

# Dark Santiago

by Lariope

Magical and Muggle worlds collide when two displaced survivors of the second war meet in an unlikely place.

## Fortune Telling

Chapter 1 of 4

Magical and Muggle worlds collide when two displaced survivors of the second war meet in an unlikely place.

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He wakes when the sun begins to beat down upon the thin blankets that cover him. Hot, southern sun, American sun, and even after three years, Snape still does not feel used to it. He swings his legs over the side of the slim bed, admiring, in a sleep-addled way, the long striped shadows left on his pale skin by the blinds.

*Glorified junk*, Snape thinks with a sort of halfhearted sneer as he pads along the bright hardwood floors, but it suits him well enough. The rough hewn dresser; the haphazard, threadbare quilts; eyelet curtains yellowed by the sun... perhaps he would not have gone out and chosen these exact things if he had had the inclination to furnish his abode, but there had seemed a kind of rugged practicality to them when he had come to see about the flat, and he'd offered double the asking price to the astonished sellers on the condition that they leave it furnished.

There is a small table in the kitchen (the dinette, the sellers had called it) that is spattered with blue paint, as if it had once been a worktable before retiring to a lazy life of holding up dishes, and Snape is unreasonably fond of it. He takes his tea there each morning and studies the dips and dents in the wood as he drifts gradually toward consciousness, as the paper in the small town of Ocean Isle is beyond abysmal. In the summer, perhaps, there might be an entertaining police blotter or two amid news of strawberry festivals and shag contests (now *there* is a term that has taken some getting used to), but in the winter there is even less. Even now, during the height of tourist season, nothing is happening in Ocean Isle except the tide coming in and out, and for the most part, that is how Snape likes it.

Today he does open the paper, however, flipping directly to the classified section. There, beneath the heading *Miscellaneous*, is the advertisement he had called in two days before.

*Behind Sunshine Bakery, Tuesday, ten a.m. Twelve hours only. Prices as stated; no negotiation.*

Satisfied that it is in order, he proceeds to the bathroom to apply the glamour that he wears on the days that he sees clients. Snape does not wear the glamour as a disguise per se (for if some witch or wizard had the tenacity to track him this far, he supposed he might surrender), but as a part of his job. Part sun-baked, new age hippie, part old-world magician, his glamour does not so much hide his features but exaggerate them: darkening his eyes, thickening his brow ridge, deepening the color of his skin, and adding the ghost of a sunburn across the bridge of his ample nose. He pulls his hair back into a ponytail, leaving two hanks at the front to be knotted and plaited. It is strange, tedious work, but Americans seem to need their mystics to be possessed of a number of beads and baubles to be considered credible.

But credible they find him, it seems, for they pay him handsomely for their little "readings." He is famous in this quiet, dying corner of the world, though few, if any, would recognize him as the reclusive man who lives above The Sandbar. When he works, he calls himself Santiago, though he has heard himself referred to as Dark Santiago, which is a source of bitter amusement to him. He supposes that there are some things even a smile and a glamour can not change.

He wears a set of robes of his own design, sleeveless with a high, loose collar, over a Muggle tee shirt and pocketed trousers that he purchased at the local swimsuit shop. The shirt is pale and fitted and reads *Still on Vacation*. Sometimes Snape feels he is. As he walks along the gray, weathered planks of the boardwalk toward the parking lot where his old red pickup truck awaits him, he feels the sea breeze catch hold of the yards of black fabric and whip them into confusion around him. *What am I doing here?* he thinks, not for the first time.

But truly, it is only in these moments of collision...robes dampened with salt air, his wand twitching beneath the table as he speaks with Santiago's mouth...that he feels nostalgic, out of place. Mostly, he is content with his sun-warmed flat, his books, his retired table, and the way the lights of the tired boardwalk Ferris wheel light the night. Muggle magic.

The trailer where he sees his clients is in a shallow pine wood, about a mile and a half from the day-old bread shop where his customers will have begun to queue up. Many will have been there since the wee hours of the morning; creaking station wagons sandwiching shiny new Mercedes, the locals and the tourists mingling for a chance to speak with Dark Santiago, the man who sees the truth in their hands. Once he opens the door to the trailer, setting out the hand painted OPEN sign and stringing a beaded curtain across the doorway, he will hear the sound of car doors opening and slamming shut again and the swish of feet through the carpet of needles on the ground.

*Fifty dollars for a fifteen minute session, the sign reads. Twenty-five dollars for every five additional minutes. Time will be rounded up to the nearest five minutes. No refunds for unused time.*

Peering out from between the beaded strands, Snape can see the line drifting off into the distance. One by one, these people will shuffle into the dank, smelly dimness of his trailer. He will work until ten, and many of them will still be standing out in the dark, looking hopeful when he emerges, then bowing their heads and trudging off again when he shuts the door. It is strange what people seem to need.

Poverty for one; his own, not theirs, though sometimes it seems that the worn looking locals pay the most overtime. But there is a reason he keeps such a shoddy office, and it isn't that he can't afford a better one. For a time, he had rented a modern looking space just off the main drag...pull in the tourists, he'd thought...but he had barely done enough business to pay the rent on the blasted place. The poorer he looks, it seems, the more people will pay, as if there is...in the realm of prophecy at least...a direct correlation between destitution and accuracy.

The other problem with the office he'd taken was that it was too accessible. The seekers, as he sometimes thinks of them when he is feeling charitable, need to quest to reach him. It had been too easy for them to pull into a carpark and sit in a lobby to wait; they need to queue up behind an old bread shop and shiver in their cars all night. The more they pay...the harder they work to get here...the more they believe. Snape supposes it had been no different in the wizarding world...the ladder up to Sybil Trelawney's loft, her bulbous rings and dreamy voice. She had sold her trade, if not the prophecies themselves to back it up.

But it does not matter what the product is when it comes to fortune telling. The willing gobble the false as greedily as the real...perhaps even more so, if his failed office was any indication. Belief is the key.

As it has always been. It strikes Snape as ironic that he'd spent his life heretofore selling lies, and now he has to lie to sell the truth. For Santiago tells the truth...a strange mixture of what his clients know but will not admit and bitter, hard won advice. He knows these people. He sees what they have not yet told their spouses, their closest friends: infidelity, illness, guilt, and secret burning hope. He sees it in their eyes, if not in their palms.

The first woman climbs the spongy wooden steps into the trailer and stands there stupidly, not seeming to know what to do with her hands.

"I'm Alice," she says, blushing. "But I guess you already knew that."

"Alice," Santiago says, as if he were agreeing, as if the name itself were the key to some great mystery. "Have a seat."

He takes her right hand in his left and holds it open on the spindle legged table before him. His thumb traces idly over the creases and lines of her palm. It is an act, of course, a prelude to the moment in which he will meet her eyes and his right hand will twitch beneath the table...*Legilimens!*...but it is a part of the act that he has found to be essential. This is one more thing he has learned about people: they don't like for him to *just know* anything. He has to work for it.

At first, he had hated all the touching, all the *humanity* traipsing in and out of the trailer, all the smells, all the willful ignorance and the terrible, pathetic need. But he has come to a strange tolerance for these Muggles, for they are believers in their way. Unlike some of their kind, they believe that magic is possible beyond the realm of their experience, and like him, they are hiding and hopeful in equal measure.

"Someone you love is missing," he says as his thumb come to rest on the heavy line that bisects Alice's palm, as if the knowledge comes precisely from that spot. He keeps his voice low and soothing with the faintest tinge of a question. He has found the accent to be of great use. American women stutter and stare when he speaks, a fact he finds exasperating and amusing by turns. American men are more suspicious, but then, they are more wary of the process in general.

Alice...Alice Fordham, he sees...nods eagerly, her eyes wide and shocked. "My son. Nine years now."

These are the trickiest customers, the ones with no clear answers in their own minds. "You are resting at this juncture, waiting," Santiago says.

"Is he...?"

"The truth is that you may never know," Santiago replies quietly. "The answer is not in your palm. But there is a branch here. Look." He gestures at the division common at the base of the palm. "You can choose how to go on."

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Hermione is packing again. For three years, she has lived out of this suitcase, discarding clothes and adding them depending on the climate of whatever town her parents have decided on. To her, they like to pretend that they are trying out different places to live, but the truth is that along with the Obliviate, Hermione seemed to have infected her family with a permanent case of wanderlust. And an affinity for the unusual.

She sighs as she pulls open the drawer of the heavy hotel dresser. It slides easily on its runners and smells generically of paper and starch. She removes the last of her clothing and folds it easily into her suitcase.

If you had told Hermione Granger that she would spend the three years following the war wandering the globe without direction or aim, she would have laughed in your face. But now it seems to her that everything has built to this, that if only she had applied the right Arithmantic equation, she would have known years ago that this would be the only possible outcome of her reckless and haphazard choices.

When the war had ended (somehow it is still not possible for her to think, "when we won the war," as victory is another thing that has turned out to be nothing like she had predicted), Hermione found that she had truly expected to die defending Harry. She had made no plans for afterward, and simple matters, such as where to live, confounded her. It is odd for her, now, to think that there had ever been a time in which she had actually expected her life to end, stranger still that she was eighteen years old at the time. Sometimes she wonders if everything important that was hers to do in life is already done.

When Hermione had arrived in Perth, when she had found Wendell and Monica Wilkins and seen the first blink of recognition in their eyes, along with a nearly painful relief, she had wondered what kind of a plan she'd had at all. Had she thought that she could ask them to leave all they'd built and come back to a country in which they no longer had a business or even a home? That she would leave them there and return to England? How could she have even considered such a thing? It could not be done.

But it seemed there was little for her to return to anyway. She felt too old, too damaged to return to Hogwarts to complete her seventh year. Professor McGonagall had

offered, but when she tried to picture herself back in a school uniform, the image would not solidify in her mind. She could not begin even to dream of a scenario in which she sat in Herbology, in *Defense Against the Dark Arts*, for Merlin's sake. What would they teach her? And who would dare to instruct her? If it had been Snape, she might have considered it, for she did not flatter herself that she was as accomplished as he had been. But the likes of Lockhart, Quirrell...despite what they had turned out to be...Lupin, even. She could run circles around them.

And then the idea of Hogsmeade weekends, having to feel the growing excitement of the student body and wanting to scream, "Honestly! It's a shopping village!" How could she witness the third years, quivering with the pleasure of frightening themselves, staring open-mouthed at the Shrieking Shack, the place where she had learned what real horror was? She could never go back, never pretend to be one of them again. And yet, with an incomplete education, she had no idea what was supposed to come next.

When the Weasleys had asked her to join them at the Burrow, she had gone gratefully, sure that if she were safe and housed in familiar surroundings, things would begin to sort themselves out.

At first it had been all right; in some ways it had even been normal. She had sat in the same chair she'd always occupied, squished into the back corner of the dinner table beside Mr Weasley. But then one night Mrs Weasley had announced that it was silly for them to be smashed together that way, like sardines in a tin, and had insisted that Hermione take Fred's place. Conversation was stilted and strange throughout the evening, but the next night, there was no extra place set for Hermione, and she seemed to be expected to return to the spot near the center of the table. And then George had gone back to his flat above Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, and Mrs Weasley had suggested that she take the twins' old room.

Even Ron had seemed keen to follow Harry and Ginny's lead and make their situation more permanent, though they would have no Grimmauld Place to escape to. Hermione had begun to see that as long as she stayed there, she would not be Hermione Granger, but a replacement, a faux Weasley, minus only the ginger hair and freckles, that she would be forced into the gaping maw of their grief.

So, when Kingsley approached her after the Awards Ceremony, a ceremony during which no one had come forward to accept a posthumous Order of Merlin for Severus Snape...and oh, God, the horrible, ringing silence, so like the sound of her own guilt...and told her that they'd located her parents and would be dispatching Aurors immediately, she had begged him to let her go herself.

And so she had found herself agreeing to a winter in Paris, a vacation; it would be good for her after all she'd been through. She had nodded and packed; she had stood beside her parents before the entrance to Les Catacombes and smiled for pictures as the dead lurked behind her.

Now they are headed to some defunct tourist beach in America. Hermione sighs again, tossing a parka aside to make room for her bathing suit and a towel, and making a mental note to stop in the airport newsstand for some beach reading. This is simply another in a long list of ocean towns they have stopped in through the years. It seems that so long as the weather is warm, her mother longs to be by the sea again, as if it calls to her like something half forgotten in her mind. Often, Hermione wonders how much damage she has done to her parents with the Memory Charm. They are, at heart, still her parents, still the staid, reasonable authorities of her youth, but there are parts of them that seem changed, heightened, since she rejoined them in Australia.

Perhaps it is the influence of magic on their lives; perhaps, having felt its effects most profoundly, they are willing to believe in a way that they had been unable to before, not even after Professor Flitwick had arrived on their doorstep to reveal Hermione's true nature. But their belief, newfound or simply previously untried, is exaggerated and strange. Her mother seems, suddenly, almost fascinated by the occult, by the unexplained. In hotel room after hotel room, she sits with her laptop, researching the places they could go, the mermaid skeleton they could see, the ghost tours of New Orleans. Hermione has tried to explain that if that is what they really want to see, she can take them to Hogwarts. Surely Professor McGonagall would allow it; she could show them the mermen, the house Ghosts, anything they they'd like. But they have no interest in returning to Britain, wizarding or otherwise. Her mother seems to need to quest, to seek out these strange sights for herself.

"Hermione, we're just in time! It's just like the message board said it would be, right in the back of the classifieds. He opens at ten on Tuesday! Oh, I do hope we make it," Helen Granger calls from the next room. "If not, we might have to wait weeks before he reads again."

Hermione can hear the sound of her father shuffling about in the adjoining room over the clacking of her mother's laptop. She wonders what he thinks of all this, if he truly shares her mother's interest in beach psychics, voodoo shamans, weeping statuary... But there has been an odd silence between Hermione and her father since Perth. On good days, she assumes that he and her mother simply grew closer in her absence. She does not dare to think that her return to their lives has been unwelcome. Had he preferred his life as Wendell Wilkins?

But regardless of her father's feelings, they are headed for Ocean Isle, because Helen Granger has heard there is "a real, live psychic" there. Hermione isn't sure what the "live" has to do with it, but she figures she probably knows everything else. Whoever it is will be young and beautiful in a gypsy sort of way. She will wear a peasant blouse and ask Hermione to look into her crystal ball...not the swirling, changing balls she knew at Hogwarts, but a flat, dead-looking thing...and will offer the scintillating prediction that a dark stranger will be entering Hermione's life, that exciting times are ahead.

Hermione has known exciting times with a dark stranger. They are distinctly overrated.

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A man named Robert enters the trailer, hands stuffed deep into his pockets.

"Well," he says, but he does not sit at the table. "Well," he says again.

"Will you join me?" Santiago asks, an eyebrow slightly raised. It grows tiresome, the ones who come but do not willingly play the game. "I will have to see your hand."

Robert holds his palm out, and it hovers over the table, but still he does not sit.

Santiago sighs. "As you wish," he says and begins to cursorily inspect the harsh lines and crevices of the man's palm from where he sits.

"You are ill," Santiago says, and he sees the truth of that in the man's face as well as in his mind. He is not an old man, this Robert...not a great deal older than Snape himself...but there is something drawn in his face, something that reminds Snape of parchment, folded and refolded until it is soft and thin.

"I've got the cancer," Robert says, finally consenting to sink into the chair before Santiago.

"Your liver," Santiago replies, and Robert nods.

"You're better at this than I thought."

Santiago bows his head slightly in response. "You have not told your daughter," he says.

Something closes in Robert's face, but it is not prohibitive, simply resigned, and Snape knows he had found the reason for the man's visit.

"You should tell her."

"I only thought to spare..."

"It will be worse for her if it comes as a surprise."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. Thanks," Robert says, and he drops a wad of crumpled bills onto the table. Santiago leaves them there until the man passes back through the doorway. Then he sweeps them into the growing pouch beneath his robe.

There is no single reason why he does this, no clear cut answer as to why he dons the glamour and dispenses advice to these Muggles who mean nothing to him, most of whom he will not see again. The line continues, one face after another, one set of woes behind the next like an old rosary.

It is possible that it is some kind of atonement, some apology for what he very nearly was, a way of acknowledging that these lives have value, that this world has value, though it is so different from his own.

It is also possible that it is simply the secrecy...that he prefers to make his living outside of normal, daily routines; that he craves the dark and hidden places; that he has grown to love shadow and disguise.

Or it could be that despite (or because of) the web of lies he has been forced to tell that he has grown a veritable passion for the truth.

He is tired. The parade has been going on for nearly six hours, and beneath Santiago's unflappable exterior, Snape longs to snap and berate these people for their false misery, for their invented problems, their weakness. Why should he have to tell them how to live their lives?

A round, pinkish woman bustles into the room and throws herself into the folding chair. Her palm is out before him before he has even the chance to greet her.

"Selma Rathburn," she says, a little breathlessly.

"Welcome, Selma."

Her eyes flick to his and then dance away again. There are gold bands around three of her chubby fingers.

"You have been here before?"

"Last time you said I should go see the doctor about those spells I'd been having. The heart palpitations?"

"You had been preoccupied with your health, yes."

"Well, I went. He said it was my weight, and he gave me a diet."

"I'm glad you found it helpful," Santiago says quietly, and he reaches out for her hand.

She flushes slightly as their fingers touch, and Snape has difficulty catching her eye for a moment.

"You have not been following your doctor's orders," he says a bit archly.

"I don't know what you mean," Selma answers, blushing even more richly than before.

"Your diet includes the donut in your purse?"

"I..."

"And the dozen more in your Taurus outside?"

"I...you can see that in my palm?" Her voice squeaks with awe and shame mingled.

And this is what baffles him most about these types of Muggles, that he can shame them, berate them, and it only makes them more willing to believe.

The woman who enters next is tall and willowy with gray threaded curls. She is eager, Snape can see, and she thrusts out one bony hand immediately...though not for his inspection, but to shake.

"Monic...Helen Granger," she corrects, which strikes Snape as exceptionally odd, though she wouldn't be the first to give a false name. Only the first to change her mind at the last minute. Her accent is British, which is also a surprise, but a welcome one. At least she won't be undone by his voice.

"Santiago," he purrs in response, and she flushes slightly. Well, perhaps not totally undone by his voice.

"How does it work? Do I pay you up front? Should I sit?" She laughs a high, nervous laugh, and Santiago reaches out and touches her shoulder, guiding her to the chair.

"You may pay at the end," he says. "Fifty dollars, provided you stay within the fifteen minute time limit."

Helen pats her purse. "I've come prepared," she says. "I flew halfway around the world to see you."

"I am flattered," he says in the same warm, lulling tone he uses for all the flighty ones, all the super-believers.

When he takes her palm, he is startled. This woman has known magic; it has left its telltale signature in her skin. It is not strong enough to make her a witch in her own right, but she has come into contact with a witch or wizard...multiple times, he would guess. The residue of magic is too strong for a simple, one-time Ministry Obliviate.

He is anxious to get into her mind, but she is asking him about the process, which hand he would like, what the different lines mean.

"First, I will want to look at your palm as a whole," he begins, but then he is able to get a good lock on her eyes, and he seizes the opportunity.

*Legilimens!*

It takes her a moment to break free of the spell, but she does, startling backward, nearly knocking over her chair in her haste to rise.

"What...what are you doing?"

In the few seconds in which he was able to hold her, he saw all he needed to know. Or did not need to know, conversely. He'd had no idea that Hermione Granger had wiped her parents' memories and hidden them in Australia. No idea that she'd left the wizarding world. Shock is numbing his synapses, slowing his reactions, and she is nearly at the doorway now, almost before he can say, "Wait!"

Because he sees the damage to the mother's mind, the lingering need to find an answer for the black spaces, the forgotten things. As he always does, he is able to zero in immediately on what brought her here, what makes her seek.

"Trust your daughter," Santiago blurts with Snape's voice.

"Do you know my daughter? Are you...are you a..." She stops and turns angrily back.

"I am a paid palm reader and sometime predictor of the future," Santiago says, recovering. "It is rare that a client feels the connection as strongly as I do myself, but you are an unusually receptive subject."

At this, Helen Granger smiles faintly and seems to relent just a bit.

"It is clear from your palm, and from the flash I have received, that your relationship with your daughter is strained. I believe you were estranged for a time, and that you mistrust ... her motivations, perhaps?... in leaving you. You think she conceals something from you. She does not."

Helen Granger stands frozen to the spot, panting slightly, wide-eyed, as if he has reached inside her and pulled from her chest a rotting thing.

"She... she changed me..." she says, not explaining, but not seeming to expect him to understand.

"She saved you," he says firmly, and it pains him to realize the depth of the girl's sacrifice and what it has earned her.

Helen Granger holds out his money. Snape does not have to ask to know that Hermione is next in line. He saw it in his fractured trip through her mother's mind. It occurs to him to tell her to keep it, just to take her daughter away from here, but he knows that she is suspicious, that she is wary of things that seem to be kept from her, and he does not want to confuse her any further. Seeing his hesitation, she presses the bills to the table.

There is a slight pause before Hermione comes in, but she does, pushing through the beaded curtain brusquely. He watches her carefully, waiting for what he is sure her mother has told her, but she marches up to the table and sits without being invited and with no apparent curiosity or interest.

She does not look as he remembered her. The youth is gone from her face and has left in its place a very hard, wary-looking woman. Her hair is still frightful, but it has the air of neglect now, as if she has not just given in to it, but given up entirely.

"Well, you've taken my mother in," she snaps.

He smirks slightly, an almost Pavlovian response to her Gryffindor charms.

"Indeed," he says, and she glances up for a moment with something that almost looks like surprise in her eyes, but it fades quickly.

"Shall we?" He indicates her palm.

He knows that he will be given away the moment the spell is cast, but he feels compelled to do it anyway, for there is a part of him that is now nearly desperate to know what she knows and he cannot. What happened to their world? What do they think of him now? Why did she leave?

The surge he feels when he touches her leaves him breathless. *Magic*. Magic again, after all this time, magic that did not come from inside himself. It calls to him like a siren song.

She feels it, too, he knows, though perhaps not as acutely as he does, and so he dives immediately, rifling through her mind as quickly as he can. But there is no need this time, for she does not pull away, and instead seems to relax into the process, displaying the range of her memories. It is strange that the girl has no Occlumency. He would have thought she'd be excellent at it.

He nearly pulls away; the images are that shocking. He sees Hagrid carrying Potter out of the forest, feels her paralyzing grief, and it is so confusing an image to him that for a moment he wonders if she is mad. Potter lived. He was *certain* that Potter had lived. He... But then he sees their battle, the strange, otherworldly hush of the Great Hall as Harry Potter and the Dark Lord circled each other. He sees the final clash and Voldemort crumpling to the ground, an image he has imagined thousands of times and thought he would never witness.

Tears make his eyes blur for a moment, but he does not drop her gaze; he holds on furiously as she lets him take her memories. Something morbid makes him push for the Shrieking Shack, where he watches his own blood stain the splintered floorboards. He cannot see her, but he feels her horror, and she remembers whispering soothing words of comfort to him at the end that he cannot recall. Is the memory real? Does it matter? Perhaps he had been delirious from the blood loss, or half drunk on the antivenin, pooled in his mouth from his shattered molar.

The memory he is looking at is worn, as if from repeated viewings. Parts are quite clear...she seems to focus in on the pallor of his skin quite strongly... the glaze of his eyes. Less clear are the others in the room. Where were Potter and Weasley? It seems as if she herself does not remember.

He sees his own funeral, a clutch of mourners beside an empty grave, black umbrellas and Impervious Charms in the endless English rain. And now he understands why she has not recognized him. She truly thinks him dead. She has no idea... Shame rolls over her...and him by proxy. He should have found some way to tell her. She should not carry this guilt.

When he releases her, he expects an immediate onslaught, but all she says is, "I suppose you've gotten an eyeful. Did you enjoy your little trip through my memories?"

"You are a warrior," he says, trying and failing to catch Santiago's dreamy tone.

"And you are a wizard," she says. "One who makes his living scamming Muggles."

"I do not scam Muggles," he says somewhat acidly, giving up on Santiago. "They get what they pay for."

"Yes? Well, I'd like my money's worth, then, *Santiago*. Tell me my fortune."

He looks at her for a moment, appraising her. He wants to be glib, but her memories stop him. "The man you think you wronged...." he says. "You did no harm. You are forgiven."

Her eyes flash angrily, but her tone is hushed. "It is not for you to forgive."

## Of Muggles and Magic

### Chapter 2 of 4

Magical and Muggle worlds collide when two displaced survivors of the second war meet in an unlikely place.

Hermione's parents are waiting in the darkness when she bursts through the curtain in an angry slap of beads. She is off and running before her mother can utter a frightened, "Hermione?"

"Hermione!"

She hears her father commanding her to stop, but despite the fact that she was winded by the third step, she cannot stop running back in the direction of the hotel. Fury is blinding her, but worse than the fury...because how dare he, how fucking *dare* he try to absolve her...is how badly she wants to turn around and run back.

There is someone magical in that nasty little trailer.

Her stomach churns as she slows to a stop before crossing the main road. She is breathless, ill.

"Hermione, what on earth?" her mother says, panting as she reaches her. "Did he say something to upset you? Did he hurt you?"

"No," Hermione whispers. "He's like me. He's magic, like me."

Helen Granger takes a sudden step back, and Hermione thinks she sees fear in her mother's eyes, fear mixed with sympathy and something that looks a bit like sorrow.

"He knows you?" her mother says, and Hermione shakes her head violently no.

"No, he doesn't know me. He doesn't know anything about me," she hisses and then there is a break in traffic, and she is off again.

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In the hotel she is no better. The nausea passes and the blackness at the corners of her vision, but she is restless and hostile, pacing her room while her parents speak in low voices in the next room. Finally, she can bear it no longer and grabs a pale, thin cardigan, throwing it on overtop of her tee shirt.

Two quick raps on the adjoining door bring silence on the other side.

"I'm going out," she calls.

"Love," her mother says finally. "You're not going out looking for..."

"No. I'm not looking for Santiago," she says, and shuts the door behind her.

She knows who she is looking for, although she will not allow herself to know it. It is impossible and crazy. Perhaps today's events have unhinged her mind. Because the wizard she is looking for is dead. She watched the light leave his eyes; she stood by and did nothing while he died, and nothing will change that. Certainly not the forgiveness of some bloody beach psychic. *A wizard...her mind insists...a bloody magical beach psychic.* But it makes no difference whether he is a wizard or not, because it changes nothing. She cannot go back and change what she did not do, and peering into grimy windows looking for a dead man is worse than senseless.

It is only that they spoke of him, that she saw him again today, fresh in her own memories, she tells herself. That is the only reason.

But she cannot stop looking, pressing her face against dirty windows, her eyes straining against the gloom, and when she finally sees him, long and curled around his stool in a seedy looking place called The Sandbar, her heart calls out yes before she can tell herself that she's lost her mind completely. She opens the door.

The room is heavy with smoke and dominated by a long, filthy looking bar. She is dimly aware that there are other people in the room who have turned at the sound of the opening door, but all she sees are familiar, spidery hands resting upon dark wood.

He looks up and nods as though he's been expecting her, and suddenly she is terrified. Because it is not Santiago the fraud at the bar, his black hair twisted into coils; it is Snape. She feels alternately pale and flushed, and no words come to her lips. She simply stands there, looking at him.

"This is a drinking establishment, Miss Granger," Snape's familiar voice drawls, and she hears him perfectly through the chatter. "Have you come to drink or have you come to gawk?"

She is dangerously close to fainting. "Drink," she whispers and takes several tottering steps forward.

He turns away from her toward the bartender and then pauses and turns back. "When last I saw you, you were barely old enough for butterbeer," he says. "I'm afraid I cannot speculate as to your preferences now."

As she begins to recover...for if this is a hallucination, it is shockingly accurate...she fights the laughter that bubbles up inside her. One would think she could dream up a Snape less apt to chastise her one moment and make disparaging comments about her youth the next.

"I'll have a gin and tonic, thank you," she says in a voice that sounds strange and dreamy to her ears.

Snape lifts an eyebrow in seeming approval. "Wiza...at home, we called them Lime Junipers."

*Home.*

"Really?" she begins, "I never heard that..." And then she does begin to laugh. "I...I'm sorry. Forgive me my rudeness, but I...you're dead. You're dead. I'm ordering drinks from a dead man."

"Which shall I excuse? The laughter? Or the assumption that I am a figment of your rather overactive imagination?"

"Either one," she says, still laughing, the sound in her throat verging on hysterical. And suddenly she reaches out and grabs him, both hands around his slim, hard bicep.

"Oh, God," she says, and the convulsions of her throat choke her. Whoever he is, he is real.

"Indeed," he says dryly. "A gin and tonic, if you will, Dave."

"She of age?" the bartender...Dave, presumably...asks.

"Difficult as it may be to believe," Snape replies. Then he turns and drops his voice. "Pull yourself together. And let go of my arm. You are making a scene."

She releases him and accepts the drink gratefully as it slides down the bar, taking a rather larger-than-necessary sip. It is cool going down, but she feels her neck tense against the alcohol.

"Am I still here?" Snape asks sardonically.

He is. She drinks deeply again. Still there.

"I don't understand," she says, finally.

"That much is obvious," he says, and he opens his mouth very wide, startling her. She takes a step back, but not before she sees what her parents would have noticed immediately. He is missing an upper left molar.

"Antivenin," he says and takes a long pull of beer.

"Antivenin," she repeats dully.

"Surely you knew I would prepare myself. I was hardly the first to endure Nagini's... affections."

"I...I didn't know. Professor--" *Forgive me.*

"I cannot have escaped your attention that I am no longer your professor, Miss Granger."

She is temporarily derailed. This is beyond ludicrous. "What would you have me call you?"

"Severus will do. And before you beg my forgiveness, let me remind you that you believed exactly what *wanted* you to believe. I could have hardly expected you to come to my aid."

"What I did was unforgivable." The words come out in a rush.

"What you did won the war. I'd never have forgiven *myself* if Potter had taken a time-out to rush me to St Mungo's. You got what you needed, and you got the job done," he says quietly. "Well done, Miss Granger."

"Hermione."

"Beg pardon?"

"If you're Severus, then I'm Hermione. Probably best to be on first name terms with one's hallucinations, in any case," she says, although he seems real enough. Unless she has died, which suddenly seems a distinct possibility. Though she wouldn't have expected second-class Muggle bars in the afterlife.

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Snape is alarmed by her appearance. Not just the hardness he had noticed when she had visited him in the trailer, the age that has settled into her face...though she is still very young, still a child by wizarding standards...but the uncharacteristic dreaminess of her eyes, the nearly drunken sway as she stands there.

He knows she truly believed him dead; this is a shock, no doubt. And yet...

This is a woman who took on the Dark Lord Voldemort as a girl. Where are the bright, flashing eyes? Where are the ~~the~~ *questions*?

She leans on the bar, still laughing a bit breathlessly, and he feels slightly relieved, as he hadn't been sure if he would have to forcibly place her onto a stool. She seems that unstable. Her hands were chilled when she touched him, and she has both of them wrapped around her drink now.

And suddenly it hits him with the force of the Hogwarts Express. Her pallor, the lack of Occlumency, the strange demeanor. He's seen someone in exactly this condition before. Nausea curls a fist into his stomach.

"Where is your wand, Miss Granger?" he asks sharply.

"Hermione," she corrects, but he will not be deterred.

"Your wand?"

"It's... it's back at my parent's flat."

Perhaps he is mistaken. But there is something in the way she lurches toward him that makes him press the issue.

"You come out searching for strange wizards without your wand?"

"Hmm," she says vaguely, and his alarm rises a tick. He hopes he doesn't have to carry her out of here.

"Granger! When was the last time you cast a spell?"

His voice seems to startle her awake for a moment. "Almost three years ago," she whispers.

It is a wonder that she is even standing, that she has made it this far. She is drunk with his magic, and if his experience is any indicator, she will not be standing much longer. "Come with me," he hisses at her through his teeth, sliding from the stool and taking her hand firmly in his. She is like ice.

"Where are we going?"

"Shut up and follow directions for once in your life," he snaps and tugs her through a door marked Employees Only. It leads to a small hallway, brightly lit with naked fluorescent bulbs. He pushes her through a second door and into the night.

"Who are you?" she asks, her eyes barely able to meet his.

For a moment, he considers showing her the Mark as proof, but then, he does not want to terrify her, and he is not sure she would understand him in this state. He removes his wand from a pouch beneath his tee shirt and thrusts it into her right hand.

"Nothing fancy. Aguamenti should do it."

"But I..."

"Water, Miss Granger. Now."

"*Aguamenti!*" she chokes, and water gushes from his wand as if she'd tapped a hydrant. It pours out into the alley behind the Sandbar, picking up crisp packets and straw wrappers and carrying them along, swirling them into pools and eddies, before plunging into the sewer. The flow does not diminish, and he watches her face carefully.

Her natural color is returning, and even in the darkness, he can see the hectic pink of her cheeks where her blusher has become redundant, and it strikes him how hard she must work just to look normal, to look like one of them. Why on earth would she have done this to herself?

"Can you stop?" he asks quietly.

"I don't know," she says, and her voice is stronger now but still more wavery than he would like.

He lets her go for a full five minutes before he closes his hand over hers and whispers, *Finite Incantatem.*

"How do you feel?" he asks when he believes that she might be able to answer.

"What happened?"

"How long has it been since you have been in contact with your wand?"

"I told you. Almost three years now."

"And in that time you have encountered no one magical? No witches or wizards at all?"

"Once... once in Haiti, I thought..."

"Were you ill?"

"I had a viral infection, something I picked up on the island. It was nothing. I was better in three days--are you telling me that this has something to do with ~~magic~~?"

"Miss Granger, we are not meant to go without our magic. I cannot imagine what would have led you to do such a thing to yourself. Surely you have noticed your symptoms: the fatigue, the gray, clammy skin. Your vision, certainly, would be affected."

She looks up at him so sharply that he is certain she has felt all this and more.

"But what happened just now?"

"Are you in contact with Potter or Weasley?"

"What does this have to do with them?"

"Answer the question, Miss Granger. Are you in contact with anyone from our world?"

"I... sometimes. Not very often, anymore."

"Do you receive their missives by OWL?"

"No... by post. If we've stayed long enough for something to reach me. Harry manages it. He knew Muggle post... before."

"And how do you feel after you have heard from them?"

"Snape," she screeches suddenly, "enough about Harry and Ron. What is happening to me?"

He is gratified to hear the strength in her voice, if her patience still leaves something to be desired after all these years. This is much more like the witch he was expecting when he made his way downstairs to The Sandbar this evening.

"I imagine that you are always a bit under the weather when you hear from them, although you probably chalk it up to some ~~Muggle~~ notion of depression."

"I..."

"You've created a magical deficiency in your blood," he says crisply. "I imagine that if you saw a Muggle healer, he might call it a vitamin deficiency. They are not entirely dissimilar."

"But why did I become ill?"

"Because of my magical signature. You've trained your body to exist without magic. To suddenly encounter it sends you into shock. It awakens your need. Like a man dying of thirst who cannot help but glut himself at the oasis."

"But I've never heard of this. Why have I never heard of this?"

"Why should you have? Those who are determined to leave rarely come back to tell their tales. And fewer still have the inclination to go. Though I suspect you might have heard of it had you been raised in the magical world from birth. It is often trotted out to frighten magical children. What happens if you leave the nest, and so forth."

"But surely I would have heard *something*! I took Muggle Studies in school," she insisted.

He snorted. Of course Hermione Granger would have taken Muggle Studies.

"Do you know of anyone who has ever abandoned his magic?"

"No, but..."

"It is extremely rare. I might not have recognized it had I not seen it before."

"Has it happened to you?"

"Does your questioning never cease? No, it has not happened to me, Miss Granger. I would never be fool enough to give up my magic."

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Hermione knows she should stop with the interrogation. Thinking back, insofar as she is able to think of anything except the rightness of his wand in her hand and the heavy, electric feel of magic as it coursed through her veins, she can recognize vaguely that she has been harassing him.

But even as she realizes that she must stop, the questions seem to pile up in her brain, and how is it possible that she has lived three years without being curious about *anything*?

"But you live here... with the Muggles." She struggles to make it sound more like a statement.

"And I use magic every day."

"But why leave? If you're still using magic, that is."

He looks at her steadily. "If you cannot determine the answer to that question for yourself, then I am sure I cannot help you."

"I suppose I deserved that," she says wearily, though he has deliberately misinterpreted her question. Whatever doubts she'd had about who this is have faded in the face of their conversation. The man before her is pure Snape. "I think I might like to have that drink back." Her voice lilts up at the end before she can catch it. Another infernal question.

He holds the door open for her, and now that she is fully in control of herself, she is able to look around at the ochre colored hallway, far too bright against the darkness.



"How did you know where to take me?"

He points to the stairs that are coated in worn rubber mats. "I live upstairs."

"Oh," she says. There doesn't seem to be much else to say. That's where Severus Snape lives.

Her mind reels as it tries to assimilate this into her worldview.

She reenters the bar and takes a seat in front of her drink. The ice has melted, but it tastes good that way, mellower.

Snape orders two shots of whiskey and slides one toward her. "It is not Ogden's by a long shot," he says. "But... considering the circumstances, it will do."

He leans his head back as he drinks, exposing the slim column of his neck, dark with stubble except where the scar tissue twists and puckers his flesh. His Adam's apple works, and she finds it difficult to look away.

"I've spoken to you so many times," she says, tearing her eyes from his throat. "I suppose I thought you could hear me. From the other side." She snorts ruefully. "Now that you're in front of me, I don't know what to say."

"Miss Granger, as I said before, your guilt is entirely misplaced."

"There was an Awards Ceremony, you know. You have an Order of Merlin, first class... back home."

He says nothing, but she thinks he is pleased, nonetheless. Or else the whiskey has colored his cheekbones softly pink.

"Much easier to honor a dead man," he says, his tone more bitter than she expects. "And you?"

"Second class."

He raises an eyebrow at her, and she shrugs. They are silent for a moment, and Hermione sips her gin and tonic. Her Lime Juniper, as it were. She wonders if he is as undone as she to see someone familiar after so many years. She feels suddenly terribly glad that it is Snape here beside her and not some old school acquaintance, someone with whom she might have to make small talk or exclaim over. It is not just the pleasure of being known, recognized, the ability...at long last...to be her entire self. She is grateful that he knew the war, that he will not press her for the lurid details...*Really? You lived in a tent? With Harry Potter?...*but can sit here beside her, quietly remembering.

"What happened to Malfoy?" he asks suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"Draco, or...?"

"Draco."

She feels a rush of sadness for him, that there are so many things he didn't get to know. "He was cleared. Last I heard of him...and this was several years ago, of course...he was selling the Manor."

"Selling Malfoy Manor," Snape says, shaking his head slowly.

"Sir, if there's anything you want to know, anything I might..."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Though I am sure I cannot possibly achieve your level of insatiability, if there is anything that occurs to me, I will ask."

She smiles tentatively. Her cheeks feel flushed with the whiskey and with something else. Magic, she supposes. Flushed with magic. The silence spins out between them like a warm golden ribbon. This is entirely surreal, but somehow she is calm, almost content. Much like her first classes at Hogwarts, as she had watched people doing things that should be impossible, and yet she had been safe in the knowledge that someday she would do those things too.

"Potter?" he says finally.

"You know he always wanted to be an Auror. He entered training directly after the war. He married Ginny Weasley. They just had a son this spring." She stops herself just before saying the child's name.

"What a waste of two decent minds," Snape says, and Hermione realizes with some shock that Snape just admitted that Harry has...had...a decent mind.

"I assume that Weasley was frothing at the mouth to join Potter in Auror training."

Hermione nods.

"But not you."

This had been one more wedge driven between them in the weeks that followed the war. If she had heard one more *Come on, Hermione, it'll be just like old times* from one of the boys, she would have had to resort to the Unforgivables. Did they have a different memory of those years than she did? Why on earth would any of them *want* things to be like old times? What she'd done, she'd done because she had to, because she loved them, because she loved her world, and there had been no other choice. But to enter into it willingly--as a profession! It was unthinkable.

"No, not me."

"You've given up magic."

"It wasn't something I decided to do," she says, and she is surprised at her own candidness. "It just kind of... happened."

"Only you could fail to notice something so debilitating," Snape says, but he sounds vaguely amused.

"I don't mean to harp on it," she says, "but my reaction tonight... will it happen again?"

Snape's glass has mysteriously refilled itself at some point, and she glances at her own to discover that it, too, is filled with the smoky brown liquid. He drains his gracefully once more before he begins to speak.

"I am not entirely certain. However, Ocean Isle is a small place, and I have lived here for quite some time. I am afraid you will come into contact with the residue of my magic more than once while you are here."

She looks at him, determined not to ask, to wait for him to tell her.

"Whether it will cause such an extreme reaction, given that you've performed magic this evening, I cannot say. It remains a possibility."

She sips her drink.

"The woman I knew had to return to her magic," he says stiffly. "Repeated contact with a wizard proved too much for her."

Hermione wonders if Snape has met a woman out here. Someone like him, someone hiding *Repeated contact*. The notion unsettles her for some reason.

"Did she... did you help her to do magic, like you did with me?"

"Occasionally," he says. "But in her case, the circumstances were... unfavorable... to a magical life. It is possible I did more harm than good. Eventually it became clear that staying away from her was the best option."

"I'm sorry, sir," she says, flushing slightly.

Snape barks out a single disparaging *ha*. "Are you under the impression that I was speaking of *alover*, Miss Granger?"

"Professor, I wouldn't presume to..."

"My mother. My fool of a mother. Thought she'd pass herself off as Muggle to win my father, although he was a dubious prize if ever there were one. And she endured it, I suppose, much as you have been enduring it, until I began to manifest. At which point, it all, as they say, went to hell in a handbasket."

Hermione is utterly flummoxed. If he were Harry or Ron she would touch him, but offering sympathy to Snape seems utterly out of the question.

He sits so still. There is nothing in his face to say that he wants or needs her comfort. These are facts he has told her, like the fact that he lives upstairs, like the fact that he was a Death Eater and once loved Lily Potter enough to die for her. It strikes her that she knows him better in this one strange moment than she ever knew him at Hogwarts. He is just another half-breed like her. She finishes her drink, and it is refilled before she can even look at him.

"Why are you here?" he says suddenly.

"I don't know. When I got back to the hotel, I felt agitated and strange. The idea that there was another wizard here... and somehow it got all tangled up in the notion of you, and I wanted to see..."

"Not why are you here in this bar, Miss Granger. Why are you not at home?"

## Victory Park

### Chapter 3 of 4

Magical and Muggle worlds collide when two displaced survivors of the second war meet in an unlikely place.

Snape rolls over against the thin, hard mattress. Images of the evening will not stop playing through his mind: the color in her face after she'd cast her *Aguamenti*, the way she'd clung to his arm when she'd arrived. She had never answered his question. What was she doing here? What had driven her from their world, from the magic she had fought for and always seemed to revel in?

Before she left, she had looked at him searchingly, her eyes impossibly dark and shadowed.

"Can I come back... tomorrow? If it's bad?" she'd asked, and he had agreed. Agreed and reminded her where to find him.

She'd called for the tab and merely blinked in his direction when it had come back with the cost of a single whiskey, a single gin and tonic. And then she'd left him sitting there, feeling more uncomfortably alone than he had in years.

It is because she brings back so many memories, he tells himself. And because there are still questions he has yet to ask her. Those are the only reasons that he wishes night would end and birth him out again into tomorrow.

It is, of course, possible that he will never see her again, and if that is the case, then he will go on as he always has until he can forget that she was ever here. It was like that at the beginning, when he had first arrived, and time had taken the sharp edges off the homesickness and the longing for things that were never really his to begin with. He can trust that to be the case again.

Still, he wishes that tomorrow would come.

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She turns up again in the midst of his evening meal, taken late at the sandwich shop next door. It is beach food, hot dogs and chips that coat his fingers in grease and bleed through their paper wrappings. But if he is truthful with himself, he had wanted to be out, wanted to be visible in the window, and when the bell at the door jingles, signaling the arrival of a slight, bushy haired girl in a pastel sundress, he stands up suddenly and then feels awkward and angular.

"Miss Granger," he says formally.

"I thought we agreed on Hermione," she says easily, sliding into the chair across from his. She looks better than she had the day before...healthier, more engaged...but he is still shocked to see how much older she appears in the light. The war was hard on her. And yet, he supposes he looks no better. They were soldiers, he thinks, and it is obvious. Still, there is dignity in how they turned out.

"Are you having difficulty?" he asks quietly.

"It's strange," she replies, her voice dropped in answer to his. "Sometimes I feel better than I have in years, and other times nearly incapacitated. And I cannot stop thinking of magic. I've grown used to doing things the Muggle way. But today everything felt like a burden."

He knows what she means. Simply ordering dinner in a restaurant, rather than summoning it up the stairs, sometimes seems a study in inefficiency.

"Have you eaten?"

"Will you duplicate your food for me?" she says, the hint of a smile around her mouth, "Or shall I order as the Muggles do?"

"It is too early, and the patrons far too sober, for last night's tricks," he says, and he watches her as she approaches the counter. Her gait is wandering, and he thinks that once she has eaten, he'd like to get her someplace secluded and give her another go round with his wand.

"So, *Santiago*," she says, returning with her food. "How long have you been in the fortune telling business?"

There is a moment when Snape wonders if she is flirting with him; her manner is so easy and light compared to yesterday, but he chalks it up to how crisp and clear the world must seem to her today.

"Just over two years. Longer if you count several false starts. It took some time to figure out the exact parameters."

"And what are the exact parameters?"

"Foolish hairdo, secluded location, otherworldly manner."

"All of which you could have learned from Professor Trelawney."

He smiles at her a bit ruefully. "Quite."

"Tell me about these false starts."

"When I first arrived, I thought my business would be primarily tourist driven. For a time, I worked at the carnival. You have seen it, I assume?"

"Victory Park?"

"A rather ironic name, is it not? But yes, Victory Park. I had a booth beside the hot dog stand." He gestures at his abandoned food. "Gave me a taste for the vile things, I'm afraid."

She smiles at him and nods encouragingly as she eats.

"In any case, I was not a match for Victory Park. I got on well with the management, but I had not yet perfected the look or the manner. Apparently, I frightened people."

She laughs, covering her mouth with a napkin, her eyes squeezing shut, her shoulders heaving slightly. "Oh, God, not while I'm eating," she says.

He tries to give her a look of consternation, but it's funny, and her laugh makes him want to join her.

"Yes, well. It would not have worked out anyway. The visitors of Victory Park are not my clientele."

She nods, seeming to understand that the people she saw in line yesterday would not frequent the amusement park. Her cheeks are still flushed from her laughter, and her eyes are moist.

"Would you like to go?" he asks, startling even himself.

"Go?" she asks, and he could take it back now, or change it into something else, but as baffled as he is by her sudden appearance in his life, he very much does not want her to go. When she is near him, he feels as if he had been the one with the magical deficiency.

He had thought that he would be content never to see a witch or wizard again. For a time, he had played a game with himself, imagining who would discover his secret and track him down in order to haul him in front of the Wizengamot. He'd had it down to Minerva and Miss Granger. At the time he'd thought he would prefer Minerva. Now he has to admit to himself that this is not unpleasant, being known. Being recognized. It has been longer than he would care to think about since he has made anyone laugh. She has a nice laugh.

"To the park," he says stiffly.

"Oh! Yes, very much."

And it is as easy as that, which is strange and somehow gratifying. She doesn't ask why he would want to go to a Muggle tourist trap, nor why he would want her to accompany him. He simply asks, and she says yes.

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Behind The Sandbar, Hermione nearly trembles as he removes his wand from beneath his shirt. He can see the discipline it must have taken to suppress her magic in the way she reaches out slowly for the wand, not allowing herself to snatch it from him as she must want to do. He admires her control, and for a moment, it allows him to admire his own mother, for what she attempted and achieved for so long. It is not easy to deny yourself what you need most, he knows.

Snape expects her to cast the Aguamenti Charm again, but after holding his wand rather reverently for a few seconds, she whispers, *Avis!*

Birds soar from his wand tip, one after the next, winging off into the dusky August sky. Gulls, he registers, before he hisses, "Miss Granger!"

She is able to bring the charm to a stop herself this time, and she stands there for a moment, breathing hard and looking flushed and shaken.

"Does my life seem so appealing to you that you would try to become an outlaw yourself?"

"An outlaw?" she says.

"The International Statute of Secrecy, Miss Granger. We're in an area surrounded by Muggles. Many of whom probably noticed an enormous flock of birds that seemed to originate from this alley."

"They were gulls," she says stiffly. "They're indigenous. And I imagine they often congregate near trashcans."

He makes to retort, although he has nothing particularly scathing planned, as she is correct, of course, and he should have realized that Hermione Granger would want to try something a bit more complicated...she had probably spent all night determining what to do when she had managed to get his wand away from him...but then he looks hard at her in the gloom and sees that she is crying.

She does not hitch or sob or throw herself into his arms, all the things he hates in histrionic females. She just stands there, weeping silently. Suddenly he feels quite awkward and useless.

"There is no need to feel badly," he says. "Your reasoning was sound."

She shakes her head and turns away from him, wiping her eyes on the sleeves of her thin sweater. He knows it is not his admonishment that made her cry, but the beauty of those birds, shimmering into existence at her call.

"Why did you do this?" he asks her. "If it pains you so much?"

She turns away from him. "Let's walk," she says, and he follows her from the alleyway.

She says nothing for nearly a block, and he listens to the dual sounds of their feet smacking the boardwalk. He thinks that if she does not answer, he will not be able to ask again. He has pressed far beyond what a casual acquaintance and a chance meeting should have allowed.

Finally, her voice pierces the silence between them. Her tone is light and conversational, and he wonders for a moment whether she is trying to make him believe that this is easy for her, but then he realizes that she is busy appearing normal to the Muggles, just a girl strolling along, chatting with her friend. The Muggle equivalent of a Notice-Me-Not.

"I had my wand when I left England," she says. "I flew to Perth...by aeroplane...because I knew I'd have to fly back out with them, and I wanted there to be some official record of my entering the country."

He nods. He would have done the same. It is half-breed thinking, the awareness of the system operating all around your own, of the deferences that must be made to it.

"The Ministry found them," she goes on, "several weeks after the war. My father had become something of an online trader. I don't know if you're familiar..."

"Familiar enough," he says. He wants her to go on, not to get caught up in these tangents.

"In any case, he'd made a fair bit of money. I'm lucky that I got there in time." She makes a small, bitter sound. "If I'd been much later, they probably would have taken off on their world tour without me, none the wiser."

He says nothing. That would have been better for all of them. And yet, if she had missed them, she wouldn't be here, an idea that now seems unthinkable.

"I did something wrong when I reversed the charm," she whispers, not looking at him. "It's not something that you notice right away. It's more insidious than that. They seem the same on the outside, but once you get them talking... They get confused easily. There are things they remember that don't seem to exist. And then other times, I think they encounter... holes in their memories. And you can see how much it bothers them, how it nearly *offends* them when it happens. They blame me, of course. As they should."

Her face is calm and impassive, and her gait does not falter, but Snape can hear the shame, the anguish, beneath her carefree tone.

"Hermione, you did not perform the charm incorrectly," he says.

She turns to look at him, and her eyes flash darkly. "*Idamaged* them," she says.

"When I was in your mother's mind," he says quietly, "I saw the holes you speak of, the confusion."

"Then you see what I did."

"No. Listen to me. No one could have undone that charm. An Auror would have done no better. I could have done no better. A Memory Charm with the strength of the one you performed...it will leave its mark. The mind is a myriad of paths and connections; it is not possible to anticipate all the ways that a memory will loop and connect, and when the connections are severed, there is always..."

"I should never have attempted it," she says flatly.

Snape is torn for a moment. He does not want to remind her or himself of the things he has done, of the person that he was when they knew each other last. But he has knowledge that she requires, comfort that she requires, and it seems unkind to withhold it.

"That depends on whether you believe that they would have been better off dead," he says.

"It's possible nothing would have happened to them at all," she says. "I might have done this to them for nothing."

"But you did not."

Her eyes are wary when they meet his.

"Do you understand what I am saying?" he says, and she nods. Her eyes are filled with tears again, but she blinks them back.

"Are you certain? Are you absolutely certain?"

"They were third on the list, Hermione. I saw it myself."

A huge breath rushes out of her, and she stumbles. He catches her arm and holds on tightly while she regains her footing. He can feel the strength of her will as she forces herself back toward normalcy.

"Thank you for telling me," she says after a time. He lets go of her arm.

They have reached the entrance of Victory Park, a wrought iron archway lit with blinking carnival lights. Beyond the entrance is the ticket booth and then the squat brick buildings that house the bumper cars. In the distance, he can see the Ferris wheel, turning endlessly against the sky.

When they cross under the arch, the man at the ticket booth nods to him, and they walk along without stopping.

"Frank," he says to her, by way of explanation. "He manages the park."

"And you don't pay here," she says.

"No."

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Hermione laughs just at the absurdity of it all, because who would have thought there could be a world in which Snape was granted free admittance to Muggle amusement parks? And even if there were, who would have ever thought she'd be visiting an amusement park with Snape?

Still, beneath her amusement, she is awed and grateful at the gift he's given her. She knows it must have cost him something to tell her, to have to go beyond the Mark and admit that he would have been privy to such things. Once again, she is pierced by gladness that it is Snape she's met after all these years.

"I stopped using magic as a courtesy to them," she says, returning to her story, for she feels now that he deserves to hear the ending, and it has felt... freeing somehow... to tell it at last. "It was clear that it made them deeply uncomfortable. They had no interest in returning to England, and I didn't see how I could land in the middle of their world, destroy it, and then dash off. So I agreed to accompany them on their trip to Paris. I left my wand in Australia. I laid it down on the kitchen table where my mother could see. She just looked and looked at it. When she locked the door, she kept glancing back, as if she expected it to follow us."

Snape says nothing, but he watches her attentively.

"We never went back," she says.

"And so what is your plan?" he asks.

What is her plan? She cannot even remember a time when she had considered making a plan. She has simply gone wherever the wind has taken her for so long that plans seem to have become obsolete.

"My plan?"

"You are living like an overgrown child, traipsing around after your parents. Surely you cannot intend to do that forever."

She is stung by his words, and she looks away. "Rich from someone who is hiding in America, pretending to be a psychic," she retorts.

"I am not hiding."

"No? The glamour is a fashion statement?"

"I am not wearing the glamour now, am I?" he says. "And if I had intended to hide, you would not have found me."

He stops in front of an ice cream shop and after exchanging pleasantries with the young girl at the counter, she hands him a cone. Snape holds it out to Hermione, and she is sure that he is making a point about her childishness and is at the point of refusing it when a second cone is produced, clearly intended for him.

The ice cream is soft and sweet, running down the paper covered cone to her hands faster than she can eat it, and they are both silent for a while, attending to the duties of consuming their dessert.

When there is time to speak again, she says, "Now it is your turn."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've told you my story," she says. "Now you tell me yours."

"I have told you a great deal already. What is it that you wish to know?"

"You haven't told me why you're here. If you aren't hiding, and you haven't given up magic, why do you live here? Why not join a wizarding community?"

They stop in front of the Ferris wheel, an ancient-looking contraption of painted steel. Snape throws away the remains of his cone, and Hermione follows suit. She looks at the hulking wheel beyond the gate.

People stroll past them. The park is not crowded; there are mostly teenagers here, locals, Hermione would guess by the look of them, playing the arcade games. There are a few couples that may be on vacation, but the entire park has the feel of something very close to extinction. The gates are rusted, and rubbish blows by on the ground.

Snape takes a few steps toward the wheel, but Hermione touches him lightly on the arm.

"Yes?" he says.

"I...I'm afraid of heights."

He looks at her condescendingly for a moment and then his expression clears. "If you want to know the answer to your question, you will have to ride," he says.

She looks at him measuringly. He is serious, she sees. She will have to do this.

But then he leans toward her and whispers, "I have a wand, Hermione. If something were to happen, I could Apparate us out in seconds."

She follows him wordlessly through the gate, past the bearded ticket taker, who points at a carriage with a large blue star on it.

Snape holds the carriage steady while she steps in and situates herself. There is rust on the door, but the joints...most importantly the joint holding their box to the wheel...seem in good shape. Snape slides in next to her, and she doesn't know where to look now that they are seated beside each other. There is something odd about the whole thing that makes her heart beat erratically, and not just from fear of the machine. He is so close to her. Has she ever sat so near to him before?

She knows it is illogical. They've touched several times this evening already, and he isn't even touching her now, just sitting beside her on a plastic covered bench. She looks out the window, feigning interest in the scenery.

There are only two other couples...*couples*...on the ride, but the wheel begins to turn without waiting for the seats to fill. As their box rises through the air, Hermione feels her stomach clench, and she stops looking out the window, settling for a point just above Snape's left shoulder. Slowly, he begins to speak, however, and his eyes draw her in.

"I am a wizard. I cannot deny it any more than you can, than my mother could. I have never had any desire to be a Muggle." He pauses, and she waits, watching him struggle to tell this to her.

"Look," he says, and she turns to see the park falling away beneath her. She shudders, and he takes her hand in his cool one. "It is perfectly safe. Perfectly safe, and perfectly ridiculous. How hard they work for just a fraction of what we can achieve with a flick of our wands."

Hermione feels as if her brain is misfiring. Her heart stutters, and her cheeks are burning. Snape is holding her hand. But still, it seems less important than what he is telling her, and she commands herself to pay attention.

"When I Apparated out of Hogsmeade, I had no destination in mind. I simply turned and left."

She is stricken by his words, by the notion of spinning wildly off into the future.

"When I arrived here, I had no idea how to proceed. I had to find a way to survive, yet I had no wish to learn a Muggle trade at this late date, nor spend the rest of my life in hiding. So I took up fortune telling because I could do it easily, because it was available, and because it grants me the kind of in-between life I am most suited to. Here, I can be no one."

The cart stops, and they are at the pinnacle of the wheel. Belatedly, Hermione realizes that they were put into the best carriage.

"Up here," he says, releasing her hand and pointing to their view of Ocean Isle, tiny and insignificant below, "I can look out and feel as if all the choices are still yet to be made. Up here, I am still on vacation."

Hermione thinks she can almost sense what he means, though it dances slightly out of her reach. But there is a way in which this height makes the world seem like an illusion. It is harder to hate it from up here.

"And you don't ever want to go back?" she asks. Her hand feels cold without his, though that makes no sense in the August heat.

"No, I will never go back to England," he says. "Sometimes I think I might like to find other wizards, to live in a magical community elsewhere. But I cannot imagine going back home. There is no place for me there now."

It pains her for some reason, the idea that he will never return. What is happening to her? Two days ago she believed him dead, and now she is mourning the idea that he will never go back to a place she no longer lives.

She looks out of the cart to the world below, the dingy storefronts lit with neon. It is an in-between place for an in-between man. A forgotten place. She can see the sea from here, crashing against the beach in all its inexorable power, and suddenly, the choice between a magical life and a Muggle one seems much clearer. The cart begins to move again.

"And you, Hermione?" he says. "Will you go home again?"

"I don't know how to undo what I've done," she says honestly.

"You cannot," he says, looking past her, out of the cart. "You can never undo what you have done. You can only go forward."

When the cart stops at the bottom again, Snape climbs out and holds out his hand to help her back to the ground. They stand there, frozen in the bright lights for a moment. Then he begins to lead her back out of the park to the boardwalk.

The air is hot and humid, but there is a breeze coming off the ocean, and the darkness makes it bearable. Snape's hand is cool and firm around hers, and she wishes that she never had to leave here, that she could buy that peasant blouse, set up beside him in his trailer, and join him in this small, magical pocket he has set up for himself, for the displaced. But that is impossible.

"Everyone at home has gone on without me," she says. "Or maybe it is that they have failed to go on, but in a different way than I have. Everything there has the mark of the war on it. I don't want to live in that forever."

He nods thoughtfully, still looking straight ahead as they walk, and yet she knows he is waiting for something more.

"I think I could go back for my wand. And then ask Professor McGonagall if she will allow me to take my NEWTs without completing my seventh year. After that, I don't know."

"I have some money," Snape says after several blocks of quiet. Then he chuckles slightly. "Actually, I have quite a bit of money. Muggle money, of course, but it could be converted to Galleons."

Hermione cannot imagine where he is going with this. "Yes, I imagine fortune telling is fairly lucrative," she says.

"They pay in cash," Snape says. "And having hardly announced myself to the local government, I pay no taxes. It adds up."

"Yes," says Hermione vaguely.

He releases her hand, and his steps quicken until she is nearly trotting to keep up with him. He is staring into the distance purposefully, as if he has become fascinated by something out there in the dark.

"Severus," Hermione says, feeling slightly alarmed and embarrassed by having to say his name. "What's wrong?"

"If you needed, if you wanted... I could be your benefactor. Once you have decided what you would like to do. There would be no strings attached, of course. You would not have to remain in touch with me beyond the practicalities of finances."

"Severus." She grabs his arm and pulls him to a stop. They are in front of The Sandbar.

"Forgive me if I have offended you," Snape says formally. "I only thought... It is difficult to start again."

"Thank you," she says. "It is an incredibly generous offer. I'll think about it."

They stand beneath the light of the bar sign, and Hermione looks at Snape's face. He is lovely in his discomfort.

"I have kept you out too late," he says.

"You aren't going to invite me up?"

"Invite you up? Whatever for?"

His words sting, but she is firm in her resolve. It seems to her that fate has tossed her here, much as it had him three years ago.

"Isn't this the way it works?" she asks. "A man has dinner with a woman, takes her to the fair and buys her an ice cream. They ride the Ferris wheel. And then he asks her up." There is a terrible pause.

"For a... nightcap," she finishes a bit lamely.

He laughs suddenly, and Hermione wonders if she has ever heard Snape laugh before. It is a deep, resonant sound. "Hermione," he says, "I realize that wizards are generally a bit behind the times, but given that, I don't think even we have used the word nightcap since the 1960s."

His face turns deadly serious. "I meant it when I said there were no strings attached. I would never dream of..."

"Severus," she says firmly. "As you said, I am a modern witch, living in modern times. I do what I want to do."

He blushes furiously and looks away from her, but she thinks she can see that he wants this, though he doesn't know how to ask for it.

"Ask me up," she says again.

"Hermione," he begins, as if he is going to launch an argument, but then something changes in his face. She can watch his yielding happen. "Will you come up?"

# The Yellow Blanket

## Chapter 4 of 4

Magical and Muggle worlds collide when two displaced survivors of the second war meet in an unlikely place.

A/N: Thank you so much to Thesporkwielder for the prompt and to OpalJade for beta reading and cheerleading.

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When he opens the door, she is surprised. She doesn't know what she expected, but it was not this. His flat is but a single room, furniture marking the divides between sleeping, eating and sitting. It was clearly a vacation home...not anywhere that someone meant to actually *live*...and yet, when she gives it some thought, she cannot imagine Snape needing or wanting more room than this.

Everything is gently worn, and she is taken aback by the femininity of it, but he catches her gaze as it travels over the room and says, "I have no particular interest in interior design, Hermione. It came this way. It serves me well enough."

And that seems true, that this would serve. There is a strange, indefinable sense of *home* about the place, and she can see how he would like the bare-bones practicality of it. And the close comfort, too.

He has turned on a single light above the kitchen counter, and it casts a warm shadow over the flat. She goes to sit on his sofa while he pours the drinks. There is a television on a dresser across from her, and she is surprised all over again.

"You have a telly," she says.

He crosses toward her, a glass of whisky in each hand, and smiles a bit sheepishly as he sits. "Sometimes, in the dark, it reminds me of a fireplace. The wall seemed too empty when I took it away."

They sit in silence, and Hermione sips her drink nervously. She thought it would all happen rather naturally after they'd made it upstairs, and she does not know how to proceed.

Snape is sitting at an odd angle, his knees serving as a barrier between them. He clears his throat, and it is loud in the silence.

"I will not deny that I feel it too," Snape says. "Whatever brought you up here. And perhaps I was... improper, taking your hand before."

"Severus..."

"You must realize that neither of us has seen another witch or wizard in many years. Naturally, we feel drawn together. Surely it would be the same if you had run in to Longbottom..."

"I love Neville," she says, "but please do not suggest such a thing again."

"Lupin, then."

"Lupin is dead."

He pales instantly, as if she'd hit him. "I did not...I had not heard that."

"I'm sorry that I blurted it out that way. It was unkind of me."

"He'd just had a child, had he not?"

"Yes, Teddie. He would be almost four now. Tonks' mother looks after him."

"Good God, Nymphadora, too?"

"Severus, I'm mangling this terribly. I'm sorry."

"No, I want to know. It is not fair that you should have to know these things while I do not."

"I'm not sure it's an issue of fairness. And I don't think I'd like to spend the evening listing the dead, if you don't mind."

"What I am trying to say is..."

"I know what you're trying to say. And I concede that you may even be right. But I cannot tell you how often I have thought, during these last two days, how glad I am that it is *you* I have found after all this time. I want to do this. And it's been a very long time since I've wanted anything at all."

Snape says nothing. He is still pale, and his face is twisted with indecision.

"Tell me my fortune," Hermione says.

"Pardon?"

She puts her glass down on the coffee table. "Tell me my fortune," she says again.

He gives her a long, unreadable look and takes her wand hand in his. Gently, he lifts it toward the light, and leans in toward it, his long, pale fingers splaying hers, and she thinks he really will inspect her palm.

Hermione is frozen as his lips meet the inside of her wrist. The look on his face is such a heady mixture of reverence and lust that her blood surges in response; she feels the flush everywhere, so quick and furious that she is almost light headed. Slowly, he drags his mouth over her skin, and by the time has reached the inside of her elbow,

she cannot bear not to touch him, and her hand curls around to lock her fingers in his hair. Their eyes meet, and her lips part in anticipation. There is a moment in which it seems he might pull away, but then he takes her face in both hands and brings her mouth almost violently to his. She has to scramble up onto her knees to meet him properly, but that is what he seems to need, for her to come to him, and she does. The kiss deepens, and she can taste ice cream and whisky in his mouth, sweet and heavy as his tongue meets hers.

They break apart, and she opens her eyes to see him shocked and needy, staring back at her. She leans back, and he follows her down, covering her body with his. She can feel his hands traveling up her thighs, rucking her dress up around her middle to give him room to settle on his knees. And then his mouth is back, warm and probing and *good*, and she forgets everything but the kissing, swiping his lips with her tongue, feeling the controlled desperation as he nips her bottom lip.

She lifts her hips slightly, and he drives his into hers, his chin lifting and a soft sound escaping the depths of his throat. She pushes herself up onto her elbows to reach the exposed flesh of his neck. Her tongue traces the curve of his Adam's apple, her lips running rough over the beginnings of stubble, over the scar. One of his hands seizes her head once more, burying itself in her hair, and he holds her to him as she kisses the soft underside of his jaw.

When she falls back, he sits on his heels and begins to touch her, smoothing his hands over her bare legs.

"You are so soft," he says, with something like wonder.

She smiles. *Thank you* doesn't seem quite the right response, though she recognizes it as a compliment as he cannot seem to stop touching her. His hands drift to her waist, his fingers dipping for a moment beneath the waistband of her knickers, brushing the secret skin of her belly. Desire clenches her muscles tight, and she pulls him back down over her, her mouth seeking his greedily.

She can feel his hardness pressing against her, and he pulls her knee up, driving himself against the hot cradle of her thighs.

"We are wearing an obscene amount of clothing," she whispers when she can bear to wrench her mouth from his, nudging her sandal against his boot.

"Indeed. And my knees may never forgive me for this," he answers, and she can feel his smile warm against her cheek.

"Far be it from me to create a rift between you and your knees," she says and begins to wiggle out from beneath him. The friction is delicious, and she stops for a moment to kiss him thoroughly before taking his hand and pulling him from the couch.

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He leads her to his bed, feeling too tall now that they are standing. The heat that had flushed his skin and brought sweat to his temples is cooling without her body pressed up against his, and he wants to kiss her again, but is not sure where to begin. It has been longer than he cares to think about since he has touched a woman this way, much longer than Ocean Isle in any case.

Fortunately for him, Hermione takes a step toward him and lifts the bottom of his tee shirt, drawing it up, exposing his skin. He takes over the removal of the garment as she runs her hands over his chest, over his shoulders, caressing his arms with her soft, gentle touch. She runs her face over his bare skin, and the tickle of her hair raises gooseflesh down his arms. She smooths it away.

Her small hands reach for the fastening of his trousers, but he nudges her gently away and attends to it himself. The thought of her hands brushing him *ah, God*.

She turns around...surely she is not so modest; after all, the undressing was her idea...and lifts her hair.

"Will you unzip me?"

His hands tremble. The zipper is tiny, miniscule in his fingertips, and he draws it down slowly, relishing the smooth line of her spine, the warm shadow in the curves of her back. He pushes the straps from her shoulders, and the dress falls so quickly; he has hardly a second to appreciate her unveiling. She steps out of the pool around her feet and climbs onto his narrow bed, sliding beneath the thin yellow quilt, pulling him along.

The bed was hardly made for one; they are tucked together, sharp places and hollows, belly to belly, to fit. Her hands roam over his back as he nuzzles deep into her neck. She lifts her leg, raising it over his hip and edges in closer. Her hair is everywhere, in his mouth, tickling his ears; he feels he is drowning deliciously in a cloud of her warm fragrance.

"Is your wand handy?" she whispers.

"Are you feeling..."

"No, no, I feel wonderful. I just... I want these gone." She pushes at the fabric of his pants. "And I don't want to get up again."

He rolls back, reaching blindly toward the nightstand, feeling her thigh drag along his aching cock. She moves against him slightly, and he groans, vanishing both their underthings and turning off the kitchen light with an impatient flick.

"I think," she whispers, pulling him toward the center of the bed and straddling his hips, "this will work best."

The crazy quilt pools around her as she rises up, planting her hands flat against his chest. Moonlight streams in from the window above the bed, illuminating her breasts, her tight brown nipples. He reaches up to cradle them gently, and she leans into his palms. She is all light and gorgeous dark, her collarbones, the undersides of her breasts, her navel, her stomach taut and smooth before him.

She rises slightly as she reaches between her legs to take him into her hand. He closes his eyes because to look at her as she does this would be too much. He feels the firm pressure of her grip as it slides up and down his length and then the heat radiating off of her, the smooth wet yield of her as she drags him through her lips, rubs him gently against her clit. Her hips move, and he gasps, the breath catching in his throat as she lowers herself onto him.

For a moment he imagines that he is outside the window looking in, though they are much too far above the street for anyone to see her. She rides him, and as if from the outside, he sees her head thrown back, sees his own fingers digging into her hips as he brings her down, down to where they are fully joined. The sight of her this way...her slightly opened mouth, the flush of her chest, her hair riotous in the moonlight...to imagine himself peering in at her so privately nearly breaks him, and he whispers, "Give me a moment, Hermione. I'm very close."

She wiggles her bum, and he hisses, "Wench," through clenched teeth. She smiles smugly before lowering herself down on top of him. He holds her for a moment, enjoying the feeling of her breath against his neck before gently beginning to thrust into her. She moves with him, and this is almost worse...or horribly better...than before... the sweat-eased slide of her skin against his...

"We have to turn over," he says.

She peels herself from him slowly, and it is exquisite torture. When she is spread before him, her hair half matted to her neck and half spread over his pillow, he thinks to himself that it doesn't matter what position they are in; he will not last a minute. He enters her slowly, unwilling to be rushed, though once he is fully seated inside, the mad urge to pound into her begins to slither its ways through his veins, and she is not helping with all her squirming and arching and the way her hands have crept to his bum and are pulling him deeper, deeper than he thought he could go, until his balls are flush against her and there is nothing left but to rock with her, to hook her knees over his forearms and lean into it. And the sounds she is making...the little throaty cries...

"Hermione..."



"It feels good, Severus. Come for me...oh, God..."

And he is powerless to disobey, feeling his orgasm twist through him like something alive.

In the dark, they are tangled together, one of his knees caught between both of hers, one arm around her waist and the other smashed between his chest and her back. She has taken the entire pillow, but he doesn't mind, for beneath the yellow blanket beside her, he has never felt more exhausted or more comfortable in his life.

"Can I stay?" she whispers, and he mouths, "Yes," against her shoulder before dropping into sleep.

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When he wakes, he cannot guess the time, he only knows that it is still dark and that she is awake. Somehow ~~he~~<sup>he</sup> feels her thinking beside him. He shifts against her, and it feels as though he has released a burst of steam. *Merlin, it is hot under this blanket.*

"Severus?" she says.

"Mmm."

"What if I don't want a benefactor? What if I want a partner?"

He sighs and tightens his arm around her, despite the sweat that is making her hair stick to his face. He cannot allow her to make foolish decisions based on this. She has barely begun to taste her life, to know what it might mean to be an adult witch. And who knows what she will feel once there is a wand back in her hands, with her NEWTs behind her and the world spread out before her.

"Sleep, Hermione," he says. "We will discuss it in the morning."

"I know what you're going to say," she whispers. "All about how I'll leave here and forget all about you. About how I have my own life to live."

She turns in his arms until she is facing him, and her lips brush over his, back and forth, feather light, until he cannot stand it, and he leans in to kiss her properly. He imagines that he can smell himself on her, the sweet high smell of dried saliva and sweat and sex, the heady aroma of their coupling. She nudges, and he pushes, until they are joined again, the tip of him dipping inside her. And this time he is able to hold on, hold on for her the way he wishes he could hold her here.

He reaches between them, touching her, drawing her response out like molten honey. When she comes, her muscles ripple around him, a hard steady pulse that makes his heart stutter and sends him careening over the edge, defenseless.

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In the morning, he brings her tea, and she sits in his bed, wrapped in the yellow quilt that he will never be able to look at again. He can feel her eyes on him.

"I should go," she says, "before I lose my nerve."

He nods and zips her into her dress, placing a chaste kiss on the top of her head. He picks up his wand and hands it to her silently. She looks at it, considering her options, it seems.

"Is there anything you need?"

"Need?"

"I have a lot of... magic... this morning."

*Ah, yes, of course.* But there is no magic for the things he needs, so he lets her go to the sink where she casts a whispered *Agua menti*, letting the water pour down the drain.

When she is finished, she sets his wand carefully on the counter and walks to the doorway, where she pauses and looks at him awkwardly for a moment.

"Severus?" she says. "If I were to come back, would you be here?"

How can he answer that? To answer her would be to end his life as he knows it and to begin a life of waiting for things that might never come to pass. Already, when she leaves, he will have to begin the cycle of forgetting again, of unlearning homesickness and loneliness.

The words he will not say choke him. "Remember my offer," he says. "It stands. As soon as you've chosen a career."

She nods at him, her brow slightly furrowed. "I hope you aren't sorry I came."

"Be well, Hermione," he says and closes the door behind her.

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She flies alone, the keys to her parents' home in Perth tucked into her suitcase with her toiletries. She is glad they did not ask her to stay, but still, the calm that met her news was painful. Her mother cried in an obligatory way. Her father only raised an eyebrow and announced they would be going on to the Netherlands, to visit the Witches Weigh House. Perhaps there are some debts that simply cannot be repaid.

She sleeps through the flight to Los Angeles, and it is not until after she has eaten at a hot dog stand that reminds her of him and then settled into the layover, into the hard blue plastic seat at the gate, that she opens her carryon to hunt up a book.

Inside she finds Severus's yellow quilt, folded into a thick square. Tucked inside is a letter on thick beige paper that calls parchment to mind.

*Hermione,*

*What you said last night was perfectly true. Your life is only beginning to open up before you, and I would not dream of asking you to take me along for the ride.*

*I imagine that you will find wizarding Britain much changed since you saw it last. People's memories are shorter than you might think, and it may well be that the things that drove you away from it are long settled.*

*It seems foolish to wish you luck, as I feel certain that you will tackle your NEWTs in your usual manner. There is no profession that would not count itself lucky to have you.*

*Still, I would be remiss in failing to tell you that I am not at all sorry that you came.*

*I might also mention that I am rather fond of this quilt and would like to have it back some day.*

*Severus*

Hermione shakes the quilt out and pulls it around herself. She fancies she can still smell him in it, spicy and salty and real.

She turns and looks out the massive glass window that separates those waiting from those taking off. Before long, she will cross an ocean, held aloft only by the movement of air over the wings of a hulking machine.

She smiles. She has no idea how he managed to get this into her luggage. But then, the world is full of magic.