

To Paris and its Witches

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Paris, France.

One

She was beautiful. It was the first thought that crossed Hermione's mind as she leaned against the door of the conference hall, frazzled and slightly out of breath, just catching the last fragments of the opening speech of the second International Convention on Magical Rights in Europe.

"While Muggle society and culture have changed over the last centuries and become more modern, more open and more diverse, Wizarding culture remains far behind in the areas of the rights of wizards and witches. Wizarding families, especially pureblood families, remain steadfast to customs and beliefs that originate many centuries into the past in regards to the rights of women and children. At the beginning of a new century, I believe that a revision of the social and cultural laws of Wizarding Europe is due. And I hope that this international conference on Magical Rights will begin to work towards this goal. It is therefore with much pleasure that I declare this conference officially open."

Hermione joined in enthusiastically as the hall erupted with applause, pausing only to find a chair and sit down after several hours of being on her feet. The Floo Network from Britain had been down again, and Hermione Granger, newly appointed head of the British Ministry of Magic's Department of Wizarding Rights, had to wait for forty-five minutes before the breakdown had been fixed. The delay had resulted in a rather chaotic arrival in France, and having had to check into her hotel before she could dash off to the conference, she had missed the majority of the opening. From the little she had heard of the plenary session, the first speaker who seemed vaguely familiar in addition to being stunningly beautiful would have to be one of the most eloquent speakers she had ever listened to. Her voice was melodious and clear, and she seemed to have an excellent grasp on her topic. Hermione wondered what position she held. She must be heavily involved with magical rights in order to be opening such a prestigious conference.

Hermione herself was one of the youngest academics involved in the new movement that had struck Britain after the war. While mainland Europe was already far into their activism, Britain had lagged behind due to the somewhat archaic governmental system and the preoccupation with war. Sometimes Hermione found it hard to believe how far behind they were because of it, how many people they had lost. Indeed, there had been so many close to Hermione who had been killed by Voldemort's Reign of Terror. Dumbledore. Flitwick. Mr. Weasley. Many of her schoolmates. The death of her parents had shaken her to the bone, and she still mourned for them. And then there were Harry and Ron, her two best friends all through her years at Hogwarts, always there for her, smiling and laughing and telling her not to study too much. Dead, both of them, through the selfless acts that had saved wizarding Britain.

She often reflected on the times they had spent together, but she found it difficult to dwell on those thoughts. Life went on, as cold and cruel as it may seem. It was a simple truth. Hermione had dealt with it through further study. She finished her NEWTs without opening a single book for revision. She was barely eighteen when she began her double apprenticeship in Charms and Arithmancy and only twenty when she finished. She now held a master qualification in both. She had worked in the Department of Magical Innovation as an Arithmancer for two years before being named head of the newly formed Department of Magical Rights and Welfare, which was why she was at the conference in France, momentarily captivated by the alluring female who was stepping down from the podium.

The plenary session ended, and Hermione found herself in one of the smaller sessions, on Muggle feminist theories and their application to Wizarding society. The session was comprised of several papers presented by various witches (and they were mainly witches, Hermione mused), and she was fascinated. The ideas were challenging, the parallels refreshing and invigorating. Her mind whirled, and her hand cramped trying to make notes and still keep up. Her concentration was broken as the door behind her opened and shut quietly. She turned in her seat slightly to see who had entered.

It was the same stunning witch that had opened the conference. She stared as she walked over to the side of the room and spoke in a low voice to one of the wizards at the door, then to a seat not two rows behind Hermione's own. She stiffened as a shiver ran down her spine. Who was this woman to put her so on edge? And where had she seen her before?

It hit her in a second. Fleur. It was Fleur Delacour, the elegant French Triwizard contestant whom Hermione had briefly met in her fourth year. The half Veela witch from whom no male could tear his eyes. Now, it was Hermione who couldn't.

She gasped. Why would Fleur be involved in something like this? What interest did she have in magical rights? She was an airhead, one who thrived on the attention that males gave her.

And yet she was so beautiful. How could a witch be so beautiful? How was it possible? Hermione suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to get out into the air. Everything seemed to be stifling her in this room, and the radiating presence of Fleur Delacour was choking her. She bounded through the door, out of the conference building and into the afternoon sunshine.

She sat on a bench for a few moments, breathing. *Get a grip, Hermione. It's only a woman. You've liked women before. No need to flip out over one that happens to be drop-dead gorgeous.* After a few minutes she was almost back to normal when she felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped.

"Oh, please excuse me, I did not mean to make you start," the silvery voice of Fleur Delacour sounded. Hermione looked up at her and was instantly lost in her gaze. Her eyes were the same shade of blue-grey as the slightly overcast sky, and there was something in them that made Hermione drift off. Her mind quickly kicked back into gear.

"Don't apologise; you didn't scare me," she lied.

Fleur smiled. "I was just wondering if you were ok. It is Hermione Granger, isn't it? I remember you from Hogwarts, the Triwizard Tournament. You were Harry's friend, were you not?"

Hermione nodded dumbly. "Yes, I was. And you're Fleur Delacour. The Beauxbatons champion. I remember now. At first I didn't recognise you when you were speaking, but then I did and you're so..." She broke off, slightly embarrassed at her rambling. It was unlike her to lose track of her words.

"You have changed a great deal since I saw you in your... was it your fourth year? You are here on your own interests or on official business?"

"Oh, I'm with the Ministry in Britain; I'm the new head of the Magical Rights Department..." She trailed off, not wanting to risk rambling again.

Fleur smiled pensively. "Yes, a suitable position for one such as you..." She seemed to drift off for a moment into a memory before turning back to Hermione, who had also become distracted.

"But concerning a different and more important topic altogether: if I could be as forward as to ask, would you have dinner with me tonight?"

Slightly shocked at the abruptness of the question, Hermione blushed and smiled. "I would absolutely love to."

* * *

Two

There was no doubt, Hermione mused in front of the mirror in her hotel room, that Fleur had meant 'dinner' as in a date. Hermione knew that it was more than just a reunion of 'acquaintances', if they had been even that, because every fibre of her being was positively humming with anticipation. And anyway, why else would Fleur have come out after her when she had run out of the room?

Hermione sang to herself as she painstakingly brushed her hair, deciding how she was going to charm it for her 'date.' Singing was actually a skill she possessed, one that she had however never shown anyone close to her. As a child she had been ostracized not only for her brains but also because she sang wherever she went, and so she had learnt to carefully suppress the habit and to sing only when she was alone.

She finally decided on a simple knot at the back of her neck with a few stray tendrils charmed to stay neat. She hadn't had time to unpack any of her clothes earlier because she had been in a hurry to get to the conference her bags had simply been thrown unceremoniously on her bed, still in their shrunk state. Everything was accordingly creased and crinkled, but Hermione finally dug out the emerald-green dress she had planned on wearing to the conference's formal dinner. Obviously it was a little too formal for a 'casual date', so she quickly transfigured it into a light red halter-neck. Grabbing her handbag from the table, she hurried out into the foyer where Fleur had arranged to meet her at half-past seven. It was seven-twenty-nine.

On her way down the only thing she could think about was what Fleur would be wearing, if she would like her dress, if she would like the way she had fixed her hair. Imagining Fleur in something more revealing than the tailored suit she had been wearing at the conference opening sent little bolts of electricity down her spine. Images were running through her mind, Fleur in a dress, Fleur in a miniskirt, Fleur standing in her hotel room wearing nothing but her... She stopped there and forced her mind to think of other things. No, that was definitely too forward of an idea for her first 'date.'

Fleur was waiting when Hermione entered the foyer. She was wearing a light blue summer dress and Hermione was once again surprised how she could be so stunning. Her legs seemed to go on forever and the curve of her shoulders was captivating. It seemed that the receptionist was just as caught in Fleur's beauty. He turned red and hastily pretended to get back to work as he caught Hermione's somewhat menacing glare. Fleur noticed the exchange between the witch and the receptionist and murmured into Hermione's ear.

"So possessive already... How promising."

Hermione shivered and blushed. Fleur straightened. "Shall we, then, ma chérie?" She offered her arm to the younger witch, and Hermione gratefully accepted, knowing that the gesture and the murmur meant exactly what she thought they meant. They exited the building arm in arm.

"So, Fleur, where are we going?" Hermione asked brightly.

"Ah, I shall show you the highlights of Paris, Hermione. The beauty of the most... romantic... city to have ever graced the surface of the earth. But first, we eat. If you will allow me?" She placed her hands around Hermione's waist and with a pop, they had Apparated.

The first thing Hermione noticed was that the ground was some fifty meters below her. Even more shocking was the fact that they were standing right at the edge of whatever building they were standing on. Hermione yelped and clutched the other witch's waist. Fleur laughed.

"Relax, you cannot fall. I won't let you. I'd have to let go of you, wouldn't I? We do not want that." Her voice sounded like music.

"Where are we?" Hermione looked over her surroundings and into the distance. "We're not..."

"Yes, ma chérie, we are on the Arc de Triomphe. One of my city's most beautiful and historical monuments. Is the view not beautiful?"

Hermione gazed out over the city in amazement, letting the beauty of the emerging lights in the dusk sink into her. "It's so beautiful..." She wanted to lean into Fleur, but was afraid that it might be too risky at this stage. *Oh, what the hell. She asked me out. She offered me her arm. She's not going to kill me for leaning on her shoulder. This feels right. It doesn't matter how long we've known each other for.*

Fleur absentmindedly stroked her hair as Hermione leaned closer. "Isn't it," she said dreamily. "But now, come and eat. I have ordered something special just for the two of us." She beckoned Hermione to follow her.

A few meters away a perfectly laid out table was waiting for the two witches. Fleur beckoned for Hermione to sit and pulled out her chair for her.

"Why, thank you," Hermione giggled. "Like a true gentleman."

"Why, Hermione, I am surprised that such an educated and culturally aware witch would use such a phallogentric and outdated phrase. I can assure you that I am much more than a gentleman," Fleur said seductively. "But I will let that pass, just this once." She conjured up a bottle of red wine. "This is from my grandfather's vineyards in the Provence. I hope it is to your satisfaction." She poured them each a glass and proceeded to conjure menus. "I think I'll have the fish. What will you have?"

"The fish sounds delicious. I'll have the same." With a pop, the menus disappeared. Fleur raised her wine glass.

"To Paris, the city of dreams," Fleur toasted.

Hermione smiled. "To Paris and its witches," she said mischievously. And they both laughed as darkness softly began to fall.

* * *

Three

After what had been a very satisfying and somewhat distracting dinner (Hermione had to forcefully tear her eyes away from Fleur's graceful hands as she managed to make even using a knife and fork look seductive), Hermione sighed happily and leaned back in her chair. It was dark now, and the stars were beginning to twinkle into existence in the velvety sky. The air was still as balmy, and only slightly cooler than the day had been. It was the kind of atmosphere that people thought only existed in Hollywood movies, Hermione mused. Beautiful settings, beautiful women. The table cleared itself of dishes and Fleur stood up from her place, stretching. Hermione smiled up at her.

"How about we go down to the river for a walk?" Hermione suggested, standing and slipping her hand into Fleur's. It felt warm and soft, just perfect.

"That sounds wonderful. I know a place that you would like very much." She slipped her arms around Hermione's waist, and they vanished. Hermione closed her eyes and breathed deeply as they momentarily seemed to be racing through nothingness, savouring the feel of Fleur's arms holding her much closer to her slim body than earlier that evening.

When she opened her eyes they were standing on the grassy bank of the river Seine set to a backdrop of bridges, chestnut trees and the illuminated form of the Eiffel Tower. Hermione felt giddy with happiness. This was perfect. Here she was, standing under the stars in Paris, France, away from home, away from stress and work and her office and away from the still-present aftereffects of the war in Britain.

"Fleur?" she murmured, turning in a slow circle, still holding the other witch close. "This is beautiful." *You're beautiful*, she added in her mind. She felt like spinning, like dancing, like jumping up and down like a small child on Christmas day. She felt like laughing hysterically and never stopping again because she was *happy*. She dropped down onto the grass under a tree and lay on her back, closing her eyes and breathing in the peaceful atmosphere around her. Fleur joined her, propping herself up on her elbows. She seemed more relaxed than Hermione, dreamier.

"I know. I used to come here with my first girlfriend, when we were on holidays from Beauxbatons. I was seventeen. She was sixteen, and a Muggle. We were together for a year before I had to leave her. I think she might have sensed that I was keeping something from her." Fleur smiled softly, reminiscing. She shook her head to clear the thoughts as Hermione looked quizzically up at her.

"Why did you leave her? Would she have objected if she had known that you were a witch?" she asked.

"Oh, I do not think that she would have objected. But our love went against all the rules and norms about relationships that I had ever learnt." Seeing Hermione's shocked look, she quickly explained, "I was young and accepted everything magical society placed before me. It is not that I and she were both female. But Muggles and magical people do not have relationships here."

"It isn't that uncommon for Muggles and witches to be together," Hermione disputed. "Some of my friends have mothers or fathers who aren't from magical backgrounds."

"In France it is different. The laws are different; our Statute of Secrecy is much stricter. It isn't that easy for Muggles and witches to be together."

"That's just ridiculous." Hermione frowned. "Love is meant to be free, not regulated by laws of who can and can't be together. What does witch or wizard or Muggle even mean? We're all still the same. Some of us can do magic, that's all."

"I know that it is exactly as you say. But the Wizarding 'race', if you would call it such, has been programmed to see Muggles as inferior, especially in pureblood circles. That's the simple truth."

"Sadly. But that's what I'm trying to change. Society is resistant, but I think the war has broken down many of the barriers between Muggle and wizard, between pureblood and Muggle-born or Half-blood. I think it will change with time. For the better."

"Indeed." Fleur said softly. "That is how I became involved in Magical Rights scholarship." Both lapsed into silence. Minutes passed without a word between the two

witches before Hermione broke the silence.

"How on earth did we get onto this topic?" Hermione asked, sitting up. Fleur laughed.

"It was me. I told you that I used to come here with my first girlfriend. But perhaps that is not the best topic for us to pursue. Tell me about yourself a little."

"There's not that much to tell. I'm a scholar and have been since the war. I decided that I couldn't stand the injustices that occurred every day in Wizarding Britain and co-formed the Department for Magical Rights and Welfare. It was partly because I needed to do something. I felt so useless after I was the only one left, I suppose. As if I wanted to do something better than just studying all the time." Hermione's voice turned melancholy.

"You were only one left? What do you mean?" Fleur asked softly.

"Harry and Ron, my two best friends all through school, both died in the war against Voldemort. They were so brave... And I survived because I didn't fight on the front line. I was the one who made the plans. They were heroes. I didn't do anything worthwhile." The reminiscence was painful.

"I am so sorry. It must have been very hard on you." There was genuine concern and love in Fleur's voice.

"I'm over it. They did what had to be done and I still love them. I miss them, yes, but I'm still here and that's what matters."

Hermione was still for a moment, then stood up and walked out into the soft moonlight. Fleur scrambled up and followed her, hoping that she hadn't upset her in any way. This was supposed to be special. She placed her arm around Hermione's waist and looked out over the river with her.

"Fleur?" Hermione asked, looking her in the eyes. "Thank you for tonight. It really is beautiful here in the evening. I haven't felt this free in a long, long time." She leaned closer until her lips were hovering only inches from Fleur's. "I don't want to talk anymore. Kiss me."

Fleur obliged. They kissed softly on the banks of the river Seine in Paris and, just for a moment, forgot the world around them.

Within a single day Hermione had fallen hopelessly in love with a witch whom she had only ever met briefly before. She hadn't particularly liked Fleur when she was the Beauxbatons champion in the Triwizard Tournament. She hadn't even spoken to her more than once. Fleur hadn't noticed Hermione while she was at Hogwarts as anything more than the friend of one competitor and the 'girlfriend' of another. She would never have thought her beautiful or interesting in the least. And now they were in love. No confirmation was given and none was needed. Perhaps, that was simply the way things were sometimes.

When they broke the kiss, Hermione almost cried out. She wanted more. She pulled Fleur close again and wove her fingers through her hair as they kissed again, this time passionately, as if there was a fire burning inside her. Fleur responded by running her hands up Hermione's back and holding her around her shoulders possessively. It seemed like an eternity before they broke apart for the second time, but when they did they both knew that they were linked in some way. Perhaps for a day, perhaps for a year. Perhaps even forever. They parted into the night with the other's taste still on their lips.