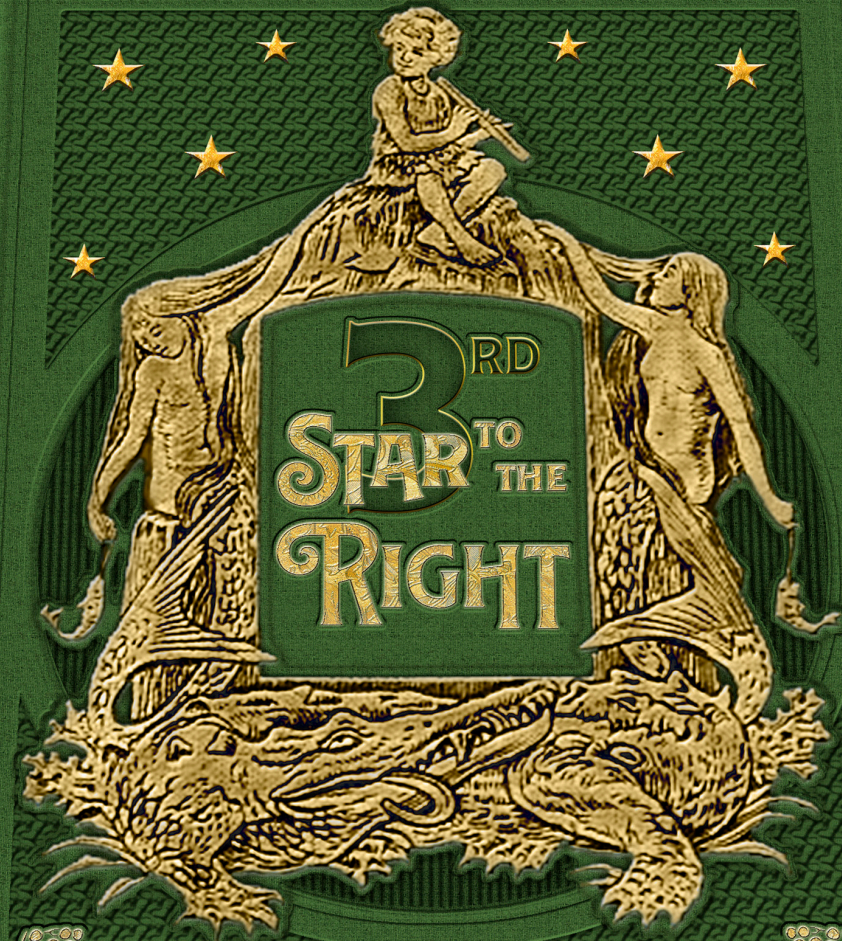


Adventures in FanFiction



3RD STAR^{TO} THE RIGHT

By Gelsey

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3RD STAR TO THE RIGHT

BY
GELSEY





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HE HOUSE HUNKERED down between two exact replicas, but it didn't take the number on the side for Hermione to pick it out as Severus Snape's childhood home. There was a surliness about it, an air that said if it could shrug away its neighbors, it would.

That same surliness Severus Snape had always had.

Hermione jiggled the keys in one hand and fingered her wand with the other. Why she had to be the one to do this, she didn't know.

Actually, that was a lie. She knew. Now that the requisite ten years had passed — it took



that long because sometimes it was hard to tell if people really were dead in the wizarding world, especially when there was no body — the matters of Severus Snape's estate had to be dealt with by someone. After Dumbledore's death, Snape had apparently never chosen a specific person to deal with it, naming only the Order of the Phoenix.

And, Hermione thought, disgruntled, no one left alive wanted anything to do with it. Harry felt a kinship but his guilt made his excuses for him; Ron loathed the man. Like Harry, Minerva felt bad about how she had treated Snape. The list went on and on, leaving Hermione as the only one willing to step up to the task. Not that she didn't have her own issues, but someone had to do it.


The shadow of the house bit with a surprising chillness; Hermione looked up, surprised, but the house remained unchanged. Nevertheless, she shivered before inserting the key and turning it once. She felt the wards flutter against her, strong magic faded only slightly by time. For a moment, she feared she wouldn't be able to enter, but then they sud-

denly yielded and she practically fell across the threshold, having to hold onto the door-knob hard in order to stay on her feet.

"Bloody hell," she muttered, glaring at the door. As ill-tempered as its owner. She wiped her hand down her coat, shedding flecks of what looked like rust. Ill-tempered and now as unhygienic, she thought resentfully. Resentful, mostly, because she'd been forced to do this alone. Severus Snape deserved more than that from the people he had helped, and she deserved more than this from her friends.

After so long, you would think some wounds would heal. But part of her was still the girl who cried when her best friend/crush abandoned her in the woods with a Horcrux and her other friend. Part of her was still the person who had to fly to Australia alone to retrieve her parents because Harry couldn't get away from the spotlight — and Ron wouldn't get away from the spotlight.

A musty smell permeated the house. She didn't think anyone had opened the door in at least as long as Snape had been dead. And perhaps it was her imagination, but it almost



seemed like she could smell blood — not rotting death, as if there were a corpse (where did Snape's body go, anyway?), but that coppery tang the final battle had familiarized her with.

She looked at her hand, at the flecks of dark brown. Blood? She shook her head, denying it.

Hermione's biggest fear had been finding her professor's decomposing corpse in the house. In fact, she'd had nightmares about it for a couple of weeks, ever since she'd found out that when the time came, the task would fall to her. She started at the bottom of the house, going room to room carefully.

She had to keep herself away from the shelves upon shelves of books. There was a terrible temptation there.

Besides, there might still be a dead body around. Creepiness factor far outweighed the books, at least until her investigation was complete.

But there were ever so many books.

Except for those books, however, the place looked ill-kept — more than simply the ten years worth of neglect. The walls not covered by shelves were dingy, the floors dingier, and the overall aura that of depression and neglect.

She couldn't imagine growing up in such a place, and yet she knew her professor had.

Probably with significantly fewer books at the time. She frowned and felt a stir of pity for the young boy.

The first floor was clear except for the rampant dust bunnies, which really did show signs of attacking if she lingered. The stairs squeaked, each noise like a scream in the silence. The first room was decorated with gloom, or so it felt. So Spartan that a Spartan might have felt deprived, it yielded no body, only a couple of black teaching robes. It looked as if it had once been a study or a spare room; there were no personal touches. The bed almost seemed like an afterthought.

The next room was a mausoleum, looking untouched for even longer than the rest of the house. "Parents' room," she murmured, identifying it by the old picture of a young Severus Snape on one bedside table (mother's side, she suspected).

Once again, no body. She sighed in relief. The thought of all those books downstairs tickled at her, but there was one room left.

The hall seemed to narrow before it ended in the cracked door. Of all the rooms so far, it was

the only one not shut; a thin strip of gray light peeked through the gap. It must have a window.

Hermione pushed it open, lips parting in surprise. Not a body, no, but a most definite mess. There were makeshift bookshelves here, planks propped up on less important books just like her mother had claimed she'd had in her university days. The top two shelves had fallen haphazardly, spilling the books onto the small floor space.

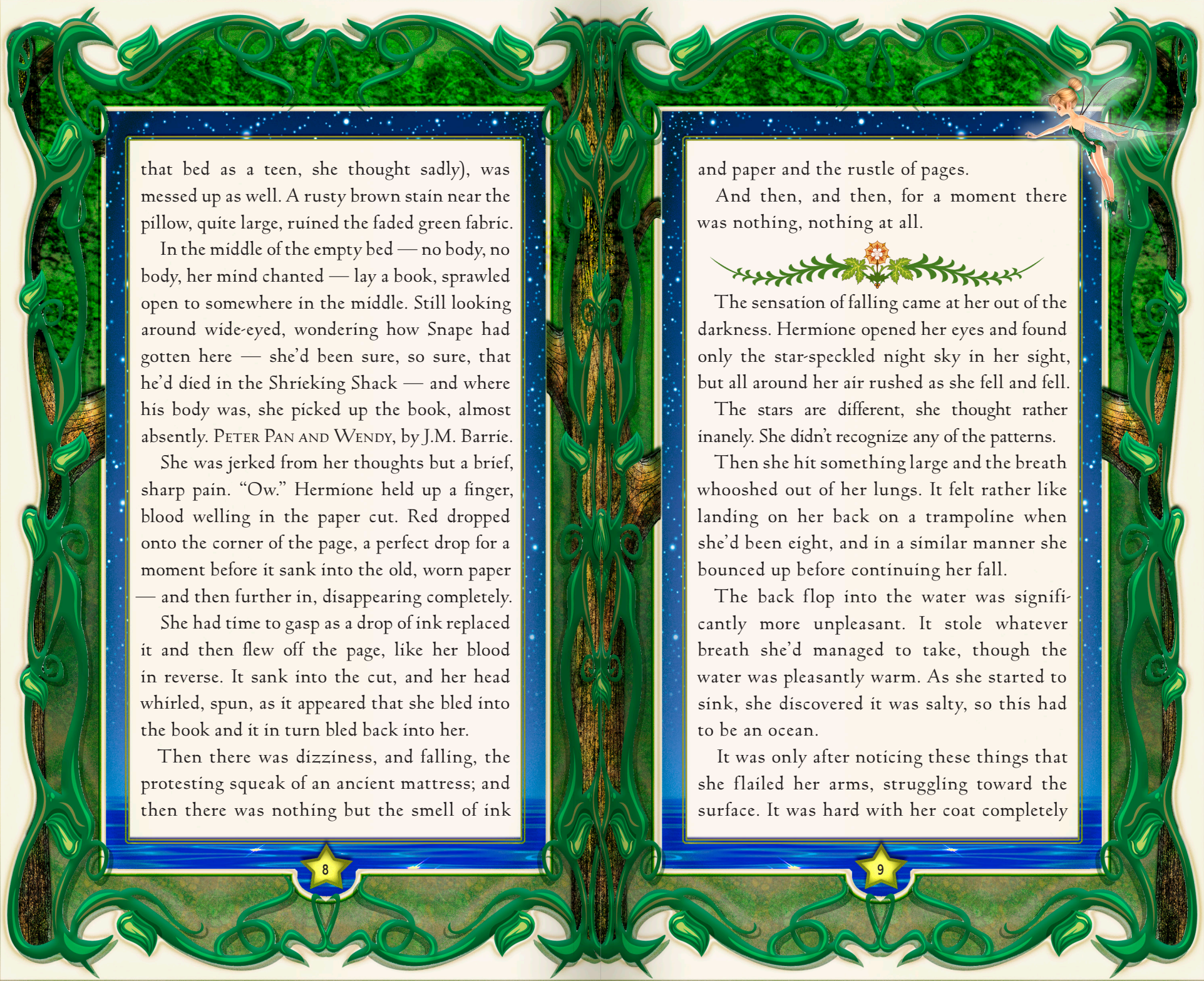
She knelt to get a closer look at the carnage and found them to be children's books and novels, nothing newer than the 1970s — Snape's childhood, she realized. Torn covers, broken spines, many mends evident, these books had been treasured and well-loved.

Why, then, had they been tossed on the floor like trash? she wondered, standing. A dark smear could be seen on the wall near the fallen shelf, and she picked her way carefully across the book graveyard to peer at it more closely.

Blood. The old smell was evident here, heavier than in the hall.

The tiny bed, tucked away against one wall under the window (Snape couldn't have fit on





that bed as a teen, she thought sadly), was messed up as well. A rusty brown stain near the pillow, quite large, ruined the faded green fabric.

In the middle of the empty bed — no body, no body, her mind chanted — lay a book, sprawled open to somewhere in the middle. Still looking around wide-eyed, wondering how Snape had gotten here — she'd been sure, so sure, that he'd died in the Shrieking Shack — and where his body was, she picked up the book, almost absently. *PETER PAN AND WENDY*, by J.M. Barrie.

She was jerked from her thoughts but a brief, sharp pain. "Ow." Hermione held up a finger, blood welling in the paper cut. Red dropped onto the corner of the page, a perfect drop for a moment before it sank into the old, worn paper — and then further in, disappearing completely.

She had time to gasp as a drop of ink replaced it and then flew off the page, like her blood in reverse. It sank into the cut, and her head whirled, spun, as it appeared that she bled into the book and it in turn bled back into her.

Then there was dizziness, and falling, the protesting squeak of an ancient mattress; and then there was nothing but the smell of ink

and paper and the rustle of pages.

And then, and then, for a moment there was nothing, nothing at all.



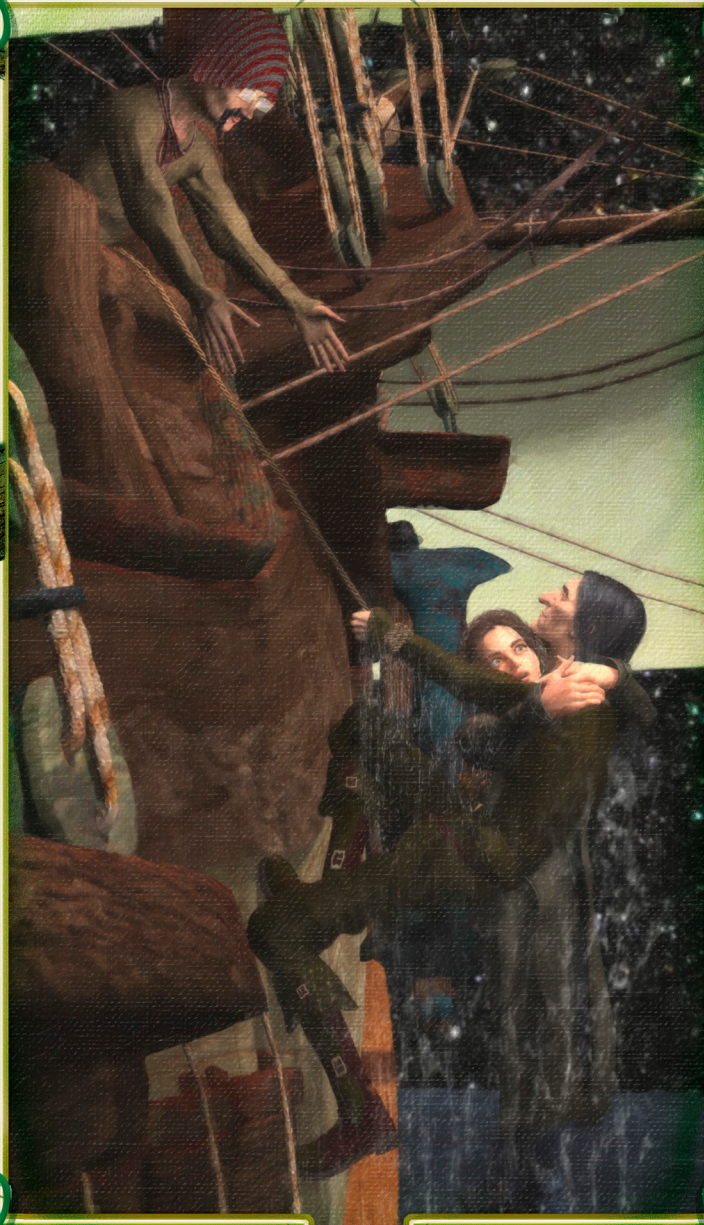
The sensation of falling came at her out of the darkness. Hermione opened her eyes and found only the star-speckled night sky in her sight, but all around her air rushed as she fell and fell.

The stars are different, she thought rather inanely. She didn't recognize any of the patterns.

Then she hit something large and the breath whooshed out of her lungs. It felt rather like landing on her back on a trampoline when she'd been eight, and in a similar manner she bounced up before continuing her fall.

The back flop into the water was significantly more unpleasant. It stole whatever breath she'd managed to take, though the water was pleasantly warm. As she started to sink, she discovered it was salty, so this had to be an ocean.

It was only after noticing these things that she flailed her arms, struggling toward the surface. It was hard with her coat completely



sodden, dragging her down despite the buoyancy the salt provided. Above, the faintness of the moon shone and was suddenly blocked with the accompanying sound of a splash. A dark figure swam down toward her, outlined only by the faint light of the moon.

Hermione almost believed she was imagining it until the shadow wrapped fingers around her wrist, reversing direction and taking her with him. She sputtered to the surface, clinging to whoever had saved her with desperate fingers.

"Loosen up, now," a familiar voice growled irritably. "fore you suffocate me instead of drowning."

Hermione looked up, still gasping, into the familiar face of Professor Severus Snape, hooked nose, dark eyes and all.

"Mister Smee, the rope!" he bellowed, heedless of her surprise. A second later and a rope came down out of the darkness. Snape caught it with one hand and wrapped it around his forearm several times. "Heave, mates!"

"Ye heard the captain, heave!" a voice yelled above, and they were traveling upward. Hermione dangled where she didn't cling to



him, but he seemed perfectly at ease, long legs tucked up and walking up the side of the... good Merlin, was this a ship? ...as someone above helped to pull them.

"Someone take her," Snape said, unceremoniously tossing her over railing. Hermione was so surprised that she didn't even struggle, and on the other side someone caught her with minimal fumbling.

"Got 'er, Captain," the man said. Hermione struggled to gain her own feet, looking around wildly as she did so. The ship was huge, broad sails open against the night sky. They must have been what she'd hit on the way down, though why she'd been falling she still didn't know.

The man who'd caught her was already at the rail, helping Snape over the rail even as Snape tried to wave him away.

And so it was that Hermione Granger got her first good look at Severus Snape since he'd died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack ten years ago.

Whip thin and fit, he was much as she remembered him if in significantly better health. She suspected that in the proper


light he would have something of a tan, and the lines of his face were less pronounced than she remembered. His long black hair had grown longer. It was loose and very wet, resembling for a moment the greasy mop she always remembered, but almost immediately he swept it back into a queue at the base of his neck. For some reason, it completely altered the look of him. Perhaps it was the (sodden) clothes he was wearing, the loose open shirt and black pants.

"What in the hell is going on tonight?" Snape growled. He didn't even look at her; he was talking to the man who had caught her. "Pan flying about willy-nilly, girls falling out of the sky." He looked at her then, sneering slightly. "Onto my ship."

His ship. Huh.

What the hell is going on? she wondered in direct echo of his words.

"I don't rightly know, Captain," the man replied. For the first time, Hermione noted his accent, a Scottish brogue, and she took a closer look at him. And blinked, and looked again. If Minerva McGonagall had been a man,



she would have been looking straight at him. Thin, with the same features and expression.

And then the thought came: *Captain? Really?*

"What are we going to do with our falling star, Captain?" the male-Minerva asked, looking at her now as well.

"I don't know, Mr. Smee," Snape said with a sigh. "What should I do with you, falling star?"

With a start, Hermione realized he was speaking to her. "Um. Professor. I don't know."

Snape barked a laugh. "Professor! I think that fall addled her brains a mite."

It was only then that she realized that Severus Snape did not recognize her, not even one little bit.

"It's me, Hermione Granger. Sir," she tacked on the honorary belatedly. "Don't you remember?"

His brow furrowed, but only for a moment. Like he almost remembered, but the memory flew away before he could grasp it.

"It's Captain, lass, and it would do you well to remember it," the man called Mr. Smee said.

Hermione had that fluttering feeling of almost remembering, but it too fled. She tried not to think about whatever it was; usually it

would come to her in its own good time.

"Just what are you doing here?" Snape — the Captain — demanded to know. "Don't tell me you're another of Pan's growing harem?" There was that sneer again. "Damn that Peter."

And like that, it came to her. The last thing, before the falling, that she could remember was the book she had been holding, *PETER PAN AND WENDY*, the novelization of the play about Peter Pan. As improbable as it seemed, she had fallen all right — directly into the book.

Hermione swayed and fell, hard, on her rear. It shouldn't be possible. And yet, here she was, on what she could only guess was the *JOLLY ROGER*.

Only instead of Captain Hook, she was staring, befuddled, at Captain Severus Snape.

Snape made a sound in his throat. "Mr. Smee, bring her to the captain's quarters and find her something dry to wear. I will be there shortly. Mr. Nott, get us back on course for Mermaid's Lagoon; we have an Indian maid to rescue from a madman and a grateful village that will shower us with gifts for her safe return. Mr. Carls..."



Smee — Mr. Smee, Hermione amended, for she didn't think he was the sort to take impoliteness — helped her to her feet and down into the ship, closing a door behind him so the barked orders were cut off from her hearing.

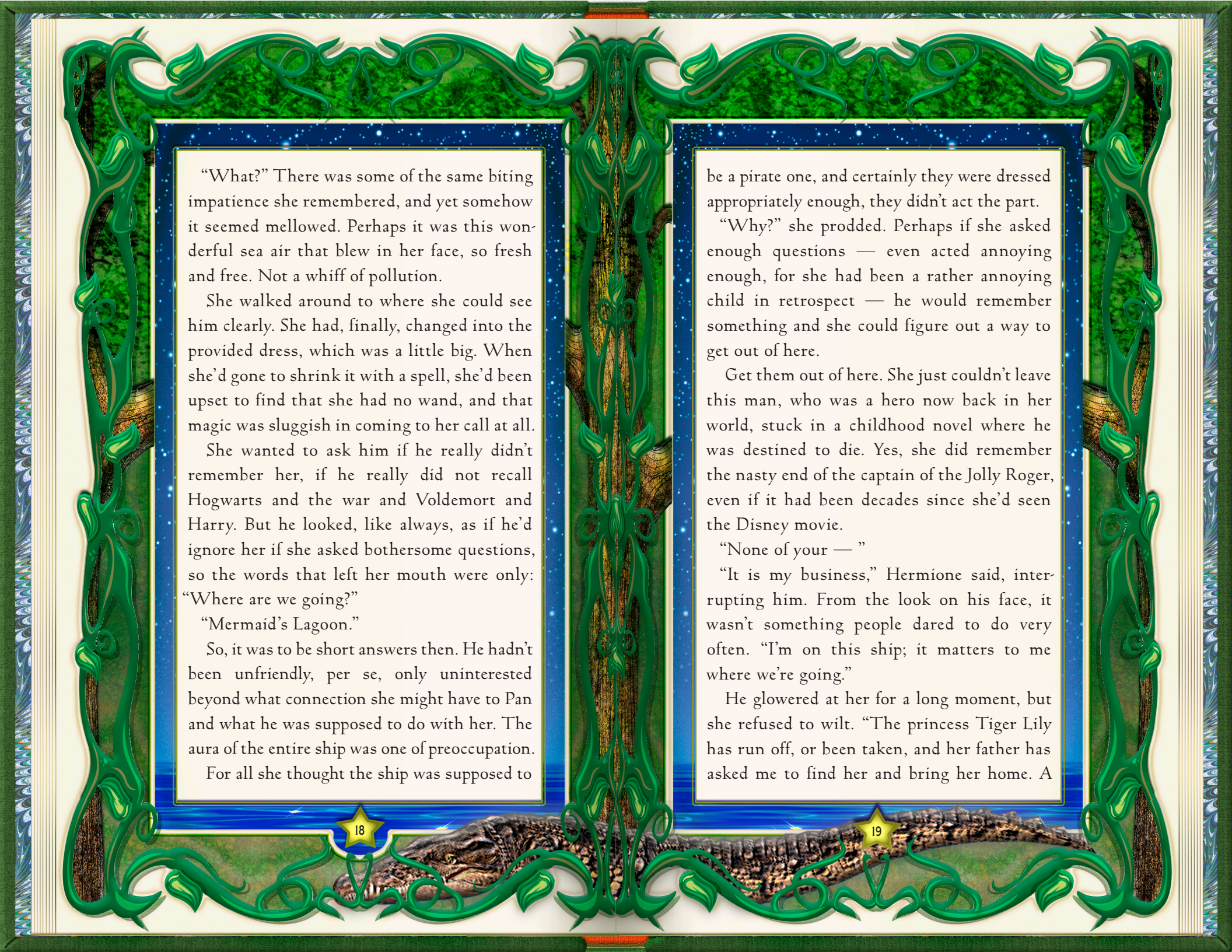
She was left in what she thought was the captain's cabin with a dress that looked too big for her.

At least, she thought, stifling a hysterical laugh, the cabin felt familiar enough. Along one shelf, carefully preserved, was a collection of jars filled with strange, dead things.

That was how Professor — Captain! — Snape found her some time later, still in her drenched clothes, holding a jar with a dead squid in it, laughing.



"Excuse me, Pro — Captain," Hermione said as she came up behind the man who was at once familiar and completely different than the one of her childhood. He stood at the wheel of his ship, long fingers resting knowledgeably on it as wind filled the sails and pushed them on their way.



“What?” There was some of the same biting impatience she remembered, and yet somehow it seemed mellowed. Perhaps it was this wonderful sea air that blew in her face, so fresh and free. Not a whiff of pollution.

She walked around to where she could see him clearly. She had, finally, changed into the provided dress, which was a little big. When she’d gone to shrink it with a spell, she’d been upset to find that she had no wand, and that magic was sluggish in coming to her call at all.

She wanted to ask him if he really didn’t remember her, if he really did not recall Hogwarts and the war and Voldemort and Harry. But he looked, like always, as if he’d ignore her if she asked bothersome questions, so the words that left her mouth were only: “Where are we going?”

“Mermaid’s Lagoon.”

So, it was to be short answers then. He hadn’t been unfriendly, per se, only uninterested beyond what connection she might have to Pan and what he was supposed to do with her. The aura of the entire ship was one of preoccupation.

For all she thought the ship was supposed to

be a pirate one, and certainly they were dressed appropriately enough, they didn’t act the part.

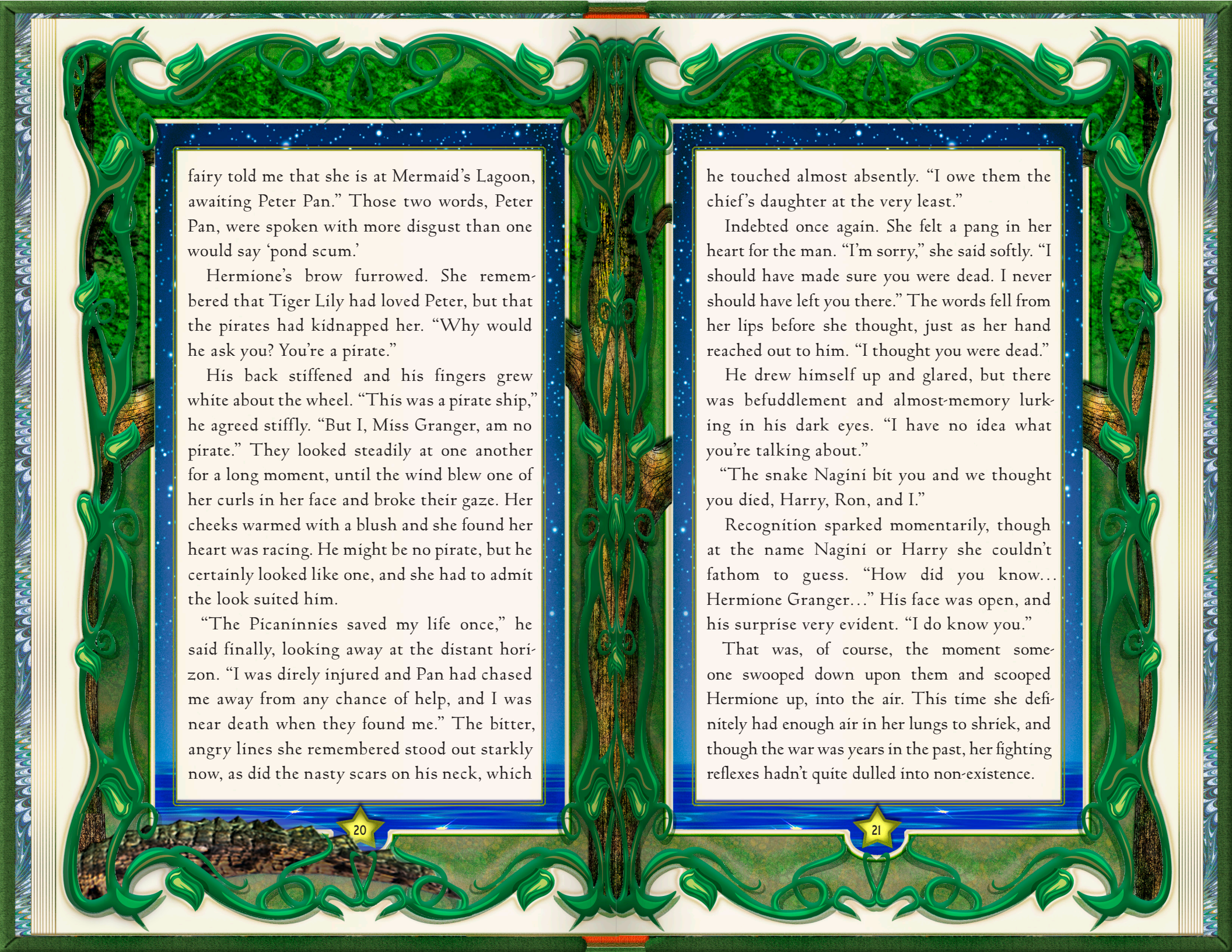
“Why?” she prodded. Perhaps if she asked enough questions — even acted annoying enough, for she had been a rather annoying child in retrospect — he would remember something and she could figure out a way to get out of here.

Get them out of here. She just couldn’t leave this man, who was a hero now back in her world, stuck in a childhood novel where he was destined to die. Yes, she did remember the nasty end of the captain of the Jolly Roger, even if it had been decades since she’d seen the Disney movie.

“None of your — ”

“It is my business,” Hermione said, interrupting him. From the look on his face, it wasn’t something people dared to do very often. “I’m on this ship; it matters to me where we’re going.”

He glowered at her for a long moment, but she refused to wilt. “The princess Tiger Lily has run off, or been taken, and her father has asked me to find her and bring her home. A



fairly told me that she is at Mermaid's Lagoon, awaiting Peter Pan." Those two words, Peter Pan, were spoken with more disgust than one would say 'pond scum.'

Hermione's brow furrowed. She remembered that Tiger Lily had loved Peter, but that the pirates had kidnapped her. "Why would he ask you? You're a pirate."

His back stiffened and his fingers grew white about the wheel. "This was a pirate ship," he agreed stiffly. "But I, Miss Granger, am no pirate." They looked steadily at one another for a long moment, until the wind blew one of her curls in her face and broke their gaze. Her cheeks warmed with a blush and she found her heart was racing. He might be no pirate, but he certainly looked like one, and she had to admit the look suited him.

"The Picaninnies saved my life once," he said finally, looking away at the distant horizon. "I was direly injured and Pan had chased me away from any chance of help, and I was near death when they found me." The bitter, angry lines she remembered stood out starkly now, as did the nasty scars on his neck, which

he touched almost absently. "I owe them the chief's daughter at the very least."


Indebted once again. She felt a pang in her heart for the man. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I should have made sure you were dead. I never should have left you there." The words fell from her lips before she thought, just as her hand reached out to him. "I thought you were dead."

He drew himself up and glared, but there was befuddlement and almost-memory lurking in his dark eyes. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The snake Nagini bit you and we thought you died, Harry, Ron, and I."

Recognition sparked momentarily, though at the name Nagini or Harry she couldn't fathom to guess. "How did you know... Hermione Granger..." His face was open, and his surprise very evident. "I do know you."

That was, of course, the moment someone swooped down upon them and scooped Hermione up, into the air. This time she definitely had enough air in her lungs to shriek, and though the war was years in the past, her fighting reflexes hadn't quite dulled into non-existence.



“Kidnapping maids again, Captain Snape?” the voice in her ear yelled tauntingly. “I won’t let you steal another one!”

For all her squirming, her kidnapper avoided her sharp elbows as she fought to put one in his gut. They were high over the ship, but close enough for her to see the enraged expression on Snape’s face. It reminded her of another night at the Shrieking Shack, when the Captain — the Professor then! — had barged in with the intent of rescuing them from Sirius Black.

“Pan!” he roared, abandoning the wheel to reach for the cutlass at his waist. He shook the sword at the air.

One of the ‘pirates’ lunged for the wheel, taking it over, while all the rest burst into action, pulling their weapons. Severus leapt down the steps and up the mast, where he nimbly climbed the rigging, coming up closer to where they were.

Pan, for who else could have grabbed her, laughed with the carefreeness of a child — but like Hermione knew better than many, children could be cruel, and there was that edge under

the otherwise joyful sound. He flew down toward his nemesis, ignoring her shouts of, “Put me down! Now!” in her bossiest tone.

Unlike with Hagrid’s half-giant brother, it didn’t work.

“Not until you’re safely away from here!” the boy declared. The voice rang a bell but Hermione couldn’t place it.


And really, she *hated* being up high. Flying had never been her thing. Her next shriek held an element of that age-old fear, and to her surprise, Severus seemed to climb even faster. “Fight me, Pan!” he roared.

In her head, for just a moment, it sounded like she’d always thought Hook would sound, that fury and drive for vengeance. Also for a moment, it reminded her of his confrontation with Sirius Black, and even more briefly of Voldemort’s demands of Harry to fight.

But then it was just Severus, who was trying to save her.

“Stay here, fair maid!” the lad who held her said airily, tossing her into the crow’s nest. It was then she was able to get a good look at the infamous Peter Pan. She’d always remembered





the Disney animation, the brown-headed boy with pointed ears and a mischievous grin. This boy had the latter two, but in every other way she felt like she was looking into Harry's face without glasses.

His hair was wild and dark, untamed. But, she realized after a moment, his eyes were brown, or perhaps hazel, not the vivid green of her friend. Perhaps this was what James Potter looked like, she thought. A wild child, both innocent and cruel. He was perhaps in his early teens, still much of a child but paused on the cusp of being more. He flew like he'd been born to it — which he had been, though remember, remember, this is a book you're in, Hermione! — just like Remus had always told Harry his father had been.

Pan zoomed toward Severus, who was balanced easily on a beam. The timeless child drew his own sword and with a whoop, he attacked. She stood, mesmerized, as they traded initial blows, for she had never expected her professor to be able to use a sword.

"But then, you never expected Severus Snape to be the captain of the Jolly Roger either," she

said wryly to the open air.

Taking a breath to steel herself against what she was about to do, Hermione swung a leg over the edge of the crow's nest and started to carefully, and much more slowly than any of the pirates she'd seen climbing in the rigging, began to descend.

She tried to place each hand and foot before she took the next step down, but she couldn't stop looking down — which made things spin just a bit — and she doubly couldn't help looking anxiously at where Severus battled the Potter Pan, as she mentally dubbed him. No matter how cautious she was, however, her distractions were detrimental and it was really no surprise when, while edging along one beam to reach the next web of rope, Hermione slipped.

Her arms windmilled, grasping at the air. Everything she touched slipped past the tips of her fingers.

This falling thing was starting to get really old. "Hermione!" "Fair maid!" Twin shouts greeted her disaster-in-process.

It was the familiar set of long fingers that

wrapped around her wrist, arresting her fall. Severus was wrapped horizontally around the beam just below the one she fallen from, legs wrapped around it and one hand holding onto the wood and the other to her.

"This is getting to be a habit, saving you," he said, an odd half-smile. His forehead crinkled. "I've done this before, haven't I?"

He started to pull her up, and she tried to help by climbing up his arm. "Several times, yes. When I was much younger. I thought..." she took a deep breath, kept trying to climb. It was harder than it seemed. "... thought I'd learned to take better care of myself since then."

She was up, clinging to his shoulders and attempting to swing her legs up to join his on the beam. She realized with a start that they looked much closer in age than they used to be, and that she still found him attractive — thank you, Viktor Krum, for that realization.

And that, of course, was the moment Potter Pan ripped her from his arms and went zooming back toward the island, leaving the Jolly Roger and its captain far behind.



"Look what I found!" crowed the boy as he deposited Hermione — rather hard and unceremoniously — in the middle of a glade. She blinked, trying very hard to get her bearings against the vertigo that flying so high and at such great speeds had given her. Her heart was pounding with fear and adrenaline and she was mentally cursing Pan worse than she'd cursed either of her two best friends in quite some time. "I stole her from Captain Snape!"

From cunning little nooks and huts that circled the glade came a gaggle of boys. All were scruffy, ragged, wearing the look of lost waifs that Hermione was all too familiar with after the war. The Lost Boys.

They crowded around very close, with the childish disregard of personal space. On top of her vertigo, she now had a sense of claustrophobia.

The children hemmed and hawed as she turned around, trying to find a way through the crowd. A few were about how she'd aged Pan earlier, on the cusp of adolescence. One looked unnervingly like what she thought Sirius Black

would have looked as a kid. Another chubbier one resembled a picture she'd seen of Peter Pettigrew, and third hanging back a little reminded her nostalgically of Remus Lupin.

She realized in that moment that Severus Snape's subconscious and his magic had twined, running the making of this fantasy world she'd been sucked into. With a little time to think, she could probably figure out how it had been executed, but for now, she was certain that only he could get them out of this.

"Why'd you take her?" the Sirius-boy finally said. "She's *old*."

"Yeah, old," the others echoed.

Hermione huffed indignantly at their center, though of course the ripe old age of twenty-eight was considered quite old to children. Especially those who never wanted to grow up.

Pan strutted through the crowd. They parted for him like they'd refused to part for her. He looked her over, up and down. "She's old, yeah. But I took her from *Snape*." There was that gloating again. Already, it was getting on her nerves.

She could actually sympathize with Severus's hatred.

"Captain Snape," she snapped at the boys at almost exactly the same time as the only girl in camp, who had only just now joined them. She wore a pretty blue dress, just like in the movie, and had the pretty brown hair with a blue bow like Hermione had never been able to have as a child. Pan immediately bowed his head to her and scuffed his rough shoe on the ground.

"Yes, Wendy," he said, echoed by the Lost Boys. Hermione, they ignored completely.

"Now shoo, shoo. Give her space. Shoo!" Wendy waved her hands at the boys, ushering them to their huts. Even Pan backed away, obeying her. "I'm so sorry for their manners, Miss. But they're just boys, and they've been alone so long." She smiled up at Hermione, who smiled back without thinking. She had an open, honest, pretty face; she was about twelve years old. "My name is Wendy. Wendy Darling." She gave a little knee dip.

"I'm Hermione Granger," Hermione replied, stifling the urge to hold out her hand to shake. She had a feeling girls of Wendy's time period never shook hands. It would be scandalous.

"Welcome to Neverland, Miss Granger."





Hermione's first impulse, after she was on the ground — oh the ground, precious steady unmoving unhigh ground! — for awhile, was to go running off back to the ship immediately.

This was first thwarted by Wendy, who while precocious had a definite fear of leaving the safety of her little house without the hero Pan.

It was secondly thwarted by the flying ball of light that finally resolved into the form of a glowing fairy. Of course, having to cross her eyes to see it as it stood on her nose and shrilly scolded her for trying to leave was more than a little unpleasant, and Hermione took an immediate disliking to the fairy named Tinker Bell.

It was lastly thwarted by the fact that she was exhausted by the previous... two days? Day and a half? Merlin, how much time had passed in the real world? Severus Snape had been in here for ten real world years.

So she allowed Wendy and Tinker Bell to herd her into Wendy's little hut and suffered through the boys crowding in so they could

hear a story from their little "mother." She was surprised by how Pan especially deferred to Wendy and had even leaned his head against her knee as she told the story. He loved her, Hermione thought.

Then, finally, she was allowed to pass out on a bed two sizes too small. Goldilocks had never had it so bad.


Rough shaking woke her, and she sat bolt upright, managing to brain herself on the bunk above her where Wendy Darling slept. She fell back with a groan. Next time, screw her weight and size and the potential of falling off yet another thing; she was going to take the top bunk.

"What?" she snapped irritably from her prone position, hand firmly clapped on her forehead.

"Shh. Quietly, Miss Granger, or you'll wake Tinker Bell." Wendy was crouched in a white lace-trimmed nightgown.

"What is it?" Hermione asked more quietly.

"Peter," she said quietly. "Peter and the Boys and my brothers, they've all gone to Mermaid's Lagoon. Slightly," it took Hermione a moment to correlate the name with the Sirius-boy, "said that Captain Snape is going to be there



and they're going to fight him." Hermione realized that the paleness of the girl's face had more to do with fear than with moonlight. "I don't want my brothers to get hurt."

Wendy's eyes, blue and pretty, brimmed with tears, and Hermione heard the same worry in her voice for her brothers that Hermione still felt to this day for Harry and Ron.

"Please, help me keep them safe," the girl pleaded, mistaking Hermione's silence for refusal.

"Of course I will, Wendy," Hermione said. "Captain Snape isn't that horrible. I'll be able to help."

"Oh, thank you!" The twelve year old threw her arms around Hermione.

Hermione wondered if she'd ever been that young. She had always gone for her boys by herself, without help.

But this innocence, wrapped around her now, was worth saving much more than Pan's. Hermione rolled out of bed, cursed her skirts, and praised Severus for giving her boots instead of slippers on the boat.

"Let's go."



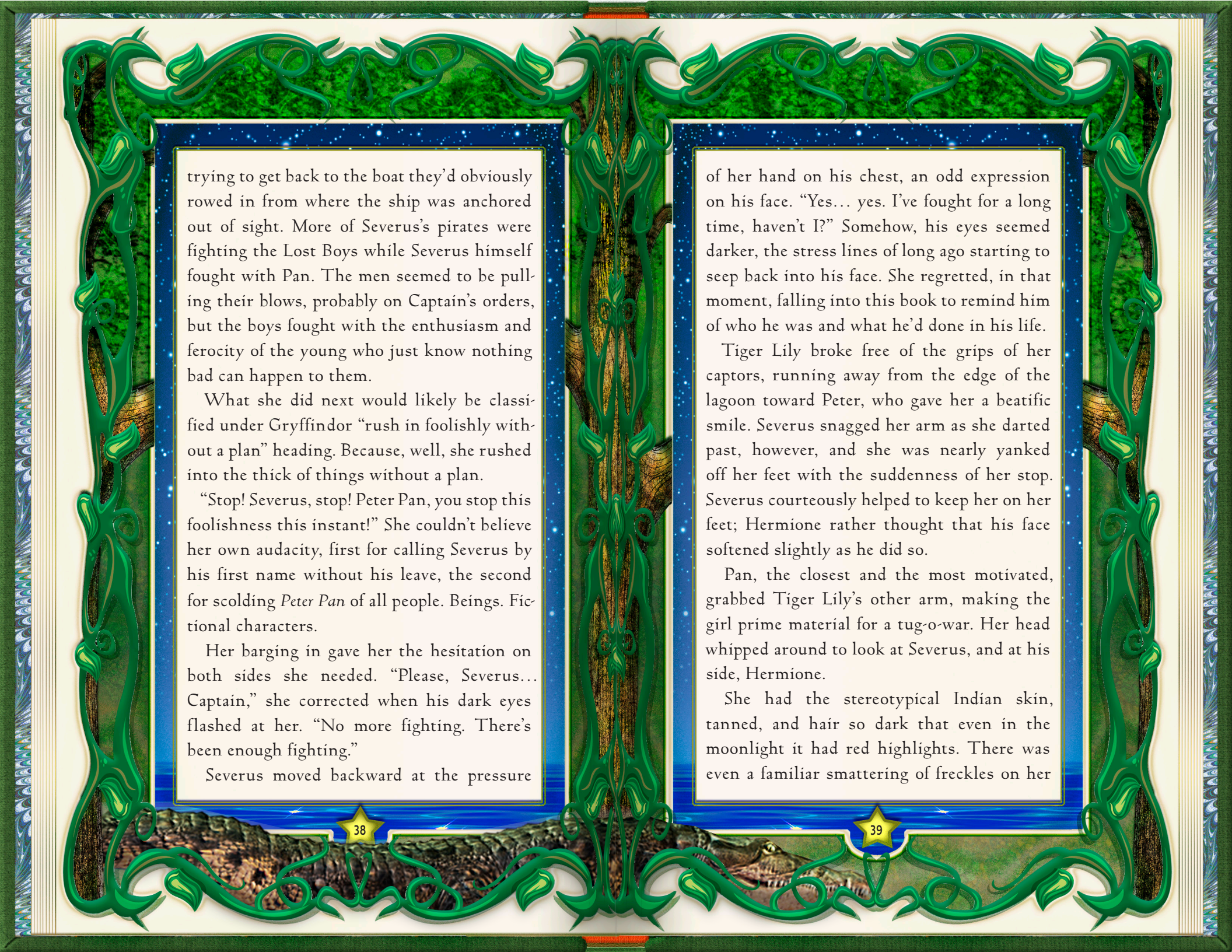
The first truly redeemable thing about Neverland, it seemed, was the fact it didn't take ages to get anywhere, at least by land. It was the first sign to Hermione, besides the fairies, that there was some form of magic at work within this world.

She wondered if it was there because Severus thought it should be.

Mermaid's Lagoon only took about thirty minutes, if that. Hermione had honestly expected bogs and marshes and all sorts of unpleasantness, but mosquitoes seemed non-existent — thank Merlin! The air was pleasantly cool and the night-blooming flowers fragrant. A few, she was certain, did not exist in the real world, though because of their mission she didn't pause to take a closer look. Besides her headache and tiredness, it really wasn't that bad.

And then, of course, they arrived at Mermaid's Lagoon. Where she'd have had to eat her words, if she'd actually said them out loud.

There was already a fight in progress. Pirates she recalled from her brief stint upon the Jolly Roger held a struggling girl and were



trying to get back to the boat they'd obviously rowed in from where the ship was anchored out of sight. More of Severus's pirates were fighting the Lost Boys while Severus himself fought with Pan. The men seemed to be pulling their blows, probably on Captain's orders, but the boys fought with the enthusiasm and ferocity of the young who just know nothing bad can happen to them.

What she did next would likely be classified under Gryffindor "rush in foolishly without a plan" heading. Because, well, she rushed into the thick of things without a plan.

"Stop! Severus, stop! Peter Pan, you stop this foolishness this instant!" She couldn't believe her own audacity, first for calling Severus by his first name without his leave, the second for scolding *Peter Pan* of all people. Beings. Fictional characters.

Her barging in gave her the hesitation on both sides she needed. "Please, Severus... Captain," she corrected when his dark eyes flashed at her. "No more fighting. There's been enough fighting."

Severus moved backward at the pressure

of her hand on his chest, an odd expression on his face. "Yes... yes. I've fought for a long time, haven't I?" Somehow, his eyes seemed darker, the stress lines of long ago starting to seep back into his face. She regretted, in that moment, falling into this book to remind him of who he was and what he'd done in his life.

Tiger Lily broke free of the grips of her captors, running away from the edge of the lagoon toward Peter, who gave her a beatific smile. Severus snagged her arm as she darted past, however, and she was nearly yanked off her feet with the suddenness of her stop. Severus courteously helped to keep her on her feet; Hermione rather thought that his face softened slightly as he did so.

Pan, the closest and the most motivated, grabbed Tiger Lily's other arm, making the girl prime material for a tug-o-war. Her head whipped around to look at Severus, and at his side, Hermione.

She had the stereotypical Indian skin, tanned, and hair so dark that even in the moonlight it had red highlights. There was even a familiar smattering of freckles on her

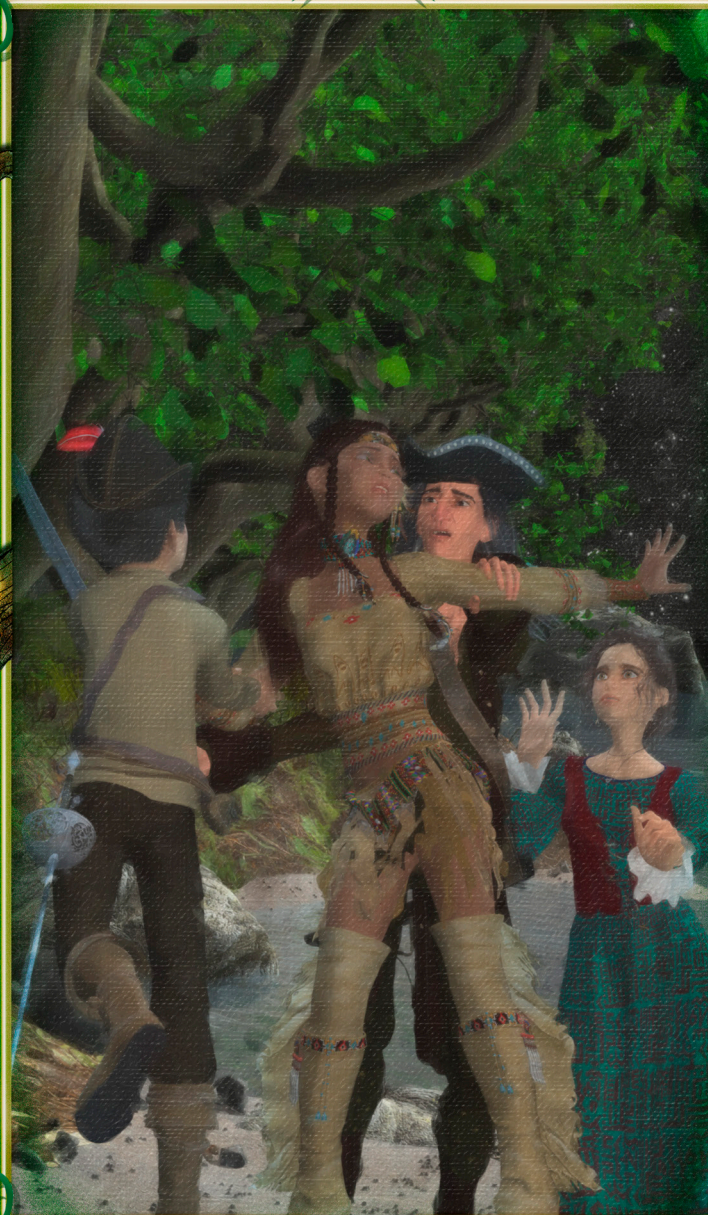
nose and cheeks. And very noticeable, even in the gloom, Hermione could see the vivid green of her eyes. She had to suppress a gasp of recognition. It was as if Harry were staring at her out of that face.

So far, too, Lily — Tiger Lily — was the oldest person outside of the pirates who Hermione had met. She was, perhaps, sixteen or so, give or take a year. Suddenly she was very glad Harry had not come with her to Spinner's End, so he didn't have to see Severus's subconscious and the representations of people from the past — like his father, mother, and the Marauders.

"Severus..." Tiger Lily said beseechingly. Severus's face twisted in a grimace of pain, or maybe it was an echo of pain past. "Please. You know I want to go."

"Your father, Tiger Lily. He wants you back," Severus said, but anyone could tell it was just an excuse. She shook her head, her dark hair dancing with the motion. "Don't go with him. He never wishes to grow up, and you already are heading there."

"No. I want to go," she declared passionately.



"Please, Severus. If our friendship ever meant anything, please let me go to him."

Hermione's heart twisted, and she wondered if these words had been spoken once before. Probably not, if circumstances were to be believed — but who could tell what happened in that time, so long ago with no witnesses.

"Stay. For me. Stay." Hermione could see how much saying this cost him, especially when Pan on Tiger Lily's other side sneered and pulled on the Indian maid's arm.

A sneer on a child's face was always ugly. It reminded Hermione of Draco Malfoy when he said "Mudblood."

"No." It was a single, heartbreaking word. Severus's face, more open than Hermione had seen it in life, closed into its more familiar — to her — aloof expression. She suspected it hid a double-life full of pain as memories, suppressed or not, doubled the pressure of now.

"Severus," Hermione murmured his name and put a hand on his arm. It took another utterance of his name before he looked down at her. "It's okay, to let someone go." He glared, and it was good to see some emotion in his face

again. "If she didn't want to stay but did anyway, you would both be miserable. Trust me."

Images of Ron flitted through her mind, of the failed relationship they'd both stayed in for so long because it was expected, because they thought it was what they should do. They'd stayed even though they hadn't wanted to, and she was telling the truth — they had both been miserable. Evidence of that misery touched her eyes, her face, her sincerity evident in the very beginnings of lines on her face. Severus studied her face, and after a moment his shoulders sagged in acceptance.

He released his hold on Tiger Lily, and Pan crowed in triumph, taking Tiger Lily's hands and dancing around with her, shouting, "She's mine, she's mine, she's mine! Not yours, mine!"

She felt Severus tense, reach for his sword again. "No more fighting," she said, loud enough to be heard. "Let's go back to the ship."

Pan's face fell. "Go? With him!" He looked aghast, perhaps even scandalized, that Hermione wished to go with the evil Captain Snape rather than stay with him and his motley band.

"Go," she repeated firmly. "I am not yours,



Pan. I'm going with the captain and see about going home."

She slipped a hand into the crook of a surprised Severus's arm to emphasize her decision, even though it caused Pan's face to contort in anger as he lifted a few feet off the ground. Anger twisted into rage as he noticed Wendy discreetly trying to herd her two brothers in the same direction as the pirates.

"No! You're staying with us!" Pan cried out. He abandoned his most recent prize to rush toward the Darlings.

"It's about time for us to go home, Peter," Wendy said, her young voice gentle. "Our parents must miss us dreadfully. It's time to go."

"No! We'll miss you dreadfully! You have to stay!" Hermione watched, wide-eyed, as the timeless boy started throwing a fit.

"You can come with us!" Wendy cried, arms around her brothers and tears on her cheeks. "All of you. My mother would take you all and love you even more than I do!"

A few of the Lost Boys perked up at this statement from where they'd been watching the byplay from the sidelines. Hermione knew they

enjoyed being mothered; having a real mother was a deeply cherished dream by many. That was why they wanted Wendy in the first place.

"No! I won't grow up. I won't!" Pan flew around, agitated and upset and keeping Wendy cut off from the pirates, who were beginning to look like they'd make a fight of this, too. "Besides, Michael is hurt. Look!" He pointed at a bloody cut on the youngest boy's arm. "And so am I, see? We need you to take care of us.," he wheedled, gesturing at a small, almost insignificant wound on his arm.

Wendy wibbled, and before Hermione's protest could leave her lips, the girl had given in, bowing her head.

As the Lost Boys and Pan whirled the group back into the woods, however, toward their hidden camp, Wendy looked back. "Hermione," was all she said.

That was when Hermione realized she was as caught up in the plot of this book now as Severus.



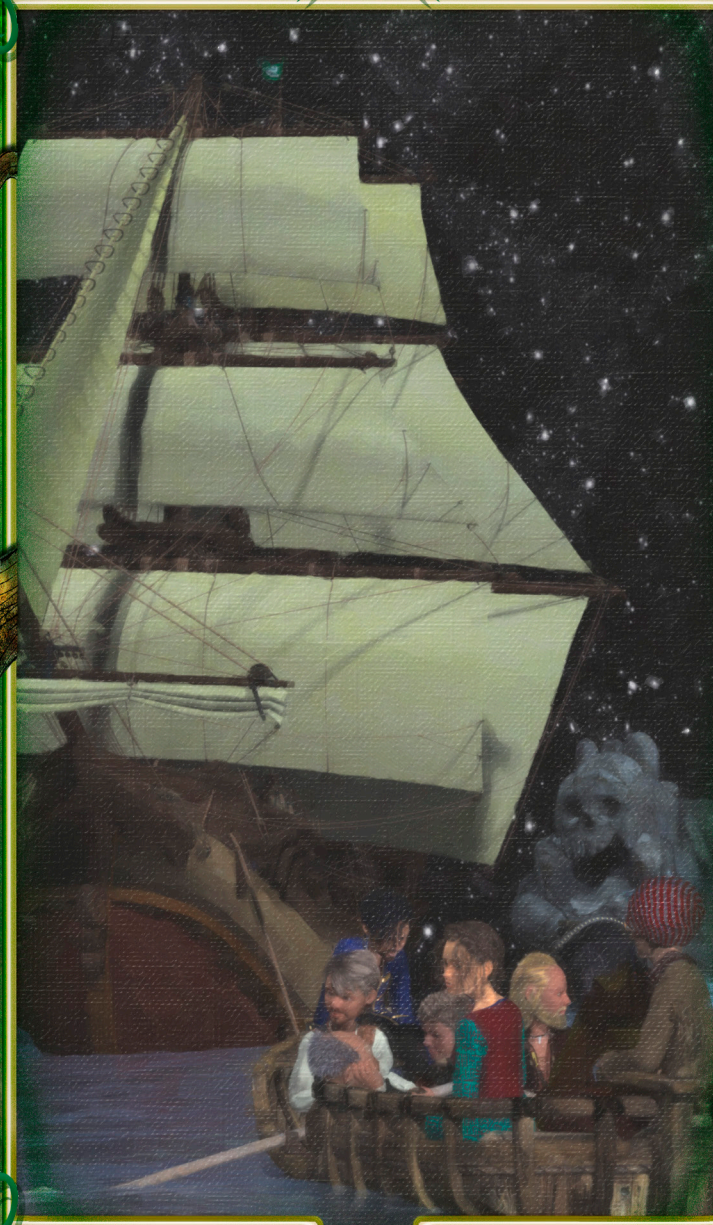
The sight of the ship as they rowed toward it was more than welcome. Her exhaustion was

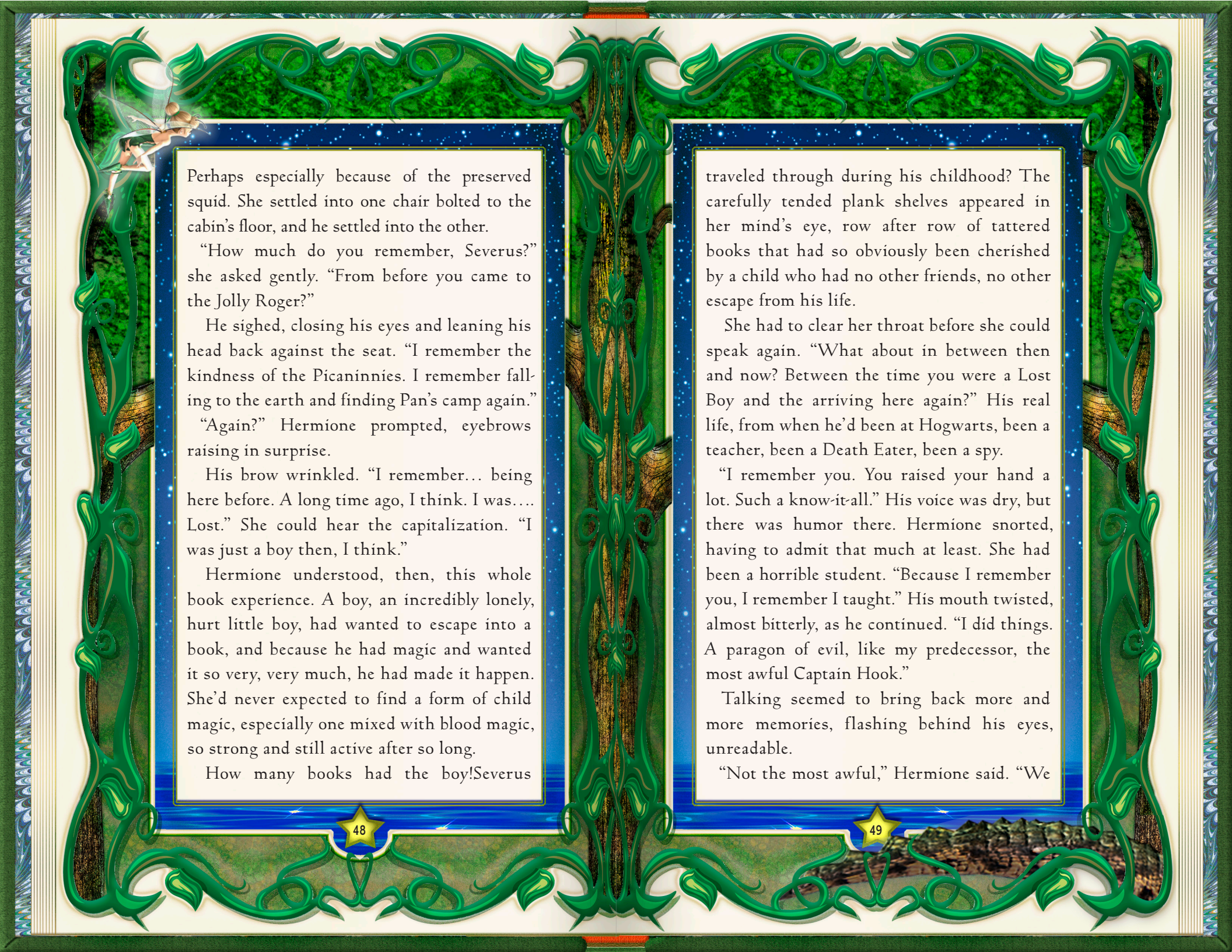
creeping up on her again, the few hours sleep she'd managed to catch not being sufficient. She shoved out of her mind the worries about how much time had already passed in the Real World. It was hard enough worrying about this fictional one right now without adding that.

The ride was quiet, but Hermione didn't mind. She didn't mind the introspection the time allowed her, and she didn't think Severus minded either. It gave her a little time, at least, to put her thoughts in order.

It wasn't until the deck of the JOLLY ROGER was solidly under her feet and its flag — not the traditional jolly roger or a calico jack, she noticed for the first time, but something that looked suspiciously like the Slytherin crest — waving merrily overhead that she spoke. “We need to talk, Severus.” Mr. Smee gave her the evil eye for her informality, but in a brash show of confidence, Hermione rolled her eyes at him. “Yes, I think we do,” he replied and led the way back to the captain's quarters.

Once again, his quarters reminded her starkly of his office back at Hogwarts, and she found it quite comforting. Even with the preserved squid.





Perhaps especially because of the preserved squid. She settled into one chair bolted to the cabin's floor, and he settled into the other.

"How much do you remember, Severus?" she asked gently. "From before you came to the Jolly Roger?"

He sighed, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the seat. "I remember the kindness of the Picaninnies. I remember falling to the earth and finding Pan's camp again."

"Again?" Hermione prompted, eyebrows raising in surprise.

His brow wrinkled. "I remember... being here before. A long time ago, I think. I was... Lost." She could hear the capitalization. "I was just a boy then, I think."

Hermione understood, then, this whole book experience. A boy, an incredibly lonely, hurt little boy, had wanted to escape into a book, and because he had magic and wanted it so very, very much, he had made it happen. She'd never expected to find a form of child magic, especially one mixed with blood magic, so strong and still active after so long.

How many books had the boy!Severus

traveled through during his childhood? The carefully tended plank shelves appeared in her mind's eye, row after row of tattered books that had so obviously been cherished by a child who had no other friends, no other escape from his life.

She had to clear her throat before she could speak again. "What about in between then and now? Between the time you were a Lost Boy and the arriving here again?" His real life, from when he'd been at Hogwarts, been a teacher, been a Death Eater, been a spy.

"I remember you. You raised your hand a lot. Such a know-it-all." His voice was dry, but there was humor there. Hermione snorted, having to admit that much at least. She had been a horrible student. "Because I remember you, I remember I taught." His mouth twisted, almost bitterly, as he continued. "I did things. A paragon of evil, like my predecessor, the most awful Captain Hook."

Talking seemed to bring back more and more memories, flashing behind his eyes, unreadable.

"Not the most awful," Hermione said. "We



knew you were the real hero.”

He barked a laugh. Hermione just regarded him calmly and levelly.

“You were cleared of any charges and posthumously awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class.” That shut him up.

It was his turn to clear his throat. “How long have I been here?” he asked. There was a weight to the question that let her know he had remembered a lot, if not everything. “How did you get here?”

Hermione rose, full of anxious energy suddenly. She paced around the small quarters, stopping to stare at the creatures-in-jars. “Ten years, when I arrived. I came to take care of the matters of your estate, now that you have finally been legally declared dead.”

For a moment there was absolute silence, she holding her breath and he apparently doing the same until it gusted out in a loud sigh. For a moment, she could swear even the ship seemed to stop bobbing in the waves.

“Dead,” he said, and laughed. Laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d heard in ages. “You mean I’m not, then?”

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t think so, no. I did, once...” The image of his body in the Shrieking Shack flashed through her mind. “I’m not dead, at least, I don’t think so, so I don’t believe you are either. Do you remember the Last Battle at all?”

Severus made a so-so motion.

“The Shrieking Shack? The snake?”

He shuddered. “Yes, Nagini,” he said, a hand going to the prominent scars on his neck. “I remember. It took longer than anticipated for my anti-venin to kick in. That must be when you thought I died.” He looked at her, but seemed to look through her, at the same time. “I then... went home. To my room.” He seemed to be tracing the events in his mind, his drawl slow as he picked through the memories. His lips twitched, and she watched the story unfold, fascinated. “My old room. Always did feel safe there, with those old books.” He said “old books” like other people might say “old friends.” Hermione could relate. “I don’t really remember after that. Just falling. And then this.”

He’d stumbled in, bleeding, disoriented. Hermione had seen the marks in the house,

the bookshelf he'd fallen against and partially collapsed. He'd probably grabbed a book, this book, and fallen on the tiny bed. With so much blood, and just a drop needed to pull you in, if her own circumstances were any clue, he had been sucked in. And the book had given him what the real world hadn't — survival. Somehow, the magic of the book had helped heal him through the Picaninny tribe. It was impossible, improbable, the thing of legends, and yet... here she was, and here he was.

She realized only when he spoke again that she'd said that all aloud. "Yes, here we are."

Hermione collapsed back in the chair, feeling drained and a little scared. "How do we get home?"

"I remember... I remember that to get home, if my mother didn't pull me out — she knew how, somehow — all I did was finish the story. Play it out to the end, no matter how different things were because I was involved."

They quietly contemplated that for a long moment. "How do we do that?"

"We take Wendy and her brothers home. And then we go home. Even if I no longer have a place



to go." He sounded more resigned than angry.

She reached across the distance between their chairs and put her hand on his. "You'll always have a place," she promised. She would make certain of that.



In real life, Hermione would have taken the arrival of the fairy Tinker Bell as too convenient for words. Her paranoia alarms would have been set off and she probably would never have agreed or trusted anything she said.

But this wasn't the real world, as Severus pointed out. And it wasn't, apparently, the first time Tinker Bell had helped the pirate captain. It had been she who had told him of Tiger Lily's plans to go to Mermaid's Lagoon.

Figures, she thought after she heard the jealousy permeating the tiny being's voice and manner. It was intense and vengeful. She wanted Wendy gone. Hermione had the feeling that she would also like Tiger Lily gone, but there was no way yet that she could get Severus to do that. If Hermione had her way, there would never be a time when Severus had

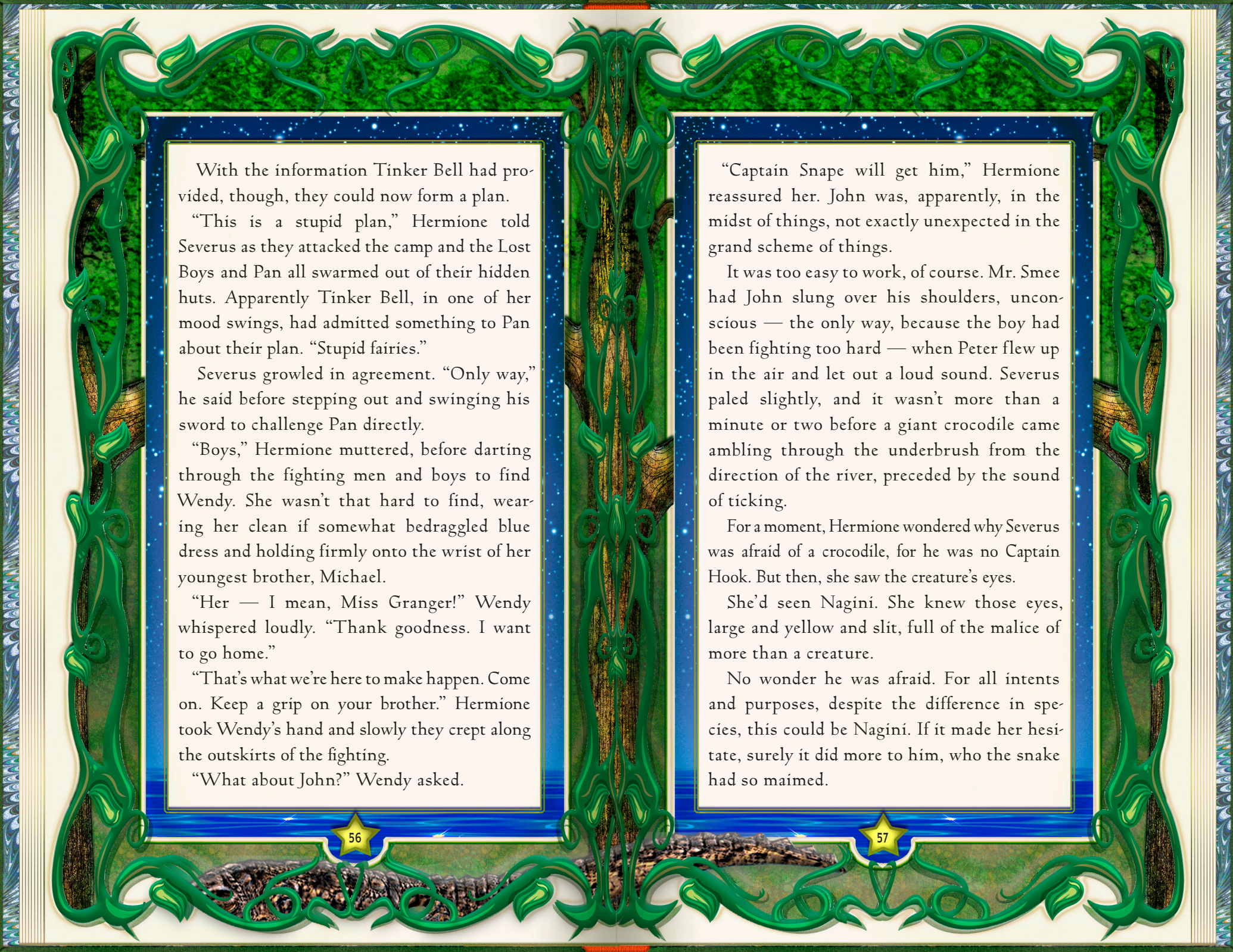
to go back for Lily. Tiger Lily. Whatever.

But it was Tinker Bell who gave them the information to get back to camp. Even though Hermione had been there, she had gotten there via terrifying flight. It was valuable information they dearly needed. And it was to Tinker Bell that Severus gave a vial to mix in with something Peter would eat or drink. If the other Lost Boys could ingest it, all to the better. "Not poison," he assured Hermione when she raised an eyebrow. "Just to sleep and stay sleeping for awhile. Not that I'm not tempted," he muttered.

After Tink left, Hermione said, "She was quite... emotional. Almost irrational." For just a second, the fairy had reminded her just a little of Severus in his war-time professor days. But... knowing what she knew now, it didn't hold true.

"Fairies are so small they can only hold one emotion at a time," Severus explained. "At least, here. Though sometimes I wonder if Barrie ever saw a real fairy before he wrote the play."

Well, it certainly did explain a lot. Even if fairies here were smarter than the fairies of their world.



With the information Tinker Bell had provided, though, they could now form a plan.

"This is a stupid plan," Hermione told Severus as they attacked the camp and the Lost Boys and Pan all swarmed out of their hidden huts. Apparently Tinker Bell, in one of her mood swings, had admitted something to Pan about their plan. "Stupid fairies."

Severus growled in agreement. "Only way," he said before stepping out and swinging his sword to challenge Pan directly.

"Boys," Hermione muttered, before darting through the fighting men and boys to find Wendy. She wasn't that hard to find, wearing her clean if somewhat bedraggled blue dress and holding firmly onto the wrist of her youngest brother, Michael.

"Her — I mean, Miss Granger!" Wendy whispered loudly. "Thank goodness. I want to go home."

"That's what we're here to make happen. Come on. Keep a grip on your brother." Hermione took Wendy's hand and slowly they crept along the outskirts of the fighting.

"What about John?" Wendy asked.

"Captain Snape will get him," Hermione reassured her. John was, apparently, in the midst of things, not exactly unexpected in the grand scheme of things.

It was too easy to work, of course. Mr. Smee had John slung over his shoulders, unconscious — the only way, because the boy had been fighting too hard — when Peter flew up in the air and let out a loud sound. Severus paled slightly, and it wasn't more than a minute or two before a giant crocodile came ambling through the underbrush from the direction of the river, preceded by the sound of ticking.

For a moment, Hermione wondered why Severus was afraid of a crocodile, for he was no Captain Hook. But then, she saw the creature's eyes.

She'd seen Nagini. She knew those eyes, large and yellow and slit, full of the malice of more than a creature.

No wonder he was afraid. For all intents and purposes, despite the difference in species, this could be Nagini. If it made her hesitate, surely it did more to him, who the snake had so maimed.

Automatically she reached for her wand, to cast a spell, but of course it wasn't there. She was in Neverland. She struggled to bring wandless magic to bear, but found it, like before, barely there.

"Severus!" she shouted. He was fighting Pan and the crocodile, and it couldn't last long. She refused, *refused*, to let him die in this fiction when he had survived so much. "Do you believe in magic?"

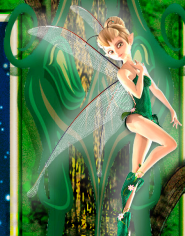
"What?" he called. Whether he hadn't heard or didn't understand, she didn't know.

"Magic? Do you still believe magic is possible, here, now?"

His eyes met hers for a brief second. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Hermione reached for her magic again, and this time it responded. Though she'd become more skilled during the last decade, she lacked finesse; finesse, however, wasn't what she needed. What she did came to bear, a blast of power that tumbled the large crocodile far away, crashing through the trees.

She used it again, to send Peter tumbling backward through the air. The effort left her



panting and trembling. Wendy looked at her with wide, scared eyes. "Don't worry, Miss Darling. Witches aren't all evil," she said before she nearly passed out. The effort here was harder than in her world, perhaps because it was more unnatural.

She never hit the ground, for Severus was there in an instant and his arm was strong around her.

Saved by a pirate. What a fantasy.

"We have to go, before they recover," Severus said. "Can you make it to the ship?"

Hermione let out a shaky breath and shook herself. "Yeah. Yes. I think so."

And so they retreated, with all possible haste, to the ship. Severus's hand was often under her elbow, and if she occasionally leaned on him when she didn't need to, none of the pirates commented on it.



They made it to the ship.

It was this phase of the plan that they'd least concentrated on. As they started to sail, that failure came sadly into light.



"How are you going to get us home?"

Wendy's voice was trusting and innocent, and it caught the pair of them like a Snorkack in the wandlight.

"Don't worry, Wendy. We'll get you there," Hermione said softly, and the girl was reassured. Hastily, she pulled Severus aside, out of earshot, and hissed, "How are we getting them home again?"

"The ship is supposed to fly off and drop them off," he replied equally as quietly. "Only I just realized Peter was driving it."

Hermione paced back and forth for a moment, thinking. "Wait. We don't need pixie dust to fly. You flew, during the war. You can do this bit of magic."

He barked a laugh. "The entire ship?"

"Yes! I know you can do it." He looked ready to disagree, but her fervent words stopped him with his mouth partly open. She stepped forward and stood on tiptoe, kissing him lightly before she thought. "I know it."

He cleared his throat, twice. "I will try, then," he said gruffly, turning away.

Somehow, when it finally started to fly,

Hermione wasn't surprised in the least.



As Neverland receded and the stars seemed to come into sharper view, Hermione finally came to where Severus stood navigating at the wheel. "Holding up all right?" she asked, concerned.

"Just fine." Indeed, he looked just fine, unlike her when she'd done her magic earlier. Perhaps it was because it was his magic keeping them in the book.

"Good," she said and came to stand next to him. It wasn't terribly long before the lights of London came into sight in the distance, then closer and closer. She fetched Wendy to show them the way to her home, which took a bit of time. But finally, they were there, and Mr. Smee lowered a long rope ladder down the side.

Wendy and then John and lastly Michael climbed down, and a woman obviously their mother rushed out the door with a glad cry, gathering them to her. "Thank God, thank God!" she cried as they all hugged her.

That was, of course, when Peter Pan came swooping down. "Wendy!"





Wendy whirled around, looking at the ageless boy. "Peter!" Somehow, the cry was still glad, for all that had happened during their time together.

A strange look overcame Mrs. Darling's face, one Hermione wanted to call recognition. Severus saw it, too, as he came up by her side. "She's been to Neverland before," he said, speaking their mutual realization.

"Why did you leave, Wendy?" His voice was heartbreaking, for once.

"My place is here, Peter. Yours can be too!" Wendy said fervently. "Mother will adopt you!" Behind her, her mother nodded, that strange expression still on her face.

"No! You'll make me grow up! Make a man out of me! I don't ever want to grow up!"

Wendy's heart seemed to break as she started to weep.

"I'll come back for you, Wendy. Every spring, I'll come back." The promise was rash, but then, so was Peter.

"Promise, Peter? You'll not forget?"

"Never!" the boy swore and then flew away, not even gracing the couple on the ship a

second glance.

"It's time for us to go," Severus murmured in Hermione's ear. Mr. Smee had already pulled up the rope ladder, nearly soundlessly.

Once again, the wind filled their sails, and they flew north, to the small factory town of Severus's birth, navigated the area until Spinner's End was directly below.

"What now?" Severus asked as they anchored above the surly looking house that no longer looked anything like its master in Hermione's eyes.

"Now, we fall out of the book," she said, taking his hand and leading him to the prow.

"Fall?" He looked a bit skeptical.

"It's how we got into it, it's how we'll get out," she said, certain of it. Before either of them could have second thoughts, she climbed the railing and he followed.

"The ship's yours, Mr. Smee," he said.

The man saluted. "Aye, Captain!"

And then, together, they jumped; together, they fell.

The house below dissolved, and there was only the sensation of falling and the warmth

of their linked hands. And then that, too, dissolved, and there was nothing, nothing at all.



Hermione came to when the sensation of falling abruptly ended when her back met the mattress. It reminded her of nothing more of dreaming and being yanked back into her body. Only she had someone at her side, a fraction of a second later, and the tiny bed simply wasn't big enough or strong enough for the both of them. Its legs broke under the strain.

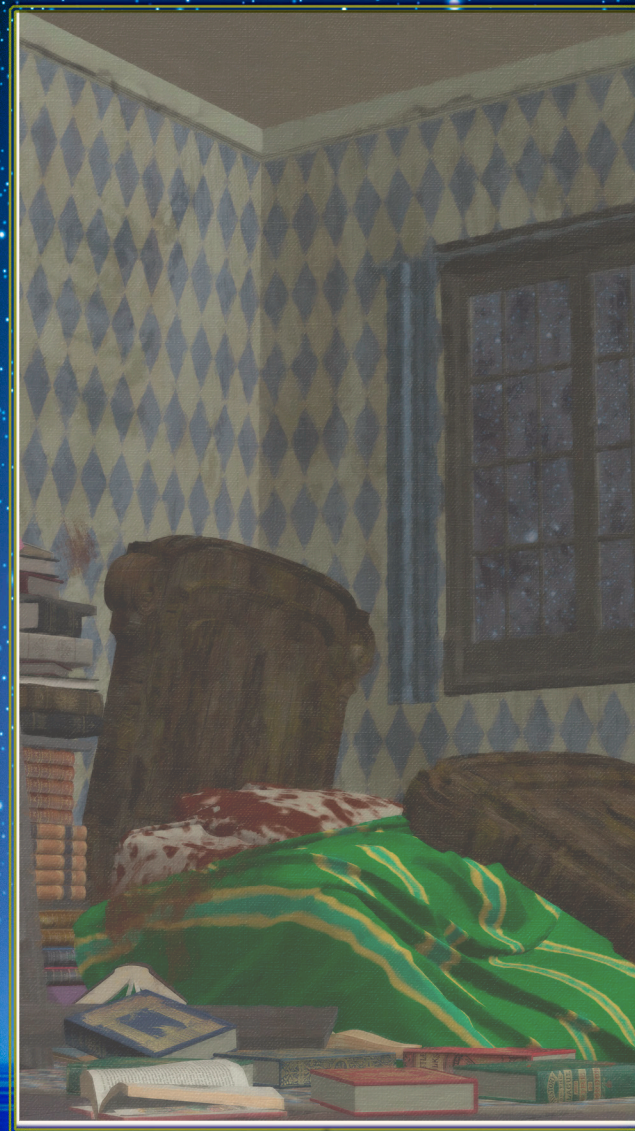
Perhaps it was inappropriate, but once the dust settled Hermione started giggling riotously. "Look, we broke the bed," she said, and collapsed into giggles once again. Severus looked stunned, briefly, at the innuendo she so casually made before chuckling slightly himself.

With a little effort, they untangled various limbs and managed to get off the bed. Severus looked at the poor, blood-stained comforter for a long moment. He was silent as they gathered their wands, which had appeared on the bed, and walked down the steps and out of the house.

Once outside, though, he stopped. "Where

do I go now?" he asked her. He looked lost, and she was reminded that even after growing up, a person could still be a Lost Boy. She slipped her hand into his and squeezed.

"That's easy," she said. Raising her hand, she pointed up at the stars, just visible in the night sky despite the light pollution of the town. "We just follow the third star to the right, and go straight on 'til morning."



COLPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was done in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art from the incomprable Marwan Aridi, and LiquidLibrary, a division of Getty Images, modified in Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop, illustrations were built in the DAZ Studio.

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Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)

