

The Foreigner

by Annie Talbot

Severus Snape has made a life for himself in the Village. What is he to do, when The Foreigner arrives?

One

Chapter 1 of 3

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He knew when she arrived in the Village.

No, it wasn't that he sensed and recognised her magical signature. It wasn't that he saw her in the Market, hair tied carelessly back, a wicker basket over her arm, wearing low-slung denim jeans and skimpy tee-shirt that might...might...be appropriate on a woman half her age.

It was the fact that, for the first time in twenty years, *he* wasn't the newcomer. The foreigner. And the villagers spoke to him about her as they'd never spoken before, entranced and alarmed by this new intruder into their daily rhythm.

The women viewed her with suspicion, of course. Her eyes, they said, showed her age. But she looked remarkably young for a woman who wouldn't see forty again. The mother of two? They shook their heads.

Behind their wives, their sisters, their mothers, the men told a different story. Old Silvio moved his hands suggestively, sketching full breasts and flaring hips. Young Antonio, barely fourteen, blushed profusely and nodded vigorously. After the clucking women had moved away, he leaned forward into the group of men.

"She paid me to help her to move some boxes into her house," he told them in a low voice. "She said I reminded her of her son."

He paused significantly. All of his companions, including The Englishman, waited respectfully, leaning forward to this newly fledged member of their manly fellowship.

"She told me all about England, and then she told me all about the Village. She knows everything! How old the church is, where the tombs are, when the Market days occur. But..."

Another pause. Antonio was enjoying this.

"... her cat leapt onto a shelf in the pantry. An enormous orange cat he was, with a squashed-in face. I offered to chase him down, but she said he could be fierce. She reached up to catch hold of him, and I saw it." His voice dropped significantly. "Her navel was pierced, and she had a lightning-bolt tattooed beside it. Can you imagine?"

And that was the moment that The Englishman knew. Hermione Granger had come to the Village.

He shouldn't have been surprised. Sooner or later, someone from the wizarding world was bound to find the Village, to seek the peace and renewal to be found in such a place. It had a magic of its own...although its inhabitants were (mostly) non-magical, the land... oh, the land itself was filled with joy.

When The Englishman had arrived there, over two decades before, he'd been welcomed in a way he had never known. Not by the people, although they were kind and surprisingly accepting of the dark stranger in their midst; they followed his cues and left him alone, making space for him when he appeared, but not seeking him out when he was absent. The town itself had welcomed him... the surrounding fields had waved to him as he walked along the dusty roadway that separated his small house from the walls of the town itself. The birds accompanied him from place to place, often landing directly in his path to twitter at him as he strode purposefully towards the town or towards his home, sometimes calling to him from the olive groves.

"Slowly..." they seemed to say. "Be mindful..."

So he walked more slowly and listened to their speech, to their songs. He looked around at the countryside... the fertile fields, the vineyards, the fruit trees. He learned to listen to the insects buzzing amongst the plantings, working busily. He saw the snakes, the field mice, the cats, dogs, farm animals.... Soon he could read the air itself as it shimmered atop the grain or exploded in glorious colour above the faraway mountains.

He would speak to them...the birds, the insects, the animals, the plants...even the clouds. He spoke to them and they spoke back.

Eventually, he'd begun to notice the men and women in the fields, the orchards, and amidst the vines. They had waved and called greetings to him; he'd lifted his hand in response.

How odd that people greeted him as if he were part of their landscape... How odd to see them as part of his own.

By his fifth year at the Village, he had taken to walking to the Market every Tuesday. He would purchase those things he couldn't provide for himself and stop for a meal at the taverna before commencing the two-mile walk to his home. Sometimes, when the weather was bad, someone would offer to drive him to the track that met the road, but normally he would walk, conversing with the birds, the insects, the grain, and the olive trees.

By his tenth year, he was visiting twice a week...Market Day and Friday. On Friday evenings, the men of the town gathered in the taverna to discuss manly things. How the crops were coming. The tourists who flocked to nearby Assisi. The cycle of Life in the Village... births, deaths, marriages. He rarely spoke, but he occupied a chair at the table, drank wine, and listened to the rhythm of the village as he'd grown accustomed to hearing the rhythm of the land.

By his fifteenth year, he'd reach the road on a nasty day and someone would be waiting for him in an ancient truck. Even so, when he arrived home, the birds would be awaiting him to ensure his safe return, no matter how late.

Nothing really changed in the Village. The cycle of life went on.

She had known he was there since the day he finally settled. She, Ron, and Harry had done Auror training, and in their free time, they used their newly-acquired skills to track Severus Snape. They'd never intended to make contact, never wished to disturb his peace. Yet, every once in a while, one of the three would bring up the question of whether he knew he was free to return to British wizarding society. Whether he knew he'd be hailed a hero rather than condemned as a murderous Death Eater. The discussions that followed were often filled with all the anguish that tales of the tragic, twisted life of Severus Snape seemed to typically engender. And always, always, they agreed to leave him alone.

In peace.

Peace was what she sought, more than anything else. Her marriage had disintegrated before her eyes...the fact that it had been equally shocking to Ron deprived her of the opportunity to blame anyone. Her children were distressed, wanting nothing to do with either parent at the moment and electing to spend school holidays with their cousins in Godric's Hollow.

At Harry's urging, she and Ron had each taken a six-month leave from work. Heaven knew, they had the time... none of them ever took much in the way of holidays. When they returned, it would be to new assignments and...hopefully...a new working relationship.

Until then, though, Hermione needed a place to rest. To heal. To rediscover who it was she wished to be. And, when it came down to it, the Village was the only place which appealed.

She had leased a house in the centre of town, an easy walk to the church, the sole taverna, the market square. She had loaded her car with boxes and attached a battered bicycle to its roof. She'd ferried across the Channel and driven across the whole of France, into Italy, and southward into Umbria.

She'd left her wand on the mantelpiece at home, to be retrieved upon her return.

For now, Hermione Granger...Muggle-born witch...would follow in the footsteps of Severus Snape...Half-Blood wizard. She would leave the magical world behind and discover the woman behind the witch.

Her first week in the Village was spent organising her new home and meeting her neighbours. On Tuesday, she attended the weekly Market day. She caught a glimpse of him there, haggling good-naturedly with a farmer over the price of a chicken for stew. She'd deliberately moved away, the tone of his voice echoing in her ears. It struck her that his Italian was the same as that of the villagers... that they all spoke with exactly the same rhythms, as if to some common heartbeat that she could not yet hear.

It should have been unsettling. Instead, it hinted at a magic that she craved as a baby does its mother's breast.

Another glimpse...he was standing outside the taverna with several men, watching others playing bocce. Antonio had apparently done something spectacularly well, as he was being clapped on the back, his hand shaken. As she watched, Snape spoke to him, smiling, one hand gripping the boy's shoulder, the other shaking his hand.

Hermione stepped back, looking away.

What magic could effect such a change in so guarded a man?

He had seen her, of course. But he had decided not to hide. Not to change his life.

The night he'd learned of her presence in the Village, he'd considered leaving. He'd thought about packing his few belongings into the elderly bag he had brought with him. But, when he had glanced around the small house which he called home, he'd been loath to depart.

She's planning to stay. She can't be here hunting for me. This is my life now... my place. I won't give it up.

The following morning, the birds were full of news of her. How she had risen at dawn and mounted a rickety old bicycle, riding out amongst the fields and orchards. She had paused often, looking about her as if seeking something beyond her view.

A tiny sparrow had perched upon the handlebars of the bike, counselling patience. She'd listened, but the sparrow could tell that she didn't understand.

Still, she'd been polite, had smiled and responded, waiting patiently for the messenger to fly away before remounting and riding on.

The sparrow had liked her.

He couldn't imagine Hermione Granger having grown up enough to stop and listen to anyone. She had always been so *eager*. But life had a way of refining people, he supposed.

Not for the last time, he wondered why life had brought her here, to the Village.

On Market day, the men had much to report. She had attended church the previous Sunday, sitting in the back and not taking Communion. She had smiled at the children and befriended the old ladies. She had sat beside Old Silvio on a bench in the square and spoken to him about the weather in unexpectedly good Italian.

Surprisingly, the Wives liked her. She had held Teresa's infant while the young mother tended to her toddler after the boy had fallen. She and Teresa were becoming good friends.

She showed photographs of her children...Rose and Hugo, for heaven's sake...to everyone. No one had heard her mention her husband, though; it was widely held that there was some great tragedy there, because of her silence on the topic.

He disagreed. The glimpses he'd had of her did not suggest tragedy. She'd married one of the Weasleys, apparently; he recalled that she and their youngest boy had been subjecting Hogwarts to a peculiarly unpleasant mating dance while he attempted to teach them Defence Against the Dark Arts. The relationship had probably run its course, leaving her as odd woman out.

He saw her notice him and turn away. She didn't seem at all shocked to see him; rather, it seemed as if she was respecting his space. So, she'd known all along that he was here? How could that be?

He spent the following three weeks listening to the birds' reports of her morning rides and her afternoon walks and to the men's commentary on her ongoing acculturation.

She had taken to talking to the birds, the sparrows in particular. She'd spoken of her life without magic, how she was discovering things about herself and the world that she'd never noticed, rather like a blind man perceiving sounds, scents, and textures that had always been there, disregarded.

She'd told them of her life in England, of her children...Did she never stop talking about her children?...and about her friends. And then she had begun to listen. To understand what the birds told her.

To slow down. To pay attention. To hold the life that she *had now* squarely before her and to immerse herself in it.

He hadn't seen her again in the Market square. She hadn't been in the taverna on Friday evenings, either, although she'd appeared there at other times.

This week, though, on Friday afternoon, as the sun turned the tips of the wheat a fiery gold, he closed the front door of his home and descended the track through the fields to the paved road.

There, waiting for him, surrounded by a flock of chattering birds of all shapes, sizes, and types, was The Foreigner.

Somehow, he was not surprised.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Ferporcel, Machshefa, and Potion Mistress for their help with this. It's a bit of a departure for me, and I needed their encouragement! And an enormous thank you to Ferporcel for the wonderful art!

Two

Chapter 2 of 3

The Englishman and The Foreigner meet

This chapter is dedicated to ferporcel and was originally written for her birthday.

Many thanks to Machshefa, Ariadne, and Melenka, who offered encouraging words and sound advice while I wrote.



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Hermione had been waiting for nearly three-quarters of an hour. She knew he was expected at the taverna that evening, and she had casually ridden between the town and his home, hoping that she could "happen" to meet him along the way.

Unfortunately, however, he seemed less a slave to schedule than he had been so many years ago. Sacrificing the pretence of accident to the honesty of intention, she had settled on the sun-warmed rock that sat across the pavement from the rutted dirt track and resigned herself to waiting.

She wasn't alone for long. A flock of friendly sparrows gathered around, twittering excitedly about the meeting that was to come. Laughing, she reassured them, but straightened in anticipation when a large crow reported with a harsh call that the man was locking his door and beginning to wind his way through the trees and fields towards them. More and more birds joined the waiting throng, chattering to one another and to her with... joy?

She forced herself not to watch for him. To give him the option of reacting privately, of turning away. Indeed, his steps paused when he first saw her, a chickadee told her, and he briefly closed his eyes.

But he never actually stopped, corrected a robin, and he seemed almost as relaxed as usual. Just... perhaps... more watchful.

When he stepped onto the paved road, her heartbeat raced and she felt momentarily as if she were suffocating. Half of her friends launched themselves into the air to greet him. She rose and turned to look at him fully for the first time in over twenty years and found her heartbeat slowing again, finding the rhythm it had gradually adopted over the past several weeks. Her breathing deepened, became even, and she noted absently that her exhalations seemed to be in time with the stirrings of the wheat in the fields behind him.

He gave a polite nod and turned to walk towards the village. Picking up her bicycle, she walked beside him, pushing it along the smooth road as they moved forward at a steady pace.

"We've kept your secret," she offered tentatively in greeting.

He grunted.

"I have no secrets, now." His pace never slowed.

Effectively silenced for the moment, she strode beside him. A bluebird settled on the handlebars of the bike, apparently enjoying the ride.

They passed through an olive grove in silence.

Then, "To what secrets were you referring?"

She looked westward across the fields, as if the memory she was relating was contained within the setting sun.

"Harry insisted that you be given the full honours of a fallen headmaster. You lay in state in the Great Hall while the others were buried. Finally, that last night, when Harry was keeping vigil alone, what we had believed to be your body reverted into its original form. Harry was sensible enough not to attempt to re-Transfigure the twig, but to fetch me to do it. It was laid to rest in a crypt near the forest. Harry sealed the tomb with the Elder wand... the last act that it will ever perform. He broke it and reburied it with Dumbledore that night. We...and the Unspeakables who protect this place...are the only people in the wizarding world who know that you still live and where you are."

The bluebird's song filled the silence that followed. They passed another field, waving to a woman who walked slowly through the rows, checking her crop.

"Thank you." His response was barely audible over the song of the bluebird and the rush of the breeze through the grain. Yet she heard it, and her heart was warmed by it.

They walked the remainder of the way into the Village in silence, surrounded by the sounds of the world around them.

Every Friday, she came to meet him. He would nod, she would smile, and they'd walk companionably through the fields and orchards and vineyards to the Village. When they reached the taverna, he'd join the men and she the women. They'd spend their evenings with their friends, smiling, laughing, and listening, yet always watching each other. And always being watched by the others, who would smile and nod when they weren't looking.

Over the weeks, he'd learned about those who were important to her. The Weasleys, including her former husband and children. The Potters and their three children, one of whom was unfortunate enough to carry his name. Longbottom, Minerva, Kingsley... she'd told him about the Malfoys, too, when he hadn't resisted. It was... gratifying... to know that Draco had turned into a man one could respect, if not like, with a family of his own.

She hadn't chattered about the past... oh, no. Far from it. She'd spoken only when one of his infrequent verbal offerings had invited it. Most of their conversations had been limited to observations about the weather, their ever-changing, yet somehow eternal surroundings, and affectionate commentary on the state of things in the Village.

They never discussed magic, although he noticed she never used it. They never discussed the wizarding world at all, only mentioning past acquaintances...friends?...when the conversation prompted a story that flowed as the past inevitably does into the present.

By becoming part of the Village, by befriending the birds and the turtle that lived in the pond before the last field to home, she'd become part of him. He didn't know, didn't realise that it was happening until the Friday when he reached the road and she wasn't there. The birds awaited him with the news that someone had come for her, had taken her away, but that was all.

His usual calm broken, he'd hurried towards the Village, hoping that one of the others knew what had happened... where she had gone... when she would return...

Indeed, the Villagers were full of the tale. Hugo was ill, Antonio told him, speaking of the boy as if he were a friend, although they'd never met. He'd wanted his mum, so of course she'd gone, nodded Teresa, clutching her infant while watching her next youngest scurry around the taverna, tumbling and being righted by whoever was nearest. The man had come in the night, said old Silvio, adding a note of drama to the tale. A man in dark clothes, with a scar on his forehead.

The same scar as her tattoo, added Antonio excitedly, wondering if this man was, perhaps, The Foreigner's former husband, come to fetch her home.

Even the priest, who usually sat quietly, watching and not speaking, approached him, offering a sealed envelope. "She left a note," he said, then returned to his corner.

Sitting amongst the men in the sudden hush, he ran his thumb under the creamy flap, feeling the threat of its sharpness as he separated the seam and removed a single sheet.

S...

Hugo is ill. D pox, actually, and he's more than Molly and Ginny can handle at the moment. I'll return as soon as he is better, I promise.

H

Beneath her script, familiar despite not having been seen for decades, was another, less welcome scrawl.

I'll keep her safe.

H.P.

The following weeks continued much as the years which had preceded them. He tended his garden daily, putting up vegetables and drying herbs for the winter. On Tuesdays and Fridays, he went into the Village, stopping in the taverna for news and conversation and the simple pleasure of being with the people who were part of his life.

The birds continued to meet him and accompany him on his short journeys to and fro, reporting on their lives and the lives of his friends. They chattered about Hermione's friends, too, as though she were walking beside him. *They miss her*, he thought. *As do I.*

There was nothing to be done about it, though. She would return when she returned; if she did not, she would not. Life would go on, and the Village would forget. The birds and the fields and the clouds would forget. He, eventually, would forget. Wouldn't he?

One Friday, as he prepared to leave for the Village, he heard a knock on his door for the first time since he had arrived, so many years before. He froze for a second, until an explosion of joyous twittering erupted through the dusty windows.

Striding forward, he flung open the door and stepped back, inviting her inside the cramped, dark space, hoping she was back to stay.

And she was.

Three

Chapter 3 of 3

The end of our story.



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It wasn't that simple, of course. For Hermione to leave England permanently would mean giving up her position with the Ministry. She had informed Harry of her decision before departing, and he had passed the word through channels.

Apparently, when the Department of Mysteries heard about Hermione's decision, all hell broke loose. The Village was a protected area... a place where no wizarding magic was to be performed. Technically, she should never have been able to find it; indeed, they figured, only her Muggle blood and the fact that she had left her wand behind had allowed her to do so. Harry forbore to mention that he, too, had found the place—perhaps Lily's blood or his own connection to Hermione had allowed him to do so. He didn't want them to strengthen wards that might cause Hermione or Snape to be expelled from the place which had become their home.

The truth was, because wizarding magic was ineffective in the region, those wards had weakened greatly. As long as no one attempted to use a wand, the Unspeakables would never know that wizarding folk could, in fact, visit at will.

As for Hermione, she moved back into the house at the heart of the Village. She met Severus at the road every Friday and every Tuesday, as well. When the weather grew too bad for her bicycle, she walked or drove. One night, during a snowstorm, she drove him home and stayed.

The Villagers smiled at one another when it was reported that her car was parked alongside the road. They knew she was safe and warm with him and he with her. The birds settled comfortably on the trees that surrounded the small house, singing light through the dingy windows.

Year turned into year and they lived together in harmony with each other, the Village, and the land. Hermione's children and friends visited regularly; eventually her grandchildren came to spend each summer with them.

If the spans of their lives were longer than those of others, the Villagers did not comment. Such things had occurred before and would occur again. What was notable was that each seemed to love the other more every day, never taking anything for granted. It was a kind of magic, the Villagers agreed, that The Foreigner had brought to The Englishman and which he returned to her a thousand fold.

When her youngest granddaughter married young Antonio's middle son, the Village rejoiced. The local wine flowed, and the Villagers and the Visitors danced together in the square.

Life went on. The fields were planted, tended, harvested, left fallow, and planted anew. Tourists traveled to Assisi, driving along the main road to the Saint's city. Often they would look at the countryside and smile. "Pretty," they'd say. "Perhaps we should stop here, sometime."

But they did not, and progress continued to roll past the small road that led to the Village.

And The Englishman and The Foreigner lived out their days in happiness and peace.

Author's Note: Many thanks to everyone who has read and reviewed this story. It occupies a special place in my heart, and I appreciate knowing that it has touched you, too.

Thanks, also, to Somigliana and ferporcel, who have encouraged me every step of the way... I wouldn't be writing at all without Somigliana's early assistance and I appreciate her willingness to drop everything to look at this short chapter when I was panicking about it. And Fer saw an early draft of this story and nagged me relentlessly until I expanded, posted, updated, and completed it. My deepest gratitude goes to them and to the others whose encouragement enabled me to write this tale.