

Prologue

'I have done wrong so build your tower, but call me home.' ¹⁷

The sky was a blanket of black embroidered with glittering details of purple. Both deep, dark hues mixed together in an elegant blend until fading into a hazy grey somewhere far over the horizon. Although the moon was missing from the night sky, depriving those who wondered through foggy roads its divine silver, guiding light, the stars took up the expanse like it was their time to shine. They twinkled through midnight plum clouds as the wind carefully passed through shadowed trees, whispering promises of a calm, ordinary night. ¹⁸

Hermione inhaled this claim from Mother Nature, smiling to herself even though the voice on the other side of the phone call was anything but content.

"I mean, sure, I made the o er, but that doesn't mean he has to take it," Harry continued to grumble. "I'm not trying to take her baby boy away."

Hermione li ed her shoulder, pressing her phone tight against her cheek as she turned away from her open bedroom window. She went back to folding her favorite pair of jeans, snorting at her best friend's previous comment. "As much as I adore Mrs. Weasley, Harry, I very much doubt she will ever see Ron as a fully grown adult. Besides, you're missing the point. She isn't completely annoyed that you o ered Ron a room at Grimmauld Place, rather that you're trying to leave the Burrow already. It's only been three months."

"Three months is long enough," Harry replied with undertones of bitterness.

"We just survived a war" Hermione reminded him with her familiar parental tone. "Three months is not long enough to even process everything. So, really, I'll just go ahead and ask the question you're hoping I won't pose: why are you trying to leave the Burrow? It's your home."

"It isn't," Harry said instantly, just as harshly and bitterly as before. Hermione stopped folding her clothes, narrowing her eyes as if she had him right before her. She heard him take a deep breath before lowering his tone and the degrees of coldness laced within it. "It isn't, is it? Not really. All I'm doing is occupying the space of someone who's never coming back." ¹⁹

"Harry—"

"I know what you're going to say, Hermione," Harry sighed, the sound coming out as static from the other end of the phone. "But it is my fault. It's my fault Fred is gone." ²⁰

Hermione bent to pick up a neat pile of cozy jumpers to place them inside her trunk. With an easy, yet impressive use of wandless magic, she made the items shrink, allowing her more space. She let a minute pass to give her best friend a moment to process what he had said, but also to get a chance to catch his breath.

When she turned to her computer desk to gather her case of quills and ink pots, she said, "The Burrow has been your home since you were twelve, Harry. They welcomed you in long before there was someone to mourn. Don't you dare sell their love short." ²¹

"I'm not, I just—"

"We were at war," it was Hermione's turn to interrupt him. "People made choices to fight and defend—you're not responsible for any of that, Harry. You were just a boy thrust into the chaos a madman made. You're a consequence of those actions. Just as all these unnecessary deaths are, too. You're not at fault for any of it, but yet you blame yourself. So much so you're willing to abandon your family. So much so you won't even look the girl you love in the eye." ²²

There was static again, but this time she knew it was caused from Harry's grumbled curse words. While they were no strangers to disagreements, he never did mutter anything unpleasant loud enough for her to hear.

"You sure you don't want to consider a career in psychology a er Hogwarts?" Harry spoke a er a moment, forcing breeze into their exchange.

She smiled at his e ort, walking over to the stack of book she was packing to take back to school. A er she assured herself that her Hogwarts, A History was among them, she said, "You know I have my heart set in teaching." ²³

Harry snorted. "Can't imagine that being a fun class."

"You think you're so funny," Hermione laughed at her best friend, grinning as she dropped socks into her trunk next, "but you won't be making any jokes when the term starts. I have come up with e ective study charts for you. If you really want to be an Auror a er Hogwarts, you're going to have to work for it."

"Need I remind you Kingsley o ered me a position as an Auror already? Mione? I'm only returning to school because you and Mrs.

Weasley almost tore Ron and me to shreds when we said we wouldn't."

"— Hermione!

She pulled the phone away from her ear when she heard her mother's voice from downstairs. She covered it as she told her mother she'd be right down before speaking into it again. "You missed Seventh Year. Did you really think I'd let you not make it up?"

"Don't you think we deserve time o ?"

"I thought three months was long enough?" Harry faked a round of laughter at Hermione's comment. She laughed, too, amused with herself before letting out a sigh. "Promise me you won't bring up leaving the Burrow until a er we've finished Hogwarts. It'll really give Mrs. Weasley some peace of mind. And she needs that right now, don't you think?"

"Okay," he said a er a moment of hesitation.

"And as for Ginny," Hermione was quick to input, "you'll never forgive yourself if you let her go."

"Fine, Mione. I'll talk to the girl I love."

"That won't be easy, but I have faith in you. Anyway, I have to go. I'll see you in—"

"Wait," Harry said. "You didn't talk to Ron."

The smile she had on melted away. "He went to get a glass of water over an hour ago, Harry. If he wanted to talk to me, he would've done so. But, anyway, I do have to go. I'll see you in a week, okay?"

With an awkward, tensed goodbye between the two best friends, Hermione ended the call. She held her mobile close to her chest, a knot forming in her throat when she recalled the last time she heard Ron's voice.

It was almost three months ago.

Hermione exhaled, trying to release the sadness before heading out her room. She did not want to bring that to the dinner table. Her parents were quite perceptive on her moods as of late. And while they were incredibly concerned on post-traumatic stress of a war she had kept hidden from them, they were wary of the heartache she carried for a boy she had spent most of her childhood loving.

As she reached the end of the staircase, she pulled on another smile. "Sorry, Mum. I was on the phone with Harry and—" The intention of deceiving her parents was gone when she was thrown o from the unexpected company sat across her mother in their living room.

Because she had indeed just survived a war and had years of experience on casing every little detail about a strange scene, Hermione was quick to intercept the di erence between the unknown couple in her home. A man and a woman with emerald and purple cloaks draped on their shoulders. A garment not typical for Muggles.

She pulled her wand out from the waistband of her sleeping shorts, the magic in her blood sparking at the adrenaline kicking up her heart rate.

"Mum," she said through her teeth, "get behind me. Now"

The couple stood—the man tall, dark, and with strikingly proud emerald eyes and the woman his opposite, with her shorter demeanor, olive skin, and regal golden eyes. Hermione raised her hand at their action, a glittering bubble of protection wrapping around her mother while her wand threatened sparks of defensive magic.

"Mum, get behind—" Hermione was silenced when her mother walked to stand next to the couple. "What are you doing? Mum Come here." ²⁴

"Please lower your wand, darling. It's all right. I promise," her mother murmured in a careful, loving tone Hermione recognized from her childhood, one she adopted whenever she tried to persuade her to be brave. Still, with tears in her own brown eyes, Jennifer Granger looked up at the couple, smiling sadly and adoringly at them, "This is Deon and Allegra Zabini. Your real parents." ²⁵

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