

# Unreliable Sources

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## Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 3

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She had been given one last chance.

Hermione stared at the heavily annotated copy in front of her and sighed. She had known that no one had expected her to be able to produce her usual double-page article on a subject as superficially mundane as Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions opening a new store in Totnes, but that was before she had researched her subject with her usual determination. So her editor, Bertie Blitherswaite, had probably given her the assignment as either a joke or as an attempt to curb her rather unusual work ethic, and she had known exactly what he was up to.

Then she had dug a little deeper.

Though Hermione had always dismissed Madam Malkin as a reasonably friendly, rather dithery old lady, hers was quite literally a rags-to-riches story. She had inherited her father's rag stall in the little market that clustered on Petticoat Lane — one of the little snickets that connected Knockturn Alley to the more prosperous Diagon Alley — but had managed to establish herself in her current premises after ten short years. Ten years after that she had become the outfitter for both Hogwarts and the Ministry, pushing two other traders out of business in the process.

That wasn't all. Although the clothes were largely magically prepared, the sewing itself had to be done manually (or as manual as a bewitched needle and thread could be), as magical seams had an unseemly tendency to come undone in areas of highly concentrated magic, e.g., Hogwarts, the Ministry, Glastonbury, or for that matter, Skegness. As she worked mainly in cotton, wool, and silk, she was in close contact with the Muggle cloth trade and had made a point of employing Muggle-born buyers since the late sixties to ensure she got competitive prices. That was some seriously radical thinking from a woman who provided robes for some of the oldest institutions in the wizarding world.

Then there was Totnes itself, with its hippy Muggle shops and its decaying castle perched atop a rather steep hill. The wizarding community there was young and vibrant, mainly young Muggle-borns moving into properties vacated by elderly witches and wizards who had retired there at the beginning of the last century. They had opened Muggle-friendly cafes and bars, taken their place in the local community, and were positively thriving. So, there were many witches and wizards (rather vociferously represented in the *Daily Prophet*) who were scandalised, but despite the Ministry officials who had investigated, no proof could be found of any activity that threatened the Statute of Secrecy. It was an amazing, modern example of how closely Muggles and wizards could live without endangering each other.

Bertie's face had been a picture when she had handed over her scroll for the first edit. She had known it would be returned to her with a blunt request to shorten the eight carefully researched feet down to eighteen inches of 'readable' material. She hadn't, however, been expecting to be summoned to the editor's office and given an ultimatum.

Just because she was fascinated by minutiae, the average readership of the *Evening Standard* despite having been founded on an anti-*Prophet* agenda of truth, accuracy, and thorough, unbiased journalism was not. The *Standard* was about being up-to-date, independent, and punchy. They wanted to tell the truth, but they didn't wish to send their readers to sleep in the process. The choice was simple; either Hermione should finally get with the programme, or she should get out the door.

She had smiled brightly, informed Bertie (who was very much like a favourite uncle) that she lived for just such challenges and that she would have a story for him by the very next week that would be astounding, insightful, and most importantly, succinct. She had then headed to the ladies' loos and cried solidly for a good ten minutes.

She had been so certain that this job would be for her. She, who had suffered so much at the shoddy, poorly researched, Ministry-dictated hands of the *Daily Prophet*. The thought of an authoritative, erudite competitor to the *Prophet* (because one couldn't count *The Quibbler*, not really) was wonderful. She had already proved her abilities as a researcher (if her school work wasn't proof enough, then surely the fact that she'd help find any of those damned Horcruxes was indicative enough of her tenacity, her diligence and her quick-mindedness), and she worked damn hard.

She loved Bertie, with his stripy cardigans and slightly improbable moustache. He had taken her on at the very beginning and had been incredibly supportive as she had tried to hone her writing style, and she hated feeling like she had let him down. Hated feeling like this was something she couldn't do. She had always been praised for her work ethic at Hogwarts. Well, almost always; her mind flickered briefly to the notes scrawled at the bottom of her old Potions essays: *If you do not curb the need to indulge yourself in such vapid discourses outside of the requested topic, it is unlikely you will ever grasp the nuances of the subject itself. Learn to control yourself.*

So what if she over researched her pieces? If deadlines were sometimes just too limiting when a story deserved the extra attention? She couldn't write about something she had no interest in, but luckily she found it easy to become interested in almost anything once the finer details were explored, even if her work being edited down to the bare bones was the frequent outcome. The demands for constant rewrites meant that she had to submit her work even earlier if there was any chance of even part of it making it to print.

She supposed Bertie had tried to be lenient with her, even if eventually she was barred from articles and opinions altogether and given interviews instead, perhaps in the belief that even she couldn't spin a twenty minute conversation over more than two feet of parchment. However, her rather blunt form of questioning didn't always yield the necessary results. It would have been fine in the Muggle world, she decided, but all wizards seemed to expect to be flattered, not interrogated.

It wasn't her fault that there was always so much more to any one topic than most people would ever guess. And she was passionate about certain things. Surely, that was a good quality? So, some wizards didn't like being told that their opinions were outdated, outmoded, and deserved to be thrown out the bloody window, but that was usually because they were outdated and outmoded. It wasn't exactly her fault that their egos made it almost impossible to have a proper discussion.

Was it?

She stared at herself hard in the mirror, hating that even after all this time, she still ended up alone and sobbing in the loos. Her flushed, dejected face stared back at her in rather unbecoming misery. This time, she knew there was little chance of Harry rushing in to save her. She was lucky that Sandra from payroll hadn't found her already, else her dressing down would already be common knowledge.

Thank goodness it was Thursday. Only one more day to go.

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Leaving her wine glass on the low coffee table, she headed to the hallway and plastered a smile to her face before answering the telephone. It was only ever her parents who called her landline, and her mother had an unerring ability to tell when her daughter was unhappy.

"Hello!" she answered, as brightly as possible.

There was a long moment of silence before a muffled voice queried, "Hermione Granger?"

The smile faded. "Yes?"

"Hermione Granger of the *Evening Standard*?" The query was slightly distorted, as if someone were attempting to disguise their voice.

"Who is this?"

"I've got a story for you. New potions shop opening up in Knockturn Alley."

"How did you get this number?" she demanded.

"s in the book," came the terse reply. Which was true, actually. She hadn't honestly considered that a wizard might deign to trace her through Muggle means, else she would certainly had registered the number as ex-directory. "You want to know about this shop, though. The owner ain't right."

"Not meaning any offence to the traders of Knockturn Alley, but few of them are," she snipped. "Now I have to ask you not to call this number again. Good night, si..."

"He's a Death Eater."

"What?"

"Thought that might get your interest. The old pawn shop, down by the pie and mash shop."

"How do you..."

She sighed as the line went dead; she'd rather been looking forward to hanging up on him. It was probably just some sort of hoax. She'd have to see how much it would cost to get her number changed.

Ten minutes later, she had her shoes on and was ready to leave the flat. It was just too good an opportunity to miss, the chance at a real scoop! The Ministry processing of the Death Eaters had been wildly uneven and mismanaged it had provided the *Standard* with fodder for weeks! It would be just like them to have released someone still a menace to the public. Even if she couldn't secure an interview, the news itself was enough to secure her a reprieve. It might even make it onto the front cover, if other news was slow . . .

She paused at the front door.

Still, this person, whoever they were, might simply be attempting to establish an honest business. It couldn't be easy trying to move forward with your life after your own personal pantomime villain dragged you into a war, only to lose spectacularly to a teenaged wizard using a borrowed wand. Did she honestly have the right to go snooping in their past? Wouldn't that put her on a par with Skeeter, Heyer, and the one who had published all those pictures of Ron and the blonde girl?

She plonked herself back down on the sofa and toed off her trainers. Just because all the dangerous Death Eaters were either dead or imprisoned, it was still probably not the best idea to head to wizarding London's most notorious street at this time of the evening, not when it got dark so early. She felt thoroughly deflated. For a minute, she had seriously believed that this might have been the answer to her current dilemma: a genuinely interesting lead, from her first anonymous source. Was it so terrible that she wanted to get a scoop?

Refilling her wine glass, she switched on the TV and flicked to the news channels, as interested in how the stories were selected and presented as the news itself. Her

parents complained ceaselessly at how the dedicated news channels only seemed capable of focussing on one story per day, repeating the same information and interviews on a loop. Having been shielded from much of the recent war, they had never really had the frustration of having only one daily news source in the form of the *Prophet*, a paper that could be described as partisan at best and self-serving and largely fictitious the rest of the time. The *Standard* had seemed like a dream to her, a great white hope. She had been so proud to be one of the founding staff members. The thrill of seeing her name in the by-line far outweighed the dubious honour of featuring in the headlines.

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She found the shop easily, simply by following the rather enticing smell of meat and pastry. She paused outside the pie and mash shop. It looked like one of those genuine old London eateries that promised hot, greasy, tasty food with a possible side helping of salmonella. She sniffed appreciatively. Had Knockturn Alley not leant the air of a stage production of *Sweeney Todd*, she might well have given in. Instead, she moved closer to the half-timbered building next door and peered through the window.

It certainly looked sinister enough. Nothing said 'Dark Wizard', after all, like peeling black paint, cobwebs, and tall towering shelves crammed with dusty bottles. It was a little suspect, those shelves being a week old at most, but then *any* dust that managed to exist in a world of magical cleaning was usually there for effect. The first time she had managed to repair a laddered pair of tights with her wand, Hermione had suddenly found herself incredibly uncomfortable at the memory of Remus Lupin's carefully neglected appearance. He had performed a non-verbal spell during their very first lesson. The patches on his robes had to have been a deliberate affectation. Most likely he had very good reasons for it, but it still jarred oddly with her memory of the kind, likeable older man.

At her knock, the door swung slowly inwards, granting her a glimpse of dirty blond hair and a large beard. She took a deep breath, gripped her wand tightly, plastered her intrepid reporter smile on her face, and began. "Good afternoon. My name is Hermione Granger of the *Evening Standard*..."

"I am well aware who you are, Miss Granger, as I should imagine is most of wizarding Britain."

She stared up in horror. The voice, especially that snide tone, was familiar.

Black eyes stared down at her, narrowed disdainfully, and though it was hard to tell under that beard, she was certain his lips had curled into a sneer.

Worryingly, she was also pretty certain that the owner of that memorable sneer was dead and had been for some time.

It was Snape.

*Professor Snape*, her inner monologue corrected, unhelpfully and quite probably inaccurately. Her carefully rehearsed greeting died on her lips.

"Well," she breathed. "Fuck."

His eyes widened slightly. "I had hoped for a rather more structured greeting from one of this country's newest writers. If I wanted base profanity, I could walk down this street any day of the month."

"You knew I was coming?"

"As I went to all the trouble of finding a working payphone in this part of London, you can assume I was certainly sincere about wanting you to come. Now, close your mouth and come inside."

She followed him mutely, incapable of doing anything other than obeying. The shock at seeing him alive and *blond* seemed to have caused her to regress to deferential student.

It was dark inside, the low shelves already crammed with assorted jars and bottles. Something skittered in the far corner.

"I'm still working on the charms," he commented, confirming her suspicions that everything she saw and heard had been designed to be as dark and forbidding as possible. He led her into an equally dismal back office and leant against the uniformly dusty desk.

"It's *you*," she breathed. "*You're* the Death Eater about to open up a shop."

"If that is an example of your deductive capabilities, then it is clear I summoned the wrong reporter."

She ignored the arrogant way in which he used the word 'summoned' and studied him instead. The hair and beard were disconcerting, but there was no mistaking those eyes, or indeed, the nose beneath them. The simple brown robe did little to hide his thinness, and without his billowing black cloak, he seemed slight, almost fragile.

"I saw you die," she whispered. "There's been no word of you for the past two years."

His shoulders slumped slightly, and he seemed to collapse in upon himself. "This is going to be impossible," he muttered. "Sit down and try not to interrupt."

Hermione sat on the slightly rickety-looking chair that he had gestured to and was pleased to discover that its spindly looks were also deliberately misleading. Feeling slightly reassured that it wouldn't collapse beneath her, she crossed her legs at the ankle and looked expectantly up at Snape.

Snape.

The name didn't really do him justice any more. *Professor Snape* was all billowing robes, black cloaks and a presence far larger than his narrow frame. The man in front of her didn't seem to possess any of the vibrant anger or impatience that had let him silence entire classrooms with the rise of one eyebrow, or sent children quaking with the curl of his lip. Even now, sitting alone with the man who had played them all, right until the very end, she realised she didn't feel the least bit threatened. Even when he had insulted her intelligence, a subject still likely to provoke defensiveness, she had only been mildly goaded.

Who, then, was the man in front of her? She immediately chastised herself for sounding like something Rita Skeeter might have written. Yet it didn't make the question any less intriguing. If he wasn't the snarling, arrogant Potions master, what could possibly be left over?

"Are you quite finished?" he asked, managing to sound both bored and amused. Although she was certain that he couldn't possibly have known what she was thinking, Hermione immediately felt warmth stain her cheeks and knew that her blush would likely betray the less than professional quality of her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she began. "But I think I'm allowed a few moments to come to terms with the fact that you're alive. And blond."

He glared at her. She folded her hands in her lap and waited.

"I am going to give you a very brief outline of how I have come to be both alive and about to open a shop in Knockturn Alley. Once I have finished, and please, only then, I will be willing to listen to your questions. Understood?"

She noticed that he hadn't offered to *answer* her questions, but allowing herself to be caught up in the surreal experience of being bossed around by a dead man, she simply nodded in silence.

He glared at her again until apparently satisfied that she had understood his instructions.

"Obviously, I survived Nagini's bite, else I would not be standing here in front of you. I was, however, gravely injured and have spent the greater part of the last two years recovering and rehabilitating. I am about to open this shop and thought it prudent to manage my return to public life as carefully as possible and came to the decision to involve yourself. I have no wish to speak with hoards of reporters, nor do I wish to cause innocent shoppers or as innocent as those likely to frequent a shop in this less than salubrious part of town the possibly dangerous level of shock they might otherwise receive should they enter this shop still under the misapprehension that I am no longer amongst the living.

"I wished to make my survival public knowledge in the least sensational way possible. *The Quibbler* would probably not be taken seriously. So I turned to the *Standard*, in the hope that it might afford me the understated disclosure I seek."

She had a feeling he had been rehearsing the more difficult sentences for a while. His delivery was as precise as always. His voice, it would appear, had escaped the injury to his neck unscathed. She was oddly comforted at the thought.

There followed a long pause until Hermione realised that she was finally free to ask questions. She dragged her eyes away from his rather bizarre facial hair and cast around for an intelligent question.

"Does the Ministry know?"

"Of course they do," he frowned, no doubt questioning her reasoning abilities once more. "I was in a private ward at St Mungo's until only recently. My official pardon was only granted after exhaustive investigation and thorough cross-examination."

"Huh." Well, that explained a lot. She wasn't certain whether the Ministry's role in keeping his survival a secret was better or worse than his having been a fugitive for the last couple of years. It was a terribly huge secret to keep from a public already nervous about the corruption exposed by Voldemort's ascent to power. "Why call me?"

"I told you, though yet to reach its full potential, the *Standard* shows at least some inclination towards competent journalism."

"No I meant, why *me*?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable. "I hoped that, despite my reputation, you might have been privy to enough of my true role during the war to be willing to aid me in this venture."

Again, the line sounded rehearsed.

"Well, that certainly makes sense. After everything you did, I probably owe you a life debt five times over."

"That's not..." he began, then nodded. "Though technically incorrect, you can see this as a way of nulling those debts."

"It hardly seems enough," she mused. "If you knew I would help you, why all the theatrics on the phone? Why not just tell me what you wanted?"

"Because doubtless you wouldn't have believed it was me," he shrugged. "Or worse still, you would have felt compelled to share the information with your colleagues, the Ministry, or more likely, Messrs Potter and Weasley."

He probably wouldn't have enjoyed all three of them turning up to investigate. Especially not if they had tried to fit under Harry's Invisibility Cloak while peering through his windows.

"Harry and Ron *are* the Ministry, these days. Harry's just about done with Auror training, and Ron's got a job in the Department of Magical Games and Sports." It was her turn to feel uncomfortable. "You do know that Harry will want to speak to you, don't you? He never got over misjudging you quite so badly."

He stared at her, and for the first time she was really aware that she was in the company of Severus Snape. The air seemed to leave the room as she realised that, despite the nondescript robe and the dusty shop front, this man had been Voldemort's most trusted servant. The man who had murdered Albus Dumbledore, betrayed the Dark Lord, and somehow survived the attack of a monstrous serpent.

Then he sighed, and in that brief moment, the tension fled the room and the air returned. "I already know of his attempts to clear my name. It was in large part thanks to him that I was finally exonerated." He seemed suddenly frail again, and Hermione wondered how much that admission had cost him. "I will answer his questions, if I can, but not yet. I would ask you to persuade him to refrain from contacting me directly, at least for the time being."

"I'll try," she agreed. "But you must know how hard it can be to stop Harry from acting on something once he's got the bit between his teeth. He's not nearly as bad as he used to be, but something this big..." She let the sentence hang unfinished between them as Snape gave another of his curt nods.

Belatedly, she pulled the slightly battered Dictaphone from her handbag, along with her spiral-bound notepad and a biro. If Snape found her use of Muggle stationery of note, he gave no outward sign of it and simply waited while she set the small recorder up on the desk, next to where he leant.

She sat back down and considered the sort of questions she ought to ask. Where he had been for the last two years had already been covered, and she doubted he would be willing to be more explicit about his rehabilitation. Two years was a very long time, especially when you had access to all the magical healing St Mungo's had to offer; he must have been very ill, indeed. Focussing on the trials of his recovery would be an easy way to win sympathy for him from much of the readership, but she knew without asking that it would not be what he wanted.

Instead, she ought to focus on the reasons for his return. Had he grown weary of solitude? Did he miss potion-making that much? Then again, perhaps it was simply a question of monetary constraint. Two years was also a long time to be out of work, especially when one added the alarming cost of legal representation.

This line of thought immediately led to another. If Snape had been tried, then he must have had access to some form of legal aid it had been one of the first amendments Percy Weasley had forced through in his new role, helping to root out the practices that had led to such wide-scale corruption within the Ministry a job to which his fastidious, diligent nature was vastly suited. Legal counsel, a prosecution, an adjudicator, maybe even a jury. There was a growing list of people who had to have known about Snape's survival, even if you overlooked the Healers who had tended him in St Mungo's. How had it been kept a secret for so long?

A quiet cough brought her back to reality, and she realised that she had been chewing quietly on the end of her pen while staring at her old Professor in his current guise.

"Why the hair?" she asked. "It's a very weak disguise; the moment someone looks at you directly or hears your voice, they're going to know who you are. It seems odd that you've bothered with such a half-measure."

"This is Knockturn Alley," he offered by way of explanation. "Few are daft enough to stare a stranger in the face. Besides, I rarely leave the shop. It's only really there to fool the few passers-by nosy enough to try and peer through the windows." He met her gaze levelly. "There have been a surprising number of those."

Hermione felt a moment's uncertainty. Was he teasing her? To cover her confusion, she found herself speaking without really thinking what she was saying.

"So that hair isn't permanent? Thank goodness for that. The beard alone offends reason."

His eyebrows, which she now realised had been lightened to match his hair, reached new heights.

"Miss Granger, are you in the habit of insulting your interviewees? That would perhaps explain the rather lacklustre articles you tend to produce."

"You've read my articles?" Given his previous answers, she had expected that he had only contacted her as he had been reasonably sure of her response at seeing him.

Knowing that he was familiar with her work, yet had still wished to have her handle his story, gave her an unexpected surge of pride.

"Don't be too pleased. I did, after all, find them rather limited."

She beamed. "After the comments you used to leave on my essays, that's almost complimentary." And it was. He would have had no qualms about demanding she introduce him to a more competent journalist had he felt her work to be substandard. Simply choosing her was a huge, albeit unvoiced, compliment.

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The article had been a masterpiece of understatement, conveying the news of his return as if it were a mildly interesting aside rather than front page material, though, Hermione was thrilled to note, that was where it ended up. The very fact that he had survived was in itself perhaps the most newsworthy discovery since the war had ended. That his recovery had taken place with the full knowledge of the Ministry of Magic could well have been the biggest scandal to hit them since Umbridge's office contents had been seized by the Aurors. Of course, she'd had to beg Bertie to allow her to handle the news so sparingly, but had eventually agreed to let her go her own way.

In the end, her editor had seemed genuinely impressed at how succinctly she'd worded the news of Snape's return. Hermione, however, felt slightly guilty, as if she was letting her personal feelings of obligation dictate a story. She knew she wouldn't have been so delicate with the facts had it been a stranger's story she was telling. Still, for a girl who sometimes worried that her current career was still driven by her exploits during the war, it was really rather wonderful to be given such a visible vote of confidence.

Telling Harry had been surprisingly easy. After hours of imagining the twists the conversation might take, she had chosen to simply sit him down and hand him the copy she had put together for the paper. He was uncharacteristically silent as he read the carefully typed statement, though Hermione could see the blood draining from his face.

He read the final paragraph aloud. "*Mr Snape believes that the few details of his treatment and trial that the Ministry of Magic were willing to release printed in full on page five, and the information he has provided here, should adequately satisfy those who might question his right to retake his place amongst Britain's wizards. As such, he explained emphatically to our reporter, Hermione Granger, he would not be granting any further interviews, save on the subject of his new business venture. He also warns that the shop, located at the north end of Knockturn Alley, is 'not open to time wasters, lollygaggers or any members of the press ill-advised enough to ignore my request for privacy.'*" He folded the paper and handed it back to her. "He doesn't want to talk to me, does he?"

"Not yet, no," she admitted. "But he says he will answer your questions at a later date. It was difficult enough for him to bark those few statements at me, and he was the one to arrange our meeting." She reached out and took Harry's hand. "Are you alright?"

"It's good news, isn't it? He survived. It's only right that he finally be allowed to live life on his own terms. How did he seem?"

"Smaller. He's still aloof and impatient, and when I annoyed him, slightly terrifying, but you can tell he was badly hurt."

"If you see him again, will you tell him that I don't need to ask him anything? I can't really express how grateful I am for everything that he did, and so I won't waste his time by trying. Unless there's a particular way he feels I can repay him, then I'll simply do as he asked in the interview and keep my distance."

Hermione nodded, honestly relieved at his response. Sometimes it was surprising just how much her friends had changed in the short time since war had ended. "Of course, but I can't imagine I'll see him any time soon."

She made her way back to the potions shop (or 'Ye Olde Potions Shoppe', as she had christened it in her mind, in keeping with its Dickensian aura. It was certainly better than the name Snape had settled on.) the day after publication. She wasn't sure if Snape would have seen the article yet, and she was proud enough of her work to want to ensure that he did. Of course, he would probably have only negative things to say about it, but she wasn't going to let a thing like that deter her. Since landing the scoop of the year, she had never felt more like an intrepid reporter.

She was distracted enough by the tantalising smells emanating from the pie shop that she didn't immediately notice the crowd gathered outside Potions: Ingredients, Bespoke, Wholesale. They were mostly the usual rabble of Knockturn Alley undesirables, but she noticed a few of her rivals from the *Prophet* amongst their ranks.

It seemed that, despite her efforts, Snape's return was not going to pass unremarked.

They seemed to be having some sort of difficulty entering the shop. As she watched, a witch in silver robes was pushed out the door into the awaiting crowd by some invisible force. The crowd didn't seem to mind in the least being barred from the shop and seemed to be taking it in turns to try and force their way inside while indulging in the sort of petty crime that keeps a crowd entertained.

She watched in completely unprofessional glee as Aubrey Heyer had his pockets picked by a diminutive wizard (she was almost certain the thing under the fraying cloak was a wizard) before making her way towards the door. A slight cheer went up as she arrived, and the crowd parted happily to let her through.

"Maybe he'll turn up now she's here," she heard one of them say as she stepped through the narrow door.

She entered easily enough and looked round in interest. Inside, the shop was gloomy and smelt slightly of burnt cabbage. There were a few people quietly browsing the shelves and throwing furtive glances at the counter. Snape was nowhere to be seen; instead, a stooped old man with receding, greying hair was behind the counter, bagging the purchases of a wheedling Rita Skeeter.

"Surely you must know when he'll be in?"

"Any questions of a potions nature can be addressed to myself. Now, if that's everything, I'll bid you good day."

"He'll want to speak with me," she assured him, her forced smile becoming even more strained.

"That doesn't sound like potions related to me," the old man grumbled, raising his wand from behind the counter. "You wouldn't be wasting my time, would you?"

Skeeter flinched. "Half an ounce of beetle eyes, then."

"We only sell by the ounce here, madam."

From the healthy pile of ingredients stacked on the counter, Hermione surmised that the conversation had been going on for some time. She settled to watch the argument in open amusement, knowing that even if Skeeter were to see her, she would not deign to acknowledge her. Hermione's job had somehow made them peers, and the older woman had become cautious around her, finally recognising that she may have met her match.

The old man looked up to see Hermione hovering near the dried Ragwort, and she worried for a moment that she, too, was about to be accused of time wasting and subjected to whatever punishment was being meted out to those found guilty. His eyes really were very piercing, despite their rheumy greyness. He held her gaze even as he began to measure out the shiny black orbs, before raising an eyebrow and jerking his head towards the door to the office she had been lead through only days before.

Ah.

She slipped through the side door and sat herself down on the rickety-looking stool she had occupied before. It was less than five minutes before she was joined by the old man.

"It is *you*, isn't it?" she asked.

"Of course it's me," he sighed. "Who else would I let handle my stock?"

"I'm just intrigued by your sudden taste for dressing up," she shrugged, reassured to find that his normally terrifying glare didn't translate particularly well onto the old man's face. "Is this going to become a theme?"

He leant against the battered desk and crossed his arms across his narrow chest.

"I've only officially been open for eight hours and already I've made more than I hoped to in the first month. People are flocking to the shop in droves, and the enchantments only keep out those that have no intention of buying anything. Once they realised that, I started raking in the Galleons, even though I told them that there was no chance of seeing Snape."

Hermione attempted to arrange her features into a look of concerned understanding as she kicked the bag holding his copy of the article under her chair. It occurred to her that she had entered the shop without meaning to buy a thing, but she filed that question away for a different time and listened sympathetically as he began to rant.

"I'm getting letters, too, from people I've never met. They want to know everything. Was Dumbledore some sort of megalomaniac? Did the Dark Lord strike me as lonely? Is it true that Draco was my son?" He looked faintly horrified at that thought. "I don't know where they get these things from. The way Skeeter was talking, you'd think the Death Eaters were just a handful of fetishists with a bad reputation. It's only been two years."

"The *Prophet* delivered wildly contradictory coverage from the very beginning." Hermione shrugged. "First there was no threat at all, then Voldemort was going to kill everybody in their beds, then it was the Muggle-borns that were the danger. All people really know is that they were scared witless. It didn't help that Harry Potter disappeared for almost a full year during the worst of the violence, only to destroy the Death Eaters in the space of one night. Even the coverage of the final battle was mixed: so many traumatised children giving contradictory statements. No one who was involved in the worst of it really wanted to talk about it. The press simply filled in the blanks."

"You never tried to set them straight?"

She squirmed under his intense gaze, uncomfortable as always at the thought of speaking about the war. "How could I? I spent much of that final year cut off from the world. Even Harry only knows part of the story. Dumbledore's portrait is probably the only one who knows exactly what went on during those last few years, but even his knowledge is limited concerning what happened amongst the Death Eaters." She dropped her gaze. "There are still people missing, you know. Hardly any of You-Know-Who's surviving followers were in a fit state to talk. The Ministry had enough Dementors left under its control to kiss the ones that wouldn't stand down. Those who were acquitted were conveniently under the influence of the Imperius Curse and can't remember a thing."

Glancing up, she watched as heavy disappointment clouded his face. For an awful moment, she thought that he was disappointed in her and was surprised at just how crushed it made her feel.

"I had no idea it was that bad," he admitted. "Lucius did try to warn me. Perhaps I was foolish thinking that I could simply take a new place in this world, hoping that being absolved of my crimes would allow me to lay the past to rest." He dropped his hands to his sides, suddenly looking very tired. When he spoke again, he sounded resigned. "Perhaps I was too hasty in refusing to discuss my greater involvement during the recent war, or indeed, the one preceding it. I had hoped it wouldn't come to this."

Hermione blinked. "To what?"

When he spoke again she could tell it was through gritted teeth. The Polyjuice Potion, or whatever variation of it he was using to disguise his face, was beginning to wear off, leaving him with a strangely piebald appearance, his awful beard beginning to re-emerge. Staring as she was, she didn't immediately grasp the meaning of his next words.

"Don't make me spell it out, Granger. The need to publish my side of the story. To share my part in the events, answer all the questions that it seems the public desires to hear. Correct any misassumptions." When she simply blinked again, he sighed. "I want you to write it for me. I'll pay you handsomely for it, though I can't afford to give you a whole lot upfront and I understand that your full-time work will come..."

Hermione closed the narrow space between them and wrapped her arms tight around him. "Thank you!"

They both froze. Though she didn't dare meet his eyes, she could feel him staring at her in a frank amazement that probably rivalled her own, but his voice, when he finally spoke, was as carefully bored and precise as ever. "Miss Granger, do you not think it perhaps unwise to attack a man with my reputation?"

"That had just occurred to me," she admitted to his armpit, her arms still locked around his narrow waist.

"So why do you persist in hugging me?"

"Honestly, I was afraid to make any sudden movements."

"It's a little late for that. Kindly unhand me."

-x-

He'd made her sign a confidentiality agreement the moment she'd said yes; of course he had, he was Snape. She was fairly certain that an affliction worse than severe pimples awaited her if she tried to break her promise of discretion. Still, it wasn't until she had got home and changed out of her smart work robes into her pyjamas and settled on the sofa that she considered what she had just got herself into. She had Apparated home in a cloud of feverish excitement at the prospect of becoming a published author, yet sitting alone in the dark, she found herself wondering if she really wanted to know the truth about Snape.

*Snape*. She had thought about him since the war, of course. Had cried herself to sleep a couple of times at the thought of a life so tragically wasted. It had all been so terribly romantic once his story had come to light, even if Harry had shouted it in a garbled rant across a battlefield. The man had dedicated his entire life to the memory of the one he loved. Such devotion hadn't married at all with the dour, impatient man she remembered from school, but she hadn't quite been able to resist wondering what it must be like to be loved like that.

Of course, rationally she knew she should have found it a little creepy. If Neville, say, had formed a lifelong passion for her, she would have felt embarrassed and awkward and more than a little pitying. Slavish devotion worked well in fictional romance, but would have most likely become irritating in real life. That hadn't stopped her wondering, though. About Snape, not poor Neville. But then, Neville had never had Snape's style.

She curled her feet underneath her and leant back against the cushions, a slow smile creeping across her face.

*Authored by Hermione Granger, O.o.M., First Class.*

It had rather a nice ring to it.

# Chapter Two

## Chapter 2 of 3

When her editor gives her one final chance, Hermione leaps at the opportunity to interview the ex-Death Eater opening a new shop in Knockturn Alley. After all, all the dangerous ones are dead. Aren't they?

"Are you crying?"

Hermione wasn't entirely certain why she had neglected to consider that a record of Snape's experiences during two wizarding wars would be anything other than horribly sad and horribly horrifying. She had returned to his little shop directly after work on Thursday evening, armed with Dictaphone and notepad, ridiculously eager, she belatedly realised, to delve into his past. She had also neglected to use her waterproof mascara that morning, an oversight that was going to cost her.

She sniffed resolutely, if a little loudly, and attempted to muster something approaching professional detachment. "No. My eyes are getting tired, that's all. It's an odd light in here."

"You're bawling your eyes out."

Apparently she'd failed.

"Well you can't blame me, can you? This is just so sad!"

"I know that, Miss Granger," he replied a little briskly. "I lived through it, remember?"

At that she broke down completely, apologising profusely and scrubbing at her face with an already ink-stained tissue. Her best efforts to calm herself, as he brusquely ordered her to, resulted in her breathing rising to hysterical little gasps.

"I'm just... so... so... s-s-sorry! It's just... that... I hadn't... th-thought... about it... like... that. You always... seem... s-s-so calm..."

"For God's sake, Granger, go and wash your face!"

The face in the mirror was frightful. She was red cheeked, her eyes were washed out, and she was unattractively snotty. She had even managed to smudge ink on the tip of her nose. She let the tap run until the water was icy cold, splashing her face until she finally felt her breathing subside. It was hardly professional and utterly mortifying. The opportunity of a lifetime, and she had managed to foul up so completely, so early on. This was their first day together; what chance now he'd let her return again?

She felt rather ashamed of herself as she returned to the table in the little kitchen above the shop. This was Snape's story, after all. It was one thing for her to find it all so terribly tragic and romantic in her head, but it was quite another to burst into tears after he had given her the honour of placing her in his temporary confidence. He had chosen to tell her his tale so that he wouldn't have to face this kind of reaction himself. It was utterly selfish of her to get so emotionally involved when he was doubtless finding this hard enough, anyway. She could only hope that he wasn't going to rescind their deal.

He was busy at the counter when she finally resumed her seat at the table, his back to her. Hermione sat down in silence, ignoring the urge to begin blathering in apology while he was so obviously avoiding her gaze.

She chewed her lip unhappily as she stared at the papers in front of her. She had only managed to broach the first of the neatly listed questions she had devised as starting points before the rush of memories that accompanied his reply had caused her to tear up. She had no idea how she was going to cope if he ever let her continue onto the more difficult questions.

Returning to the table, he set a chipped mug in front of her. "Chamomile. It's good for the nerves," he explained unnecessarily, nudging the sugar bowl towards her. "I'd suggest you sweeten it, too. Help settle you a bit."

This unexpected kindness caused her eyes to fill again, and she gratefully accepted the scratchy sheet of kitchen roll he handed her.

"I'm so sorry," she apologised before blowing her nose. "It's very embarrassing, falling to pieces like this. I just haven't really thought about it in so long."

"Well, it's only natural that it was a traumatising experience for you. I imagine you've managed to suppress a lot of it."

"I've never really spoken about it to anyone." She'd tried to tell her parents, but she'd glossed over so many of the details in the past that it was impossible to make them understand. "At first it was all too fresh, and afterwards we were just so glad it was over that we never brought it up."

She sipped from her mug, more appreciative of the warmth and sweetness than the drink itself.

"Maybe it was unfair of me to ask you to be the one to listen to this. You were closely involved, after all." It was then that she realised that he'd made himself a mug of the buttery, floral tea as well.

"No, I'm glad you did. I'll be fine. I always feel a lot better after a good cry, don't you find?"

He looked understandably uncomfortable, and she was a little surprised when he chose to answer. "I wouldn't really know."

"Well, of course not! I'm sorry, I wasn't suggesting you were the crying type, I..."

"No, it's not that I'm especially brave or stoic just the opposite in fact. I fear that if I were to allow myself to cry, I just wouldn't be able to stop."

Before she had realised what she was doing, she had reached across the table to squeeze his fingers. He raised an incongruously blond eyebrow, and she let go before he had the chance to pull away.

"Drink your tea," he told her.

-x-

She cried again that night as she typed up her notes onto her laptop. The tea really had been thoughtful, and he had certainly been surprisingly gentle with her afterwards. *Gentle*. That wasn't a word she would ever have associated with him. Funny how you never saw teachers as real people, capable of a whole range of traits and emotions. It was all too easy to think of them as being two-dimensional, a bit like parents. She supposed he was a man just like any other. Maybe he sang in the shower and scratched himself when he thought no one was looking.

It wasn't really a comforting thought. Not the scratching, though that certainly wasn't something to dwell on. Admitting that Snape was human would mean accepting that he had felt every moment of pain or neglect or mistrust directed at him throughout his life. It made his survival more miraculous than she'd even considered. It was more than she wanted to consider.

She was almost glad that she wouldn't be able to return to the shop until Sunday afternoon. If she were going to do him or his story any credit, then it was obvious that she was going to have to toughen up a little, at least while she was around him.

-x-

After the intense quiet of Snape's kitchen, the noise and bustle of the *Standard's* offices seemed blessedly ordinary and impersonal. By lunchtime, however, she was forced to admit that her mind was still in the little flat above the shop. She wasn't daydreaming per se, but she did come awfully close. It was perhaps the first time that she hadn't been entirely focussed on her work.

Sunday afternoon found her sitting in the dismal back office, Snape evidently having decided she wasn't to be trusted to keep her composure if he allowed her upstairs. The shop was open, but the bell above the door only rang fitfully throughout the day, and for the most part, they remained undisturbed.

The questions that she'd chosen for that day concerned the timeline of Voldemort's first rise to power and the period after his disappearance. The questions were a little dry, perhaps, but it was important background information. Perhaps Hermione could have unearthed most of it from old issues of the *Prophet*, but she decided that it was important to hear the period described by Snape. Maybe she was chickening out slightly by leaving out any question regarding the prophecy, Snape's decision to turn double-agent, or the event that destroyed Voldemort's physical body, but there were no embarrassing tears, in itself an improvement.

She also learnt that Snape did not respond well to staged questions. She would ask about a certain topic or event, and he would talk at length, his voice slow and considered, with Hermione occasionally prompting him once he began to falter. Eventually, however, her own opinions and experiences asserted themselves, and she found herself ignoring her question sheet as the interview turned into a conversation and, at times, an outright argument.

-x-

"I don't see why the Malfoys deserve a special mention."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Lucius paid the lion's share of my medical expenses. He also paid the deposit on this shop. It will be many years until I can pay him back. Until then, he deserves my gratitude."

"Considering you made an Unbreakable Vow and, you know, did what you did on Draco's behalf, I'd say he owed you."

"It was Narcissa's request, not Lucius', though it, too, came with obligations."

"I'll say."

"No, to her."

His long fingers snatched up the Dictaphone from where it stood, largely forgotten, on the table between them and turned it off. He stared stonily at the slim recorder, and Hermione found herself wondering if his familiarity with the device had come purely from observing her, or if he had some closer association with recording equipment. It was certainly unlikely that any pure-blood would associate the narrow device with espionage, had he ever chosen to utilise one. That would be a question for another day.

Without looking up, he switched it back on and placed it on the table, and continued to speak as if there hadn't been a pause.

"She trusted me enough to fly in the face of her own sister. To disobey a direct command from the Dark Lord. She entrusted the care of her child to me. I was already aware that Dumbledore wished for me to be the one to kill him." He paused again, and when he resumed speaking his voice was pitched so low that Hermione feared the recorder would be unable to pick it up.

"Believe it or not, I had never killed before that night. Oh, I had seen murder done and done nothing to prevent it. I had hurt people, cursed people, delivered wounds that may have proved mortal, but I had never knowingly taken a life. The nearest I had ever come was delivering the prophecy that orphaned young Potter. Narcissa's request allowed it to become an act of compassion. I did what I did to save her son, not simply because I was ordered to. It very probably saved my soul."

And didn't that just turn the whole world onto its head? Finding out that Kreacher had been lonely and terribly misunderstood had felt a lot like vindication. After all, she'd told everyone in that house that they ought to make more effort to be nice to him. Realising after all this time that the Malfoys had not only supported Snape after the war, but actually been responsible for his continued humanity throughout . . .

Any attempts at thanking Narcissa Malfoy would probably be as awkward and as well received as the hug she had tried to bestow upon the weeping house-elf, but Hermione knew already that her annoyingly Gryffindor sense of honour wouldn't let her rest until she had at least tried.

-x-

She skirted around the topic for days before she finally worked up the nerve to ask him about Lily Evans, the girl who eventually became Harry's mum and unwittingly ended the First Wizarding War by refusing to stand aside and let a madman murder her infant son. She expected Snape to react angrily to the line of questioning and suspected he'd refuse to answer, despite the fact that he had been uncomfortably honest so far. His actual reaction, once he finally understood her mumbled question, took her by surprise.

"Oh God, not you, too," he sighed. "I really hoped that that wouldn't follow me into the afterlife. It's not easy to control extracted memories without a wand, especially when you are dying. Of course I thought of Lily. I wanted him to know that I wasn't a monster. Some of the better moments in my life were to do with Lily. I was a better person around her. I certainly didn't expect a teenaged infatuation to haunt me this long."

"But your Patronus was a doe?" she pushed.

"And? What's yours?"

"An otter."

"And are you in love with someone who has an otter Patronus? Did Weasley's Patronus change shape when you dated?"

"How do you know about that?"

"I thought the whole reason you became a journalist was to prevent the kind of twaddle one sees in the gossip columns? Now answer the question."

"No. At least I don't think so. I'm not sure he ever cast one while we were together. Mine certainly stayed the same."

"Well there we go. Patronuses are a very personal form of magic based almost entirely on emotion and emotive memories. I have no idea why mine should be a doe other than the fact they are remarkably skittish and have little common sense."

"They have dark eyes like yours, too."



"That is a frankly ridiculous piece of romantic dribble, and I shall kindly overlook it."

"Please do." Figuring that things could hardly get any more awkward, she continued. "You asked Harry to look at you. His eyes..."

"Are very like his mother's, yes. As it was, I had a whole little speech I'd been planning for months. Unfortunately, I passed out before I was even able to start it."

Hermione wasn't entirely sure she believed that, but she pushed on, regardless.

"Perhaps you could pretend to be just a little bit in love with her? It's just so very romantic."

"I have no inclination to be portrayed as a fool. Why do you think I want this book written? *blinded* in that woman's name surely that's enough?"

That night, she realised she had taken hardly any notes. So much of their conversation had been just that conversation. She had sat and talked with him for hours. It had been surprisingly easy. She was already looking forward to Tuesday, when she would have enough time free to talk to him again.

-x-

The narrow stairs to the flat were hidden behind an old velvet curtain and creaked terribly. They were the last of the deliberate creepy affectations. The flat itself, though obviously belonging to a bachelor, was perfectly habitable.

The first time she'd been allowed up there, she'd been a little too on edge to take anything in. Now she looked around in interest, noting the worn, but serviceable cupboards in the kitchen and the bookshelf that extended over the door frame. She stilled the urge to stand on her tip toes to read the spines and busied herself with the kettle instead.

She was searching for a plate for the biscuits when Snape joined her. It wasn't until he accepted the proffered gingernut with a sigh that she realised just how much at home she'd made herself in the little space.

-x-

"Did it change? Your Patronus? Once you stopped needing Lily's memory to cast it?"

He looked uncomfortable. "I don't know."

She frowned. "But..."

"Since Lily's memory lost its power," he interrupted quietly, his eyes fixed upon the table, "I have been unable to cast that particular charm."

"But you're free," she whispered. "Doesn't that make you happy?"

In the silence that followed, she risked sliding her hand across the table towards his. To her surprise, he permitted the contact for a few long seconds before pulling his hand away.

-x-

She settled into the chair beside the steamed up window and took a grateful sip of her tea. It seemed odd coming to Hogsmeade after so long away. The little village seemed smaller than ever and had lost much of the magic that had entranced her as a child.

It was just her and Luna, so far. Once, she would have felt uncomfortable trying to make conversation with the younger girl, but she had come to admire her. She ran *The Quibbler* almost single-handedly, relying on guest writers for some of the articles, but producing many herself. She might seem unfocussed, but her work ethic had to be formidable. She simply never felt the need to show it off as Hermione would have done.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?" Hermione apologised, placing her bag on one of the still vacant seats.

"That's all right," the blonde girl smiled as she scooped the marshmallows from her hot chocolate, one by one. "You have a full-time job and lots of other friends. Of course they come first."

Hermione placed her chamomile tea on the table and frowned. "You're one of my best friends, Luna."

"That's a very nice thing to say." She looked up thoughtfully, her spoon suspended in midair. "You seem happier now. I was worried you weren't enjoying your work."

"Honestly, I wasn't," she admitted. "But writing is what I enjoy. I think I might finally have found my niche."

"I think you could be very good," Luna smiled. "If I could afford to hire you full-time, I would."

"I don't know if my style would suit *The Quibbler*."

"That's only because you don't take it seriously," Luna pointed out with unsettling honesty. "If you put your mind to it, I should think you could even find a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. They're very impressed with determination."

It was possibly the second biggest compliment she'd received in her literary career.

-x-

She rewound the Dictaphone and pressed play. Instantly, her small flat was filled with the sound of his voice. It was funny; she never really had the chance to simply enjoy the sound of him speaking when they conversed. Her mind seemed to have to whirl simply to keep up with what he was saying, let alone how he was saying it. Yet sitting there, huddled over her battered laptop, she was free to simply listen. It was almost like being back in class.

"*Hate Horace? Why ever would you think that?*" His voice was rich, but it was the tone she enjoyed most. He sounded intrigued and slightly amused, his dry humour finally evident to her after so many hours of listening.

"*He didn't seem very focussed on potions. He didn't even want to return to teach.*"

"*I never particularly wanted to teach it, either. It's a rather thankless task.*"

"*He was rather lazy.*"

"*He didn't like to undertake any unnecessary enterprises, it's true. I'd say that was rather a reasonable quality.*"

"*He didn't even lift a finger when Ron was poisoned. Harry told me he just stood there!*"

"*Well, it was rather unexpected for the boy to start frothing at the mouth. Maybe he was just testing Potter.*"

She could hear her own indignant splutters and remembered the utterly incorrigible expression on his face as he had almost grinned. Her recorded protests died very quickly after that, and she wondered if he had noticed the effect his near-smile had on her. She sincerely hoped not.

*"I'd already expressed my opinion that the boy was probably receiving help from an outside source. If he hadn't been consistently outperforming you, then I would have presumed that you'd taken him under your wing in lieu of Longbottom. I doubt it was quite as touch-and-go as you were led to believe. As it happened, there was a simple antidote for the entire range of poisons that present those symptoms. It wasn't the most sophisticated murder attempt; the boy's heart really wasn't in it." He cleared his throat. "Horace had just such a vial, clearly marked, not so very far from where the bezoar was stored."*

*"He said that Harry's quick thinking had saved Ron's life!"*

*"You seem to be forgetting that he's a Slytherin. I doubt he was ever that interested in the Chosen One's brewing abilities."*

They'd already wandered so far off topic that Hermione wasn't even sure what they'd been discussing, but she'd pursued the argument to the end.

*"Ah, yes, the Slug Club. Surely you don't approve of such favouritism?"*

*"Perhaps I wouldn't, had I not benefitted from it myself. I was in the Slug Club, of course I was. It didn't matter that I was a poor, surly half-blood; it wasn't my conversation that he was interested in. He was the one who secured me a position with a brewer when everyone else in this school had written me off." His words took on that careful, precise tone that suggested he had considered this subject in detail before. "Dumbledore despised him for being a coward, but Gryffindors don't always understand what courage really is. He continued to support talented students despite their House or blood status throughout the Dark Lord's ascent and continued to support them during the first war. That is why the Death Eaters were looking for him, not his brewing prowess. He's certainly a proficient potioneer, but they already had me for that. He continued to aid his protégés after he left the safety of Hogwarts, even though he was one of the few who believed that Voldemort would return."*

*"He seemed very interested in those with influential relations."* She wondered if she sounded quite so strident in all her interviews.

*"Well, he was. In order to promote his talented band of half-bloods and Muggle-borns, he needed to make connections. He had a rather blatant way of going about it, but his methods were successful. You would have been part of his club even if you hadn't been friends with Potter. He didn't feel the need to include Draco, despite the message such an oversight sent to the Malfoys." His chuckle came through the tiny speaker as a deep, throaty rumble. "Besides, his return meant that Albus had no choice but to finally grant me the Dark Arts job."*

She could almost hear the cogs turning as she'd mulled over his words.

*"He returned to fight. In his pyjamas. He battled You-Know-Who . . ."*

It was a bit disconcerting, really. So much of her identity was based in what she knew and what she believed. The more time she spent talking to Snape, the less certain she became of what that actually was.

-x-

It wasn't until her stomach began to rumble that Hermione realised she was supposed to join her friends for dinner in less than half an hour. She pushed the slight feeling of guilt aside as she sent her Patronus off with a message for Harry and motioned for Snape to continue speaking.

It wasn't until the large silver stag filled the doorway that Hermione realised that hadn't perhaps been the best method of communication to opt for.

"Honestly, Hermione! We hardly ever see you anymore. That's the second night you've had to cancel. I think you should tell your boss that you need to reduce your workload."

She flushed instantly. She hadn't thought to inform Snape that she'd cancelled a previous night out because he'd had the night free to be interviewed. Glancing across the table at his pale face, she realised that he probably hadn't even listened to the message.

The silence that followed was heavy and awkward, dragging out between them until Hermione's stomach had rumbled again. Snape was up, reaching for his cloak and heading down the creaking stairs before she had chance to speak. She nearly tripped in her haste to catch up with him as he exited the shop out onto the street.

She was breathing heavily by the time she joined him in the queue in the shop next door.

-x-

The pie was as delicious as she had feared. It was just her luck to find her absolute favourite new food in a place that you had to risk being mugged to approach. The gravy had soaked through the pastry in places, causing it to fall apart at the touch of her plastic fork, letting the filling spill out onto the mashed potato.

"It feels so wrong, eating out of polystyrene while wearing robes," she mused.

"You can take them off if it would make you more comfortable," he spoke idly.

To hide her sudden confusion, she searched for another topic. "The man who served us. It was his hair in the Polyjuice Potion, wasn't it? The day you asked me to author this book?"

"Nigel? Yes, he let me borrow his face for a few hours in return for some topical cream. What of it?"

Hermione dropped her fork into the container, no longer quite so hungry. "He works just next door. How did you know that no one would realise you couldn't possibly be him?"

He grinned at her then, his black eyes twinkling with unexpected warmth. "They all knew. Knockturn Alley has a very odd moral code, but they look after their own. I'd been trading with them for two weeks before you showed up. It was a joke at the expense of those who wouldn't normally be seen dead on these narrow streets."

He looked very different when he smiled. The tired lines of his face seemed to even out to make room for the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Hermione found herself grinning back at him, unable to stop the silly smile from creeping across her face.

-x-

The look on her face must have given her away quite neatly. She'd had every intention of helping Luna celebrate her birthday, despite the sometimes unorthodox path the day could take, until she had realised that it fell on the Sunday she'd set aside for going through her notes with Snape.

"I think she might have a secret boyfriend. Always cancelling. She certainly looks like she's doing something more fun than working."

She had been scaling down her social life so that she could interview Snape. She had been taking on less at work in order to spend more time with him. Of course, it was all in the interest of her eventual career. If the book performed well, then she might have a serious career ahead of her in writing. Her articles at work were less thoroughly researched and dramatically shorter than before. Bertie had actually called her into his office to speak about her work. She had been certain that she had been about to

face the sack, but instead he praised her new concise style, saying it showed a real maturity. She had felt like a fraud. She wondered what Snape's reaction would be to the fact that he finally had her writing only the allotted amount. It had driven him to distraction when she was at school. He'd probably find it hilarious.

Or maybe he'd wonder why she was letting her real work suffer. He probably hadn't considered why she was spending so much time with him. She had already had her suspicions confirmed that he was actually rather lonely. He might not have realised that she was spending more time with him than strictly necessary. He might believe that she pitied him. Worse yet, he might realise the truth.

But what was that?

That in actual fact she was the one who was lonely? Not for friends or colleagues, but for the special companionship that it seemed only he could provide? The endless hours of talking and sitting and just being with someone, one special person. That it was fascinating watching the vicious teacher she remembered and the romantic hero she had imagined occupying the same space. Watching them evolve into an entirely new person. A person she knew to be brave and vulnerable, stern and gentle, arrogant, yet, woefully unaware of his true worth and a whole slew of other wonderful, frustrating juxtapositions that...

*Holy crap.*

She really hadn't seen that one coming.

Fancying him had been one thing. Admiring him for his bravery in the war was completely acceptable. Even the fierce gratitude she felt for being the one he had chosen to open up to even if simply because he required a writer she still felt incredibly touched that he had chosen her.

But this thing that she felt churning away under her ribcage . . .

However would she be able to face him, now that she knew that she was falling in love with him? Not with the memory, or the tragic hero, or even thank God her old teacher, but the man she had been planning to go and see tomorrow rather than going to one of her oldest friends' birthdays?

Well, she wouldn't go. She hadn't arranged to go and see him, not properly. So he had grown used to her just dropping round whenever she had a spare couple of hours, but there was no real reason for him to expect her. She would owl him and let him know...

But owling him would suggest she had been planning to go and see him. He might think that she felt the need to apprise him of her whereabouts. Which was just silly.

She would go to the party, and she would see Snape on the Thursday like they had planned.

-x-

"Hermione! It's so wonderful to see you," said Luna, handing her a cupful of what Hermione optimistically hoped was punch. "But really if you'd rather be with your boyfriend, I wouldn't mind at all."

"I don't have a boyfriend," Hermione protested. Her new self-awareness made her almost painfully aware of the fact.

The birthday girl studied her quietly for a moment. "Well, of course you don't. Now try your drink. It's a medieval recipe meant to raise the spirits and balance the humours."

"It actually works," interjected a rather flushed-looking Ginny, pausing to hug Hermione before refilling her glass. "Though that may have more to do with the fact that it appears to have fermented than any alchemical properties."

Hermione took a seat on one of the blankets that had been spread on the grass, enjoying the late spring sunshine and listening to the lazy conversation as it flowed around her, glad that she had come. Since school had ended, it was rare for so many of them to assemble in one place. It was lovely to see just how far Luna's social circle extended these days, so different from the odd, lonely girl she remembered from Hogwarts. All of them had changed.

She nattered quietly with Harry and even managed a friendly, if brief, chat with Ron before both boys headed off to paddle in the stream at the bottom of the meadow. It was rather lovely to stretch out and enjoy the sunshine. She'd kept herself cooped up indoors a lot recently. Maybe Snape would agree to having their next interview out in the sunshine? Surely there was someone left on Knockturn Alley who hadn't donated a strand of hair to Snape's campaign for anonymity? She'd rather it was someone a little less wrinkled than Nigel, though maybe the thought of him and his topical cream would help to rid her of this one-sided obsess...

She stopped herself, guiltily. What would her friends say if they found out that the hours they believed she was at work, she was not only interviewing Snape but daydreaming about him, too?

-x-

Thursday afternoon she tidied her desk, submitted her corrected copy for its final edit, and Apparated home. Normally, she would have gone straight to Snape's house, but it had been a long, airless day in the office, and she felt the need for a shower first. That she spent more time than usual fixing her hair and reapplying her makeup was simply because she felt like doing so.

It took longer than usual for Snape to answer the door. He didn't answer the first knock, and she became worried that he might have had an accident brewing. Tonight was their prearranged time to meet, after all. Finally, after the third knock, the door opened and he scowled down at her.

"Oh. It's you."

The coldness of his greeting took her carefully light smile and crumpled it. "Is this a bad time? I thought you were expecting me?"

"So I was," he mumbled. "You'd better come in."

For the first ten minutes, she was convinced he had somehow been alerted to her feelings for him and had come to regret showing her any kindness that might have led her on. He seemed utterly repulsed by her. She was almost in tears by the time she came to pack away her quills.

He escorted her to the door, his face as black as thunder. She sniffed resolutely and dug deep inside for her best professional smile.

"Thank you so much for your cooperation. The publisher will send you a proof as soon as it's bound."

She turned to spin away.

"Wait!"

She caught herself in time, the momentum causing her to stagger. "Yes?"

"Perhaps I might see perhaps you would be so kind as to let me see each section as it is completed? I am still a little apprehensive about so much of my life being made public . . ."

Her eyes narrowed. "You hired me for my professionalism," she snapped. "Please have a little faith in me."

"I do," he admitted. Something about his response made her regret her tone, and she found herself relenting.

"Of course you'd want to see it. I'll bring you my chapters once they're ready to be seen."

-x-

It was a hard book to write. She wanted to present the truth as unfettered as possible, yet she felt it her duty to paint Snape as she had come to know him: brave, honest, and above all, honourable. She didn't wish for the darker parts of his history to become sensationalised, but neither did she think he wished them to be brushed under the carpet. Rewrite followed rewrite as she found she could not write about him without it sounding like romantic drivel or to be so emotionally removed as to sound like the instructions on a DVD player.

It was impossible to write it as he had told it; it was all too coloured by her personal experience. Instead, she chose to write it as she had heard it, the story of a man in an impossible position. A man who somehow balanced petty cruelty with great nobility.

It was also rather surprising how demanding the actual writing proved to be. She wrote for a living and was used to working quickly, yet framing a book was entirely unlike producing a series of articles. Her work hours were pretty flexible, provided she produce quality material within an allotted time frame, but eventually she conceded defeat and requested a sizeable chunk of her annual leave in order to work uninterrupted. At least there was no need to look for an interesting angle with this story she was utterly fascinated by the man's past and just knew that others would be, too. Until the *Standard* had arrived, most people's knowledge of either of the recent wars had been gleaned from the *Prophet*, and even the least discerning reader must have noticed the Grawp-sized holes in their reporting.

Every couple of weeks she would visit Snape to hand over her chapters. Had she not been used to the brutal editing process at the newspaper, she doubted she would have been able to let him see her unfinished work, but the only comments he ever made were when he felt that a topic hadn't been covered in enough depth or he felt that her interpretations of the other characters Dumbledore, Malfoy or even Voldemort were a little off.

"No one ever realises how funny the Dark Lord could be. Of course, during the second war it was all killing and Crucio, but the first time I met him, he was utterly charming. He could hold the entire room captivated or have them in stitches. It's one of the reasons so many people were willing to follow him. He was incredibly handsome before he lost his original body, and he had a way of making you feel like you were the only person in the room. Time and again, he would make time to go and talk to the outcasts who came to hear him speak. He had a way of making you feel special. For many of us, no one had ever taken the time to treat us like that before."

-x-

Staring at the bound proof with its plain black cover, Hermione wanted to cry.

She was immensely proud of herself; how could she not be? How many people, witch or Muggle, got to see their work published at such a young age? She had already made Flourish and Blotts' pre-order bestseller list. Or rather, Snape had. His publisher had already mentioned that they might have other projects lined up for her very soon and that she could well become a household name in biographical and historical writing. It was wonderful.

It was also one of the saddest days of her life. Probably the saddest day since the war had ended, at any rate. With the book completed, there was no more reason to go and visit Snape. Yes, she would see him at the book launch, and there were various publishing functions to attend, but never again would she have the cosy, informal time spent at his kitchen table drinking tea and just being able to talk to him.

She had told him enough about herself for him to write her biography, had he so wished. She couldn't think of anyone who knew so much about her. Her parents had never understood much of what she had told them about her magical life. Ron and Harry, though she loved them dearly and they loved her back, had never had any interest in her Muggle experiences. Snape knew about her disastrous pony-trekking experiences, her love of films, and had even listened to her recount her primary school discos to the point where he could probably do all the moves to the Birdie Song and the Agado.

She would miss having someone to talk to like that.

Strike that. She would miss *him*.

-x-

She had only ever been to Muggle book launches before, slightly underwhelming affairs on the top floors of the local Waterstone's bookshop. A reading, a signing, maybe a glass of fizzy wine. A photographer from the local paper and a few people from the industry.

Which, it turned out, was nothing like a magical book launch. The crowds that had attended Gilderoy Lockhart's book signing, even including the innocent shoppers who simply wished to purchase their children's school books, paled in comparison with this.

Flourish and Blotts had been magically extended to such an extent that the bookshelves seemed to be lost in the distance. The graceful little gallery had been stretched to fit a long, velvet-draped table and seats for Snape, an unexpectedly large entourage from the publishers, and various Ministry officials. Glowing orbs of light floated serenely over the crowd, and every spare space seemed to have been piled high with copies of the book.

It had taken Snape a lot of deliberation to finally decide on a title, she knew. The almost painfully self-explanatory sign above his shop had convinced her that the flowery, alliterative or punning titles so favoured by the publisher were unlikely to appeal to him. *Triptych: A Political, Personal and Martial History of the Recent Wizarding Wars* suited him somehow, as did the plain black jacket with its silver title.

She had become so used to seeing him hiding beneath a potion or with that ridiculous yellow hair that the memory of his normal appearance had faded to a vague recollection of crooked teeth and black robes. It didn't really sit with the man she had been spending her afternoons with, and she was slightly apprehensive about how he might appear that night.

Hermione took a seat at the end of the long table and listened to the noise welling up from the crowds below. She had been aware that the book was eagerly anticipated, but she hadn't expected such an overwhelming response. It was the first even vaguely academic record of recent wizarding history she should know, having tried crosschecking the details she was less familiar with in the other titles already on the market. While to me after to me endlessly re-examined the details of the Goblin Wars, no serious historian had considered discussing the events that had only recently turned their world on its head. Even Grindelwald's exploits on the continent had yet to receive any real attention. The lack of twentieth century studies had dismayed her, but something told her that the crowds cheering below were less interested in the academic merits of the volume than in the little-seen man himself.

When Snape finally made his entrance, the noise escalated so suddenly that she almost spilled her champagne. He allowed himself to be escorted to the middle chair and gazed impassively down at the crowds below before sparing a brief glance in her direction. Hermione attempted to muster something akin to a conspiratorial grin, but he had already looked away by the time she hitched the smile onto her face.

After that, the rest of the evening passed in a rather uncomfortable blur. She had stood to be introduced, but despite a few catcalls from her friends in the crowd, she was given a polite smattering of applause before the attention of all present focussed back on Snape. He'd spoken, beautifully and politely, of course, but with none of the warmth or humour she was used to hearing. The crowd didn't seem to notice.

Once the formal part of the evening was over, they headed downstairs to mill with the crowd. Feeling rather overlooked, Hermione contented herself by drinking rather a lot of champagne and dutifully chatting with members of the press, most of whom she was going to see at work tomorrow anyway, and explaining continually about the confidentiality agreement that had stopped her from telling anybody beforehand. Bertie had been unable to attend, having been previously invited to a great-niece's birthday party, and given her parents' preferred state of wilful ignorance, they had yet to learn that the book, with its stark portrayal of the realities of war, even existed.

She made one last concerted effort to make her way towards Snape when she noticed him looking especially bored, but was elbowed aside by a blonde witch at least eight inches taller than herself. Looking up, she realised that many of those now vying for the man's attention were similarly statuesque women, all glittering in beautiful robes.

She could hardly blame them; the Snape on display tonight clean shaven, his hair back to its intended colour, and dressed in flowing dark grey robes with black trim looked amazing. There was no chance of his ever being pretty, but there was something so compelling about his dark looks and that rich voice. She'd been foolish to think that she was the only one who would notice.

She sighed, grabbing another glass of champagne as it floated past. She'd made a conscious decision to dress conservatively, not wanting to draw any attention away from Snape. Now she simply felt dowdy. To think she used to long to blend in with the crowd. She didn't remember being overlooked hurting quite this much.

A loud giggle suddenly erupted from one of the women by his side, and Hermione realised she didn't want her drink after all.

Leaving her glass next to one of the rapidly diminishing piles of books, she said her handful of goodbyes and slipped away unseen.

A copy of the final book was waiting for her at the flat. Turning it over in her hands, she found his curiously unanimated picture glaring at her from the back cover.

She placed it face up on the coffee table and headed to bed.

## Chapter Three

### Chapter 3 of 3

When her editor gives her one final chance, Hermione leaps at the opportunity to interview the ex-Death Eater opening a new shop in Knockturn Alley. After all, all the dangerous ones are dead. Aren't they? EWE? Short and sweet!

When Hermione awoke, she was annoyed, but not all that surprised, to find several photographers gathered outside the entrance to her block of flats, failing spectacularly at remaining unobtrusive in the distinctly Muggle area. She had known that she was pushing her way back into the spotlight by taking on Snape's book, but she had hoped that the gutter press wouldn't be too interested in the lowly author.

Briefly, she considered lowering the wards around her flat and Apparating directly to work, but decided it would be easier to simply run the gauntlet of assembled paparazzi. Harry, she knew, would go mental if he learned that she had slackened her security the moment she made her way back into the public eye. Besides, the wards would only have to be replaced, and it had taken her ages to tweak hers so they wouldn't interfere with the television reception. Five minutes of aggravation now was far better than a missed episode of *Diagnosis: Murder*.

They were still there the next morning and, to her growing chagrin, the morning after that. She took to spending a lot more time visiting Harry. Grimmauld Place, despite its many drawbacks, was still blessedly invisible. Now that she was no longer trying to balance working with Snape alongside her actual career, her free time had begun to feel horribly empty once more. She was even considering visiting her parents in Australia, deterred only by the fact that it would only take one look from her mother before the whole embarrassing story of her unrequited feelings for Snape came pouring out.

Maybe she just needed to talk to someone about this. No matter who she told, they'd probably react with horror, or ridicule her so thoroughly that even she'd start to see how ridiculous the whole thing was. She was just considering who would be the best person to confide in when suddenly the photographers outside erupted into catcalls and the *pop!* of flashing bulbs. There was a louder bang and then silence. Two minutes later there was a knock on her door.

It was Snape.

Unlike the photographers, he had obviously realised that she had been unable to ward the entire building without alerting her Muggle neighbours that something odd was afoot and had probably used a wandless *Alohomora* on the downstairs keypad. Or the kids from number three had left the front door unlocked again.

Hermione rushed to the window. It was either that or rush to him, a gesture she doubted he'd appreciate. Frowning through the glass, she realised that the street below was curiously empty.

"What did you do to them?" She tried to sound disapproving, but somehow ended up sounding envious. It seemed celebrity had not softened his dislike for time wasters.

"Nothing permanent," he sighed. "They'll be back in a couple of hours."

"How do you know my address?" she pressed, watching as his eyes flickered round the small flat.

"It was listed in the phone book, next to your number."

Which rather solved the question of how the photographers from outside were aware of where she lived; officially she was still registered as living with her parents.

As she led the way through to the kitchen, she realised just how much she had missed him. She'd made a passable attempt at not thinking about him after the book launch, but having him here, in her rather ordinary Muggle flat, made her feelings rather difficult to ignore. It didn't help that he'd made no attempt whatsoever to disguise himself. His hair fell in its inky curtains on either side of his cleanly shaved face, and he was dressed in black a faintly Muggle ensemble of trousers, shirt and coat, it was true, but the effect was as striking as ever.

Worried that she was about to start staring at him again, she busied herself with making tea. The ordinary variety she didn't want him knowing that she'd purposely gone out and bought chamomile, even if it was his favourite.

"How's the shop?"

"Bustling," he replied gloomily. "It's inundated by autograph hunters. Takings are through the roof. I've had to hire an underling to man the till while I hide in the back, brewing. If anything, it's worse than when I was hated."

"I'm sure a lot of people still hate you," she assured him, cautiously sniffing the milk.

"Quite," he replied, apparently distracted by the lucky cat waving happily at him from the herb rack.

"I imagine your assistant isn't too pleased at being called an underling for a start."

"Of course you find this amusing. My life isn't my own any more," he complained. "Again," he corrected, taking an offered space at the breakfast bar and glaring at the fruit bowl instead.

The kettle was replaced on the counter with a resounding *thud*, and Hermione stared at him in dismay as she processed just what she'd done. "I'm so sorry."

"What? No, the book was perfect. It's people who are stupid. I should have realised they'd be like this. Actually I came over here to see if I could thank you properly. Maybe take you to dinner."

She blinked at him in uncertain silence until she realised that his gaze had turned into a glare.

"That would be lovely," she answered faintly.

-x-

All the effort with the Sleekeazy's, Hermione decided, had been distinctly Not Worth It. She had expected to receive some attention as they sat together attempting to enjoy their meal, but she hadn't expected the obvious, open-mouthed stares they were receiving from the tables closest. It made any attempts at gauging his feelings about her impossible. His face was completely blank for much of the time, and his answers betrayed his distraction.

Finally, after an excruciatingly uncomfortable hour of small talk and stony silences, he hissed, "How do you bear it?"

"You sort of get used to it, eventually," she sighed. "Does that sound horribly conceited? I realised that you either dealt with the stares or you allowed it to drive you insane. Harry wouldn't leave the house for a little while. It put his whole life on hold."

"You tackled it head on," he reminded her, refilling her wine glass. "You were one of the founding writers for the *Standard*."

"And you published your account of what actually happened." She held up her hand, preventing him from filling her glass to the brim. She'd filled a lot of the silences by drinking and was conscious that she still had to Apparate home. "No one else even thought about doing it. We wouldn't have been able to go through it all again. We were all so busy trying to move on that I think we chose to forget a lot of it."

"I had a lot of time to think about things. It's hard to move on with your life when you're mostly paralysed." He topped up his own glass and took a sip. "At the time, it was difficult to have nothing but those memories to hold on to."

That was the most detail he had ever gone into about the time he spent in St Mungo's after the war; it hurt to remember that his suffering had continued long after the rest of them had begun to pick up the pieces of their lives.

"But I made you relive all of it, didn't I? I didn't really consider what I would be doing to you. Can you forgive me for that, Hermione?"

"Of course!" she protested. "I think it helped me just as much to realise why we had to go through all of that. At the time it was simply because we knew that no one else could. Understanding the reasons behind all the decisions that were taken made their consequences a little easier to bear." She toyed with the stem of her wine glass as she continued. "Seeing you, talking to you this often I don't dream about you dying anymore."

It was funny; all those weeks spent together, and this was the first time either of them had spoken quite like this. Perhaps it was the wine or the candlelight, but the restaurant seemed to have faded away, leaving a different level of intimacy behind than there had ever been at his kitchen table. It wasn't exactly comfortable, their conversation was too raw for that, but Hermione found herself wanting to explore it further.

A clatter of cutlery from the next table over brought her back to earth with a jolt. Snape leant back in his chair, away from her, and folded his arms across his chest. The moment was gone.

Hermione felt oddly bereft. She spoke quickly, unwilling to say goodbye to this new understanding.

"Maybe we can try this again some time. Go somewhere quieter?"

-x-

After the days spent in Snape's little kitchen above the shop, the newspaper office seemed irritatingly crowded and noisy. Maybe, if her fledgling career as an author didn't take off, she should consider working freelance, instead. She knew that Luna would be happy to accept her work, and wouldn't it just be marvellous to sell her pieces to the *Prophet*? How many noses would that put out of joint? And perhaps more importantly, how wonderful would it be to ensure that thoroughly researched, properly written news reached such a wide circulation?

She was idly daydreaming of accidentally forcing Rita Skeeter out of work for good when Colin from the Sports Section perched on the side of her desk.

"So, what's the deal with you and Snape?" He demanded without preamble.

"Huh?"

He dropped a copy of the *Prophet* onto her desk, folded his arms across his chest and grinned. Hermione picked it up gingerly and smoothed it out. She hadn't even glanced at the *Prophet* in years for this very reason; there on the front cover was a picture of the two of them, her and Snape, at dinner. She watched the black and white photograph of herself reaching across the table to cover his hand with hers. She didn't even recall touching him. There were so many little touches between them now, brushing hands, holding her elbow as they walked. The picture, though, looked incredibly intimate. Maybe it was the candlelight, or maybe the fact that each of them was so focussed on the other that neither had spotted the camera. Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't pulled away.

They really did look as if they were on a date.

It was quite an effort to pull her eyes away from the image. She didn't even have to glance at the article to know what it said. The sad part was, though it was as inaccurate as all the other stories about her that had made their way into print, this was a story she desperately wished to be true.

"This is the first time we'd really met since the book launch," she explained quietly. "He just bought me dinner as a thank you."

"Really? You still expected a thank you on top of the introduction he wrote for you?"

She looked up at that. "What?"

"Look, Hermione. Bertie isn't going to be in for the rest of the afternoon. Why don't you go home and think about all this before the Howlers start to arrive?" He dropped his voice. "And before Sandra finds an excuse to start interrogating you."

Normally, Hermione was loath to take guidance from a man who followed the International Gobstones circuit with genuine interest, but for once his advice seemed sound. There wasn't really much else for her to do that day, else she would never have indulged in daydreaming at work. She gathered up her things. Colin kindly didn't even murmur as she slipped the paper into her bag.

-x-

The copy of *Triptych* was on the coffee table where she had left it, only partially buried beneath a snow of magazines and other detritus. On the inside back cover was a smaller picture of her looking calm and serious in her work robes.

Hermione Granger, often referred to as the Brains of the Golden Trio, was a pivotal player in the closing stages of the Second War. Close to Harry Potter since their first year together in Hogwarts, it was she who stayed by his side throughout his hunt for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Horcruxes and personally destroyed one during the Final Battle. She currently is on the staff at the Evening Standard and is known for her campaigning over Rights and Registration. This is her first book.

Really, it was a little damning to see her life condensed into a few short lines. At least they hadn't succumbed to the urge to comment on the Muggle-born status, though there were few indeed who weren't aware of that already.

Flipping the book over, she turned past the fly-leaf and the copyright details in search of Colin's introduction.

She almost missed it. The introduction was the one she'd seen Snape write weeks ago, and it wasn't until she flicked back a few pages that she found the dedication. She hadn't realised that he planned to use one, and she read the two brief lines in interest and then once again, her heart thumping painfully in her chest. By the fifth read she suddenly understood Colin's sly smile.

*For Lilia and Lutria.*

*One gave me the courage to die, the other the strength to live.*

The Lily and the Otter.

Anyone with a rough knowledge of the war and a tentative grasp of the bastardised Latin commonly used by the wizarding world could easily work it out. For a man as cagey with the truth as Severus Snape, he was almost shouting his intentions from the rooftops. For goodness sake, he'd laughed like a drain when she'd admitted that her Patronus shape had been listed on the limited edition Chocolate Frog card each of the Order member had received along with their Orders of Merlin.

Yet did it mean what the gossip columnists of the *Prophet* wanted it to mean? He had told her that Lily, though important to him, had not represented the romantic ideal that everyone else had thought. Of course she'd assumed he was lying, but now she wasn't so sure. Perhaps she, too, was simply a friend.

A friend.

Hermione sat very still, the tastefully bound book still open on her knee.

Going by the press coverage the two of them had received, there could be little doubt that everyone else thought it had meant something far, far more. Maybe this was another little joke, played on those who presumed they had all the facts, like all those Polyjuiced shop assistants. Yet he wouldn't make a joke at the expense of her feelings, would he? Unless he presumed she was in on it?

If and she was only considering this because that's what Bertie was forever reminding her to do, consider all the angles if he had meant it as a . *declaration*, he must be thoroughly confused by her lack of response. He had been the one to contact her after the book launch, after all. He *had* invited her out to dinner.

She closed the book and turned it over. His photograph, still immobile, still scowling, stared back at her.

They'd become close. Of course they had. She's been quite happy insinuating herself into his daily routine, his tiny kitchen, and his biscuit tin, right up until the moment when she'd realised just how much he'd come to mean to her. She knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't have had any qualms about telling her, had her presence been unwelcome. He'd never once implied that he resented her almost constant presence. He'd been the one to suggest she return to him with each completed chapter, as well. She'd been so ridiculously grateful for those extra afternoons, tucked away in his little flat, that she'd never even considered that they might have been about more than editorial control.

If it hadn't been for that awful book launch, she might have let herself believe that he was beginning to feel the same way, but that was before he'd been swarmed by all those attractive women who must have left him in no doubt that he could do a lot better than her.

Hermione traced her finger across his picture, following the curve of his eyebrow then the distinctive hook of his nose and wished that, just for once, Snape didn't have to be so damn enigmatic.

-x-

Hermione spent the next few days ignoring the continued, if dwindling, presence of the press camped outside her building. They'd been moved along twice by the Muggle police already, and she was just waiting for the first unregulated Obliviate before she called the Aurors to arrest all of them. Harry had implied he was simply waiting for her Floo call. She also practised the dubious art of deflecting all Snape-based questions from her friends and colleagues, attempting to simultaneously act as though she had been aware of the rumours all along, then discredit them, aiming for somewhere between flattered and bemused. She doubted she was very convincing.

The rest of the time was given over to the sort of inane pondering that she hadn't indulged in since she was sixteen: did Snape like her? And, if so, did ~~like~~ *like* her like her, or merely like her? And just how much fretting was she allowed to do before he grew bored and consoled himself with Lavender Brown? (Not *the* Lavender Brown, of course, now Lavender O'Leary. She'd married her Healer just months after being discharged from St Mungo's and was disgustingly happy, if the handmade Christmas cards with their obligatory photos of her ever expanding brood were anything to go by.)

The worst part was, she *knew* she was acting like a ninny. All she had to do was sit him down and ask him, and if that proved too difficult, she could always kiss the man. Cosmo and Company were in agreement that men liked women who made the first move, and although she couldn't imagine that any of their writers had ever met a man quite like Snape, if he did leapt away from her in disgust, then she'd at least have her answer.

By the time the evening of their next *date* seemed a little too optimistic at this point and *assignment* more hopeful still their next meeting arrived, Hermione had finally done with fretting and come to a decision.

She was going to give herself one last chance.

One last chance to ascertain Snape's intentions towards her before she gave up on the whole silly idea. She owed it to herself to find out. This wasn't school even if he felt warmly towards her as a friend, with the book done there was no longer any reason for her to try and live in his pockets. She couldn't just drift along, hoping that he might start to notice her . . .

One last chance.

And when she buggered that up, she still had nearly two weeks holiday left to spend licking her wounds in Australia, eating her Mum's cooking.

-x-

He arrived at exactly five to seven, looking neat and elegant in dark blue robes. The colour sat beautifully against his pale complexion, evening out his skin tones and making his dark eyes darker still. The bottle of wine under his arm completed the radiant vision.

"I thought we could stay in," she breezed, reminding herself to breathe. "That's if you don't mind. There are several really good takeaways round here. I thought we could order something in and let them photograph someone else for a change."

She regretted her flippant tone when he frowned, looking slightly pained. "I am so sorry if I've caused you any extra discomfort," he apologised gravely. "I know that you've

tried to avoid the press."

"It's been worth it," she assured him, taking the wine and standing aside to let him into the flat.

-x-

She'd planned carefully. With no dining table, their choice of seating was either the breakfast bar decidedly unromantic or the sofa, which had the same drawback of forcing them to sit facing in the same direction rather than towards one another. Choosing the sofa gave them the option of watching a film, should the conversation fall flat, and the large coffee table held a *lot* of food. The lighting had taken her a while to perfect the candles had made it look as if she was trying a bit too hard, and besides, she wasn't technically allowed them in the flat and the careful Mood Lighting Charm she'd discovered in *Witch Weekly* had been even worse. Eventually she'd settled on the standard lamp in the corner and the light on the extractor fan over the oven. If the latter was a little too stark to be considered romantic, it was at least bright enough to ensure she didn't fall over anything on her way to the fridge.

Snape was happy to let her place the food order whether from lack of experience or previously latent good manners, she couldn't tell and he didn't seem to notice that she had ordered enough to feed herself on leftovers for the rest of the week. He placed a little bit of everything on his plate as she poured the wine and, after the tiniest bit of prompting, gave her an update on the comings and goings at the little shop and the denizens of Knockturn Alley with whom she'd become familiar during their time together. Hermione found herself asking questions about the regular customers and realised, to her dismay, that she had begun to miss them as well. Luckily the conversation moved on to the latest Ministry gossip before he could ask her about her week, as she didn't think he needed to know quite how much of her free time had been spent fretting over him. In fact, when she made a point of forgetting about the way his voice made her want to shiver or the fact that his cologne made her mouth water each time he shifted on the sofa, it was still surprisingly easy to talk to him. So easy, in fact, that she began to question the sense in risking such a lovely, unexpected friendship.

After a while the conversation meandered back to her work, and she finally told him about the ultimatum Bertie had delivered on the very day that Snape had phoned with his bizarre tip-off.

"You were my last chance," she admitted, twirling noodles round her fork. "You worked out surprisingly well."

He chuckled at that, deep in his throat, and Hermione found herself pushing on. "I wanted to ask you about the dedication."

And with that, the sense of relaxed reflection vanished, and she became very aware that she was curled up next to Snape on her tiny sofa, bare feet tucked up underneath her, her knee pressed gently against his thigh.

"Ah."

"I wondered what you meant by it."

"I didn't mean to be presumptuous. I might have been your last chance, but you were the first real hope I'd had that there might possibly be a place for me in a world no longer at war."

Which was really rather lovely. Hermione found herself blinking up at him, not quite trusting her voice to reply just then. It was sad, of course, just like everything else he had told her during their time together, but lovely all the same.

"Thank you," she whispered.

The conversation had taken a more serious turn, straying into the same territory they had brushed against in the restaurant, and Hermione was conscious of the same feeling of prickling tension under her skin. Talking candidly with Snape was akin to standing on a precipice, contemplating the fall. That dizzying, breath-stealing feeling of dry-mouthed exhilaration. She surmised from the sudden tension in his shoulders the he seemed to feel it, too.

She took another step closer to the edge. "I was so pleased that you thought of me as a friend."

"Friends," he repeated, and Hermione found herself praying that she hadn't imagined the wistfulness in his reply. "Yes, of course."

Decision made, she took his plate out of his hands and placed it carefully on the low coffee table. He neither resisted nor questioned her, but sat very, very still. She watched in fascination as his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed.

"Yes. But I was rather hoping I could convince you to be more than that."

He sent her a glance, so quick and furtive that she didn't even attempt to read it, and his shoulders straightened almost imperceptibly. Hermione was certain that if he wasn't Severus Snape, he would be fiddling nervously with the cuffs of his shirt. When he spoke he addressed the coffee table, but his voice was carefully light.

"You don't owe me anything."

"That's probably vastly untrue," she mused, "but that isn't why I offered."

He looked up again, this time holding her gaze until her own resolve began to falter. She had been so certain that *for once*, the rumours had been true.

"It wouldn't be a good idea, Hermione. I don't exactly have the best track record. I'm not really what you want."

He spoke with a curious detachment, like he had when she had first interviewed him, his answer sounding oddly rehearsed. Hermione wondered if he'd prepared for this moment as carefully as their first meeting. Maybe he'd had a chance to practice it at the book launch after she'd snuck home.

She'd never been any good at disguising her emotions, not like him. The sudden pain must have been written clearly on her face as he relented slightly, shifting to cover her hand with his.

"You don't know what you're asking."

The temptation to twist her wrist and entwine her fingers with his was strong, but she knew this gesture she'd used it with him a hundred times by now an ineffectual mix of comfort and apology. Then his thumb began to stroke the back of her hand.

"I think I know better than anyone. All the things you've told me. All the things you didn't tell me. All the additional research I couldn't stop myself from doing."

It was another confession of course she'd looked into his life beyond his role during the wars and he must have known what she would find. The lonely, wretched childhood he'd left behind. The full extent of his misery at school. The rumours that had plagued him throughout his career, ensuring he never had the opportunity to leave Dumbledore's side. He must also know that she knew all that already, yet was still asking for more.

She edged towards him, still horribly unsure. He watched her as she moved closer, not moving away, but not exactly welcoming her either. She pulled away with a sigh. She had been so sure.

-x-

She was tidying the kitchen when she heard his approach. That in itself was telling; he could glide as silently as any ghost when he chose, though *what* it meant, she had



no idea. She was confused and horribly close to tears, appalled that she had misread his signals so wildly and devastated that she might have done irrevocable damage to their unexpected, yet cherished friendship.

There was only so much time you could realistically spend on dishes when you had magic, so she turned to face him, resigned to meet whatever brush-off he gave her with as much dignity as possible. The look on his face was strangely intense, and looking up, she realised that he was standing just that fraction too close. She would only have to inch forward to press her damp hands against his chest, and the subtle scent of his cologne was already enveloping her, teasing and dizzying.

"Sev..." she began sadly, only to have her words cut short as he closed the space between them and pressed his lips to hers.

His hands reached up to lightly hold her face. He tilted her head back gently, and she opened to him, conscious only of his mouth, his fingers on her skin and the sudden tattoo of her pulse as it thrummed through her body. The kiss was gentle, slow and thorough, and when he gently sought entrance to her mouth, she could taste the sweet-sour tang of the wine they'd just shared on his tongue.

She shivered beneath him, her hands by her sides, still clutching the tea towel.

He pulled away, breaking the strange spell that had held her captive before him. "Is this what you want?" he asked.

"Almost," she whispered, reaching up onto her tip toes to kiss him back, the tea towel forgotten on the floor as she tangled her fingers in his hair.

-x-

It was strange, having a man in her bedroom. She realised now that she had only ever had boys in her bed until she had persuaded Severus to follow her home. She wondered distantly if that thought should worry her, yet it simply added to the mounting feeling of nervous anticipation that seem to grow with each kiss, each steady caress.

She had planned it all so carefully, though she hadn't really believed it might actually come to this. Everything tidy, her grown up sheets on the bed, the old teddy bear that had survived six years in Hogwarts hidden at the bottom of her trunk was now relegated to the bottom of the wardrobe. The discarded candles from the front room had been carefully placed around that she could light in a heartbeat. Now, as his kisses grew more demanding, she didn't spare them a thought.

Despite the urgency of his attentions, there was nothing rushed in his actions. His carefully controlled ministrations had her writhing against him in frustration. Occasionally he would draw back slightly, as if giving her space to pull away, chuckling when she invariably surged against him, closing the distance between them.

She had hoped, naively, to seduce him. They hadn't made it further than the doorway, and yet it was already obvious that it would be he who was seducing her. The realisation made her stomach flutter uncontrollably. She let him take the lead, helpless to do anything but submit to his every embrace. She would never dare admit it, but he could do with her as he wished. There was nothing she could refuse him now.

He undressed her slowly, carefully, his eyes never straying from hers for more than a few moments, slowly peeling her clothes away, revealing the skin beneath, inch by torturous inch. She knew she was artless in her response, her hands following no set pattern as they roamed across his chest, just desperate to touch him, all of him. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his robe and then again with those of the shirt beneath. Eventually she conceded defeat and let her hands trail across the thin cotton instead, marvelling at the heat of his skin beneath the cloth.

It was mostly dark in her room, the curtains closed, what little light there was, falling from the sitting room through the open door, yet it was enough to see the carefully guarded expression on his face as he pulled away to unbutton his shirt. Her fingers trailed after his, lightly stroking each new piece of skin as it was exposed. Once enough of the buttons were undone she replaced her fingers with her mouth and was rewarded with a quiet gasp as her tongue darted out from between her lips to taste the hollow at the base of his throat.

His actions became less hesitant after that, and once his shirt had joined her pretty lace top on the floor, he let her guide him to the edge of the bed. She watched as he slipped off his shoes and socks, his face hidden by the heavy fall of his hair, his skin pale in the soft light. It might have been the shadows, but she was certain she could make out the faintest smudge on his forearm, where his Dark Mark used to rest. If she brushed his hair aside she knew she would find the scar on his throat, the one he had never offered to show her, even when they discussed the cause. She understood his hesitance then his body bore testament to every piece of evil he had been exposed to, each leaving its mark upon his flesh. Her hand flew unconsciously to her own throat and the silver line at its base, the legacy of Bellatrix Lestrange's knife, and she felt a surge of incredible tenderness towards him.

She unhooked her bra, letting it fall beside his neatly arranged shoes, smiling as his eyes whipped up to meet hers and leaning in to kiss him.

He touched her almost reverently at first before allowing her weight to carry them both down onto the bed. Then, their gentle touches translated into an undignified scramble to rid themselves and each other of the rest of their clothes, kicking off trousers and twisting out of underwear, shivering together at the sensation of newly exposed skin meeting skin.

She would have loved to have taken the time to explore him, to learn to navigate the sharp contours of his body, but that would simply have to wait. Now, she was too consumed by her need for him to wait any longer.

Even then he was gentle, sinking into her so slowly that she found herself bucking against him, pleading in whispers for more *please, just more*. His hips began to move in earnest and neither spoke after that, too intent on the movement of their bodies and the play of lips and teeth over skin.

-x-

At some point, the door closed itself and the little tealight on her dressing table flared briefly before settling into an ember-like glow. It was sweetly serene, lying there, drifting off only to wake herself to reach out and touch him, smiling with each confirmation that he was really there, in her bed. His long hair spilt across the pillow, tickling her face, and his steady, warm breath chased across her skin.

She explored him gently with her fingertips, not wanting to wake him, from the delicate ridge of his collarbone down through the sparse hair on his chest. With her eyes more accustomed to the soft light, she was aware that his skin was more marked than she had first believed, yet less than she might have guessed. Considering their long ago conversations about the war, she realised that she probably knew the story behind every cut and scar on his body. After that it was easy to overlook them they didn't define him, after all. What intrigued her more was the silken softness of the skin at his hips and the feel of his muscles tensing briefly, each place she touched. Retracing her path up his chest she raised her chin, smiling when she realised that he was watching her explorations.

He reached up, pushing her hair back from her face, and smiled. It was that same teasing half-smile that stole the harshness from his face and left him boyish, his normal defences having slipped, and like before, it stole her breath away. His fingers brushed the shell of her ear, making her shiver, before slipping down across her throat to skim across her chest. Hermione let her eyes drift shut as she enjoyed the warm tingling each precise touch elicited from her skin, her hands moving of their own accord to mirror each move he made.

At some point their casual touches became more intense, and their play turned earnest as mouths met and fingers grasped. Their coupling was less frantic this time, less needy and more focussed on the slowly building pleasure between them. She heard herself whispering his name, over and over, and it never occurred to her that she should stop.

-x-

As she lay in his arms, her racing heart reluctant to slow, Hermione wondered if perhaps she was too happy. It seemed as though it couldn't be real. Everything that she had wanted everything that she had needed had been gifted to her by the man sprawled inelegantly beside her. And what a man he was perhaps the noblest man she

knew, definitely the most loyal. It hardly made sense for someone as ordinary as herself to fit into his world of promises kept and debts repaid.

A terrible thought made her freeze

"I never asked," she whispered. "Is this what *you* want?"

He stared at her in silence for a few moments before silently slipping from the bed. She watched him go sadly, struggling to keep her face neutral. If he wished to leave, it was better that she let him go than try to force him to stay against his will. She had been the one, after all, to offer herself without demanding commitment. Really, since the very moment she had answered the phone all those weeks before, he had always seemed too good to be true

He picked his discarded robe up from the back of the chair, but rather than shrugging it back on, he reached inside the pocket to retrieve his wand.

*"Expecto Patronum!"*

The plume of silvery mist that erupted from the tip of his wand didn't quite coalesce into a recognisable shape, yet there was something hauntingly familiar in the way that it twisted and gambolled through the semi-darkness of the room.

"Well," she breathed. "Fuck."