

# Emilie

*by Snow Flower*

Teasing Snape was reckless enough, but a simple dare became the love triangle  
Hermione never saw coming. (DH epilogue disregarded.)

## One

*Chapter 1 of 3*

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epilogue disregarded.)

Disclaimer: I don't own any of it. I'm a poor college student.

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Hermione stared at her reflection, completely astonished. Behind her, Ginny was bouncing up and down excitedly, practically squealing with delight.

"It's perfect!" she gasped enthusiastically. Hermione could only nod dumbly in response.

Her previously tangled and mousy-brown hair had within the space of seconds become long, sleek, and black. Her normal facial features had altered as well, her nondescript medium complexion darkening to a beautiful olive and her eyes suddenly enhanced by glowing blue-green. She looked...

"Stunning." Ginny began circling her and eyeing each individual body part admiringly. Hermione finally mustered the presence of mind to squawk indignantly and turn away from Ginny's roving gaze.

"What?" the other girl asked unabashedly, shrugging. Hermione understood her immediately: neither of them could deny that the glamor was a phenomenal success. Even her body had altered, her average stature and average figure becoming taller and more elongated. She had the long, lithe, dark look of a beautiful Italian dancer, and she was loving every second of it.

"So." Ginny grinned. "When are you going to show Flitwick?"

Hermione paled and lost concentration. The glamor faltered, allowing for the briefest moment a glimpse of the previous her to leak through. "I probably shouldn't show him this one," she reasoned aloud. "It's so elaborate. He'll think it's a waste of time, especially when I was supposed to be focusing on the curricula for the first and second years..."

"Fine, fine, forget Flitwick! Let's have fun with it!" Ginny's face was already transforming, her normally beautiful smile taking on a distinctly mischievous air. "You could have such a good time with this, Hermione!"

The Charms apprentice continued to shake her head adamantly. When Ginny resumed cajoling, she walked over to the nearest desk in the empty classroom and began to gather her things, wishing fervently that she had the courage to do as Ginny had suggested and experiment with her glamor. It had taken her months to perfect it, and here it was...just days before the students were due to arrive for their fall term...and she would have very little free time once she took up her official post as Professor Flitwick's assistant.

Still, she couldn't justify such reckless behavior. The two of them were the only apprentices currently in residence at Hogwarts, and as such they had to be professional and decorous at all times. Ginny was nothing but a bad influence, really...and considering she had fought long and hard for her upcoming post as Defense Against the Dark Arts apprentice, she ought to have known better than to jeopardize their positions in such a way.

Hermione sighed, struggling to hold all her various texts and papers, even in their reduced form. "Don't you have to check in with Harry?" she called, leaving the classroom and hearing Ginny's light step falling into tandem beside her. "It's been a few hours."

"He's in training all day. I won't be able to talk to him until tonight." Again she beamed. "You know, I wasn't suggesting that you do anything illegal. I just meant... maybe have some fun for a change. You have to go into Hogsmeade to pick up those books for Flitwick, don't you?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and I should probably do that fairly soon, too. I still have a lot of work to do on the fourth years' lesson plans."

"So why not go as glamorous you? What's it going to hurt? See how many looks you get," Ginny whispered conspiratorially, and Hermione felt herself flushing hotly. A few days prior, she'd made the grave mistake of admitting to her that she was... well, somewhat craving male companionship since her relationship with Ron had dissolved during their seventh year.

"I still don't think it's a good idea," Hermione insisted. They had alighted outside the entrance to her chambers, and Ginny waited at a polite distance while she murmured the password. The portrait admitted the two girls, whereupon Hermione immediately began to put away her lesson plans and check her schedule for the remainder of the day.

Ginny, as usual, wandered aimlessly, touching and observing every available thing within her living space. Watching her out of the corner of her eye, Hermione couldn't help but smile despite herself. She had a sharp eye and the superb reflexes of a born athlete, and yet Ginny still possessed a childlike impulsiveness that Hermione found thoroughly endearing. She couldn't help but wish she could experience such joy and spontaneity once in a while.

She was being ridiculous and flighty, she told herself. She couldn't just run off and tease unsuspecting people with her glamor, even if she was rather adept at it. It was brilliant, really, as well it should have been, given the extraordinary effort she'd devoted to it over the summer. Professor Flitwick had insisted that she would be a shoo-in as a Charms mistress if she desired the post, and the full-body glamor was thus far the one area of her studies in which Hermione had found herself genuinely challenged and taxed. It was exhilarating.

The glamor itself was exhilarating. The feeling of power she'd had when cloaked in it had been... indescribable, really. It wasn't just the bolstering of her self-esteem; she knew she was average-looking at best, and transforming into such a striking person could certainly become addictive. But it was more than that...it was the anonymity.

Ginny would understand that, she reflected wryly. When she, Ron, and Harry had made the decision to return to Hogwarts to complete their seventh year, Ginny and Harry...now in the same grade due to the discontinuity in Harry's education...had quickly resumed their relationship and become a regular feature in the *Daily Prophet*. Hermione considered their affection for one another a blessing, but she also acknowledged that it had been difficult at times to watch two of her best friends fall deeper and deeper into love with one another when all that had seemed to fill her days had been exams.

It had been worth it in the end, though. Her attempt at a romance with Ron was nothing short of a spectacular failure, but her NEWT scores had earned the kind of respect and lavish praise that was unprecedented even for the Brain of Gryffindor. Hermione suspected she would never be able to shake her reputation as a boring, bookish know-it-all, but the feeling of fullness and satisfaction it had given her had been well worth it.

"Come on!" Ginny's voice broke her reverie. "Apprentices can't be late, you know. Apprentices are slaves. We're supposed to be working, working, working."

Hermione chuckled, detouring to her little kitchenette to pour herself a glass of iced tea. "I don't know how the new Defense instructor is treating *you*, but Professor Flitwick isn't like that."

"Snape."

Hermione coughed forcefully. "Pardon me?"

"Snape's the Defense instructor. He's back."

Hermione could practically feel her eyebrows brushing her hairline. "Are you serious? He recovered that quickly?"

Ginny nodded nonchalantly, now standing on her tiptoes to scrutinize the spine of a particularly interesting volume above the fireplace. "Yes. Mum was telling me that the Healers at St. Mungo's finally got him to admit that he was taking an anti-venom potion for months beforehand. He figured that if Voldemort got upset with him, Nagini would be one of his weapons of choice."

"Smart man," Hermione murmured under her breath. For a moment she feared Ginny's reaction, but she was relieved to find that Ginny, at least, shared her respect for their former Potions instructor.

"*That* he definitely is," she agreed. "And he deserved that Order of Merlin, too, I thought...far better than third class, if you ask me. But then again, everyone did put *up* such a riot over him not technically being part of the battle in the end."

Hermione swung open the portrait door and exited into the hallway. She and Ginny had Flooed from The Burrow for their summer studies at Hogwarts, but with the start of term impending, they'd just been assigned private rooms in the castle for the duration of their apprenticeships. Her quarters were very near Flitwick's and the location of the Ravenclaw common room; it took her a moment to orient herself and find her bearings, as it was not a part of the castle to which she, as a Gryffindor, was especially accustomed. "I sense a *but* coming," she teased, tossing her book bag over her shoulder and double-checking that it contained the list of texts Flitwick required.

"I don't think we're going to get along." Ginny appeared to be understating the situation, judging by the scowl on her face.

"When did you see him?"

"This morning. He's as foul as ever. That man will *never* have a friend in his life, I'm telling you."

Hermione felt a pang of regret, recalling what Harry had told her of Snape's memories and the man's deep affection for Lily Potter. Regardless how he'd behaved toward them, their harsh treatment of him over the years had suddenly seemed grossly inconsiderate, to phrase it mildly. "He's probably not used to having any," she pointed out as they skipped from staircase to staircase, skillfully navigating their way out of the castle. "And he strikes me as the kind of master who would want his apprentice to do everything without question."

"In that case, he definitely hired the wrong apprentice."

Hermione barked a laugh. "Are you fighting with him already?"

"We had a... brief discussion about my duties, yes."

"Your duties entailing...?"

"A lot of correcting papers and very little actual training."

Hermione furrowed her brows. "That seems pretty unreasonable. Surely he intends for the two of you to practice together to improve your skills."

"I don't know." Ginny didn't look especially perturbed as she laced her arm through Hermione's and they exited the castle, the warm sun striking their shoulders, bare in loose Muggle tops. "I guess I'll find out."

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By the time they reached Hogsmeade, Ginny had begun to whine about being hungry. Hermione scolded her for not mentioning it before they'd left the castle, but Ginny effortlessly brushed her off and dragged her into Madam Puddifoot's, citing an uncontrollable craving for her particularly good cakes. Hermione bemoaned the prices the resulting dent in her meager allowance as an apprentice, but Ginny happily consumed half her weight in cake and told the sullen young witch at the counter to charge it to Harry Potter's Gringotts account.

"Harry lets you spend his money whenever you want?" Hermione asked doubtfully. She paid for her own light lunch with a few spare coins and glanced dubiously at Ginny.

"He doesn't care. He's getting paid a ridiculous amount anyway."

Hermione couldn't disagree with that. Harry's professional Quidditch career was already proving to be highly lucrative, especially considering the number of shameless promotional posters and photos of him that had been plastered over every square inch of Diagon Alley. The Wizarding population was tickled to have the Boy-Who-Conquered playing Quidditch for their nation, still very much in the public eye, and they demonstrated it liberally and without restraint in buying any product whose name crossed his lips.

"Actually," Ginny continued, "we're thinking about buying a house."

"I'm sure your mum's thrilled about that."

Ginny laughed. "After we're married, of course."

Pulling open the door to the bookstore, Hermione tossed over her shoulder, "Perhaps you'd better let your mum and dad adjust *that* before you start buying houses."

"Wait, Hermione..." Ginny's voice was close to her ear, hissing insistently. Hermione felt herself yanked abruptly backward before landing awkwardly in her friend's arms.

"What was *that* about?" Hermione demanded. But Ginny was too busy dragging her bodily around the corner of the store. Finally she took refuge in the shaded alley, her brown eyes gleaming with some contrivance Hermione didn't want to consider.

"You'll never guess who's in there."

"Not me," Hermione replied testily, readjusting her skirt and checking that all her supplies were still in her bag.

"Snape!"

Hermione felt a slight flutter of curiosity, wondering if he bore any scars from the vicious attack of Voldemort's familiar. Ultimately, though, she didn't see how Snape's presence in the bookstore pertained to her at all.

"And that matters to me because...?"

"Your glamor!" Ginny's voice was rising with her mounting excitement. "Think how funny it would be!"

Hermione choked. "Are you out of your mind? Is this some kind of revenge for the argument you had with him earlier?"

Ginny remained stubbornly silent.

"Ginevra," Hermione said in a slow, warning tone, "you know I'm not going to do that. What would be the point? He'd know it was me. He'd probably see right through all the magic..."

"He wouldn't know it was you," Ginny countered blithely. "Even Snape can't see through a glamor."

"I still don't see the point," Hermione replied huffily. She turned to head back in the direction of the front door.

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Ginny teased. "Think how fun it would be. You don't have to chat him up. Just... say hello to him. See what he's like when he's not yelling and spitting at students. And if you can manage to tease him and make him a bit uncomfortable, well, that's just a bonus."

Hermione cracked a smile. "I doubt he's any more pleasant to strangers than he is to students," she pointed out, but she could feel her reserve waning. She had to admit, even if only to herself, that Snape had always intrigued her. She'd felt something akin to genuine disappointment after the terrible events of their sixth year, and the time she'd spent thinking of him as a coward and a traitor had hurt her deeply. Despite his saturnine and thoroughly unpleasant personality, he was a brilliant academic and an inspiration for her, decidedly influential in her young life.

Talking with him *might* be interesting, for that matter. To pick his brain about various topics when he didn't know it was the insufferable Gryffindor know-it-all... and in a bookstore...

Before she knew it, Hermione had impulsively handed over her book bag to Ginny, adjusted her skirt and shirt, and applied all her concentration to manifesting the glamor she'd perfected earlier. She could feel the thrumming of the energy surrounding her and the absolute flawlessness of her transition: the lengthening and darkening of her hair and skin, the glow in her turquoise eyes, and the radiating appearance of sultry health in her lengthy limbs.

Ginny released a low whistle. "Careful," she warned as Hermione started brazenly for the door. "Snape might decide to *chayou* up."

Hermione chose not to think too deeply on that particular notion. She strolled through the door with as calm a gait as she could manage...no easy feat considering the frantic pounding of her heart and the deafening rush of blood in her ears. The proprietor of the bookstore looked up and locked gazes with her, smiling slightly. His young assistant's jaw hit the floor the moment her legs came within his greedy view.

He couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen, and Hermione knew that her glamor placed her in her mid to late twenties. The poor kid oozed out from behind the counter in a puddle of open admiration and planted himself unsteadily before her. "Can I help you?" he asked breathlessly, his voice cracking.

"I'm looking for Kernwhimple's treatise on the acidosis of Re'em blood in strengthening serums," she replied smoothly. "Perhaps you carry that?"

Snape was within view now, and his head had slowly lifted from the book in which he'd been immersed upon hearing her voice. Hermione frantically wondered if she and Ginny had overlooked the most critical aspect of the glamor...did it fail to alter her voice? Could he recognize her from all those years he'd spent listening to her uncontrolled jabbering in the classroom?

Snape didn't seem to recognize her, however. Instead, he eyed her speculatively. Hermione, somewhat dizzy with sudden nervousness, noted that he'd filled out and gained a bit of color in the year and a half since Voldemort's defeat. The faintest trace of a scar marred the smooth flesh of his throat. She fancied that if she touched it, it would have just the slightest friction against her skin.

The assistant, meanwhile, was staring at her, a wildly disappointed look in his eyes. "N-No," he replied, "we don't. That's a bit too expensive for us..."

"And obscure." The sharp sound of Snape's book slamming shut jolted Hermione. She watched as he returned it to the shelf, his fingers caressing the spine as though they missed it already. "You'd be lucky to find a copy at all, let alone here." He turned to face her directly, and Hermione gleaned some satisfaction from the fact that the feeling of power imparted by her glamor made his frame seem far less tall and imposing. "Why are you interested?" he concluded on a low note.

"I've run out of reading material." She thought of flashing him a smile but decided against it. She had to seem completely cool and nonchalant. "Since you seem to be more informed than I, then, Mr...?"

He stared at her unblinkingly. "Severus Snape."

She allowed one eyebrow to raise admiringly. "Severus Snape? It's a pleasure. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed that piece you wrote on the modification of stirring technique in Wolfsbane."

He did not thank her, but something in Snape's eyes became less hostile and more... appraising, almost.

"In any case, I would appreciate it if you could let me know how I might procure Kernwhimple's treatise, if it is at all possible."

"I can't say that I know of a way," he murmured. His voice was nearly too low for her to catch. "But I do have a few contacts. I could put in some inquiries for you if you desire it."

"I do desire it." Hermione allowed herself a small smile and realized dizzily that his eyes had strayed momentarily to her lips. Reminding herself that this was her Potions teacher...and a mean one, at that...she strengthened her voice and added, "If it's not too inconvenient, of course. It's really only a hobby of mine, so I'd hate to cut into your time if you brew potions professionally. I'm not worth that."

His eyes flashed. "On the contrary"...he began to reach for the volume he'd just returned to the shelf..."I very rarely have the pleasure of meeting someone for whom potions are a topic of interest. But I must purchase my selection." He motioned toward the door. "If you would wait for me outside, I will join you shortly."

She turned, hoping he didn't notice the unsteadiness of her walk, and hurried outside. Ginny, half-hidden behind a tree across the avenue, waved merrily toward her. Hermione motioned for her to remain quiet and arranged herself to look as collected as possible, lounging lightly against the building. Snape emerged a moment later, the warmth of the sun creating a striking contrast against his habitual black cloak and pale skin.

He walked over to her calmly and said, "If you wish for me to make inquiries on your behalf, I shall require a name and somewhere I can reach you."

"Of course." Hermione was still caught in a disbelieving daze, skeptical that he could possibly procure such a rare and treasured volume. She'd mentioned it expressly because she'd known it would undoubtedly flummox the assistant and arouse Snape's interest, but he spoke of obtaining it as though he held no doubt of his own abilities.

Grateful for once to be clothed as a Muggle, Hermione opened her handbag and withdrew a piece of parchment and a Muggle pen. She thought she saw a derisive smirk on his face as she did so, but the smirk vanished when she raised her knee and unabashedly supported the small scrap of parchment against the top of her thigh, neatly writing her name. She wasn't sure whether he was horrified or intrigued by the few additional exposed inches of her leg.

He had a Muggle father, she reminded herself, straightening up and handing him the scrap of parchment. He surely was accustomed to seeing women in skirts.

Hermione capped her pen, daring to meet his eyes boldly. They seemed to have returned to their usual guarded expression. She returned the pen to her purse and said sincerely, "Thank you so much. I appreciate this."

"My pleasure." Hermione refused to believe that she imagined the way his eyes lingered on her parted lips as she smiled. "I shall have a reply for you soon."

She held out her hand obligingly. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Snape."

His hand was large and warm around hers, a sensation that surprised her somehow. She'd imagined it cold, clammy, and forbidding. She watched him curiously as he walked away until Ginny appeared in front of her, once again bouncing irrepressibly.

"So?" she demanded. "What do you think? Did you tease him?"

Hermione's face broke into an enormous smile. "I think he's going to get me a book I've wanted to read for ages."

## Two

### *Chapter 2 of 3*

Teasing Snape was reckless enough, but a simple dare became the love triangle Hermione never saw coming. (DH epilogue disregarded.)

Disclaimer: Again, I own none of it.

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Striding back into the castle after her evening walk, Hermione couldn't help but feel an odd sense of satisfaction by how utterly exhausted she was. It was Friday, the end of the students' first week of the term, and she would have been willing to bet Galleons that she was just as worn down and thrilled to embrace the weekend as they were. Yet despite the long hours she'd put in, her excitement was equal to that of the students. Hermione loved the bustle and havoc...and, more than anything, the crisp promise...of a new autumn and a new school year.

Quidditch season was already in full swing as well, and she could hear the eager shouts of the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff teams as they practiced side by side. Throwing open the massive castle doors, she very nearly ran full-on into Ginny.

"Hey!" Ginny grabbed her shoulders lightly, staring at her intently, almost studiously. "You look horrible."

Hermione made a face, knowing full well that her hair was a mess. The dark circles under her eyes attested to the late evening she'd spent poring over the second- and

third-year curricula, anxiously wondering if any further revision was necessary. "I'm tired," she admitted finally, "and I got splashed with water when I was down by the lake. I guess the squid's in a feisty mood."

Ginny raised an eyebrow and pursed her delicate lips. "Don't say things like that. I don't want to know what would put the squid in a feisty mood."

Side by side, the two apprentices made their way up to Hermione's room, where she fixed herself a cup of hot chocolate and collapsed on her living room sofa. Ginny did the same, though with an antsy air about her. Hermione gave her a questioning glance. "What's wrong? Are you late for something?"

"Snape and I are sparring tonight," Ginny replied. "I've been practicing all day. I'm afraid I'm going to be too tired to do very well."

"How about some medichocolate?" Hermione was halfway to her bathroom, where she kept her stash of medichocolate and various other magical remedies, when Ginny summoned the will to say in a long-suffering tone, "No, much as I'd like that, I have to learn to do it on my own. Snape'd probably sack me outright if he found out I was using medichocolate to beat him."

"What makes you so sure you're going to beat him?" Unbidden, an image of Snape facing Gilderoy Lockhart sprang into her mind. She'd been only thirteen at the time, but she hadn't been immune to the almost serpentine grace with which he'd moved. She suspected that few of his students had ever considered throughout the years their loathed professor's upbringing, but it was obvious that he'd been dueling well, if not competitively, for many years.

"I probably won't," Ginny admitted with good grace. "But I'm damn sure going to try. Do you want to come watch?"

"I doubt Snape would appreciate that," Hermione replied dryly.

"You could go as your other self," Ginny teased. "Did you ever hear back from him about that book, by the way?"

Hermione sighed. "No. I didn't expect to, honestly. He probably got back to the castle and realized that sending some stupid girl he met in a bookstore a volume as precious as the Kernwhimple treatise would be an incredibly stupid thing to do."

"Even though she's gorgeous and was chatting him up, you mean."

"I did not!" Hermione refilled her cup of hot chocolate, her cheeks burning. She didn't think she'd been especially flirtatious in her behavior towards him, but then again, she hadn't exactly been reserved either. Something about the intensity of his dark eyes had made the cool, collected demeanor to which she'd aspired a rather difficult state to attain.

"Oh, come on. I saw the way you smiled at him outside the store. You can't tease him just for the sake of teasing him, but then again, we all know you're a miserable flirt."

Hermione didn't bother to respond. It was a universally acknowledged fact.

"But when there's a book at stake..."

Hermione summoned a pillow and threw it lightly at Ginny's head.

Ginny ducked agilely and laughed. "He won't care if you come watch, you know. Eventually someone will have to in order to grade me. He can't do the final grade during the dueling practical. He can only grade my written and field work."

"Field work?" Hermione asked idly. She was staring pensively out the living room window, regarding the students playing Quidditch and the rapidly darkening Forbidden Forest. It was a beautiful evening, and if she was honest with herself, her long walk had more invigorated than relaxed her. She was suddenly astonishingly awake, and she was curious to see Snape duel Ginny. She was curious to see him period, really.

Would he be at all changed by his encounter a week prior with a stranger in a book store? Or was that an unimportant occurrence to him?

"My very final test...if I pass the dueling, that is...will be any creature he chooses. Werewolves, dragons, that sort of thing." Hermione tuned back in to find Ginny describing the harrowing circumstances of her final test.

"He's going to make you fight a *dragon*?"

"Knowing Snape, no. That would be too predictable."

Hermione felt a slight twinge of irritation. *Knowing Snape*. Ginny didn't know him, not really. None of them did. She'd fancied since running into him in Hogsmeade that she understood him rather better than she'd ever thought, as it was obvious their mutual interests extended to the history of potions; but then again, if Snape had been at all like her, he would have owed to warn Emilie that he hadn't been able to procure the book.

Pulling on her heavy cloak to ward against the dungeon cold, Hermione couldn't help but feel guilty. Impersonating someone else with Polyjuice was sketchy enough, but adopting a glamor and fabricating an entire identity was downright wrong. She shouldn't have let Ginny talk her into approaching him while wearing the glamor, and she most definitely shouldn't have exchanged names with him.

"Well?" Ginny asked, her small frame hanging halfway through the door. "Are you coming?"

Hermione nodded reluctantly, following Ginny through the door and down into the dungeons. With every step the air grew cooler and more humid. As they passed through a hallway in which Hermione had never ventured, she was immediately struck by the sight of a bright gold door several dozen feet ahead of them. "Is that your room?" she asked with a giggle.

Ginny seemed to puff up to twice her natural size and took on an indignant air. "Yes. Snape told me when I moved in that I'd better not 'fancy I could decorate with any ridiculous Gryffindor colors' 'cause he'd destroy them if I did. So I asked Flitwick to decorate my door and put on an Imperturbable Charm Snape couldn't break."

Hermione wasn't sure whether to be impressed by her mentor's ingenuity or disappointed in the Potions master's skills. "And Flitwick was successful...Snape can't break it?" she surmised.

"Oh, he probably could if he tried. He's terrifically good with all sorts of charms, I've found. I honestly think he can tell it was Flitwick's work, and he's just afraid of causing an all-out war with another professor."

Somehow that was even more disappointing. Snape and Flitwick battling over the motif of Ginny's quarters would have been an amusing sight indeed.

They walked in silence the remainder of the way, Ginny calmly leading Hermione through several more winding hallways before settling in front of a nondescript oak door. Ginny rapped lightly three times and then added one particularly forceful *bang* for good measure. Both girls heard an audible sigh echo from within the room.

"You are late, Miss Weasley," the deep voice called.

Ginny flashed Hermione an unrepentant grin and walked through with a swagger. "Sorry, Professor. I had to find Hermione. I invited her to watch us. If that's acceptable to you, of course, sir?" Her voice was honeyed and entirely fake.

Snape shot her a warning look and then deigned to turn his attention to Hermione, who was beginning to feel extremely discomfited. Logically she knew that Ginny was

spending the majority of her time in Snape's company, but there was an undeniable familiarity between the two of them that set her on edge. She felt simultaneously repulsed and annoyed.

"Very well." Snape looked away and appeared to have already dismissed her presence entirely. "In dueling stance, Miss Weasley. I trust you have practiced the spells I assigned you."

The alteration in Ginny was remarkable, Hermione noted. She herself had always performed reasonably well in Defense, but acting on the spur of the moment was not her forte, and she was no longer ashamed to acknowledge it. Ginny, on the other hand, settled with effortless grace into her dueling stance, her eyes suddenly sharply focused and her shoulders flawlessly positioned. She, like Harry, was a born fighter. She didn't have his raw, brute power, but she more than compensated for that fault with her almost dizzying speed and dexterity.

Snape was even faster, Hermione soon realized. The two bowed ceremoniously, faced off, and then Ginny fired off a hex that Snape proceeded to parry almost lazily. He looked like a bored fencer.

"Again, Miss Weasley. Mind your stance."

Ginny attempted again and did a much better job, though Snape still neutralized the hex with no appearance of effort. If he didn't even break a sweat fighting against Ginny, then there was no longer any question in Hermione's mind that he'd been not the least threatened by Lockhart. He'd probably been disgusted with him, in fact.

An hour flew by before Hermione realized it. Snape never seemed to grow fatigued or drained, and for her part, she became increasingly embarrassed by her own lack of dueling skills. He would have been nearly as disgusted by her as he'd been by Lockhart, given the opportunity to watch her duel.

Sweat soon began to bead in glistening drops at Ginny's hairline, and once they had passed the hour mark, her breathing had increased markedly. She was rapidly tiring, and though Hermione had imagined Snape would force her to push through it, he instead astonished her by halting their session abruptly with an almost concerned expression.

"You have overtaxed yourself, Miss Weasley. Sit down and drink something. I have provided a strengthening brew and medichocolate for you." He pointed a slender finger in the direction of the small table and chair at the other side of the room, and Ginny stumbled gratefully toward them. Hermione automatically started forward to follow her friend, and Snape's gaze swiveled over to her. He'd probably forgotten that she was even there.

"Miss Granger. You are Filius Flitwick's apprentice, are you not?"

"Yes, Professor."

"You are living at Hogwarts for the time being?"

Growing confused and mildly suspicious, Hermione licked her lips. "Yes, sir."

He was silent for a moment and then spoke again. "Miss Weasley will need to build up her stamina. Regular hour-long sessions with me will only exhaust her to the point of delirium. If your dueling skills are sufficient, I should like her to practice with you several times a week before attempting to continue with me."

Hermione clamped her jaws shut. She wasn't entirely sure how to respond.

"Well?" he snapped. "Are they or aren't they, girl? If they are inadequate, I will ask Filius to help her."

"I believe they will be adequate, sir," she said stiffly.

"Very well. The two of you will meet twice a week. In three weeks' time, I will begin supervising you. Once Miss Weasley has progressed, she will resume working exclusively with me. For us to continue in this manner will only waste my time and drain her of valuable magical energy."

He turned to Ginny, who was somehow managing to gulp pumpkin juice, gobble medichocolate, and fix him with an irritated look all at once. "You will continue to meet with me Friday evenings, Miss Weasley, to refine the techniques you have practiced with Miss Granger. I expect you to be diligent in arranging times in accordance with both your schedule and Miss Granger's. You will not interfere with her obligations to Professor Flitwick."

Ginny swallowed loudly. "Are we going to study a new hex tonight?"

Snape's expression softened slightly and a strangely discomfited look overcame him. "No," he barked shortly. "I have something I must attend to. We will begin tomorrow after lunch. You are excused." He glanced over at Hermione again before walking swiftly from the room, cloak billowing behind him, as usual.

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"You're absolutely sure Snape won't care if you stay up here?" Hermione called. She was currently relaxing on her bed, partly immersed in the latest edition of *Hogwarts, A History*...updated to include the author's retelling of the epic second battle against Voldemort, naturally...and Ginny was splashing about happily in her enormous tub.

"No," the other girl called through the open door. Hermione could just barely distinguish the long fall of coppery hair over the side of the tub and two small knees protruding through the mass of bubbles. Ginny had immediately fallen in love with Hermione's lush quarters; her own dungeons rooms were well outfitted but remained unavoidably cold despite even the most dedicated application of warming charms. "He doesn't care what I do, as long as I'm around when I'm supposed to be," she continued airily. "I could probably live back at home for all he cares."

"Why don't you?" Hermione tossed aside the book and summoned her hairbrush. She began to unfasten the frizzy plait of hair trailing down her back and work through it painstakingly with the brush, muttering irritably whenever her movements were arrested by an especially vicious tangle.

"Can't handle living with Ron," Ginny yelled back. "He's got a new girl every week. It's driving Mum crazy."

Hermione expected to feel uncomfortable at this revelation, but there was just a dull ache in her chest. She'd feared at the time that her split with Ron would end their friendship entirely, but immediately afterward he'd rebounded and found himself a string of girls to provide the amusement and comfort he apparently hadn't found with her. Hermione was not upset by this, however. She was lonely, but she supposed that was inevitable at an age when many of her classmates and peers were just discovering the joy and value of committed, long-term relationships.

Ron didn't appear to be especially burdened by his lack of a long-term relationship, she thought with a chuckle. He was content to move from girl to girl while slogging through Auror training, and Hermione found that if he was content with his current lot in life, then she could be genuinely happy for him. She rather felt sorry for Mrs. Weasley, though.

"How is your mum, by the way?" For a brief moment she pondered, yet again, chopping her hair short to be rid of its malevolence. Her brush bent alarmingly, threatening to snap in half.

"She's fine. It was rough for a while there, but..." Ginny's voice trailed off, allowing the soft splashing of her movements to reach Hermione's ears. "Dad said she's still crying a lot at night, but she's getting better. They're thinking of going out of town over the Christmas holidays, actually. He's afraid it will be especially hard for her again."

"It probably will," Hermione agreed, horrified by the recollection of the Weasley family's first Christmas at The Burrow without one of their children. She couldn't even begin to fathom the grief and pain of losing a child.

"Anyway, they invited us to come along, wherever they decide to go. I said I'd talk to you about it, but I figured you might want to stay here for the first year. Snape will probably kill me if I leave."

A sharp, echoing rap caused Hermione to jump. "What was that?" Ginny bellowed, equally startled, as Hermione tumbled from her bed and went searching for the source of the sound. She'd already had a few students, mostly scared first years, stop by her quarters for homework help and words of comfort, but it was nearly midnight. Any student caught out at this hour would summarily require a reprimand and a detention, and Hermione wasn't keen on doling out detentions before her first week as Professor Flitwick's assistant had passed.

The sound repeated itself more insistently. She entered the living room and realized that an owl was pecking against the living room window. Gasping, Hermione opened it quickly and allowed the poor creature to enter. It had begun raining perhaps an hour before, complete with blustery winds, and the owl was bedraggled and visibly exhausted.

It was a beautiful bird, a deep brown with exceptionally sharp eyes. Hermione had never seen it before, but she requested some warm bread from the house-elves before indulging her curiosity about the missive it clutched in its talons. Once she'd fed it first, dried it off, and wrapped it in a blanket to allow it to recover, she glanced at the spidery writing on the letter.

Snape. It was Snape's handwriting!

Anxiously she broke open the seal, devouring the letter.

**Miss de Costa,**

***I apologize for the delay in communicating with you the status of your request. I have had rather a trying week, but the good news I have received from a colleague of mine more than redeems this, as I think you will agree. He has procured the work you requested and has assured me it will be delivered into my possession some time this weekend. I can therefore pass it on to you at your earliest convenience.***

He'd signed it simply with his name, but it was somehow the most satisfying thing she'd ever read.

## Three

*Chapter 3 of 3*

Teasing Snape was reckless enough, but a simple dare became the love triangle Hermione never saw coming. (DH epilogue disregarded.)

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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**Mr. Snape,**

***I can't tell you how thrilled I was to receive your letter. I don't think I need express to you the futility I would have faced if I had tried to acquire the volume for myself. Searching the store in Hogsmeade was really a last hopeless effort on my part. I can't believe how immensely fortunate I am to have run into you.***

***You sound as though your work schedule has kept you quite busy. As I am under a fairly relaxed schedule myself at the moment, please allow me to meet you at your convenience. Let me know where and at what time this happens to be. I am simply grateful that you've managed to accomplish such an impossible task for me, and I would hate to impose upon you further.***

***Again, you have my sincerest gratitude.***

**Emilie de Costa**

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**Miss de Costa,**

***Though I appreciate your solicitude, I regret that at present I cannot possibly ask you to stop by my residence to pick up the treatise. I believe arranging a time and place to meet elsewhere would be much more convenient for both of us.***

***As you are already familiar with Hogsmeade, might I suggest an establishment there? I have a preexisting commitment next Friday evening, but Saturday evening would be more than satisfactory for me. I am acquainted with the proprietor of the Three Broomsticks and am confident that I can arrange for the two of us to occupy a table removed from the usual weekend din, if you wish it.***

**Severus Snape**

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Hermione stared at Snape's letter, her mouth hanging open rather unattractively. It was Sunday evening, a mere two days after she'd received the first communication from him. She was supposed to be correcting the essays that the third-years had turned in on Friday, but she suspected that her brain had just given up altogether and shut down in defense.

Snape was asking her out to dinner?

Ginny, curled up beside her on the sofa, started giggling abruptly, and Hermione felt herself flushing in mortification. "Oh, shit," she muttered, crumpling up the letter in embarrassment. "Did I say that out loud?"

"He's not asking *you* out to dinner," Ginny reminded her, as though the observation was supposed to be heartening. "He's asking *Emilie* out to dinner. Where'd you come up with her name, by the way? And on the spot like that!" she marveled.

"It was my mum's best friend's name," Hermione mumbled, sinking back into the welcoming cushions with a groan. "She was killed in a traffic collision when they were in their second year of university."

Ginny's eyes softened and she clucked in sympathy.

"What am I going to do?" Hermione resumed, despairing. "I can't go out to dinner with him. I can't even believe that he asked her on *date*."

"You know," Ginny posited thoughtfully, "maybe we're reading too far into this...being girls and over-analyzing and whatnot. He could just mean that you two will meet, maybe have a butterbeer or a few shots of firewhiskey, and exchange the book. Then you'll go your separate ways."

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she digested this viewpoint. "But then why go to the Three Broomsticks and reserve *table*? He was very explicit about that. We could just sit at the bar if all he wanted to do was have a drink out of courtesy."

"Okay, fine," Ginny replied testily. "Pardon me for trying to take some of the pressure off you. I guess he *does* want to have dinner."

"A date?" Hermione mouthed dubiously.

"A date," Ginny confirmed. "But it's more of an academic date, so maybe that doesn't count as *date* in the strictest sense."

"Semantics," Hermione said dismissively. "I still have to have dinner with him. What am I going to do?"

Ginny chuckled again, downing more of her hot chocolate and staring into the fireplace with an amused look in her eyes. She seemed more wan than usual, and Hermione surmised that she'd spent the afternoon practicing hexes and had worn herself out. "I guess you're going to have dinner with him," Ginny concluded, polishing off the last of the plate of biscuits Hermione had acquired from the kitchens. She looked as though she needed the sustenance.

Rising unsteadily to her feet, Hermione carried the girls' empty mugs to her little kitchen area. "What am I supposed to say?" she demanded aloud. "I'm going to thank him for getting it for me, obviously, but what about after that?"

"I don't know," Ginny was beginning to sound bored. "Speaking of Snape, are you still going to be my dueling partner during the week? Snape wants us to practice at least an hour and a half before I go up against him again on Friday."

"You make it sound like you're planning a battle offensive," Hermione said dryly. "Yes, of course I'll still be your partner. What evenings are good for you?"

Ginny shrugged. "I can work around your schedule. I know you have a lot more grading than me, and you seem to like to go for walks in the evenings. How about Tuesday and Thursday at eight? We can do forty-five minutes each time."

"That sounds fine." Hermione found that she'd been absently wiping out the two mugs for the past few minutes without realizing that her hands were moving. "Gin, do you think I should call it off? The thing with Snape, I mean."

"Why?" Ginny's coppery head swiveled to regard her, her expression understandably thunderstruck. "You want that book. You don't have to tell me that. Your eyes glaze over every time you even talk about it, for Merlin's sake." She was beginning to assume a no-nonsense tone startlingly reminiscent of Mrs. Weasley.

"I know, but this is wrong." Hermione sighed and headed for her bedroom, Ginny trailing behind her. Accepting that she wasn't going to be able to concentrate adequately to get the third-year essays out of the way that evening, she began rooting around in her pajama drawer, finally extricating a flannel nightgown. "It's deceptive," she elaborated. "I'll take care of it, of course...the book, I mean...but Snape's gone through all the work of getting it for me. He thinks I'm someone completely different."

"So?"

"So how can I possibly repay him?" Hermione wailed from the bathroom, where she changed into her nightgown and commenced her nightly ritual of facial cleansing and brushing through her horrible hair. "I'm ridiculously indebted to him for this. I can't offer him money...he would probably be insulted. I could offer to pay for dinner, but would that insult him as well?"

"I don't know," Ginny admitted, sounding genuinely troubled. "I guess I hadn't thought of that. You could offer to pay for your half, but maybe *it's* a date to him."

"But perhaps we're wrong. If it were a date, would he have said something to the effect of, 'Would you like to have dinner with me?' Something more conclusive?"

"My mum says my dad asked her out on their first date by offering to reverse a Transfigured mouse she botched and fetching it food from the kitchens," Ginny replied, leaning against the bedroom door. "They ended up nicking milk and cookies and sneaking out to the lake. I don't think men of Snape's generation are quite as obvious as the fellows our age. Harry was about as subtle as a brick to the head," she added in an amused afterthought.

Hermione snorted. "Harry hasn't got a subtle bone in his body," she agreed. "Nor has Ron, really, but I never expected anything subtle from him."

"As I heard it, *you* were the not-so-subtle one," Ginny pointed out.

Cringing, Hermione recalled throwing herself into Ron's arms at the most idiotically inopportune moment during the final battle against Voldemort. "That was my fault," she agreed. "But my point is, if he's asking me...her...Emilie...out on a date, shouldn't he be a bit more open about it?"

"Perhaps he's shy. Look at what he was like with Harry's mum. He's been in love with her for how many years after she died? He probably still is."

"Very true," Hermione conceded, braiding her hair into a more manageable state and facing the mirror resolutely. Her usual plain appearance, mousy brown hair and dull brown eyes stared back at her. Her skin was growing paler with the autumn cold, her summer freckles fading into the nondescript beige canvas of her face. She couldn't imagine a starker contrast to Emilie's sultry beauty. "So why ask Emilie out to dinner?" she wondered softly.

Ginny gave a shrug. "It's been twenty years. You can't blame the man for wanting to move on."

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**Mr. Snape,**

***I am indeed familiar with the Three Broomsticks. I quite like it, in fact, despite the usual weekend din, as you so aptly put it. I would be more than happy to meet you there next Saturday evening. Shall we say seven?***

**Emilie de Costa**

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**Miss de Costa,**



*Seven o'clock would be fine.*

*Severus Snape*