

The Guardian

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The war is over, but not all the battles have been fought. Hermione seeks help from the ex-Potions master.

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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There are those with money and those without, and then there are those who have never had very much money but have spent their lives around those who do and who suddenly find themselves without any at all. Not a terribly comfortable position.

They called it the Second Battle of Hogwarts. It had come and gone quickly, and then life went on. Everything went back to normal. The students went back to school, the shops reopened. Nothing had changed. For some.

Not for Severus Snape. His role as a spy had been crucial in the defeat of Voldemort, but however much the strategists of the war sang his praises, all anyone heard was "Death Eater". His failure to do the decent thing and die on the floor of the Shrieking Shack was taken by all and sundry as proof-positive of his involvement in the Dark Arts, despite the mediwitch's report that his survival was due to the strong dose of dittany he had taken before entering the shack. There was a formal ceremony and effusive speeches of regret when his tenure at Hogwarts was revoked. He was not officially fired, they had granted him the tenuous grace of retirement, but it amounted to the same, and he had little hope of gaining other employment in the foreseeable future. The pittance of a pension he was given would be just enough to keep him alive; stretching before him was an interminable state of poverty and crushing boredom.

For Hermione, likewise, nothing would ever be the same. Three days after she had brought them back from Australia, an escaped Death Eater had wreaked her vengeance on Hermione's parents. While Hermione was celebrating with her friends, she lost her family and the only real connection she still had to the Muggle world.

In addition to playing a public role as a war hero, mourning her parents and friends, and trying to pass a record number of N.E.W.T.s, Hermione now had to deal with her parents' estate. And it was not a simple estate. There was her parents' practice, for one thing. It was a highly successful dental practice, and there were quite a few bidders for the client list. Then there were the not insubstantial financial instruments and no shortage of investment advisors interested in convincing her to redirect them. Offers were likewise being made on the house, the art, the antique furnishings and the permanent membership in the exclusive, international time-share program that had arranged all their overseas holidays.

All of that would have been enough to overwhelm her, but Porsches rarely explode while speeding down the motorway (at a perfectly safe and legal speed, it had been determined). An intensive investigation by the insurance company had uncovered no obvious cause of the malfunction. A case of accidental death of both parents of a dependent child invoked a quadruple payment clause on the policy, which could be avoided if the proper forms were to be filed. Meanwhile, anxious to avoid bad publicity, the agents of Volkswagen, who make and distribute the Porsche line, were eager to make arrangements for a consolation payment, in return for a binding agreement whereby nothing could ever be said of the matter in any public forum. As small a consolation payment as possible, of course.

Hermione's first meeting with the estate agents had not gone well. There were representatives from a dozen different concerns, each trying to talk her into signing something she didn't understand. She nodded and listened and flatly refused to put pen to paper, finally announcing that anyone who wished could leave their documents for her to study at her leisure. Very few did. Then she left the room.

The one thought that had echoed through her head as she sat through as much of the horror and confusion as she could manage was that there had to be a way to use her magic to get the upper hand. As soon as she was out of sight, she cast a Disillusionment Charm and headed back to the door of the meeting room, where the bulk of her inquisitors were still conferring. "Trying to be difficult, that one is." "It's not a problem. We'll just get her a court-appointed guardian." "How's that going to help?" "Ah, well, it wouldn't, would it, if I didn't happen to know the judge her case is under. He's quite amenable to a ... percentage arrangement."

Hermione went back to her parents' house and had a good, long cry, after which she made herself a cuppa and sat down to reread her parents' will. A smile crept over her face as she made her plans. Then she walked out of the house, past the assorted wards that kept her safe while she was there, and Apparated to a nondescript house in a nondescript neighborhood known as Spinner's End.

It took a bit of convincing to get Severus Snape to hear her out, and once she had explained her predicament, he was less than sympathetic.

"How is this of any possible interest to me?"

"I need someone who is comfortable in the Muggle world and who can walk into a roomful of charlatans and quislings and crush them into a fine powder."

"I repeat, in what way is this of any possible interest to me?"

She sat back and sipped at the tea he had so grudgingly made for her. "The question at hand is how many millions my parents' estate is worth. Tell me what number would interest you."

"Are we talking pounds or Galleons?"

"Pounds for the moment, but it could well be Galleons by the time it's all finished."

"Congratulations, Miss Granger, you have my undivided attention."

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The nicest part of being Harry's friend was the comfortable times they spent together. The second nicest part was having unlimited access to the facilities of the Ministry of Magic. Hermione knew better than to bother filing papers herself. They would have been lost in the morass of bureaucracy, never to be heard of again. Instead, she asked Harry to mention to the Minister that a friend of his was in a spot of trouble and could use some help of a bureaucratic and legal nature. Dealing with Muggle authorities complicated things, but a personal request from the Minister of Magic to the Muggle Prime Minister worked wonders in moving things along. By late that afternoon, Severus Snape was officially declared her legal guardian.

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Hermione had wondered how Professor Snape would make an entrance without his robes swirling around him. She needn't have worried. He managed just fine with a full-cut black trench-coat.

"Only the interested parties are allowed" The clerk's words died under the withering Snape glare.

"I am ... very ... interested."

"Of course, sir. Excuse me..."

"And what, precisely, is your interest?" asked a fussy-looking little man with billowing robes of his own and a decidedly moth-eaten wig.

"That would depend on who is asking."

The little man brought himself up to his full height, which was at least five feet, possibly an inch or two more, and squeaked, "I am the judge overseeing this case."

"Ah, yes. The arbiter." Severus stepped forward and, with a dramatic flourish, drew out a sheaf of documents from an inner pocket, presenting them to the magistrate. "My credentials."

The little man took up the first document and promptly fell back into his chair. "Ah. Yes. I see." He leafed through the rest of the stack. "Well, this all seems to be in order. So. You are the guardian."

"What!" Two of the suit-wearing men who had been standing behind the magistrate, looking smug, leapt forward to examine the documents. Hermione recognized them as the representatives of the insurance agency and the automobile company.

Severus stepped back, folding his arms across his chest and watching as the vultures conferred and bickered.

Shaking his head vigorously, the judge pulled away from the group. "As I said, it all seems in order. It would, of course, have been better if we had been informed ahead of time. A great deal of trouble has been gone to on your behalf, young lady." He looked sternly at Hermione. "We have endeavored mightily to look out for your best interests, and you have gone behind our backs to bring in this" He looked back at the documents. "Teacher. Hardly a personal relation. I am quite disappointed that you did not think that your own government would care for you better than a mere ... educator. It's not the way things are done, you know." He looked at Hermione hopefully.

"I have complete faith in Professor Snape. He will look after my interests."

"Yes. Well. That is yet to be seen, but I cannot override a direct order from the Privy Council. I do hope you know what you are doing, young lady."

"I hardly think the Privy Council would steer me wrong. Do you, your honour?"

With a significant glance at the court stenographer, the magistrate acceded.

The remainder of the session could not have gone better, from Hermione's viewpoint, anyway. Snape sneered and postured and ranted while she sat back and enjoyed the show. She walked out several million pounds the richer.

The sale of her parents' assets went even better. Their financial assets, including life insurance, savings, and investments, were more than adequate to support Hermione in comfort for the rest of her life, but the house was another matter entirely.

When Hermione's parents first married, they had just finished their schooling and were dedicated to working with National Health patients. In those days, public practice paid poorly. Concerned that their children would not be able to afford to give them grandchildren, the parents on both sides had pooled their resources and made the down payment on a couple of cheap, adjoining row houses in one of the less desirable neighborhoods of London. The ground floor of the corner house was converted into a clinic, and the two top floors were connected to make room for a growing family. It had been a great disappointment to them all when Hermione's mother had suffered complications when giving birth and been told not to risk another child.

What was cheap housing in 1974, when the Grangers moved in, had become prime real estate by the time of their murders in 1998. Single row houses were selling at well over half a million pounds. Two adjoining houses going on the market as a unit sparked a bidding war. With Severus glowering over the negotiations, Hermione walked away with a considerably expanded fortune.

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"Can I buy you dinner?"

"Why?"

"To thank you for your help."

"You have paid me for my services." Quite generously, in fact. While he was still far from wealthy, Hermione's insistence on paying him a percentage had both inspired his performance on her behalf and ensured his future comfort. "There is no further need for appreciation."

"Nevertheless. I would like to buy you dinner. Please."

A slight dip of his head was the only indication of his agreement.

Unsure of how he would take to being paid for, she chose a café rather than a formal restaurant, though she did quietly snicker to herself as she contemplated forcing Severus Snape to dine at a common pub. She studied the wine list with care before ordering her food. After he placed his order, she selected a moderately pricey bottle.

"Are you even old enough to drink?" he asked, after the waitress had left.

"I am, but it's for you. A full-bodied red to go with the lamb shanks you ordered."

"Am I expected to drink the entire bottle? Tell me, Miss Granger, are you attempting to get me drunk? I should warn you, I have no intentions of being taken advantage of."

She couldn't help but laugh. "No. Believe me, that is the last thing on my mind."

His flinch was barely perceptible, but she noticed. Damn, she thought. Insulting his manhood is not going to get me what I want.

"I'm feeling exultant. I just want to share the high."

With furrowed brow, he examined her carefully. "The term 'exultant' generally refers to a more ... outwardly expressive emotion."

Hermione finally allowed herself a smile. "I am not an expressive person. Trust me, I feel quite exultant. Those petty little manipulative bastards got exactly what was coming to them, and I am quite proud of myself for being clever enough to have brought you in to stick it to them. They are hardly in the league of the miscreants we have fought in the past," she looked directly in his eyes at that, forcing him to acknowledge their shared struggles, "but still well deserving of a bit of comeuppance. Don't you agree?"

Yes, he thought. She deserved her little victories. After all the big battles had been won, when it was supposed to be over, she alone had continued to suffer from the onslaught. If wresting a few Galleons from corrupt businessmen could grant her a sense of control over the madness, that was something he could support.

"Indeed, Miss Granger. You have done well."

"I'm so pleased to hear that. So you don't mind?"

What? No one survived as long as he had among Slytherins and Death Eaters without being intently aware of the nuance of conversational gambits. "Mind?"

"Being made my guardian? I hadn't intended that, of course. Just that you be given acting status for this negotiation. It was a complete surprise to me that the Ministry arranged for full guardianship."

What the hell had he got himself into? "Perhaps this would be an appropriate time for you to explain to me the full implications of guardianship, as you understand it."

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Seven years. Seven fucking long years. Bloody indentured servitude is what it was.

Hermione's parents had specified in their wills that she was not to have control over her inheritance until she reached the age of 25. Until that time, her assets would be held in trust by a guardian. Of course, it didn't occur to them that naming their best friends as guardians and going out with them, in the same car, on a night when Death Eaters were on the rampage and looking for vengeance, might not be the most prudent of plans. The guardians that the Grangers had so carefully chosen for their daughter, preparing them years in advance with the precious, secret knowledge of her special gifts, had perished along with them.

Leaving her to the tender mercies of the fates.

Having no faith in the fates, she had found herself a new guardian.

Leaving her to the tender mercies of Severus I-don't-want-to-get-bloody-involved-in-anything, the-war-is-over-leave-me-alone, never-make-me-speak-to-another-blithering-idiot-student-again Snape.

"No doubt you will be making arrangements to transfer the guardianship."

She refused to look uncomfortable. With an effort of will, she kept her feet from shifting, her hands from wringing and her eyes from dropping. "I see no reason for that."

A challenge. Very well, then. "So. You have no problem with leaving your fortune in my hands for the next seven years? Do you imagine that ex-Death Eaters have some special talents as financial managers? Are you expecting me to use my nefarious connections to enrich you? Or are you merely naïve enough to imagine that, as a one-time member of the Order I am somehow above ordinary avarice?" He lifted his wineglass to his mouth as he enjoyed her stunned expression.

"None of those. I trust you."

Fuck. In all his years of duplicitous deception, he had never been caught out. There had never been a moment when he had broken his cover and embarrassed himself. Until then. Spluttering his wine all over his lap was hardly in keeping with the suave, superior image he had been cultivating.

"You WHAT?"

"You heard me. I trust you." She gave him a moment to clean himself, then refilled his glass. "Don't misunderstand me. I wouldn't trust you to tell me the truth more than half the time or to give me your honest opinion on anything of importance."

Wiping off the last remnants of the wine residue, he glared at her. "Then you do not trust me. Nor should you."

"On the contrary. Those are mere matters of personal communication. I trust you implicitly when it comes to matters of honour and character. As my guardian, you have control over my finances and, by implication, my major life decisions. In those areas, you have my complete trust."

"Then you are a fool."

She smiled. "Perhaps. But can you honestly claim that I would have been better served by those cretins you defended me from today?"

It was not often that Severus Snape was bested in a trial of wits. In fact, he was hard pressed to remember the last time it had happened. She was, of course, correct. The

very idea that a comrade (and he had to acknowledge that her actions during the war had earned her that accolade) should be subjected to the pecuniary imprecations of venal Muggle functionaries had infuriated him to the point of very nearly publicly hexing Muggles. The fact that he had done nothing more than merely cowing them into positions of supplication and drawing maximal financial damages had been a triumph of restraint on his part.

She was correct. As her guardian, he might belittle and demean her, but he would ferociously defend her rights against all the forces of Muggle dimness.

"Don't be absurd. They would merely have bored you to death with their tedious tendentiousness. I will rob you blind."

She smiled. "You are welcome to try."

Damn. First the impertinent chit confronted him with his heretofore carefully hidden moral code and then she dared him to break it. He would have to find a way to pilfer her funds without actually taking possession of them. Deposit them into a charitable fund, perhaps. One that sponsored a scholarship for bushy-haired know-it-all witches. That would do for a start. This could, he mused, be a very interesting seven years.

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The next day, Severus Snape was visited by the goblin Holiglot, Hermione's accountant, who apprised him of the schedule of quarterly appraisals of her books and the penalty clauses accruing if he were to be found negligent in his guardianship duties.

Severus smiled. Robbing her blind would indeed be a challenge worthy of his skills.