

The Three Year Pantomime

by zhangers

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Curtain Call

Chapter 1 of 1

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Chapter One Curtain Call

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21st of November, 1999.

The cup that trembled in her fingers was chipped and faded, with a mismatched floral saucer. The table was pockmarked and rickety. One of its legs ended in a textbook prosthetic a *Potioneer's Annual* from the 70s, so faded and dusty that its grey cloth cover seemed one with the linoleum beneath. There was an oily yellow stain on the ceiling over the stovetop that couldn't be Vanished away anymore and a long, scraggly crack running from the windowsill to the empty light socket. Everything smelled faintly of mildew, old leather, and something sour without a name that could be found nowhere else in the whole world.

It all seemed peculiar and faintly unbelievable, while it had been second nature only yesterday, or even a few hours ago. Like breathing out and breathing in, she had somehow gotten used to it until time faded its inherent oddness into nothing. It had thrown its sands into her eyes, had blinded and trapped her, had worked at her edges until, finally, she had taken the shape of her vessel. She was stretched and thin, wiry and twisted like a vine in the dark, reaching its frail tendrils to no place and for no purpose.

Human beings could get used to anything, could be made to get used to anything.

The thought came to her out of nowhere, from years and years ago, when she was almost as tall as the chest of drawers and magic was a pack of cards or a string of bright silk handkerchiefs. She was staring towards the front where the grainy screen showed bronze-skinned actors with crocodile tears and water squeezed from a sponge for sweat. The voice like a fat, aloof uncle at Christmas, full of sweeties and sermons, was saying "the pyramids of Giza were a wonder of human ingenuity... and human perseverance." In her ignorant way she had wondered how the slaves did not die, and then had answered, in equal ignorance, that the truth of it was had to be that human beings could be made to get used to anything, in time. Now she knew better and worse.

The spell that held those Muggle slaves lasted until they perished and so was only temporary, like hers. Three years was time enough to forget the life before and yet no time at all. She brushed the grit from the corners of her eyes and found herself neither blind nor bound nor worn down by them after all. She looked as if for the first time and found that every detail had become stark and contrastive in its unnaturalness, its uncanniness. The world around her jarred because she had become jarring, as she had always been.

And so, defeated or near enough, time abhorred her and for its last trick slowed to a trickle. It had been five to the hour for longer than was fair. She watched the hands as they ticked and tocked unwillingly. The chime sounded, was drowned by the sound of a crack somewhere in the street behind her.

She had chosen her seat so that she didn't have to see when the door creaked open, which it did on cue. Enter the player that she knew too well, in his invariable fashion. She recognised his footsteps, loud and staccato in his hard leather boots, and the swish of his voluminous robe. It was a dramatic entrance: black figure in the slanting reddish light of early evening, casting a shadow too long for the landing floor to contain. He saw himself as a Byronesque figure, and in the beginning she had bought the antihero act. Now it seemed another false detail.

He seemed to pause in the doorway, his eyes no doubt upon the new installation she had placed in the hall. Then there was the rustle of parchment, which was her cue. She put her teacup down with the softest of clinks and waited. Her heart began to tom-tom in earnest in her chest, despite all the promises she had made to herself. It was a hard habit to break, whatever this feeling was that he created.

He crossed the space between them in two steps and imposed his presence upon the opposite chair. It made an ugly squeaking noise as he dragged it out across the sticky linoleum.

She remarked to herself, meaning nothing, that there would be more gouge marks. He left them everywhere. Her right hand found the spot on her left wrist of its own accord even though the bruise there had long since healed. She kept her eyes fixed downwards, on the half-empty teacup, as she gathered her breath for the unpleasant ordeal that had been scripted for them both.

"News," he opened. He always spoke to her in monosyllables when he could.

"Oh?" she answered in a good impression of an even voice with just a little hardness to it. Years on the receiving end had made her quite proficient at it.

"Big news," he countered, so that she could practically hear the eyebrow rising. "It's been..."

"...repealed," she finished for him.

"...annulled," he had said, at the same time.

"Annulled," she mused, just above a whisper. The corners of her mouth crept upwards, and she brought them down with some difficulty. "Like a real marriage. I prefer repealed. The *Prophet* is using 'revoked'."

She pushed her prop across the table at him. The headline read:

Marriage Law Revoked After Wizengamot Investigation

The letters were huge and towering. There were no pictures. Underneath the story of the year there followed a sad litany of its scattered offspring:

One In Four Marriages Product of Love Potion Department of Marital Affairs Embroiled in Death Eater Scandal Marriage Law Victim Comes Forward Marital Rape Allegations Spread Marriage Law Offspring Crisis Chudley Cannons Blast Into Cup Lead

He slid a thick sheaf of parchment over the newspaper, covering its bold headline with a mass of tiny, neat script in Ministry purple.

"The official notice," he declared, in a voice entirely devoid of colour.

He scraped the chair out again with another sharp, excessive gesture, did not bother pushing it back in, and made his rather hasty exit to the right.

She listened to his footsteps as he took the stairs two at a time and then to the shutting of his bedroom door in something just below a slam.

She poured herself a second cup of tea and put in just the right amount of bracing lemon before dragging the thick sheaf towards her.

Like all of their joint mail, he had had it sent safely out of her reach and had been at the package already with a penknife and a sharp eye.

The first page was a covering letter. It bore the logo of a witch and wizard, intertwined like serpents at the tail, their crossed wands raised proudly above their heads. Their profiled faces bore the same features twisted into the same empty smiles. It was more than familiar, and like everything, she was only just now seeing how grotesque it was.

She cast her eyes down the page.

Mr Severus T. Snape, Mrs Hermione J. Snape (née Granger)

Number 33 Spinner's End

Ancoats

Care Of:

Mr Severus T. Snape

Shop 41, Knockturn Alley

21st October, 1999.

Dear Mr and Mrs Snape,

We write to inform you that under the revision of the Marriage Law Act, all marriages made after the date of the 1st of September, 1996 in satisfaction of the said Act must be subject to review by the Department for Domestic and Marital Affairs (DDMA).

According to our records, your marriage, lodged on the date of the 19th of February 1997, falls within this category. Under the Marriage Law Revocation Act, Paragraph A, your marriage is officially annulled until further notice.

Each party is required to take the following steps:

1. Cease cohabitation within Seven (7) days. Each party is to confirm their address with the DDMA within the allotted time.

2. Report in person to the assigned Act Enforcement Officer at the appointed time for counsel

3. Complete the Marriage Details Form Sections 1 to 18

4. Attend a Marriage Appraisal Hearing at the appointed time

Failure to meet with any and/or all required actions will result in immediate disciplinary action under Paragraph F of the Marriage Law Revocation Act.

Domestic Department Officers will visit each party within the seven (7) days to confirm the observance of the habitation requirement. This officer will give details of your appointment for counsel and appraisal hearing. He/she will also collect your Marriage Details Confirmation Form.

We enclose the following:

1. The Marriage Law Revocation Act and You: All the Facts You Need to Know

2. I'm Annulled What Next? A Survival Guide

3. The Marriage Law Revocation Act and Property Settlement

4. The Marriage Law Revocation Act and Spousal Abuse

5. Marriage Details Form

Any additional queries and/or disputes may be made to the Domestic Department Officer in person and/or through correspondence to the DDMA.

Yours Sincerely,

Dorian Mathews

Department of Domestic and Marital Affairs

Ministry of Magic

She read the thing again, just to be sure, and found it contained nothing more or less than could be expected. Underneath it was another letter, identical, and after that a series of twinned forms. She peeled hers from his and tucked them neatly into her robes. As ever, the feel of firm parchment in her hands had reassured her, and her legs barely trembled as she crossed the room with silent steps.

In the corner of the hallway was her old school trunk, placed purposefully where he had seen it and, she hoped, had been taken a little aback. It had been packed since the morning and contained every single item that was properly hers. It had taken less than three hours to clear out as many years of her life, and now there was no trace of them in this house. Except in the yellow room, of course. She had stood in front of that shut door for a long time, her hand poised over the handle and even turning it a quarter circle, but in the end she did not go in. A shudder went through her at the memory, and she tugged her travelling cloak more tightly around her neck. Without a backwards glance, she eased the front door open.

Sunset had turned into twilight, giving the filthy, damp street a blue, forbidding look. A gust of wind caught her hair, and even though it smelt of bin bags and was cold enough to make her lungs burn, it felt like the first fresh air she had had in living memory. She turned to the south, where Spinner's End dipped, and she could see the town sprawl out before her, like a postcard. Lights were appearing in the distance, pinpricks of electricity winking out of the semi dark one after another. There were streetlights and headlights and furtive lights from between curtains belonging to thousands of people living in thousands of homes that were not this one. And beyond them, much further south, she remembered the one that used to be hers.

Another gust of wind slammed the door behind her, hard, and the resounding noise was like a herald.

A tiny smile, and then a tiny step.

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Author's Notes:

Thank you for reading this first chapter. It is intended as a short prologue of sorts. I hope you enjoyed it next time we'll get a clue about how the end all started as well as a lighter tone!

I am also looking for a Beta-reader for this fic as I fear I am wearing the admins rather thin with my continued grammatical sins. Must have strong constitution where comma abuse is concerned, as well as familiarity with all breeds of dashes. Please drop me a line if you could help.

-Zhangers