

A Helping Hand

by *OpalJade*

A friendly ghost makes Hermione and Snape use their lips for more than just verbal sparring.

* One Shot*

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I hope you enjoy my fluffy contribution to the Yule 2008 Challenge. It was based on prompt #2: Stand Here Please.

Massive hugs to my very patient betas, Lariope and lulabelle72. They are wonders!

Snape's eyes narrowed in anticipation when he heard the echoing of heels clattering down the stone hallway towards his door. He stood up, brought his drink with him (so as to give her the impression she was disturbing him) and opened the door widely before she had time to knock.

"Miss Granger," Snape began in a tone worthy of a preacher, "I recommend that you use an extra strength Scourgify inside your auditory canals to ensure you can hear me properly. I do not want to repeat myself again."

"Why, Severus, I didn't know you knew of any such charm," replied the young witch sweetly, casting a glance at the shine on his stringy black hair.

Snape ignored her. Wasn't this how their little game of intellectual dueling usually went? He always allowed her one easy shot, and as far as Snape was concerned, his hair (or his nose for that matter) was too easy a target to be worthy of a response. He had more pressing arguments to win.

He continued his sermon with a tinge of self-righteousness that may or may not have been alcohol induced. "I would also suggest that you check the plasticity of your eardrums, the nerve signal to your cochlea, and the conductivity of your neurons to ensure that all is in proper working order, because this will be that last time that I explain..."

"I'm not here on behalf of Harry," interrupted Hermione impatiently, shoving two pieces of parchment into his left hand (for his right one was clutching the glass of Firewhisky tightly).

"You left these essays in the staff room." She started to pivot away from his doorway, but turned around to add, "For the record, Harry has given up on you. I guess his hearing comprehension is better than you thought."

Snape looked down at the two scrolls in his hand. Yes, they were indeed the plagiarized essays he had left on the table for Minerva to peruse. He rolled them up again, feeling like an idiot. Of course Granger wasn't here to *convince* him to go anywhere!

But, surely she did not think he was so pathetic that he would *want* to correct two missing essays on Christmas Eve?

For a brief moment something seemed to squeeze his sternum too tightly. It might have been disappointment, but as he had suffered from that malaise for the better part of

forty years, it could've been a lung collapsing and he wouldn't have known the difference. With the best disdainful expression he could muster, he finally sneered, "Well, it took him long enough."

Hermione sighed deeply, as if she too were giving up. "It's not like he was asking you to dress up as Santa Claus. He was just inviting you to spend Christmas Eve dinner with his family and friends."

Snape glared at the wall behind her. Actually, he glared at her shadow on the wall behind her, which was much more satisfying than just staring at the familiar stones. It struck him that he had indeed reached new levels on the patheticness scale. What did that say about him that even Boy Wonder gave up after two feeble attempts at inviting him? True, he had been rather brusque with Potter, but still, wasn't he supposed to be resilient and determined and all that?

He cast his gaze down from the shadows on the wall to Miss Granger's actual physical being. There she was, his young colleague, cleverly dressed to match the holiday season. If he were honest with himself, he would admit that she looked more than acceptable tonight. And if he were extremely honest with himself (which wasn't likely to happen until he finished his drink), he would acknowledge that some small part of him, perhaps his stomach or even his heart, had hoped Miss Granger had come down here to drag him to that dratted Christmas Eve dinner after all. He had already planned on letting her win this round.

Well, it wouldn't be the first Christmas where he swallowed his loneliness along with his liquor.

"I do not know what I would have done *without* these two essays tonight, Miss Granger. Thank you for returning them and good evening!"

Snape started to shut the door in her face, when suddenly a strange glow from above his door cast a soft translucent blue light across the room. Squinting slightly, they both looked upwards towards the ceiling to find a fresh nest of mistletoe dangling in the air above their heads.

Their eyes met, and the unfamiliar, hopeful expression in hers sent a wave of longing shooting down through him. It was immediately nullified by an equal and opposite wave of panic creeping up from his gut.

Merlin! She didn't think this was *his* doing? Verbal sparring with Granger he could do, but kissing her ...

This had the old meddling fool written all over it. How he had managed to come back from behind the veil to torment him like this, he had no idea! Unless it was Minerva who had solicited the service of a ghost to...

"It's mistletoe," said Hermione with a soft laugh, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Very good, Miss Granger. I am delighted to see your optical nerves do not need fine tuning as well."

She was the one to ignore him this time, mostly because she wondered what had him all fidgety and nervous. Surely, the thought of kissing her wasn't *that* frightening?

"Hmm, Professor, I believe someone up there wants you to kiss me," she said pointing to the pretty ball of leaves and berries dangling over their heads. "Or did you wandlessly make this plant appear?" she inquired teasingly.

Was she ridiculing him?

"I did not... I doubt... I don't *have* to kiss anybody!" he finally managed to spit out with the vehemence of a nine-year-old boy forced to play spin the bottle.

Hermione was surprised and hurt at the intensity with which he rejected the idea of going along with this benign Christmas tradition with her. In a remote part of her mind, she had always thought there might be something more to their banter than just an amusing battle of wits. To test that hypothesis, she had, in fact, come down here to try to convince him to accompany her to Harry's (though she had pretended otherwise so as not to lose two rounds of verbal sparring in a row). Now she realized that this game had been one sided all along, and that in fact, Snape had not been flirting with her all this time.

"Suit yourself," she said, feigning indifference as she turned to leave for the third time that evening.

Before she had completely closed the door behind her, Snape noticed the light on the ceiling becoming agitated, and he was now able to see the bright outline of an arm bouncing the meddling mistletoe up and down in frustration. He had no idea who the ghost was or why it was being so insistent, but someone clearly wanted to see him kiss the young witch before she disappeared.

It finally hit him that he might not get another chance like this with Hermione, and he quickly pulled her back into his office by the arm, dropping his Firewhisky on the floor in the process. They both ignored the shattered glass, staring at one another with equally wide-eyed apprehension.

"Miss Granger, I will raise no objection if *you* wish to kiss me," he said a little too formally, considering how childish his words actually were.

Hermione stared at the blush climbing up from his neck to his cheeks like a paper towel absorbing pomegranate juice. Severus seemed so... vulnerable. Enjoying this subtle shift in power, Hermione couldn't help but tease him a bit more to see if she could make him blush again.

"And how would you like to be kissed, Severus? A peck on the cheek, a kiss on the mouth, or full-bodied snogging?"

He swallowed twice and shifted his feet nervously, trying to avoid the broken Firewhisky glass on the floor. *How would he like to be kissed?* The blood reddening his face seemed to suddenly relocate elsewhere, answering that question for him.

When he saw the twinkle in her eyes, he realized their sparring game was back on, but that somehow the stakes had become much higher. True, he felt intimidated by sharing a kiss with a witch twenty years his junior, and also true, it had been a very long time since he'd partaken in these sorts of amorous activities. But even more frightening than that was the fact that he absolutely had no experience kissing a witch the likes of Granger.

But, in the true spirit of competition, he simply couldn't let her have the upper hand in this matter.

He leaned in and captured her around her waist in too grand a gesture, making her head snap back in surprise. He bent down low and whispered sotto voce, "Option three suits me best, Miss Granger."

Hermione chose to ignore the awkward way in which he held her, concentrating instead on the way his voice made her skin tingle all the way up her spine. His mouth was a mere centimetre away from hers, and she reached up on her tippy toes to close the distance between them. Their lips met, and she heard him swallow as he released the strong grip he had on her waist, as if he was giving her a chance to change her mind.

She lifted her arms around his shoulders, moved in closer to him, and kissed him hungrily to let him know that option three suited her best as well.

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From up above, Lily's soul smiled fondly as she watched Sev and Hermione kissing passionately. She had taken a great risk by leaving the safety of the veil and coming down here as a ghost tonight, but it had been worth it, for these two special people had constantly and unselfishly taken much greater risks in order to help Harry survive.

She cared for them both and was glad to finally be able to lend a helping hand to repay them.

Lily faded back into the ether feeling content; her last vision of the two of them was their entwined bodies stumbling backwards to his desk (Sev still hanging on to the two

essays for dear life).

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A/N: Here's the drawing that inspired this little fic. Hope you like it! Thanks to SW69 for helping me post this.

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