

Without Christmas...

by chivalric

Father Christmas is drunk, and that on Christmas Eve. Naturally, someone has to take his place, because without Christmas, the world will drown in darkness.

One-shot Story

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Dreamy, my dear, thanks so much for crosschecking and your most needed input!

notsosaintly, hugs from Germany and I wish you a very, merry Christmas.

"I *hate* those sodding reindeers!"

The reindeers in question pawed their hoofs in eager anticipation of the night's events. Three of them: all big, all brown, all slightly overfed. Their thick fur smelled of hay and apples, their antlers were decorated with tiny little bulbs and bells. They even dared to blow their warm breath down the neck of the tall, dark man who tried to harness them to the sledge. "Stop looking so damn happy, you filthy beasts," he bawled. "It's Christmas Eve. This is not fun. It's a necessity, and I can't believe the old fart is drunk again. Like last year and the year before and the year before that. Someone should hex him. He behaves fine for three hundred sixty-four days a year and on Christmas Eve, he is too pissed to find his own arse."

Reindeer number one nibbled at the man's ear; its reward was a slap on the nose. Not at all offended, it searched in his pockets for a carrot or maybe a Christmas biscuit

"Good goods, I hate Christmas," Snape sighed and climbed on the sledge. Slapping the reins, hissing a "Gee up!" towards the reindeers, he had to press one hand to the merry red-and-white cap he wore, or the wind would have ripped it away into the night. His wide, velvet cloak billowed behind him, but it was not black. It was of a deep, rich red colour bordered with snow-white fur. His boots were red as well and made of suede; he knew from experience they wouldn't keep him warm for long. After all, he was doing this for the forth time now, playing the part of Father Christmas. And just because he was the only one who was kind enough to do it. Kind enough and and too bloody stupid to stay out of trouble, that was.

Tiny, snowy crystals hit the Potions master's face. The sledge was going fast, Hogwarts was already way beyond him. He was flying through clouds, and he pulled the coat tighter round his bony shoulders. Although it was enchanted to keep him dry and more or less warm, it didn't work perfectly. Snape hated the cold, he hated the winter, and for some damn unfair reason, Christmas Eve was always colder than all the other nights of the year.

"If only I hadn't been in that pub four years ago," Snape muttered under his breath, urging the reindeers on. He was late already, but packing the parcels into the back of the sledge always took him longer than he expected. Maybe it was because he disliked presents in general. They were usually useless, they broke quickly, and damn it, he wished he would get at least one present for a change this year, too.

Unlikely, though. The war was over, the Dark Lord was dead, but still Snape hid in the dungeons, snarled at his students, and wondered why he hadn't decided to stay dead after Nagini's attempt to kill him. "If only. Shouldn't have swallowed the bezoar. Shouldn't have healed the wound with my last bit of breath," he growled. "I would be

safely in the afterworld now instead of feeling the urge to get drunk every other evening." He did so and knew about it to forget how miserable his life was. He also was well aware of the fact that without the occasional need of hiding in a shabby pub, he wouldn't have bumped into a very drunk Father Christmas those four years ago.

The whip cracked, and Snape drove the sledge onto a snowy rooftop somewhere in Switzerland. He always started his task in a small country in order to get the hang of it again. Jumping out and onto the roof, he nearly fell. Swearing and cursing, he checked his list for the names of the children, summoned their presents, and Apparated right into the living room downstairs. A sleepy cat greeted him, lying under an overdecorated Christmas tree, and Snape dumped the parcels carelessly on the floor. "One down, several millions to go. Wonderful prospects. Great life, really."

If only the real job owner could keep his hands off the booze on Christmas Eve! Already fuming with rage and disgust, Snape slumped down onto his sledge and took off to the next address on his list. "Stupid git. Too pissed to stand on his own legs. Why did I take the chair next to him? And why didn't I push him away when he threw his arms around me and began to cry and sobbed onto my robes and begged me to take over, or the world would explode. Idiot. He is and so am I. How could I ever agree to this?"

The next set of parcels was dumped. Snape glared at the tree and at the stockings neatly hanging from the mantelpiece. The head of a rocking horse, poorly wrapped in ugly paper, bumped at his knee. "I should have told him to bugger off. Damn it, if he hadn't been right with the world-will-explode bit, I would have done it."

It became a long, very long night for Severus Snape. Once, he stumbled over a sleepy child, wrapped up in a blue blanket. It had chosen the place right under the tree to fall asleep. Thumb in mouth, bunny closely clutched in one small arm, it looked heartbreakingly cute.

"Move your bottom," Snape snarled and nudged the child with his red boot. "You're in the way."

"Weihnachtsmann?" the child mumbled and stared at him with big, shiny eyes.

Obviously, he was in Germany. After thousands and thousands of houses, Snape had lost count in which country he was. Baring his teeth they were brushed, for a change, and a couple of years ago he had been pathetic enough to seek out a dentist who had straightened them, too he shoved a parcel into the little boy's hands. "Do I look like Father Christmas to you? Do I have a fat belly, do I say 'Ho, Ho, Ho!' or do I look happy and merry to you?"

"Mammi!" the child whispered in horror.

"Exactly. Call for Mummy so she sees me as well. It would only mean I have to Obliviate two instead of one." A flick of his wand, and the child fell back asleep, a smile once more on the small face. "Children," Snape grumbled. "Who the hell invented them?"

One house after another, one parcel after the next was delivered. Around three in the morning, Snape didn't feel his ice-cold feet anymore, and he was too hungry to remember how food actually tasted. He longed for his bed and a duvet over his head; he longed for a large bottle of Firewhisky, and although he would never, ever admit it, he very much longed for someone who held him close in caring arms. "No wonder the old fart couldn't cope with the job anymore. The simple thought of doing this for centuries is enough to make me feel suicidal!" Angrily, he kicked a door open, the parcel in his hands too big to be held up with one arm. Warmth greeted him and the smell of hot chocolate obviously, whoever lived here had gone to bed not too long ago. A book lay on the table, knitting needles were stuck in something fluffy and green, and there was only a small tree in the corner, decorated in red and gold.

"A Gryffindor household," Snape sighed. "Lovely. I think the child who lives here shouldn't get any presents at all."

"Who the heck are you?"

Snape spun round, lost his balance, and crashed hard onto the ground. The parcel clattered to the floor, hit the funny bone in his elbow, and made him howl with pain. Cradling his elbow, he spat out a specifically nasty swearword when all of a sudden, a wand appeared under his nose.

"Who are you, why are you breaking into my parents' house, and what is in that parcel?" The voice was tightly controlled. A female voice. The feet in front of Snape's eyes were stuck in slippers shaped like teddy bears, a nightgown swished angrily across the ground, and that wand looked as if she would actually use it if he didn't answer her immediately.

"I'm bloody Father Christmas, you horribly indignant thing," Snape snarled and got up on tired legs. "I wear a red coat, a red cap, I bring parcels, so who the hell do you think I am? A burglar? Goodness, why Gryffindors always have to talk first and think last. Their house should be burned down to the ground." Huffing and puffing, Snape ripped the cap off it had slipped over his eyes, it was too warm now that he was inside a house for more than thirty seconds, and besides, he hated the damn thing anyway. Raising his eyes in order to find out who dared to threaten him with a wand, his jaws sagged open when he recognised the girl young woman in front of him.

"Granger!"

"Professor Snape?" The wand wavered; then she dropped it onto the table next to her book. Instead, she drew her dressing gown around her body. "How... but... Now that is impossible!"

"What is?" Snape sighed and slumped into an armchair. The ice on the hem of his coat was melting, leaving a wet patch on the floor as well as on his trousers. "Someone has to deliver the damn parcels, Miss Granger. I'm the only one available as everyone else prefers to spend Christmas Eve with friends and family. I have neither. I'm the perfect choice for the lousiest job on earth. Believe me, it's even worse than spying for the Dark Lord." Reaching out, he took the mug from the table, peeked in, saw a rest of the now cold chocolate, and downed it. "Come to think of it you don't write letters to Father Christmas still?"

Hermione pulled a chair close and sat down. "My cousin's little son is visiting us. The parcel is for him; there should be a pirate ship inside." Absent-mindedly, she pulled over a bowl with Christmas biscuits, ate two, then offered some to her former Potions professor. "Baked them myself they are edible," she said. "But, Professor Snape Father Christmas doesn't exist!"

Frowning, Snape took a biscuit. When the first nibble proved it to taste sweet and actually surprisingly good, he devoured it in one bite. "Muggle-born witches," he said with a shudder. "You know nothing, Miss Granger. Of course Father Christmas exists. The current one is now more than six hundred years old; he drinks too much on Christmas Eve, and he overfeeds his reindeers. Without him, without Christmas, the world would drown in darkness. Didn't you learn anything at school?" Snapping his fingers, he filled up the mug and took a deep sip. The cream left a white moustache on his upper lip.

Hermione grinned. "I must admit, you look cute in this costume, Professor, but of course it is nonsense what you say. The current Father Christmas? How many have there been until today? And this drowning in darkness rubbish quite poetic, I must give you that, but day and night are certainly not influenced by a friendly man delivering parcels."

"I do *not* look cute, Miss Granger, is that clear?" Snape snapped, but was all of a sudden too tired to insist on the point. "Until today, there have been seven persons incorporating Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, as he is often called nowadays. I'm just a substitute, though. And the drowning in darkness rubbish is no rubbish, but a bitter reality. You don't have anything to eat, do you?"

Hermione looked at him, then asked politely, "Would you like some of the roast duck we had for dinner?"

Unceremoniously, Snape took off his coat, dropping it to the floor next to the cap. "Hand it over, girl. I'm starving," he said. "Christmas Eve messes massively with my inner clock. But then, that's only natural. I must have used the Christmas Time-Turner half a million times by now."

Rummaging in the nearby kitchen, Hermione came back only moments later with a plate filled with meat, roast potatoes, vegetables, and gravy. "Here you go, Professor. You know, for a Father Christmas you look far too thin. You should have shoved a pillow under your shirt. And grown a beard, of course. Do you at least say 'Ho Ho Ho'?"

every now and then?" Smiling, she poured him a glass of wine and sat down, watching him eat. Somehow in between recognising him and serving him dinner, she had managed to get dressed as well. *Pity*, Snape thought absently and speared a sprout. *I liked the way the gown caressed her figure*. Then he frowned inwardly. *She's a former student, and therefore, out of my reach!* A scolding subnote was attached to his thoughts. Besides, he didn't want to reach for her or anyone else, of course!

Concentrating on his food, Snape mumbled, "HmMMM," between bites. "That's good. Didn't know I was that hungry. More potatoes, please. Thanks. And another glass of wine, if you don't mind. I've got... let's see... Yes, I've got another ten minutes."

"Before what?"

"Before I have to go, Miss Granger. There are another ten thousand households I've got to visit tonight. Parcels for every brat who wrote a wish list. A secret wish is powerful magic, Miss Granger. Little children can wish very forcefully, Muggle or not. Their wishes need to be fulfilled, otherwise the balance between our world and the Muggle world tips. Endless darkness, Miss Granger, would be the result. Is there more meat? And some gravy?" Hastily, as if someone was about to steal the nearly empty plate from right under his crooked nose, he shoved a potato into his mouth and ate it.

Visibly sceptical, Hermione put some more meat on his plate and added gravy. "Right. So there are wishes that need to be fulfilled. The Christmas wishes of small children. What if the presents just appeared under the tree? That would be a lot easier than delivering them in person." As Snape was busy with knife and fork, she reached out and snatched the Time-Turner from his pocket where it had been just visible between all the fur. "Uh, that's a strong one," she exclaimed.

Snape nodded. "Naturally. And as for your question what do you think would happen if the children didn't have a clearly defined target they could aim their wishes at? What if they just *wished*?"

The Time-Turner dangled on its golden chain, reflecting the light from the candles Hermione had lit earlier on. "No target? You mean, no Father Christmas? I guess... their wishes would find a way..."

"Or a person. Not necessarily a good person, Miss Granger. Father Christmas is a symbol for the good in the world, he channels the wishes, calls for them, and they land safely in his lap, so to speak. Unfortunately, it is quite a bit of responsibility to take on, and the current Father Christmas is losing his will to do it any longer. I bumped into him some years ago; I was stupid enough not to flee right away, and now it looks as if I will have to take on the job on a permanent basis. I wear the clothes, I deliver the parcels, and I am seen by enough children whilst flying through the night sky to keep the magic working. The few who see me up close I Obliviate. No beard. No 'Ho Ho Ho'. And definitely no cushion under my shirt, thank you very much." Getting up, he took the Time-Turner out of her fingers and hung it round his neck. "Dinner was delicious. I have to go now." Briskly, he dried his cloak with a quick charm and pulled it on.

Hermione got up as well, summoned boots and a winter coat, and said, "I'm coming with you."

Snape whirled round and nearly tripped over the chair he had just got up from. "No, you don't! What do you think, that this is a funny little escapade, an adventure..."

"I think you are too tired to handle the Time-Turner properly. Moreover, you had two-and-a-half glasses of wine. I'll come with you if you like it or not. Who knows, in your poor condition you might manage to mess up the time-continuum completely."

Snape clutched the tiny piece of jewelled magic in his fingers. "I am not doing this for the first time," he hissed. "I am absolutely capable..."

"You will take me along, or you won't go at all," Hermione stated categorically, went to the front door, and held it open for him. "Are you coming, Professor?"

"Damn the girl," Snape muttered, refusing to feel relieved at her offer to assist him. He was tired. He was maybe a little bit tipsy. Company, someone to talk to, someone who would keep him awake, might not be the worst idea.

"Reindeers? I thought... a broom, or maybe..."

Sighing, Snape got into the sledge and held out his hand to help the girl inside. "I'm playing Father Christmas here, remember? The sledge is a very important part of the magic. So are those sodding animals. All over the world, children are looking out for it. They want to see it flying through the night sky, driven by a man in a red cap and a red coat. Occasionally, children need to get what they want."

"I don't suppose you are visiting one of the shopping centres, carrying children on your knees and listen to their wishes in person?" she mocked, took his outstretched hand, and jumped into the sledge. The reindeers snorted cheerfully.

Snape slapped his forehead. "Shit," he said with feeling. "I would have forgotten that appointment. Actually, I hoped I would forget it. Damn you, Miss Granger, was it necessary to remind me of that special torture that is waiting for me?" Snape slapped the reins, and they took off.

Up in the air under a sky with millions and millions of stars, Hermione edged a bit closer to him. It was cold in the sledge; warming charms didn't seem to work properly. "What are you talking about?" she finally managed the wind ripped the words off her lips, it wasn't easy to talk. "Which appointment?"

Snape hunched his shoulders. "Shopping centre appointment," he hissed. "The coat and the cap, the sledge, the reindeers mandatory, all of it. In addition, one hour in a shopping centre of my choice. Horrible rules. If I could find a way out, I would certainly spend Christmas Eve at home with a good book and a glass of port." A growled command, and the reindeers sped up a bit. "But actually... and as you are already here... You might come in handy, Miss Granger. Are you prepared to handle a bunch of children, their parents, the reindeers, and the presents as well whilst I listen to the ridiculous wishes those little monsters will utter into my poor ears?"

Hermione smiled. She had just detected that the closer she got to the Potions master, the warmer she became. He radiated heat *Possibly sheer rage at the fact that he has to behave decently for one night*, she thought with a grin. "I guess so. I'll try my best, anyway."

"That'll have to do," he grumbled. "Since you insisted, you can make yourself useful as well."

The shopping centre of his choice was in London, and he didn't land on the roof this time but right in front of the big doors. Beforehand, he had ordered her to put a glamour both on him and herself. "So the little brats won't get suspicious," as he had phrased it. Therefore, he looked like Father Christmas and she like an elf, complete with belly and beard in his case and long ears and diminished size in hers. Grumbling and growling, he elbowed the waiting parents out of the way, a big bag over his shoulder and a stunned Hermione at his heels. "I hate this," she heard him hiss over and over again. "Hate it. Will kill the old fart once this night is over. Promise, this time I will kill him for getting drunk!"

"Santa!" the children cheered and stormed inside, circling him, cornering him until Snape had no other choice but to sit on the huge chair that stood in front of the toyshop. It was decorated with baubles and lights and sweets, and the sight of her former Potions teacher not only walking up to it, but sitting down on it as well brought a big grin to Hermione's face. *Somehow, he seems to enjoy this*, she thought involuntarily and then, just in time, remembered that she had a job to do. With loud, commanding words she lined up children and parents, told them sternly, "One after the other, please," and prevented a three-year-old girl from sneaking her hand into the bag.

Behind her, Snape had just taken the first child onto his lap; out of the corner of her eye, she saw him listening earnestly before nodding once. For a brief second, he rummaged in his bag, pulled out a small parcel, and handed it to the child. "Don't you dare touch me with your sticky paws again, young man," he snapped. "Get lost. Next one."

The next one was a girl, and she hugged him in an unguarded moment. Hermione saw his expression change from thunderous to surprised to... She narrowed her eyes.

Did he look... touched? Yes, definitely. For a brief moment, Hermione witnessed a Snape who was pleased about a child's affection, a Potions master who neither sneered nor grumbled but returned a little girl's hug with genuine happiness. It only lasted for a heartbeat; then he coughed, took the child's hands in his, and grumbled something unintelligible in his glamoured beard.

Hermione, though, felt a warmth blossom in her belly she hadn't expected. *He can be nice?* she thought, slightly bewildered. *Now that comes as a surprise!*

Surprise or not, Snape behaved for nearly forty-five minutes. Then another little girl sat on his knees, hands folded and ankles crossed, and whispered something in a voice so hushed Hermione wasn't sure she had said anything at all. Snape must have thought so as well he frowned, bent lower, and ordered her to repeat her words.

The girl dropped her head and slowly whispered, "I do not want presents for Christmas. I want... I wish for peace on earth. Please."

Disapproving, Hermione shook her head. The girl was maybe five years old. Knowing her cousin's son, she very much doubted that the child knew what 'peace on earth' actually meant. Clearly, the parents had indoctrinated their child to say so, possibly to impress Father Christmas.

Snape seemed equally confused. At least, Hermione thought so until he got up, put the girl on the chair, and turned to the rows of parents who were impatiently waiting for the queue to move forward.

When Snape got up, they moved back a step or two. Hermione saw anger flare up in his black eyes, and she assumed it must be quite a scary sight. Suddenly, he seemed taller than the glamour suggested, taller and thinner, looking more like himself. He didn't resemble the friendly, old man in a red coat more than a wolf in a stolen, bloody fur resembled a sheep. He looked as if he could easily slap a child's bottom. Or the bottom of its parents.

"You!" Snape hissed after a very long moment and pointed at a tall, blond woman. "You are this child's mother." It wasn't a question. "Tessa. You have a house, you have enough money to spend on clothes, make-up, a car, and holidays. You don't need to work. You just bought yourself lingerie worth three hundred fifty-eight Pounds, twenty-three pence. Your daughter, your only child, wants a puppy, and *you* dare to order her to tell me she doesn't want one single present for Christmas?" Snape didn't say the last bit he thundered it right into the face of the woman, who paled up to her blond hairline.

"I... just...thought..."

"You did *not* think, woman," Snape roared, stabbing her chest with one long, cold finger. "You wanted to hinder your daughter telling me her deepest wish. But let me clarify things I can read a child's mind as easily as I can read yours. I know what she wants, and I know you know it, too. So you better make sure she gets what she wants, or I will come back after Christmas to have a word with you. And believe me many, many children could tell you that it is a bad thing to get on the wrong side of me!"

The blond woman raised her chin. "Peace on earth is a worthy wish," she managed. The other parents, though, took a step away from her. Looking at the thunderous face of the man in the red coat, she seemed to do some serious thinking. "I... Maybe a puppy isn't a bad idea after all," she croaked. "She'll learn to take responsibility..."

Snape narrowed his eyes. The woman shrank back from him and clutched at her handbag. "I'll check on Rose and on the puppy," he hissed. "Regularly. And you!" he snapped, whipping round and pointing at a small, round man with a red face. "You better spend your last money on Christmas presents for your two children and not for another round in the pub. Is that understood!"

The man's eyes flew open, he stared at the tall, quite dangerous looking Father Christmas, turned, and ran away.

Hermione decided that now was a good time to get out of the shopping centre. "The reindeers are waiting," she said quietly, tugging at Snape's sleeve. "Let's go before you hex someone." For a shocked second, she thought he would hex her, but then he took a deep breath and stalked out of the building, jumped gracefully into the sledge, and pulled her up as well. Slapping the reins, he didn't even hear the dozens and dozens of disbelieving gasps when the reindeers pulled the sledge right up into the night sky.

"Horrible people," he grumbled, dropping the glamour. "Honestly, I hate Christmas. Someone should delete it from the calendar."

Hermione decided to ignore his words and moved closer instead. The wind howled, but somehow, it didn't touch him. "That's unfair," she murmured. "The weather doesn't seem to affect you as badly as it does me."

"It's the coat." Snape looked at her disapprovingly. "You'll catch a cold. Get closer. I'll enlarge the charm."

They landed on the next rooftop about ten minutes later. Snape disappeared through the chimney, and Hermione heard him cursing all the way down. Before she could get excited, he was back up already, and they took off again.

And landed. And took off. And landed... It was an endless up and down, interrupted by getting in and out of the sledge, in and out of houses, leaving parcels under trees, and trying not to get detected by the inhabitants. Very soon, Hermione decided not to stay back in the sledge, but give her former professor a hand instead. She carried the parcels whilst he Apparated them inside; she displayed them nicely under the trees whilst he calculated how often the Time-Turner needed to be turned in order to keep the schedule. It worked surprisingly well Snape was less grumpy now that he didn't have to do everything himself, and Hermione found out that Snape wasn't quite as nasty as she had thought. When her teeth began to chatter during a particularly nasty storm, he wordlessly opened his fluffy coat and allowed her to snuggle up to him a surprise as well as a relief.

"Told you to stay at home," Snape grumbled when she put one arm round his waist. "And don't you think you are allowed to get intimate with me after tonight ever again."

"Of course not," she replied, barely able to keep the smile out of her voice. "Would I ever dare to intimidate you?"

"Fifty points from Gryffindor. Five hundred, actually, and yes, I know it is of no use as you aren't a student anymore," he snapped, but she could easily hear how tired he was and that this was the only reason why he let her get away with her cheeky reply.

At five in the morning, they were done. The last parcel was a small tractor for an even smaller boy, sleeping peacefully on the couch next to the tree. Snape looked at him thoughtfully, then picked up the blanket that had slipped to the ground and covered the tiny body.

"Getting mellow, Professor?" Hermione asked, which earned her a dismissive snort.

"He's the son of one of my former students. If the boy gets ill, his father will ask me for coughing potions. The blanket just keeps work off my back."

"Of course," Hermione said with a smile.

Outside, the sky was still pitch black, but that didn't change the fact that Christmas Day would be dawning soon. Hermione wondered where the time had gone. It felt as if they had worked for an eternity, not only for one night. But then, using the Christmas Time-Turner, it probably had been two eternities.

She was only slightly tired. Just one thing was left to do. "Professor?" she asked, and hesitantly put her hand on his arm.

The sledge silently flew through the night, back towards Hogwarts. "Yes?" he said, his voice tight with fatigue. "What is it?"

"I thought... Well, it's Christmas, and I figured it's only fair if you got a present as well."

Snape stopped the reindeers in mid-air so abruptly the sledge nearly keeled over. With a thunderous expression on his face, he turned to her. "I can understand that the thought of me playing Father Christmas is most ridiculous, Miss Granger," he said coldly. "But don't you dare to make fun of me. I have never received a Christmas present in my life. I won't tonight, either, as you damn well know."

Instead of arguing with him or feeling offended at his harsh words after all, she had known him for an eternity or two by now she pulled out a parcel from under her coat and held it out to him.

Snape looked at it as if it would bite him any moment. She had wrapped it in plain silver paper without a ribbon, and despite his visible confusion, she didn't pull her hand back.

"Take it," she urged. "It's for you. It was meant to be for you anyway, but I had planned to send it by owl tomorrow. Given the circumstances, I consider this a better time for you to open it."

"I don't get Christmas presents," he repeated stubbornly. "I have neither friends nor family. There is no one who would bother to..."

"I bothered," she growled. "It's three years now since I left school, it's four years since Voldemort died. With your help, in case you have forgotten. Every year I read the article about the Christmas feast at Hogwarts, every year I scan the pictures, and never, ever do I see you on at least one of them. I figured you didn't like Christmas. This year, I decided it was about time that someone showed you how nice and lovely this time of year can be. Please, take the parcel, Professor. I didn't spend an entire month making what's inside for you to stare at it as if it was something small and nasty."

Very, very slowly, Snape took the parcel. The reindeers tossed their heads impatiently, the sledge wavered, and Hermione edged a bit closer towards him. *He might be tired, exhausted even*, she thought, *but he's deliciously warm*. Carefully, she picked up the reins and even more carefully, made the reindeers take them home.

Unwrapping the parcel took him ages. Finally, the paper unfolded, and the scarf she had finished shortly before his arrival cascaded over his hands. Rich, deep green colours mixed with lighter greens and emerald shades, embroidered with silver threads glowed in the pale moonlight.

Snape opened his mouth and closed it again. He looked as if he'd been hit by something large and hard right over the head.

"Severus," she sighed, considering it a good time to call him by his given name. With one hand, she gently took the scarf out of his limp hands and wrapped it around his neck. "Looks pretty bad in combination with red, but then, you wear black every other day of the year, don't you?"

"Always black," he muttered and stroked the soft garment. "Even my pyjamas are black. I never owned anything... colourful. Never, ever did I own anything so beautiful, either. Thank you. I don't know what else to say. Thank you, Miss Granger."

"Hermione," she corrected. "I spent the night with you. I guess that changes things."

He blushed ever so slightly. "We didn't spend the night together. Not in the usual sense of the word, anyway."

She handed him back the reins, and he took them without hesitation. Opening his wide coat, she snuggled up to him once more. Only after several miles or however fast reindeers galloped through the night did he begin to rummage in the empty bag to his feet. He even dropped the reins, which didn't bother the reindeers much. Apparently, they wanted to get home, as they just pulled along, only slower than before.

"What are you looking for?" Hermione asked. Snape had taken off the red cap, and his long, black hair whipped behind him.

"Don't be impatient," he answered, his voice muffled by his bent position. "I know I've put it in here. Must be there... somewhere... Ah, here it is." Fishing for the reins, he thrust something into her hand. Something small and cold and with sharp edges. "Didn't have time to wrap it up." It sounded like an apology, and Snape didn't look at her when he said it.

Hermione took whatever Snape had handed her, but her fingers were cold, and she nearly dropped it. *Lumos*, she whispered, and in the last moment, just before it fell to the ground and would probably have been lost in the dark night, she caught it and brought it close to her face to examine it.

It was small, it was golden, it was heavy and very, very beautiful. A slide. Plain, at first sight, but when she turned it in her hands, she saw the tiny rubies sparkling in her wandlight. They build a pattern an ancient rune, meaning...

"The rune stands for happiness," Snape grumbled. "Found this whilst the reindeers needed a rest. I believe we were in Portugal at the time."

"I... but..." Hermione said, having no idea how to continue, possibly for the first time in her life. "I didn't expect a Christmas present from you!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," Snape snapped.

Hermione could see that his cheeks were slightly pink. Maybe it was because of the cold; maybe, he'd blushed. Her heart was stabbed by an odd little pain, and she looked at her former professor, still unsure what to do. She wanted to hug him, to press her lips onto his cheek, to just get closer to him.

Instead, the sledge landed with a gentle *swish* on Hogwarts' North Tower. The impact was strong enough to shake the sledge, and Hermione gripped the slide so as not to lose it again. Instinctively, she put out an arm to protect herself from getting hurt, but bumped hard against Snape's bony frame, nevertheless. She felt his ribs under her fingertips, his shoulder bruised her cheek, and there was something else...

"You smell like Christmas biscuits did you eat some whilst I was looking the other way?" she asked and raised her face up to his.

"Maybe... one or two..." he murmured. His hands were trembling, she observed.

Quite unexpectedly, it begun to snow. Big, wet flakes drifted down towards the ground. They fell onto his ridiculous red coat, onto the fluffy sleeves, onto the empty bags in the back of the sledge. Involuntarily, he lifted his hand to wipe a flake off his lips.

She caught his wrist. A moment later, she had wiped off the tiny, frozen crystal off his skin. "I did not expect a present," she whispered. "And I am not disappointed. The slide is beautiful, and it is perfect. My hair is always all over the place; now I can finally hold it back properly. Thank you. Thank you very much."

"You resemble a mop under normal circumstances," Snape growled. "My only intention was to make you more presentable, Miss Granger." He edged away from her and jumped off the sledge. Stunned at his rudeness, she watched him folding up the bags, taking off coat and hat, and placing them onto the seat. "Get out," he ordered. "I should have taken you home, of course. Didn't think of it, though. You'll have to Apparate back to your parents' house." With a swift move, he took the scarf she'd given him and turned to walk away.

"Professor Snape!"

He continued walking. Quickly, she jumped onto the roof and ran after him. "Severus!"

"Yes?" His eyebrows were raised questioningly. *I might be wrong here*, she thought. *If I am, he'll slaughter me*. Aloud, she said, "You are grumpy and snappy, Severus, and you looked like a clown in those red robes. You scared the life out of that horrible mother, and you left presents for a myriad of children. I witnessed all night long that you are a good man and not at all the nasty dungeon bat you claim to be. Merlin, Severus, you volunteered to be Father Christmas despite the fact that you claim to hate this day, and do you really want to spend Christmas Day on your own?"

Snape seemed to be taken aback a bit. Then he grumbled, "I always have," let his eyes wander over her shivering body and added, nearly threateningly, "You're cold. You'll get ill if you don't get into dry clothes soon and have something hot to drink."

"I'll Apparate home in a minute, remember?" she replied and added just the right amount of chattering teeth to the sentence.

It worked. Snape pulled his eyebrows together, grabbed hold of her icy hand, and led her to the window in the North Tower, the one he had slipped through so many hours ago. "Before you go home, you'll get warm," he ordered. "You'll take a hot bath, you'll drink some tea, and you'll eat. Is that understood?" He held the window open whilst she wriggled inside and closed it safely after her. A quick glance outside showed them the sledge, being pulled up into the sky by the reindeers.

"Warmth," Hermione murmured. "I could very well do with some warmth in my life, that's certain."

"Don't dawdle, then," Snape said, and Hermione smiled. This time, it was her who took his hand; he didn't object. Together, they walked through the quiet school and downstairs to the dungeons. Snape clutched the scarf in one hand, Hermione the slide. Without looking at each other, they held hands until Snape opened the door to his private rooms, where he lit candles and the logs in the fireplace, busied himself by making tea and ordering sandwiches from a very sleepy house-elf all the while Hermione was standing in the doorway, watching him and wondering if she had been wrong after all.

Finally, Snape looked at her. "Don't stand there like a statue," he said. "The bathroom is over there. I assume you want to wash the night's dirt off your hands. Take your time, Miss Granger. There's no need to rush anymore."

Hermione didn't move an inch. Irritated, Snape came closer. "Is something wrong?" he asked, put one finger under her chin, and stared at her as if... as if...

As if he doesn't know what to do now Hermione thought. *As if he's actually interested in my well-being!*

Slowly, she held out the slide. It sparkled in the candlelight. "Would you be so kind and put it into my hair?" she asked, and Snape took it, slowly and hesitantly. A nearly invisible smile curved his thin lips when he opened the slide and then, carefully, brushed her hair back over her neck with spread fingers. One lock tried to escape. He caught it, curled it around his finger, then captured it quickly in the slide along with the rest of her hair. He was surprisingly skilled in a task he clearly hadn't done before, and when he was done, when her silly locks were tamed, he continued looking at her for a very long moment.

"Thank you," she said and, on an impulse, stretched and brushed her lips across his cheek. Before he could react, she squeezed past him, vanished into the bathroom, and pulled the door close.

"Now why have I done this?" she wondered, looking at her image in the mirror. "You don't even know if he likes you. You guess he does, but that's not good enough. You need proof. So make yourself presentable and then go and ask him if he likes you. Simple, really. Nothing you need to worry about."

Her image looked back at her, sternly and with pursed lips. *Asking Severus Snape anything personal is easy?* her image seemed to wonder. *Are you crazy or what?*

"Shut up," Hermione hissed, bent down, and splashed water into her face. It was cold and made her shiver again, but she knew that warm water would make her sleepy. Now that she was out of the wind and the cold, her limbs felt heavy as lead, and she feared she wouldn't be able to sit through the meal Severus had ordered.

His soap smelled of summer flowers, and the towel next to the sink was soft and fluffy. It smelled like him, too. Using it was a strangely intimate thing to do. Nevertheless, she buried her face in the towel and breathed in deeply. Then, she looked into the mirror once more, turning her head so she could see the slide. Naturally, as it was fastened at the base of her neck, she couldn't see it properly, but she could catch a glimpse of the red and gold sparkles. As her hair was out of her face now, her eyes seemed bigger, and her forehead higher. She had never worn her hair in a braid; admittedly, it didn't look bad.

Actually, it made her look older. Usually, although she was twenty-three, people tended to think her much younger. She rarely used make-up, she mostly wore jeans and a jumper even at work, and the last time she had dressed up had been... erm... "Must have been during my last year at Hogwarts," she said to herself. "Well. Can't be helped. Let's get out and into the lion's cave."

Silently, she opened the door. She had taken her boots off, feeling more comfortable in her thick, woollen socks. Naturally, her feet didn't make a sound when she stepped into Snape's living room. The crackling fire was the only sound to be heard; that, and the snores that came from the couch.

"Severus?" Hermione whispered, staring at the legs that were to be seen. Tiptoeing around the couch, she wondered if he really could have fallen asleep, if she really had spent that much time in the bathroom.

When she saw him, she couldn't suppress a grin. There was the feared Potions master, stretched out on an old leather couch, very fast asleep, lips slightly parted and legs propped up on the armrest. He was definitely snoring, and his face was relaxed to the extent that he actually looked as young as he was. But what made Hermione's heart flutter was the fact that he was snuggled into the scarf she had given him. Both hands were buried in the green wool, and he used a major part of the soft garment as a cushion. As the scarf was very long, parts of it reached down to his waist and even over one knee.

Carefully, Hermione knelt down next to him. She stroked along the scarf, remembering knitting it. "I knew you would like it," she whispered so as not to wake him up. "Looks good on you, really."

"Wssit?" Snape mumbled, struggling slightly in order to wake up. Soothing, Hermione put her hand over his.

His fingers closed around hers, and he pulled her hand under his cheek.

"Look, Santa, that's inappropriate behaviour for a man whose job it is to deliver presents." Hermione's voice was barely loud enough to be heard even in the very silent room. She managed to sit down on the couch, her side touching his chest. Suddenly, she became very, very tired; and seeing him sleep, her hand caught in his, made her wish she could lay down next to him. "I'm still cold," she told the sleeping man. "I hoped you would be awake, you know. I wanted to tell... Well, that I like you, for example. Actually, I played with the thought of seducing you. I had such a lovely line. It would have made you blush. You blushed when I gave you the scarf. You were rude just a little later, and I believe you snarled at me because you like me. I think you are not very good with women. Or people. Or anyone, really."

"Cmsslp," Snape murmured, using his one free hand to pull her down.

Not knowing what else to do, Hermione put up her feet and snuggled up to him. He still smelled of biscuits and maybe some mince pie. "It seems you have a sweet tooth, Severus." Yawning, she was more than glad that he put one arm across her waist she was shivering and the warmth his body radiated was more than welcome. "I think we should talk in the morning," she managed before her eyes dropped closed.

Christmas morning dawned, and Snape managed to open half an eye to the world. He didn't see much, though, as his vision was blurred by a mass of brown, curly hair. Something metallic scratched along his nose, and he was very, very warm. Which was good. He liked to be warm.

Did he like curly locks, too?

Confused, he tried to move and found that someone was lying in his arms, snuggled up closely and with one leg thrown across his hips. It felt... comfortable. It felt a lot better than he would have expected, especially because he was used to waking up alone not only on Christmas Day, but on any other day of the year as well.

Those locks, though, were so very soft. And the woman in his arms had not only helped him last night all night, each minute of this horribly long night she had given him a present as well.

The scarf around his neck. The scarf he had fallen asleep upon, stroking it, admiring its beauty and, already half dozed off, contemplating about the probability of her accepting an invitation for dinner. Vaguely, he remembered the warm, happy feeling the idea had caused: him and her sharing an evening, talking and enjoying each other's company without any reindeers nearby or the necessity to deliver parcels spoiling the event.

He did like curly locks. Her locks. After all, he had bothered to buy the slide that threatened to cut off his nose any moment now. At the time, he had considered it a good idea. Giving it to her, though, had made him blush. "I've been rude," he whispered with a pang of regret. "Nasty. Unfriendly. As usual."

The bushy hair moved, tickled his nose, and Snape remembered that there was a woman attached to the curls. He froze, afraid she would be offended at the close contact once she was fully awake.

"Severus," she murmured and turned. Her nose touched his; she opened her eyes, saw him, and smiled. "Thought you were a dream. Sorry I have fallen asleep on your couch. Especially because you were here first." Belatedly, she added, "Merry Christmas," and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Snape was so stunned that he answered, "Merry Christmas to you, too." It was the first time in his adult life that he had said those words. From out of nowhere came a fluttering hope that, maybe, it might not be the last time. After all, she was still here. And she had... had she just kissed him?

"Merry Christmas," he repeated, pulling her closer. "Hermione."

A/N: This story is a tribute to Terry Pratchett's story "Hogfather". There, it is Death (big, soft-hearted skeleton who likes cats and humans) putting on the red coat in order to save the world. In case you don't know Pratchett: please check him out, as he is simply one marvellous author.