one another, later. Right now she wanted him inside of her to the exclusion of all else. Now that she had gotten her way, she was reluctant to let go, only because she wanted to remember this moment forever.

Harry didn’t respond to that teasing, just pushed her gently against one of the smooth sides of the bath and braced them by planting his feet, changing the angle of joining enough that Hermione gasped as sparks flickered at the corners of her vision.

He paused, “You okay?” Rising to the surface again, always, was his concern for her. Hermione gripped his shoulders tightly. She wasn’t made of glass. She wouldn’t break.

“Good.” She tried to mimic the movement, but found herself unable to move unless he was moving.

Luckily, Harry got the idea, even as words fled them both and they were lost on a wave of building pleasure that began building between them, gentle brushes of their lips contrasting the intensity of their joining.

Later, when words were again a concept between them, Harry’s voice brought her new heights as he held her against the wall and she fluttered and clutched around his fingers. He was in no rush, taking down her hair and enticing her with his words and the pictures he painted in her mind until she could barely breathe and was single minded with focus on her goal. In those moments, he told her every single fantasy he’d ever entertained about the prefect’s bath, telling her in no uncertain terms and with much detail what he’d thought about doing with her, and to her, and for her.

Hermione, sated, wondered if perhaps professors could borrow that bathroom. Harry kissed her shoulder with a chuckle, as he cleaned the both of them off with a flannel in the water that seemed cool against flushed skin.

Hermione let her eyes drift shut as he carried them both to one of the wide divans, and cuddled close. After the baby came, she was going to make a point to see if he’d be keen on the idea of playing some of those out with her.

Rather than say so now, Hermione filed that exemplary plan away with her own ideas. She drifted
off to sleep with Harry’s hand resting, as was his ongoing habit, over their baby. Evidently, the baby was now awake, because as she was comfortable. She felt a bit of movement against Harry.

On a yawn, she muttered. “Talk to the baby so I can sleep.”

With a sleepy kiss of assent against her temple, Harry complied.

It was then that the baby learned about The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, which explained why Hermione dreamed of pizza and going to New York. Her last conscious thought before slipping off to the land of Nod was that Teddy would probably like the MoMA.

“We,” Hermione declared, “Are a pair of sloths.” She was sitting against the headboard, drinking her before dinner potions. They had exactly zero intentions of leaving the bed. They needed sleep. And non-amorous cuddles. Also dinner.

Harry was charged with accepting a tray from Petra.

Harry took the green vial and handed her a blue one. “Sexually replete sloths, mind.”

“Shame on me.” Hermione agreed, “We are a pair of sexually replete sloths.” She knocked back the vile blue potion with a splutter. It was a protein supplement. No matter what she did to doctor it up a bit, it was horrible. “Who did nothing but laze about and shag.”

Harry had the vial case balanced in his lap. She had only a few more to take before eating. They were marked like a pill box from Boots might be divided, which made keeping track fairly brainless. Her potions even had colored vials.

She passed back the vial, “Hand me the pink one.” The pink vial contained a B12 complex, and tasted fairly plain. It was strong enough to wash down the gritty taste of the proteins. Her heart went out to people who had to drink whey protein and other such isolates. If the wizarding equivalent was nasty, she couldn’t imagine how they tasted.

Harry complied, removing the cork for her and adding, “So basically we had Saturday a few days early.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who has to go to work tomorrow with Remus. You’ll not be looking so smug then.”

Harry disagreed, watching her carefully as she swallowed the final supplement in this round, “This does sort of explain, though, why so many of the student body has birthdays in late December and Early January.”

Hermione couldn’t resist stating the obvious. “Like Snape, you mean?”

“All I’m saying is that today answered a lot of questions for me.” Harry cleaned off his glasses. “I think this might be the only day some couples have sex. Use a spell to sync up their cycle, and well, there you go.”

Hermione was going to let him dwell in this delusion if it made him happy.
“Well, don’t let it worry you.” Hermione assured him, all humor, “I have it on good authority that the living accommodations in my womb are presently occupied. Horrible tenant, really.”

Hermione got a reply of some indignation from that joke, and she felt it best to rub a slow circle on the top of her bump, and assure the baby, “You were very good today. I was only teasing your father. Don’t take offense.”

“You’ve gone and hurt their feelings, haven’t you?” Harry asked, reproving her in a way that she wondered if he was perhaps laughing or incredulous. She couldn’t quite tell.

“No.” Hermione assured him, “They said that if I want trouble, I can have some.”

Hermione, of course, did not believe in putting stock in idle threats. She’d learned with Teddy. Obviously, her child was her child, and did not believe in making idle threats. In this they were well matched, which Hermione found slightly worrisome considering her baby’s brain wasn’t fully developed.

Not fifteen minutes later, Hermione set down her fork on her just uncovered bed tray. She’d had five bites. She had a massive case of heartburn. When she said as much to Harry, he laughed, so she whacked him over the head with a pillow.

Repeatedly.

Chapter End Notes

There is some overlap between Roman and Greek traditions here, as there was then. Teddy's birthday next update!
It's nice having a bear about the house.

Chapter Summary

“It's nice having a bear about the house.” -Michael Bond, A Bear Called Paddington

OR


OR


Chapter Notes

Yes, I *am* a Paddington devotee. It's required of my generation. I had paddington pants when toilet training.

Minding the Manor

Paddington Party ideas and yet more ideas.

Palm Sunday

More Palm Sunday

Both of these are RC resources, but give a good context for the data used in the story. You can learn to make palm crosses here. I once dropped a relative's and broke their statue of Jesus. I think that was the day they decided I was a bit suspect, and likely to roast over a spit spun by the Prince of Darkness. It was an accident! But Harry's hesitation is my own.

It is traditional, at least amongst liturgical Lutherans, to scrub, scrub, scrub, during the early part of Holy Week. The smart amongst us faff off and eat clandestine easter candy in the barns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione stepped into the sitting room of Twelve Grimmauld Place out of the floo, and was glad to see that elves and people were bustling about, carrying out her express wishes. Teddy’s second birthday party was today, and Hermione supposed that she had done quite well with party planning. It wasn’t something she’d expected to worry over after keeping Harry and Ron alive in the Forest of Dean, but it was a unique challenge.
It was a warm April day, and so the party was going to be held in the back garden. The Spring had 
not yet allowed for the full bloom of the gardens, but the day was pleasant and the sky a cheery 
blue, well in keeping with the party’s theme.

Moving through the rooms, she stopped occasionally to answer a question or to fix a tray’s 
arrangement. When she came to the wide french doors, Hermione paused and looked out over the 
hustle and bustle around the party tent taking up a large portion of the garden. The whole thing was 
coming together nicely.

A tousled man joined her at the balustrade. “What happened to, ‘He’s not even going to remember 
his birthday. A tea will be fine, surely?’ This doesn’t look like those teas you rail on about, really.”

Hermione considered his question, “This party is more for Remus, and Sirius, and all of us.” 
Teddy’s first birthday had consisted of a Victoria Sponge around her mother’s kitchen table. She 
knew they all wanted more for Teddy, so she’d revised her initial plans.

Harry was similarly lost in the unspoken memories between them. Teddy’s first birthday had been 
a very bittersweet day. They’d done the best they could under the threat of skirmishes that had 
continued on even in peacetime. Hermione had been rattled, holding onto her baby with both hands 
anytime they had to emerge from behind the charms. Political change had been at a standstill.

Hermione continued, looking out at the blooming flowers that scented the air. “And besides, he 
only turns two once. Give him another twelve years, and he’ll say, ‘Mum, why would I want party? 
Are you even real?’”

Harry kissed her temple, “When the kids start to hate us, we’ll just have another one. You’ll only 
be 34 when he’s 15.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open in surprise. She knew he was joking, and so she allowed her 
expression to shift into one of unabashed horror. “That’s a horrible idea.”

“We’ll see what you say in 2013, shall we?” With that, Harry wandered away to steal yet more 
food. She gathered she wasn’t meant to noticed the disillusioned treat in his pocket. Amateur.

Hermione stepped on the bear paw prints pressed into the flagstone walk, making sure each paw 
was evenly spaced for a moderate stride length. She stopped to adjust the map on a stake next to 
the apparition point, which held an arrow that read, “Bear-y good time this way!” It had Darkest 
Peru on the map, and showed a suitcase landing in the UK, just where 12 Grimmauld Place would 
be on a map.

She was quite satisfied with the red, white, and blue color scheme. She continued on into the entry 
way of the garden tent, and saw that the tea tables scattered around had been dressed. There were 
little double decker buses driving in a circle around a centerpiece, and the table linens were jauntily 
colorful. Small black cabs zipped in and out of the circle around the buses.

Hermione saw that one vintage suitcase had been filled with the favor for parents, a jar of Foundry 
made marmalade, with oranges from the carefully cultivated trees of Uncle Nev. They had little 
tags that read “You are Sweeter than Marmalade!”

She adjusted the stack gently, and then turned to assist in the laying out of one of the tea tables. 
There was a mix of Paddington themed biscuits and more traditional tea treats as well as Peruvian 
treats selected with the adult palate in mind, as well as orange marmalade tea sandwiches.

She’d found a set of Paddington Bear themed tea cups, and had replicated them until she had
enough to serve each expected guest with some left over. Rather than use the silver, she had found coordinating tea pots in red and blue on sale in a muggle shop, and had carried them home, quite proud of her savings.

Hermione, where appropriate, decorated the table with tiny Union Jack flags and small suitcases that held plates of food, and signs that said, “Wanted on Voyage!” and “Nothing better than tea to wash down marmalade sandwiches!” and “A wise bear always keeps a marmalade sandwich in his hat in case of emergency!”

On the other side of the tent, Remus and Sirius were hanging up old fashioned Union Jack bunting, the sort that was not made of triangles but was huge pieces of fabric meant to be gathered properly. They were having a time of it, even with wands, but Hermione decided to leave them to it.

Hermione turned her attention to the party bags, little suitcases she’d transfigured out of a bit of cardboard, which would later hold an extra slice of cake and some goodies. The little tag on the suitcase’s red handle read, “Bon Voyage!” Hermione was at once satisfied with her efforts, though she couldn’t take all of the credit. After all, Sirius and Remus had figured out the bunting and were now working to beat one another hanging it, in a great feat of manly strength.

Harry wasn’t even bothering to hide the tea sandwiches he’d taken from the tea table. Luckily, Hermione glanced over just in time to see one of the housemaids fixing the pile. Harry owed that elf a great debt. He chewed, and said, “So, how many people are coming, again?”

“Stop being such a party pooper!” Hermione demanded. “Have you got a camera?”

Harry nodded. “I left it inside.” He glanced over at his godparents, “Though maybe I ought to get some pictures of this.”

“Leave them be.” Hermione returned, “I don’t see you helping.”

“I’m tasting the food.” Harry slipped an arm around her, “I meant to tell you the cake is ready and you’re wanted in the kitchens, if it pleases Her Grace.”

Hermione sniffed. Likely he had been sneaking food. Didn’t she feed him? Didn’t they have a whole kitchen? There were cereals in the pantry, and he was a big boy, he could have boiled an egg before leaving the Foundry.

Harry laughed and let her go, the direction of her thoughts clear.

Hermione headed off to Grimmauld’s kitchen, a smaller space than she was used to, but quite efficient and not unlike that of the townhouse in London and the house in Inverness. There, Hermione was greeted by a sight she had not expected.

The cake she had painstakingly discussed with the elf who managed the pastries at the Foundry was nowhere in sight. Her simple suitcase cake had been replaced by a five-tiered monstrosity, complete with a Paddington theme. It was lovely, and well done, and adorable. However, it was not what she had been expecting. It was grandiose, not garish, but certainly more than she’d suggested.

She knew at once that Sirius had meddled. Hermione could not feel particularly angry, as she’d refused to let him open the ballroom at Ebony Park and inflate a giant bounce castle. She approved the cake, only to watch in horror as the fondant bear fell from the cake, and splattered onto the floor.

Inge was at once at her pastry board, mixing and rolling. Hermione left her to it, and went upstairs
to change and wake Teddy. Hermione wore a dress Petra had purchased at Saraphine. She thought she looked a bit like Paddington Bear herself, what with the baby having become more prominent as though overnight. Petra laughed at the comment, and dressed her hair.

Hermione quite liked this hairstyle as it came together. The simple braids and snood was one she reverted to quite often, as it kept her hair out of her way, and out of Teddy’s grasp. Today, her hair covering was all but transparent. It took the huge weight and bulk of her hair and contained it in a way that was simple and unfussy. She didn’t have time on an ordinary day to fix her hair five times, not with all of her work in educational reform. She needed hair that went from meeting to meeting to lunch to playtime with Teddy to meeting to work in the library to dinner with a minimum of attention.

Hermione was putting her pearl studs into her ears as she left the room that she shared with Harry when they visited Grimmauld. It had been Hermione’s before their marriage, and Harry had moved down the corridor after they’d gotten married. She’d picked it when she’d taken up semi-permanent residence here because it was big enough for her and Teddy, and it had an alcove where she’d put his cot and his things.

Naturally, within a day, his things had overtaken hers. Hermione still remembered cuddling a tiny Teddy to her chest as she rested on her back up the silk coverlet, baby detritus everywhere. Even at three weeks old, he’d had more things than she did. She remembered staring up at the underside of the canopy until her eyes fell shut in sheer exhaustion. She’d never let the room get messy, but it certainly had been the epicenter of her life for a long time.

The green walls held secrets no one else knew. She remembered one night when Teddy was five months old. He’d been fussy and grumpy, his tufts of hair rotating in color. They’d paced the floor in the small chamber. Hermione was loathe to leave it, because she didn’t feel quite safe when not behind a warded door.

At some point, they’d fallen asleep, Teddy against her chest in the wingback upon which Crooksy normally slept. Hermione had only realized she’d fallen asleep when Harry was gently waking her. His face had been illuminated by a candlestick set down on the dressing table that she typically used as a desk.

Nothing out of the ordinary had happened that night. Harry’d put Ted in his cot, and shepherded her into the nearby bed, leaving the curtains open to promote airflow on a stuffy night. Hermione remembered that he’d slept there beside her that night, as he had so many times in the tent.

Hermione was jarred from her thoughts as Petra’s fingers pinned back a braid very tightly. How easy it was to get lost in memories in this room. And now that tiny baby that had been the only thing keeping her alive was well into toddlerhood. Now, he slept in the nursery across the hall. Now, he had a big boy bed, and his own space, and his own things.

She knew that, never again, would he be a tiny baby in her arms. And even with this baby, things would be different. In a lot of ways, she regretted the terror and the fear that had saturated Teddy’s babyhood. She could never not regret it. And yet, she knew that her bond with him, and his with her, had been forged in that fire.

Today was, as his first birthday had been, something of a bittersweet moment. The first move across the hall was emblematic of yet more steps he was taking towards growing up. Hermione was proud of Teddy, proud of the brightness of his mind and the compassion of his soul, proud of his unfettered capacity to love and to connect with the world around him.

And now, as Petra charmed her snood to stick, it was time for him to face another birthday. This
one, she hoped, would be better than the last, though his actual birthday wasn’t for another six days. Some people tutted that it was bad luck to host a birthday party before his birthday, but she wasn’t about to let Easter overshadow his birthday. What child wanted a birthday party on Good Friday? And what sensible person would host it knowing as she did that a good two-thirds of the guest list would have sent their regrets?

Hermione woke Teddy gently from his early nap, and cuddled her sleepy baby, waking him with the excited news that it was time for his birthday party. She dressed him quickly, giving him no time to fuss. She was glad she’d bathed him before his nap, because there was no way he’d be contented in a bath now.

They made it to the garden just in time for Ron to be the first person to arrive and join Harry in snacking. The guests began to arrive, and Harry, for his part, did put down the plate long enough to greet people without a biscuit in his mouth.

Despite the kerfuffle with the cake, the party began without any hitch. It was a bit of an odd crew, everyone from Teddy’s play group came with their siblings, as well as a few members of the Order. McGonagall was there, naturally, along with Susan Bones, Seamus, Dean, Hannah, and Neville, every possible Weasley, and their significant others. Ellie came, along with Andromeda, among others. It wasn’t a crush, but it was a comfortable gathering of people who loved Teddy.

Teddy, naturally, was quite shy at first. He held onto Hermione with some tenacity, which made pouring the tea difficult. Andromeda insisted on taking over that duty, and so Hermione carried Teddy around as they greeted guests. Teddy mostly smiled, but it was the effort and the training that counted amongst family.

“Teddy…” Hermione suggested, “Why don’t you go with Ron to play pin the tag on Paddington?”

Glancing at Ron, who was always one for party games, Ted shook his head and buried his head against her as his hair flashed, trying his best to twine his t-strap clad feet around her. Naturally, her pregnancy made that impossible, but his arms were nearly vice like. Hermione soothed him, “You don’t have to play if you don’t want to play, but Hestia and Cordelia and Uriah are going to play.”

A little boy wearing shorts and knee socks, very much like Teddy’s own, called out, “Teddy! Come!”

Teddy sniffed. He didn’t like being bossed about, but evidently thought better of not going, for he nodded his assent. With one last look at Hermione for encouragement, off they went to play pin the tag on Paddington, in his duffle coat and hat. Teddy was 24 months old, so perhaps the game was beyond him and his age mates, but the point was that he joined in and had fun.

Hermione found herself next to Andromeda, which was no hardship. They were friends of a sort. Hermione sometimes felt awkward, because she knew Andromeda must have feelings that went unexpressed to Hermione regarding Teddy’s relationship to and bond with Hermione.

It was those thoughts that compelled her to say, as she had several times before, “I am sorry that you missed his first birthday. I regret that, more than you know, and I—”

Andromeda placed her teacup gently into the saucer. Hermione loved her, she was so bright and full of life and so forthright. “I understand, Hermione.” She glanced at Hermione, “You’re not the evil stepmother, you know.”

How she hit on those worries and those fears so easily was beyond Hermione. She had, however,
done so. She worried constantly that Andi would one day resent her, would one day blame her for being a mother to Teddy, would one day come to see as usurping Tonks’ place in Teddy’s heart as she filled, as best she was able, her role in Teddy’s life.

Andromeda continued, “I wish Nymphadora was here. We all do.” Her smile was hard won, “And were she here, she would say, ‘Wotcher, ’Mione! Cracking party!’ and she would eat too much cake and make horrible faces for everyone’s amusement and she would smile and laugh, secure in the knowledge that there is no such thing as too much love in that beautiful child’s life.”

Hermione found herself pressing her lips together as her eyes watered. “I’m so sorry.” Hermione cleared her throat, “I shouldn’t be talking like this, or burdening you with my fears. You’re just the only person who…”

“Understands?” Andromeda’s voice was full of compassion. “Sometimes I do. And sometimes don’t understand why you’re hurting yourself needlessly. Both you and Ted suffer for it.”

With that, Andromeda swanned off, likely to go chat with Augusta, who was holding court at a tea table. Hermione knew she was going to be roped into another charity event, but in the moment, her flats planted in the soft grass, watching Teddy run around with a pack of people who loved him, Hermione whispered a prayer of thanks.

*Thank you, Tonks. I wish you were here.*

Hermione wasn’t too pleased by all the presents Teddy was given, after all, the invitations had very plainly made it clear there were no gifts expected. She’d even said that the pleasure of their company was present enough, but did people listen? No. They brought gifts aplenty, so that by the time everyone had arrived, the elves were compelled to set up a gift table.

The assembled merrymakers sang the song and cut the cake. Teddy had to be encouraged to blow the candles out, and Hermione knew Remus had helped him do it. He didn’t care for his birthday cake, and was fussy enough to want to be held.

Then he decided that he wanted to play with his friends. Then he decided that Daddy needed to play, and so they greying werewolf was happily compelled to be Teddy’s support person when the older siblings of his playgroup friends insisted on a game of hide and find.

He tripped and cried for her, but was eventually satisfied with the crackers Fred and George produced from their pockets. They assured the gathering crowd that they were quite safe. Sirius wasn’t sure about their wares and hovered like a broody hen while Teddy fiddled with a cracker that emitted the letters of his name in various colors.

Hermione smiled softly at Fred and George. “He loves them.”

They nodded to her, “New kids line—” George began, making careful notes from where he stood by the small gathering of toddlers and young children.

Fred continued, clearly not very interested in her when there was data to collect, “Wee Weasley’s Wonders!”

“Ted’s our first customer.” George finished, “Do you think we might do some surveys with him?”

“On safe products?” Hermione waited for their answering nod, “Have at it.”

And so they produced yet more products that were viewed in wonderment by all assembled. Even
the ones that accidentally lit part of the tent on fire. No children were harmed, however, and all was handled well.

As all good things do, the party wound down after a few hours. Hermione was tired, and she felt like she had to unscrew her smile as Hannah and Neville left. She turned to Ellie, “I knew you’d love Hannah. I saw you talking with Seamus and Dean—”

Ellie was working with her to go around and collect all of the centerpieces. Ellie looked up, a divot between her eyebrows proclaiming her confusion, “Hermione, I don’t think Dean would want to go on a double date with me. He’s got a—”

Hermione waved her wand over the little cars, and they turned back into buttons. Hermione swept them into her hand. She knew the truth as surely as she knew the weight of the buttons in her hand. *He’s got a boyfriend.* “Of course he does!”

“Forget I said that, seriously.” Ellie was deadly serious, reaching across the tea table for a button Hermione had forgotten. “Please.”

She knew Dean. She knew he loved Seamus. They had been together in some way since the age of eleven. Memories flooded her mind. Dean and Seamus at the Quidditch Cup. Dean and Seamus dancing at the Yule Ball. Even then when everyone had passed it off as a lark, Hermione had not been quite satisfied by that explanation. Things had happened and she’d let it go, quite certain that her friends were happy. Of course Seamus and Dean were a couple.

Of course they were. Dean and Seamus holding hands and laughing together and sitting together and never spending so much as a day apart until the war, and Seamus’s frantic embrace of Dean at the final battle, and Dean’s sister’s small smiles at the two of them in the common room last year, and…

Hermione sank down into a chair. “Of course! But why’d he let me make a fool of myself and embarrass—” Hermione wondered why she had ever floated along thinking Dean of all people, Dean who was utterly devoted to Seamus, would look twice at Ellie? Where had that absurd thought even come from? How could she do that to Dean and Seamus?

She felt horrible. She was a loathsome, contemptible, friend, worthy of scorn. She had known from third year on that there was something there between them, and yet, she had run roughshod over the best couple in their entire year, and fiddled and meddled in a way that must have implied horrible things. She wanted them to be happy together. She hoped they didn’t think otherwise? What if they thought she was homophobic? What if they thought she was oblivious to them? Oh, she was a horrible friend.

“Okay,” Ellie insisted, reading her face like a book because Ellie could read people like Hermione read, well, books, “first off, nobody knew that you were playing matchmaker, well not Dean and —, well, Dean anyway. He thinks you’re the only one of his friends who has figured it out and has been actively helping them, with all of your invites.”

Hermione drew in a bit of air. Whenever she invited Seamus, she invited Dean, and whenever she invited Dean she invited Seamus. To do so would be like leaving a member of the family out, and it was impossible to think of one without the other. They’d been here today, for example. And they’d brought one gift.

She swallowed a horrible knot of self-loathing, “How does making him your plus one at New Years help him?”
“The relationship is new, Hermione.” Ellie said, and Hermione gathered that they had not been dating at New Years, “Very new.”

In Hermione’s mind, it wasn’t new, not really, not at all. But if Dean and Seamus were only just articulating what Hermione had seen from the start, she would leave them to it. She wondered if this was how people had felt when she and Harry had gotten married. There was some kinship there between the relationships, a momentary flash of questioning and then a flare of rightness, a simple, ‘oh of course they are!’ and then people got on with their lives.

Hermione nodded, and they got back to work. She was really quite absurdly happy for them. Even so, she almost wished that Ellie hadn’t slipped up. Then again, it wasn’t as though Hermione had any intention of outing them or even of doing anything at all. When what she knew was confirmed by the couple in question, then and only then would she do anything.

Well, she was going to stop setting up Ellie with Dean as she had once, but beyond that, she was not going to do anything other than simply be there for her friends. If they ever wanted to get married, she would offer them her house for a reception. Seamus was Catholic, too, and they had a really lovely chapel on the grounds that would be perfect, as well. Because really, she hadn’t had much of a reception despite the reported 34 million galleon price tag on her wedding, and Augusta was right, the Foundry was just crying out for a big celebration.

Ellie sighed, and tugged down the bodice of her dress, “Oh, God, stop it. Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything!” Hermione defended herself from spurious accusations. “I’m not even thinking anything.”

Except that she was, she really was. When the time came, she promised that she would somehow make sure her friends knew she loved them. The idea that they believed, even for a single second, anything else was unthinkable.

Hermione woke early the next morning, and had cake for breakfast, because the baby was quite insistent and she knew when to capitulate without making it look like capitulation. Hermione knew she was going to be on her feet for ages today. Palm Sunday included a small processional and the blessing of the palms. As a child, she had once participated under Grandmother Granger’s watchful eye, but that had only been from the narthex to the nave.

After the blessing of the palms, they were processing to the gazebo and back again. The gazebo had been placed there for this occasion. Hermione appreciated that it would be useful, but also that it would be going back to the rose garden. She was starting to need a place to sit when she took Cadbury out.

The service was really interesting from an academic standpoint. She understood that Palm Sunday commemorated the start of Holy Week, and was first step to Easter. At the processional with the palms, Hermione was able to get a look at the congregation in a way that was denied her in the sanctuary or in the weekly lines. There were, as she knew, wizarding people of all stripes. She pegged two or three as Uni students, and a handful as elderly.

The only other significant population of people were those with families, mothers and fathers, same-gendered parents and single parents. Hermione noted too, that there were a great many people who were very clearly wizarding or minority populations thereof and would not have fit in with a muggle congregation.

Still others, she knew, appreciated singing the Latin hymns and honoring the Latin mass as it had
been practiced among not only muggle people, but wizarding people. There were changes that must have been significant, though Hermione could hardly guess at any beyond a few, having never been to a muggle Mass.

As she had been warned to expect, the altar for the blessing of the palms was set with candlesticks. There were many prayers said and Bible passages read, some of which referenced Noah’s Ark and other such stories. The palms, after being blessed, sprinkled with Holy water, and perfumed with the ball of incense, were passed out. Hermione did not go to the alter rails, knowing that if she got down she might not get up.

They left and Hermione let Harry carry the branches, as she wanted to watch her step. Fr. Smithson led a chanting of Cum Appropinquaret and Pueri hebraeorum tollentes among others, which Hermione knew to be based on Psalms.

Hermione, not for the first time, wondered how the people around her knew enough Latin to follow along. Then, she looked at Teddy, next to her on Remus's hip, absorbing everything around him, and she understood that such traditions were built into the fabric of his life.

Hermione had not expected the doors to be shut in front of them but it seemed most everyone else knew what to do, and knew to stop after Fr. Smithson had entered. From the other side of the door, Fr. Smithson and two of the alter girls chanted the first lines of Gloria, laus. Hermione caught on that this was call and answer, that they were seeking to be let inside, so they repeated the chorus as those inside chanted the verses.

Their voices, some well-tuned and a great many not, sang out, “Gloria, laus et honor/ tibi sit, Rex Christe, Redemptor/Cui puerile decus prompsit/Hosanna pium.”

It was really quite beautiful and striking to see the only deacon, a rather portly man, strike the rune-inscribed door with the shaft of the Cross he was carrying in the processional. The sound reverberated in the expectant silence as the hymn ended. Thus, they were admitted to the Chapel, the doors swinging open with a creak.

The Mass proceeded, Father Smithson looking very much like a tomato in his red vestments. Teddy, as he often did, found his way to her arms, and so she held him to her. She smoothed back his sandy hair, wondering how on earth he would be two in five days. It hardly seemed possible, but then again, she knew well that it was. In this moment, Hermione’s mind was not on the Mass taking place before her, but rather on the way her family filled the spaces around her as fully as their a Capella strains of Hosanna to the Son of David filled the air.

She had never expected any of this, but none of it was something she’d trade.

In decades past, Branch Sunday literally meant that they would have been given branches rather than the most historically actuate palm leaves, but there was some benefit to magic and to modern trade. After the Mass, Harry held the branches carefully, leaning over to whisper, “They’re sacramental and I’m terrified I’m going to drop them.”

Hermione empathized with Harry’s clumsiness. She instead took them over to Sirius and interested him with them. Once they were inside and Teddy had begun to amuse himself with his wooden trains and Cadbury, Sirius began to fold the palms into crosses. He was really quite expert at it. Hermione marveled, “You’re very good at it.”

“One of my lunatic cousins taught me how to do it.” Sirius grinned, folding the palm in his hand this way and that as Fella herself brought in a tray of baked figs. “After I got blasted off the
tapery, I sent her a palm cross every year.”

Hermione smiled, and thanked Fella for the tray. Sirius extended the cross to her, “For your lars, pulcherrima filia.”

Hermione took the small cross and placed it on the side table, against a lamp, away from puppy teeth and toddler hands. Later she would carry it to her lars. She thanked him, and continued on with her quest for information as Remus began to chat with Fella, who was forever fond of Master Jamesey’s friends, grown men though they now were. Hermione understood that these interactions were a balm to Fella, who mourned James with the intensity of someone mourning a child, a loss Hermione could not comprehend but could respect.

The baby was quite restless. A foot jabbed some part of her innards for the fourth time. She dropped her voice as she took a wooden train track away from Cadbury before he could chew upon it, “That’s quite enough, thank you.”

In this sense she was addressing both her errant dog and her pugilistic baby. The baby responded with some insistence, “Yes, well, I’m hungry.”

Hermione realized that, yes, she was in fact hungry. It seemed that, though cake had sounded like a fantastic idea for breakfast, it was not the fuel they needed to last to the next meal. Returning to her seat once Teddy was given back his track and Cadbury was given a squeaky, Hermione insisted, “This is why I said cake for breakfast was not a good idea.”

“Beg pardon?” Remus asked as she sat again.

Hermione dissembled as Harry decided that Percy would beat Henry down the track. Teddy’s Thomas had already bested Harry’s Rosie in the first heat.

Remus extended the tray of figs, and Hermione took one. Sirius remarked as she bit into it, “They’re often served stuffed with soft cheeses and wrapped in prosciutto, neither of which you may consume,” Sirius bit into some sort of nut topped fig, “and neither of which are presently in your pantry, as though you would accidentally eat a gorgonzola and undercooked meat sandwich with a button mushroom and raw egg salad.”

Hermione chewed, and she chewed.

She chewed.

All the while, the small voice in her head was demanding, “Spit it out! Disgusting! Disgusting! What are you trying to feed me? Spit it out!” They were echoing Hermione’s own thoughts. Never had she tasted anything so vile in all her days. There was a crunchy texture of the nuts, and the chewiness of the fruit. It was odd and not altogether pleasing to her palate.

She tried to swallow it. She tried, but the whole of her throat seemed unwilling to cooperate with her wishes. Her eyes watered. She was going to eat the fig if it killed her. She hadn’t a napkin to spit it out. Once she had the thought had crossed her mind, she knew she had to spit it out.

Wildly, trying not to betray her utter disgust, as her mouth was entirely full, she nodded as Sirius rambled on about fig trees and Jesus and other such nonsense.

She couldn’t see anywhere to dispose of this thing, and she was not going to spit it out into her hand or onto her floor. She had to oversee their waxing tomorrow, and the housemaids worked too hard to spit out food on the floor. Besides, the idea was gross.
The tiny voice in her head was echoing the single thought in her mind as her eyes clapped onto the drawing room’s wide window. One was open for fresh air.

Uncaring of anything else, Hermione bolted. She hauled in air as she stuck her head out of the window, and watched the masticated fig land in shrubbery below. She drew in a breath quickly and pulled her head back inside.

Everyone was looking at her, “I thought I saw a wrackspurt.”

Harry glanced her way, not believing her for a single second, every bit his father’s son, “Would you care for another fig?”

Mulishly, she glared at him before turning her attention to Sirius and Remus and declaring that she would pour the tea. Her bright smile, she thought, rather did the trick.

The cold light of dawn seeped through a crack in the heavy curtains, illuminating a snoring Harry Potter. His feet were covered not only by piles of blankets, but also a chocolate labrador, whose ever growing legs were serving as a nest for a rather bushy looking half-kneazle. When the curtains were opened, he yanked the blankets over his head, shoving one foot out from under the warm confines of the blankets.

His young wife, having been up for ages already, had no sympathy for her husband. In fact, she relished the act of waking him in such a manner. She stood at the foot of their bed, ancient and heavy, and ran her fingers along the bottom of his foot, her grin amplified by the early morning sunlight streaming in the uncovered and opened windows.

“Hermione.” Harry yanked a pillow over his head, little good that it did him. He stared at the tempus spell he’d reflected onto the sheets, and groaned, “Get in bed or go away.”

“It is Spring Cleaning Monday!” She announced, quite aware that he was going to tell her to turn her enthusiasm down before he’d had some caffeine. “And Cadbury’s playing in the garden. I’ve got a lot to do, and you have school, so…”

With that, she vanished the covers and flounced as well as she could flounce out of the room. She went into the attached room and turned on the shower, declaring, “You’re wasting water, Harry!”

She heard a thump, a curse, a groan, and another string of expletives as she left their chambers, quite satisfied with herself. If there was one thing that drove Harry to action, it was a tap left running. It was only too bad that he’d forgotten that he could turn it off with a wave of his hand. Funny the things being tired could do.

Hermione returned to the dining room, where she was overseeing the emptying of the room so that the floors could be waxed and cleaned. The sideboards were removed, along with the draperies and the paintings. The portraits were quite fussy about the whole thing.

“I have been in exactly this spot since 1717!” A gruff wizard declared, “And I want your assurances that I will be returned to my spot! I’ve not fought in wars to be denied my rightful hanging place!”

Hermione was cut off from assuring him that his frame would be replaced with exacting care as an elf carried his frame away by another portrait, “Algernon! Do cease! You’ve never once been out of place.” She smiled fondly at the elf, “Thank you for keeping me level.”

Harry ate a piece of cold quiche, startling when she literally vanished the oak table out from under
him. His fork was halfway to his mouth when the table disappeared. “Is there some reason I’m not allowed a table?”

“You snoozed.” Hermione returned, giving back the table just the same, along with his place setting and other such detritus he’d been given for breakfast.

She had never had any intention of really removing it. “And I want you to come with me, so hurry up and eat.”

Harry finished his food, pocketed an apple, and they set off down the hallway back to their chambers. The corridor lamps had been divested of their glass bulbs and all around them, elves with bustling with a grand sense of purpose. Every carpet would be cleaned, every ceiling scrubbed, every centimeter of the Foundry made spotless in the next three days. There wasn’t a single moment to waste. Although the house was neat as a pin and orderly, a yearly spring cleaning in advance of Easter was an entirely different matter.

In contrast to the halls and the more public spaces, their rooms were entirely vacant of any other living being save one crotchety half-cat, though both beds had been stripped of their hangings already. The winter coverings would be replaced with some lighter weight coverings, and the whole bed would be renewed. And that was only one item of furniture. Hermione knew that it was doable, but she still had not expected this item to pop up on her agenda.

Hermione bade him to close his eyes, and led him to a new door that hadn’t been there last night. When she let him open them, she pointed out this door that had not been there before, next to the portal door that led to Teddy’s bedroom.

He smirked, “Are we going to Narnia?”

“Does this look like a wardrobe to you?” Hermione returned, “Open the door, please.”

Harry did, and Hermione watched as confusion bloomed. She followed him through, “This door showed up this morning, just like Teddy’s did. The Foundry has made her wishes plain.”

For in front of them, was a nursery. It was the nursery of the Foundry. Technically, the small entryway they were now standing in was on the other side of the house, but you couldn’t tell that by the slim doorway.

Hermione had to swallow a lump in her throat. The nursery consisted of a sitting room, a school room, a small library, and several bedrooms. The entire place had largely been untouched since James had moved to his own room at the age of Eleven. His toys rested upon shelves, lovingly cared for, and awaiting him. Clearly, Fleamont and Euphie had not had reason to pack away his things.

Harry’s eyes were as wet as her own. They had never seen fit to come up here, even though one of the doors led to Ted’s bedroom. They had simply used the door that had shown up, and left the rest well enough alone. There was so much of the house that Hermione had largely left it to Fella.

They poked around for a little while, Harry pausing to look upon his father’s things with new eyes. “It’s like he’s here.”

Hermione watched as Harry tapped a hanging model plane. She explored the schoolroom, and the small library, with its bright windows and cozy window seats. The whole suite of rooms seemed so happy, as though James and Fleamont before him had been quite happy here. She hoped and prayed they had been happy in these rooms.
Harry shook his head, “We should use these rooms somehow. He wouldn’t want these rooms to be as he left them when there are children in the house. He’d want Ted and the baby to play here.”

Harry ran his fingers along a hobby horse, who tossed its mane and nickered.

“I’m not sure I want to turn my room into a nursery.” Hermione ventured.

Harry was staring at the shelves before him. “Planning to move, then?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. The bedroom, with its feminine furniture, stood totally unused, and had for the entirety of their marriage. Traditionally, she was supposed to leave her door open when she wanted company. Really, they thought it a custom they were happy to end. It was very déclassé, according to twittering she’d picked up from older women, but she liked sharing a room. “You do snore.”

Hermione accepted the hug that was always on offer, and revealed, “It was fine when we weren’t expecting Eleanor, but now that we are, it’s unfair to expect her to work in there.”

Eleanor would no doubt feel uncomfortable.

“And you’re not exactly comfortable having her there, are you?” Harry searched her gaze, his lanky frame wrapping about her in the best of hugs.

Hermione did not reply. Their magical signatures were thick and readily evident in their chambers. It was a very personal and private space, and not only in a sexually intimate way. It was the space in which they unwound and were able just be the people they were, without a care for perception. It was hard not to get mixed up and lost in the roles they played. Their chambers were the main place they were able to connect with one another as Harry and Hermione, as the people they were, without the roles they played getting in the way.

In their chambers, she felt safe, comforted, and free to be the woman who put her feet on the sofa and railed on about Conservative politics and liked Indian takeaway, when she could get it. It was much the same for Harry, she knew, when he added, “Me either.”

And so, after Harry trotted off to school with his satchel over one shoulder, Hermione set about her work. The elves didn’t like it, didn’t like that she sought to work alongside them. In many cases, her presence made them uncomfortable, and early in her marriage that had been enough to send her into a bout of self-loathing and hot tears in the loo.

She didn’t want to be one of those ladies, those horrid women who treated their employees like pieces of furniture or less worthy creatures. She didn’t want her staff to think that she felt herself above putting her hand to work. She had earned herself several well-meaning lectures from Augusta, about roles and not embarrassing the elves. In the end, though, it was her house and she intended to do her part.

She did not scrub out fireplaces, of which there were many, or sweep the carpets upon her hands and knees. She did not push the jumbo to polish the floors. It wasn’t that she wouldn’t, it was merely that nobody let her.

At least the housemaids didn’t scatter when she came into a room. Hermione had learned that many of the housemaids had been of the thought that they weren’t to be in the same room. Hermione only didn’t like watching them work, so she tried to help or to make conversation so as to assure herself that there were open lines of communication.

It soon became clear, however, that there was only so much supervision she was required to do, or
rather only so much that the staff wanted. Hermione didn’t want to act like Jaws, sneaking up on unsuspecting people. She hoped one day that she would be seen more as a co-laborer, but she doubted that would ever happen, or that it would be helpful to staff morale and the functioning of the Foundry. Fella, as ever, was her trusted eyes and ears.

Instead, she turned her attention to Teddy’s thank you cards. Ellie had helped her to make a list of various gifts that he’d been given, and Hermione was keen to get the cards off by owl as soon as possible.

Harry shoved the parchment into a pile. He’d grabbed the wrong folio this morning, and he had WC notes and drafts, not his Transfiguration notes and papers. He was only glad that the class this afternoon was to be a practical.

Neville caught onto his unease, and noted, “You need an assistant.”

“I need a Rememberall.” Harry returned, determinedly putting away the incorrect folio. He looked at Neville askance, “It isn’t as if you’ve got one.”

Neville, too, had lost his Rememberall.

“Gram does, you know, and anything I really need help with I fob off on her.” He looked sheepish, “But my Dad’s personal secretary is just waiting for me to finish school. He’s doing something in Spain, I don’t know what. Probably should.”

Harry’s grandfather and his father and his mother had assistants. They’d all been murdered, execution style, at the hand of Death Eaters, left to bleed and die in the snow. Harry still paid their salaries to their families, unable to express the way he felt about people who had died rather than reveal anything that might have put his family at risk.

Their books were spread out over the library table. NEWTs were looming, and they revised together rather than eat lunch in the Great Hall most days. Working through lunch meant they both could get home in time for dinner. “Sirius has said the same thing. He thinks I should let Hermione take care of it. But with the baby coming, I haven’t…”

Harry trailed off. He wasn’t about to add another person to the mix, or put yet another thing on her plate. She said she was taking Holy Week off, but had it been any other week, Hermione would have been slammed with meetings and work and writing and shaking hands to put her plans into action.

Neville knew better than most what Hermione was doing. The papers derided it as cronyism, but he was one of her principal backers in the government, and was even now working with Hermione to write a bill based on her landmark address that had already been printed in books the magical world over.

“Well, if you think you need help to manage things, you do the work and hire somebody.” Neville declared. “It’s not as if you’re incapable.”

“I don’t know, Nev.” Harry picked up his quill, and dipped it into a pot of sustainable ink, “Seems a lot of money to spend as an excuse to be lazy.”

“Tell me that this time next year, would you?” Neville grinned, not bothering to hide his expression by ducking his head, knowing full well he was repeating himself, teasing Harry about his stupid assertion that his would be a marriage blanc with the very visible and highly anticipated proof that it was not, “Oh, wait. You didn’t even make it a year before that was patently obvious,
“Have I mentioned that Gram’s cross because Hermione won’t be participating in the Season?” Neville passed the book with a question he knew he had not asked as yet.

“She wasn’t going to participate anyway.” Harry informed Neville, wondering if perhaps Hermione had planned her ‘confinement’ as Augusta called it, to conflict with the start of the social whirl Augusta so loved. Hermione was not that devious, but he wouldn’t blame her if she had done. Personally, he thought it a solid idea. Maybe if they kept having babies, Augusta would leave them to rusticate.

“If Gram wanted her there…” Neville scoffed.

Harry sighed. Neville did have a point.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm going through the five stages of grief with regards to this election, so my thoughts are with people and in that boat, and everyone staring at this place going, "Holy shit, what's going on?" I have no idea and it is utterly terrifying, but I am here without question for another few years because of, primarily, school.

I keep dreaming about Nearer My God to Thee. So, you know, send the Carpathia.

Pulcherrima filia = My very beautiful daughter.

Gloria, laus et honor/ tibi sit, Rex Christe, Redemptor/Cui puerile decus prompsit/Hosanna pium = all glory, laud, and honor/to Thee, Redeemer, King/to whom the lips of children/made sweet Hosannas ring.
"Hoc est praeceptum meum ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos..." John 15:12

OR

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

OR

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.-

Verse 13

OR

Tonks. Holy Week. Rita.

Chapter Notes

So many links, I'm sorry.

The Eurostar was at Waterloo at the time. I think the classes were called something different then, but I don't remember. Anyway, Dress Inspiration Longer, with a hat.

What is Holy Week?

Chrism Mass

Cam Ye By Atholl Bonnie Prince Charlie, etc. etc. Remember that there were many English noblemen involved in the Jacobite uprisings, many of whom were Catholic, and wanted a Catholic King.

Maundy Thursday's Gift Traditions

Modern Major-General.

Granger Bedroom Inspiration
Waterloo was not very crowded. Still, Sirius seemed quite intent on keeping her close. Hermione bore this with some level of understanding. Fella was looking after Teddy, who would have bent over backwards for time with him. Though it was now Easter break at Hogwarts, Harry could not get away from the WC to join them, and Remus was in Romania.

In that sense, Hermione was glad to be Sirius’s plus one for the day. It wasn’t every day that someone showed up with two express tickets to The City of Light, now was it? Hermione would have been a fool not to go. She wished she’d had some notice, but she made it work. It was simply lucky that she’d taken the week off from her, or otherwise she would have never been able to go.

She dressed with some relish. It was enjoyable, finding ways to blend magical and mundane fashions in ways that made her appropriate for either setting, or any in between. Happily, vintage fashion was a huge driving force of street fashion in Paris, so she felt safe in wearing her own clothes.

The Diana made pinafore dress was comfortable and, with its carefully cut fabric, was reminiscent of the 1960s mod subculture that had swept the UK, and indeed the world. It had details and a
shape, and was most assuredly not a muumuu. She was glad that the outfit went with a wide brimmed hat, under which she wore her hair in a twist. Petra despaired of her simple hairstyles, but Hermione liked her hair that way.

Hermione knew this was also her chance to ask some questions of Sirius that had been percolating in her brain for some time. Unfortunately, there was little time to converse as they left for Waterloo. Once they were there and Sirius swanned towards the Eurostar platform, Hermione wondered why they weren’t going on the Floo. Sirius merely muttered something about swollen feet.

Hermione huffed and trotted along as best she could. Sirius, of course, splashed out because Merlin forbid he travel in anything other than the best of comfort, although really, the Standard fare would have been just the same. She supposed after twelve years in prison if the man wanted to spend his money going places and doing things once denied him, who was she to really judge?

In any case, they were met at Waterloo, escorted through passport control and security, and led to the lounge. Hermione was approached by a few witches in the magical lounge, and she made polite small talk about her charity work. All she really wanted to do was read *Ars Alchemia*, but she knew that with the pluses came the minuses, and she chatted politely while Sirius retreated behind *The Financial Times*.

Boarding was made easy by their lack of luggage. Hermione enjoyed seeing the crowds, even if she did not join them. Their seats faced each other with a work surface in-between that, given there were almost no people in the car with them, Sirius magically expanded to a slight degree.

They set off to Paris, and the first thing Hermione did was slide off her shoes under the table.

It was a short trip, of course, less than two and a half hours. Sirius had work to do and Hermione herself was still working on thank you cards. She reminded herself to make Teddy sit down this afternoon and, as best as he might, sign them.

Sirius wanted to talk about the nursery. “I spent a lot of time there, you know.”

“James moved out, I thought, at eleven…” Hermione ventured, looking up from her statistical analysis reports of muggle studies coursework and feedback collected from former students. 27% felt that the current textbooks were fine, with a whopping 62% wondering why they had texts at all.

Sirius grinned. “It was a good place to hatch schemes. Nobody expected to find us in a schoolroom.” He seemed disinclined to reminisce today, and added, “Remus and I think it would be good if you totally did over the place.”

“But it’s lovely.” Hermione protested. Sure, some things needed to be put away, and restored, but the whole place was in pristine condition.

“Don’t you think it would be better if there was somewhere at the Foundry that’s totally free of the sort of ghosts you can’t see?” Sirius asked, “Do you really want to risk being angry at one of them because they decided to paint on the walls that somehow became a shrine to a dead man?”

Hermione considered this for a long second. “We haven’t much time, you know, and that sort of work would be a huge undertaking. Just last month we had to redo the cabinetry in one of the barns, and…”

“You really need a better grasp of your financial situation.” Sirius sighed, “I hate money, and here I
“Am, lecturing you. I’ll enjoy this.” He screwed up his face, and Hermione got the impression that she was looking at his impression of himself, “Darling, why have pots of money if you don’t sink it into the old pile?”

“How often do you say to that yourself?” Hermione laughed, amused by his tone and his joy.

“Actually,” Sirius mused, “I mostly find myself saying it to Remus.”

Hermione had grown up solidly middle-class. Her mother was a successful surgeon, her father a very prominent applied researcher and dentist. She struggled with the transition to the financial responsibilities they now held.

Harry, and Remus, had grown up desperately poor. Harry was frugal and careful. Remus, having gone hungry as an adult, wore that mantle more heavily. After all, Sirius’s exoneration had happened at a pivotal time in Harry’s life, meaning that he’d had some training in his youth to cope. Hermione had helped him, but somehow she knew Sirius wasn’t talking about repainting the walls ecru.

She sighed. “I suppose you’ve already got designers in mind, haven’t you?”

“Me? Surely not I!” He feigned shock, before sobering under the weight under her frank gaze. “Your Mum, actually.” He produced some folders, and laid them carefully atop her documents. “I’m meant to be buttering you up.”

Hermione sniffed at the prospectuses from various design firms. “Well, it explains why she was neither here nor there about going to Mothercare for us.”

“Don’t deny yourselves the experience, Hermione.” Sirius suggested, lifting his own work back to the center of his workspace, “After all, you’re not at war anymore. You can take the time to choose between something you find functional and something you adore.”

Hermione made a small sound of acknowledgement and tucked the thick envelopes with her mother’s scrawl on top of them into her bag. She could not open that emotional door right now. Teddy had been okay, had developed just fine, bouncing from safe house to safe house. The cot she’d carried around in her beaded bag had been a safe space for the both of them, and she was reluctant to give that up.

They were silent for the rest of the journey. Hermione drank some tea, and got up to stretch her legs with a small walk. She had walked four steps in the thankfully empty carriage before she realized she was walking on her sheer tights and had to go back for her shoes. Whilst on the move, she visited the snack car and the loo.

She made smalltalk with a muggle fashion designer who complimented her wardrobe while Hermione was waiting for a glass of juice to chase her nutritional supplemental potions, which of course she would take in private. A pregnant lady drinking suspicious things out of vials was not the sort of thing that would go over well in a mundane setting. Unlike magical communities, mundane circles had clear ideas of what it was to protect a child’s welfare, no greater good required.

Hermione demurred that it was bespoke, but spent a few moments discussing the need for a wider range of maternity fashion. Hermione left the conversation with the names of a few designers the lady seemed to think that she knew as a matter of course. It was nice to talk to someone about a disdain for pussybow blouses and boxy pinafore dresses and find a kindred soul.
Buoyed, Hermione returned to her seat and plowed through her data, making quick notes for further work and exploration as she picked at the second breakfast that had been placed in front of her that day. Sirius worked on whatever he was doing, complained sotto about Burke, and signed his name with an imperious flourish.

Hermione read the document over and offered suggestions. They passed the rest of the trip in companionable discussion of mental health services in the wizarding community.

Once in Paris, and more specifically in Gare du Nord, they were met by someone right at the door onto the platform.

The station was easily one of the busiest in the world. The concourse was very crowded, even from what she could see, and Hermione knew that the whole place made her vulnerable at first glance. She was glad for her wand in her sleeve as she wove through the disembarking process, even with priority access.

When Hermione raised an eyebrow at him over the shining town car, Sirius raised one back. It seemed that he felt himself above a taxi. In any case, the car they were speedily ushered into was convenient. Hermione settled into it, admittedly a little travel weary, and glad to have visited the loo in the train.

It took about twenty minutes to go from the station to the church, which was itself a short ten minute walk to the Sorbonne.

When they pulled up to the doors, Hermione saw that the 13th century church was teeming with people. Mothers were lifting prams up the steps, and men were hustling indoors as the strains of organ music filled the air. Families with large handfuls of children not yet old enough for reception were blending into the crowd of elderly women.

Of course there were photographers. Hermione ignored them with a polite glance their way, as they stayed back enough to blend in with the mundane people. She took Sirius’s offered arm and removed her missal from her bag. As they entered the church, Hermione waited for Sirius to dip his fingers in the Holy Water and cross himself. When he returned to her side, she marveled at the gold-leaf and the arches. It was so very different from the assure reverence of the Foundry chapel, which stone and wood carvings allowed statues and stain glass to stand out.

Sirius elaborated, leaning close to move through the crush, “Of course wizarding dioceses don’t agree in totality with the society that now overtly runs the place, but we do tend to congregate here for larger masses, as we have done for centuries. Today, they’re celebrating the Chrism Mass.”

He led her through the throng as she affirmed, “The mass that blesses the oils that are used for various purposes.”

“Ten points.” He smiled, switching languages to thank people who moved and to secure their seats.

When they were finally sitting, Hermione took the moment to consider the people around her. They were wizards and witches all, a great many of them known to her through social connections. Now was not the time to socialize, but she knew then that people of her community were here not only to show devotion to their shared faith, but also to see and be seen.

After all, it was something of a status symbol to pop off to Paris in the middle of a workday, wasn’t
it, and to know that your family had been sitting there for ages?

Hermione was swept away by the wonder of the Mass at its grandest expression, with singing and chanting and scads of small children in vestments. The air was thick with scent and with a sort of magic that transcended even the magic in her veins. The candles at the light cast ethereal shadows along the arches, the gold, and the walls.

Though she did not speak French beyond a smattering better suited to survival, Hermione was able to follow along by virtue of the liberal use of Latin. Where required, Sirius translated in her ear. as words fell down upon them from the wooden pulpit above them. Hermione lost herself in the cadence of the French overlaid with the soft English in her ear.

In the assembled crowds that were moving to attend to communion, Hermione saw mothers nourishing their babies, and toddlers vacillating between rapt attention and boredom alleviated by small toys snuck inside the church in their father’s pockets or Mummy’s handbag. The choir seemed to hold the attention of most older children, even as little girls fiddled with their chapel veils. Hermione wondered if her baby would be born male or female.

Their small mental voice was matter-of-fact. “I could tell you, but it’s a bit dark in here.”

“Don’t you sort of just know?” Hermione muttered, lowering her head lifting her missal to hide her words as people moved about her to receive communion, which was something that as a non-catholic, she was unable to do. In any case, the movement gave her ample privacy to ask.

She’d promised herself that she wouldn’t ask outright, but she was curious to know if they knew or had any sense of their biological sex. Their voice did seem rather gendered to her, but she would not even admit in her own mind that she rather assumed them to be one gender over the other. In the end, it mattered not.

Their response told her everything she needed to know. They knew, and yet, they were bent on teasing her. They were so much their father’s child. “Aren’t you the one who says gender is a construct?”

Upon his return, Sirius knelt for a long period in solemn prayer, as he did every time she had observed him in Mass.

In that moment, she absurdly and profoundly missed Harry. There was a unity between the two of them in that sacred moment that existed nowhere else. She knew of his prayers in those moments, his prayers for her, and for the children, and for their family, to the people he was obligated to advocate for in this world. She felt a unity with him in those moments as his wife, knowing that this powerful and influential man who submitted to one one of the earth, humbled himself before his God, not for himself, but for her.

It was probably a little bit blasphemous, but one of the main reasons she so liked Mass was because it was something they did together, no matter the week. No matter their challenges during the week, they came together to attend Mass and center themselves. In seeking that which was and is greater than themselves, they found each other.

Honestly, it was a bit startling to look to her side and not see him there, his glasses sliding slowly down his nose as he looked over his missal and held her hand in his. She wished he was there to see their community in less isolation and more context. It was nothing short of fascinating to see.

And so, upon leaving the beautiful church, Hermione felt a little bit morose. It wasn’t uncommon.
The Mass was sometimes a little bit spiritually overwhelming and emotionally moving. In it, she saw the unity of humanity beyond religious and cultural lines. She did not see the Mass as something that separated, but rather something that unified in the sense that it asked each person to pause, and to consider their lives in the full scope of their existence, and then to affirm that they would go forth and live in a meaningful way.

It naturally meant different things for different people, but that was rather how she saw it.

As they left the church, Hermione realized that they soon had a train to catch. Sirius insisted they have a bit of lunch first as, “You don’t come to Paris and not eat, Hermione.”

And so they found themselves at a tiny magical restaurant near the train station. It had clearly been in that place since the dawn of Paris, its dining room largely unchanged and a careful monument to the glory of Parisian food in its purest form.

Hermione tucked into her own meal, pausing to note that now was the perfect time to grill Sirius like the fish he was presently consuming. “So, I’ve been meaning to ask you some questions.”

“You mean you’ve waited to ask me something?” Sirius asked, feigning shock and surprise.

Hermione let it slide. It did not do to sass one’s sources of information. “Why does it seem that most wizarding families of a certain background are largely Roman Catholic? It seems to me that the concentration is a bit odd in an Anglican in name only country.”

“My mother would have said that we were Catholic before Henry dissolved the monasteries, and Catholic we remained. He could terrorize the muggles, but not us. Why do you think he sired no living sons?”

Hermione hoped he was joking, and that no wizard had cursed Henry VIII in such a fashion. She wouldn’t have put it past a Black ancestor, though. It even made sense, if they thought it would restore a Catholic monarch to the throne, though Hermione was hopeful that no one had done such a dark thing, because of all the people who had died in the name of religion.

“The Statue largely helped. And you will note that we do keep to ourselves and to our traditions.” Sirius explained what Hermione assumed long ago. The culture remained because it had not been allowed to be influenced by outside forces, at least in the area of religion. It was yet another facet of the insular lives of many of the First Houses.

He further added, “In addition, in the muggle aristocracy, there is a greater prevalence of Roman Catholic people due to French heritages. We’re all a bit French.” He grinned, “Well, not the Potters, so much.”

“Hey!” Hermione responded in kind to his teasing, “We’ve got a bit of a Welsh background, and some Scottish, too!”

“Oh, yes.” Sirius agreed, mischief in his eyes, “The very epitome of cultural and ethnic diversity. Why, Harry’s Grandmother was from Cumbria, and his grandfather from Cornwall. Different worlds, those.”

Hermione bit into her food, “So this thing about Henry. Were the Potters Jacobites, then, too?”

“It’s not so simple.” Sirius warned her, “None of Harry’s predecessors were blind in their fealty to
any religious cause. However, at the time, whichever Potter held the title was heavily invested in that first rebellion. His son was not unable to see the writing on the wall, though he remained a devout man. In fact, he had something of a relationship with the Court.”

Hermione digested this information. She allowed, “Augusta didn’t cover much of this during my enclosure.”

“She wouldn’t have even if she knew any of it in any detail.” Sirius told her, “She was more concerned with making sure you understood how to get on in the here and now.”

Hermione glanced over to where a few people were eating, and then looking back at them. She smiled their way, and went on with her meal. “I do what I can.”

Sirius smirked. “And a lot of what people say you can’t.”

Hermione grinned in return. There were some compensations for being a fish in a glass bowl. She got to help people, got to say what she thought and make sure that people heard her, and got to create real and lasting change. Why shouldn’t she relish that fact, and take every advantage of it to do what she knew she needed to do?

The conversation was easy, and flowed along with the progress of their meal. They gossiped in good-natured fashion about their family and finalized Easter plans. Tomorrow was to be quite busy, and there was every good reason to hasten home and prepare for Maundy Thursday.

Cleaning was still being undertaken at the Foundry, and Hermione knew every elf who worked there was glad to have her out from underfoot.

And so, they lingered over the meal, dashing to catch the train. The photographers lingering on the wizarding platform were thus treated to some pictures of Hermione with an unguarded expression on her face as she, replete with too much food and good company, rushed for the train and popped a hand on her head to keep her hat steady.

That afternoon, Hermione sat with Teddy at the table in the library, crayons and art supplies of all fashion spread out around them.

He was so little that she held him on her lap, and using a chunk crayon, guided him through the letters of his name. She tried her best to make it fun. Correspondence wasn’t always going to be fun, and one day it would be the bane of his existence, but someone had taken the time to give him something, and to spend their time with him in his honor, and they each deserved the reciprocation of a visible thanks. These were the lessons that she had a duty and an obligation to teach him.

Hermione was simply glad to have the time with him. Teddy was currently making something akin to an E, and looked to her, twisting his head to get a view of her neck. She hadn’t a lap to speak of, but at least she still had a knee upon which to balance him. “And after your birthday, comes Easter.”

“Sweets.” Teddy declared emphatically, “All for Teddy.”

“You’re not going to share them?” Hermione asked, replacing the finished card with yet another one from the pile, “I like sweets.”

“Cadbury can have some.” He seemed to think for a long second, “Crooks, too.”

“Well, that’s very kind.” Hermione praised him, “And then we’re going to Hannah’s father’s house
for a pace-egging.”

“No.” Teddy declared, his brow becoming even more furrowed.

“No?” Hermione queried, helping him to make his letters. “You don’t want to play with the Easter eggs?”

He paused, and made a big squiggle as if lost in thought. “Cadbury wants to go.”

Hermione laughed, and saw that they only had a few more cards to go. “We’ll see.” She switched out the card, and placed one of the remaining few in front of him, “For now, let’s finish these and we’ll go see Hedwig and ask her to take them. Maybe you can even give her a treat.”

“Rats!” Teddy exclaimed, sounding rather happy about the prospect.

Hermione woke early on Maundy Thursday. There were so many traditions to be held to that she rushed through her attention to the lars, and hastened to a quick shower. As the Dias Mandatum, the “day of the new commandment,” the whole day focused on the idea that Christians should love one another, just as Christ has loved them. The evening was far more somber.

Harry had actually beat her out of bed. He had a lot to do himself. There were gifts to give to the poor and disenfranchised. It was, of course, a day of fasting. For her part, Hermione had to make sure that things went off without a hitch. She also had to make sure that the Easter Rabbit was going to be in town, and that her parents were still coming to stay overnight for Easter.

Hermione moved into the dressing room, “That tie makes you look like a prat.”

“Wonderful.” Harry set it down on the highboy, and picked up his jacket. “I’m not wearing one today.”

“Good for you.” Hermione was not adverse to praising rebellion. She gestured to the box she’d levitated in behind her, “Are you sure you don’t need my help?”

“Hermione, dunce that I am, I think I can manage a visit to a charity and bequeathing them with something for each year of my life. I think I can manage to donate money to charity.” Harry teased her gently, referencing the tradition they were carrying forward.

As the Queen gave out special money and coinage, so too did the upper reaches of the Wizarding aristocracy. Instead of singling out individual people as if to lord their good fortune over them, it was Harry’s idea that they pick a charity of which they were patrons and support them with the traditional bequests.

Hermione hesitated as the great wooden box that held the money, for no cheque would do, lowered itself to the small table that held Harry’s own dressing items. It landed next to a beater’s bat and in between two candlesticks. “I only meant that I would come with you if you wanted me. I had planned to go along.”

“You were on a train for ages yesterday, and we’ll be up until two in the morning tonight.” Harry reminded her, “I’d hoped you’d rest.”

Hermione patted Cadbury, and tossed the ball he’d left at her feet into the bedroom. He hopped back into the bed and settled with a sigh, eliciting a slow squeak from his ball, looking so forlorn that Hermione was compelled to join him. She swallowed her early morning potions, let the gentle caress found in a fleeting embrace chase away the taste of iron in her mouth, and crawled back into
bed.

Harry kissed her again, and pulled the curtains around the bed. “Sleep.”

“Yes, O Great One.” Hermione teased, rolling to her side and conjuring a pillow between her knees for support.

Harry chuckled and exited their rooms, heading with all due to seriousness to his tasks, singing rather badly, “I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical/From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical…”

If he continued, Hermione did not know, for he was gone, and she was asleep.

Later that day, Hermione worked with Fella to prepare for her parent’s short visit with them. Hermione knew it would have gone off without a hitch without her, but they’d never stayed overnight, and Hermione was keen to make sure it set a good tone for future visits. She was of the mind that her Mum might stay for a while when the baby came.

Hermione had put them in one of her favorite bedrooms. It reminded her a great deal of her mother’s sensibilities, with its floaty curtains, and patterned rug that contrasted the simplicity of the bed hangings and the comfortably minimalist mantle.

Fella was observing a housemaid with an eagle eye. “We must be certain that the fire is up to muggle safety standards.” She looked to Hermione, “I’ve assigned Violet to the task of seeing to your parents. She’s quite up to the task.”

Violet, who stood, bloomed under this praise. The room was perfectly turned out, with every hassle on the bed hanging having been combed into a perfect fringe. Violet had much to commend her, and Hermione told her so gently before continuing to fix the simple spray of flowers on the small table. “My parents are very much looking forward to this visit.” Hermione began, “They may have some questions for you, Violet, about your duties and your life and your experiences.”

“I’m happy to answer anything!” Violet promised. Hermione knew that was true at present, but she also knew that such feelings might change once she actually met her parents.

Hermione assured her, “Feel free to tell them if their inquiries become too personal.”

Fella had already gone over with her the various needs of her parents, and they had now stocked up on Dad’s tea. Her parents were easygoing people, but Hermione knew that Fella was very much holding the staff to a high standard of excellence. To impress Her Grace’s mother was foremost in many minds, Hermione had gathered.

After they left Violet to finish her tasks in her afternoon apron and cap, Hermione invited Fella to a cup of tea. They partook in Fella’s own sitting room, a very charmingly dainty room with lace on the table and a sewing machine in the corner.

After the regular discussion that generally defined their meetings, Hermione came to her point, “I’d like you to speak as frankly as you wish, as this is a subject of some sensitivity.” Hermione knew that oftentimes staff would not offer opinions to their employers, but she knew that Fella would do, if asked and made to understand that Hermione wanted and valued the support, “I would like to make use of the nursery, but I don’t wish to step on toes of the beings for whom that might be traumatic. What are your opinions on the subject?”
Fella paused for a long moment, as if collecting her thoughts. “Many of us who stayed on when the staff was downsized spent many happy years in those rooms. I think we would be happy to spend yet more there.”

Hermione knew that when the staff had been downsized, those who chose to stay on had been the true-blue, the most loyal of the staff, those who felt it their duty and their honor to serve the House of Potter. For many who stayed, the Foundry was their home, their world.

Hermione was not about to rock their world yet again, when they had been so stalwart, when they had spent thirteen years tending to a vacant home, with no contact with Harry, after burying the people they had served and loved so well. They deserved the respect and the peace that was offered to all in this post-war world more than most.

“I’m gratified to know that,” Hermione assured her. “Harry and I have discussed a remodel of the floor, and we are concerned about how that might come across to those of you who, as you say, were very happy there.” Hermione asked her question, “Would it be a source of pain to know that James’s things have been largely packed away, to go in there and see things not as they once were?”

“It may be bittersweet, ma’am.” Petra swallowed. “But it is not disrespectful to live one’s life, to go on living and growing in spite of pain. None of us can pause the pace of time, and to deny this truth would be to deny ourselves of the joy that new experiences will bring.”

Hermione nodded. Petra had said her piece. They had her blessing. Hermione reached out and squeezed her elfin hand. It was a gesture of much familiarity, but Hermione knew of no other way to express that she understood what had been said.

After a long moment, Petra took up her quill. “The first thing we will need to do is empty the rooms. I’ll take the liberty of setting aside family items you may wish to use, and items of sentiment to His Lordship.” James was forever His Lordship, as he had not set foot in the Foundry after going into hiding, just before his father had died. “And I will arrange for a deep cleaning of the entire floor.”

“I’m not in a great rush.” Hermione replied, “Take the time you need, any of the staff need, to work through the process. I am sure Sirius and Remus will wish to be involved.”

“They used to hide in the nursery, cooking up schemes, even when they were near to adulthood.” Fella reminisced, “And so I am sure they shall. I will confer with their staff, should you wish it.”

“Of course.” Hermione agreed, “I am contented to leave this entirely your hands.”

Fella smothered a smile. They both knew that was a bit of a lie. She was contented to leave Fella in charge, but they both knew Hermione would be as involved in the whole thing as she possibly could be. After all, when setting up Teddy’s room, Hermione had been rather exacting, even as she had made little decor changes.

The day passed far too quickly. Harry was off doing his duty, whereas Hermione found many to contend within the Foundry’s boarders. One of the horses wasn’t well, and so Hermione had gone down to speak to the veterinarian herself. The wizard was more than happy to come by, and Ewan was on the right track after a few spells and a prescription for a daily potion in his mash. He perked up some at the offer of a hot mash made just for him.

Hermione took Cadbury on a good walk, and had something of a solitary meal, knowing that Harry
was expected to eat as part of the luncheon he was attending without her. Over a simple fast meal, plentiful in portions but simple in its construction, Hermione studied her Latin and read over the background of the Holy Thursday Mass.

After eating, she returned some of the never ending stream of letters vying for her attention. Harry sought her out long enough to tell her that his day had gone well, and that he was pleased to know that the agency had plans to expand their emergency youth shelter. He left a bowl of olives on her desk, which she absentmindedly consumed as she attended to the tasks at hand.

She was, of course, delayed in returning to dress. It was lucky that she paid Petra to pick her clothes, otherwise she would have had no idea what to wear. Hermione was quite happy with the simple moss green dress, and the veil that wrapped around her shoulder, its long scalloped edge providing some detail to an otherwise very simple outfit.

Furthermore, as she expanded, she was growing and more cognizant of the papers and their endless speculation on her expected date of confinement. Anything she could do to confuse them was something she embraced. Though the Chapel was on the Foundry’s grounds, and though it was largely close-knit enough to keep the press out, there was little even the most dragon like of the elderly ladies might do to shame suspicious newcomers.

The red of the veil contrasted the mossy green of her dress, but not in such a way that she looked like a giant Christmas tree. She picked up her missal, given to her by Remus, and sought out Harry, who was vanishing cat and dog hair from his trousers as she came upon him. “You look really pretty.”

Cadbury squeaked his squeaky as if in agreement.

“You’re biochemically being manipulated into thinking so.” Hermione returned, “Otherwise you would admit that the giant veil is a concession to both frizz and and the never-ending expansion charm that is, as we speak, giving me five more stretch marks.”

“I’ll translate that as thank you.” Harry smirked, “Damn fast days. We could break it.”

“And I’ll leave you to be the one to explain to both Sirius and Remus why you’re not in the communion line on this, one of the most solemn occasions of the year.” Hermione warned him, patting Crooksy, who was soaking up her attention like a sponge collected water.

Harry considered this, “I will never understand the point of abstinence on fast days. Muggle parishes don’t care, do they?” He paused, “And even if some do, you’re not going to tell me that people don’t do exactly as they please the world over.”

“Perhaps they do.” Hermione admitted, “But their parents aren’t werewolves, and we neither of us have time to shower. You’ll survive, I’m sure.”

Harry countered hopefully, “At least tell me where they are.”

“Why would I do a thing like that?” Hermione returned, adjusted her veil, and left the room.

Harry sighed, as though he was indeed forlorn, and stood to button his jacket. Hermione thought him quite smart. At least in the sense that he must have realized that to deny him his chance to collect his own data was unscientific and went against her core personhood.

The first part of the service was very meaningful, in that the Gospel Book was brought down from the altar into the congregation, a very obvious symbol of the word made flesh. Later still, feet were
washed by Fr. Smithson, a further symbol of He who came not to be served, but rather to serve. It was clear that this liturgy, ancient and packed with meaning, was meant to encapsulate the entirety of the Gospel into a single service.

Hermione did not know if this was entirely true, only that it seemed to make sense to her. Fr. Smithson did not rush the foot washing process. It seemed that the people selected were representatives the various populations in the congregation. All Hermione knew was that she was glad she could not be asked. To have asked her or Harry or Sirius would have been seen as sucking up and not service, not to put too fine a point on it.

Hermione also suspected that to ask her would have also violated some code of tradition. Traditions played a larger role in her life as a leader of the community, and if it was expected that she cover her elbows and knees, she did not think anyone would take too kindly to seeing her feet. She was perfectly happy, as it stood, to keep her pregnancy swollen ankles and feet encased in her shoes. Besides, laughing uproariously when her feet were touched in a service of such a somber tone probably would have not gone over well.

The chanting and signing as the pedilavium went along and mixed with the slosh of the water in the basins as it was magically filled and refilled took up a good period of time. Hermione knew that it was also symbolic of baptism, because feet in ancient times had been awfully dirty and this action made the most unclean thing clean in a religious setting.

The bell for communion was silenced in difference to the season and so the clap of wooden blocks served as the impetus, and there was far more wafers blessed than would be needed. Hermione understood that these were for all the days in which they could not be sanctified.

Communion took far longer than usual, and she felt like she stuck out like a sore thumb for not communing. At least she could busy herself by closing her eyes and translating the chanting in her head. Anyone who stared probably was committing some kind of sin, considering they all were told to keep their thoughts on their own prayers. In focusing inward, Hermione lost her nerves.

Hermione watched as the Sacrament was moved to a lavishly green Altar of Repose, and was processed around and to a new location with great ceremony by Fr. Smithson and some of the assistants and alter children. Hermione supposed in a less progressive church this cadre of people would have been all male, but not so in wizarding churches.

The congregation chanted *Pange Lingua* on their knees as it was moved and processed passed them. This journey, too, was filled with meaning. As they sang each verse and paused, the sacrament was moved first from the High Altar to the Crossing, then from the Crossing to the center of the nave, then from the center to the back of the nave, and then around to the Altar of Repose in the Chantry, which looked a bit like a representation the Garden of Gethsemane.

Hermione knew that people would be keeping watch over this blessed Sacrament overnight. Hermione was glad that it wasn’t here who would be fulfilling the adoration. She was exhausted, though she knew that this service wasn’t anywhere near finished.

Following the removal of the communion, Fr. Smithson knelt for the final two verses in adoration, and nearly let the Cross touch the floor. At that, the mood that had been building in Hermione’s heart solidified into something she could name.

There was no ending to this part of the service, and so she felt abandoned in the midst of great confusion, lost in mystery, left to question this action in a way that she had not questioned the meaning of the earlier parts of the service.
In silence, a new segment of the service began, almost as though she was being told that this was a different office being completed in the same night. This, then, was the Office of Tenebrae. She knew now that the Chapel’s altar would gradually be stripped, and the congregants would be left to view this desolation and this emptiness as a reflection of what was to come.

Hermione experienced a growing sense of dread, as though every second was building and building toward the outcome. The air of mystery was heavy around the congregants as the service progressed, building in agony and despair as each reading was carried out with depressing finality. As the readings progressed, one by one the candles on the candelabra were extinguished, marching them closer and closer to total darkness and all that it symbolized. In the end, only the Christ candle, the one used so much at Christmas, remained.

This was the light by which the altar was stripped.

First, the Cross was removed. Then the Gospel Book that had recently been brought into their midst was closed and carried away, along with the Missal. Then, in somber movements in keeping with the tone of Deus, Deus meus, the small cloths were carried away. The rest of the linens followed, save for the Frontal, which was left to puddle on the floor and onto the stairs in an act of degradation so clear that Hermione could not describe it.

As the strains of Miserere mei, Deus filled the air, Hermione was struck silent by her sudden awareness of her own shock and the lump in her throat. She watched, eyes filled with tears, as Fr. Smithson returned and poured two large puddles of wine and water on the altar. The last wine to be poured over that altar had been her wedding wine, and she remembered how she had been lectured within an inch of her life not to spill so much as a drop of it. She understood why, now, in this moment.

The wine and the water puddled over the stone and Fr. Smithson levitated the goblets away. This, then, was an act he completed alone. He took a large swath of palm branches, the ones that had been left over from their dispersal, and began to loudly and very determinedly scrub the stone with wine and water. The rasp of the leaves over the stone echoed even amidst the chant. As he finished scrubbing, he raised the leaves high, and in act so filled with pain and suffering that it hurt her soul to see it, he threw the branches, hard. He flung them, and as they hit the ground, the singing stopped in an instant.

In that same second, the remanning light was gone and the windows letting moonlight enter were totally blackened with the help of spellwork. There was nothing by which to see, and nothing to hear but the pounding of their own hearts and their own mortality for the longest of moments. The silence was chilling after the chanting of the lamentations and the ethereal chants.

There was no other word for it. It was bone-chillingly terrifying and utterly miserable, even as they had sang and read and prayed and moved for over two hours. Songs were meant to be joyous, and yet these only seemed to punctuate the utter sadness and utter bereft feelings echoed in the readings. She didn’t rationally know why. It should have been only mildly awkward, or perhaps sad on an empathetic level. And yet, when the Great Strepitus began, Hermione had to grip Harry’s arm to keep from crying out.

To be in utter darkness, to go from utter silence to hear the loud slam of an ancient book against stone was shocking. That single action echoed. To feel the whole building begin to shake in the aftermath only seemed to emphasize their relationship to the world around them, and the mystical and symbolic meanings of the last two hours.
After a long moment, the shaking and the clattering stopped with the slam of another book. The sound shocked her like nothing else as silence again reigned. From behind the altar, the Christ candle emerged, lit by a silent lumos.

It was the only light by which they were permitted to leave, and Hermione was glad of it, if only because on one could see the tears silently streaming down her face.

Friday was Teddy’s second birthday. There was no way around the truth. It was hard. Remus cried, deep soul-wrenching sobs that echoed before the silencing charm fell. Sirius did his best to be happy and keep up a front for Teddy.

Hermione determined it the best idea to get Teddy out of the house.

And so, they went to his favorite places in London, Harry in tow for one of Teddy’s favorite thing to do. They visited St. James Park and watched the pelicans. They wandered around outside, and played up a great deal, trying their best to distract Teddy. He didn't not seem to mind or even to understand, but the pall over his birthday was one they were going to have to cope with, and best they learned to do it before it hurt him.

He sat in his ‘big boy pushchair’ for some time, just looking as they watched for wildlife on the footpaths, Cadbury sniffing but otherwise being a gentleman, a credit to the elves who spent their days training him.

Of course, that didn’t last long, even with all manner of wildlife to see.

Teddy wanted to run and play. Hermione felt herself beyond the running and playing, so she stayed on the blanket with Cadbury, who was contented to sniff at the grass under the blanket and sleep. Hermione made liberal use of cushioning charms and eventually found a comfortable way to sit, even if she did have to sneakily conjure a pillow to make it work.

It was a beautiful sunny day, with a great puffy clouds and a perfectly blue sky. Hermione sat on the blanket, and watched Teddy and Harry play on the grass, their position undefiled by anyone else. If Harry cast a gentle barrier to give them some privacy, Hermione wasn’t going to speculate. She didn’t blame him. Teddy deserved a childhood, and they were all committed to making sure that he had the best childhood they could give him.

After a while, Teddy tired himself out, and crawled on top of her, and fell asleep. Hermione smoothed back his hair and looked him over, this little boy who brought them all together and made them focus on the best things in life amidst pain. There were grass stains on his shorts, and his socks were rolling down his knees, and he looked the picture of toddlerhood.

Not to be outdone, Cadbury hopped up onto Harry, and lolled in his lap, until they got enough steam together to wander back to Grimmauld. The walk seemed far longer than it had in years past, though Hermione did not know if it was due to her pregnancy, the puppy who was tired and wanted to ride in the pram but had to contend with being carried by a wizard, or if it was because she did not know what she would find.

She shouldn’t have worried. When they crossed the threshold with a levitating push chair between them, Hermione saw that there was a big cake on the table, family presents scattered round, and a Papa with a smile on his face. She knew who had sent him that smile, and as they waited with anticipation for the guest to arrive and the birthday boy to wake up, Hermione sent her yet another
Two

By Rita Skeeter

This week was an interesting one for the House of Potter. Yesterday, Harry Potter, the aforementioned Duke, was seen carrying out official duties in the name of his house. He attended a luncheon, visited with staff and residents at a new youth shelter for magical youths displaced by war, and made several large donations to the agency. Sources did not reveal the amount of these gifts or their nature, but they did reveal that he kept to tradition and gave a specific amount or an item for each year of his life.

This is, of course, common for First Houses, though we cannot help but wonder why there was no announcement made by the Potter PR machine. Could it be that this oversight was an attempt to smooth over Her Grace’s dereliction of her public calendar?

It is likely that His Grace meant to keep his visit low key due to the conspicuous absence of his wife at the aforementioned occasion. When pressed for her whereabouts, he allowed that his wife sent her deepest regards and that she was “storing up energy for Easter and Ted’s [Edward Remus Lupin-Black] birthday.” This argument is, as I mentioned above, interesting, if only for the simple fact that it holds no water and also that it again presents a construction of Her Grace as a home-focused wife.

On Saturday, the Duchess hosted the Black heir presumptive’s second birthday party. Sources reveal that the theme was Paddington Bear’s adventures. Security was, sources claim, very tight, with anti-apparition wards being used, with guests given portkeys. At a toy shop in Diagon, a source reports that “many guests came to the shop to buy gifts for young Teddy.” They report that he seems to like Mr. Puckle, and also tactile toys.

On Sunday, our photographer spotted her amidst the congregation (far right) at the Foundry Chapel, commemorating Palm Sunday. On Wednesday, aerial photos show (bottom), a great cleaning underway at the ancestral seat. Likely, given that the Foundry is rumored to hold more rooms that even Hogwarts, this process took the elves therein several days.

Thursday, she was spotted in Paris at yet another Mass on the arm of Lord Black. She wore, as is her enduring custom, rather non-traditional maternity wear designed by Diana Phipps (Her Grace is rumored to have spent four sessions designing her clothing to suit her taste in her anticipated confinement), who seems to be setting aside her reputation as a designer for demure ladies of taste in favor of parchment pushing daring (more on page 11).

After the Mass at a muggle congregation favored on certain occasions by the Roman Catholic wizarding elite, they were seen cosily dining at brasserie costing upwards of £15 a head. In fact, so contented were that they dashed for the train back to London (Below).
It is interesting, is it not, that Her Grace has ample energy to run through Paris so speedily that her head covering is danger of slipping, but is unable to fulfill the obligations on her public calendar? I, for one, am left questioning not only her work ethic, but also the level of religious piety she seems to put forth. Perhaps both are as one, mere abuses of tradition, ready to fade when they no longer suit her?

Whatever the case, our thoughts are with Edward Remus, on this his second birthday. We hope that Her Grace’s personal concerns do nothing to disturb the occasion of his birthday. We wish him the best for the coming year, and hope those entrusted with his care stay the course.
It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.

Chapter Summary

“It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.” — William T. Sherman

OR

"War is no joke, it seems. It destroys, kills, burns, separates, brings unhappiness." -- Zlata Filipović, Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo

OR

Easter's Vigil. The light illuminates the darkness. In which we revisit yet more of the war. And hope for the future even in the midst of it.

Chapter Notes

So, please help me with a nursery theme/motif? Classic books, if you please. Literary. I wrote one, and I'm wondering if anyone else has any better ideas.

Easter Vigil

Hermione's Reading for Ceres Information about Cerealia. It's in English, which we're meant to take as a clue that she's tired and didn't learn the Latin.

Book Harry Reads

TW: Hermione thinks about killing a man by slitting his throat with Teddy in the next room. War flashbacks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione took another critical look at her desk diary, which listed her every engagement. It was color-coded and very precise. Hermione flipped back to September, on through October, November, and on through April. By her count, since her marriage the week of September 20th, she had completed seventy-five official public engagements. The first two months of her marriage, September and October, she had been in school. She had also spent part of November and most of December devoted to her NEWTS.

All told, her math revealed that she averaged about 15 engagements a month. She averaged about two a week, though most times she clumped them together on the same day or two day period. Hermione could not believe that Rita fucking Skeeter had the guts to say outright that she had been
in dereliction of her duties. If things continued, she would likely complete one-hundred and eighty events related to charity and conciseness-raising in the first year of her marriage, although she did anticipate taking some time completely off when the baby came.

Granted, her first engagements had been easy, selected with her mother’s help, and Augusta’s input. At the time, though, she had been totally overwhelmed with those, so she tried not to judge herself in retrospect. She knew what was required of her, what she was blessed to be able to do, and she did her best to step up.

She had been offered a slew of patronages even with the world’s reaction to her marriage, and had picked a handful, not only donating her support in terms of public appearances, but also in doing behind the scenes work, grant work and the like. She was not a society belle doing charity work for props and photo-ops. She was participating in rebuilding a war torn society, and that meant getting dirt under nails and letting her voice go hoarse.

She worked hard. At the first ten engagements, she had felt that surely she was drowning, surely she had said the wrong thing, surely she had put a foot wrong. She had learned two things very quickly.

Never eat anything in public, ever, unless at an engagement where others were eating. This way, she avoided future headlines that read, Duchess of Porker, which Hermione knew was shamelessly stolen from Muggle newspapers, not that anyone called the writers out on it. If they were going to insult her, at least they should be original about it. She hated the obsession in the papers with her body, and knew that one day, she would work to change it. If not for her own sake, then for all of the little girls who deserved better from their communities.

Also, she had learned to never step in and do something properly unless asked. She’d had to temper her take-charge nature in order to help the most people and not overshadow them, even her innate forcefulness it did come in handy when directing conversations, which was thankfully her prerogative during casual chats and introductions.

She’d found her feet. She learned through trial and error how to navigate visits to social service agencies and war-rebuilding sites without actively disrupting the services clients were provided. She learned how to keep the focus not on herself but on what she was there to do, who she was there to give a voice to and represent. In essence, all she really had to do was relate everything back to the cause at hand. Many times she went without it being announced. When anything was on The Circular, it was a circus.

She worked with and for her charities, unlike many women with patronages. She did, largely without balking, what was asked of her, and offered what she thought might be of most benefit to them. She read to small children. She cut ribbons and accepted flowers. She gave speeches and took tours. She shook hands and nodded in all the right places. She deflected some questions and answered others. She made nice with the elderly and, at various moments, held her own in the aftermath of war with those in the community who blamed her or reviled her.

Hermione continued working, carefully checking the Circular found in The Prophet, filling in the chart she was making with exacting detail. She didn’t keep much statistical data, but Petra did log everything. She said Hermione didn’t devote enough time to fashion to require a full workday in that area, and that she needed a proper secretary. Hermione thought Petra did the job well, and wasn’t about to let anyone else into her filing system. Petra, at least, tolerated Hermione’s exacting nature with a smile.

Even during the months where her morning sickness had been terrible, she had kept up as many engagements as possible and had continued her support from home. She had even gone from
doctor’s appointments to charity engagements. She had done her work, and done it well.

She was easily near the top of the pack. If she didn’t beat out some other families at the numbers game, she certainly garnered the most publicity by a long shot. She wasn’t above using her ill-appreciated notoriety to leverage some good for her charities.

Hermione took a look at some of the articles Petra had pulled. One of the first to mention her charity work had not been written by Rita, and so was a bit more balanced in perspective. The society editor had written, “Quite poised, the new Duchess of Potter started her second month of marriage with a visit to London’s Recovery Support Office. She spent the fourth Saturday of her marriage meeting key staff, selected participants, and giving a speech to the assembled. As expected, her speech…”

Hermione thought back to October seventeenth, mere months past, and yet a lifetime ago. She remembered that she had learned everything she could about who she would be meeting, and what they were doing. And yet, arriving there had been terrifying. To see her name on The Circular seemed to say something about her life, about the choices that she had made. The Circular was very formal.

That day, it had read: October Seventeenth. The Duchess of Potter this morning visited London’s Recovery Office and was formally welcomed by the Director of the Agency, Mrs. Ursula Rainfrew. Having met key staff and clients of the agency, Her Grace was escorted on a tour of the agency. Later, Her Grace gave a speech highlighting the need for governmental and community support in the recovery efforts, and encouraged volunteerism.

Hermione had not paid much mind to the dissection of her clothes, or of herself, so long as the “donations and awareness of the charities and war rebuilding efforts have risen exponentially in recent weeks due to her efforts” continued. The kinder factions of the press called this the Hermione Effect. Hermione was glad that it was useful for something other than selling out last season’s dresses and everyone marveling at it.

She didn’t live or die by her press coverage, but sitting here and looking at a small slice of it told her there had been quite a lot of it. The press was merciless, and especially once the Law had gone public, they had wasted no time in branding her with a mark of suspiciousness. There had been some balance but it was clear that, although there were good journalists who sought more facts than they did sensation, it was Rita and her ilk who ran the show. They were lauded for expressing the common opinion.

Hermione privately thought that the world needed a little less of the common opinion, and more reaching for something better, more consideration of what would make the world a better place, what could create lasting change. It was the common opinion gaining traction into power that had led them to nearly two decades of war with a decade long detente, after all. They could not afford to give Rita a platform.

Hermione was aggregating percentages based off of Petra’s carefully kept records when someone knocked on her door.

“Come in!” She called, knowing that it was likely Petra come to ask about something or other, or that it was Fella come to ask about her parent’s anticipated arrival later this afternoon.

Instead, it was Sirius Black. Hermione watched as he sat, and noted, “I hope you’ve got a plan, because if not, I’m more than happy to nail her to the wall.”

He did not need to reference that column for her to know what he meant. The whole family was on
edge. Harry himself was absolutely livid; Remus constantly wore a chilling smile. Sirius, Sirius, of all people was the calmest one of the lot, a sort of calm that not even Hermione could claim.

Hermione didn’t need to overcome emotions. She had a plan. She’d warned the bitch not to come after Teddy. She’d warned her once, and let it go, but now it was time to remind Rita just who she was dealing with. Justice would wait no longer.

“That won’t be needed.” Hermione replied, looking down over her chart and tables that rested on backdated copies of The Circular she’d demanded Petra find at the expense of her normal morning tasks. “Rita and I have an understanding, which she has violated one time too many.”

What was coming Rita’s way was entirely of her own doing, and Hermione felt no remorse. She didn’t even feel satisfaction. This was justice. Justice was logical, objective. Justice was Rita’s due. And Hermione was tasked with the duty of seeing that justice came Rita’s way. She never shirked her duty. At the end of the day, that alone Rita would never again doubt.

“I’ll be coming along.” Sirius decreed, “So you might as well fill me in on the plan.”

Hermione knew that he was looking around her study. She rather liked this room. It was functional, with its desk and work tables and shelves. It was small enough to feel cozy and homey, and the constant patina of open books and toys on the floor added to this feeling, even amongst the antiques and silk. On a good day, the room could be imposing, but Hermione only knew that it was her space, and she knew that she herself was a little imposing, even as she was unfailingly polite. Why shouldn’t the room reflect her?

“It’s not necessary, but thank you.” Hermione was entirely focused on her plan and her task. She didn’t need backup. Indeed, such a thing might make the whole ordeal a bit messy, and Hermione did not want messes or witnesses. Even though Sirius could not be compelled to testify using magical means, and he had once been the best auror on the force, Hermione had this handled.

Sirius rose, and crossed the room to the tea trolley, waving his wand to pour himself a cup of tea. The cup made itself as he asked, “You do understand, Hermione, the reasons why she’s so full of bile and venom?”

“I’m me.” Hermione dipped her quill in her ink, instead of exploring the history that she and Rita shared. Keeping a woman in a jar and blackmailing her did rather inspire hate in someone as petty as Rita.

“Yes, you’re you, Hermione.” Sirius agreed, returning to the chair arranged across from her desk, as though they were having a meeting and not dancing around what she planned to do about Rita. “Which means that you are brilliant, articulate, genuine, and that you have a heart for others and the things they experience, none of which Rita can claim as her own. But you’re also the controlling force behind two Houses. You alone have power the likes of which makes even dear little oblivious Rita tremble.”

Hermione finished a row, and looked up. There was something within his effusively matter of fact praise that concerned her. “What are you saying?”

She was certain that none of what Rita was doing was personal. She was angry that Hermione wasn’t bowing to her assumptions and her edicts, wasn’t changing who she was or what she did in the face of relentless criticism.

Hermione didn’t care what she thought or she said, and were it not for the horrible things she said about Teddy, Hermione would not be giving her the time of day. After this, her position would be
made clear, and that would be the end of it. She had better things to do than worry about some cut-rate journalist who had made a hash of her life for almost a decade.

“Well, think of it this way, loathe as I am to perpetuate sexism.” Sirius levitated his teacup so that he didn’t have to hold onto it as he spoke, “You are the Duchess of Potter. Everyone knows that Harry, while growing to be an extremely strong political and social force in our world in his own right, is utterly devoted to you and that he runs nearly everything by you. Couple that with your own influence, and…”

Hermione reflected upon what Sirius was saying. While she understood their communication to simply be an act of two people who valued each other’s opinions, she knew that if she were power-mad it would be easy to see how the way Harry sought her out could be taken as an usurpation of Harry’s own agency. In any case, to value one’s wife and her opinion in this way was not very common. “I see.”

Sirius summoned a plate of biscuits from the kitchen. He knew where they were kept. After all, he’d grown up here, and summoning some of his favorites was an easy thing to do, since the biscuit keepers hadn’t moved in decades.

He offered her one, and continued speaking when she declined. “Not only that, but you hold the future of the House of Black in your hands. You are openly acknowledged as my heir’s mother. As such, you, and you alone, stand at the helm of not one, but two Most Noble and Ancient Houses.”

Hermione let her disbelief show on her face. She did not doubt that the world saw her as Ted’s mother. She herself knew she was, in the ways that counted, in the way that Tonks had wanted for Teddy. However, given how patriarchal the community could be, she did not see how childrearing and family life could be seen by them as a source of power.

Hermione herself did not feel as though she found power through her role as a wife and mother, only some element of personal fulfillment. She alone wielded her power in other ways. Love wasn’t about power. Maybe that was where the blood supremacists like the Blacks had gone wrong. Love was never about power.

Sirius asked, “Who, do you suppose, Teddy will turn to when hard choices must be made? Even before Remus puts an octogenarian me into a pleasure-induced grave, no one in this world would ever deny that, as the woman raising our son, bringing up the future of the House of Black, that you have unparalleled influence and control over the direction of our line, and thus, the House.” He took in her face, “Don’t look so mule-faced, Hermione, it’s only your due.”

Hermione voiced her thoughts, “That’s an absurd amount of power to assign to one person.”

Sirius’ face clearly told her that absurdity did nothing to change the truth.

“Supposing, Hermione, that you should also have a few daughters. Since exposure breeds liking, who do you suppose those girls will marry?” Sirius took in the shift of her expression, and hastened to add, “Or your sons for that matter? Hestia Prewitt…”

“He’s two!” Teddy was two, and she was not marrying him off to Hestia Prewitt, or anybody for that matter. He would figure that part of life out by himself and they would abide by his choices. She only wanted him to be happy and healthy in his relationships. It wasn’t as though she was aiming to be a modern Queen Victoria.

“You’re not listening, Hermione.” Sirius sighed, setting down his teacup onto the floating saucer, “Like it or not, you’re powerful, even beyond the massive amount of influence you wield on your
own. Rita is seeking to undermine this influence, even now.”

Hermione set down her quill with a finality that was echoed in her tired sigh, “I do wish you wouldn’t assume this baby to be a boy.”

Everyone assumed the child she carried was male. Moreover, everyone assumed she was carrying the next Earl of Willard, the son and heir to all she surveyed. It infuriated her. Harry had gotten himself in hot water with the press a few times for putting down reporters quite scathingly about it. He really didn’t care to consider blowback about it, and neither did Hermione. It was their fault for assuming that of course she would live and die in a quest to provide him with an heir, and a spare, and never mind those useless girl children, and also that Harry felt that way about it, despite evidence and commentary to the contrary. The wizarding community could be so backwards.

“Do you want me to leave you alone to process what I’ve just told you?” Sirius asked, “Or would some witty repartee help? I’m happy to poke fun at you for agreeing with Harry’s on the baby’s sex but being too stubborn to admit it.” He grinned, “Alternatively, Padfoot could make an appearance.”

“I’ve already got one overgrown puppy, thank you.” Hermione sniffed, sprinkling a bit of magical sand over her parchment and letting it dry.

Hermione was entirely satisfied with her arsenal of information. Now, all she had to do was let Rita stew. It was no hardship. She knew what it would do to Rita, knew her well enough to know that she was, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Hermione wasn’t in any hurry to put her out of her misery. Easter Monday would come soon enough. After all, waiting did rather put a damper on Rita’s holiday, didn’t it? It was only just after what she had tried to do to Ted’s birthday.

Hermione patted Sirius on the shoulder, and strode from her office, letting her feet guide her to the doorway. She confirmed that the bonfire was being set up with a peek out of the window, and reversed her path through the kitchens. The flurry of activity to prepare for the day’s meals had not abated.

Dr. and Mr. Grangy were coming to dinner, and well, Hermione just didn’t have the heart to correct them on the pronunciation of her parent’s names. Sirius, Remus, and Teddy were already in residence. Father Smithson was also expected to join them and bless the house. Hermione had finagled a very special carer for Teddy, and she was expected shortly before dinner.

Those tasks complete, Hermione collected Crookshanks out of the dining room. She had to go to the Chapel to honor Ceres, which had slipped her mind this morning in the flurry with the paper’s arrival at the breakfast table. Hermione set Crooksy down on the stairs and summoned a jumper.

The side chapel was cold, and if she was going to be handling chaffs of wheat, at least she wanted to do in relative warmth, even before the warming charm began to be effective.

Hermione moved through the rituals at her lars. It was not lost on her that she would have to be catatonic not to know what to do here, at least by now. Hermione was glad to do her duty today, as the relish with which she completed it gave her some awareness that Rita was yet more incorrect, if such a thing were even possible.

Cerealia was today, but like Fordicidia, they did little to celebrate it. Though they owned farms, and benefited from those efforts, they themselves were not the ones who undertook the work of actually farming. These rituals, then, belonged only to the people who did the work. To assume
ownership of that duty would be a slap in the face to every single person that did sacrifice themselves for their care of the earth and animal husbandry in ways they could never understand or replicate.

Hermione recited the reading for the day, one that everyone with a Lars might recite. “Honour the goddess with wheat, and dancing salt grains/And grains of incense offered on the ancient hearths/And if there’s no incense, burn your resinous torches/Ceres is pleased with little, if it’s pure in kind.”

She did as instructed and lit incense and put the sticks amongst a sacrificial sheave of wheat that rested on the stone top of her lars, with a salt circle around it. The spellwork that accompanied this gesture made sure there would be no fires. In so doing, she put forward thoughts for all of those who worked the estates, everyone who farmed, who devoted themselves to the service of feeding, clothing, and caring for the earth and its creatures.

Hermione broke off a few bits of the wheat, and wrapped it in a cloth, setting it aside. The fact that Holy Saturday and Cerealia coincided was no accident.

When her time at her lars was done, she stood and picked up the cloth. Carefully, she moved through the church, and made her way carefully up the stairs at the back. She cut through the choir loft and went to the narrow passage that butted up to it. Hermione, looking around the cheery but cramped space, wished that Fr. Smithson would consent to letting them open up the rectory for when he wanted to work or stay on at the Foundry.

She understood that he valued his spaces in the muggle community for diaconal work, but she wished that he did not feel himself more suited to a tiny study and attached bedroom on top of the chapel’s vestibule. The two rooms were very cramped. It hardly made sense, not when there was an entire cottage within walking distance that would afford him privacy and space.

He wouldn’t even take meals with them. Hermione didn’t mean that he should take up abiding by their schedule, for he was as busy as they were. There weren’t enough magical priests to cover all of the sick visits and the like for people who did not venture into muggle communities. Couple that with the priest shortage in general, and Fr. Smithson was busy indeed. Hermione had taken to adding him to the meal roster, and so it was a simple thing to see that there was always something sent to him at mealtimes when he was here.

Hermione wondered how anyone fit down the passage. Hermione hated to barge in on Father Smithson, but she did wish to give him the wheat for the paschal candle and to confirm his presence at dinner.

The small office her bade her to enter was much smaller than his typical office, but it was cosy, functional. He’d inherited it, but had quickly made it his own, from the muggle coffee pot to the owl perch in the corner. Interestingly, Hedwig was perched there, and hoo-hoo’d in greeting.

Hermione completed their business quickly after realizing that she had interrupted his writing. Clearly, Hedwig had brought some post for him.

He was nice about seeing her, but Hermione still felt badly. Hedwig tagged along with her, and together they walked across the yard. In the distance, Hermione heard some of the horses communicating with one another. Hedwig was perched gently on her shoulder, and was her companion until they got the stairs. Hedwig flew upwards then, likely taking the short way around to her perch in the sitting room.

Upon her return to the Hall, she found Fella there waiting to go over the last minute preparations.
for her parents. As Fella excused herself, Harry came through the room, shuffling papers as he walked. Hermione saw the *Broom Handler’s Digest* peeking out from between what looked like letters and travel documents.

Hermione’s curiosity was piqued as she rose from the sofa she had been conversing upon. She didn’t particularly want Harry to have to anywhere on business, considering his NEWTs were upcoming, and he needed to focus. She admitted to herself that, too, she would miss him. “Where are you planning to go?”

“Go?” Harry asked, shuffling parchments quickly, “Oh. That’s…” He looked down at the opened parchment in his grasp, “There’s a thing in Shanghai.”

“Oh?” Hermione asked. She had never gone along to China. She really did want to get there, but there was so much going on that she barely had time to get out of the West Country most months, unless they were in London for something or other.

Harry nodded, reading from the parchment he was holding. “There’s a group there doing a lot of work with foster placements for magical babies with disabilities, and I think it could help to learn from them.”

“I’d quite like to go.” Hermione asserted. “After all, it’s my charities that would be impacted. I should go.”

“Oh, well. The trip’s not settled yet, not really, I’ve only—” Harry hastened, “If you want to go to China, we can go sometime.”

“Aren’t you already going?” Hermione was confused. He seemed confused as to why they were talking about this, and Hermione was further confused by his confusion.

“I came to find you because I picked up the wrong mail pile.” Harry switched tracks, extending the top half his document pile. “This bit’s yours. Sorry I opened the one.”

Hermione took it. “Oh, well, thank—”

Harry was already moving away, calling out that something of great importance had slipped his mind. Hermione shuffled through her mail, looking heavenward for a single second, “And people say women get pregnancy brain.”

“Begging your pardon, y’Grace?”

Hermione looked up again to see Bartus carrying Cadbury’s favorite bed over to the hearth. Clearly, the puppy that was sleeping there was not resting in enough comfort for Bartus’s peace of mind. “I’m just talking to myself.” Hermione admitted, with a smile.

His face revealed nothing, as he replied tonelessly, “Of course, ma’am.”

Hermione, in that fashion, returned to her office to answer the letters that could not wait.

She was still working when her mother was announced, and breezed into her study. Her mother did not beat around the bush, and came directly to her point after thanking the housemaid that had admitted her, “Did you get the design books I gave Sirius? Have you looked them over?”

Hermione put down her quill, after signing her name to the letter. “I got them yes, thank you.” Hermione affirmed.
She and Harry had looked through the various books. They were mostly from design firms and baby and child focused companies. Mum had put a book on top of the company who had done her nursery almost two decades ago. Mum put a bit of stock in things like traditions, and Hermione suspected that she had very firm ideas about what she ought to do.

“I know that tone.” Mum sighed.

Hermione pushed up from her desk chair and stretched. “I’ve only been asking you to stand up for the last fifteen minutes. It wouldn’t hurt so badly otherwise.”

Hermione returned, “Don’t sass me.”

Mum’s head reared back. Evidently Hermione had been heard despite her best efforts to forestall that outcome. “Excuse me?”

“My back hurts.” Hermione switched tracks, and saved herself from a lengthily explanation with another truth. She hastened over to the other side of the room and began to pace, in an effort to ease her discomfort, “But I got them, yes.”

“And…?” Mum demanded.

Hermione found it quite funny. Here she was, arguably one of the most magically powerful people on the planet, with the social and economic capitol to make even the biggest snob generally uncomfortable, and she was easily cowed by a single arch of her mother’s eyebrow.

Still, she wasn’t laughing when she admitted, “And, would you like to go upstairs and see the nursery that I’m letting you remodel?”

Mum was already on her feet, and striding to the door. “Oh, I’m so excited! Oh!”

Hermione sighed. After Mum walked right out, Hermione asked, “What is it with people walking away from me?”

“I don’t know.” Said the tiny voice in her head, with an unmistakable air of sarcasm, “I can’t, but I probably would if I could.”

She followed her mother, allowing, “I’m going to ignore that from you because I know you didn’t sleep well.”

She was horribly exhausted. Her legs and feet and back hurt. They were swollen, slightly. Not enough to worry her but enough for her to notice it.

Hermione spotted her mother high above her on the staircase as she entered the Hall, “Mum, I wasn’t serious! You’re not actually remodeling their rooms! Mum!”

But Mum was already conversing with Fella, and either hadn’t heard her or was pretending not to do so. Didn’t they have anything better to do?

“Fuck.” Hermione swore.

Now her mother was on a mission. Where did she get that single-minded focus? All Hermione knew is that she wanted to be put out of her misery if she ever acted like that, because really, it was insufferable. She began to go up the stairs, formulating ways to take back her words. They were not to be taken seriously. She didn’t know why she had thought to mock her mother. Oh, this was dreadful.
“Please don’t consider dying until I’ve completed my gestational process.” They quipped, “Or else all the nursery plans will be wasted.”

“Okay, first off, that’s not funny. Secondly, you’re not even fully developed, and yet you have rapier wit and a fine grasp of sarcasm.” Hermione observed, “Merlin help me.”

“Perhaps he shall!” The voice replied as Hermione made her way up the stairs, completely forgetting that there was a nursery door in her office, much like there was next to Teddy’s in the bedroom.

Hermione was tired by the time she came to the first floor. She sat down on a bench there, and summoned herself a glass of water. She sipped it, wondering how there could be sixty members of staff in the house alone, and not one was along this staircase. Of course they didn’t use this staircase, no matter how she tried to make it clear that she wanted them to do so.

Hermione rubbed her back gently, vanished the glass, and continued onward and upward, cutting through the bedroom to save herself yet more flights of stairs. When she got to the nursery, she had one thing to say to her mother, “You left me!”

“We’re not in a shop and you’re a big girl, Hermione.” Mum thought her upset was mere acting to tease her, but it really wasn’t. She was honestly unnerved.

Hermione blinked back irrational tears. “How am I going to go to China if I get tired going upstairs?”

“You can get a flying carpet there.” Mum soothed, leaving Hermione to wonder who had told her about flying carpets, “Now, pull a chair out of thin air and fill me in whilst I have a look round.”

“You don’t conjure out of thin…” Hermione spluttered, affronted that her mother could make such a glaringly incorrect assumption. She stopped when she realized that Mum was teasing her and that this was not the time for a lecture on magical theory.

She transfigured, thank you very much, an extra clip in her pocket into a comfortable chair and seated herself as her mother poked around. “These bay windows are beautiful.” Mum declared, “Have you given thought to a theme?”

Hermione shook her head. “I’m going to let Teddy pick what he wants. I don’t want him to feel left out, and we never did do anything to personalize his room when Harry moved home.”

That had been a rough day for everyone involved. Grimmauld, and to a lesser extent, Ebony Park, had been the first real home Harry had known.

It had taken a lot of guts to take that step, to cross the threshold here, not only because opening the door meant being open to new things. It had also meant leaving the nest, even though it had come so late in life. Sirius had done his best to prepare him for the day he’d make his own home, but the day it had come was no less challenging because of it.
“Yeah?” Hermione had asked, putting more chopped up eggs onto Teddy’s plate. He stuffed some in his face, and tried to feed her some egg. Hermione avoided it by directing Ted to his chopped up grapes. “Harry?”

“I’ve been thinking we should open up The Foundry.” He’d ventured, “At least go see it. I get letters from the steward, and the housekeeper, and just…”

“You want to see it.” Hermione understood, “We’ll go today.”

And they had, slipping by on their way home from buying books and getting fitted for robes and having lunch with Ron. Although they had returned to Grimmauld, crossing that threshold together had changed them, shaped them, and Harry had begun to move, even as he had not slept there until their marriage, not really.

Harry had stood in the Hall, and looked at her as they stood upon the crest that was in the floor. “I was never meant to live in Little Whinging, was I?”

Hermione had been silent. Sirius had made that point since he was thirteen and had flat out told Dumbledore to go fly a kite, that no blood magic was stronger than the protection of ready wands and actual training. He’d said they would honor Lily’s love by honoring her magical intentions for her son, honoring her wishes. And there had been no other choice.

Harry’d sighed, and looped an arm around her in the way that he had always done. “But to see this place…” He’d trailed off, “It feels like I’m walking into Hogwarts again. And this time, I don’t have to leave.”

Harry’d grinned. “I’m going to die right here.”

“Trust you,” She’d chided, “To take a lovely moment of homecoming and start bleating on about your death.”

“Hey!” Harry had laughed. “I’ve already left you the library. I guess I shouldn’t have said that. Now you know your path to knowledge is only through my death.”

Hermione had laughed, and they’d wandered along, not knowing then they had both come home in a way they had never expected.

Mum continued to get a feel for the space. She entered the various rooms that were an offshoot of the playroom, the schoolroom and library, the large toilet, the bedrooms. It took up the whole wing, so there were a lot of rooms.

When she came back to the half-emptied playroom, she continued on with her line of inquiry, “But for the baby?”

“I’m not sure.” Hermione elaborated, “I’m thinking something out of Aesop’s or Beatrix Potter. Something bookish, but I might do the shared spaces that way and something else entirely for the baby. Harry’s keen on Lord of the Rings, as he says the saga resonates with him, but I hardly think anything beyond The Hobbit is nursery friendly.”

“I had a feeling you’d pick a book theme, if anything.” Mum noted, “I think you should find out what the baby is, and then you can pick.”

“They’re a person.” Hermione deadpanned, “I’m fairly certain. Though Harry could possibly be an alien. He is a little bit weird, you know.”
“Hermione…” Mum wheedled, stepping around some crates to get at a door, and opened it to see a large storage closet that had yet to be emptied. “I don’t see why you won’t find out the sex.”

“Because, as I have said,” At least five times now, Hermione thought, “they’ll be gendered the second they come out of the womb, and there’s only so much I can do then, but now, now I can force the world to see them and anticipate them as a person and nothing more or nothing less, and that is what I intend to do.” Hermione continued, “Besides you know if we knew we’d not be able to keep it secret, and I do want to, even if it means hiding things from ourselves.”

“Well, Daddy and I think it’s a boy.” She grinned, “Teddy did ask for a brother, and you know how he nearly always gets what he wants.”

Hermione did not know what to say to that, and luckily the aforementioned boy himself interrupted the conversation. Hermione had not heard him coming, which was indeed odd, because there was a puppy scrabbling at his heels and one Harry Potter opening the door that connected his bedroom to the toy room.

Hermione supposed she was tired. Had she been willing to think about it, she would have realized that she was exhausted.

Teddy had his own toys stored in here, rotating out with the ones he played with in his room. He zoomed to his play kitchen, “Food! Look, there’s food!”

“Hey, Teddy Bear!” Hermione accepted the wooden piece of cake as Harry chortled at Teddy’s automatic choice for her, “Are you excited for tomorrow?”

“Candy!” He cried, giving what looked to be a wooden bunch of grapes at Mum in greeting, “Candy until I ‘plod!”

“And there goes visiting Wheezes.” Harry declared, accepting the vaguely lemon looking faux-food item assigned him.

“You won’t explode.” Hermione ran her hand down Teddy’s back as he crowded up to her again and made every attempt to feed her a wooden bit of spinach.

Later, Hermione thought that she had been wrong, or at least precipitous in that pronouncement. Teddy, she suspected, just might explode with suppressed annoyance when he saw who was standing in the doorway.

“Look who’s come to play, Ted!” Remus looked to his son, a bright smile on his face, “It’s Eleanor.”

Their first meeting had not been the initial connection between soulmates, but Hermione had not expected such a warm reception to a new person in Ted’s sphere. He was, as they all knew, a shy young boy. He’d been a baby that was keen to keep her close, and that hadn’t changed. He did not like anyone else doing the things he thought Mummy ought to do. He had warmed up to Remus and Sirius participating in his care, because he did love them and Hermione hadn’t given him a choice.

He was older now, and all the more expressive and stubborn. It wasn’t that he was unkind. It was simply that he was a toddler who had bonded very well to the few people who had been around him in a very trying time, and he understood safety as being with one of the people he considered his own. He was lovable and sweet and generous and kind, and Hermione knew that his heart held a potential for a true appreciation of Eleanor, if they gave him the time to build the relationship.
He just needed time to get used to the idea of a new person. He needed time to evaluate how he felt, and space to be allowed to take things slowly. These visits, short periods of time spent in Eleanor’s company, were designed to give him a framework for those choices. Nobody would make him work with someone he hated, but he needed to give Eleanor a shot.

They greeted the nanny-in-training and carer-for-the evening. Teddy did greet Eleanor with a polite hello, but then turned to his father and said, “Goodbye.”

Remus startled. Hermione herself was aghast, but hopeful. She was very carefully quiet. Perhaps they’d turned a corner and that Ted was somehow innately more comfortable with Eleanor. At their first visit on his birthday, he had been characteristically shy and restrained, content to politely interact with his Nanny if one of his family stayed with him. Equally as typical, Hermione had been his go-to person. And so, they had played with toys in Eleanor’s company, and toured his bedroom and toy room, with Hermione serving as a go-between the toddler and the nanny.

Hermione wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, not when she had expected screaming and crying, and yells of “Mummy!” echoing down the halls. She knew he would calm down within a few minutes, but she never looked forward to a cheery goodbye, knowing that it upset him so.

And so, they cheerily said their farewells, until that was, Hermione began to say that she would see him later. “We’ll come back in a little while.”

Teddy’s face was all quizzicality and his hair began to tinge towards her own shade. “Daddy goes with Papa. Mummy stay with Teddy.”

“Well, that’s very logical, Ted.” Hermione began, looking from Ted to Eleanor, “But I thought you would want to show Eleanor your room and your toys. And maybe you could show Eleanor Cadbury’s agility course?”

Of course, Eleanor was a professional. “Teddy, do you have any Thomas trains in your room? I really like Thomas.”

She knew full well Thomas was a huge portion of Ted’s life, although he had never seen the television program, and only knew of the books. Mum and Dad had given him some records, as well, but that was the extent of his media exposure.

“Towfoursixeightnine.” Teddy intoned part of Thomas’ song in answer, adding the number after eight because he likely thought it was part of the song. He looked to his nanny, and then back at Hermione. He suggested a compromise. “Cadbury stays with Teddy?”

“I think he could be persuaded.” Hermione agreed, hugging Teddy tightly, and very seriously telling Cadbury to mind Teddy. Cadbury did his bit, and ran helter-skelter toward his favorite person.

At this, they beat a hasty retreat, Teddy’s laughter ringing in their ears. On their way down the corridor, Remus nudged her gently, “See? Every little boy does need a dog.”

Hermione grinned, “And now he’s got one at each house. Cadbury and Padfoot are no doubt great friends.”

“He gnawed on my shoes!” Sirius returned from ahead of them.

“That’s Canine for ‘I love you, Pads.’” Harry suggested, “Or so Hermione says.”

“My shoemaker did not,” Sirius replied. “share her opinion.”
Hermione veered left, wanting nothing more than to have a bit of a lie down, but knowing that she had to get ready. Sirius had more pairs of shoes than she did, much to Petra’s eternal regret. He also spent a ton on his shoes, whereas she was quite happy with sensible shoes. Sensible, sturdy, economical shoes were all a girl needed to whip the world into shape.

Hermione shrugged on the dusty rose jacket, knowing even as Petra tugged it gently into place that it would not close. “It’s meant to frame your face, ma’am, nothing more.” Petra advised.

Hermione thereby let the edges of the jacket go, and did her best to stifle a yawn. She was sure that her mother was already ready, so Hermione made short work of sliding on her shoes, mentally bemoaning her ankles.

She cast a longing look towards her bed. She wanted sleep beyond all else. The

She met her father in the corridor. He greeted her, adding, “You look nice, Bunny.” He paused, “Are you sleeping enough?”

Hermione did not feel that she looked particularly nice. All the same, it was nice to hear. “Thanks, Dad. Yes, I think so.” She accepted his company as they moved towards the drawing room, “How was work?”

Her father happily discussed his patients and various interesting cases for as long as it took to get to the drawing room. They arrived momentarily before Harry and her mother, who had likewise bumped into one another. Conversation flowed, but Hermione found that most of it passed her by. She sipped the water she accepted, and tried not to be a limpet, when all she wanted was her bed.

As they went into dinner, Hermione felt Harry’s concern. The conversation that passed between them was silent. You didn’t fight a war together and not learn how to tell the other person you were fine without developing that skill. Unfortunately, that also meant that Harry knew she was stretching the truth to suit her own ends.

Finally, dessert came. Typically, they eschewed the gendered separation so common at the Foundry. For the first time, she resented this, because she did not want to put Fr. Smithson in an awkward position. She excused herself before the house blessing, knowing full well that soon Fr. Smithson would have to be on his way.

Hermione wasn’t five steps out of the room before her mother was beside her. Hermione let the mask she had fixed upon herself fall for the first time. She was beyond exhausted. It had hit her like a freight train, and there was little she might say to explain it.

She made up her mind when she saw the fear and the worry on her mother’s face. “I’m going to bed.”

“I think that best.” Mum agreed, gently steering Hermione towards the stairs. “We’ll get you settled.”

Hermione realized that she did not care about missing the Easter Vigil, missing the bonfire and the Easter light, missing the blessing of her house. It was not ideal. She should be there, to participate. It was her hearth, her threshold, her home. And yet, she knew that a more pressing duty had to take precedence.

She had to listen to her body.

And so, they made their way up the stairs. Hermione found Petra waiting, the covers turned down,
her nightdress waiting with her potions and a cup of tea. Hermione knew that her mother was looking her over, and Hermione could not help but gently chide her, “I don’t need my mouth reconstructed, Mum.”

She didn’t exactly want to articulate that, less than two years ago, she had been tortured horribly. She did not want to say that sometimes, it caught up with her. Sometimes, her body just needed to rest. It was not unusual, and likely any exhaustion she did admit to was exacerbated by her pregnancy. The last week had been long indeed.

Still, Mum made a questioning sound, and pressed vials into Hermione’s hands as she sat down at her dressing table and Petra began to take down her hair. Thankfully, they were blessedly silent, and Hermione was not required to comment on anything. Hermione was so tired. She honestly did not think that she remembered ever appreciating having a bed so much in her entire life.

This included the first nights in a bed after the War, after months on the run sleeping little. The beds in the tent had been awful, and more than often and not, she and Harry had shared a tiny bunk to keep the nightmares at bay and manage the horcrux. When Ron had come back, there had been little change, even if they had moved from a bunk to the couch, coming together by happenstance and habit rather than outward intention.

Hermione swallowed the potions that were passed her way. She felt marginally better, and had enough energy to change, noting with some worry that her glamours were fading and the scars and obvious effects of wartime trauma was slightly more visible. She just didn’t have the energy to prop them up.

And so she went to her bed. Last updated in the 17th century, it was huge and rather imposing. It spoke of power. Right now, though, Hermione did not see the freshly changed hangings, nor the intricate wood carvings. All she saw was her pillows.

“If you’re this tired tomorrow, you’re calling the doctor.” Mum insisted.

Hermione knew that she wouldn’t be tired tomorrow. Tomorrow, she would wake up and put on her clothes and do the walkabout, and explore Teddy’s Easter basket, and eat a big meal with her parents and Harry and Remus and Sirius.

Hermione felt him crossing the threshold to their rooms before she heard or saw him. Harry’s hair was as untidy as ever and his suit was rumpled. Hermione was sorry she had left him to make her excuses, but she had intended on returning. “You’re alright?”

“You can feel it when I’m not.” Hermione reminded him, “I’m just tired. Go to Mass.”

Harry rolled his eyes, conveying exactly what he thought of her directive.

Hermione sighed, “You’re hovering.”

“Well, if anyone’s interested in my opinion, I think he ought to stay.” The tiny voice seemed full of their usual vigor, and Hermione’s heart unclenched even as she realized she had been worried, “You might be tired, but I’m not. Why should I be bored? I hate being bored.”

Hermione relented, “I’ve been outvoted.”

Mum grinned, thinking it was her own efforts that had led Hermione to welcome Harry’s concern, and not the baby’s own desire to be close to their father, not the look on Harry’s face. “I’ll just go and find Daddy before he gets into golf stories with Remus. He promised Teddy a dramatic reading of Horton Hears a Who.” She looked at Harry, offering him advice in the way that
expressed her maternal caring. “She really is fine. It’s just time she slows down a little.”

“Mum!” Hermione cried, knowing that she had just gone and given Harry yet more ammunition to hover and fret. She did not need or want him to worry. He worried enough on his own. “I just need some sleep. Would you get out of my room?”

“Be sure to keep your feet up, Hermione. You’ve got stumps for legs.” Mum swept from the room, her heels clicking on wood and stone floors.

Hermione resisted the urge to throw a pillow at her retreating form. Instead, she assured Petra that she was free to go. Harry was still standing in the entry of the wide room, “I really am just fine.”

Harry accepted her words like Crooks accepted antibiotics. He sat down to remove his shoes, and looked at her from where he had bent down to undo the laces, “Smith-Webster was right.”

“No.” Hermione disagreed. “She wasn’t right. I’m listening to my body and I’m resting.”

“She said prolonged malnutrition—” Harry began, vanishing his shoes to the closet to keep them away from Cadbury.

Hermione cut him off, “Ten months of near starvation does not prolonged malnutrition make, not when I have taken every single possible opportunity for the last five months to compensate for it.” Harry deserved the arch look she sent him as he divested himself of his jacket, “Or have you missed the potions I chug by the liter?”

“I also didn’t miss the after-effects of the War, Hermione!” Harry insisted, “I was there, or have you forgotten?”

How could she forget? How could she forget? The War hadn’t ended with Voldemort’s death. She had fought battles for months afterward. The stress and the lack of food had robbed her of so much. The torture at Malfoy Manor had only layered issues upon an already worn body.

I was the one who held you when your gums bled and your body shook for weeks!” Harry referenced the days and weeks after the Final Battle, the days she had spent with her parents, barely alive enough to care for Teddy and sit in a warm bath with a tired baby.

“I was the one who held you when you cried because your hair began to break and fall out.” Those days in the tent had been the worst, the clawing desperation to end the War with the knowledge that no matter what she did, it was stealing not only her loved ones, but the smallest things she liked about herself.

Harry, Hermione noticed, when she looked away from the painting on the wall, was knotting the waist of his flannel trousers, “Don’t sit there and tell me your body has overcome that so easily.”

Hermione swallowed.

She would never tell him that she had often cut her portions in half, splitting it between him and Ron. If he or Ron ever knew that, they would go absolutely ballistic. She had always claimed to have nibbled when cooking, the desperation to keep them functional weighing heavily upon her, stealing any appetite she should have had. It helped that she had never been overly thin, her body clinging to its weight.

She remembered the day she’d gone to meet her parents, the day she went to Grimmauld to meet them, because there had been no way she could leave the country. Her mother had taken one look at her and sobbed. Hermione would always remember that moment. Things had swiftly gotten
complicated, but she would always remember the terror in her father’s voice when he’d asked, “Who did this to you?”

Back in the present moment, Hermione shook her head. “I remember, too, you know. But I am telling you, it’s over. It’s over and in the past.”

It was over and in the past. The War would not touch this baby.

Smith-Webster could keep her pragmatism and her plan for the worst hope for the best attitude.

There was nothing she would not do to give her children a future untouched by Tom Riddle and his ilk.

She had slit a man’s throat with Teddy in the next room when their location had been compromised by a zealot who believed his Lord would rise again and that the “muggleborn bitch’s death would allow it to happen.”

Hermione hadn’t hesitated to tell him that he was sure to see Tommy soon. She’d not hesitated to make it happen. She’d dispatched him, carried Teddy to another room, and tripped the emergency ward, all the while vanishing blood from her body and clothes. There was nothing, nothing, she would not do for those she loved.

And so, despite the niggling concern in the back of her mind, Hermione knew she would keep her vow. The war would not touch this baby. She would not let it. Instead, she looked to Harry. “The baby wants you to read to them.” Hermione determinedly changed the subject, “If you’re intent on skipping Mass and sleeping in an unblessed house, you might as well read something decent.”

“Franny Hill, then?” Harry suggested, setting his wand on his nightstand and lowering the gas lamp there manually.

Hermione huffed and pulled the blankets over her head as she lowered her head to the pillow behind her. “Don’t be disgusting.”

Harry laughed gently, climbed into his side of the bed, and began to read the book he’d grabbed softly, “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.”

Hermione snuggled against Harry, and slept. The last thought she had was the baby thinking, “I wonder if there are any hippos in this book…”

Chapter End Notes

If you don't know what Fanny Hill is, you're on your own with Google. I wouldn't google it at work, though. It was banned until 1966 in the USA, and even then met public outcry.

All of the medical effects Harry or Hermione mention or will mention are legitimate effects from starvation and malnutrition as well as the general effects of war that have thus far been touched upon. Any further medical discussions will be similarly rooted
in fact. The Cruciatus Curse, for example, is rooted in this chapter in an understanding of electrocution.
A villain is just a victim whose story hasn’t been told.

Chapter Summary

“A villain is just a victim whose story hasn’t been told.”

― Chris Colfer, The Wishing Spell

Song inspiration of this chapter.

Chapter Notes

I suppose I must have been inspired by Lady Mary's fashion for the garden party. It just worked with what I'd written.

I borrowed the dialogue for the skit from Mary Shelley’s Proserpine though I clearly, clearly, bastardized the plot to fit in with the idea of the equinox being about the balance between dark and light.

A good bit of the holiday itself is borrowed from pagan rites surrounding Ostara.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Easter was going to fly by in a flash. Hermione accepted that truth the second Teddy crawled into their bed, and proceeded to scream about candy. Hermione jolted, and woke with a start. It was not even close to dawn, but there was no getting him to cuddle her in an attempt to go back to sleep for longer than a moment. Hermione knew it was a safety issue, but at the moment she wished he still slept in a cot and was unable to get out of it.

Unable to curb his enjoyment of the holiday, they all gathered, in various levels of sleepiness, to watch him open his basket. Other families might have insisted their children wait until dinner to open their treats, but Hermione privately felt that half the fun was waking up to a basket.

Teddy’s basket contained several chocolates that would be doled out, as he didn’t really care about it. Rather than provide him things that would simply be eaten, they bought him a set of pavement chalk designed by their favorite pranksters, and a few toys meant to be used outside. He, of course, also got the newest Mr. Puckle book, which was cleverly entitled Mr. Puckle’s Bunny Basket.

Teddy, of course, took that and hauled it over to Mum, who read a few pages before he was off again, having noticed that Cadbury and Crooks each had their own basket of gifts to explore.

It was a modest basket, because Harry still had memories of Dudley and his expansive piles of presents and was adamant that some restraint be shown, especially from Padfoot, who was already mumbling about buying Teddy his first pony. Remus was of the position that this moderation ensured that Teddy would not associate every single holiday with a parade of presents.
Cadbury and Crooks each got a present with a card that had a bunny footprint on it, consisting of a toy and a box of treats. Within minutes, Teddy was more interested in throwing Cadbury’s new ball and joining him to race after it and scramble over upturned furniture than he was in anything he had gotten. It was so much fun to see, and required a liberal use of magic to keep him on his feet and from knocking over the floral displays that banked the table.

There were flowers everywhere, most of which she had arranged previously. Some were arranged in floating bowls of water. Sipping her tea, Mum asked, “Bunny, do explain all of the flowers to me.”

Hermione knew that her mother was doing little more than quizzing her on her ability to remember flower meanings as well as their potions properties. Hermione obliged her, “The holiday, as well as being celebrated as Easter, is for Wizarding people a day of communion with the earth and the celebration of the balance of magic.”

She slanted a knowing glance at her father, who was tucking into a large plate of food. His kippers turned her stomach, but she continued on, “It’s rather like neopaganism in that we celebrate the balance between dark and light, winter and summer, life and death, in perfect harmony on this day.”

It was, for this reason, as her parents soon saw, that the Easter service was conducted outside. It was with great meaning and intention that their bare feet resting in the dewy and new grass of the gardens, flowers fragrant all around them as the sun rose in the sky, illuminating the balance of the world around them, even as Fr. Smithson proclaimed the eternal triumph of light over dark. This balance, this eventual triumph of good, was a reminder to all who sought deeper and elemental symbolism in the Resurrection.

Later, after the service, they proceeded to a festive brunch. Hermione could smell the food before she saw the festive and decorated table. Her mouth watered, and the tiny voice in the back of head and the center of her heart insisted, “Cake!”

In addition to the Simnel Cake, there was what Hermione knew to be a rich, fudge cake set on the sideboard, a jewel meant to be admired. The round confection was dotted with pastel sugar pearls and banked with pastel flowers, which carried over to the theme of the place settings, which used the floral china and the pink and white table linens. There were magical treat filled eggs for place cards and a flower above each plate. The whole center of the table was taken up by a spray of beautiful hydgenrias. There were no lilies on the table, for obvious reasons. When it was the flower that Harry rested on his parent’s graves, Hermione as general rule did not allow them to be used in decorating.

Though it was the lovely tablescape that filled her eyes, it was the glorious scent of food that filled her nostrils. For once, the scent of cooked lamb did not repulse her, and the scent of cabbage and new potatoes rested thickly in the back of her mouth. The buns took up a large platter, which sat next to even larger bowls of carrots and spring peas. The final note to fill her nostrils was the cleansing scent of a mint sauce that still smelled as though the mint belonged back in the garden.

Hermione inwardly shook her head, “There are other foods besides cake, you know.”

“Yeah.” Harry agreed from beside her as he, too, took his place at the table. “Like splits and chelsea buns.”

Bemused by the baby’s agreement, Hermione reminded him. “You’re supposed to encourage healthy eating habits, not subsisting off of cakes and other sweets, I do hope you realize.”
Harry placed his napkin on his lap, “What’s life without balance? And what’s Easter without eating half of yourself in baked goods and sweets?”

That didn’t sound like balance to her, but she turned to help Sirius settle Ted into his seat, and move it up to the table so that he could take his place between them at the round table.

As the food began to be passed around the round and informal table, Hermione contented herself with the knowledge that she was the only sensible person in her entire family. Still, this mad bunch of people were her absolute favorite. It was only a shame that she couldn’t eat her fill because her stomach was full before her eyes were, though the benefit in hosting the dinner was that she got to keep the leftovers.

Later that day, just before two o’clock, Hermione went upstairs to dress. Her church clothes had long since been discarded for the comfort of more slouchy clothing, and since both outfits would appear in the press, she couldn’t, according to dictum, wear the same outfit. And anyway, Augusta Longbottom’s Equinox Garden Party was such an event that even Hermione referred to it mentally as Lady Longbottom’s Garden Party.

Her outfit had been selected by Petra, designed by Diana, and approved by Hermione. Basically, Petra had voiced the concern that Hermione needed a dress for the garden party, as her maternity wardrobe was limited and to repeat a dress would not do. Hermione, neck deep in her work for Hogwarts that was set to begin in September, had informed the elf that she would happily approve anything that Petra thought sensible and wouldn’t demand her time. She’d received three sketches by the week’s end, which Petra narrowed down to two, and had one fitting.

It was remarkably easy to actually procure the dress in such a way that gave Hermione hope for the future. And yet, getting dressed was something of an ordeal. Mum wanted to be in on the process, and Hermione felt something like a dress up doll yet again when Petra pulled the freshly ironed and readied dress from the closets.

Though her dress was a stunningly beautiful lilac shift, simple and tasteful, it was her hat that Hermione liked best. Of course, there were any number of considerations that went into her millenary, almost as many that went into her clothing. The idea of an absurdly loud hat was an utter impossibility, for which she was glad. The simple matching lilac ribbon that wound around the crown complimented a close and upturned brim, which would not obscure her vision and would allow people to see her.

Hermione knew these pictures were going to be fodder for the press, just as this morning’s pictures would be, and she knew too, that the idea of a day off was impossible. She had taken her rest last night, and did feel better. She only wondered when holidays had stopped being days of rest for her.

Dressed and hair fixed to rest at the nape of her neck, Hermione fiddled with the edges of her sleeves, running her finger underneath the delicate edge to remove a crease at her elbow. Staring critically into the glass, she asked the woman standing behind her, “You’re certain I don’t look like a frosted grape?”

“There are no lilac fruits or vegetables, Hermione.” Mum promised her, “And even if there were, you would outshine them all.”

“Don’t mock my insecurities.” Hermione chided her mother, as Petra held out two broaches. Addressing the elf, she decided, “The pearl one, thank you. It’s more whimsical.”

So decided, Petra pinned the broach on properly. Hermione accepted her gloves, and noted that
they would never fit over her engagement ring. Carefully, Hermione tried to get it off. Her hands were slightly swollen, so this was no easy feat. Eventually, her mother attempted to help her. Between them, they got it off, and Hermione deactivated the pokey before she was shipped three rooms over.

Hermione passed her ring to Petra, and slipped on her gloves. Turning to face her mother, she asked her once again, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to come? Andi’s coming to see Ted, and you are more than welcome to come.”

Mum shook her head, “Daddy and I intend to visit with Andromeda and then perhaps take a nice stroll on the grounds. We’re having a quiet holiday.”

Hermione smiled, not quite remembering when quiet holidays had left her behind, but remembering just the same how nice they had been.

When they arrived at Snowdyn in the north of England, the press was a throng along the drive. They’d arrived after Sirius and Remus, who for some reason had embraced being earlier than they typically were to such functions. One would think that the press would be barred, but in Augusta’s mind, it was tradition to allow some visibility on this day. Hermione ended up spending a few minutes with some of the assembled crowds, and accepted flowers, one of which she charmed to the front of her clutch, to the utter delight of the gap-toothed little girl who given them to her.

Hermione understood that by giving the press just enough, they had little grounds to press for more. Once they were in the gardens, the photographers were not affiliated with any publications, and instead would release certain images with Augusta’s consent. This differed from muggle events, where press passes were the norm.

Harry’s grey morning dress went quite well with her lilac dress. As they moved inside, Hermione was struck by the familial atmosphere. There were children running and playing everywhere, with large colorful tables with activities and games like coloring and egg dying for the egg hunt and pacing that would take place on Tuesday, wherein most children would come back for a day of more casual fun. Teddy was not old enough for so much social engagement, so they felt collectively that he would have more fun at the pacing.

Spying Neville and Hannah milling about in the crowds, Hermione made her way towards them with Harry, stopping to greet and be greeted as the process required. Leaning down, Harry murmured, “Does Nev look nervous to you?”

As they walked, Hermione took in their friend in his own black morning dress. He looked, actually, rather cool and confident, comfortable in his own skin as he engaged with his grandmother’s guests. Neville was one of the most self-assured and self-aware people she knew, because that self awareness had been earned, sought, forged. “No. Why should he…”

Hermione trailed off as Harry smirked and tapped his third finger gently against her hand. That rather said it all. Hermione quickly sought out a glimpse of Hannah’s left hand, but found it bare. She supposed that Harry was informing her that Neville planned to ask Hannah for her hand sooner rather than later.

“I’ve no clue when, so don’t turn into a bookie.” Harry warned, “But I think they’ve talked about it, so it’ll be soon. I went with him last week to pick up her ring.”

Hermione wondered how on earth he could have kept such a secret from her. How could he possibly not have told her? She supposed she was still smarting for being so accustomed to the
love between Seamus and Dean that the shift in their relationship had caught her unawares.

Hermione greeted her friends quite happily, having quite missed the both of them. With school being so busy, and Hermione so occupied with her charity work and her meetings with Minerva and the educational committee, Hermione had very little time to actually socialize. Neville and Harry began to go on about Quidditch, and so Hermione and Hannah were left to their own devices. Though Hermione could not ask if Hannah knew, the look in her eyes revealed much.

“I’ve been told your redoing your nursery, Hermione.” Hannah smiled, the joy in her eyes increasing if such a thing were possible, “And if you should need someone with a keen eye for fabrics and textiles to assist you, I will happily devote myself to the task.”

Hermione smiled gently, knowing well that Hannah wanted in on the fun. “Of course! After your NEWTs, we’ll set to work.”

“Hermione.” Hannah’s solemnity was profound, “The baby is coming in July. NEWTs aren’t well and truly over until May. I cannot, as your friend, suggest you delay your renovations to that degree.”

Hermione wondered how hard it could possibly be to redo a few rooms. The elves had cleaned the whole Foundry in a matter of days. She began to ask, but Hannah was quite on a roll.

Hannah shook her head, “No, I think it would be a fine study break task.” Naturally, after a moment of boldness, Hannah retreated, suddenly realizing she had left her shell behind, “That is, if you want me there?”

“Of course I do.” Hermione assured her, and returned to the topic of a letter Hannah had sent her days ago, “What’s been going on with Madam Pince?”

Hannah regaled her with the tale of the staid librarian’s courtship that was rising to the top of the grapevine, looping her arm around Hermione’s, and leading them both toward the tent where Augusta was now holding court. On the journey there, Hermione learned that the stour librarian was being courted by a man from Dublin, with a fine antiquarian bookshop and an adult daughter. Hogwarts thought it adorable to see the softer side of the very formidable librarian.

“If she marries,” Hannah mused, as they entered the tent, “I wonder who will take the post.”

It did not occur to Hannah that a married woman might work a traditional job, or even keep a job after marriage. They all worked, in some capacity, in charity and philanthropy and political activism if they were so inclined, but very few of the women Hannah knew had a boss or something as rigid as a schedule they did not control. They, if not occupied with charity and children and home, ran interior design firm, consulting firms, acted as financial managers if they were mathematically inclined, and so on.

It occurred to Hermione that very few of her classmates and the women in years above her, at least in the more socioeconomically privileged classes did not work before marriage. Hermione supposed that she herself could not judge that, as aside from taking down Tom Riddle, she had not been employed with any task she had not chosen freely. She saw her work in educational reform and political advocacy as employment, and Harry treated it that way, so it had no occurred to her that some might not see it as such.

“Certainly not me.” Hermione assured her, “One Potter working at Hogwarts is quite enough.”

Harry was hovering and attentive enough right now that she thought if they worked together that
no one would get anything done, and the castle would be rife with giggles about how DADA was now taking place in the library. Remus, mingling in the crowd with Sirius, would no doubt have a field day over it.

Hannah smiled, “Mr. Church feels that they will hire someone young, but of course this is all speculation.”

Diana Abbott-Church was absent, regrettably, from this yearly even, though of course it was for the best of reasons. She had chosen to adhere to the practice of confinement, retiring from public life for the final trimester of her pregnancy. As she approached delivery, Hannah had told her in soft tones, she would largely draw inward even in her own home. It was a period of time, rather like the enclosure, where a soon-to-be mother was meant to commune in unity with her baby’s magic and her own magic that would soon be severed and separated.

On that score, Hermione had not decided what she was going to do, but she knew that she wasn’t going to bar Harry from her rooms, nor the delivery. It seemed unpardonably cruel to both husband and wife, though of course Hermione didn’t comment to that end. Hermione rather suspected that the Abbott-Churches were not keeping separate quarters, given her firsthand knowledge of the devotion between husband and wife. If Diana was using the time to rest and nest rather than get trussed up and make small talk, Hermione envied her.

Augusta, naturally, was her regal self. Hermione soon found herself sitting, and listening as Augusta introduced her to yet more people, and plied her with drinks. She was ever lecturing on the importance of hydration, though Hermione did not think nonalcoholic champagne very hydrating.

Harry, of course, hovered. It seemed as though the farther her pregnancy progressed, the less he was willing to be parted from her, and the more he made no apology for commanding the space around them.

By the time they were called to the seats surrounding the stage, Hermione was totally and completely worn out from making banal chit chat with everyone who came her way, though cheered by Augusta’s witty commentary, delivered in the undertones of a society dragon who knew everything about everyone, even the things they might not want known.

The silver of her flats matched the cool metal of her broach and the cool frost of the buttons on her dress, and fluttered in the gentle breeze. Hermione was glad to find their seats, if only to have a rather private conversation with Harry. In a soft tone, she revealed something she had learned a moment ago Harry, mindful of the people milling about them, removing playbills from their seats. “Were I you, I would look very carefully at the magical transportation bill. It seems Pucey has a controlling interest in the new broom factory in Slovenia.”

Harry did need to tell her that the bill was intended to decrease the import tax on foreign brooms, and thus increase profits of any manufacturer who sold them in Great Britain. Naturally, it was being touted as a cost saving law for Joe Bloggs, but it was clear that Mr. Pucey, though his friends on the WC, was seeking to line his pockets. Instead, he only smiled, and Hermione felt the comfortable pleasure of wielding power in unison for the good of their community.

Hermione turned her attention to the stage, a stone configuration with stairs. From what Hermione had learned, the stone columns and sprays of flowers and greenery harkened to the reason for this celebration, that of the Vernal Equinox, the balance found between unforgiving stone and bounteous flowers.

The play about Ceres, Pluto, and Proserpine was meant to educate the children, and entertain the
guests. Hermione knew the birthrate had been low in the aftermath of the first war, had boomed for a
time, and then slowed in recent years. Hermione expected that they were in the midst of a boom,
as she had learned indirectly of several children to come today alone. It was clear that for most
families larger families were the norm, or at least the cultural representation of the norm.

Hermione spied little girls in little smocked dresses and perfectly starched sashes. Their brothers
were also dressed to compliment, with their shorts and shining shoes, or with their morning suits,
happy to mirror their fathers and be perceived as young men. A great many wore sailor suits. Harry
murmured, “I’ll owe you a forfeit to tell Remus you want to put Teddy in one of those.”

Hermione smirked, “Done.”

As people settled down, Augusta took to the stage that was at the center of a circle marked by great
colored eggs and tall candles to thank all of her guests for coming, adding, “Now at the center of
Ostara are we, happy in this place of balance we be, as we pass from balance to the light of
summer’s bright shine, let us remember the story of Proserpine!”

Hermione glanced down at playbill Harry had passed her as Augusta moved to the side of the stage
and the curtains rose. Augusta was in charge of scenery and the various sound effect spells. Poor
Neville had clearly been roped into being Pluto, Hannah Proserpine, and Susan Bones’ elderly
relative, Ceres.

And so, the play began with much comedy and laughter as Proserpine and Pluto made bumbling
plans to tryst. In the play, as with the wizarding texts, there was no rape in the tale. Hermione did
not know if this change was historically accurate, but she believed it must be as the wizarding point
of the tale was not the seasons, but rather the balance of dark and light in life. There could be no
balance in the context of assault. Regressive though some factions of the society might be, witch
nothing in their culture conveyed that anyone should marry or abide with their abuser, or that abuse
was romantic or comical. Consent, after all, was highly cherished.

He exited stage right, with plans to meet his beloved on earth, on this the equinox, the day of
balance between his domain and hers, dark and night. These were the only days they might be
together.

It was clear, though, that instead of resting in this balance that Ceres was keen to get on with the
growing season. Proserpine protested, “Dear Mother, leave me not! I love to rest under the shadow
of that hanging cave and listen to your tales. Your Proserpine entreats you stay; sit on this shady
bank, and as I twine a wreathe tell once again…”

The whole thing was a bit overdone and wonderfully slapstick. Hannah was a consummate actress
in that she used her entire body, her face and her movements, to convey a frustration she wanted to
reveal to the audience but not to Ceres.

Her mother did not know that Proserpine wanted her to stay so that they would indwell in this day
of balance so that she might meet her lover. She did not know that she begged her to stay so that
Ceres might fall asleep and she would be free to slip below to earth for a time.

Ceres refused her daughter, “I must away — dear Proserpine, farewel! —Eunoe can tell thee how
the giants fell!”

This launched Proserpine into a great calamity. She faced either not going and abandoning her dear
Pluto on the rare possible day of their togetherness or being found out by her mother’s nymphs.
Proserpine bade Ino to gather more flowers for a crown she sought to make, “But you are idling —
look, my lap is full of sweetest flowers; — haste to gather more, that before sunset we may make
Ino, embodied by one of the Smiths, hastened away, playing the gullible guard well, to the laughter of the audience. It was at this moment that Proserpine delivered a monologue, asked the audience not to tell where she had gone, and slipped away to meet her beloved Pluto.

When Eunoe, another guard, returned along with Ino, they were all a-fluster, and zipped and zoomed with exaggeratedly silent apparition amongst the children in the audience to ask them if they knew where she had gone. Keeping their word, they giggled and shook their heads.

Ceres was distraught over her daughter’s disappearance, having been called back early. “Night shall not hide her from my anxious search. No moment will I rest, or sleep, or pause till she returns, until I clasp again my only loved one, my lost Proserpine.”

But Proserpine was not lost. With joy and wonder, she hastened to the banks of a river, where Augusta made grand use of her magic to convey the rushing of a river and the soft ambiance of animal life along the banks they were pretending to rest upon. There, Pluto pressed his suit and she consented to be his bride. They would live, said she, in this perfect moment of harmony for eternity, neither dark nor light. They would bless the earth with their union and the perfection of eternal balance of dark and light.

Of course, this was not possible, for dark could not exist with light, nor light without dark, and the balance was found not in this momentary stasis, but within respecting the cycle of the earth, with knowing that in the deepest night that the sun would rise, and knowing that high noon would fade to twilight.

But it was with the abandon of innocent love that they plotted this dream, quite unaware that even now, Ceres had been brought word of their location and was hastening to their side. She, upon seeing her beloved daughter sitting side by side with Pluto their heads adorned with wreaths meant only for weddings, was enraged.

She wept when her daughter outlaid their plan to dwell in the unity of perfect love and peaceful, harmonic, balance. Never had she explained that such things were impossible, for she had kept Proserpine in the dark about knowledge, the light that would illuminate her choices, and also expose her to the shadows of darkness. She lamented that no parent wanted to let their beloved children face the darkness. But it was, she concluded, the only way to help her to appreciate the light.

Ceres lectured her innocent daughter and her besotted swain, “Thy looks cheer me, so shall they cheer this land, which I will fly, thou gone. Nor seed of grass, or corn shall grow, thou absent from the earth; That will not reappear till your return.”

And so, with some discussion and slapstick, it was decided that in motion they would dwell, six months in light, and six months in dark, ever in motion, ever in flux. Ceres was not keen to have her future son-in-law along to her kingdom, but it was a diplomatic and artistic way of explaining how the light would resist the dark, and how the light and dark, in the end, would live in harmony.

It was in this way that magic was explained to the children, that it was what you chose to do with it that mattered. The play illustrated that Pluto was not evil because he had not made evil choices, and explored the power of choice as well as the balance between light and dark on a cosmic level. To understand the light, one must understand the dark.

Proserpine would in this way see the light in the the dark, and Pluto would come to value the night and the winter in a way that he could not. No longer would each exist separately in heaven and
below, but would mingle in the moments that marked the passage of time on earth. Ceres, as all of humanity, would learn to exist in the occasionally uncomfortable truths of this commingled world.

Hermione had thoroughly enjoyed the play, so happy to see the children engaged and shouting and engaging with the characters. Augusta’s spell work to set the scenery had added such levity and humor to the performance. It was something she knew she would look forward to next year.

Hermione was mingling with other guests and their children when Mr. Church hastened discreetly to her side.

“Your Grace—” He asked quickly, no matter how many times she asked him to call her Hermione, he reverted to formality when stressed, “I must ask you if you have seen my sister-in-law.”

Hermione answered honestly before she thought better of it, “No, I haven’t.” Realizing that Hannah was likely with Neville and therefore likely did not want a brother for a chaperone, she promised, to Mr. Church’s visible relief, that she would find her.

Harry played along, and they set off away from the tents and the party towards the greenhouse. “Poor Mr. Church,” His handsome face had been awash in worry that no doubt reflected his thoughts about his impending paternity, “about to become a father and feels as though he can’t keep track of Hannah.”

“Well, she likely gave him the slip.” Harry grinned, “Not that I blame them. If we’d had more than a few days, I think you and I would have made a sport of it.”

Hermione laughed. Their sole attempt to give Augusta the slip on their wedding day had not gone well. Still, it probably was true.

They walked along the paths that led to the greenhouses, not really looking for Hannah, but knowing that they would bump into the couple sooner or later, talking about everything and nothing. It was, after the tenseness of their discussion last night, good to settle in with one another.

They were wandering in companionable silence through the rose hothouse when they turned a corner, and very slowly and carefully backed away, saying nothing. The people before them deserved privacy at what was clearly, clearly, a very special moment.

Walking quickly the other way, they both threw up a half-dozen privacy spells, as Hannah and Neville had likely been too engaged with one another to remember such precautions, and raced to the front of the greenhouses. Once back on the footpath, they reflected upon what they had seen. “Well.” Hermione declared primly, “You know there’s only one way to legalize an engagement.”

The ring sparkling on Hannah’s hand as it twined around Neville’s neck to pull him towards her had rather given the reason for their embrace away.

“Yeah.” Harry grinned, “You know what? I’ve always said Neville had more guts than me, and now I know it.”

They would not have dared to even think of kissing so passionately upon their engagement, but Hermione remembered that soft brush of of their lips with a fondness and a wonder that was not invalidated or paled by later experiences or her present knowledge.

Hermione smiled, and shifted against Harry to kiss him gently. “I love you, anyway.”

His hand found his way to her back to gently support her against him, the expanse of her womb
alive and very apparent between them, “I’d storm the gates of hell and bring heaven tumbling to earth for you, Hermione.”

She knew he would, knew that he had done so much with only her friendship and her love to sustain him as he went forward into the unknown to face death. She knew that he knew she would do the very same for him. Hermione just kissed him again, saying what she could not in words, and whispered, “I’d settle for being in the room when you drop sneaky hints to Neville.”

“I’m not going to tell the poor guy we saw them in a passionate embrace likely moments after Hannah’s ring was on her finger.” Harry offered her his arm, “You’ll have to content yourself with tales and needling over the stag night Ron will plan.”

Hermione forced a put upon sigh. “Coward.”

“Discretion is the better point of valor, Beloved.” Harry grinned. “And anyway, I’m more interested in getting back to the party to see Abbott and Augusta start clucking over a wedding.”

Hermione did not tell Harry that Hannah would certainly not return to the party, as the engagement would likely be formally announced later, and a proper party given where it would be celebrated by friends and family alike. These moments to adjust were for Neville and Hannah alone.

Still, when they went back into the party to make their goodbyes, Hermione assured Mr. Church that Hannah had gone up to the house and that all was well. She’d make her way there, after all.

When Augusta stared at her with a question in her eyes, Hermione said nothing that could possibly be taken one way or another, but nodded sympathetically when Augusta declared her grandson very rude indeed for abandoning his guests. Hermione was saved from further comment when Neville came slipping up to his grandmother’s side to assisting in providing farewells to their guests.

She did, however, go home to find that her DA coin was warm with a recent message from Hannah Abbott. It read, in sweepingly happy block letters, *Will you be my Pronuba? I’m GETTING MARRIED!*

Hermione had only one word to say in response. *YES!*

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Rita was a punctual woman.

She had not been anything of a punctual girl, but she had become punctual over time. It hadn’t been easy, being roommates with Bella Black, and if there was one thing she had learned straight off was that punctuality helped her to one up that lazy bitch on a regular basis. It was so easy to turn in assignments just a bit sooner, to be up just a bit earlier, to primly turn in at just the right moment.

Where it counted, Rita was the consummate Slytherin. She was driven by duty and honor, tradition and ambition. It was her duty to put Bella in her place, and her honor to enjoy the process. Bella gave it as good as she got, but Rita had come out ahead. Rita had been sly, cunning, and had won in the end. Bella had submitted to the He Who Must Not Be Named, and had gotten nowhere save a cold grave. A Slytherin woman submitted to no man.

Rita would never let it show, but she mourned the Bella she had once known. Cold in her grave now, she had once been a girl just brimming with potential. And it had been snuffed out after it had been twisted by the He Who Must Not Be Named for his own ends. In some way, Rita had loved Bella, loved her with a fierce passion that had manifested as competition and rage. There was no capacity for love in Bella, and Rita had never sought her regard in that fashion. Still, she
recognized even now that Bella had shaped her path.

Her path was staid now, even as she was the foremost journalist in wizarding Britain. She had publications in *Witch Weekly*, *The Daily Prophet* and was a frequent correspondent on the airwaves. And yet, her days began in the same way.

In her flat, she woke at six and fed her pet tarantula Nellie, day by day by day. She then had her shower, and dressed impeccably before making her way to the office. In the morning, she attended to office tasks and in the afternoons, she interviewed people and attended events. Rita thought the postwar focus on home and hearth to be deadly dull, but understandable. The people were being reactionary and putting on rose colored glasses.

Ever driven by the truth, Rita was determined to peel away those rose-hued glasses and force the people to face reality of the lives of the people they thought ought to lead their community. By and large, the people applauded her efforts. Her stories sold issues. Even if no one really wrote as they had done before the war, Rita knew that sales said it all.

Rita was happy to be writing a great many social issue stories, as it gave her a platform to make the truth heard. At least one plus side of this postwar focus on home and hearth enabled a discussion of domestic discourse and brought it into the forefront of political life. Rita was a pureblood, and she understood the lessons that others were quick to forget. The drawing room was, and would remain, a battlefront.

It was with this thought in mind that Rita arrived for tea at Willard House. She arrived exactly at 3:57, a few minutes early by design. As she was escorted to the rose garden along the back of the house, Rita couldn’t help but make notes for the article that was surely to be born of this meeting.

*Carpets worn, in good repair. Likely not replaced since 1949, or thereabouts. Thread count high, carpets a deep blue, speaks to a postwar color choice. Disregarding of rationing? Lamps, plain. Paintings, snobbish. Open door to music room suggests is being used as playroom, somewhat haphazardly converted. Appears young Mr. Lupin is fond of books. Ginger Cat from Hell is sleeping on said books. Animal neglect? Lack of proper bed? Destruction of property? Ill-mannered child? Household staff resent young, inexperienced, mistress?*

Rita scowled inwardly. Her editors were completely and totally hemming in her journalistic freedoms. At the most, she could only hint at the things she saw, could only hide her keen and sharp observations under layers of chilly decorum. It was horrible, and an affront to journalism.

Rita smiled as politely as possible when she was shown to the tea table. Hermione Granger was sitting there, looking so positively fecund that it was all Rita could do not to stare. Her body, never slim or lithe, was rounded with child. Despite rumors of lack of access to contraception and a slip-up leading to her oft alluded to state, Rita knew Granger well enough to know that the child she carried had been her fully informed and consenting choice. No doubt she had planned it, because Rita knew that Granger would never let a law control her body.

Rita wasn’t stupid. A woman only got pregnant so shortly after her marriage to shore up her position, to make divorce impossible, to declare her power in a way so elemental that it was base. Come what may, Hermione Granger held the future of the House of Potter in her arms, and to her music they would dance.

Rita had once had quite a lot of respect for the Granger girl. She had seen the same potential in her that she had once seen in Bella, but like Bella, Hermione Granger had allowed herself to be swept up by relationships, by loyalty, by what she professed to all and sundry to be duty and love. Bella had done the same thing, and Hermione was not so far off from being cut from the same cloth.
In truth, she still respected her. It had taken guts to clip Rita’s wings. It had taken a merciless streak
a mile wide to capture her in a jar, to make her dance to her tune. For a long while in that jar, it had
been almost possible to see hints of Bella, her Bella, in Granger’s eyes. During those long months,
she had thought often of her Bella and what she would have said, the look on her youthful face as a
dark mirth would bloom in her eyes.

They sat down to a cream tea. Granger was effortless, even in this, spooning bits of the cream and
jam onto her plate before spreading the jam and cream on her scone. They discussed a lot of
nothing, the weather, and various articles. It was fine, it was all fine, because her observations of
the house, even just on the short journey to the conservatory, had given her enough fuel for
countless stories.

On the side table rested a beautiful arrangement of bugloss and yarrow broke up the roses and
ornate flowers that spread out before them just beyond a glass wall.

As they consumed tea, Rita let it slip, “But of course I am all that is fair, and polite, even when
dealing with the most difficult of subjects. A certain sensitivity is required, as I know you agree.”

“Rita.” Granger set down her teacup gently, “I had no idea that you felt your journalistic integrity
to be hampered.”

Rita just bet she hadn’t. She and her letters and her threats of litigation whenever she so much as
mentioned Edward proved that to be a lie. Rita had been called into the Editor’s office more than
once in recent months, and she knew just who was behind it. Rita had to keep her teeth from
grinding together, “It is a sad fact of my reality, but as any good journalist, I press on regardless.
The truth must be spoken.”

Granger nodded, “I so agree. I had no idea that your editors were editing you at all. I fully believed
the readership of The Prophet was getting your unvarnished opinions and insights.”

Rita sipped her tea, and considered how to spin this stroke of good fortune. Perhaps playing on
Granger’s burgeoning maternal sensibilities would not be amiss. So decided, she demurred,
“Indeed not.”

Granger’s eyes flashed, and in that moment Rita knew she had won. It was mere icing on the cake
when she replied, “We live in a country that is defined by a free press. I want you to know that I
will not be a party to censorship. In fact,” She seemed to hesitate, and it was all Rita could do not to
show her hand, not to pounce, not to push. “I want you to write anything you want, anything at all,
about me. I won’t be a part of journalistic oppression.”

Rita could not help the smirk that bloomed on her face, though she quickly hid it. This was a chess
match, and poor Granger didn’t even know she was playing. “You’re kind, but my editor…”

Granger, in that way that said she had quite overestimated her own power, replied quickly, “You
leave your editor to me. I’ll even write a letter for you to take back with you, should you be willing
to wait.”

Oh, poor, poor, manipulated Granger. Well, there was a sucker born every minute, and Rita was
too honorable not to give her just what she had asked for, and so she agreed to waiting after they
finished their tea. “You mean to say I have your blessing to write anything I like?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Granger sipped her tea, totally unaware that she was playing into Rita’s
hand so well that Rita could scarce believe it. Granger clearly had gone soft, retired her strength
and her power behind the image of a vapid society matron. Bella had never done that, not even
during her political alliance with LeStrange.

Granger continued, unaware of Rita’s thoughts, “You are driven by the truth, and so you will write nothing but your unvarnished and unapologetic truth. You will write what you perceive about what you know. It isn’t as though you would willingly debase yourself with rumor and innuendo, is it?”

Rita did smirk then, “My, how perceptive you are, ma’am.” She refused to call a teenage girl ‘Your Grace,’ refused to live a lie, between them, not when it didn’t suit her. Hermione Granger and Harry Potter’s marriage had been, and would remain, a farce to circumvent the Marriage Law.

Granger accepted this compliment, backhanded though Rita knew it was in her heart, as her due. “It’s what people want, isn’t it?” She nibbled at her cake on the edge of a dainty dessert fork, “The truth?”

Rita nodded, unable to believe that she had just been given carte blanche by Hermione Granger. She could already see it. No longer would she have to make up sources to give credence to her own perceptions. She would put them in black and white unapologetically. No longer would she have to resort to publishing pictures of an uninteresting child when the fact was that more interesting snaps had been barred from publication. She would hide behind nothing, she would be forced to hide no longer.

“Speak your truth, then.” Granger blandly noted, “And I will have no further quarrel with you.”

Rita, having been given such a gift in finding her opponent without fangs, conceded a small measure. In this fashion, she would come up tops, and she could always make sure that people knew that she was the upstanding journalist at The Prophet. “In truth, I have often felt badly about publishing pictures of Edward Remus.”

She felt no such thing, but as a consummate Slytherin she knew that you sometimes had to sacrifice a few pawns to win a game. In doing so, she lulled Granger into a false sense of security. Rita was gratified by her response.

Granger didn’t even seem to blame her. It was masterful on Rita’s own part. Granger blamed the editors. “Well, you’ll no longer feel so forced, will you? You’ll have no further reason to bother with stories that don’t matter to you, unless they’re assigned.”

Rita did not scoff outwardly. She had her editor wrapped around her perfectly polished pinky. He was more interested in screwing his secretary and smoking cigars to bother with assigning stories, unless of course, one of the First Houses or the political elite complained.

Rita went in for the kill as she ate the last of her cake. It was sinfully rich, but nowhere near as enjoyable as the ease with which Hermione Granger wrote a letter stating that she would oppose no story Rita wrote so long as it expressed her own full view of the truth, and contained no commentary on or photographs of the children.

Rita Skeeter was a firm believer in the truth. She believed that people had the right to the truth, no matter how ugly. She hadn’t roomed with Bella Black for seven years and not learned what it was to hold to the truth when everyone around you were crying otherwise. A chorus of people telling the truth did not make it true.

No, Rita believed in the truth, and she lived by the truth. The truth was that Hermione Granger was nothing like her Bella had been, and even so, all she could see was yet another ruthless and valiant young woman mowed down by the wagon she’d hitched her horse to. When she Floo’d back to her office, for a brief moment she left herself breathe in the memory of patchouli.
Later that night, when she raised a shot glass in triumph in her empty lounge, only Nellie heard her say, “To what was, is, and could have been.”

When she blacked out from drinking on an empty stomach, Rita was certain she heard chocolatey laughter, laughter that had been twisted over time. It was a reminder of a truth that remained only in Rita’s mind.

Hermione, on her way to her meeting with Kingsley and the educational committee, stopped by Harry’s office. In his shirtsleeves, Harry looked up from his conference table as she came into the room. “Meeting with Kings?”

Hermione nodded. She felt a frisson of satisfaction humming in her veins as she shut the door behind her and warded it. “I’ve totally solved our Rita problem.” She crossed the room as Harry pushed his chair back from the table.

He gently pulled her down into his lap, and let his lips fall to her ear as his hand found the spot where the baby was making themselves known with a sharp jab. “So, are you going to let me in on your master plan?”

“It seems that dear Rita’s editors have been holding her back. I gave her carte blanche.” Hermione revealed, “I told her to speak her truth, no holds barred. I claimed it was journalistic censorship.”

Harry froze, tense until he saw through what she had done. “You basically shredded any credibility she had been given. You…” Harry pressed a jubilant kiss to her mouth, “You played her so well she has no idea that you gave her the rope to hang herself. Now, just imagine the headlines.”

“Oh,” Hermione purred, quite happy with herself. “I have. I have. Now that Rita’s totally in charge of what she writes, you know her credibility will tank. Soon, we’ll be seeing nothing but pointed rants and vendettas, interspersed with nothing but the most outrageous lies that no one will believe, even if Rita does. They’ll sell, but as nothing more than jokes, if that.”

Readership would go down, and more than that, the threat of Rita’s innuendos would fade. She would become yet another banal or possibly even batty writer who dissected their daily lives, with none of the smoke and mirrors and hints that her readers ate up.

Rita, Hermione knew, thought her readers turned to her for the truth. Hermione knew better. Her readers turned to her for salacious gossip, the barest suggestion of truth, the mirrors and facade she so strongly erected around a single grain of truth she held secreted to her chest like power. In divulging that truth she thought she had, she would break the spell she had woven over some subset of the population.

“You’ve allowed her to be who she is.” Harry grinned, “She’s the anti-Xeno Lovegood.”

Hermione didn’t think that quite fair. Xeno had beliefs, had convictions, had truths he would never sacrifice. Xeno had believed in them when no one else had, and had understood the Hollows. “Xeno is a good man.”

“Surely there are parallels there.” Harry posited, “Though I hardly think Rita is going to like when her readership tanks because she stakes her credibility on the idea you’ve been placed under the Imperious and live to do my bidding.”

“We’ll see if she’s willing to live and die behind her truth.” Hermione returned, knowing that she had taken a gamble. It was entirely possible that this plan could backfire, but at least now Rita was honor-bound to write the truth and stick by it, unless she wanted her agreement to blow up in
Hermione, problem solved and plan revealed, made move to stand up. She had to be crushing Harry, who while solid with sinew and height, was not meant to be keeping someone of her girth and heft on his lap.

Harry gently held her back, “What would people say if they knew how sly and cunning their Gryffindor Princess truly is?”

Hermione’s heart pounded when he continued pressing kisses to her pulse point, “How does it feel to outsmart her so well and so fully that she remains blissfully unaware of your machinations and your triumph?”

Hermione did not let on that it felt good to know that she had Rita just where she wanted her without said reporter being any the wiser. She did not allow that it was a thrill to lull Rita into believing that she was getting exactly what she wanted. The fact that she derived pleasure from justice was only sensible, was only right. She did not ask why he’d ever doubted that she would win, because she knew truly that he never had. Even when he had not seen the method behind her choices, he had trusted them.

Hermione smirked, before turning to kiss Harry properly, “Everyone knows Gryffindors are brash.”

What people did not frequently remember was that Gryffindors were, as a rule, driven by justice. And sometimes, sometimes, justice was swift, and justice was silent and sweet.

Chapter End Notes

Hermione is such a BAMF. I also had a ton of fun writing from Rita's POV.

Also. ALSO. Neville <3 Hannah.
I mean, when I think about it, what's more important? Clothes - or the miracle of new life?

Chapter Summary

“I mean, when I think about it, what's more important? Clothes - or the miracle of new life?” -- Sophie Kinsella, Confessions of a Shopaholic

Chapter Notes

I know Bugaboo didn't exist in the late 90s in the UK, but that Donkey rolls like a dream, okay? Forgive that anachronism.

Hermione's wearing something like this or this in terms of general style.

Hohenheim College is a nod to this guy. Obviously it's not a real college at Cambridge, though it is a real place, and University.

The baby consultant Helen books is real, though, though it is not near Sloane Square.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The 27th week of her pregnancy was a momentous one, and it ended in mere days.

She sat in the bath, and looked at the way her body crested like a mountain in the water, knowing that the start of her third and final trimester was imminent. She leaned back against the floating pillow above the rim of the tub, and closed her eyes. “I plan everything, and I failed to anticipate this.” She gestured with a relaxed and weighted arm to Harry, who was cleaning his teeth not four feet away.

“So you want something you didn’t know you wanted.” Harry spat out his toothpaste. There were no oral cleaning charms in their household, as some habits forged in muggle childhoods died hard, and some refused to die at all. He turned on the water again to rinse his mouth, “This is not a huge deal, Hermione. Don’t make it one.”

Hermione huffed. That was easy enough for him to say, when he wasn’t the one who had the future of an entire educational system in his hands, when he wasn’t the one who had no nursery in which to place their baby because he'd agreed to some remodel that her mother was going on about incessantly, when he wasn’t the one who’d come to a startling conclusion in the blink of an eye.

Harry swigged his mouthwash, swished, and expectorated it. “You’re making this a big deal. I can see it in your face.”

Hermione did not retort that her eyes were closed and she was the picture of serene relaxation. Ron had come for dinner, and the evening had passed in the unity of their togetherness. His stories of his work typically invigorated her, but with each tale he told she had simply become more and more and more aware of her mounting exhaustion.
She was not making a big deal of anything, only realizing that there was less time to do things than she had realized, especially if she gave in to absurdly appealing notions. They needed, more than ever, to get ready for this baby.

He wasn’t the one who had responsibilities he wanted to set aside for a few weeks to grow their baby, and rest with Teddy, and do nothing more than nest. She had never heard of anything more indulgent, indolent, and quite so appealing. She wasn’t saying she wanted to lock herself in her chambers and conduct a novena, but she did want to take some time to focus on getting things ready for the baby.

Damn Diana Abbott-Church and her letters extolling the virtues of confinement. She was Hermione Granger. She didn’t retire from anything, let alone the world. She was on the verge of revolutionizing wizarding and muggle relations, and she was mere months from starting Uni and working on her law degree. She was a take charge person, a warrior. And yet, she found herself utterly exhausted, and desirous of a break. Her tumble into bed Easter Eve had made that entirely clear. She needed a rest, and in order to rest, she needed to pull things together in a big way.

She was going to attempt some sort of confinement, even if that only meant clearing her diary and rescheduling the endless rounds of charity visits and accompanying photo calls. She had lost her bloody fucking mind.

She opened her eyes to inform Harry of her qualms none too gently when she saw that he was standing before her, a look of boyish hope upon his face, “I think we should go to Duntulm after my NEWTs. From now until then, we can get things ready to go, and then we’ll just go, and Smith-Webster can Floo up for your checks.”

Hermione considered the idea. Duntulum was the castle on Skye. To muggles, it looked like ruins near the sea, and was shrouded in mystery and supposed hauntings, propped up by those in the know, its air of foreboding enhanced by the wards. To them, however, it was a small and utterly charming castle that was entirely suited to a nice bit of escapism and rest. The grounds were beautiful and the scenery restful. It was a wonder what charms and wards could do to one’s perceptions.

Hermione reached for Harry’s hand to pull herself to standing and accepted the towel he wrapped around her, which was actually a bath sheet because towels covered nothing any longer. Water dripping around her, she lumbered her way out of the bath, “I think that might be nice.” Hermione’s mind was already making a list of the things she would need to handle before they could leave so she scrambled into a nightgown after applying a drying spell to her body. “But for now, you need to go revise.”

Harry sighed as he helped to settle her nightgown and tied the ribbon at the voluminous waist. “You know, I regret Ron’s leaving me to face NEWTs alone deeply.”

Hermione noted that he no longer even mentioned wishing she was there, and although she missed his affirmations of that fact, she knew it had not changed. Hermione had gathered that as her pregnancy progressed, he had begun to feel that she spent enough time in Minerva’s office planning Cultural Studies. If anything, she had confirmed that assumption with their earlier discussion and his assertion that wanting a break was not a big deal.

Hermione allowed Petra to pass her all manner of face washing items as he returned to the library and to his revision. Her skin was evening out, but her face was oily and rounding out. She sat down at her dressing table after her face was suitably clean, and Petra made short work of putting her hair back and getting it ready so that it would be manageable come the morning. This took a few minutes, and so while she worked, Hermione levitated a quill and parchment and began to
make a list of things to do.

The Easter party on the gardens of Snoedyn had been tightly controlled by security and informal. Hannah had left her gloves on in public, but she had pulled Hermione aside and gushed, showing her the ring she couldn’t bear to take off until her father made the announcement, as was custom. She glowed with her happiness, and Hermione now knew that the wedding would take place next spring. Hermione was utterly determined that Hannah should have exactly the wedding of her dreams, and knew that there would be a lot of planning for her duties as pronuba.

There was to be a private dinner of celebration next week, and an announcement made by Hannah’s father to the press, complete with a formal photograph that would be released. Hannah, therefore, would not be compelled to hide her ring for long.

However, beyond the announcement and the dinner, all public and more formal ceremonies did not begin until the betrothal, as magical custom saw engagement as a more modern convention that while a legal status, was not binding. Still, there were rules that governed it, and one such custom was than an engagement was an intensely private matter.

Augusta was at her most commanding, and was entirely glad to have some time to plan things out properly. Hermione was going to be doing a lot of the organization for Hannah’s parties and the surrounding events, but Augusta and Diana Abbott-Church and her father would do most of the planing of the ceremonies and for that Hermione was glad, as Hannah and Neville were having both a bonding and a religious ceremony. The wedding was likely to be a huge event, at least on par with the planned Windsor and Rhys-Jones wedding that was all over the muggle press.

Hermione had never been quite so happy for Neville. He would be a very good husband, and he was an amazing friend. Hermione had stood with him in so much pain, in challenge and loss, and now she was happy to stand by his side to witness this joy. She looked forward to his happiness as acutely as she anticipated her own. Both he and Hannah deserved every bit of life joy would bring, and somehow all of the pain made this all the sweeter. If there was anyone who deserved a happily ever after, it was Neville and Hannah.

Hermione’s list, despite the lack of urgency relating to the wedding, was massive. They had nothing for the baby. Hermione knew that the cradle was waiting and its linens would be made out of her dress’ ruins. She also knew that Teddy’s clothes and Silver Cross were waiting to be unpacked, but a baby needed more than the few baby items that had been in good enough repair to salvage after being hauled around on the run, and a Silver Cross pram.

Once her hair was done, she proceeded to her desk and pulled out a thick book marked Baby and turned to her carefully researched and annotated section on infant goods. She had read most everything she could get her hands upon about various items, and knew that the time had come to bite the bullet and commit to items and to work with Harry to make a shopping guide.

Shrugging on a dressing gown, she asked Petra, “Please bring that notebook, some stationary, and my diary to the library. We’ve got to plan some shopping for this week. I’ll want to invite my mother and Ellie, Augusta, Hannah, and Eleanor.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Petra got on with the task. She was very organized and so this of course simply meant gathering various items from their orderly places and accompanying Hermione to the library, where she joined Harry, seeking his opinion and input when he did not look engrossed in revision.

Hermione knew that it was likely Ellie would decline her invitation, as she was busy with school. She was set on matriculating at Cambridge along with Hermione, and she was putting every bit of
her effort into her exams and end of term marks. Hermione was confident in Ellie’s abilities, and was quite certain that she had done better in her interviews than Hermione had done.

Hermione knew that choosing to apply for a place at a muggle college within Cambridge rather than College was something of a shock to the wizarding community at Cambridge, but she desperately wanted a place to feel as though she was being evaluated on merit and not reputation. Thereby, she had put her hat in the ring for muggle colleges, after working with Minerva to produce muggle copies of her records and other documents.

Hermione sighed the letters that Petra had written out, and passed them back to be sent out. Ellie was not likely to come, but that didn’t matter. Inviting the person to come along was entirely the point. She wished she could invite Ginny, but she knew that shopping was going to be stressful, and she did not want to add to the complexity of the day. Furthermore, from the few conversations they had from time to time, it was clear that the baby wasn’t interesting to Ginny.

Hermione thought it best to take her to lunch or something, sometime soon.

Hermione thought that a day of shopping was a good compromise. Women like Diana Abbott-Church selected their baby items in the early part of their confinement with help from personal shoppers or people from the stores who came to them, but Hermione wanted to go out and go shopping in muggle London, and possibly magical London if she could avoid the press. Naturally, she wanted Harry to come, and so by the time they went to bed, Harry had caught up with his charms revision and Hermione had begun to plan a very nice day of shopping, making sure that Petra would clear any date she chose with him, as well.

Her mother was the first to owl a reply for herself and for Ellie. They would be, of course, utterly delighted, etc. etc. Hermione left it to Petra to organize a date and time, stipulating that they would also include a celebratory brunch somewhere if Hannah consented to join them. She did, of course, and so Petra took care of making reservations for them.

It felt nice, Hermione thought as she fell asleep, to be so efficiently handling things. She was hopeful that the momentum would continue. If nothing else, she had begun to walk in the right direction, and that was something she relished. A job begun was half done, after all.

Hermione thought, with the engagement to consume her, that Augusta simply would not have the time, the energy, or even the desire to devote her time to Hermione’s concerns. Hermione would not have blamed her.

And yet, it seemed that she was as focused as ever. Hermione selfishly was glad to know that she maintained her position in Augusta’s regard, though she could have done without being quite so forcefully told that people put their shingles out to be hired and patronized.

Hermione sought to further explain her query into what she might do, “I think I might need help with the nursery design. I wanted to do it myself but time being what it is, I—” Aware she was babbling, Hermione composed herself with silence.

This morning, she had pulled out countless interior design manuals and texts, and had begun to try and see what she might make of the nursery. When she’d tried a simple painting spell, the wall had come out streaky, as though somehow she had taken a mundane roller and not applied coats evenly, and the color spell she had used had come out a sickly grey rather than a soft green.

She had then made every effort to apply a carpet removal spell, in order to remove the carpets that
had been put down in the closets at some point. It was 70s carpeting, with a very high pile, and Hermione suspected that Mr. Prongs had picked them as a great joke to annoy his mother.

She’d planned to frame a square each for Harry, Remus, and Sirius, but upon trying to remove the carpets, she’d set the carpet on fire. Luckily, only one corner was singed, but the whole escapade that had led to the whole wing needing to be aired out had rather put paid to her idea of doing it themselves.

Augusta understood. “I’ve long thought Helen to be sensible in her advice. I’m glad to see you taking it. Ernie Macmillan’s aunt, Susannah, is an interior designer. She finished Hogwarts a few years after Frank and studied in Italy and France. Very lovely woman, but of course you’ve met. She’ll do your nursery.”

Hermione had met her briefly at a tea, and had come to understand that Susannah Fawley, nee Macmillan, was highly sought after in their community for her artistic vision. Hermione began to voice concern that she might be fully booked, but Augusta anticipated a concern Hermione did not have, rather than the one she did.

“She’ll carry out your wishes, Hermione.” Augusta assured her, “She’ll merely execute your vision properly.”

Harry was terribly excited about the nursery. He’d had vague notions of painting it himself, dragging Ron along for the ride. They’d have to talk about his own expectations, but there was no reason they couldn’t meet with Susannah. At the very least she could coordinate the process and not burn down the house.

“She’ll have an opening, do you suppose?” Hermione asked, sipping her tea.

Augusta smiled, and wrapped her fingers gently around the handle of her teacup, “Dear, anybody with half a brain would jump to assist you.” She sipped her tea, “Susannah is no idiot. Had I a younger son, I would have strongly encouraged a match.”

Coming from Augusta, this was high praise indeed.

Hermione found Augusta’s assessment of Susannah Macmillan Fawley to be entirely correct. She was a very charming, down to earth woman with a notebook at the ready and a willingness to get down to the task at hand without boring small talk. Dressed in comfortable muggle clothing that displayed a penchant for 1970s flair, her peasant dress at once colorful and practical. She carried a leather notebook and a fountain pen, a concession to the idea that she frequently wrote while walking, as Hermione would soon learn.

She was the one to ask for her non-disclosure agreement before they could come to the topic. She further assured them that any staff working on the project would be bound to the confidentiality clauses of their contracts, and any bespoke craftspeople they worked with had also made agreements to that end. It was clear that Susannah did not trust her clients and their spaces to anyone seeking publicity or flash.

They had a lot of fun, Hermione thought, because they were decisive people and made no apologies for it. Susannah didn’t apologize for her expertise, and made no bones about telling Harry when something wouldn’t work, or reminding Hermione that they had to refine their ideas and let one thing be their focus for now. It was, she said with a smile, what she was being compensated to do.
Hermione trusted her instantly, and felt a lot better knowing that she was quite serious about what she did, and was not airy fairy in the least. The only truly artistic person she knew on a personal level was Luna, and Hermione did not think that she could work with a designer whose timetable would be wrecked by wrackspurts. She loved Luna, but she did not think the idea of having such an innovative and unique designer would go well.

They first toured the spaces that were to be done up. Teddy’s room, the nursery’s main room and the baby’s room were included, as well as Eleanor’s suite, which included a bedroom, small sitting room, and her bath. The other rooms, such as the schoolroom and the other bedrooms were left well enough alone. Susannah had enough on her plate.

Harry was quick to assure her that she had access to all of the furniture they were not using, and Hermione knew that there wouldn’t be much, if any, new furniture purchased, not when they made it clear that they wanted to use what they had, just in a way that made sense for them and wasn’t a carbon copy of the space as it had once been. It was clear that without saying much, Susannah had come to see quite clearly that her preference was for the good, sturdy, sort of furniture rather than anything new.

To her credit, Susannah paid the ruined carpet and the hastily repaired walls no mind. She didn’t even blink when she saw the charred spot on the floor, nor when Hermione insisted that the carpet be cut into liberal pieces and placed in hanging archival boxes. Hermione suspected that she heard, and accommodated, far stranger requests.

As Diana did, Susannah had a bag. Whereas Diana’s bag looked like, and probably was, a vintage Kelly bag, Susannah’s bag reminded Hermione of a Longchamp tote. She enlarged a table that she removed from a zippered compartment, and spread wallpapers and fabrics and all manner of bits and bobs to get a sense of their preferences. She watched their reactions carefully, watched what they mentioned they thought went together, and asked questions so skillfully that Hermione hardly felt as though she had asked them anything.

This was the information that she would use to create the boards and drawings that would guide the projects. Books of fabrics and paint chips and wallpapers, rather than flying in the air as they did in Diana’s flamboyant style, stacked themselves neatly upon the table in categories and groups of colors and coordinating sets.

Susannah did not seem daunted, but rather energetic and invigorated at the scope of the project before her and her team. She, Hermione noted, had been drawing the layout of the rooms as they’d walked, her pencil moving even as she had talked to them and left no corner of the rooms unobserved. Hermione could not see the tiny notes in the margins, but it was clear from just listening to the way that she spoke, and seeing the way she left no detail unexplored, that Susannah knew what she was about in this task.

The first thing they agreed upon was to incorporate the existing design elements, and leave the integrity of the Foundry in place, meaning that the whole project was about refreshing an already lovely space versus any major changes. The character of the nursery was, as Susannah phrased it, “meant to be enhanced and highlighted, not butchered by modernism and minimalism.”

Hermione was glad she had cut her teeth working in historical houses and had grown up in one, because she had an innate respect and admiration for the wall sconces and the hidden storage spaces in the walls, and the window seats. She was incredibly knowledgeable, not only of her craft, but also of the history of the Foundry and the way it had been designed and expanded.

The simplest place to begin was with Eleanor’s suite. Ted’s room would need to be done quickly, as they were not keen to unsettle him before the coming upheaval of the baby’s arrival.
With a grin that revealed just how much Harry had planned and schemed, he told Susannah, “You’ll have the run of the place for most of May and June, as we’ll be away.”

This suited Susannah admirably, who made note of the dates Harry named, and asked them what thoughts they had insofar as Eleanor’s spaces. It was clear that, while Susannah was getting a feel for their vision and their desires, that nothing could be permanently designed today. They ran through some ideas, surely, but Susannah’s real work would begin when she returned to her studio and conferred with her staff.

Hermione began, “She is mundane, so the design will have to be cognizant of that fact.” Hermione revealed this information so that things like switches and faucets and handles would rely on manual functionality, and so that design elements would not be expanded by the idea that Eleanor could summon something or the like, “She was, however, raised in a wizarding home. She’s only asked there be space for her phonograph and records, as well as a dedicated space for her sewing, which she quite enjoys.”

With that information, Susannah promised build up a design board and present it for their approval via owl when she sent the same for the other spaces as well. Harry asked her to please consult Eleanor if any concerns or questions came up, but it was clear that no such issues were likely to happen. It was abundantly clear that Susannah was used to high-profile and high-stakes jobs, and found some measure of satisfaction in them.

They left the initial meeting, escorting Susannah to the Floo, hopeful that her designs would speak to them. At least now, Hermione had some idea of the colors she had selected, and was relaxed with the knowledge that everything would be put into place for her and Harry to edit, refine, and make their own.

“I feel very accomplished.” Harry declared, “Also, I’m glad we didn’t have to furnish a house.”

Hermione grinned, “If you want to put together a cot, you can for Willard House. We’re getting one tomorrow, you know.”

“Just out of curiosity, how many pages of notes did you make?” Harry was quite amused by her notes on baby gear, something he thought pointless, since she already knew what she liked. That said, she had taken Sirius’s advice to heart. They didn’t have to choose just anything this time, and if they were going to pick something, they were going to do so mindfully. And anyhow, researching came as naturally as breathing to her.

Hermione tilted her head, “On cots? Five pages.” Misinterpreting his expression, she added, “I’ve condensed by research into a handy shopping resource.”

“I’m not sure if you’re looking forward to this, or preparing for an utter bloodbath.” Harry mused.

Hermione grinned at his innocence. “It’s both, of course. Decidedly both.”

She was so happy they were going to do this together. She knew they weren’t ever going to be average parents living in the suburbs of London, taking their children to Guides, but at least they could and would make this process their own.

Hermione, hearing the door open in the nursery’s sitting room, pressed to return Harry’s kiss, and called out, “Teddy Bear! Come and see the paint chips for your bedroom, love.”

Remus was just on time with Teddy and Sirius. Hermione accepted Teddy into her embrace, who launched himself at her, and looked to the gentleman before her, “There’s something I wanted to
ask you about, if you’ve a moment.”

They agreed that of course they did, and so Hermione led them to the closet and opened the door. There was such a look of hidden mirth on Remus’s face when he said, “Hermione, that’s our closet.”

“What?” She asked, looking around at the glittering bits of something on the ceiling that she had not noticed. “It’s very…”

Sirius grinned, “James, you see, was very invested in our relationship. And so he made us a closet to come out of, when we told Fleamont and Euphie we wanted to bond. He felt we needed a moment.”

“So, uhm.” Hermione couldn’t help but picturing James thinking that designing his friends a very flamboyant closet would help them to come out. “What did you do, practice the whole, ‘Mum, Dad, I’m gay…” speech in the closet?”

“No…” Remus reflected, his pale complexion looking quite pallid against the bright walls, “I think they knew by third year. The closet was James’s idea of a prank. He was just being an arse.”

Sirius didn’t look too bothered by that assessment, meaning that James’s behavior had likely been eyebrow raising, but well-meaning. “Used it for our reflection period before our bonding, actually. Much nicer than a antechamber of a disused state room. Fits a couch nicely.” Sirius informed her as she tried not to let him get a rise out of her, “I’d forgotten about the shag rug.”

Remus added, “We spent a lot of time in here hanging shelves.”

Hermione felt her color rise, because she had not known the carpeting to be called by that term, and because everyone knew what ‘hanging shelves’ meant. Clearly, this had been James’s idea of a very funny pun, then. “I’d be grateful if you would take anything of sentimental value with you within the next week or so.”

“So.” Remus waved a hand, waggling his fingers in a farewell. “Now, go away. I want to see if the mirror is still in the ceiling.”

Hermione fled, leaving behind her shadow box idea and notions of innocent childhood decor choices. Behind her, she heard Sirius laughing, “Moons, you dog, you, teasing her like that!”

She hastened away, muttering to Teddy about silly men when she heard Remus retort, “Takes one to know one…” as they began to remove the carpet.

She returned to find Harry holding up wallpaper samples against the wall in the nursery sitting room, “Which one says ‘fun’ to you?”

“James building Remus and Sirius a literal closet from which to emerge upon their intention to bond sounds like a real laugh.” Hermione shifted Teddy against her, but he scrambled down to play with Cadbury who was no longer napping now that his very best mate was here to play with him.

Harry looked back at her, “Why would he do that?” He set down the wallpaper and returned to staring at the paint swatches, debating two shades of nearly identical leaf green, clearly very invested in even the most minor detail.

“I guess he was being supportive in his own way. Maybe it was an engagement present. Who knows?” Hermione ventured, “They seemed fond of it and were full of hanging shelves Dad jokes.”
“Hermione, don’t reference, please, parents doing anything other than turning out the lamps and fumbling in the darkness on the rare occasion they actually feel like it.” Harry insisted, “I fear for my mental health.”

“With assumptions like that, I fear for mine.” Hermione returned, waiting for and watching as the shoe dropped.

Harry spluttered, “I didn’t mean us, Hermione. Just them.” He shook his head, “The less said the better.” His gaze caught motion behind them, “Ted, don’t climb on the boxes. Come and tell me which one of these you like.”

Hermione turned to watch as Teddy, ignoring the directive, clumsily threw the ball again, and ran after Cadbury.

Harry was in an absolute panic, after unearthing his diary from his messy desk in the study. He’d agreed to this date, agreed to go shopping today, all without realizing that he could not miss a subcommittee meeting and that the second years had an exam tomorrow and that their preparation period today was critical. He could not believe his life was such a mess.

He stirred his cereal carefully, knowing that there was a good chance this would be his last meal after abandoning Hermione like this, but really he had no alternative. “Hermione…”

She had been so animated, so happy, going on for the last ten minutes about the itinerary, and wondering if Augusta had ever gone shopping in muggle London, and declaring that this was going to be an actually enjoyable day out, that Harry had only now worked up the courage to broach the subject.

Hermione paused in her chatter, “What’s wrong?”

Harry hated, in this moment, how well she knew him. He hated that he could read the reaction she tried to hide as he told her, “I messed up my diary and I can’t go, Hermione. I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, frost building in her voice, behind her innate confusion, “How can you mess up your diary? You schedule something, you write it down, so you don’t double book. There are spells for it, too!”

Harry explained about how he had been losing his book and forgetting to write things down, and how it had led to a giant mess, a mess in which they now found themselves. He added, “We looked through all of the look books together, and the catalogs, so you know what I like. I’ll be happy with whatever you pick, and this can be a ladies’ day.”

“This isn’t Ascot, Harry!” Hermione insisted, “And you were meant to be there. This was meant to be a thing with did together with the people who love us.”

“You’ve done most of the work already, and now this is just going to make the final selections.” Harry hated himself for trying to rationalize the fact he’d hurt her and implying that she was overreacting. He just didn’t know how else to handle things. “I do care, Hermione.”

“This isn’t just my baby, you know.” Final blow delivered, she stared blankly back at him, her expression saying it all. She was clearly telling him that he could have fooled her. She said nothing beyond the most basic things required in front of the staff to save face. Her eyes filled with angry tears when he told her he loved her and slipped from the room, feeling very much like the worst sort of heel.
She wasn’t having a shower because they went against magical custom, and not even the most liberal witch they knew would ever dream of coming. It had been such a disappointment to Helen and Ellen, but Hermione had accepted it, never wanting to ask for gifts.

All she had wanted was his time, which she should have to ask for like it was meant to be a treat, a present. All she had wanted was him there when she debated the merits between car seats, and ultimately picked the one she had decided upon weeks ago. All she had wanted was his support and involvement in something that meant a lot to her because she had never had the chance to do this for Teddy.

Halfway through the subcommittee meeting, Harry realized that he had been lost in thought the entire time and that Neville and Sirius were shooting him worried glances. This is why, Harry thought, you should never be on the same subcommittee as family. It led to all sorts of complications, the least of which was Sirius tutting over Moony being in Romania when the children were having troubles, and Neville dragging him to the Ministry tea shop and buying them badly made coffee.

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Hermione finished her breakfast in silence, quite away that every elf in the room knew that there was tension between her and Harry, as well as why. She was determined that Harry’s absence would not ruin their day. “Well, Baby, what’s say you and I get ready to go? We’re meeting at Willard House in ten minutes, so we need to hurry.”

“Do I like shopping?” The baby asked very excitedly, “I’ve never been, have I?”

Hermione agreed that they hadn’t, mostly because she herself didn’t like shopping and it was a far better use of time to have things sent to her. “You’ll have to decide if you like it. There will be lots of things to hear.”

Hermione found the baby’s interest was telling enough. They liked to hear things, and so Hermione suspected they might like all the shopping they had to do today. Hermione grabbed her bag, one Diana had made to go with the grey skirt. Its wide waistband above her bump, and flowing down around her calves made her feel free to move about and added some movement to the structure of its cut. It quite balanced out the blouse and red cardigan she was wearing. She made sure that she had her notes, her wallet with her muggle cards, and a few other things.

Augusta and Mum were deep in conversation that ended when she entered the sitting room. They had a tea tray between them, and it was clear that everyone in the room had partaken of this repast. Hermione was certain she was early, but evidently they had been waiting for her.

Hermione looked around the room, before smoothing her hand over the front of her dress. “Am I late? I thought we said…” She broke off as she heard the floo in the entryway open.

“No, no, not at all.” Mum assured her as they all got up and bustled to the door to meet Eleanor, “I’ve brought the car, and Augusta and Hannah enlarged it for me on the inside. It’s rather like the Tardis.”

“We’ll need less room, as Harry isn’t coming.” Hermione found this the best way to tell them all that she had been stood up. There was no reason to tell them why, for she knew that the story would out in time. She really didn’t feel like talking about it.

Eleanor looked quite excited to be invited along, and Hermione was very happy to have her and her expertise along for the day. Her studies were quickly drawing to a close, and Hermione felt that a day spent in one another’s company would do them both well as the time to begin working together...
closely approached.

“Well.” Augusta said, her tone revealing exactly what she thought of the gentleman in question as she adjusted her small hat in the mirror once the greetings were complete, “We’ll just have a wonderful time and he shall be sorry indeed to have missed it.”

Hermione meant to ask if Augusta was comfortable in muggle London, but was not given the chance as Pressman stepped forward to tell her that the car had been brought round from the mews, as though he was speaking of the carriages. Hermione was amused by the connection he made.

Ellie came scampering down the stairs, her own bag in her hand. She was full of energy, and looked very stylish, with her printed blouse and trousers. Her cousin’s innate dress sense must just have been in her bones, Hermione realized, for nothing she ever did would let her look half as beautiful as Ellie did without trying. “I have been waiting,” said she, with no small grin, “for this day for my entire life. If you think we’re wasting one single second, you’re wrong.”

Hannah grinned when Hermione protested Ellie’s dramatics as they loaded up into her mother’s magically expanded Jaguar. “You are rather reticent to shop, Hermione. I don’t find Ellen’s assessment too far off the mark.”

With the traffic, it was something of a drive, and it occurred to Hermione that Mum was just driving, so Hermione knew she had read the annotated outline Hermione had sent her way the other day. How nice to know that someone in her life took this seriously.

Hermione used that time to participate in a lively discussion of the days plans. Mum put paid to the idea of visiting every possible store on the list, as did Augusta, who made her point plainly, “The thing to do, Hermione, is go to the stores you’re sure to find what you need.”

It was then that Mum revealed, “I’ve booked you an appointment with a baby shopper.”

“What?” Hermione asked, looking down at her carefully detailed map and shopping list, “I was abundantly clear that I intend to pick—”

“This is a firm, Bunny, that exists entirely to coordinate baby purchases. They’ve got a showroom that’s huge, five floors, I’m told. They’re the experts. Everybody’s going there. Dr. Wilcox’s daughters have both frequented them.” Mum informed her primly, “They’ve got contacts and are very knowledgable.”

“I want to wander around the shops, Mum.” Hermione insisted. “I don’t care—”

“Ninny, do shut up.” Ellie declared, “Nobody in their right minds wants to navigate the crush at John Lewis on Oxford Street. We’ll have more time to peruse the other shops on your list if you condense some of the bigger ones and get on with it in a sensible manner.”

“You shut up.” Hermione returned without heat, conceding. “If you’ve made the appointment, we’ll go, but if I’m not happy with it, we’re leaving.”

“Of course.” Mum was sly, having gotten her way, “Do mind your manners, Hermione. You’ll have poor Eleanor leaving you for greener pastures.”

“Oh no, Dr. Granger.” Eleanor piped up, “I’ve already signed a contract.”

“I hate shopping.” Hermione murmured, when everyone else laughed.

Hearing the laugh, the baby was quite amused, “I like it, so far.”
“Just you wait.” Hermione muttered, drawing raised eyebrows from the cousin sitting next to her. She admitted she’d been talking to the baby, but it was clear that Ellie did not quite believe her.

They soon found their way to this firm that had Mum in the boughs, and found parking. Augusta was enthralled by the credit card machines that had just been installed, as she confided, “I should like to push the buttons next time. Just for the experience, mind you.”

Hermione agreed with a smile, and they proceeded down the pavement. They were something of an interesting group, even in this fashionable part of London near Sloane Square. Ellie turned heads, as she always did wherever she went, and Hannah was aglow with the newness of her engagement. Her eyes were brighter than the pear shaped diamond on her hand.

They walked past Prada and Armani, the impressive facade of Dolce & Gabbana. Hermione, aware of all of the people around them, observed that the occasional passage of window-shopping tourists and money flashing oligarchs and desperate wisterias were no threat to safety. She was mostly concerned with keeping her party together.

There was a shop bay window near the Knightsbridge tube station, perfectly charming with its neat and orderly flower boxes. Mum pulled open the door, and they all went inside to find a vestibule that was interestingly striped and patterned, with vintage luggage being used as decor.

The wooden desk and its engraved sign welcomed them to Stork’s Supply Company. The logo was of a stork carrying a baby in the traditional fashion with a suitcase in one of its feet, implying that no baby could be happy in just what the stork gave them, and that the modern stork brought luggage along with their delivery.

Mum was no fool. She knew that the wizarding press had their sticky beaks everywhere, so she had booked the appointment under her own maiden name, Helen Jane Brown. The receptionist seemed quite used to larger groups of people, and was expecting them. They were welcomed warmly, and ushered to a private consultation room that was soft, comfortable, and not at all sickeningly babyish.

Hermione realized that Mum had made this appointment ages ago, but the timing had worked out. As they were left alone when the receptionist, Keeley, went to fetch tea, Mum told her, “We were all in on this, you see, and if you hadn’t taken it upon yourself to arrange something, we would have absconded with you.”

Augusta added from where she sat on the sofa, “I did not know that baby showers prior to the birth were so important in muggle culture, and it seemed to me that you ought to at least have a day of your own. You have conceded much to make your way in society, but every girl deserves something to make them feel special. Merlin knows your wedding, while lovely, was hardly the stuff of dreams.”

“May I remind everyone that I wasn’t even invited?” Ellie interjected, not really annoyed, “The pensive just wasn’t the same.”

Hannah was quick to assure Ellie, “You’ll come to my wedding, won’t you? We don’t have bridesmaids, but if we did, I think you’d be a cracking one.”

Keeley brought the tea, which Augusta replaced with her own blend with a twitch of her pinky, which made Hermione smile and Hannah snort inelegantly. Heaven forbid Augusta should have to consume anything other than her favored tea.

They could not tease her for it, however, because Keeley returned to introduce Claire, who got
right down to business. She explained the process, and added, “The whole point of Stork’s is to make building your layette as streamlined and as personalized as possible. We’re not incentivized to push brands, so we’ll work together to find exactly what works for your circumstances.”

Claire asked for a bit of information about what she thought she might need.

Hermione explained, “I’m not having a shower, and all I have are things I saved, so we’re pretty much starting at square one. I have a pram, but I’m particularly interested in a double pushchair, for a newborn and a toddler, as well as the basics.”

“She needs everything.” Ellie interjected. “Everything. I hope you’re quite ready for this, Claire. Keeley made a smart escape.”

Hermione shot Ellie a glance. They did have a few stores to visit, and she wasn’t committing to anything before she was good and ready. Ellie smiled back unrepentantly.

Claire was undaunted. She simply smiled when Hermione pulled out her journal and replied, “I do so love a challenge. We’ll get you kitted right out.”

They began with buggies, which Claire brought to them. Amid the laughter and helpful insight of her party, Hermione dismissed joggers and lightweights, because she knew that they could charm anything they needed to on the buggy. What they needed was something that could be versatile. Hermione looked to Eleanor, “Have you ever used a Bugaboo?”

Eleanor nodded. “I’ve found them to be good buggies.” Eleanor explained her reasoning, and Hermione found that her own research concurred.

Hermione then settled upon the one Claire suggested, a single buggy that could become a double with an extra seat and a modification kit. They bought the lot, meaning that the buggy’s set was complete, even down to the little rain covers. An impervious charm would help, but Hermione knew that there might be times Eleanor would have the children without the benefit of a wand.

Hermione’s greatest struggle was in selecting a color for the buggy. She waffled between a sensible color and a fun color. Hermione approached the whole thing logically, “Well, the Balmoral’s hood is brown, so that’s out.” They didn’t match entirely, so Hermione wasn’t going to go for a clashing shade of brown. Even if no one compared them, the slight difference would drive her mad. “I like the ice blue.”

Ellie, of course, had an opinion. “If you buy anything blue, the press will swear up and down that you’ve anticipated a boy, and if the baby’s a girl…”

Augusta interjected. “Blue was historically a color for girls.”

“I say buy what you like, Hermione.” Hannah declared, “And if you should need it, I’d be happy to engage in diversions at any point in time.”

Augusta slanted the blonde girl a very telling look. “I should like to be feared to the degree that you’re not planning assignations in front of me with the intention of drawing the press to our doors.”

“You’re very scary.” Hannah assured her, “Very scary indeed.”

Augusta inclined her chin. “Are we settled on the pastel blue? We’ve a great deal of ground to cover.”
And indeed they were settled.

That single purchase opened the floodgates, and Hermione found herself making the final choices, selecting everything from a little egg shaped caddy to rest the baby in during baths, to countless muslin and linen squares far less per unit than anything found of comparable quality in a magical shop, to a bouncer seat. She debated the merits of cots, and bought a mattress and decided that one from her mother’s favorite nursery shop would be better, given that she liked nothing she saw on the floor. They discussed everything from blankets to sterilizers and nappy bins.

The purchases mounted. Hermione was very careful in picking what she did, as some items were not needed because of magic, and yet more had to be picked carefully so that they worked with the magic that would be placed upon them. They selected things that would go with the design elements Susannah had suggested, and could modify if they didn’t mesh with the room’s decor.

They bought a play yard, one that Eleanor suggested, mostly because Hermione figured if nothing else it could hold items they needed to keep from Cadbury. They bought a humidifier for both the Foundry and Willard House, because the rooms needed them and the spells needed a focus object, and so many other things that Hermione’s head began to spin.

The whole thing was daunting, and as she looked down at her list she knew that they had barely scratched the surface. They still had to go to the boutiques that would allow her to select some of the soft goods this baby would need, like sheets and linens and little babygros.

They ended up going onto the floor with Claire, who wanted to show them the full range of items. Hermione selected one last item, a handmade caddy for all of the little bath items that would be homemade at the Foundry, and returned to their consultation room. The whole of the room was covered in demonstration products of the items they had selected.

Claire was discreetly totaling their selections, and mentioned, “We’re happy to deliver.”

Hermione refused gently, with a smile. “I’m sure your company would do a lovely job, but my housekeeper would rather oversee it herself. If you’d just help us get everything out to pavement, we’ll be fine.”

They planned to send everything home to the Foundry, naturally. Hermione had a bunch of sticky portkeys in her bag for just this purpose. Claire was aghast. “At least allow us to load it into the boot for you.” She looked concerned, “It might not fit, however.”

Ellie smiled winningly, “I’m certain it will.”

Claire handed her the bill in a perfectly detailed folder that included all of her selections and item numbers in case she required any reorders or any replacement parts, which of course they would be happy to supply. Claire then excused herself to fetch the completed order from the stock rooms and await some items they’d had to call out for, and to arrange the packing of the car.

Hermione scanned the itemized bill, and slipped her card into the appropriate slot. She did not let herself feel guilty for making such a magnitude of purchases without Harry’s input. He could have been here, and he had chosen not to come. She didn’t think it anything other than a choice. She slipped her sales slip into her purse as the car was, with a little help from magic, packed, and allowed her mind to admit what her heart had kept repeating.

She wished Harry was here, with her. Somehow all of this made the baby’s imminent arrival all the more real and tangible, and she found herself needing him more than she needed to know the difference between one baby item or another. She didn’t want to do this without him, but like so
many things in life, she had no choice.

Harry sighed, and stood to throw away his coffee cup now that Neville had left, his commiseration falling on unhearing ears as they had both pretended to read the next portion of a proposal to be debated. He tripped over the corner of a chair sticking out, only to look up as he righted it and see an ethereal woman, her pale face blotchy with unshed tears. He couldn’t help himself, and asked, “Are you alright?”

She didn’t look up from where she was picking at a muffin. “I was so sure I’d get the job. I desperately need one, and they took one look at me and said I was overqualified. They hadn’t even looked at my CV.”

Harry knew a bit about being judged on first sight. He wasn’t sure what it was about her that made them dismiss her outright, but he thought she had probably had dodged a hex. “You’re better off, trust me.”

She looked up, and Harry had the distinct impression that they had met before, as though he had met her or possibly her sister. He just couldn’t place her, but it was possible that the tears were responsible for that distortion of her features.

She startled, “I—” She tried again, “Do excuse me. I didn’t—”

Harry ignored her discomfort at realizing who she had been conversing with, and smiled, trying to put this poor girl at ease. “Look, I’ve got a few minutes.” He didn’t really, but he couldn’t just walk away, “Maybe I can help. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

And so, with some assurances that he wasn’t only asking to be nice and that her candidness was perfectly alright, she did, explaining that she had come all the way from Cumbria to interview at the Ministry. She, it soon became clear, was half-veela, and faced quite a lot of employment discrimination on the back of that fact, because no one gave her a shot to do a job without believing that she was using her allure to get ahead. He hadn’t even realized that she was supposed to be very pretty, but he noted objectively that she was conventionally pretty, with white blonde hair and eyes so blue they were almost icy.

Harry replied, empathizing with her frustration, “You should talk to my wife. She’s, well, I’m sure you know of her, and this isn’t the sort of thing she would let pass. She’s brilliant at this sort of thing. She’s just the person you’d want in your corner, and I know she’d stop at nothing to see you have access to gainful employment.”

The woman grinned, “That sounds lovely, but as it stands I’m not going to be in London much longer. I’m going to have to get to France to stay with some rellies.” She grimaced slightly, “Relatives, that is.”

Harry thought for a long second, ignoring whatever blunder she thought she’d committed. “What position did you say you were seeking? Maybe I can help you find…” He broke off, unwilling to make a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep.

“I applied for a secretarial position in the Magical Sports Office.” She revealed. “I was Quidditch captain at Beauxbatons, and I worked on the school paper. I’ve been working for my family for a while, but I just…”

Harry had a flash of inspiration, and put this entire thing down to a stroke of sheer dumb luck. “Look, I know this is weird, but I could really use administrative support, mostly for Ministry
work, but also in just keeping my head on straight. I’m horrible at keeping my diary, my desk is a mess, my files atrocious, and no matter how I try to keep up with it, I just can’t. Hermione comes in once and a while to put me to rights and lecture on organization, but with the baby coming, I’d really rather take responsibility for my own shortcomings.”

If there was one thing today had taught him, it was that. He’d screwed up, and it was his family who suffered. He did not particularly want to admit that he needed help, but he could no longer deny that his inability to manage his office was hurting Hermione. That was enough to justify this change. Helping this girl was the right thing to do, and merely added to the suitability of this solution.

The girl tilted her head, “You want a PA, then?”

“The pay’s decent, the hours are probably awful, and you’d probably spend a lot of time making decisions on your own. As long as my life flows so that I can get work done to go home and Hermione’s happy, I don’t care.” Harry summarized, “The only thing I’d insist upon is an ironclad NDA, and a background check. I’m fine without references.”

She blurted, “You’re mad.”

“Excuse me?” Harry wasn’t exactly used to being told that to his face, but he found it much nicer to be told directly rather than knowing someone was saying it behind his back.

“I—” She blushed. “You can’t just meet a down on her luck person in the canteen, and decide to hire them. You don’t even know my name.”

Harry arched an eyebrow, “That’s easily remedied, isn’t it?” He glanced at his watch, “Do you know how to run a mimeograph? I’ve got a presentation in seven minutes and I don’t have handouts duplicated. If it makes you feel better, today can be a trial day.”

She grabbed her purse, “My name’s Bobbie. How many copies did you need?”

“Twenty-five.” Harry replied, standing and pushing in his chair so he didn’t trip again, “We’ve a deal, then?”

“Why not?” She returned, stepping up to stand at his side, “It’s worth a shot.”

Harry dumped his coffee cup, and led Bobbie to the lifts. Punching in his access code, they went down to the WC level.

He made a note of it as they walked down the corridor, “I’ll have to get you an access code of your own.” He glanced at his watch again, “I really do have to make that meeting. The mimeograph is down the second hallway, in the copy room, which is the second door on the right, past the emergency box but before the painting of Headmaster Dippet.”

With that, he set off towards his office to grab his robes. As he hastened away, he called back, “The meeting room’s clearly demarcated on the wall map. Just look for meeting room 2C. When you’re done with that, feel free to let yourself into my chambers. Thanks so much!”

Ellie and Hannah were chatting a mile a minute as they made their way inside the next shop, having already combed several baby stores in Kensington and Knightsbridge after a leisurely brunch. Hermione had stocked up thoroughly on countless other items, and felt the baby had a decent unisex wardrobe, even if she had once found herself straying to one side of the store before chiding herself that baby clothes did not have genders, and so she had bought the pink and grey
Augusta did not seem too far out of her element no matter the store they visited, though Hermione kept a close eye on her pureblooded friends. As they browsed the womenswear store that had drawn Ellie’s interest, Hermione voiced a suspicion, “You’ve been here, haven’t you, Augusta?”

“I worked nearby during the War, and I used to come shopping when I had the time. Thackery handles my orders now.” Augusta informed her, referencing her dear secretary, to which Hermione was rather surprised.

Augusta smirked, “You thought you’d have to play minder, and you still invited me. How sweet.”

Hermione wandered off when she saw a handbag that she thought might work as a nappy bag. She wasn’t keen to use something that was marketed as a nappy bag, not when it would be used so heavily and everything she had seen was so babyish. Her beaded bag was technically illegal, so she couldn’t ask Eleanor to carry that, nor would she have trusted it to anyone else. She never knew when she might need it, after all.

Hermione was examining the zips to see if the pockets could be magically enlarged within legal limits when a voice drawled from behind her, sounding so much like Malfoy that her skin began to crawl. “And here we have the Dot Collection. It’s new in, very exclusive.” She began to expound on the collection. In a low whisper meant to draw attention, she flicked a glance at Hermione, “That’s a £400 bag, you know.”

“I wasn’t aware.” Hermione hadn’t yet looked for the price. However, looking at the bag, she hardly thought that fairly priced. She decided that she would simply have Diana make her a fair-trade, cruelty free bag, as were all of her other bags. Who in their right mind would pay £400 for a badly affixed label and zip fob? Not her. She couldn’t abide the flash.

Hermione continued on with her examination of the bag, now feeling rather perturbed. The shop assistant did not leave her be, or turn to another bag to show the other girl while she waited. Instead of politely offering her assistance, or buggering off to her cave, she smirked, and continued to address the woman with her, making profuse apologies that Hermione would not hand over the bag, though of course she did not say what she meant in that direct a fashion.

It turned her stomach. She wasn’t giving up the bag until she was done with it, and she wasn’t going to be done with it until she was certain the shop assistant had gotten the message.

The poor woman she was with made every possible attempt to smooth things over and apologize to Hermione. She even went so far as to suggest that she was fine browsing on her own, but the shop assistant was something of a sycophant.

Hermione took her time, while the shop assistant talked up everything to the other customer, who was confident in her beautiful dress and elegant heels. Hermione was inclined to summon a chair for her, but knew she could not. She did, however, fling a cushioning charm her way. Just because the shop assistant was putting her in an awkward spot and trying to pit her against Hermione didn’t mean that Hermione had anything against her.

She actually seemed very nice, and was instead talking as though conversing with the shop assistant about a gallery opening rather than the stupid bag. It was almost as if, with glances and smiles, they were bonding over the awful shop assistant.

Hermione was just about to set the bag down and walk away when Ellie swanned her way. “I hardly think the bag’s all you say it is.” She adopted a innocent expression so perfectly that
Hermione was impressed, “Haven’t returns been up 68% since you switched leather suppliers?”

The shop assistant’s back was up as she glanced at the fish on her hook, whose glossy hair did not obscure a perceptive face. “We pride ourselves on quality goods.”

“And media hype.” Ellie returned, looking over the shop assistant, “Word to the wise. Your corporate office might have you chasing after one demographic, but it’s the business that you’re eschewing that would have buttered your bread for decades.”

The beautiful woman smiled genuinely at Ellie, “Diversity in a client base is important.”

The shop assistant looked flustered as she smiled at that comment, “Indeed—”

It was at that moment that Eleanor approached her carefully, quite unaware of the dynamics she’d entered into, and softly said, “Your Grace, Her Grace, Dr. Granger and Lady Hannah have continued on and would like us to meet them when Miss Brown has completed her purchases.”

Clearly, the shop assistant had heard her, however. Ellie looked pleased as punch.

Hermione thanked her, and passed the bag to the model. “I hope you have a great time at that gallery opening. There’s a really great Monet on the second floor in an alcove that never moves. Apparently it was meant to stay there in perpetuity so that the bequest would be honored.”

She and Harry had gone once just to play the tourist and to see one of the exhibits. She had a real soft spot for female artists like Louise Rayner, and when the exhibit had opened, she’d gone.

She smiled as she took the bag, “Thank you, I’ll look for it.”

Ellie smiled, and they left the store. As soon as they were outside, Ellie laughed. “Oh, Eleanor, you were wonderful.”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor asked, “Did I miss something?”

“Just that you quite shut down a nasty shop girl and helped Hermione to make friends with someone who is presently on the cover of every magazine from here to Hong Kong.” Ellie replied.

“Is she famous, then?” Hermione asked, sadly unable to place her face or assign the charming lady a name. “She seemed quite lovely.”

Ellie scoffed, “Oh, to live in your world, Hermione.” She glanced at Eleanor, who seemed equally unaware of the model, “Is she famous, she asks!”

And so they continued shopping, finishing up not soon after, rounding out their day on Walton Street. They all congratulated themselves for a job well done, having purchased everything that was needed, even a bespoke cot set for Willard House. She had picked it with Harry in mind, thinking he’d like that one best, and asked that a set of the drawings be mailed to his office, where it would be streamlined through Ministry channels into magical mail.

For herself, Hermione was glad to get through it and feel as though she was more ready for the baby to come. She hoped that whatever Harry had done today had been as important as he’d articulated, because she knew, once the smiles and laughter of close female company faded from her reality, that she really was rather stung by his lack of even so much as quick pop-in at brunch or a swing-by during one of the shops.

Standing in the sitting room of the nursery where all the items had been placed for now, she
couldn’t quite shake the feeling of fear that was building in the back of her mind and in the pit of her belly, making the place where their baby dwelled feel very heavy.

Chapter End Notes

A stencil duplicator is another name for a mimeograph. You take a master copy stencil of whatever and run it through and it makes copies as you turn the handle. It stinks to high heaven and was the forerunner to the copy machine. They’re fun to use, however.
And clarity grows in the quickening light, Now is the time for action and life, To fertilise plans and banish strife. Take the leap across the Beltane fire, and let the energies take you higher.

Chapter Summary

"...And clarity grows in the quickening light, Now is the time for action and life, To fertilise plans and banish strife. Take the leap across the Beltane fire, And let the energies take you higher."

-Luna's Grimoire, Beltane Poem

Chapter Notes

It's been forever, I'm sorry! I'm back on track, though, and updates will be regular from here on out. I put some music in the chapter because it flowed better that way, otherwise all links are here. Be aware that many links in the context do make noise, so mind you don't fill the library/cafe/train/wherever with drums and flutes!

Beltane is an ancient festival. It is usually celebrated the night before May Day on 1 May. The Fire Festival is very real, and quite the experience.

There are many ways to celebrate Beltane, and the reason I did not focus on May Day was because it will come around again and it's the focus then. Besides, the unity of Beltane was important to their growth and development. The music there is as you would find at any May Day celebration, complete with Morris dancing and the maypole.

Insofar as clothes, this dress inspired the Beltane dress, though think less 1930s bias cut and more boho.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione exited Kingsley’s office, mentally pondering the large box that had been labeled with the letters DJU. She knew it couldn’t be files related to Umbridge, because not even Kings was that transparent and open. However, Hermione was determined to suss out any movement on the subject, because she knew Umbridge was to due to stand trial. She could not help but wonder if Kingsley had wanted her to see some evidence, though she knew that was likely her ego talking.

Hermione was driven on, excited by her suppositions and flush with the news that Cultural Studies was moving ahead, albeit slowly, toward a pilot class and baseline applied research. Her overhaul to Muggle Studies was going well, and she was hopeful that would begin without any hitch in September. She and Minerva had been unlucky so far in finding a professor for Cultural Studies, but the summer loomed ahead, full of potential.
Hermione used the lifts to get to the WC offices, and made her way past security to Harry’s chambers. She’d gotten a second wind after sitting for a while, and she’d determined that the thing to do was to have an adult conversation about her hurt feelings. It was almost six, and she thought that perhaps they might go to dinner somewhere in Muggle London. They didn’t spend a whole lot of time together, and Hermione was determined that she would do her part to make changes.

Her uneasy feelings weren’t really about the shopping. Harry had a lot on his plate, and she didn’t blame him for not wanting to sit around all day and debate the virtues of bamboo fibers over that of cotton strands. He would have been out of place amongst all of the feminine activity, and she understood that, she really did. Still, the way she felt was the way she felt, and she knew that they needed to talk.

Hermione knew that they were facing real changes in their lives, real change in the way they related to the world, and she found herself wondering if they were ready for this baby. She thought perhaps that, for all their bravado, that they were nowhere near ready to be parents. She just wanted to be sure she was not alone in this concern, this fear. She just did not want to feel so isolated from him.

Their marriage had begun so strangely, and she’d been pregnant within weeks. They had made so many changes, and she wondered if perhaps they were coping as well as she thought, given that they were both throwing themselves into their work. Harry was burying himself in school, in work at the WC, with every cause he could think up, and she was no better. Her charity work, her educational reform efforts, and her massive attention to details at the Foundry left them little time to talk or connect with one another.

She was afraid that, holistically, it all spoke to avoidance of something within their dynamic. What if being busy was just a way to avoid addressing the herd of elephants in the room?

Hermione opened the door to the office and found the antechamber to be as vacant and still, devoid of reporters or anyone waiting to see Harry. Hermione let her fingers brush over the gleaming wood of the register table, and noted that today had been chalk full of people vying for his time. She did not want to feel like one of those people, nor did she want Harry to feel that way about her.

“Are you sure that goes under A?” Harry asked an unknown person, “Wouldn’t it be T?”

Curious, but unwilling to interrupt, Hermione walked quickly to the ajar door that led to the rooms beyond the entry. It was Harry’s actual office that drew her attention. The mess on his desk was tidied. Gone was the higgledy piggledy mishmash of books and papers and writs and quills. The filing cabinet was actually closed, and the key wasn’t hanging out of the lock.

The door to his records room was ajar, and the light spilled out into his office. The voice that answered was soft and knowledgeable, “Files are traditionally kept by surname. So this would be Terrance Atwell, and filed under A for Atwell.”

Hermione moved closer, her heart warmed by the idea that perhaps Harry had tidied his office, and was taking filing lessons. It was never dirty, but certainly it had never been so orderly, even as there remained a great deal of work to be done. Harry was looking over a large stack of files on the small table in the crowded room, which doubled as a cloak-room and storage space.

The woman standing at the cabinet was, Hermione saw, stunningly beautiful. She was breathtakingly beautiful, so physically interesting that her beauty had to be allure. Hermione knew that in a split second, once she stopped listening to the obvious voice in her head that said she wasn’t as pretty. She had blue eyes, and fair hair. Hermione strongly suspected that she was a distant relation of Fleur’s, likely on the maternal side somewhere, such as a cousin. There was just
something in the shape of her jaw and the curve of her nose that reminded Hermione of Fleur.

How she missed Fleur and Bill. Her breath froze in her lungs for a long moment. Fleur would have swept into the room and known just what to say and do.

Hermione was, for a single second, conscious of the truth that even on her best day, she would never look as half as lovely as the other woman on her worst day. Still, that didn’t matter. Other women were her sisters, her allies, and she was theirs in the same way. The world wasn’t a competition, no matter how much the patriarchy tried to make it one on the basis of looks. Hermione waited but a scant moment to be acknowledged. She was really happy to know that Harry was taking filing lessons, was working to put things right in his own way, before the baby came. And even more than that, she was hopeful that he too saw the need to take what time they could to focus on one another.

“Hermione!” Harry exclaimed, bounding out of the filing room, all limbs and exuberance, “You would not believe how many files I had on my desk.”

“I would, actually.” Hermione assured him, to which Harry laughed gently and performed introductions.

Warmly, Hermione addressed Roberta, “What tale of woe did he tell you to borrow you away from your post?”

“Actually, I told him one of my own.” Bobbie replied, “I meant to be applying for a spot in Magical Sports, but they took one look at me, and dismissed me out of hand.”

Hermione bristled, “Who did that to you?” She was going to get to the bottom of that, because any witch or wizard deserved a job based on qualifications, not sex or gender, “I—”

Somehow it did not seem appropriate to pry, nor to say that she intended to fix the situation so that gender-based discrimination was uprooted here in their government, even if that required her full-time focus.

Noting Bobbie’s kind gaze, she shook her head, “I apologize. We’ve only just met and I’m interrogating you.”

“I do hope we’ll have plenty of time to come to know one another, ma’am.” Bobbie replied, and it was then that Hermione, after muttering something to the affirmative, looked to Harry.

“I hadn’t realized you…” She did not finish the sentence, and instead took a breath,”Well, anyway, I came to see if you were finished here.”

For some reason, Hermione was absurdly upset. Harry had hired an assistant. He wasn’t doing any of the filing himself. Yet again, they had thrown piles of money at a problem to make it go away, rather than addressing the root cause. Hermione was not entirely sure why the congruence between his activities and her own not six hours previous filled her with such an awareness of their privilege and arrogance, but it did.

What kind of person, knowing they had a problem, simply threw pots of money at something to make themselves feel more prepared, more in control? What did it say about their understanding of the changes they had chosen, the changes they had wrought in their lives?

It seemed that both she and Harry had more coping issues than she had been prepared to articulate, even walking into this room. The gravity of everything she was realizing weighed upon her. She felt as though she had not taken responsibility for her actions, that neither of them had done so, and
had sought to mitigate the impact of their with money. Even the hiring of Eleanor and the massive overhaul of the nursery spoke to this realization.

Harry was talking, Hermione realized, and so she made an effort to pay attention to his words, “—should go. I’ll see that you have a meeting with HR tomorrow, Bobbie.”

Hermione was lost in thought, trying not to cry or scream as Harry made the various preparations that would allow him to leave. Something inside of her felt jagged. As he shrugged on his jacket, Hermione blurted, “I’ve just forgotten I was supposed to see Mum tonight.”

“Did you forget and leave something with her?” Harry asked, and Hermione remembered that she had, in fact, just spent the entire day with her mother.

Hermione knew it the second Harry realized she’d lied to him. The confusion and pain in his eyes were hastily hidden, but she saw them, felt the tumult of emotion between them.

Finally, after a painful heartbeat, Hermione stepped up and admitted the truth. “We really should talk.”

“It’s not about the fact that you hired someone!” Hermione insisted, as she had five times. She did not care about Bobbie’s arrival. Her hiring was symptomatic of a larger, overarching theme emerging in their approach to life, and it was one she hated. She did not hate Bobbie. She didn’t even know her. “We can’t just go around throwing money at our problems and hope they’ll smooth over!”

She was trying to keep her voice down, but exasperation had made itself plain in her voice since their return home. She stood from where she had been sitting on the sofa in their sitting room, and made sure that the door to the hall was firmly shut, the privacy spells holding strong.

Their senior staff, upon greeting them when they came home, had read the situation and made themselves scarce. Hermione was sure that outside of this room, she would be able to hear a pin drop and a dust mite land.

Harry shoved his hand through his hair for the fourth time in the last ten minutes. He’d been pacing for that same period of time, turning precisely to face her when she spoke. His collar buttons had long since been undone, and his sleeves rolled back.

For her part, Hermione had sat rigidly on the settee, magic flinging off of her in sharp pings. Her stockinged toes had been digging into the carpet with every new exchange. Even after ages of discussion it seemed as though they were at cross-purposes. “What are you even talking about?”

“No time to get ready for a baby?” Hermione came to the heart of her concerns with no small amount of scorn in her voice, self-loathing evident in the way she stood, rigid on the rug, “Throw a couple thousand pounds at a shopper, and that’s fixed! Can’t manage work-life balance? Here’s thirty grand a year for a PA! Tired and overwhelmed? No problem! Open up the bloody castle in Scotland and hide out until you feel better!”

“Everybody has assistants, Hermione, it isn’t that uncommon.” Harry returned, “And don’t come at me about money, not when you’re the one so completely invested in restoring the house.” His words felt like the accusation they were, acid boiling on his tongue, “You’re the one who wants to eat up time with these rituals, with these traditions!”

“Who do you think, Harry, is the person for whom I spend all my time on this house?” Hermione knew she was verging on shrill, beyond caring if she hurt him or not, “It certainly isn’t solely a
self-centered foray into magical culture like you’re forever insisting! I do it because I love you, because you’re the one who desperately needs connections to a past that was stolen from you. You’re the one who needs to feel as though he belongs, not me! Do you think I care about that stuff on a personal level like you do?”

Hermione had never articulated this to him before, but it was true. Beyond the knowledge that these rituals and traditions were a living and breathing means of cultural transmission that she was going to use in her lessons to empower muggle-born people and their families, as well as half-bloods, there were personal reasons that her research had come to mean so much to her. She did not ache to belong. She did not want to fit in quite the same way, as though fitting in would connect her to people she had lost. She did not feel a personal need to learn that which she should have known all along, as Harry did.

She had long thought Harry to be beside her in this task. She had asked him for involvement and support. They had agreed that they were doing these together so as to create traditions that were meaningful to them, for their family, for Teddy and for the baby. It was clear, however, that he resented these activities far more than he had ever let on. It was laughable, because he took so much away from them.

There was some expression on his face that Hermione did not care to take the time to interpret. It was as though the depth of her concern, and the personal nature of her efforts, had been entirely lost on him.

Hermione felt her magic crackle in her hair. “Why you think I care about all of these rituals, these traditions, all of the effort that goes into making your house, and let us not forget that it is yours, what it should have been all along?”

“Oh, you’re such a Helga Hufflepuff, Hermione!” Harry retorted, “You spend days in the library and months developing an educational program for me. Not saying anything but ‘good morning’ and ‘good night’ for three week stretches, that’s all for me! Leaving Hogwarts early, was that for me, too?” His affectation of wonder dripped with sarcasm, “Well, if only I would have only known!” The false wonder faded and left behind a very real scorn, “Get off your high horse!”

“I’m not the only one burying herself in work. You could make more time than you do! Yes, you could, even with NEWTs and work, and everything!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Oh, who’s avoiding subjects now?” Harry retorted, his feet planted in the treads by the fireplace, “You can’t take what you’re dishing out so you shove it back on me!”

“Yes.” Hermione’s teeth gritted so tightly that she felt a muscle in her throat jump, “A great deal of my desire to see this educational reform through comes from the fact that it’s the bedrock social justice and empowerment, and it’s a body of knowledge that was heretofore closed to me. I am allowed as many reasons as I want to have to empower me to reach a conclusion.” Hermione’s eyes blazed, “But don’t you dare turn my motivations into those of some vapid housewife who gets weepy when she isn’t doted upon.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry scoffed, “Oh—”

“Yes, I have political aspirations.” Hermione snapped in return, waspish and biting, “Newsflash. Hermione Granger has ambitions that extend into many areas!” Hermione forced out a breath, and asked a sincere question that had long been burning on the tip of her tongue, “Do you think I don’t know what it means to you to see tradition and continuity everywhere around you?”

Harry had finally composed his response, and Hermione had finally run out of indignation enough
to let him get a word in edgewise. She knew she was prone to diatribes, but for once she did not care about her failings. “What do you mean, ‘my house?’”

Hermione huffed, and looked to the crest carved above the lintel of the door. It read, *Eskhatos ekthiros katargetai o thanatos*. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. These were the words that countless men and women had let guide their lives, and it connected Harry irrevocably to something no one else, not even she, could claim. No one else, that was, save the child that existed between them and would forevermore.

Harry’s face had drained of blood in the scant moment her eyes had been elsewhere. There was such a broken pain in his voice when he spoke, pent up and restrained. Hermione had not heard that same quality in his voice since the War. “Are you telling me that you’ve been trying to be someone else, for me, because I swear to God, Hermione that if what you’re telling me is that you never wanted any of this and you went along with it because you knew I did, then you and I—”

“I’m not saying that I tried to be Cissy Malfoy. I’m quite contented with being Hermione Granger, thank you. If you wanted someone who was going to go lurching blindly through life you should have married Astoria.” Hermione retorted, quite angry that he was still missing the point.

“Oh, very funny!” Harry rolled his eyes, “Now we’re trotting out the ‘maybe you should have married somebody else.’” Harry folded his arms across his chest, “I’ll wait for the revelation that I’m not the man you married.”

“I’ve not forgotten or regretted my choices.” Hermione retorted, “I can and do state my opinions. Nobody makes me do anything. I’ve never lost my head once over anybody, and I’m proud of that. Not even you.”

“I need you to be honest with me, here.” Harry’s voice was deadly serious, “Are you telling me that you’ve felt coerced?”

Hermione shook her head, “No. If you would listen, you’d know that, wouldn’t you? I chose all of this, am choosing everything I do with awareness. I wanted this, every bit of it. But honestly?” Hermione struggled for a second to translate her swirling thoughts once again to return to the original topic, “I thought you understood that exploring the traditions of our culture was not something I did for anyone else but the people in this room. I make the choices I make for me, but when doing so I think about you. But for you not to see that—”

“I see that!” Harry insisted, “I don’t even know why we’re having this discussion. People have obligations. They hire assistants. People upon occasion do make babies. They prepare for them. Where, exactly, is the disconnect?”

“I want you to see what’s happening around us.” Hermione demanded, “I want you to see the bed we’ve made, the one we’re going to spend the next century sleeping in. I don’t want to be alone in this examination of our life together.”

“I did see it, I do see it, and funnily enough, funnily enough…” Harry’s voice was brittle. The sheer amount of magic in the air was enough to charge the room’s atmosphere. Hermione was certain an electrical storm was soon to break above their heads, “I thought we were doing what people who love each other and want to build a grown up life together do.” Harry’s voice was rock solid, but Hermione knew him well enough to know that there was emotion, deep emotion, behind the words he spoke, “Are we making mistakes? More than I’d ever dreamed. Tonight’s made that clear, if nothing else.”

Hermione would have agreed had he stopped there. However, he continued speaking, “It’s you that
realized something tonight. That’s why you got upset, why you lied.” Harry’s eyes flashed, “Don’t project your own emotions onto me because I’m somehow easier to lecture.”

Hermione gave her emotions vent in a splutter. “If that’s what you think then I—” Hermione concluded, “I’ve got nothing left to say.”

Harry’s jaw worked, his mouth opened. Nothing came out, save a broken noise that might have been a cry. “Well, that’s fine, isn’t it?”

Hermione did not reply, the silence echoing around them. Finally, he turned effortlessly on his heel, opened the door, letting the silencing charms fall, and brushed past the housemaid who just happened to be dusting the wainscoting, taking himself off to parts unknown. In the echoing silence, Hermione heard the sharp click of his feet on the floor.

The mirror over the fireplace shattered. Hermione did not admit, even unto her self, that it had nothing to do with the slam of the door and everything to do with the wave of magic that exploded from her magical core.

Of course there was no keeping their disagreement and estrangement private. They lived in a fishbowl. Hermione repeated herself once again, “Yes. Cancel Beltane.”

“Ma’am…” Fella pressed, standing as she was near Hermione’s chair. At least this time she was only fishing and not asking Hermione to repeat herself. “If it is your wish, I will alter your arrangements.”

Hermione had spent hours considering the small party, and nodded. “Thank you.” Hermione looked at the elf who was her right hand in many ways. She passed back the menu card for the upcoming rota of meals, “You will need to check with His Grace as to his plans for dinner.”

“Of course.” Fella agreed, collecting her papers, not quite meeting Hermione’s direct gaze. Fella exited the sitting room quietly, and Hermione turned herself resolutely back to notes she was revising upon the reception of Minerva’s feedback.

She worked with a steady, exacting pace. Eventually, the pressure on her bladder grew as insistent as the discomfort that came from trying to hunch over notes, and she put it aside. Pushing to her feet, she made her way to the loo. Ablutions completed and hands clean, she called to Petra.

Naturally, the elf had been waiting on eggshells for this summons, and could not do enough to facilitate Hermione’s transition to bed. When she was dressed anew, Hermione strode across the sitting room, and opened her chosen door.

Petra hesitated, “I have not had a fire placed there, Ma’am.”

Hermione pressed onward into the bedroom that would have traditionally been hers. Harry threw her support and respect for traditions in her face, but she had never truly bothered to explore traditions that hadn’t mattered to them. She’d avoided countless festivals, most recently Lemuria, because the idea of driving off the ghosts of their dead after the War did not seem to fit the context of their lives. If he wanted to see her adhere to traditions with exactitude, well then, she’d been more than pleased to show him.

They would start here, with separate lives, as was traditional. If that’s what he wanted, that’s what she would give him. If he was contented with the way they were so distant from one another, she would go her own way as well. Hermione thought bitterly of the musings she’d been kicking around of an enclosure, of a few weeks just to spend together in Scotland as a family. But no. They
would stay in Cornwall. Maybe if he was so happy with the status quo, he should go to Willard House.

Hermione merely waived a hand at the cold fireplace, and watched as a fire jumped to life in the still grate. This seemed to spur Petra into action and she made short work of ensuring that the room was habitable. The silence of her brisk work was oppressive, even when Cadbury came yipping inside, after his evening run. There had been no sign of Harry for hours.

Hermione could not escape the headache that had been long building, even when Petra took down her hair and braided her hair loosely, leaving the thick rope of hair to rest on the crisp cotton of her nightdress. When Petra asked if there was anything else she required, Hermione shook her head.

Softly, Petra bade her good night, and retired to her own chambers. Hermione, with the click of the door, let the air leave her lungs. Though she would never admit it, the exhalation ended on a sob. She quite trusted Cadbury to keep her secret.

Hermione cried all the harder when the growing dog whimpered and placed his head on her knees. Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, doing her best to stifle her sobs in the desperate hope that Harry wouldn’t hear if he was nearby, even though she wanted to put this behind them. She both knew they weren’t ready to put this argument to rest and work towards the truths they’d expressed. She wanted to let this make them better, wanted to work on the problems they’d let take root. Maybe tomorrow she would try. For now, though, she just wanted to be angry and think about Harry getting his just desserts.

Still, that was cold comfort when the tiny voice underneath her heart, declared, “I don’t like this. I’m…I don’t like this.”

If anything could have made her sadder still, it would have been that admission of dis-ease and sadness from their child. As it stood, Hermione accepted those words. They were evidence that she was not alone, evidence that the choices they made no longer simply impacted their lives. They were a balm to her soul, and salt in the wound.

“I don’t like this.” Ron repeated himself, “I don’t like this at all.” He kept glancing at the bottle on the table, and Harry quite agreed. There was something wrong with it, even as the bottle sat amid the detritus of Ron’s coffee table.

Setting his glass down, he exclaimed, “Need a coaster.” He knew he was half-drunk, but as he looked around Ron’s flat, no coasters were readily evident. “You’ve not got any.”

Ron shook his head. “Harry, drowning yourself in cheap—”

“’S not cheap. Sirius gave me this from the cellar.” Harry informed him, letting the amber liquid slide down his throat. “’s mine, though, left it at my—” Harry knocked back the rest of the glass, so that the taste of those words would leave his mouth. They tasted like glass, and dirt. “—house.”

“This wasn’t the answer after the War, and it isn’t the answer now. Merlin, go home.” Ron seemed exasperated, but Harry knew that even Ron’s extra pair of eyes on his face could not frustrate his easygoing friend.

Harry made short work of pouring himself another glass, in the muggle fashion, though he could not fathom how he had two glasses in front of him now, nor why they kept moving. “She’s sad. I’m angry. Why do I care that she’s sad? I’m sad, too.” Harry gulped the firewhiskey, let it burn down his throat, to that aching pit in his belly, “Won’t be, soon.”
“You know, when you came over and said, ‘Let’s have fun’ I figured you meant going to a muggle restaurant in Inverness and eating our weight in mash.” Ron mused, “D’you want a sandwich? Soak up some of that firewhisky, eh?”

“Hermione didn’t come to dinner.” Harry blurted. “I drank a bottle of port by myself.”

“An entire bottle of port?” Ron wedged an arm under Harry’s elbow, and pulled him to his feet. “Of all the nights to run out of sober-up.” He muttered this to himself, Harry barely heard him over the rush in his ears.

“I like it better than madeira.” Harry wobbled back and forth. “Ron…”

“We’re going to find you a sober up. And then you are going home.” Ron’s voice grew firm and low, “Harry. Do not pass out. If you pass out, I can’t give you a sober-up. Damn owl delivery—”

The floor had somehow risen up to meet Harry’s face. His last thought was that he had broken his glasses.

Hermione heard a thump and a muffled curse. Hauling herself out of bed, she nearly tripped over a snoring Cadbury in the dark, unfamiliar, bedroom. The bed still smelled of talcum. She rebuked herself and muttered, “Lumos.”

When her wand tip lit, she continued on much more sensibly.

What she saw when she opened the door shocked her. Ron was struggling with Harry, trying to get up from where they had fallen in front of the fireplace, and stagger over to the sofa. Cadbury made short work of jumping onto them, all aquiver with joy.

Hermione was tying the sash of her robe when she realized two very salient facts. They reeked of alcohol, and Harry’s glasses were broken, lying in pieces on the floor next to his pocket. They saw her there before she could speak. Ron groaned and muttered something under his breath.

Harry, however stated, “I drank port. And firewhisky.” With this, he slumped against Ron. “A lot of it.”

Ron shifted, putting Cadbury off of his lap as the dog scampered off to find a chew toy for Ron to throw, as was his habit and Cadbury’s expectation. “He neglects to mention blacking out in my flat, crying into his glass, and asking me for relationship advice.”

“You give shit advice.” Harry slurred, “‘S why your relationships end. Can’t fix things with sex.”

Harry’s firewhisky induced frankness was borne with good humor by Ron, who had likely heard the same thing, albeit more politely, from Harry when sober. Ron hadn’t yet come to a place where he was interested in working out a relationship when it hit the skids.

“That’s what happens,” Ron stood again, and began the work of hauling Harry to his feet. “When you get old and get married.”

Harry looked decidedly green. Hermione did not do her carpets the service of conjuring a bucket. She was horribly amused, and hated herself for it. She did not offer to help because Ron sent her a look that warned her off, nor did she offer the aid of spellwork, because rolling around on the floor was often a prime component of male bonding, as it was in this case, clearly.

“Hey!” Harry wobbled on his feet now that he was standing. He reached out and grabbed the back
of a chaise, narrowly missing a sleeping Crooksy. “Not talking bout that. Disrespectful. Private.”

“So you’ve told me. Not that I’ve ever fucking asked, mind.” Ron admitted with a smile as he tossed his arm around Harry’s waist, “Come on, you lightweight.”

Hermione was oddly touched. Harry didn’t talk about sex with Ron, which was something she had not assumed. She knew them both to be very private, but the hardline approach he was holding, even when stone drunk melted the ice of her lingering rage, however slightly.

Cadbury padded towards the larger of the two bedrooms, vaulting himself with ease onto the bed therein. The covers were as pristine as they had been this morning. Ron took Cadbury’s lead, and began to usher a wobbly Harry towards the room they habitually shared.

“Gotta go—” Harry was already directing Ron in the opposite direction. His wobbly feet were determinedly putting them in the direction of her own routinely disused room, “The chair—” Harry began, before groaning, “Oy, fuck.”

“We’re putting you in your bed like a sensible drunkard.” Ron declared, as Harry shook his head and tried in vain to overpower his lanky and bulky friend.

“Can’t sleep without Hermione, and she’s not let me into her bed.” Harry slurred, “Chair’s fine.”

Ron glanced at her, his pale skin going red at the edges of his face and the top of his neck. Hermione tried to smother a giggle. Poor old Ron. It was an incredibly intimate thing, and not because of sex, but because the magical signatures in a shared sleeping space melded.

“Harry…” Hermione began, and it was then that her erstwhile husband looked up, and Hermione felt a pang of regret. Did he regret that he wasn’t at Uni, getting drunk as often as he could do? Did he regret what he could not face? She was getting to go to Uni. He was not able to make such a venture work, and though he said he didn’t mind stepping back for the baby's sake, Hermione wondered. That had been his own offer, made months ago, but had that changed?

“You’re brilliant.” Harry breathed, and for the first time Hermione realized that the expression of wonder on his face every time he looked at her was not consideration, but pure admiration. Hermione felt her heart race in her veins, “Like a sunrise.”

Ron shoved Harry along faster, “There, that’s sorted. The dear old missus is charmed anew, and you can avoid going on about her in my presence.” Ron looked back at Hermione as she padded into the bedroom behind them, “He told his vomit earlier, though I did have to listen to his maudlin bullshit. He’s no Byron, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Stay for breakfast, Ron.” Hermione insisted, as she pulled the covers down, “Your room’s open.”

Ron shoved Harry face-first into the mattress, and threw his legs onto the bed in two smooth motions, “Keep your sick in the bin, do you hear me? It’ll vanish.”

Ron summoned the wastepaper bin from the desk in the sitting room, and, after flicking his wand to make it vanish any contents continually, placed it by the side of the bed, dragging Harry’s hand to the bin, “It’s there.”

Harry agreed, voice muffled by the pillows. “Ron, I love you.”

“I hate you too, you bastard.” Ron returned.

Hermione shared a grin with Ron, who let himself out of the bedroom with haste and tripped along
to his own bedroom down the corridor, whistling a jaunty tune. Hermione knew it at once.

"Ah, you're drunk,

you're drunk, you silly old fool,

Still you can not see..."

Hermione studied Harry, knowing that despite the song Ron was whistling that he was not in the wrong house, nor had she taken a lover. He was splayed out in their bed, suit jacket long discarded, sleeves rolled back and cuffed to reveal capable and strong forearms. Hermione diverted that train of thought before it had the chance to gather steam and leave the station, though she did promptly and very dispassionately divest him of his braces, trousers, socks, and shoes, if only to avoid sharing a bed with them.

She did not, however, place pepper-up by the beside table. There was the matter of tradition between them, and if Harry wanted to play by the rules, she wasn’t going to contradict him. Let him deal with his overindulgence in the most traditional way possible, with cotton-mouth, bloodshot eyes, and a splitting headache.

The morning room was entirely too bright for Harry’s comfort, but as Ron took pleasure in it, Hermione made no move to alter the shades. Ron was cheerfully plowing through a plate of food, with as much gusto as he had consumed the previous two plates. He had to be off to the Ministry, but he wasn’t going to miss a Foundry breakfast, not when the elves pulled out all the stops for dear Mr. Weasley.

Hermione focused on her own breakfast. The baby precluded gluttony. She was hungry all of the time, it seemed, but could eat only in small portions, or else she felt as though it would come right back up. Harry squinted out the window, “The daffodils are looking well this morning.”

“You look like you were dragged through the hedge backwards.” Ron offered from where he sat across from Harry, “Been out poking at the flowers? At least you got a potion.”

“Small mercies.” Harry agreed, looking to Hermione. Hermione smiled tightly in return. “Still not speaking to me, then?”

“I’m not not speaking to you. We can argue and move on from it. We frequently do, you know.” Hermione noted, breezing along as though Harry hadn’t asked a contentious question. They spatted quite a lot, but this was not like that in some way, for he had walked away and she had shut him out.

She lifted her correspondence, noting with another pang of worry that Minerva still could not secure a Cultural Studies teacher. Every applicant for the post was woefully under qualified, and the single one that had been was not able to take the post, after all. Hermione had been so hopeful about the interview yesterday, but Minerva’s report was not favorable.

Hermione folded the letter anew. Ron and Harry were having some sort of non-verbal conversation. Hermione’s gaze darted between their faces. She resolved not to ask. Whatever they were discussing was none of her concern.

“Fella told me you cancelled Beltane.” Ron blurted, picking up his pumpkin juice and taking a healthy swig.

Hermione sighed, tucking a loose strand back underneath the printed cotton that restrained her hair
and added some color to her outfit. “Despite what you read in the papers, Ron, I’m not powerful or influential enough to cancel a holiday.” Hermione ignored the letter on the table behind her that suggested she had done exactly that, in cancelling a small, family, celebration, “I simply abrogated a fete no one seemed particularly interested in attending.”

“Your parents were coming.” Ron contradicted.

“Yes.” Hermione agreed. When she planned a party, people came. She gave them so rarely that anyone who was invited wanted to go for the simple novelty of the activity. She had only really invited her parents this time, though, because Augusta was going to spend the time with the Abbots in anticipation of the May Day Party. She didn't really want to see her parents when she and Harry were not in accord, because they would only meddle and worry. “But I don’t plan things for them.”

Harry sighed, and set down his teacup. “For Merlin’s sake, Hermione.”

“No, you do deserve the right to discern what’s important to you on your own. I shouldn't think I know everything, should I?” Hermione lurched to her feet as gracefully as she could do in her present circumstances, “When you figure it out, do let me know.”

Hermione flicked her eyes over the two young men in the room, who had pushed to their feet easily enough, though Ron had a piece of toast in his hand and Harry looked as though he wanted to say something to her to forestall her departure. “Gentlemen.”

She swept from the room, feeling quite like an orca, but hoping that her bearing held enough gravitas not to belay that fact. She was a little hurt, but the hurt would pass, and they would talk through everything. Sunlight was the best disinfectant, and even the mildest antiseptics stung when first applied to a fresh wound.

Hermione went about her day, spending time with Teddy. He wanted to go see the horses, and so they wandered down to the stables, and spent most of the day in bucolic pursuits therein. Hermione had not ridden seriously since early childhood. It wasn’t something she really enjoyed, but Mum had declared it a basic life skill, and insisted she learn, along with tennis, and various other sports. Hermione was very bad at tennis.

She was not keen on the ball flying right into her nose and smashing her skull into her brain and so she had always had the habit of standing like a stump in the far reaches of the court, moving away from the ball rather than towards it.

Teddy enjoyed running across the tennis court with Cadbury, and the wards prevented them from running too far. Hermione parked herself on a chaise near the court, and let them get their energy out, though after a while Teddy wanted a racket.

One of staff provided a child’s sized racket, and Hermione did her best to teach him to swing, though she was increasingly ungainly. She did use a bit of magic to actually help him hit a ball she lobbed his way. It was clear that Teddy enjoyed tennis, and she resolved herself to finding a tutor for him in time, and also to spending more time at matches than she had previously anticipated. He was a toddler, but if he had a hobby, there was no way she was going to be anything less than his biggest fan, even if it did mean learning to enjoy a sport she had long ago abandoned.

They were rambling inside for a lunch in the orangery, when Petra appeared at her side with a
sealed missive. Hermione took it, naturally, and turned it over to find that it was sealed, not with Harry’s signet, but with the intertwined H&H that dominated their personal correspondence.

Hermione had no shame in admitting that she had barely settled Teddy into his chair when she turned her attention to the letter in her grasp. Hermione skipped the salutations and came to the point of the letter, knowing that she would attend to the details of it later.

…and you asked me this morning to define what was important, what mattered. You matter, Hermione. You are the sum total, the entire encapsulation, of everything that truly matters in my life. I don’t have your way with a quill, nor the emotional awareness to put what I feel into words very well.

But I know this: You know me better than I know myself. You’ve been the center of my universe since I was an underfed eleven year-old, and you were a earnest girl with leadership skills. That universe has expanded in ways I never expected (I can hear you, and I’m not talking about your waistline), and I anticipate it will continue to do so, especially since I remain your most ardent supporter, and know you will accomplish amazing things. I need to learn how to stay connected to the center of my universe, when the edges of that system keep expanding, and I want to learn it with you.

A very brilliant witch once told me a bit about an upcoming holiday. Beltane is the season of maturing life, of love, of love made flesh and magic made tangible. In this spirit, come with me to Edinburgh, to the Fire Festival. If Beltane is a celebration of unity, there is no better way to honor it than by finding our unity once again. Beltane celebrates the center of the universe, and the only way I can think to honor it is to be with the center of mine.

Once and always yours,

Harry

Hermione savored that letter, knowing that somehow, their argument had broken down stalemates and torn down walls between them. They’d gotten things off their chests and had created a space in which to talk, and to build themselves up and go forward.

It was with haste that Hermione wrote a reply after lunch, Teddy napping in the center of the wide bed that dominated their bedroom. Hermione sat nearby at the tiny writing desk in her sitting room, and penned a simple reply.

Harry,

You say you haven’t a way with a quill, but you do. I am not the sun, even though my temper flares brightly and I can be blinded by my own perspective. I am scared, from time to time, of the plates we have spinning. I pause, from moment to moment, and lose my breath at the wonder that is our life together. I marvel and, yes, overanalyze, the places and spaces I find myself from time to time.

And then I look at you, with your tie askew and your hair a mess, and I know that everything is as it should be, because we are together. There is nothing we cannot do, nothing we cannot accomplish, side by side. I was scared, shopping. My hands shook with the enormity of what we are facing, and in that moment, I felt groundless, on shaky footing, like the rock upon which I have built everything I know was gone under my feet.

I know my mettle and I know my own desires. It was not about the pram, nor the Nanny and the PA. It was not about the house or the parties, my slavish devotion to knowledge or your singleminded passion for your work. I had never been more aware of the tangibility of change in
our lives than I was in that shop. I looked instinctively for you, and you were not with me. My heart pounded, and there was no way to ground myself that did not involve wishing for your hand in mine and your eyes reflecting the surety and unity I find only within you.

You are my soft place to fall, and the place from which I begin every new venture. If I am the sun to your solar system, then you are the terra firma of my earth. You are the bedrock, the warm soil, in which I root myself and every hope and prayer for the future.

Lately, I have begun to wonder if you regret the path our choices have paved for us. I wonder if we are ready, if we can ever be ready, for the irrevocability of the way one choice leads to another. I cannot do this myself. I do not want to do this myself. The increasing space between us is as much my fault as it is your own. If there is anything I regret, it is that alone.

It’s clear we need to talk, to restructure some things as we are able. This is neither the place nor space to attempt that undertaking. I don’t know if a revel in the middle of wizarding Edinburgh is conducive to talking, but trying ought to be interesting.

HJ

Hermione sent off her affirmative reply with Hedwig, who accepted a pat and flew away with her typical grace. Leaving Teddy to sleep, she headed to attend to other concerns, which consumed most of her day. She floo’d Minerva, and though they had the summer to find someone, the lack of a professor for Cultural Studies was a topic that dominated their interaction. It was a welcome relief when Teddy demanded Minerva’s attention.

Hermione did not feel too badly about canceling her small Beltane gathering. There would be others. She hadn’t been planning anything large, and though it was bad manners indeed to cancel, at least she had only cancelled on Mum and Dad. Ellie was busy, and their magical friends were scattered across Europe. Ron had to work, but she imagined she would see George and Fred at the Fire Festival, as they were never ones to miss parties or a chance to sell their wares.

Whatever the evening held, Hermione was elated by the fact that Harry had reached out. He had closed the gap between them, in some way. His words had been his own, honest and heartfelt, and it told her all she ever wanted to know. He was willing to try to understand her perspective and to understand her needs, to listen to her as she expressed those thoughts and feelings. She was committed to doing the same.

The wizarding Fire Festival was unlike anything she had ever seen, and that included the Victory celebrations. The crowd was an absolute crush of people in outlandish costumes, engaging in every form of merriment known to mankind. Hermione soaked up the magical energy that permeated the throngs. Everywhere she looked, there were people with candles, bowls of water, and flowers.

She heard the beat of drums thick in the air, felt the reverberations in her spine. While mundane people celebrated in their own way on Calton Hill, magical people celebrated where they always had done, on Arthur’s Seat, with bonfires rising into the sky and magic sparking around them.

They had already eaten their bannocks, offered some to the fire, and to the animals that were being honored, and now they were wandering through the thick and merry crowd, watching the dancing that was swelling to engulf larger and larger numbers of celebrants, most of whom were the more privileged wizarding sets. Hermione hated the classism in this culture, and vowed to work to change it from within, with education.
Chant filled the air as people whirled and spun, antler circlets and flower crowns melding together in movement. Hermione tucked herself closer to Harry, leaning against his frame as they moved along, the celebrants that were involved in the rituals around the bonfire clad in bright colors and covered in ritualistic sigils. Their feet were bare against the earth, protected from heat and damage with magic.

Dances grew, separating men and women into concentric and undulating circles around the bonfires, connecting the two bonfires through which those completing the ritual on behalf all assembled would pass. Dancing around the fire invoked magical intention and blessing for the coming year. It was about, as Harry had written, magic made flesh. Naturally, that happened through acts of unity, creation.

The air smelled thickly of cedar and juniper. In celebrating abundance, they honored livestock and the soil that gave life to crops. It was for this reason that their feet were bare. Many women, in the thrill of the dance, threw back their coverings and let them float in the smoke, if they chose to wear them. Hermione’s covering was part of her dress, and so it settled around her in a nimbus, alluding to her wild hair and changing form, but revealing little as her dress floated over her curves.

Making up her mind, she took Harry’s hand and pulled him towards the circle. He took up a place across from her as she slipped in between Penny’s cousins Frances and Rosemarie. They were twins, some three years above her. They were Hufflepuffs, and welcomed her into their circle with warmth and joy, even if her ability to move was hampered at present.

And so they circled and spun, the hazy smoke seeming to clear as fire glinted against Harry’s glasses, his gaze never once leaving her form. The circle moved faster and faster as the music flowed, whatever tune played dominated by the rhythm of the tenor drums. It occurred to Hermione that the dancing they were doing now was rather like the dancing that had taken place at their wedding, on the night of their engagement. The connection made sense. After all, both contexts were meant to bring them abundance and unity.

Hermione’s green dress swirled around her calves as her hands clasped with the Clearwater twins, her eyes locked on Harry. Both girls were marrying in the coming year. Frances to a young man who was studying with her at Cambridge and was known to the family, and Rosemarie to a man who was well on his way to rising up the ranks in potions development.

Harry was trying desperately to court him for a post at one of the companies. Their sister-in-law, Ermintrude, was on the left of Rosemarie, undoubtably their chaperone. It was atypical to bring unmarried people to this festival, but the Clearwaters were nothing if not progressive, and it made sense to Hermione. Their attendance was educational and meant to empower the girls.

They were intent in their footwork matching the pace of the melody around them, joy bursting around them as the spells unfolded before them, blessings and spells called out over the music to the cheers of those gathered around. Their feet mixed trod upon oatmeal scattered during the ritual. The spells were soon completed, magic thick in the air, and though Hermione saw little of the rite, she felt it all. The leaves in her hair thrummed with magic.

Hermione could no sooner look away from Harry than she could have stopped breathing, or feeling her magic flow into the earth as the earth rose up to meet her.

They danced until the circles began to shrink as couples jumped the fire. Magic helped them not to be engulfed by flames, and to get enough height to actually leap over the flames. Were she mundane, Hermione never would have considered it in a million years. And yet, she was not mundane, for her own magic compelled her forward as the drums reverberated thickly.
“Jump, jump, jump.” The crowds intoned, voices blending as one with music, the tenor drums and the various other instruments cutting through the smoke, “Jump, jump, jump.”

Rosemarie and Frances let go, stepping back fluidly into the circle that was still dancing behind their own, and Hermione found that she was at the end of a chain that had somehow snaked around to meet the men that had once been across from them. Her hand fell into Harry’s, and sharing a glance that spoke a thousand words, magic sparked between them.

And so, they ran as one towards the flames. Just before they would have run into the flames, their magic and inertia carried them up in a single motion, over the flames in an arc so like that of those who had gone before them. Her hand was tight within Harry’s own, and for the first time in her life, Hermione knew what it was to dance with her feet off the ground.

She knew what it was to fly. The crowd cheered as the next couple came together, and so Harry and Hermione moved off through crowds. In one accord, they made their way quickly to the dark paths lit only by torchlight.

The drums reverberated as Hermione hauled air into her lungs, the very atoms that sustained them crackling with magic. Harry stepped closer, pressing against the proof of magic made life between them. Hermione pressed up as Harry bent down, and the magic that flared in that simple kiss shook her from her head to her toes. Hermione forgot where she was and what she had meant to say.

Her grasp was possessive, desperate, matched equally in Harry’s ardor. The grassy path that tomorrow would be used by young women, single girls and wives alike, to collect dew in which to ritualistically wash their faces. However, tonight it was secured and lit by the occasional floating torch.

Some half-drunk man bumped into them on the dark path, and chortled, “Jumped the fire, did you?” His crisp accent revealed that he was so far in his cups that he did not recognize the man who occupied the WC seat three spaces down from his own, “A year and a day unto you.”

Hermione laughed, and buried her face into Harry’s sensible tweed jacket. Harry’s hand fell onto her hip. He acknowledged his colleague’s congratulations, though it didn’t really apply.

After a long moment, Harry began, “I said a lot of things I didn’t really mean.”

“We both said things we meant, but not in the most constructive way.” Hermione disagreed, “I miss you, even when you’re right there. I love you, and I want you with me, no matter what. I didn’t know to tell you that I feel increasingly isolated from you.”

“I didn’t know how to ask you how you were getting on, or tell you that I was struggling. It somehow didn’t seem right to feel that way.” Harry admitted, turning slightly to wrap an arm around her waist. “I really didn’t have the right to throw your fears about being seen as vapid in your face. The things you do have immeasurable value, Hermione.”

“I meant to hurt you when I said the Foundry was your house. You’ve never acted that way.” Hermione knew that it was she alone who had made the Foundry a home, with Harry, and she knew too that it could never be his home, unless it was hers, because she felt the same way. “I intended to annoy you this morning, and I was glad I had done.”

“We know each other.” Harry admitted, “Quite handy when drawing proverbial blood, isn’t it?”

“I just want to talk about the things we’re doing individually and together. I need to process and plan, and I don’t want to plan alone anymore. I don’t want you to fall in line with my plans.”
Hermione ventured with some confidence, “You were right when you said we’re building a life together, but I can’t handle the details alone anymore. The details are the substance of our life, not just the big choices.”

“The details of choices help you to feel informed and confident. I know that. You have so much of both in spades that I just—” Harry searched for his words for a long moment.

Hermione cut in, “I need an honest answer. Do I intimidate you?”

“No, Hermione.” Harry assured her, “You dazzle me. I’m proud to be beside you in everything you do. If I had my way, I’d be quite happy to go down in history as the man who loved Hermione Granger. But I am not intimidated. I am only sorry that I didn’t ask you what you wanted and needed.”

“I just want you there.” Hermione admitted, “I just want to feel we share a common vision and are doing our parts to make that a reality, and we do, and are, but sometimes…”

Harry knew what she meant, for he said, “You miss the small things we’ve let fall by the wayside in service to that larger vision.”

“Yes.” Hermione agreed, finding words to expound upon this relatively easily, “I mean, I love your political work, and I’m proud of your management of the holdings. And all those things are coming together with my own work to create a freer, more open, community that is founded on equality and transparency.” Hermione pulled her chiffon cloak forward slightly, “But sometimes I think that it wouldn’t hurt if we took a day off and visited the orchards together, or took Ted swimming, or sought out sustainably designed wallpaper, or drafted an anonymous letter of dissent for The Prophet.”

“Change begins at home. We say that to other people.” Harry grinned, “Maybe we should say it to ourselves and see what happens.”

“I don’t know what we can let go of, in terms of work.” Hermione ventured. “So many people count on us. I feel selfish for just wanting to cocoon myself with you and Teddy and the baby.”

“Hermione, there isn’t anything we can’t do, not when we’re together.” Harry reminded her, “We’ve just got to look for and plan more ways to bring each other in on projects, and we’ve got to draw more work-life boundaries. I don’t know what that will look like, but we can work out the details together.”

“I like the sound of that.” Hermione’s heart felt buoyant. The baby lurched inside of her, quite happy to hear their parents voices blending in a comfortable cadence. Her hand found the spot where she’d just gotten a sharp kick, or jab, and she guided Harry’s hand there, gently.

“Insofar as the notion of your selfishness, if that’s how you define being selfish, I want you to be as selfish as you like as often as you like.” Harry said, searching her face in the torchlight, “Your right to take care of yourself and do what you think best is yours alone. If there’s a soul who doesn’t like it, that’s their problem. You are not selfish for wanting to rest, for wanting to bond with the baby, and to prepare Teddy.”

Hermione knew there was so much people expected from her, “Locking myself away in a bolt-hole in the wilds of Scotland is a bit self-serving.”

“I was thinking it was only sensible on your part.” Harry grinned, “Seeing as how we just jumped the fire, we ought to have a trip. I was denied one the first time you married me, see.”
Though they had a great many things to talk about, Hermione welcomed the short detour for banter with open arms, “You are absurd.”

“What’s absurd is the size of the bed at the Duntulm.” Harry returned, “It’s at least twice the size of the one at home.”

“Well, that’s handy.” Hermione observed, “You won’t have to steal space from Ted, Crooks, or Cadbury. Isn’t that nice? One does wonder, however, what your predecessors were up to, needing a bed that large.”

Harry wasted no time informing her of something she would have preferred not to envision. “I’m told my great-great-great and so on and so forth grandfather had a mistress that was a giantess.”

Hermione laughed, because no matter the topic, it was wonderful just to be talking again, about everything and nothing. Hermione knew that they had not made this a priority in any significant way in some time. “You’re lying!”

“Yeah, just a bit.” Harry followed her lead and began to walk again, “She wasn’t a giantess. She just liked to pretend, you see.”

Hermione wasn’t sure how that would work, or why that would be particularly arousing. She wasn’t judging some long dead ancestor, only she did wonder about giant-human relations, on a theoretical level. Uncomfortably, she thought of Hagrid’s parents, and inwardly flinched. “You know what, let’s not talk about this and say we did. No matter how I reply, I’m going to end up knowing more about them than I care to know.”

“I really thought telling you would get it out of my brain.” Harry promised, “It hasn’t—” Harry broke off, for in the distance they could hear an auror they knew well and loved dearly whistling a jaunty tune to make his presence known to any couples who hadn’t been smart enough to charm themselves into privacy.

They came upon each other in short order, and found Ron off duty, carrying a cup of mead. In the torchlight, Ron’s eyes slid onto them. He brightened, “Oy, do I know you two? I could have sworn we’d met.”

“Ronald, long time no see.” Harry played along, “It’s been a donkey’s age, hasn’t it? I almost didn’t recognize you, mate!”

“You two are idiots.” Hermione interjected, “How is that funny? You saw each other not four hours ago in the lifts at the Ministry.”

“How’d you know that?” Harry asked, as Ron slid his arm into her other side, taking her elbow in a very courtly gesture.

“You be the gentleman, Hermione.” Ron requested, “I could do with a bit of flirting, by the way. It’s been so long since I felt pretty.”

Hermione laughed, “Oh, Ron. If you want to feel pretty, all you have to do is compare yourself to a large, ungainly, animal. Harry will rush to tell you you’re a very pretty orca, or hippo.” Glancing at the man in question, “I have spies everywhere, you do realize.”

“When you take over the world, and are a benevolent overlord, remember that I’m your dearest and most beloved friend.” Ron joked, “Speaking of, I heard Luna got a post at the British Museum and is coming back.”
“Really?” Hermione demanded, “I haven’t got a letter in two weeks or so. She has a habit of writing a reply in her head and not remembering to post it.”

“That’s Luna.” Harry noted fondly, “It’ll be great to have her home. Any idea how long she plans to stay?”

“That girl’s like Charlie. She’s got more wanderlust than she has nargles.” Ron asserted, “She’ll be gone in a year, I reckon.”

They came to the top of the path, and saw that the fires were going strong, with some embers being scraped off to the side, and bagged. Hermione expressed her interest, and collected a bag of the ashes, still glowing and warm. She pocketed the bag, insulated by a simple spell.

It was then that she noticed Ron was studying her carefully while Harry kept a firm grip on her arm to keep her from being jostled by the crowds. “You don’t need those, Hermione.”

“I’d forgotten!” Hermione exclaimed, “How magnanimous of you to remind me that there is a human life form sitting on my spine.” She let her gaze turn steely as Harry tried to smother a laugh, “I’m hours away from being 28 weeks along. I’ve got a bevy of photographers asserting I’m having quadruplets. What makes you think I needed a reminder that I don’t need ingredients for a fertility potion?”

Ron bristled, and it had nothing to do with the shrill undertone in her voice or the way the crowds were milling about the trio, “Well, if they’re not for you, keep them away from me. I’m a Weasley, I can’t look at any female tonight.” Hastily, he added, “An unrelated female, I mean.”

“I know what you meant.” Hermione assured him, “If you’re curious, these are for Neville.”

“Neville?” Harry asked, “They’re not even married yet. Shouldn’t you, you know, wait? I wouldn’t want to face Augusta otherwise.”

“Don’t be dense.” Hermione returned, “They’re for his plants.”

She tried not to laugh when they looked doubly relived. “Don’t worry, the only couple I’d meddle like that is with…” She stopped deliberately. She would never meddle with anyone, but it did rather spoil the teasing if she admitted it, “Well, it’s neither here nor there, presently.”

Hermione soon learned that Ron was off for the evening. She gathered that he had not had a very good day up until this point. She refused to entertain the idea of leaving him alone tonight, and so they blended into the festival after a short sojourn at a table to rest her feet and fill Ron’s hollow leg. This did not, of course, deter any antics she and Harry got up to when Ron wasn’t looking.

They had a handful of near misses. Ron gave them a funny look when he came back from the ice cream line, but Hermione passed off her blush as a bit of a tinge from the fire. Harry simply hummed noncommittally, and put to his own sundae. Hermione almost regretted how voluminous her dress was, as it made it all to easy for Harry to draw lazy hearts and circles on the inside of her knee, and lower thigh, venturing no higher than the mid-point of her thigh. It was all Hermione could do not to grip the table.

Hermione jolted when Ron called her name, “Harry was just asking what you think the table is made out of? He says oak. I say hawthorne.”

“Oak tables are very sturdy.” Hermione blurted, “This is transfigured. For set-up. Probably a plastic bottle or the like.”
She was just a little bit flustered, but it was enough to abandon his present task. Hermione straightened her spine and did her best to look imperiously in Harry’s direction, as though she was lecturing about something obvious, and not clutching the folds of her skirts with tight knuckles.

“Ron, that girl over there is trying to get your attention.” Harry interjected. Ron turned away, and Harry wasted no time in leaning over to press an infuriatingly gentle kiss to the slope of Hermione’s neck, where her pulse jumped wildly.

Ron was distracted enough for Hermione to hiss, “Two could play this game.”

Ron said something as he shoved to his feet, taking his ice cream with him, and dashed away, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

Harry agreed easily, “My turn first.” Harry made some great pantomime of reaching around her for a paper napkin, “Tomorrow’s May Day. I wonder what would happen if you slipped away from the party at the Abbots.”

Hermione’s eyes glinted. “I meant going home, letting Ron raid the pantry, and decidedly not going to sleep.”

She was direct, if nothing else. She knew what she wanted and while she was open to feedback, she wasn’t shy about making her own wishes known. Harry smoothed a hand down her back, the thin chiffon of her dress doing nothing to block the heat of his hand on her body. “Ron says you can’t fix communication issues with sex.”

“That’s exactly what he does say, and he’s wrong.” Hermione snapped, knowing keenly that she would probably tell him to go away quite rudely if she didn’t get her wits about her. Harry was merely touching the inside of her wrist.

“Excuse me…” An unfamiliar voice interjected, and Hermione was pulled away from her conversation with Harry to chat for a long moment with some young woman who was related in some fashion or another to Anthony Goldstein and just wanted a chance to meet her and Harry. Such things were common enough, but it was a bit draining to listen to her story, though they were all impacted by the War, and standing in unity in the aftermath was important. That said, Matilda’s conversation lasted right up until Ron came back, making the excuse that the young woman had simply needed an auror’s help finding her sister and getting home. She’d spent the whole time talking about her pet pekinese.

Harry commiserated with Ron, as they both seemed to always be working when in public, Harry as well, Harry, and Ron as Ron in one capacity or another. Hermione thought they were both as thick as planks. Ron could get to know any young woman who showed interest, and a great many did. He was smart, and funny, and single, and he worked to help people. As they stuffed their faces with the rest of the chips, Hermione said as much.

“’Mione, you know the only woman I want in my life long-term right now is you.” Ron dipped a chip in vinegar, “I like no strings. You two are enough of a ball of yarn for anybody.”

“Are you telling me that we’re a cautionary tale?” Hermione considered this for a long moment, the flute music in the air contrasting with the heavy threads of magic in the air, “And here I thought we were like Cinderella.” She glanced at Harry, “However will we cope?”

“We could go home and eat.” Harry suggested, “Read the paper, knit, you know, whatever it is we do when no one’s looking.”
“I can’t eat anything else.” Hermione desperately wanted those last chips, but there was simply no more room, “And I let Teddy rip up the newspaper this afternoon.”

“You’re not a cautionary tale.” Ron admitted, “I’m just single and you two aren’t.”

Hermione was very moved by that statement. Her mind whirled with thought. It was very clear that Ronald felt isolated from them, and having experienced that recently with Harry, Hermione was very keen to nip that in the bud. It seemed that her carnal desires would have to be subverted, at least for now. “You know what I want to do?”

“If it involves going to a protest incognito or visiting a debtor’s prison, count me out.” Ron insisted. “Otherwise, what?”

“Muggles don’t have debtor’s prison anymore, only credit scores.” Harry told Ron before looking to Hermione, who was already sending the refuse into the bin with a flick of her wand, “What do you want to do?”

“Well, it’s ten o’clock on Thursday night in one of the world’s greatest cities. There's only one place to go.” Hermione looked down at her dress, “We all might have to change.”

“Hermione?” Ron asked, worriedly. "Where could you possibly want to be more than here?”

“Ron, I think it’s time you learned about the magic that is Sainsbury’s.” Hermione asserted, “You’ve never been to a muggle shop like that, have you?”

“No.” Ron allowed, “But how is that fun?”

Harry’s exclamation of agreement, Hermione knew, was likely fueled by his impending ability to show Ron the entire selection of ice cream, even the strange flavors. Hermione wondered what food combinations they would come up with, and spared a thought for the work the kitchen staff undertook.

“Don’t knock it until you try it, Ronald!” Hermione insisted, “They’ve got all manner of sweets, and an entire bakery counter.”

They were three largely introverted people. Even though Ron was gregarious, his position as Ronald Weasley and as an auror curtailed his ability to be himself in public. There was only so long that a festival could hold their interest, and they all three knew it. Soon they would be once again sitting on the benches, looking at each other. It made more sense to get out of here and do something that was more fun for the three of them.

And so, after some quick transfiguration, they went to Sainsbury’s, and had a wonderful time. Ron stared for a good ten minutes at the plethora of sweets, and marveled at all of the frozen food. He ended up buying a good £75 of food for his flat. If Hermione arranged to visit later in the week for the express purpose of checking on his mundane food storage practices, Ron was none the wiser.

They went back to the Foundry, and soon enough Ron was snoring into his bowl of cake, ice cream, and fudge topped with fruit loops as a crunchy garnish. He’d eaten so much, and laughed so much, that he was literally sick. Hermione quite understood. Though their Beltane had not looked like anyone else’s, it had been wonderful, full of warmth and joy and love.

Hermione left Harry to pour Ron into his bed as Ron had done for him. She eschewed Petra’s
assistance, and tried not to wake everyone when Cadbury yipped excitedly and demanded to be let out into the garden for a wee. Hermione undertook that duty, standing in the crisp air of Cornwall, the scent of flowers and newness all around her. Though she would be up in mere hours to collect the dew, and gather herbs for potions, she could not help but relish this moment.

All in all, it was a lovely Beltane. The magic in her veins hummed, and her hair crackled with power. She shocked poor Cadbury when she patted him as they heeded the call of a warm bed.

Heading down the corridor, she saw light spilling forth from the sconce across from Ron’s door. Pausing, she saw that Harry was yanking off Ron’s brogues in muggle fashion, and heard Ron whisper, “Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry asked, and Hermione got the distinct impression she was witnessing a rare moment of undisguised tenderness between the two of them.

Ron rolled over on his side, and hiked up the blankets as he asked, “Do you ever wonder how life turned out the way it did? I know neither of us expected to be where we are right now.”

“Sometimes, of course.” Harry admitted, “I know you’ve had it pretty rough, Ron, with your Mum and Lav, and—”

“It’s not anything to do with them.” Ron shook his head, “I just want to know what you do when you look around at your life and it takes you a minute to figure out—” He sighed, “Forget it.”

“Honestly?” Harry asked, “I look for Hermione. You. Remus and Sirius. I figure if I don’t have a clue what the hell I’m doing, at least I’m not alone and making mistakes that feel right. It reminds me why I made the choices I made, and reminds me that there’s no Riddle to run from anymore, only people I love to run towards when I’m scared.”

Hermione understood the meaning behind Harry’s amendment. “Well, I try. We try.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at Ron, “Do you want to talk about whatever’s really eating at you?”

“Tomorrow.” Ron promised. “You might be a little shocked.”

“Won’t change anything.” Harry avowed himself of this truth, and stood, “Tomorrow. If you want, Hermione…”

“Oh, please.” Ron scoffed, sticking his wand under his pillow as he had for the duration of the war, “Like that’s even a question.”

Hermione hastened away, realizing that she had just eavesdropped. She didn’t know anything she hadn’t already known, because she had known for months that something was not on with Ron. She had never been able to figure it out, and when she had asked him, he hadn’t been ready to talk. In time, they had all trusted one another with their vulnerability and their truths, and there was nothing that could replace that experience.

Hermione was not participating in the May Day dancing, though she was quite enjoying listening to the music of the strolling players and hearing the laughter of the maypole dancers. Nothing could induce her to move herself from this wicker sofa, not after being stuffed with food at the Abbott house. The brunch had entirely too much to recommend it, the best of which was now the public knowledge and discussion of Hannah and Neville’s engagement.

May was a bad luck month for marriages, but it was very good month for engagements.
An affianced bride was traditionally the May Queen, and so Hannah was, her hair bedecked with flowers, a crown befitting the day’s dual function as Floralia.

Hermione was certain that the sun was mocking her with its brightness, even as it highlighted the happiness between the couple and the renewal of the communication that she and Harry shared. They’d really talked last night, really made concrete plans and honestly and truly mended fences and come together mentally and emotionally. The lack of sleep had been worth it, as had talking herself slightly hoarse, because it meant that their prior discord had served a higher purpose and been to their good.

“If you could be drinking,” Ron interjected next to her, “I’d say you were hungover.”

He should know, as he himself had been massively hopped up on sugar last night, staggering into bed only because Harry had poured him into it and left a pepper-up by the bed. Ron had gotten a little carried away eating and drinking his haul from Sainsburys, and he hadn’t eaten enough Beltane Bannocks to soak up the alcohol and processed sugar. Still, given the somber note of his confession to Harry, she said nothing in retort.

Neither Hannah nor Neville had gone, because as an unmarried couple, being anywhere near references to fertility and sex was not seemly, apparently. Ron did not suffer those same restrictions because he was an adult living on his own and was freer to do as he pleased no matter what anyone might say, and so it had been a Golden Trio celebration for most of the evening.

Beltane had been amazingly moving, and it had been so wonderful to mark its passage on a grand scale. Beltane was a day in which the space between earth and magic was thin, and magical potency flowed to a peak. The symbolism of fire was everywhere, as was dancing, gaiety, and primal romance. The imagery spoke not only to the flowering of the earth, but also to the balance of magic between masculine and feminine.

Hermione herself had been given a posy of blue camellias by her most ardent suitor, found by her bed this morning.

Sex on Beltane, therefore, was not only sex for the fun of it, but was known in magical circles as some of the most unifying moments a couple could share, because their magic was so close to the surface after the rituals around the fire. It focused on becoming aware of one’s magical connections and one’s magic through sex, in the balance of unity between partners. Typically, powerful magic lent itself to certain connotations regarding the actual sex act, which Hermione happily confirmed to herself. What happened when two sexually and emotionally compatible people came together on Beltane was the stuff of legend confined to the blushes and languid smiles of those in the know.

“I’m tired.” Hermione asserted, not willing to scandalize Ron or make the sacred profane through discussion. And anyway, Ron seemed quite contented in the knowledge that they had only had sex the once in very decorous fashion, and she was not going to dissuade him. His slight discomfort last night had been a bit adorable, even though she was the picture of circumspection, “There’s little functional difference. The next time you and Harry want to celebrate Beltane, leave me at home.”

Behind her eyes, Hermione could see the fires in Edinburgh, were they had passed much of the previous night. It had been quite a spectacle, as it was nice to seewizarding rites carried out on a grand scale. Her bonfires in the garden now looked quite small by comparison, and all of the ritual dancing last night had worn her out for any dancing today. Well, maybe other rituals, but the point stood. Her legs still felt like jelly.

Ron agreed, his voice as full of music as the strolling musicians and morris dancers, “Well, it’s not like May Day dancing would be of any use to you, ’Mione.” Hermione saw that he was eyeing her
belly with something akin to hesitation and curiosity all mingled together that spoke to wonder and a hidden interest.

Quite fed up with this air of mysterious avoidance, Hermione prodded herself gently, and found an active appendage somewhere on her left side that seemed to be moving in time with the Morris Dancers and their bells. Holding her hand there, she grabbed Ron’s hand with her left hand, and placed it on that spot. “Ron, Baby. Baby, Uncle Ron.”

Hermione glanced at her friend, “It’s not catching, you know. You’re not going to fall over and die if you acknowledge them directly instead of just rapturously staring.”

Hermione felt the baby echo this statement with a sharp jab and an excited appeal. “I like quidditch!”

Before Ron could voice the obvious question, Hermione informed him, “They want you to talk about Quidditch.”

“When you come out, the first thing you’ve got to tell your father is that you want to be a keeper. Keepers are the best, see, so first thing you make that clear.” And so Ron began to talk animatedly to the baby, which was nice not only because it helped them to bond, but also because it gave her the appearance of engaging socially.

Really, she was fighting to keep her eyes open behind her sunglasses and her head up underneath her hat. When called upon to act as interpreter between man and baby, Hermione did her duty, and watched as Harry stood in the midst of a gaggle of their male relatives, his eyes seeking hers as he stifled a yawn.

Hermione grinned.

"Oi!" Ron scoffed, "Could you just not? You've put me off talking about maneuvers."

Hermione grinned, "Sorry. Anyway, the baby's more interested in food. Their attention span isn't the best."

Ron wandered off a moment later to find himself food, and so Hermione shoved inelegantly to her feet and went to take her place amidst the ladies. Diana Abbott-Church was there, because it was a family party, and she was keen to discuss anything related to their shared impending motherhood, though of course a lot of it was rather indirect with Mrs. Abbott-Church. Diana was due in the middle of June rather than the end of July.

They were frequent correspondents, and Hermione found her to be very open and warm therein. It was nice, though Diana was a few years older and a Ravenclaw, to have a mum friend. Diana and she would never be confidantes, but they got on and respected one another. It was rather nice to have a friend that was simply that, a friend, not a lover, not a brother, not a comrade in arms. Diana was just someone to chat about books they were reading on child development and count kicks with, and it was nice.

The lack of meaning was nice. Hermione knew that mum friendships were supposed to be fraught with tension, but after the war, this was a walk in the park.

After a while, Ron gathered them together once again. Hermione watched him shuffle for a long second, and considered telling him that this might want to wait, but she knew that Ron wanted to get this off of his chest, even if she wasn’t meant to know that.

They congregated in the back corner of one of the marquees, Harry helping her to balance on a
small and dainty chair by standing at her side, facing Ron, who stood just in front of her. Hermione pushed back her hat gently, and found that it was stuck to her head. Muttering a spell, it budged. “Whatever it is, Ron, you know we’re here for you.”

Ron swallowed, “I don’t want—”

Hermione reached for his hand. She knew someone might see, but she didn’t really care. Ron needed her, needed Harry, and the world could hang if it came to that. His grip was glammy, but his pulse was strong and sure.

Harry said nothing, waiting in companionable silence as the world outside their bubble passed them by, music filling the air, the shouts and laughter of those who made merry cutting through their heartbeats.

Hermione looked to Harry, confusion and hesitation. Whatever this was, Harry knew nothing more than she had gleaned and pieced together over time. She knew that whatever it was, they would stop at nothing to be with Ron in the aftermath of the decision he made, even if they would not make the same choice. If he wanted their counsel, they would give it, but if he did not, they would simply sit with him. She was just about to speak, or to implore Harry to do the same, when Ron took the lead.

Ron confessed, staring boldly at Harry and Hermione, “I don’t want to be an auror anymore. I hate it. I really tried.”

“Oh, Ron.” Hermione began, as Harry clapped Ron on the shoulder, “That’s perfectly alright!”

“It means you can look for something you don’t hate.” Harry reminded him, “You don’t have to be an auror, Ron.”

“You just have to be happy.” Hermione finished. “Is there something you do want to do?”

“I don’t know.” Ron explained, “That’s what bothers me. All my life I wanted to be an auror. And now I don’t know anything, and everyone around me is so settled and sure, and I’m just—” He sighed, “I’m not.”

“Well, we love you for the things you are.” Hermione declared, “And anywhere you work will be lucky to have you. Until then, you should come to Duntulum and clear your head.”

“I need to stay busy.” Ron declined her offer, “I was thinking about going to see Charlie for a while. I just don’t want to leave while you’re—” Ron gestured gently, “I don’t want anything to happen to you and not be here.”

“Oh, Ron.” Hermione had to duck her head to hide tears, tears that seemed to come her way far more easily these days than they ever had before, “You’d be just a floo away.”

“You really would be and if you want to go see Charlie, you should go.” Harry agreed, “But you have to bring me back some boots.”

“Don’t.” Hermione laughed, “He’ll never wear anything else.”

“They’re cool, Hermione.” Harry returned, looking to Ron, “We’d demand to go with you, but the heat does awful things to Hermione right now.”

Hermione gave Harry a mock glare, as was his intention, if for no other reason that to make Ron smile. “I do have a wand, you know, and I’m quite good a cooling runes, though I think Smith-
Webster would object to international travel at this point.”

“I’m going to be alright.” Ron squared his shoulders, and looking at the way they were all standing together, Hermione knew there was no way he would ever be wrong, at least in that respect.

She and Harry exchanged a glance. They both knew they had to keep talking, keep taking steps in the right direction. Still, Hermione’s heart raced for a moment when Harry affirmed, “We’re all going to be better than fine. I promise.”

Hermione flopped onto the sofa, still wearing her May Day dress, careful to lay on her side, because she felt like an upturned turtle on her back, crushed by the movement of her breasts and the upswell of her belly.

Once she had summoned herself a blanket and pillow, she decided that the moment had arrived, even as Harry was shucking his suit jacket and tossing his tie somewhere. Cadbury made short work of leaping on her hat, and trying to knaw on it before it vanished to her closet. Crooks merely went to roost on Harry's coat, as was befitting a feline of his distinction.

Hermione gave a great sigh, and spoke, “Husband mine, I do so hereby inform you that I am far gone with child and anticipate my feminine trial with great expectation and piety.” She made a joke out of a formal statement made when a woman entered her final trimester, knowing that much of the sentiment was not a joke, even if the ritual was a bit funny.

Harry had once said the enclosure process reminded him of a 50s sitcom, like I Love Lucy, who was so far gone in her pregnancy that she was wearing maternity clothes when she told a bewildered Ricky about Little Ricky at The Tropicana. Luckily, that was fiction, Harry had said, because any man who didn’t notice by that point had more problems than he could catalog.

Harry joined her there on the sofa, a very handy enlarging spell making their comfortable sojourn possible, “I suppose this is the bit where I’m meant to lock you away and have somebody come find me when they can speak in complete in sentences and are toilet trained?”

“And until your lady wife no longer looks like an overstuffed pigeon.” Hermione concurred with his interpretation of sexist bullshit, and helpfully provided a modern twist that she was sure he’d understand, “I’m going to sleep and if you wake me before Ted gets home, I’ll smother you in your sleep.”

“Is that code for ‘Go away, Harry,” or something else?” Harry returned, cuddling her very nicely.

Hermione shifted against him, hauling a leg over his hip so as to use her husband as a giant body pillow. Harry rubbed her back gently, his eyes level with hers as Hermione opened her eyes. The seriousness of his gaze robbed her of any joke she might have told. “Just love me.”

“‘Just love me’ she says.” Harry repeated himself he had one night in late September. The note of fond tenderness in his voice filled her soul. Hermione vanished his glasses to the side table, and slid her hand up to rest upon his heart as Harry rounded out, “Pigeons mate for life, you know, and father pigeons are generally involved in incubation and raising their hatchlings.”

Hermione rewarded his snark with a roll of her eyes. He rather missed it, however, given that her eyes were closed. Somehow, Hermione knew that Harry was aware of her response. He laughed gently, and the reverberations of his chest lulled her into a sleep that would only be broken by the happy resonance of Teddy’s laughter and Cadbury’s barks.
And yes, I have left parties with friends to go do more random fun things, as our Trio did.

Sorry if this was rusty, the next chapter is much more polished.
Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company.

Chapter Summary

"Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company." George Gordon Byron, Lord Byron

Chapter Notes

As you will see in the letters, Hermione's not actually isolated or alone. However, letters are amazing because they give a depth of insight while maintaining a distance from the outside world that I wanted to evoke in this time period.

I fixed Miriam Abbott-Church's name. I have to go back and edit, her name is Miriam, not Diana. Diana is the dressmaker. Thanks again for catching that!

Potter Passion

By Rita Skeeter

2 May

They say a picture speaks a thousand words, and it is certain that the pictures on page six speak a million words of their own, though their exact tone is open to debate. To those of you who are aware of the standards of this publication, you will know then that these images are the most tame of the myriad of images captured. However, their publication speaks not only to public interest but also to the personal ethos of those who are involved in the political, social, economic, and moral path our community. It also serves as a reminder to those who would emulate them, as many do: private matters belong in private spaces.

Before I end this, I should tell you: I saw the front page this morning, Hermione. I wouldn’t give a moment’s thought to it. Augusta says that the only distasteful action was in Rita’s choosing to publish those pictures. I am inclined to agree, but you know that Augusta is a sound source for prevailing opinions.

You looked lovely, by the way, and I very much look forward to being there with you next year. It will mean that this behemoth of a wedding is behind us, and I can spend time with Neville outside of a crowd of people or with a chaperone.

I will come visit sometime next week, if you like, just let me know a day. You’re still my favorite chaperone, even if I can’t bring Neville to Duntulm. Please don’t suggest it again, this is a time of feminine rejuvenation, and I desperately need to vent. He
keeps moving my laboratory specimens! It’s a good thing I do love him. Otherwise I would supplant you in Rita’s Rag, and the headline would literally scream: Neville is No More! I don’t know, I lack her panache for headlines.

All my love,

Hannah

The Decapitating Debutante

Hermione,

Uhm. Do you remember when we were kids and you got norks before I did, and I turned red at any mention of your protuberances? My delicate sensibilities have again been trespassed against and the repressed old lady in my head is quite offended at your antics in the paper. Then again, the mature part of my brain is screaming: Go Ninny Go!

As Ever,

Ellie

Question: do his glasses do that cute fogging/skewing thing habitually? There is something to be said for a partner with glasses, wouldn’t you say?

A Fond Farewell

By Rita Skeeter

6 May

It has been announced this morning, via the Circular, that a certain duchess who is so infamous for her exploits that she shall remain nameless is retiring from her activities and, in the verbiage of the Circular, will be retiring from public life until September. It is clear, then, that the article in this column of the preceding day was nothing more than a fond farewell from the aforementioned couple, who seemingly cannot bear to be out of the spotlight for longer than it takes to lay quill to parchment.

In this sense, they shall be obliged. In the coming weeks, not only will their present and future undertakings be reported as they happen, but this column will also present exclusives of the post-war activities of The Golden Trio. Little has been said publicly about this pivotal period. That is, until now. Beginning from Victory Day, we will take a investigative and critical look at the events that have led us to present day.

Hermione,

Are you sure we can’t stick her in a jar, again? I’m getting ready to go to Egypt, and so if you want me to take a beetle with me, I’d be happy to do it. Hell, I’d enjoy it!
Tell Harry I need his boot size, again. I forgot. Oh, and if you could thank Fella for sending over all of that food for the trip, that would save me writing another letter. I still haven’t packed. Do you know where my passport is? I think you have it.

Ron

Victory, Victorious

By Rita Skeeter

7 May

Two years ago, we were mourning our lost, as we do every day. Two years ago on this day, it had been announced that Kingsley Shacklebolt was officially Minister for Magic after the State Opening that followed the election. One year ago on this day, Harry James Potter was taking up his seat in the Wizard’s Council, in an unbroken chain of primogeniture that had been neglected since his majority. Though the circumstances of his dereliction of duties were well understood by many, those in the know present a more nuanced view of this delay.

“He was completely and totally against the idea of taking up his seat.” A source close to the ever-dutiful Weasley family recalls, “It took Ron (Ronald Weasley, youngest son and closest Potter confidante), and Hermione (if you don’t know who she is, well, then I for one envy you), days to talk him round. He didn’t feel ready.”

Faithful readers will recall that it was this column that announced that Harry and Neville, Lord Valley took up their hereditary seats on the same day. While many put this down to circumstance, it was clear then that these brothers-in-arms had a plan. Behind closed doors, another source reveals that they planned from the start to leverage their political and social power to sway the voting in pivotal post-war reforms.

“That two teenage boys felt they could, and would, have such impact on such an august body,” notes another source, “was fundamentally absurd.” Indeed, it speaks not only to the bombastic nature of both young men, but also the impacts of the privilege to which Potter was elevated after his years in muggle absurdity. Many felt that the Potter estate should rightly revert to the Crown. It did not, and anyone could have predicted that outcome. After all, Potter’s guardianship had been received by one of the premier statesmen of our age.

“Neville’s influence has always been hard to quantify.” Notes a source, “Everyone always praised Ron as Harry’s best mate, but I’ll tell you true, ever since Harry went to Sirius, it was Neville who was more a brother than a friend. Ron was always made to feel a second string friend.”

This bitterness is quite understandable, as the Weasley family provided Harry with his homecoming into Wizarding society. And yet, was it due to the Longbottom fortune that Harry cultivated their bond? Was it due to their assured political unity that the two young men bonded? Was it true loyalty? In answer to this question, our source close to the Weasley family notes that, “Ronald wanted a quiet life, a life of peacetime. Harry and Neville had their eyes on an altogether different prize. They, I assure you, have no intention of ever being country gentleman.” Should we then expect that they will be more like Dumbledore than their ancestors? With the way they’re both seeking posts at Hogwarts this autumn, it certainly seems likely.

What, then did victory look like for the Trio? Tomorrow, we will be exploring the relationship between the married two thirds of the Golden Trio, but for today, what follows is an exploration of
the bond between the two young men born at the end of July. Country to popular myth that Harry must come first in all things, it was actually the other young man who was born first.

Neville, son of Frank and Alice Longbottom, the ducal couple of the same...

Hermione,

I’m in absolute rage! I could kill her myself, bare-handed! How dare she do this to us all, but especially to Neville? She has no right! And though he says it’s not a problem, he’s spent all afternoon in the potting shed. Augusta is no doubt writing to you to soothe you, but I know better. You don’t want soothing. What we need is a plan. An absolute plan. I swear, if it’s the last thing I do that woman will be shoved out of the UK on a rail. I wouldn’t wish her on America or Australia, but perhaps Antarctica? Her soul of ice would fit in quite well, there. I pity the penguins, however.

Love,

Hannah

The Murdering Soon-to-be Marchioness

Hermione, Lamb,

You’re very kind to reach out to me. I’ve my ways of handling this, and rest assured it shall be handled to my exacting specifications. Frank and Alice deserve far better, as do all of you. I have not yet given up the hope and prayer than that my dear Francis and Alice will return to me in mind as well as heart. It would never do, upon their recovery, for them to see or to feel that I had given up in any way, shape, or form. I have not and I shall not. They fought bravely for us, and so I shall fight bravely for them. Alice is all that a amoeba like Rita will only dream of being. Frank is a man of honor, and is Longbottom in all the ways that matter, healthy or not. She is not fit to speak his name, nor Alice’s, and though I do appreciate your support, it is my duty to defend them as they would do for me.

You are a credit to witches, my girl.

Augusta

Love and Marriage

By Rita Skeeter

8 May

Much has been said regarding the marriage of Harry and Hermione, and more not need be said herein regarding their wedding. Sources close to the couple reveal that the union is far more volatile than the couple’s PR machine would like you to think. “When they were both at Hogwarts,
after their marriage, things changed. They would disappear for hours, absolutely hours, and emerge from wherever they’d gone to row looking flushed and mussed. Everybody knew. Spatting in closets like a common fishwife.”

“It’s not a love match.” Another student revealed, “You never, not once, saw them touch each other, or even look at one another. They were perfectly businesslike. It’s sad, really. I’m glad she dismantled the marriage law, but it seems an awful price to pay, doesn’t it? Stuck with a husband who won’t even look at you in potions?”

“It’s common for pureblooded marriages to be that way.” A friend of the above source voiced dissent, “Your learn to get on and it can be better that way. But it’s shameful that they can’t even be honest. Just shameful.”

Indeed it is, but not for the reasons one might suppose. No hapless victims, these. For in selling us all this bill of goods that they’re in passionate love, the Potter couple forget that the wizarding community is small, and forgets nothing. After their marriage, the formerly self-assured Hermione Granger withdrew from things she loved, perhaps, some say, dealing with the dashed expectations of a love marriage. Others say that it was a plan, a plot, from the word, “Nubo.”

A developing story puts this assertion in a much stronger place. Check back tomorrow for an absolute bombshell of a story. In the meantime, please continue reading for a timeline and detailed review of the facts of the Potter union, facts those involved would prefer to hide…

H,

Ron says thanks for his passport. I’m sure he’ll forget to write.

Can I please, please, pin her beetle-self to a board and keep her in my study? Failing that, you should know that at lunch I got two letters from Rookwood, and he’s chomping at the bit. I’m asking not because I don’t trust your opinion, but simply because I grow tired of seeing trees and parchment wasted so foolishly. Think of the environment. I am, writing this on the back of a quiz answer sheet, as I am.

And can we please, please, talk about how they’re all going on about closets? Remus looked at me this morning, arched his eyebrow, and asked, “Really? Really?” I said, “Why should you be the only person with a closet?” He dropped his head into his hands, I’m sorry you missed it.

What do you think she thinks she knows? Whatever it is, it’s got to be better than the ‘revelation’ that we don’t love each other and barely make eye contact. Oh, shit, somebody nearly blew out the wall. First years should not be left unattended with—

Blonde? Or Brunette?

By Rita Skeeter

9 May
It seems that the Potter couple will be rusticating in Scotland until the completion of Her Grace’s confinement. Or, at least, that’s what their spokesperson announced. Ministry documents tell a far richer, more palatable, truth. It appears that mere days ago, His Grace hired none other than the cousin of the late Fleur Weasley to be his administrative assistant. Half-veela Roberta Delacour, 21, is a graduate of the French Wizarding educational system, is a keen devotee of quidditch, and is 36-24-36.

One can just imagine Her Grace’s reaction. Though many find it indecent to mention, the poor dear is in her enclosure, and even at her best has never boasted the sort of effortless beauty that would have transformed her frizzy hair and inky fingers into visual interest, coming barely up to His Grace’s waistcoat buttons, even in her dowdy court shoes.

“Magical men,” an esteemed employee at Mungo’s reveals, though of course they have never treated either of those involved in this story, “Tend to become rather clingy at the latter stages of the process. It’s an energetic and magical bond. Men have been known to put aside mistresses.”

However, this medical mind reveals, it is common enough to see one partner reaching out when the magical signatures that bloom late in confinement don’t resonate. There is one reason and one reason only that developing signatures don’t flow harmoniously and strengthen the bond between mother and husband. Jumping the fire on Beltane, though an old wives’ tale to strengthen or forge a bond, would do nothing.

In this, then, the question I posed at the beginning is not the only question up in the air. Dear readers, what say you: Weasley red or Black raven?

That’s it. I’m absolutely done. You gave her rope, she hanged herself.

No, I will not give her time! It’s absurd. No one would ever believe it.

Exactly? What do you mean, exactly? I’m going to end up wearing out my DA galleon. We’ll talk later. The second years are staring.

Hermione, lamb,

I am sure this young relative of Fleur’s is lovely and quite good at her job. But do not forget, my dear, that assistants will come and go. I am in no way suggesting that anything untoward is going on, but rather reminding you that allowing your temper to rise on behalf of the young lady is not the best course of action for any involved.

I think it is a good idea to send her a letter assuring her that you know Rita is the scum of the earth. No doubt you have already had a kind word with the young lady. I will not speak to anything else Rita fabricated, as I do not fill my mouth and mind with swill.

I was pleased to see you looking so well yesterday afternoon, though I implore you to keep your feet up a little more. Swollen ankles in pregnancy are an absolute nightmare, and being a witch gives you no right to ignore obvious solutions and
needs. There is only so much magic can do, my girl. You are fast approaching the final
days of being a mother of one, and a bit more rest would do you good.

I am vindicated to know that the nursery is going well. Wasn’t I absolutely correct
about Susannah? Well, of course I was, I would hardly steer one of my girls wrongly,
now would I? Now, as to your questions about Edward, I’m sure his clinginess is
symptomatic of the changes in his little life, and the neediness will do him no harm. He
might, as a point of fact, be modeling himself after Harry.

Just spend time loving your babies, Hermione. It’s the entire point of enclosure. I’ll
visit tomorrow during tea. You could do with some company, I’m sure, that doesn’t
jump to action every time you move.

-Augusta

Hermione,

I saw the paper, and I am appalled, absolutely appalled. What is this world that we
live in, that a man has to be screwing his secretary on his desk because his wife
doesn’t meet some (wrong, stupid, absurd) notion of beauty? Daddy has had female
secretaries, as you do in pink collar jobs, and I will never understand why a woman
doing a job to earn a wage is meant to be competition. This is why, daughter mine,
that smashing the patriarchy is so important.

Take none of this to heart, not a bit of it. You are beautiful. You are doing things you
chose to do with your body, and you are amazingly lovely in every possible way. There
is not a person in the world who exceeds you in any fashion. You are brilliant, and you
use that brilliance in compassionate and understanding ways. You make the world a
better place in ways that have nothing to do with your beautiful eyes, and your soft
skin, except that you use those eyes to see, and that skin to feel.

None of this is about Harry, but though you would never admit it, I suspect you need to
hear this: there has never, never, been anyone else for him. You are the other, and
better, he would say, part of his soul. You have a bond known only to the two of you.
He would no sooner desecrate it than he would have joined Tom Riddle. You’re his
universe, Hermione. Don’t let anything some jealous hack of a reporter has to say get
you down when you’re as vulnerable and fragile as you are now. There is nothing
wrong with either of those things, by the way, so long as you understand the strength
in accepting and honoring those feelings.

Daddy and I coming up. We’re going to stop for a treat or two for Ted, don’t fuss.
Becoming a big brother is a big occasion, he could do with a little fussing. A few
sweets won’t harm him, and I happen to know a good dentist who, by the by, wants to
use his drill without lidocaine on Miss Skeeter.

All my love,

Mummy

Caritas et Sorores
Charity and sisterhood is the motto of the Ladies’ Auxiliary that many of the women of the First Houses favor with their time and goodwill. Every bride in perpetuity has dreamed of her entry into the ranks of the Ladies’ Auxiliary. Every bride, that is, except the conspicuously unengaged Hermione Jane.

Though the first year of marriage is traditionally a family affair, even the least modern of brides make exception for women’s events like the LA. Who could claim that Hermione nee Granger is anything but modern, with her transparent political aims and her rabble rousing in the houses of government? Thusly, there must be some reason that she has not created waves there, as she is wont to do everywhere she goes.

The membership list of the LA is quite a unspoken truth in our community. Fortunately, due to my sterling reputation and wide array of friends and contacts, I was able to sit down just this morning with someone who attends every LA meeting without fail. “Her Grace occasionally comes to tea, and she nearly always sits with Lady Hannah and Mrs. Abbott-Church. If the Dowager attends, she sits with them. Sometimes, she’ll have a scone or some cakes, but she always takes her tea with no milk and three sugars.”

When pressed, the source affirms that, yes, Hermione has a sweet tooth. “Some have said that there’s no baby, but that’s just hogwash. Plain and simple. She glows, and though she never talks about her baby in company, she moves like it. Speaks a thousand words, and is a logical conclusion. Why would you or anyone think there isn't one?”

The source adds that the Duchess of Potter is very graceful, and always participates in activities when she does attend. “I’ve heard the other ladies discussing inviting her to the playgroup with [redacted], but Lady Longbottom has put them off it for a time. They’ve agreed she needs her rest, I’m told.”

“Well, it isn’t for me to agree or disagree with their affairs. If it was me, I’d go to every do with bells on, oh, the things they wear.” The source reveals a rather hidden side of Hermione’s character, “She’s swell. She’ll come and talk, and never puts on like she’s too good or talking to someone she doesn’t like. I bumped into her one time with a tray, and she was as nice as you please. I saw her in London once, and she said hiya.”

Though I personally have never heard tell of a softer side of the abrasive and shrill duchess, it seems that time with her social betters has been to her betterment. Perhaps this will improve her charitable efforts. The LA donates untold galleons yearly to worthy causes, and though their donation records are sealed, it has been revealed that Her Grace, the Duchess of Potter, has donated a mere 10% of what the others have given in this last year alone.

Sources say, in pretty fashion, that this is because Her Grace has a private charity and is active in supporting her patronages. In the first year following the War, it was said that Hermione was pivotal in establishing the Lily Potter Fund, which intends on paper to help muggleborn students, and indigent children in magical society. Thus far, the Foundation has done little of note, and repeated requests to Minerva McGonagall and Remus Lupin for information about the Foundation and its activities have gone unanswered. Their silence is telling. It will not last, however, as in the interest of transparency I wish to make it clear that an expose on this feeble foundation is forthcoming. Watch this space, dear reader.

Hermione’s philanthropic exploits date back to her Hogwarts days, wherein she attempted in the
spirit of caritas to liberate the very life forms upon which she now relies for her every comfort. Her
diatribes in the paper have slowly been replaced by rambling nothings about educational reform.
Having completed her education, this change has no impact upon her, and is thus far easier to
implement.

Could it be, though this is just conjecture, that the funds she so passionately sought after the War
for rebuilding, have gone to rebuilding yet something else? Return tomorrow to learn about The
Foundry. In the meantime, turn to page eight to continue reading about Her Grace’s charitable
giving and engagement.

Hermione,

She owl’d twelve times, and I thought her above targeting a child when none at the
Auxiliary would give her time of day. I have enclosed a letter from a sixth-year
student, Miss Natasha Walton. Though you need no introduction, it appears that Rita
polyjuiced herself and accosted a child working a part-time job for information. Her
duplicity knows no bounds and I will be seeking justice on behalf of this child in my
care, as I failed to do in the past.

Miss Walton is a Ravenclaw, and so naturally Rita’s subterfuge is deeply jarring on
many levels. I have no doubt that Miss Walton seeks to offer her apologies, though I
have assured her that there is no one she need apologize to, as there is no one more
understanding of Rita’s antics. After all, you know what it is to be a bright child
manipulated by adults for their own ends.

I have had a word with your husband. I am given to understand that the younger
students are learning today how to identify someone who has been polyjuiced, even a
stranger, and so I suppose some good has come of this event. Privately, I do agree
with your approach of saying nothing. However, I wonder if Miss Skeeter would be
pleased to know that she is indirectly responsible for getting the younger students out
of exam revision in practicals today.

Warmly,

Minerva

“What Mummy doesn’t know…”

By Rita Skeeter

13 May

It is no secret that Hermione eschews magical medical treatment, but after months of careful
investigative reporting, I can now confirm that she is seeing a witch by the name of Smith-Webster,
yes of those Smiths, who married a muggleborn man and settled in muggle London. The Smith-
Webster children were privately educated. Not only can I confirm where Hermione is being
treated, I am also at liberty to publish the excerpts of the following documents. These were made,
clearly, by a clinic note on the inside of a file. The scant, slim, note-keeping suggests that Dr.
Smith-Webster is holding to extreme privacy protocols.
“…not, under any circumstances, to mention any of the following should Helen Granger accompany H. to appointments: starvation, any visible or palpable scar tissues, torture, electrocution, bone degeneration, or anything related to H’s previous medical traumas.”

We here at the Daily Prophet would like to applaud Hermione for her circumspection. She who would blare her personal affairs from the tallest parapet of her Scottish castle is considering her mother’s feelings. And since we know a muggle would never subscribe to this publication without a wizard or witch in the home, we can be assured that her privacy is unshaken.

Whatever would it do to Helen Granger to know that while she was safely away in Australia under the protection of Sirius Black, former convict and society paragon, her darling daughter was scavenging in the woods to survive? I for one am grateful that she will never hear tell of the magnitude of her daughter’s suffering, nor of the way she very nearly died. It has been said that the Trio spent the first three weeks after the war holed up in Grimmauld Place, nursing wounds. Miss Granger, as she was then, was overcome by a throng at St. Mungo’s, during emergency treatment for internal bleeding. It was the first of extensive medical treatment, covered at length on page eight.

If there is anything to be said for the separation of our communities, it is simply found in the truth that muggle hearts and minds are protected from reality. Turn to page eight to continue reading an expose on the post-war health of The Golden Trio...

Hermione,

Mummy and I are beside ourselves. That your private and personal sufferings should be made so plain to the entire world is a direct violation of your fundamental humanity. What’s worse is that Mum and I did not, refused to, listen when you tried in your own way to tell us details. The fact that your story was made light of in this paper is something that you cannot, cannot, excuse.

I am sorry. I am sorry for every scar, even bit of blood you spilled. I’m sorrier than you know, for knowing now what I do, for not staying and fighting by your side. I should have done things so very differently.

Do not let your fear of this Rita woman hold you back. The power that she embodied, of that regime, is gone. You and those you love made sure of that. She is the last vestiges of those days. As far as I am concerned, the mercy you show in restraint is a gift she does not deserve. She holds no power, none.

What you do is your choice. Mummy is still planning on coming up tomorrow. I am of half a mind to cancel the conference in Oxford and join her. The world will survive without one staid dentist giving a talk about milk teeth.

Please do floss. Dental care in late pregnancy is critical. I have attached an article written by Mr. Chatterjee (do you remember him? He’s quite busy these days, we’ve left off the rugby for golf these last few months), on just that subject. You will find it enclosed. Also find a thank you note for Ted. The picture he drew is quite proudly displayed in my office.

-Dad
Scotland the Grave

By Rita Skeeter

14 May

You will forgive me, dear Scotland, for making a play with your lovely anthem. Today, we turn focus from our scheduled exploration of the Trio’s post-war unconventional living arrangements, to explore more contemporary matters.

It appears that Ronald Weasley has resigned from the Auror office (see above for documentation). An official spokesperson declined to comment on the matter in any specificity, but was keen to reveal that “it is not uncommon for someone to want to hang up their wands as they age, as circumstances change, or as they discern new and developing interests.” Speculation said that, as Hermione is due any day, that Ronald would be racing to Scotland. After all, very few men are involved in enclosure, but those that are typically have quite a lot to do with the circumstances.

However, our flame-haired forever-faithful was not seen on the Floo to Scotland. In fact, he was seen boarding (see left) an express line to Eastern Europe, which is a stopover for many parts of the middle east including Egypt. We know that Charlie Weasley took up a post there taming-dragons when he was jilted by the much mourned Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin. Perhaps the younger Weasley is following suit? Whatever the case, be it loveliness or laziness, sadness or sloth, it is with deepest sincerity that we hope he avoids the scruffy haircut and the boots which are so ubiquitous in the camps.

Meanwhile, in Scotland… A Duped Duke was seen in Portree (see below). He and his young companion bought sweets, and then joined his very French godfather and father-in-law for a lunch. The conversation was tense indeed.

One onlooker described it thusly, “I’ve nothing to say to anyone from the paper. If they were having a disagreement, it would be no concern of yours. I’ve never known someone to make such a fuss over such a thing in all my days. Such things are very common during enclosure.”

What is very common, you may ask? It seems that Duke was keen to get away from the Duntulm for an afternoon. We do wonder what he was attempting to avoid. After the stories of eerie hauntings at Duntulm are mere stories circulated to keep muggles at bay. The castle is in fine repair behind wards designed to ensure privacy and peace for the well-heeled occupants. What a thing it must be, to have all of that lush loveliness at your fingertips, and turn away from it, disgusted.

What truths could be haunting the Duke and Duchess of Potter? Will that truth look them in the face over the breakfast table, a specter to a reality that is unacknowledged? What say you, reader?

‘Mione,

Settled just fine here with Charlie! You’ll never guess who I just missed! Had your guess, then? Luna. I am almost sorry not to have seen here, even if it does mean listening to her rattle on about snabberwosits or whatever they’re called, don’t correct
me, my name is better and if they don’t exist I can call them what I like. I think Charlie likes her. Likes her, likes her, Merlin help me. He won’t shut up about her. It’s nauseating, but at least I’ve some practice in tuning things I don’t want to hear about out.

Anyway, tell the baby and Teddy I say hello. I’m cool uncle Ron, and I’ll bring presents. Yes, I’ll run them by you first. I’m not Hagrid. Norberta’s just fine, having a hatchling. She’s crosser than you, isn’t that nice? You can tell Harry exactly this, and I’ll know if you don’t: I’m handling it. And no, Hermione, it’s none of your nevermind. Do whatever it is you’re doing, knitting, planning world domination, whatever.

Stop teasing Harry when he asks you if you’re alright. I’m the one who gets the hourly owls, and I am trying to pitch in here. Just tell him you’re miserable and give him something productive to do. You know where I am if you need anything. Beetle crushing, Harry-wrangling, you name it, I’m you’re flame-haired-forever-faithful. Do you know anything embarrassing about Luna that would shut Charlie up? Anything, please, it’s been a day and I’m desperate! Please owl some biscuits, Charlie can’t cook and the camp cookery is gross.

I love you, but I think Rita’s right and we should end the affair. It was great while it lasted, but long distance flings aren’t for me. I’m sure you understand, don’t you? Also, to the gentleman reading this over your shoulder: stop laughing, you wanker! I told her to stop teasing you. I didn’t say I couldn’t do it. I’ve got to earn my biscuits somehow, haven’t I?

Sod off, Harry. Hugs, Hermione.

Ron

Hermione,

I’ve bought the children a small item. A bauble, truly. What sort of cool parent would I be if I didn’t assure myself that the children were able to safely navigate their homes? I bought them a slide. It is epic. Remus even says so! No more stairs! Stairs are for bores. We’ve got a slide now, slides are cool. I’ve installed it at Ebony Park, but you may place it where you see fit. Teddy declared it diverting and said he will bring it home to Mummy.

Yes, I am,

Sirius.

Were there any other words in that query, I direct you to your Moomy, who is, actually, doing that, yes.

Marry in Haste, Repent in Leisure

By Rita Skeeter
We now have confirmation that all is not well on the lovely Isle of Skye. It seems that the discord near Portree could not come at a more troubling time, for it is clear that all of next week, the Boy who Lived to Marry Rashly will be sitting his NEWTs all of next week. We here at the DP wish him, along with everyone else sitting their exams in the next week, the best of luck. We sincerely hope that any personal concerns will be sat by the wayside for focus and concentration.

Meanwhile, the Brightest Witch of the Age, has continued her spiral into the domestic. A source close to the former Lioness Bookworm notes that “she took to homemaking with a singleminded focus, and seems to quite enjoy all of the minute detail. You won’t find a more exacting household anywhere.” The source adds that this comes with a price, “Her desire to make a good home is a source of contention between her and Harry, who feels that such things should not be brought to his attention, as is his right.”

We blame neither the Duke, who feels that such things should be effortlessly handled by a wife and a staff, nor the Duchess, who is unable to meet that expectation. After all, her education was deficient in the basic subject that young people of First Houses learn at the knee of those who bring them up. It is hardly her fault that she cannot manage the intricacies. Our source minces no words, “That’s why they should never have married. They weren’t meant to, of course. Harry was meant for an entirely different woman.”

Investigations are being undertaken to assess these claims. If they are true, in fact, much will be called into question. How different things would be if they complied. Perhaps the law would have been proven to work, perhaps the millions of galleons invested in it would have not been a waste, and perhaps, most of all, the human cost would be minimized. Hermione would be a comfortable middle-class wife and Harry would be able to have a cup of earl grey without a dissertation on the topic.

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Hermione,

I’m writing a letter illegally on scrap paper I’m not meant to take from the exam room. Let Minerva press charges, I’ve already got a job lined up for September and she’d be out of a professor. Anyway, I finished and now I’m just sitting here. I hope you’re doing okay. I don’t like being away from you. I feel weird about it. You would tell me if you needed. Don’t read that bit. It’s a magical impulse.

Anyway, what I wanted to say is this. I’ve had a word with Mafalda H., and there’s no record anywhere of anything she might have sent me back you know when about you know what. I would sooner fall on my sword than let anything happen to her. She’s a good person who was tortured by the things The Toad Queen made her do. She stuck her neck out for me to right wrongs she herself could not control.

You want to know what I find funny? How much do you think Rita would pay to know that I drink PG Tips like a normal person? I love the idea that I’m some picky toff. Really, I think I wore the same t-shirt for 90% of school. What did you do with it, anyway?

Love you. When you’ve finished your spiral into the domestic, would you mind telling me what you’re brewing in the basement? I’m a little bit worried. Sorry, misspelling.
I’m interested.

-H.

An Announcement and a Review

By Rita Skeeter

20 May

Over the course of the last fortnight, we have reviewed the various ins and outs of the post-war period in exacting detail. I know many of you have many questions, and if the mail I’ve received during this period say anything, it is that those questions deserved to be answered. On the basis, then, of the wealth of material I have not been able to publish in this format, I am enthused to announce that my next autobiographical novel is forthcoming.

The Golden Trio: The Rise and Fall will take into account the relationship of the three members of the Golden Trio and properly contextualize it. A second expansion has been added to address newfound documentation regarding the marriage law. Hermione’s muggle school teachers have given expanded interviews, and never before seen photographs have been added. This book will be released just in time for a certain Boy who Lived’s birthday gift-giving.

Never fear, dear reader, nothing of this column will change. You may rely on the book as a compendium of information that will enhance this series, which will also be bound and published at the close of this publication run. Today on the docket: a continuing discussion of the marriage law, and the marriage of the Potter couple.

Harry,

Burn this, unless Hermione knows. I’m sure you’ve told her, no matter what I said. I’ll meet you at the Burrow after 2:30, okay? -R. P.S. Ignore the bit about vitamins on the back, if you’re not a dragon it’s nothing to do with you. -RBW

Arthur,

I’m sorry we met in those circumstances this afternoon. I’m sorry Molly continued to be a source for Rita. I’m sorry most of all that we’ve all continued to suffer for it. I don’t know what Molly meant when she said all of those things about Rita understanding her plight. I want to tell you that whatever’s gone wrong, I will do everything I can to help. I’ve had a bit of a word with Hermione about it, and of course she agrees. You know that, or at least I hope you do. There is nothing, nothing, so sordid that would justify her actions, and there is nothing that you could say that would ever change what Hermione and I know about how much we care.

I suppose I’m the last person you would care to confide in, but at least consider telling Ron. He deserves to know the truth, whatever it is. You don’t need me to tell you how to handle your life. I know. It’s just, don’t let the fight for freedom and truth not matter. We live in a new age, and we all need to act that way.
Yours,

Harry

A Striped Leopard

By Rita Skeeter

25 May

“Hermione is as single-minded as ever.” A source close to the oft-discussed Cultural Studies program to be launched at Hogwarts this autumn reveals, “She attended nearly every interview for the post, and rejected perfectly qualified candidates before the Headmistress had even voiced her own opinion.”

What, then, did this source have to say about the former Miss Granger’s efforts? “Her overhauls have been soundly embraced by professors. After all, they’re keen to stay on her good side. Her husband and his brother-in-magic both work at the castle, not to mention her father-in-law. Rumor has it that Remus Lupin is set to be Deputy Headmaster when the incumbent vacates their post.”

What does this mean, then, for Hermione’s growing family? “Mark my words, she’ll be here teaching. I could see her doing Muggle Studies in a trice. Why else would she have gotten the NEWT in the subject?”Why else, indeed? If it does turn out that there is a Potter-cacy at Hogwarts, it certainly would speak to long-term planning that is so evident in the couple’s choices. A likely alternative to this theory is that the former Miss Granger has her eye on the chairmanship of the board, which was her principle check and balance during her impassioned political reform, which have universally now been left dormant after the adulations died out.

Turn to page six for more information…

…meeting with you to discuss the particulars of your enrollment. Though wizarding students who are of age are free to enroll in mundane colleges, we wish to express to you the infrequency of this choice and wish to take the time to iron out the unique challenges this will present to you. We also wish to assure ourselves that your muggle documentation is in order by the deadline of 5 August, to allow for transmission before the deadline in mid-August.

Therefore, we will owl in six to eight weeks to determine an interview time and place. As you are aware, the ability to enroll at a mundane college is exceptionally challenging, and we wish to be on the same page. There is nothing to do to prepare. Simply bring yourself, magical and mundane identification, and a willingness to be challenged. We look forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Lucilla W. Tish

Senior Magical-Mundane Liaison
Hermione,

This is what I get for not looking at the papers for a few days. A book? Has she lost her BLOODY FUCKING MIND? Can’t you do something? Can’t I do something? You know what, this is all bullshit. I’m going to London and I’m going to give that bitch what for. I’ve been nice, but even I have my limits. What can you do to stop me? You’re rusticating. And anyway, even without a wand, I can run faster than you now.

Okay, so I appreciate that you don’t want me to go. Personally, I think she better start hammering the final nail into the coffin you’re always talking about, because I think her present theory of you faking your pregnancy and screwing Sirius and Ron (threesomes or separately, I’m dying to know, please enlighten), is a bit past jumping the shark.

Question: why is it always Sirius? He’s as gay as anything! Remus is the one who married a woman. Remus is bi. Sirius is gay. Does she not get how this works? Or was Sirius a total ladykiller at school? No, you know what, I bet he pined after Remus and merely encouraged rumors about girls. I know how these things work. Boarding school is boarding school.

I cannot wait until we’re at Cambridge together and I don’t have to wait for your reply. Have you thought about what you’re wearing to your ‘I can pass as muggle’ interview? I don’t care if you will be newly postpartum, you’re a witch and you’ve got a closet that even a fashionista would kill for, or possibly gain the requisite amount of curves to wear without alteration. If you don’t look absolutely killer I will be so disappointed and you will owe me at least two skirts. Speaking of, can I borrow that teal dress? It’s my color, you know, and you only finish college once, HJ! I’ll just let myself into your closet at home, shall I?

I’ve enclosed some of my chemistry revision. Would you give it a look and see what you think? I desperately need the best score possible and I just don’t get what this is on about, even though I should. Ugh, I’ve got to go talk to Millie. Why do we tolerate her?

xxooxx,

Ellie
Enclosure is a deeply valued wizarding tradition, dating back to the roots of our culture. Muggle adopted this practice, and abandoned it in due course. As wizarding society anticipates the birth of the Earl of Willard, it is important to note that for all of her supposed championing of tradition, the Duchess of Potter has forgone some of the fundamentals in this tradition. We know her social betters have done their due diligence to educate her, but we feel that the written word, so precious to Her Grace, will have a far greater impact than the helpful words of those who seek to guide her.

The act of enclosure, the broad process by which one gender isolates themselves from another gender for magical and/or social reasons, is common prior to marriage and also before childbearing. Thus, there would be no men in a woman’s enclosure. This is hardly a concern for Her Grace, as it is widely known since Christmas last that she shares not a chamber with the Duke. His Grace is frequently spotted in London since the completion of his NEWTs, and is said to be residing at Willard House.

What does appear to be of concern to many is the sheer volume of visitors to Her Grace’s side. Naturally, her confidantes Lady Hannah and Miss Brown are frequently by her side. Also eternally present are the Dowager Duchess of Longbottom, Mrs. Miriam Abbott-Church, and Dr. Granger. Also a frequent visitor is Susan Bones, who was known to be a chum of the former Miss Granger’s at school, among other young ladies of that set, including the Greengrass sisters. It is clear that the upper set are making their acceptance of Her Grace clear in this most intimate fashion.

Absent from her chambers are any members of the Weasley family. As Miss Penelope Clearwater is no longer said to be with Percival in any fashion, she can hardly be counted upon as their representative. Ginny and Molly Weasley have not been to Skye, much less Duntulm, at all.

In her youth, Mary Hortensia Leah Prewitt, or Molly, was the belle of her set. Known both for her progressive political views and her charming vivaciousness, the season of 1966-1967 is still recalled by society matrons. Molly stands at the helm of her family line, to the point that her third son, is known to all as the heir of the Prewitt line, her second son, Charles, is now in line to be the patriarch of the Weasley family after the death on the battlefield of William and his bride, Fleur, herself a scion of a good family, though not the English brides that Prewitt family members tended to seek for their sons. Does this speak to a personal rift between the families, or to a deeper divide that existed long before Her Grace was even a twinkle in her father’s eye?

Whatever the case, we hope that the following information will be of use and value to her...

10 June

Dear Hermione,

I struggled in writing this letter, and hope you will factor that into the delay of response. What I am about to tell you in answer to your query is not for general discussion. Yes, I remember Molly’s season very well. Her parents were comfortable, you understand, and no expense was spared on her entry into society. She had been set on Arthur from childhood, and I suspect it was some mix of genuine mutual love and the careful cultivation of the match from their families.
Her parents were lovely people, and I counted her mother as a friend. Her father’s little sister was my roommate at school, and we spent several summers together in Italy, as was the fashion then. The elder generations were a bit fusty, but I know much the same is said of me and my beloved vulture hat. God willing, you will know this one day.

Mary and Arthur’s betrothal was announced in formal fashion. There was a tea. There was much joy. There is nothing we like better than a wedding, and never more so when two old families merge. It creates a bit of a problem now, but it warms something in us that is insular and traditional, no matter how we work to overcome it.

But in the winter of 1967, and I remember it well, because I had lost a baby mere months before and threw myself into the social whirl to deal with the emotions of it, Arthur and Molly, as she insisted she be called universally, even as the young matrons had begun to send invitations to her in her own right, rather than to her and her mother, announced that they would not be having a magical wedding.

They wanted to do the equivalent of the registry office, and leave it at that. I applauded their devotion to their ideals of access and equality, and still do, though it would have been better not to imply that other forms of magical marriages were somehow morally repugnant and distasteful in quite the way I recall. In youthful zeal, they protested and wrote editorials.

Many people were not so understanding, and in their interactions, many feelings were hurt. Many nasty things were said, and more hurtful things done. I remember Molly burned her copy of the social register, and spat on invitations. She decried the very community that been her home all her life.

The trouble is, a great many families considered a civil marriage inferior, when there were other options. They did not consider this a valid form of marriage, and there was a great deal of information flying about if such a child could inherit. Of course they can! However, in this process, a great many cultural values were spat upon in this period, and Mrs. Prewitt, in her attempts to have a solemnization of the wedding in a magical fashion, suffered greatly. She cried over it, and was broken that her child considered her parent’s marriage barbaric. If only Molly had lived and let live, and if only the other ladies had not become so offended.

There is so much to this story. In the 1940s, some other things occurred, but both families were supported and valued and loved. It is not germane to this story except that Mary, Molly I should say out of respect for her wishes, had every potential to belong as she had always done. She closed doors in her own face, and yowled when others responded by striking her from lists and groups. When I told you once in anger that every door in good society would be closed to you, I was thinking of poor Molly. I would not have done it.

Molly, by all accounts, is satisfied by the outcome. A community that once embraced her was distasteful to her, and she and Arthur left, I believe, intending before the War and her pregnancies to blend in in the muggle community. You see that sort of lack of self-awareness in the young who have never worked or wanted for anything, and I daresay Arthur was not so mature then as to consider the long term impacts of what was happening.

Except, I fear, as time went on, she saw that her choices had largely closed her
children to things that would have been theirs by rights, even after the family fortunes turned upon the death of her brothers and fathers, much as it did for the Weasley family. However wrongly it may be, Arthur’s long-term career was hampered. Molly was socially isolated. I saw trouble brewing when Bill was nearly of age. A match was encouraged, but the girl’s family would hear nothing of it.

I suspect, and you may tell me if I am wrong, that Molly saw Ginny’s match to Harry as a correction to all that had befallen her. I wonder if she would have lorded the status in our set over the very women who had, over time, shunned her. She will say now that it was our duplicity that led to the estrangement, but I tell you that there was more to it. A seventeen year old girl is a mere child, but as the anger and sniping continued into her twenties and thirties, attempts to mend fences fell flat. I believe she blames us as much as she blames the Dark for the circumstances in which she finds herself.

You see now, why this tale is not for discussion. I am sure that Rita seeks to remind all of us of this, though I cannot fathom why. We have all made choices, rightly or wrongly, and I do wish Rita would let past hurts be, for it is not as though she was ever a party to them. I fear the reminder of the hurts could harm Arthur’s livelihood and the children’s careers. None of this is known in wider society, and the marriage bond is something we all hold sacred. To question it, to bring these matters to light, would have consequences.

Please, my darling girl, put it out of your mind. I beg you. There are some rifts you cannot heal. What is done is done, and your interference would only stress and strain your ties to the Weasleys. I know you love them so. Let nothing you know now change that, only let it help you see that mothers and fathers were once young and made choices as you must now.

All my love,

Augusta

Hermione,

You’re bloody joking, right? You aren’t because I asked Sirius about it and he said that his association with them infuriated Wallburga. Molly’s a source for Rita, and Rita’s warning her. We’ve established this, but WHY did she mention Charlie and Percy? Percy does not need the attention right now. What dirt does she think she has on Molly, or information that would point back to Molly?

Whoever invented the trope of the sexy professor should be shot, beloved, because I am burning the midnight oil yet again, and look like death. I met your mum for lunch, and she said you hadn’t replied to her last letter. I asked you this morning if there was something the matter. I will assume until you tell me otherwise that bursting into tears and declaring that you love your mother is a fact you will, you know, actually tell her. No, before you ask, I did not tell her you had cried. I rather covet your temperamental variances. I asked Neville about synonyms, but I came up with that on my own. Much better than mood swings, right?

I’m stupidly in love with you, and I’m glad our souls are entertained like the clouds in the sky. I wouldn’t have wanted any other kind of wedding. I hope Teddy and the baby
are as one day as lucky as we are. Sheer dumb luck, it seems, gave us so much.

I hope you won’t see this until morning. Sleep, Hermione. You know what, sod this. I’m coming home. Work can wait. I’ll still send this Hedwig, because she looks like she’d eat me if I told her she’d flown here and waited for hours for nothing. No wonder Cads and Crooks are so intimidated by her!

As Ever,

Your idiot husband who works for 1 galleon a year, and worships you.

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A September Bride, A June Mother

By Rita Skeeter

12 June

This week, we’ve been discussing the inter-and interpersonal circumstances of the Potter nuptials. Recent reports suggest that Hermione is due sooner than August. The assertion has been made that the child she carries was conceived on September the 21st, it would mean that the child is not due in August as was announced, but is in fact due this week. It would not be unfathomable to consider the idea that the lying period, that started early mind, is actually a cover for a different due date, either this week or perhaps even prior.

Various experts have weighed in on the matter in a full page article on page seven…

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Hermione,

She’s really scraping the barrel for stories, isn’t she? I’m in France! I met a man, he smelled like cigarettes. Do you have any (SINGLE AND STRAIGHT OR AT LEAST FLEXIBLE) friends you might set me up with? I’m a little pissed, okay, a lot. I love you to bits! Your owl is so pretty. I want an owl. Millie called me, she’s such a bloody bore, Ninny. God knows I love her. Why, though, why?

XOXO

Ellen Marie Brown

Shit, you know who I am, right?

Ellie

---

H,

So, how was it for you? That one time, I mean. One month I’m being lambasted on the wireless for being so bold as to touch you in public and the next you’re a virgin mother. I’m glad Rita set them straight! I am so glad no one’s at session. Neville keeps laughing at me. Not very sporting, really.
THIS MEETING IS BORING. Do you fancy being a duke? I think you’re better at it.

P.S. I am not laughing. I am merely appreciating my good fortune. Harry’s on the front page. Not me. -NV

P.P.S. The correspondence between a man and his wife is sacred, Valley! Sacred!

P.P.P.S Not when you doodle images of the chambers being a jail and beg her to rescue you.

I’m not bothering with a postscript. Neville ate all of the M&M’s I had in my robes. I dislike him immensely.

I HAD TO SPEAK. I STILL HAVE NERVES SOMETIMES YOU KNOW. I WAS STRESS EATING AND FORGOT MYSELF.

He’s the professor all the girls like, Hermione. It boggles the mind.

It’s the motorcycle jacket. Gran hates it. Hannah makes fun of it.

Only of your jacket? I’ve got to go, Hermione. I’m evidently supposed to be arguing for something or other right now.

15 June

He’s here! Llywelyn David Hogarth Church VI. Miriam and baby hale and well. He’s got the most blonde hair you’ve ever seen. -Hannah

A Dragon for the Churches

By Rita Skeeter

17 June

Mr. Llywelyn Church and his wife, Mrs. Abbott-Church, are now the proud parents of a son. In Abbott tradition, the young boy has been christened in a private ceremony within two days of his birth, and is known to all as, in Churchly tradition, Llywelyn David Hogarth Church VI. Another factoid: this is the first Abbott christening in as many generations that lacked a maternal grandmother. Pictures to be published as they emerge, though it can be said that Miriam Abbott-Church was delivered of child in her home, with her sister, father, husband and mother-in-law in attendance.

21 June

Hermione,

Rita’s spinning her web, preparing for publication, but I know you, as I did, found Rita’s sticking her beak into Miriam’s delivery to be crass and disgusting, much like...
the woman herself. Miriam still struggles with Mummy’s death, and to bring it up so publicly when everyone knows this was hard for her without Mummy here, speaks volumes about that vile creature.

You should know that there is a huge display waiting for her in Flourish and Blotts. People were talking, but stopped when they saw me. I did manage to overhear a range of opinions. I hope people have stopped contacting you for comment. To announce this during your confinement when you’re meant to be left well enough alone is beyond the pale.

Enclosed you will find the newest Mr. Puckle book. I saw it and knew Ted had to have it.

How’s it going with Eleanor? Is Teddy warming up to her? How are you finding it? I know you were stressed yesterday when I stopped by to show you pictures of Llywelyn. If there’s anything you need or want to talk about, I’m here. I know I’ve been busy the past few days with Llew, but I’m here, always.

Miriam is not yet up to thank yous and to returning your lovely letter, but she wants you to know especially that your gift was more than thoughtful and your words very meaningful. She plans to bring the baby up to see you as soon as her midwife clears them both for travel.

Love and hugs,

Hannah

Who is finding herself a bit broody. Seeing you should knock me out of it. Lunch on Tuesday, please? Neville’s continued virtue depends upon someone telling me not to accost him on the rare occasion I see him alone, or relatively so. I get a thrill out of imagining his face were I to act upon my irrational, base, urges. Any suggestions on locations? I will not accost Neville. I will not accost Neville. I will not accost Neville. Do you know he had asthma when he was little?

J’en mettrais ma main au feu!

By Rita Skeeter

22 June

Dr. Helen Granger was seen out in Muggle London, evidently attending a French-speaking playgroup with Edward Remus and an unidentified muggle woman. No photographs of this event were recorded, but sources note that the little boy’s French is “conversant, and passable.” It is very clear that the conglomerate of people that orbit the Potter couple will likely be spending time in France very soon. Will they be breaking tradition and having their baby in France? Will the heir to the Potter lineage be born in France?

If so, there are a great many ancestors of the same who would even now be turning over in their graves. There is, after all, a reason the child will be an Earl. It is a quintessential British title, and they would expect the child’s very roots to be British. Why, then....

H,
So evidently we're decamping for France because Sirius is keen that Ted should be fluent? I wonder what she would make of his swimming lessons? Are we moving to Atlantis? Wait until he starts riding, she'll say we plan to live in the barns.

My real reason for sending you this note is simple: Smith-Webster rang here, and since we haven't a phone up in Scotland, Bobbie told her I'd pass along the message. She'd like to move your appointment tomorrow from noon to 2:30. I told her that should be fine, but owl back one way or another and ring her back.

-H

I bet Rita would pay a pretty penny to see this and know that contrary to yesterday's news, I do actually write you, and don't send everything through staff. I do let Bobbie post things, though. I suspect she strong-arms her way to the front of the queues to do it quickly. - HJP.

Hermione,

A little less than five weeks to go! Put on your party knickers, because guess who's coming for a bit of a post-holiday holiday? Me!

I know you have one question, as you always do these days: Qu sont les toilettes?

Plein de bisous!

Ellie
A lambkin in peace, but a lion in war, The pride of her kindred the heroine grew; Her grandsire, old Odin, triumphantly swore "Whoe'er shall provoke thee, th' encounter shall rue!"

Chapter Summary

A lambkin in peace, but a lion in war,  
The pride of her kindred the heroine grew;  
Her grandsire, old Odin, triumphantly swore  
"Whoe'er shall provoke thee, th' encounter shall rue!"

- Caledonia, Robert Burns

Chapter Notes

All notes at the bottom this time, for spoilers.

Happy Mother's Day to any Americans reading!

“"It was very nice of you to think of this, Hannah.” Hermione lowered herself awkwardly into the chair that had been set up prior to their entry into the room adjacent to the baths, not even finding it funny when Ellie hovered. She did feel a bit off balance, so she was glad to have Ellie there to grip her elbow.

“Everyone’s going to be seeing your toes.” Ellie whispered in return, eyeing where the manicurist was setting up her supplies with her wand on a rolling cart, “You should always have your toes done before labor.”

“You just wanted a magical pedicure.” Hermione mused, wondering if the housemaids would give her a hoover if she asked very nicely. They were in a right tizzy because she’d done dishes yesterday.

Hannah agreed with the sensibility of that desire, adding that it was Miriam who had suggested it for Hermione. However, she was unable to join them as she had had a poor night’s sleep. Mr. Church had written to send her regrets on behalf of his wife.

“Ninny.” Ellie returned, as the manicurist asked who was going first once they were all done soaking, “She’s sort of under a deadline.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but politely thanked Rufina and assured her that Hannah could go first as she charmed the water for them, and left them to soak their feet in privacy as she went away to mix up oils and salves for their feet.

The dressing room of the Foundry’s baths was as she remembered it from her last visit. The only difference she noted were the spa chairs, obviously set up by Rufina. The frescos were bright and
Hannah noted Hermione’s H on the wall, and revealed that she was unsure how an N and an H would look together, without looking like the abbreviation for the American state of New Hampshire. Traditionally, a husband’s name went first, but she and Neville were discussing breaking with that tradition in order to have a couple’s monogram that didn’t look like it belonged next to an international postal code.

Hermione had never really had the opportunity to reflect on her bonding before it happened. Circumstances being what they were, she was in middle of it before she had even remembered that she had a new monogram. No one had been given the time to remind her of all the planning that would have ordinarily gone into planning a wedding, much less a bonding. Although Hannah was not getting married until April, there were eons of preparation ahead of her. At least Hermione was able to be a good pronuba and warn her of some things, though she had little experience with others.

There were many things Hermione had been warned to expect in the latter days of her pregnancy. She had been warned of so much that it hardly served her to ponder it. What no one had ever told her was that she would be subjected to showing her swollen feet to Hannah’s manicurist, nor that she would be expected to allow her nails to be varnished in a flashy color. It had hardly required much cajoling on their parts, though Hermione wondered how she had found herself sitting and waiting for a cheery purple varnish entitled Happy Hippogriff be applied to her toes.

Ellie had gone for a far more flashy shade of bottle green entitled Hermione Green-ger. “It does rather match the green in your eyes, Nin.”

“I suppose you think yourself amusing.” Hermione sniffed, turning her attention to Hannah, who had chosen a shade of gunmetal grey.

Hannah was very earthy, but the term hufflepunk had been coined for a reason, though Hannah did not fall into the definition of punk in the way that some others might have done. Hermione thought fleetingly of Tonks, and her motorcycle jacket. Hermione was glad to know that it had been kept for Ted. Somehow, she knew her sunny little boy was not a pollyanna, even though he was somewhere in the kitchen gardens conducting a nature study. Hermione knew full well that meant tramping about and getting dirty, which was just fine with her.

Hannah did have an edge that one would never expect of her, and it made Hermione happy to see Hannah so self-aware. Despite her floral day dress and demure cardigan, Hermione knew well that her friend was a fan of Pink Floyd and Modest Mouse, to name a few muggle bands that had achieved enough in terms of quality artistry to make their way into the musically selective Hufflepuff dorm, though they could hardly be termed punk bands.

Not, of course, that what anyone else thought mattered to a stalwart badger. They liked what they liked, and fuck anyone who had anything negative to say about a passion or a hobby. Hermione checked quickly on the knitting that was clacking away near the sofa, working at double-time. This blanket was mint green, with white scalloped edges.

“You hauled me from Skye to Cornwall in a magical fireplace.” Ellie returned, steam rising from her scented footbath, “Meaning I can no longer lie to my sister and say I am not in the country, on top of the motion sickness, mind. I am entitled to be cheeky.”

Hermione arched an eyebrow, and looked to Hannah, “Does she really want to have a complaint competition right now?”
“I do think Hermione would win, Ellie.” Hannah advised her muggle friend, shifting her feet in the magical water she was reluctant to vacate, her fingers moving her lunula along its chain on her neck. “After all, you haven’t a clingy toddler at 35 weeks in the middle of July.”

Ellie agreed very happily that the aforementioned facts were quite true. “Hermione can have the babies. I’m going to be a cool aunt.”

Hannah considered the statement. “That seems sensible. Be open to the possibility of changing your mind, I think.”

“What about you?” Ellie’s curiosity was not rudely or bluntly expressed, but the general subject she was broaching to Hannah was something that Hermione had never been able to help Ellie understand. “Are you going to follow in Nin’s footsteps?”

Hannah was not taken aback by such a personal question. Her openness and kind frankness was something that Hermione so valued about her, and it was again on display as she lifted her left foot from the charmed water and Rufina began to scrub at her foot with a stone. “Not so closely. Plans are meant to be altered, aren’t they, based on new information? I’m not going to say yes or no definitively, but as it stands Neville wants to be settled in teaching, and I want to finishing my healing training.”

“You don’t seem like the sort of person not to have a plan.” Ellie ventured, “I think that your attention to detail is a mutual trait between you and Hermione.”

Hannah looked askance at Ellen, and it was that that Hermione realized that Hannah had forgotten Ellen was mundane.

Hermione sought to try and explain again, though they’d had this conversation a thousand times. Ellie had not yet had a great many life experiences that required her to reflect on choices she made. “A person can’t anticipate how they will grow and change over time, Ellen.”

“I suspect, also, that magic impacts this, though we are reluctant to give this weight in our choices.” Hannah posited, “You know when you diet, and your brain cries out, ‘chocolate!’ at all times and in all places? Even though you seem to notice it, smell it, taste it, you resist the chocolate, right?”

Ellie nodded, and Hannah took this as affirmation to continue.

“Magic can sometimes rise up to support that tiny voice.” Hannah explained, “And a person’s rational mind is always in control, lest you misunderstand issues of consent, there is some element of making positive and sensible choices in efforts to safely enact the want of our fundamental souls that speaks to maturity and self-awareness.” The blonde looked to her friend’s cousin, “Of course you must also be reasoned. It is complex, and not something to be done heedlessly. Magic is powerful, but it is no more than your will and your intention given animation and focus.”

“Why do I feel like I’ve just been given a magical sex talk?” Ellie asked, absorbing Hannah’s words in a way she had never seemed to do with Hermione, even when she had made the exact same point.

“Because you have, at least partly.” Hermione replied, “What do you think I meant when I’ve told you that like seeks like? Magic seeks compatible magic, and magic is largely manifestation, will made action.”

“Speaking of magic made flesh, Hermione, have you thought about who you will invoke during
“labor?” Hannah asked, her skin now freshly exfoliated. The water was instantly refreshed by the skilled practitioner upon the stool at Hannah’s feet. Rufina opened a jar, and it smelled of freshly crushed roses.

Hermione had to circumspect, though she did not want to offend Hannah’s manicurist with the implication that she would run to the press. However, Rita’s trickery knew no bounds. Hermione hesitated, unsure what exactly to say to shift the conversation as Hannah accepted her foot massage.

It was nice to have Ellie, to have family. Ellie understood well the look on her face, and jumped to her rescue in the way that only someone who had grown up with her might have been able to do. “What does it mean to invite someone?”

“Well.” Hermione replied, inwardly heaving a sigh of relief as she flashed Ellie a small smile of genuine gratitude. “It simply means that you’ve chosen to incorporate some traditions over others, at least for me and in this case.”

Ellie expertly engineered the conversation so that by the time Hermione got around to her specific circumstances, the manicurist had packed up and gone along with her day. Teddy joined them for lunch, and they had a nice afternoon together. By the end of it, Teddy was as ready for his nap as was Cadbury. Hermione wasted no time in following suit.

Of course Ellie entertained herself admirably, but when Hermione found her hitting tennis balls back over the net after she woke up and sought out her cousin, Hermione felt compelled to remind her, “Ellie, aren’t your friends in Ibiza?”

“I was in France, Nin.” Ellie replied, “And I can’t help that no one wanted to hire me for summer work, now can I?”

Hermione lowered herself onto the wicker chair that appeared beside her. The elves were forever conjuring furniture for her, though it had gotten to the point that something appeared if she stood for exactly 4.2 seconds in the same spot. Their hearts were in the right places, and Hermione found it dead useful, if a bit over-concerned on their parts.

Hermione had nothing really to say, except to tell Ellie that she had had quite enough of the blasé persona right now. “Ellie.”

“And I want to be here, alright?” Ellen continued on as though she hadn’t heard her cousin. “I can’t exactly articulate why, only that it matters to me.” Ellie picked up a ball she’d dropped and lobbed it with her racket over the net, “I just want you to remember that the people who love you, they aren’t all like Hannah and Luna and those Greengrass girls.”

Hermione did not doubt the truth of Ellie’s statement, but she knew there was more to the whole thing, especially since she did hear from Mille upon occasion herself, “This isn’t because Millie is spending the summer with Richard, is it?”

“If she wants to throw her life away on some worthless waste of space, that’s her choice.” Ellie was resigned to this truth, though Hermione knew she was in a considerable amount of pain over the way Millie was invalidating her sister’s feelings over their father’s abuse and abandonment, “I don’t have to sit by and watch.”

“You’re right.” Hermione agreed, “And if he should abandon Millie, or dash her hopes again, it won’t be her fault any more than it was your own.”
Ellie did not reply. Instead, she set the rack on the small table that had be left for her use, as her rack wouldn’t float. She wiped her palms on her tennis skirt, one she had because she played the sport quite competently. Hermione made a mental note to drop a word with Daphne, who also played tennis very well. It would do them both very well to have an equally matched partner. She resolved to send an owl later this afternoon.

“Well,” Ellie sighed, looking around the tennis court and the gardens beyond it. “Shall we get you out of the sun?”

Hermione agreed, knowing full well that no one could compel Ellie to speak before she was ready to talk. Hermione was contented to wait, though the fact that the baby was no longer filling her mind with endless chatter made each moment seem incredibly long.

Hermione pushed her infinity scarf off, though it had been keeping her quite cool and comfortable, and tilted her head up to the sun. She noted the passage of time in the sun’s daily trek across the sky, and murmured, “I don’t think it’s going to be as long as they say.”

“Of course it won’t.” Ellie agreed, “Dr. Smith-Webster may have her science, but that baby’s a Brown. I’ve never known any of us to do anything on anyone’s schedule but our own.”

Hermione agreed. She sighed, and quoted a text she had been pondering for some weeks. “In pangs of birth you are hailed Lucina Juno…as Luna you are hailed.”

“I think your baby is the master of their own fate, Hermione.” Ellie returned Hermione’s teasing with a gentle smile, “I don’t think anyone has a say but them, do you?”

Hermione laughed. “Can you picture this house in two years? Stubborn Teddy mixed up with whatever Brown-ness this baby exhibits, I’m not going to have any hair left to cover.”

“You should have thought about that before you found yourself desirous of further propagation of the species.” Ellie retorted, “And not about the fact that studies show two years to be an ideal gap between siblings.”

Hermione hmm’d noncommittally. After all, one and a half years had worked out quite well for her and Ellie, though of course she did not say as much. They did not to state the obvious. And though she had not told Ellie this in some days, she knew that Ellie would never forget that truth.

Teddy was in a strop. Hermione was determined to help him soothe his hurt feelings, but she could have done quite without the glares and the hysterics. His baleful rage, and the broken toy dragon, said enough.

It was Eleanor who put the whole behavior into context, though Hermione hardly needed that information. Edward was glaring their way from his seat, where he sat glaring at the toy his accidental magic had broken. “You do not need to feel guilty. You went into the garden, ma’am. This is not some deep-seated emptiness. He was annoyed because you were not there when he woke, and that I would not fetch you.”

Hermione considered Eleanor’s well reasoned words, and nodded. “The toy is not to be fixed. Magic doesn’t right all wrongs, and actions have consequences.”

Hermione considered the fact that Teddy was two, and debated going back on her word. He was going through a lot, but that did not mean that he would live his life free from the natural consequences of the things he had done and the choices he had made.
Hermione waited until Eleanor received an apology from Teddy, and then approached her green-haired little boy with a greeting, making no mention of the matter that was now settled between him and his nanny, not to be dragged out past its conclusion and resolution. He sniffed woefully, and hauled her by the hand to the rocking chair. Knowing full well what he wanted, Hermione allowed herself to be used as a pillow with a minimum of words spoken between them. Though she had no lap left to offer him, Teddy tuckted himself against her in the cushioned seat, and rested his pink-haired head against her breasts, fisting a hand in the silk of her scarf.

“Teddy Bear.” Hermione murmured, her heart so full at the moment that she thought she might explode. This chair had been unearthed from her parent’s attic, and now sat in the redesigned nursery, as much a fixture as the cranberry and green walls, and the dark woods of the trim and window seat. This chair had seen many a moment between her and Teddy, and it felt very much like a thread connecting their past and their future with the present.

Hermione left Teddy to his consideration of her heartbeat, and looked around the wide sitting room. The redecorated area was broken up into cohesive spaces by the use of framed illustrations from all of the children’s books she loved from *Stuart Little* to *The Wind in the Willows.*

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears as she brushed her fingers over Teddy’s warm body, her eyes looking toward the gleaming wooden table that served as his tea table. Every detail was perfect, right down to the perfect leafy walls and the framed pages of classic books. There were pages of Beatrix Potter hanging in one area, and Aesop’s Fables in another, and yet they all came together to create a harmonious flow.

Teddy’s toys were perfectly grouped so that his kitchen area could have also been called the *Alice in Wonderland* corner and his block table the *Stuart Little* area. The things that tied the room together was the use of woods, warm but not heavy, the consistent furniture and the color schemes, green and cream and pops of cranberry. In a sense, the myriad of book decor was intentional and purposeful, as she again and again experienced the wonder of discerning just what literary connection the space was trying to make.

There were only a few references, so it wasn’t like the whole thing clashed or screamed a theme in some way that they would outgrow or need to change as the furniture and toys changed and evolved. It was the wall art, the connections to toys, the clever use of the same color palate, that brought everything together.

Teddy would play here, and learn here, and grow here. He would never know, again, the transient states that had defined his early life. Since their arrival home from Skye two days ago, she knew he had made this space his own.

She could see him sitting here, fifteen years on, flopped down on the sofa as another person sat on the window seat and read, not quite sure why they still came here, but only knowing that when they did, they felt together and safe. Sure, he had a home with Remus and Sirius, but that did not negate the fact that, in this space, she felt she had a safe and comforting place to give her children.

Soon enough Teddy would have had enough of a cuddle, and he would be off like a rocket. Cadbury was sleeping in a bed that had been brought here for his use, but she knew soon that both dog and boy would be off again on some adventure. Hermione foresaw that this would involve playing with water, which meant a Cadbury that smelled of wet dog and a sopping Teddy.

She knew that the growth of his world would continue day by day, until he was too big to fit on her lap, with problems too big to fix with a kiss and a cuddle. She dreaded it, even as she was incredibly proud of the little boy he was becoming. She had no doubt that as an old lady she would come and sit in this rocker, incredibly proud of all her children were doing, and wishing that she
had done more too heed Augusta’s reminders to spend time just loving her babies, even though now she knew she was giving it all she could. There would simply never be enough time, and that was something not even magic could alter.

Harry poked her in the shoulder. “Hermione, it’s after noon.”

“Go. Away.” Hermione had not had an easy night’s sleep, and she was so tired once again that she knew she could sleep the final days of her pregnancy away, and not find this anything other than the absolute best thing to do. She had been utterly knackered for at least the least two days.

“You told Petra to wake you at shortly after noon.” Harry burrowed one of his room-temperature hands under the blankets, and pressed that hand gently to her side, “You warded the doors against everyone and the elves are in a tizzy.”

“Why are you here, then?” Hermione asked, cracking her eyes against the weak sun filtering through the curtains Petra had drawn earlier in the day.

“You forgot to ward me out.” Harry returned, settling against the curve of her body. “Crooks left another hedgehog on the doorstep.”

Crooks rumbled in approval, where he rested on the pillow on her left.

Hermione accepted this answer, and patted Crooksy, who was never out of her eyesight lately. In the last twenty-four hours he had become oddly attentive and reluctant to stray from even her bed or her chair. During their sojourn on the Isle of Skye, he had brought her any number of dead birds, rodents, gnomes, and other such creatures, which made Teddy squeal and Hermione feel oddly touched. Today, he had not moved more than five inches from her side in waking moments. She knew then that she had been sleeping long enough to give her a cramp, and long enough for her half-kneazle to provide her with a fresh kill.

“What’s today’s date, then?” Hermione struggled to sit up, and let Harry help her change position. Hermione shoved the sleeves of her nightdress up, and considered the fact that, even sitting on the edge of the bed, she saw nothing of her body save the baby, who although had taken it upon themselves to drop some days ago, now made a whole host of other activities challenging.

His touch was unfailingly gentle, and over the last few weeks he had taken to looking at her as though he could not quite believe what he was seeing. Hermione cared not what he thought of her changing shape, and rested her head against his shoulder. The cramp, she realized, feeling quite stupid, was the fourth contraction in the past hour and a half.

“It’s the twenty-fifth.” Harry brushed an errant curl back behind her body. “Four days.”

Hermione hummed. She’d thought this would be over by now. She was quite ready to be done with this pregnancy. She was quite ready to hold their baby, quite ready to be the only person living in her body. Her back hurt and these contractions were the absolute bane of her existence.

Hermione was in the middle of shifting her weight when, on an inhalation of breath, the pain got worse, intensified, rather than relaxing somewhat. She wasn’t ill-informed, and knew that the fact that it didn’t get easier was a sign of something bigger brewing.

Still, she knew one actual contraction didn’t mean all that much. She had to establish a pattern. The preceding ones today had not been anything of note. Still, by the time she was sitting on the chair by the bed a few minutes later, Harry had sussed the information out of her.
He was, as ever, ready to do something to face a challenge head on, and though Hermione agreed in principle, the idea of sending for Smith-Webster was not yet one she thought sensible, for very obvious reasons. The poor doctor would simply sit here for hours, and Hermione thought she might scream if she had one more person willing to hover. “I don’t think you should floo yet.”

“But she said—” Harry began, switching tracks when his original opening fell on unhearing ears, “She gave us a paper. Maybe I should go get it? It was very authoritative.”

“We need to wait until they’re regular. This could go on for days. The contractions have been going on for weeks.” Hermione summoned her slippers, and found her magic was still as uneven as it had been the past few days.

Her slippers first zoomed towards her at breakneck speed and then fell to the floor in a thud. Cadbury, quite put out because Teddy was with Sirius this afternoon doing what he called ‘gentlemanly things’ leaped on the shoe. Hermione tried not to think of her two year old somewhere on broomstick.

Hermione ignored them there, and dropped the wards, knowing that Petra would not come until she was called. The magic sizzled in the air, not as seamless as it had once been.

Harry went and got her slippers, not using magic for the simple fact that she knew he didn’t want to point out that his magic was as unruffled as it had ever been. Harry was quite adept at her shoes these days, largely because she could neither see nor reach her feet without a great deal of effort and ingenuity. “I’ve got a feeling, Hermione. She’ll be born today, of that I’m sure.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but accepted her husband’s help in getting to her feet. Irrespective of his wrongness on the child’s sex, and intended arrival, he was rather handy to have around, especially when the person playing field hockey with her bladder ensured that her next destination was the toilet. “You’re wrong on both counts.”

Harry looked at her, and shook his head, modulating his leggy pace to walk along with her. Hermione knew her typically brisk pace was now officially somewhat puttering, and she so enjoyed watching Harry figure out how to slow himself down enough to make her pace seem average. “You’ll see. Even a stopped watch is right twice a day, right?”

“You’re not a stopped watch.” Hermione assured him as she headed to the loo to take of a most pressing need, “You’re very sweet. You’re wrong, but very sweet.”

Behind the door, Hermione heard Harry muttering about clearing his schedule. It was a bit absurd, because she knew full well that all he had planned to do this afternoon was talk shop with Neville while helping him in his laboratory, which actually meant whining about missing Ron and commiserating with Neville about the preparations for the school year and Neville’s wedding.

Still, if he wanted to sit around all day with nothing to do, he was welcome to do so. She was absolutely exhausted, likely because she was unable to find a position that suited her very well. Exiting the toilet, Hermione appraised Harry, who was trying very hard not to look like he hadn’t been watching the door.

After a long moment of consideration, she laughed. It was either laugh, or cry, in this situation, and extended a hand in his direction, “Send a note to Bobbie if it makes you feel better.”

“I’ve been told I make a very nice body pillow.” Harry shrugged, leaving Hermione to gather that such a missive had been dispatched while she was completing her ablutions, noting the empty Hedwig perch and open window that supported her theory.
“You do.” Hermione affirmed, “But please read or something.”

“I wasn’t staring at you in your sleep!” Harry defended his earlier actions, “I was merely lost in thought and didn’t even see beyond my own nose.”

Hermione sighed, and lumbered up into their bed. She was entirely too tired to prove her point.

Harry had not expected to be right, even though alarm bells had started ringing the second Petra had sent for him, her hands twisting her hanky and explaining that Hermione had locked everyone out of their rooms. She hadn’t been wrong when she’d asserted he’d been watching her, and he could read a list as well as anybody. Hermione, for her own reasons, did not want to acknowledge the approach of labor, perhaps because it had been as clear as crystal.

At this moment, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to be right. Hermione was with Augusta and her mother and Smith-Webster and Ellie in the apartment that was traditionally supposed to be her own. They’d never even bothered to use the rooms. Her bedroom across from the one they shared was enough vacant space in their midst.

He was not in that room. He’d been given tasks. Normally, he would have appreciated being given something concrete and useful to do, but right now Hermione’s insistence that he go and be the one to wait for Ron seemed entirely asinine. There was an entire room waiting for Ron, and so what if Ron did have an important role in the whole process, he didn’t need a bloody hero's welcome.

Still, what Hermione wanted, Hermione was to going to have, even if it did mean that he had to stand in front of a cold fireplace listening to the clock tick in his brain.

Hermione was in that white bedroom down the corridor doing her level best to give birth to their baby amidst the light of who knew how many candles because the magical energy in the room meant gas lights were a bad idea. He was standing here, watching Remus and Rookwood play chess. Remus was going to trounce Rookwood, that much Harry knew in a single glance of their openings. One could not live with Ron for nearly a decade and figure out how to muddle through chess.

Harry glanced at his watch. Ron should have arrived two minutes ago.

“There’s always customs.” Neville noted, coming up to Harry’s side, carrying his mug of strong coffee. Neville had been here for far too long, but as soon Harry had sent for Augusta, he had come along. “I’ll wait for him.”

“Hermione told me to wait for Ron.” Harry declared, glancing at his watch again. The watch face glared at him, reminding him that his place was not in this room. Behind him, he saw Adam and Sirius exchange a glance, having fallen silent in their discussion of politics. “And so I’m going to wait for him. I swear to Merlin, if he stopped in Prague to get a snack I’ll—”

Thankfully, the floo opened in a blaze of smoke and light and Ron stepped out of the hearth, looking like he hadn’t shaved in a week and had had shoved himself into traveling without realizing that his shirt was buttoned incorrectly, and his trousers were shoved into hastily laced dragonhide boots. “You’re here. Good.”

Ron was in the middle of explaining his delay when the gas lamps flicked with the crackle of magic in the air. It felt like a pull in the pit of his belly, a demand at the core of his soul. Harry saw Adam note the time of this one on his watch, and knew that, for all that the night seemed endless, Ron had shown up in the nick of time.
Ignoring Ron, Harry turned on his heel and strode down the hall. Clearly, the contractions were no longer short or far apart, not that he hadn't already figured that out. She had been at this for almost ten hours. Ten hours, and Harry was quite sure he had never seen something so brutal in his life. It was fundamentally gladiatorial, far worse in Harry’s mind than any pain born out of the war, though he knew better than to give that thought voice.

The lamps in the other chambers were off, because the magical backlash had grown stronger. Harry made his way back to the room, cutting through two rooms instead of going back into the corridor. Cutting through the sitting room via the closet to the bedroom was faster, even if his footsteps did echo in the wide rooms. Near the threshold, Harry paused to exhale. It was his job to keep it together. Hermione needed his strength right now, and she did not need to worry about him. Every single person in this room acted as though this was normal. Hermione herself was in pain, and refused every bit of medical support Smith-Webster might afford her to lessen it. Harry had learned about eight hours ago to shut his mouth unless Hermione asked something of him. There was so little that he could do that he hopped to her bidding, completing it to the exact detail. He still felt helpless and useless.

Harry paused by the door to wash his hands again and lay out more incense. He left the door open, and undid the top button of his shirt, as well as the cuffs, rolling them back once more. He hardly saw the point in loosing knots and ties in homage to Juno Lucina, but it mattered to Hermione. Frankly, he would have taken Smith-Webster up on her offer of drugs before untying every knot and opening every fastener in the room, but what did he know of feminine magic?

These traditions were important to Hermione, and it seemed to bring her a sense of control and peace. The incense was quickly lit and set upon the table in the corner near Hermione’s lares, which had been moved here for her access in the early stages of labor, though that time was now far in the past.

Harry, for a single moment, felt glued to the floor as the room bustled around him. Augusta was attending to the more ritualistic elements of birth, the prayers and the rites, whereas Helen was standing at the head of the bed, doing the things that were of immediate need, seeing that Hermione was in the position she wanted to be in, that she felt empowered and safe.

The magic in this room was thick, pulsing around him to the point that it was heady and transformative. Harry knew it, could taste it and feel it in his very bones. This was Hermione’s magic, rising and cresting and falling with each moment. Shaken from his own senses by a sharp gasp, he crossed the room to hear Hermione ask, “Ron’s here?”

Harry agreed, taking the place of Helen, who had been on her feet all day without the benefit of Pepper Up. “Already making himself a plate of food, unless I miss my guess.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you today.” Hermione shifted against the bed, and Harry did the only sensible thing and wedged himself behind her on the corner of the bed.

Harry saw almost instantly that the muscles of Hermione’s neck were knotted tight with tension, and so he set to gently murmuring positive and relaxing words in her ear. She wasn’t helpless, and his valiant warrior of a wife would fear nothing, nothing, while there was breath in his body.

But soon even that was not enough, and Hermione found her way onto her side, his body bracketing hers with intention and a reverence that shook Harry to his core. Hermione had spent ages on her birthing ball, leaning back against his chest.
Smith-Webster had suggested she get into the bed indeterminate ages ago, and here she had stayed. How much longer it would be, Harry did not know. He only knew that he was all anticipation for this to be over so that the baby would be here, and all dread knowing that Hermione had not yet faced the worst of what the night might bring her way.

Hermione was glassy-end and slicked over with sweat, the heavy weight of her hair pinned to her head. Tradition be damned, Hermione had declared, when the weight of her hair made her itchy, hot and uncomfortable. Her hair was gathered haphazardly on the top of her head, her idealized intentions having faded when the weight and heat of her hair quickly became untenable.

Hermione shifted restlessly and modulated her breath as another contraction began build. Somewhere in Harry’s mind, a timer began. “You’re doing so well, Beloved.”

Her whole body was tight with the contraction, her body seeking that c-position without her awareness of it. It was almost thirty-nine seconds before the contraction began to abate. Things like complete sentences had long ago escaped Hermione. She was deep in some psychic headspace, where the only thing that mattered was the encapsulating experience of bringing forth their baby.

His arm was up under her knee, holding the position when she couldn't do it herself. This allowed her to relax enough to say, her voice thick with tears she was now beginning to shed, “Is Teddy okay? Where’s Ted?”

Harry watched Helen exchange a look with Smith-Webster over Hermione’s shoulder as she replaced ice in the bin by the bed. Harry did not care what they meant by their exchange. All that mattered was Hermione, and the fact that she was openly weeping, shaking with the force of her tears, like floodgates had opened.

“He’s fine.” Harry assured her, knowing full well that his wife was somewhere beyond him, in a place of her own making, a place ruled by her fundamental emotions and sensations. “He’s with Ellie and Eleanor. He’s sleeping. Remember? He read *Mr. Puckle’s New Baby* and went to bed.”

Hermione’s tears came from the pit of her soul. She was crying, he knew, because she was in the most pain she had ever been in in her entire life. It seemed, however, that her emotional cup was the cup that was running over right now. “He could be—”

Harry understood, then. He understood, then, and so he did the only thing he could do. Harry left her side only so long as it took him to settle on her other side, so that he could see her face and dry her hot tears with a room-temperature cloth that would no doubt feel quite cool to her warm skin. “Oh, Hermione.”

She cried, talking through her tears about Ted’s safety, about him growing. There wasn’t a whole lot that she said, but Harry got the point well enough. Hermione had hit the worst of transition, and she was at the end of her rope. She was vulnerable, and she wasn’t scared for herself, but for Ted. She was scared, in this moment, because she was not with him and everything felt so wrong to her on a fundamental level. This only served to heighten her anxieties about his babyhood, and all the things she had not been able to give him, and all of the challenges he was facing as he grew up in front of their very eyes.

He did not quite know what to say to help her understand that Ted would always be her baby, even when he was a punk rock politician or whatever he wanted to be in life. He would always need his mother. As someone who had never really had time to remember his own mum, Harry knew that well.
Hermione was incoherent when she began to speak, senseless. “I need to see—”

“Focus, Hermione.” He wasn’t about to tell her that the driving desire to see Ted was utterly impossible. She wasn’t even aware of the things she was saying, and he wasn’t going to point them out to assure her that she was safe, and everything was okay. Harry was very aware of the upswell in energy and magic around them. What she needed to do was do what her body told her to do, and have this baby. “You’re doing so well, and everything’s fine.”

The sharp onset of another contraction stole Hermione’s breath, and Harry scrambled to hold her through it. He wanted so desperately to take her pain, to draw it within himself. Eyes falling shut, Harry heard the crackle of magic in the air, and though it was absolutely agonizing, he welcomed the breathless onslaught of agony. The pain was so bad, it was nearly beyond sensation. He could barely breathe, could barely hear above the snap and crackle of magic so elemental it felt like electricity in the air.

“Harry!” Helen’s voice was sharp and broke like thunder into his focus. “She needs the pain. She needs it. The things she’s feeling are the only way for her body to do what it needs to do. You will stop, and you will stop now.”

Harry blinked back at her, glasses askew. He wanted to demand answers, demand her reasons. He wanted to pull a wand on her. He wanted to scream that his wife, his bonded wife, was in agony and that he had the capacity to ease it. He wanted to declare that Hermione was his wife, that it was his right and his duty to ease her suffering. Harry exhaled and let the connection fall, knowing that this wasn’t about him, and that Helen acted on Smith-Webster’s authority.

It made sense that Smith-Webster had sent Helen in her stead. He would have no such hesitation about pulling a wand on a stranger in his home.

“I won’t apologize.” Harry declared, as the contraction from hell finally eased and Hermione let go of the ragged breath she had been trying to use to control the pain and the course of energy through her body. Her eyes were glassy, and brightened not by joy but by pain. It made him ache, made his soul bleed.

Helping Hermione to relax was a constant effort to read the magic, to read her body, to read her expressive face, and then doing his best to selecting the best way to approach helping her. He counted on their years spent together in a battle of another sort to do this on his own, without too many questions or statements. Hermione was beyond talking and found efforts to reach her verbally too often distracting and tiring.

“I’m not asking you to apologize.” Helen asserted softly, leaning over the bed to make herself heard to Harry without disturbing Hermione, “One of you needs to keep your head about you, and for as many times as she’s done that for you, it’s your turn now, no matter how much it hurts.”

His entire universe was wrapped up in Hermione Granger. Watching her reach out and clasp his hand with her own drained and shaking hand told Harry that, as in everything else, they were in this together. She had faith that he would, despite his lack of capacity, get her through this, get both her and the baby through this ordeal. Harry would not live to see Hermione’s unshakable faith in him undermined, misplaced as it was, not when it was her wellness and that of their baby at stake.

Harry swallowed and nodded. After a moment of shoving back tears, Harry looked to his mother-in-law, and replied, “Thank you.”

Helen patted his shoulder gently, and Harry drew a breath he hadn’t known he was holding.
Dawn streaking across the sky as the dark of night gave way to a lavender sky as Hermione gave one last shuddering groan of a breath.

Her body felt as though it was being ripped in half. She was dizzy with the force of the pain and the sensation that rocked the blazing candles in the room, nearly extinguishing them before they blazed anew with light.

Her eyes burned as badly as her stretched and exposed body. Dr. Smith-Webster was in between her knees, with Augusta at her side. Somebody was telling her to breathe, to breathe, and somebody was counting. It seemed to go on forever, a single moment where the veil thinned and magic danced, where all time was now, where agony became joy and pain became wonder.

“She’s here!” Smith-Webster’s voice cut through Hermione’s hazy thoughts.

Hermione began to shake as Smith-Webster’s words resonated. She was so tired.

Hermione heard laughter, beneath the pound of her heartbeat and the ringing in her ears. She supposed someone had screamed, but the only sound she heard now was the thin squall that assured her that her daughter was here, and was alive and protesting her ordeal.

Hermione felt Harry’s tears on her exposed shoulder, felt his lips against her neck. She heard him whisper her name like a benediction. Desperately, she sought out some glance of their baby, their daughter, but she saw little beyond blood and fluid and the movement of magical hands as they clasped new life and carried out any manner of checks on the baby to ensure her health.

Hermione slumped against the pillows. She knew there was something she was meant to say, but her vision was blurry with fatigue and pain and tears and the only thing she could really focus on was the totality of this moment. Her eyes fell closed, though she fought it with every bit of her strength.

Very quickly, there was a naked baby on her exposed chest. Hermione’s shaking hand moved gently along the shell of her tiny ear, and watched as the baby’s face scrunched. “Today’s been a trying day for you, hasn’t?”

Hermione, for the first time in a very long time, did not receive a mental answer to a question put directly to the baby. She missed that connection, but it was assuaged by the knowledge that Harry too, could be a part of her life in a way that he had been unable to do so far. Hermione watched them meet, watched as the baby, cradled against her mother’s chest, sought out the stimuli of her father's touch, heard the overflow of emotions in Harry’s voice.

Hermione’s heart overflowed. This tiny baby, with her splotchy skin and her wrinkled fingers, and dark hair plastered to her eggshell head, had become, in the space of a single moment, a single glance, her father’s little girl. Hermione knew well what a bond that was, and rejoiced in that knowledge, not only for herself, for the baby.

Hermione sought out her mother’s gaze and found a wellspring of understanding there. Augusta was radiating with joy, and Smith-Webster was busying herself with the delivery of the placenta, which Hermione hardly noticed in the upswell of magic and emotion around her. Still, Hermione found her gaze hardly able to be away from the baby, and by extension, Harry.

They had a daughter.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a lightbulb illuminated. Hermione licked her dry and cracked lips, and ran a single finger down the baby’s tiny spine, as she made frog-like movements. “Harry.”
Hermione knew her voice was hoarse and thready.

Harry stopped speaking then, and took in her face. Hermione knew the bags under her eyes had long ago passed grey and headed into purple, knew that her sweaty hair was plastered to her head and unmanageable tangle that would take days to undo, and knew that the cast of the thousands of candles around them sent a ghostly tint to her skin that somehow lent an overtone to the tang of blood and magic in the air. Still, she knew in a rush that the reverence in his eyes was not for their child alone.

“I’ve given us a daughter.” The words, while not the most traditional, did their job. Had she noticed, or even cared, she would have seen Augusta very carefully studying this moment. It was, after all, her memory that she would present to Rookwood.

Harry understood what she was doing, what she was starting, because he kissed her gently, an affirmation of not only their shared affection, but of something far more prosaic. “In her I am well pleased, and in you I am blessed.”

Those words, also, were their own. Although they were meant for the onlookers, meant for Smith-Webster and her mother and Augusta to hear, Hermione knew that Harry spoke them for her alone. That they would be recorded forevermore in a pensive was beside the point. This moment was about stating the wondrous reality of their changed existence.

Still, Hermione watched as that heartfelt affirmation set into motion a chain of events that would continue now as they had continued for eons, unbroken. After a few more minutes, Hermione urged Harry onward. Harry lifted the baby gently from her chest, and held her close. Hermione tried to watch him take the baby to her mother, who was waiting with a basin and Fella.

Augusta demanded her attention gently. “He’ll bring her back very quickly, my lamb. It helps them bond.” Hermione still felt very empty and very exposed. Clearly, Augusta understood this, because she had already levitated a bowl of lukewarm water to Hermione’s side.

“We’ll have you feeling better by the time they get back, won’t we?” Augusta dipped a cloth into the heavily scented water, and though Hermione desperately wanted to be with the entirety of her family, her eyes were very heavy.

Augusta gently bathed her face as Petra refreshed the linens. Hermione sighed. She was just so tired. “You go on and rest. When you wake up, you’ll feel so much better and your baby will have had quite enough of male company.”

Hermione slumped against the pillows behind her, uncaring that she now wore a crisp cotton nightgown, and slept. Her last conscious thought was that it was nearly dawn. She hoped Harry showed the baby her first sunrise.

Harry could not take his eyes off of the sleeping face that peeked out from the gentle cocoon of blankets around her tiny body. The softness of the cotton, Harry knew, was nothing in comparison to the space that she had vacated rather roughly, nor of the cuddle that awaited her. “It’s hardly up to the snuff of your usual accommodations, is it?”

The baby’s fingers twitched as if in agreement. Harry took that as encouragement, and stepped across the threshold to the sitting room. He hardly had so much as breathed before every bit of activity in the room stilled.

“She doesn’t have a name as yet.” Harry explained, “Hermione’s well. She’s just a bit out of it.”
Harry suspected that anything he had said fell on deaf ears, for his parents and Adam were already far more interested in their granddaughter. Harry hardly minded that he was persona non-grata. Hermione had already declared her weight and length off the table for discussion, because she wasn’t some kind of farm animal meant for fattening up and Hermione did not want their child’s body to be such a focus of consideration from the moment of their birth.

Harry, knowing that he had a duty, turned to Rookwood and added, “5:27.”

Neville, too, took note of this information and made quick work of dispatching the owls that had awaited his addition of two salient facts. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw a great many scrolls of parchment glow with the addition of her birth time and her sex. As soon as Neville met his niece, he would sit down and affix his own signature to the announcements, just as Harry had done in advance. This role went hand-in-hand with Augusta’s duties, which were symbolically important.

The time of birth was critical information for her natal charts, and horoscopes and the like. While Hermione put even less store by such things than he did himself, there was official documentation that had to be handled and recorded. Rookwood would need this information, also, for his own purposes, which included updating wills and the like.

Harry took solace and found joy in the tiny heartbeat and sought out Ron’s gaze. As ever, Ron was right next to him, looking at the little girl who would call him uncle with wonder and resolve on his face. It was clear to Harry that his daughter had a champion and a protector in her uncle.

“Ron.” Harry spoke in a soft voice so as to not disturb the baby, who though quite awake, did not deserve to be disturbed with anything other than the absolute outpouring of adoration going on around her. “Go and tell Fr. Smithson that the baby’s here and Hermione is resting comfortably, and see to the bells.”

Ron’s task was the most important, aside from Hermione’s own efforts, and the choice of who would carry this news into the world had been a simple one. Of course it would be Ron. It was the affirmation of brotherhood between them, as typically a new father chose his brother for the role of informing the cleric and the world of the good fortune that had blessed their family and their home.

Ron moved quickly from the room.

Clearly, Rookwood thought him under informed. “If I may—” Rookwood began, clearly uncomfortable with what he saw as his duty.

Remus tore his gentle gaze away from the baby, and glared so sharply at Rookwood that it was a wonder his flesh did not melt from his face. It seemed to Harry that Mr. Moony was battling a few of his more werewolfly instincts. Sirius laid a hand on his bonded’s arm, but not before Harry swore he heard a rumble emitting from somewhere in Remus’s chest.

Rookwood inhaled.

“You may not.” Harry declared, quite ready to make this an issue of wand point if Rookwood pushed him. “My daughter will have the bells peal for her health and her life. My wife will have Mass said for her sake.”

Clearly, Rookwood had nothing further to say, not that it would have mattered one bit if he had opened his mouth. Ron had already gone racing across the grounds.

Harry was sure that there wasn’t a person in this room who did hold with the more patriarchal
elements of some wizarding traditions. The baby deserved every bit of celebration and thanksgiving, not because she was his daughter, but because she was a person with the same worth and the same value as any new life. Hermione would have a mass, not because he would have been somehow grateful to her for doing some kind of duty, but because tradition mattered to her and because, collectively, they did have a lot to be glad about in how well she had done thus far in her own health.

In mere seconds the silence in the sitting room was broken by the bells reverberating around them. Harry moved to the window that overlooked the chapel, and saw that the sun was now well and truly rising, the sky resplendent with a summer sunrise and the happy peals of bells. Above their heads, the bells had begun to ring out, pealing above the sunrise as though they had brought the sun.

Harry looked to the smiles on the faces around him, and knew in his heart who had brought the sun this morning. She was, after all, her mother’s daughter.

All across the United Kingdom, bells pealed. Hermione knew that a person had to be magical to hear them and know that they pealed, but peal they did, loud and clear. It told one and all that a magical baby had been safely born. Hermione explained this tradition to her daughter, “And the way people figure out who was born is via following the bells. The call to ring is picked up as the sound travels. It began here, and so you, Baby, are the originator of many a person’s early rising.”

Mum smiled, “The news is already all over the Wireless. Thankfully Neville was able to get owls out to your friends before it hit the newswire.”

Hermione knew that Neville had worked very hard to get those missives out, just as Augusta had done to uphold her roles, both ceremonial and practical, during the delivery. Hermione knew that some portions of it would go in a pensive, while other more intimate moments would simply be things Augusta could attest to as a witness. After all, no witch would ever want the whole world to see her body splayed open on the delivery table.

Shoving away consideration of her aching bits, and the fact that they had just completed a halfway passable attempt at nursing, Hermione turned her attention to more pressing matters. The baby, hours old, had yet to be given a name. Although her name wouldn’t be announced at large until eight days from today, it seemed that her name was something she and Harry ought to have discussed and decided before Teddy came in to meet her. As it stood, Hermione had only put it off for a few hours to get some rest and to make sure she felt herself before seeing Ted. She really had not wanted to scare him, nor had she wanted him to see the baby until Smith-Webster had pronounced her in the peak of infantile health.

Hermione was meant to stay in this room with the baby for the week. It was an altogether pleasant room, done up in gauzy white linens, with hyacinth wallpaper on the walls. It was by no means a small room, though they had failed in their halfhearted attempts to divert Crooksy, who now sat on the windowsill near the bed, surveying this new person with his Mummy with something of an air of dignified solemnity.

After fussing and situating them once more, her mother headed off to join her father in some much needed rest. Dad had pronounced his granddaughter as a very fine specimen of babyhood, and had declared his intention to take her golfing as soon as she was allowed to go. Hermione understood the sentiment behind his teasing, and accepted his heartfelt hug, prolonging it as long as possible.

As expected, Remus was unfailingly aware of the baby, and attentive to her needs that spoke to a
deep wellspring of love. Sirius pronounced her quite lovely, and swanned off to have a cigar, not that he even liked cigars. Hermione suspected that he was, in actuality, developing his film. She was certain he’d filled several rolls already.

Hermione found herself alone with Harry for the first time, though really they weren’t alone anymore. Hermione knew she should put the baby down in the cradle. However, she could not bring herself to let her go.

He perched himself on the side of the bed, largely because he was in the process of laying down on top of the duvet. “She needs a name, Harry.”

Harry put his glasses on the bedside table, and kicked off his shoes. “I thought we agreed on it.”

“We have, I think.” Hermione tried to express herself more clearly, “I just think now that she’s here we ought to discuss it a little more openly.”

“She looks like a Caledonia.” Harry affirmed, studying her little face. “It suits her.”

Caledonia had simply been the only choice they had really and honestly considered for a girl. Had she been male, her name would have been Henry James, but as it stood Hermione had come across Caledonia in some reading years ago, and it had always stuck with her. Given their present circumstances, it seemed to simply fit this baby as no other appellation had, even in their brief consideration of other names. Hermione had hesitated simply because she too had a big name that many people could not pronounce.

Harry knew the direction of her thoughts and enunciated, “Cal-ah-don-ia. It’s not nearly as confusing as Her-My-Oh-Knee, is it?”

“Oh shut up.” Hermione retorted, “If she hates us at eleven, I’ll put the blame squarely at your door. Just don’t call her Cale.”

Though it was spelled more like the vegetable than the flower, the first portion of her name was frequently pronounced as Calla, which was, very obviously, a type of lily flower.

“Of course not, ’Mione.” Harry grinned, “Well, Caledonia, how do you like your name?”

Caledonia offered no discernible opinion. She had just finished venting her frustration with anything and everything, so Hermione supposed she had earned herself a rest. In an hour or so, Teddy was meant to come down. Hermione very much looked forward to being a cohesive whole family once again.

“Are we still settled on Helen as her middle name?” Hermione sought clarification. They had long ago settled upon Helen as an homage her to mother, who had been of great support to them in so many ways.

Surprisingly, Harry shook his head sheepishly. “She was born at sunrise, you know.”

Hermione did not quite understand his hesitation. Helen meant ‘shining light’ and seemed amazingly fitting, but Hermione was curious as to Harry’s hesitation. He had been the one to absolutely insist upon naming the baby, in some small way, for her mother.

After a moment, in which Harry got wrapped up in studying their daughter’s tiny wrinkled hands, he once again directed his words to his wife, “It’s important to me that we call her Jane.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, not entirely opposed to the idea, as Jane was her mother’s middle name,
as well as her own.

“I didn’t think it was possible for there to be more light, more joy, in our lives.” Harry seemed to be speaking unto himself, but Hermione heard him well enough, “But you proved me wrong.”

Hermione hated when she could not immediately understand where Harry was going with things, especially when this seemed so obvious to Harry. “I still don’t see what—”

Harry studied her carefully, the light streaming in the windows nothing in the face of the light in his eyes, “It’s not Aurora who brings the sun in the morning.”

Hermione was determined to reframe his assertions. She wasn’t the source of Light in his life, no matter what he said or believed about it. “No, it’s the rotation of the earth.”

“Symbolically, emotionally.” Harry corrected, “It’s important to me, okay?”

Hermione assured him, “I’m not opposed to it.”

Objective completed, Harry returned to teasing her gently. He found her reluctance to use diminutives humorous, but it was very important to her that their baby have a name that was strong and could be a name she could embrace. Harry ventured, “And if she gets tired of using her forename, we can always call her Janey.”

Now that was just an absurdity and they both knew that well. Doing her best to appear stern and not to smile, Hermione insisted, “Her name is Caledonia.”

“By your will, domina mea.” Harry agreed, and slid into a contented sleep.

For her part, Hermione considered the changes in her life in the last day, and looked out the window. The bells had ceased ringing, and Hermione knew Fr. Smithson had completed his prayers on her behalf. Augusta had tended to her lares in her stead, and Mummy had taken it upon herself to stay with Ted when Ellie had come to hold Caledonia and pronounce her a very beautiful baby.

The fuss was largely over, and Hermione was left with the task of getting to know this dark-haired baby, who had once quite enjoyed cake but now probably had very little idea of what it was. Hermione missed the personality that had taken root and bloomed in her mind over the last few months, but she knew in her heart that the same witty little girl was somewhere behind those newborn blue eyes, and it was the privilege of her life to watch Caledonia find and express herself.

“I suspect as soon as you get the hang of spoken language, that you will have quite a lot to say.” Hermione fixed the swaddling around her fragile baby, “But as it stands I wish you knew what you thought of things.”

In her sleep, Caledonia shifted, and though Hermione knew it was not a response to any question, she rather thought that Caledonia was looking forward to the adventure ahead of her.

Either that, or she found wearing a nappy annoying.

Chapter End Notes

Caledonia has historical usage as a name for Scotland. [Wiki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caledonia) gives a good overview.
There is a story about Caledonian women being very strong and forthright in comparison to their Roman counterparts, which I find apropos.

However, the reason to use the name was not as historical and factual as Hermione posits. She simply likes the poetry of it, as well. See Burns more Burns and Scott, and Dougie MacLean which other people have also covered.

If you're interested in info on Juno Lucina a check here and also here

More info to follow on various customs, etc.

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