

Of Myth and Magic

by Wonk

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Grimmauld Place

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter One

Grimmauld Place

She was not going to tell her shrink about this. Granted, she was becoming used to storing secrets away from him, giving him crumbs (the dreams, the stray thoughts or names or words) and keeping the bread of her delusions for herself. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

And he definitely wasn't going to find about this. Her, standing here on the pavement, huddled beneath an umbrella and watching. She couldn't - ~~she~~*shouldn't* - tell him what she was watching for, either. Waiting for. Because truly, she had no idea.

All she knew was that this place, this solid wall between one terraced house and another in a dodgy part of London, was not as it appeared to be. It hadn't changed from the last times she had been there - four visits in total, so far - except that there was now a man's cap balanced on the fencepost nearest the gate. The wool was damp, specked with raindrops. Hermione wanted to take it, stuff it into her handbag, but she knew her mum would inevitably come across it and take it as yet another sign that something about her daughter wasn't quite right.

There had been so many "not quite right" moments in the past six years since Hermione had, as she called it, "woken up." When she came to in her childhood bedroom in her quiet neighbourhood in her quiet suburb south of London, wondering why her hands were so clean, why her muscles didn't ache, and why on earth she felt as though her muscles were made of bricks, her blood running sluggish with dust. Her fingers felt thick, hard to move. Indeed, it had felt not so much like waking and much more like falling asleep.

Six years. Six years of not doing nearly as well in school as her parents had hoped, not able to hold down a job due to her wont to daydream. Six years of psychiatrist visits, of her mother watching her, chewing her lip, jotting down notes when she thought Hermione wasn't watching. The disbelieving laughter when Hermione - not usually one to make a fool of herself - took the broom from the cupboard, set it in the centre of the sitting room floor, and watched it carefully, brown eyes barely even blinking, as if she was waiting for it to take flight. Then there was the shock when Mrs Granger walked in on her daughter throwing a handful of her grandmother's ashes into the fireplace and shouting, "The Burrow!" before sticking her foot into the flames and meriting a trip to the overcrowded A&E. That had even frightened Hermione's father, who had for so long before this point clung to the platitude that "bright people are always a bit odd," and had come home from work that evening white-faced, his mobile phone clutched tight in his hand and words racing through his mind: *What are we going to do about Hermione?*

When she didn't know what she was going to do about ~~her~~ *herself*.

She knew it wasn't good for her, standing here like this, waiting for something that wasn't there to appear. Something magical to happen between misnumbered houses. Something to prove to her that she wasn't mad.

You are mad.

She allowed herself twenty minutes. She could measure the passing of time well enough he had to, since she'd forgotten her mobile (as she almost always did). The neighbours had kindly allowed her a half-hour of staring last time before they called the police. She wondered if they'd be less wary, now that she was back after having been patted down, her handbag searched for non-existent drugs.

One more minute.

Now that she was only a crackpot, obviously in need of professional help. Chasing ghosts of dreams to the dodgy part of Islington.

Thirty seconds.

"Can I help you?"

It was an old woman with a dog. A dachshund. She looked concerned. A clear rain cap was pulled over her head, dotted with rain; her dog lifted his leg on the fencepost.

"I'm just waiting for a friend," Hermione said. She startled herself with the lightness of her voice. "He's running late."

"Right, well," the woman said, already walking on, "do be careful. It's going to be dark, soon."

"Thank you," Hermione said and sighed as the woman disappeared into number thirteen.

Rain. Five cars driving by. A dog barking, someone dragging a recycling bin from the kerb.

"You, too?"

Hermione started. Did she know that voice? It was a man all and dark in a buttoned black trench coat, black hair, black eyes studying the gap between houses from behind a hooked nose. He held a black umbrella, just like Hermione's, and stood next to her, his stance casual, as though he knew her.

She relaxed, as if she knew him.

"Yes," she said. "But I don't know why."

"No," he said. "I don't either."

They stood in companionable silence for a moment, looking at nothing.

"Snape," he said.

"Hermione," she replied.

And they both thought those names sounded rather familiar.

Charing Cross

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione and Snape meet yet again.

Chapter Two

Charing Cross

The house seemed emptier than usual. Smelled a bit strange, like something had died somewhere, despite the fact that he'd so recently pulled out the furniture, torn out the shelves, replaced everything he could afford to replace and taken a hair dryer and plastic wrap to the windows in desperate hope of staving off the worst of the draughts. If he lived somewhere different, he would have torn up the floors by now, but he knew, beneath the cold carpet in the study and the warped old wood in the lounge, there would be nothing but stone. No dead bodies, none of the things that haunted his nightmares: wasted, white, noseless faces; the flickering, forked tongues of snakes.

No *her*.

There was no one there to greet him when he pushed open the front door (hard, with the sharp bone of his hip...it always stuck in wet weather). It shouldn't surprise him, the absence of life, but for some reason, today it did.

It had felt strange to sit on the train alone. Startling the middle-aged woman who sat across from him, her short, rose-tipped nose stuck fast in *The Daily Mail*, she was trying to pretend she wasn't looking up between paragraphs, judging to see whether or not he'd moved (or perhaps drawn a switchblade from his pocket, planning to rob her for her necklace, worth no more than five quid at the cash for gold). He smiled at her once, but that only sent her red-faced back into her paper. She disembarked at the same stop, Cokeworth North, but hung back and bee-lined to the café, as though she was afraid he would follow her home.

Again, this sort of thing didn't usually bother him, but today it did.

The walk from the station had been cold, damp, and strangely silent, the town nestled in mist rolling in from the river. He could barely see the pavement beneath his feet. His mind was back on that street in London hours before, when he had tried not to look at *her*, with her cloud-like brown hair, her large eyes, her teeth that she tried to hide

behind her fingers...he hadn't been able to tell, but perhaps they were a bit crooked, or a bit large. Enough to cause her embarrassment, regardless, though he had only just wondered what on earth he had said that had made her smile.

The fact that she asked where he'd come from had surprised him. He thought - no, he *knew* - that his accent was no different than hers.

"Lincolnshire," he'd told her.

"Oh," she said. "Are you here for long?"

"No," he replied, "but I'll be back."

They hadn't exchanged anything more than names. No numbers or addresses. It seemed as though she was growing more unsteady the longer they stood there, trying not to look at each other, watching the terraced houses as though waiting for a light show to begin. It must have only been minutes, but it had felt much shorter. He could feel a ticking in his head, his subconscious reminding him that he was running out of time. He didn't know what it was counting down to.

"Do you promise?" she had asked, finally looking over, her eyes meeting his.

He felt as though his heart had literally stopped. Dropped dead into the cavity of his abdomen and sunk right behind his lower ribs. He pressed his hand to the bones, pushed hard, like he'd be able to feel its inability to beat beneath his palm.

She didn't look away.

"Yes," he said, and his heart sputtered back to life. "I promise."

It was two months before Hermione saw him again. A dull, damp autumn had given way to an even damper mid-winter, the rain driving down from a grey sky, narrow streets hazy with fog. The city teemed with black-coated Christmas shoppers: dashing off pavements, into shops, onto buses or down the stairs and escalators on the Tube. So many times, she thought it was *him*, but it never was.

Until now.

It was in a pub, a chain on Charing Cross Road, new mass-market paraphernalia stuffed into a 17th-century shell. Black beams stretched over shiny laminated menus stood up on tables, and cheap house beer poured free from the taps. The carpets were patterned and somehow sticky, and Hermione could smell the toilets from the back of the bar. She'd never been there before but she was there today, though she wouldn't be able to tell you why. Her mum and dad had always gone to great pains to avoid such places whenever possible. They'd gone half-hours out of their way on family holidays, in search of "a true gastropub," (her mother always said): "You know we don't trust restaurants with pictures on the menu."

Her parents wouldn't even give this place a second glance if Hermione were standing naked in the front window.

But she was perfectly presentable today, tucked inside her woollen coat, a wilting paper poppy pinned to her lapel, as she sipped her gin and tonic. She didn't flinch as he sat down across from her, whiskey in hand.

"This is getting odd," Hermione told him.

"It is," he agreed. He held a hand out to her, and she took it, giving it a brief squeeze, as though she couldn't bring herself to touch him long enough for a handshake.

"How is Lincolnshire?" she asked.

"Dark," Snape replied. "Rainy."

"Like London, then," she said.

"Not dissimilar."

He drank and made a face, and she smiled, nearly forgetting to cover her mouth with her hand.

"How did you find me?" Hermione asked, if only because she thought she should.

"I wasn't looking for you," Snape replied. "Why didn't you find me?"

"I wasn't looking for you," Hermione retorted, and his eyebrows arched with surprise before returning to their natural glower.

"So here we are, again," he said. He sat back in his creaking chair and crossed one leg over the other, his ankle resting on his knee. His shoes were leather but worn...black, like his clothing. He was a man-shaped void, devoid of colour, a person in negative. "What brought you to Charing Cross?" he asked.

Hermione leant across the table, her hands in fists on the surface. Leftover crumbs stuck to the folds of her palms.

"It's the same, isn't it?" she whispered. "The same draw."

He didn't say anything. He only watched her with black, shining eyes.

"You're here, too," she reminded him. "You can't lie to me."

His foot found the floor. The chair creaked beneath him, swayed dangerously as he scooted toward her, his knee knocking against her stockinged thigh before reaching a safe place toward the side of the table. He sucked in his lips, a surprisingly pink tongue appearing before vanishing back behind his teeth. *He's not handsome*, Hermione thought. *So why do I feel compelled to stare?*

"Yes," he admitted at last. The whisper of his voice flustered her. For the first time (though why on earth was it the first time, considering the place where they'd first met?), she realized that she knew nothing about this man. He could be *dangerous*.

Actually, it was very likely he *was* dangerous. Those eyes, the unsettling way he sat there, wholly *other* to the way this world was, like someone who didn't belong, someone who transcended. Did Hermione have this effect on people? Sometimes, she wished she did, if only because it would provide a reason as to why she had so few friends.

"What is it?" she asked, the chair edging out from beneath her.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"When did you arrive?"

"An hour ago."

"Did you take the tube here?"

"Yes. I'd originally planned on going back to Islington, but ended up here instead."

"Me too," she whispered.

She stopped, the hair on the back of her neck prickling. The barman was loitering near them and looked as though he was watching them. It made her uneasy, though at the same time, thrilled her.

"The wall," she said.

"A secret passageway," he said, and his brows furrowed, as though he were confused.

"Yes!" she said. "Why does everyone think we're crazy?"

"We're shutting for the afternoon," the barman called over.

Hermione ignored him.

"It's just a wall though, isn't it?" she said.

"I expect so," Snape replied.

Hermione frowned, beat her fists once on the table, then took her glass and marched back up to the bar.

The barman wasn't even doing anything. Just standing there, waiting for them to leave. He scowled at her as she slid her empty glass across to him, but didn't reach out to touch it.

"I have a question," Hermione said.

The barman raised his eyebrows, waiting for her to ask.

"Do you have odd people coming in here?"

The barman rolled his eyes. "A bit more specific," he said.

"Have you," Hermione replied, thinking hard, "ever had anyone try to walk through the back wall?"

If he were doing anything, he would have stopped. As it was, he became even stiller, his jaw tightening, a vein standing out from the short line of his neck.

"Bunch of nutters," the barman muttered, then added, louder, "We're shutting up." He grabbed Hermione's glass and threw it in the box with the bottles; the sound of it shattering made Hermione jump. "Happy Christmas."

Hermione and Snape lingered on the pavement as the barman locked the door behind them. Glances were exchanged - but where smiles might accompany, out of embarrassment for choosing a pub with such poor service - only confusion remained.

"Right," Hermione said, as Snape drew his coat tighter around his thin frame. "What now?"

He turned toward her, a mere ten degrees. She caught sight of the black sliver of a pupil, the glint that told her he was looking at her, soaking her in, committing her to memory. She fought the urge to bury her face in her hands.

"When are your parents expecting you home?" he asked her, and she finally smiled without embarrassment, knowing that this was a very bad idea, indeed.