

# No Good Deed

*by Amphotera*

"She wanted to take the high road, but Severus Snape was just too insufferable a roommate."

## Early November

*Chapter 1 of 4*

"She wanted to take the high road, but Severus Snape was just too insufferable a roommate."

Disclaimer: They're not mine. If they were, I wouldn't be a penniless grad student. Please don't sue me.

So, yeah. It's all about my beta. My best friend *and* beta, more specifically, who is an absolute saint and who asked me to write a story in which Lupin resurrects for her Christmas present. I felt bad for her, since she's even crazier about Lupin than I am about Snape, but I'm just not that creative. Hence you get a Christmas-themed HG/SS story instead. I don't know yet how long it will turn out to be...probably relatively short...but I hope to have it finished by mid-December. If you don't like it, blame my lack of talent rather than her outline for the plot.

It's a poor substitute for a healthy, thriving, naked Lupin, I know (inasmuch as a werewolf *can* be healthy and thriving). But at least there will be a naked Snape. I'm pretty partial to that vision, myself.

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### Early November

Hermione drained the last of her butterbeer, feeling so happy as to be almost giggly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt cozier or more contented. She had Harry by her side and Ron across from her, both in excellent moods and laughing happily themselves. The whole of Hogwarts' staff, and many students in addition, nearly overflowed through the walls of the Three Broomsticks for Professor Flitwick's party. The jovial clamor had begun to reach deafening levels.

"Want another butterbeer, Ms. Youngest-Charms-Professor-in-the-History-of-Hogwarts?" Harry teased her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Ron, sitting across from them in one of Madam Rosmerta's more modest booths, shot her a beaming smile.

"I'm fine, Harry. I think I've had enough. And remember"...she raised her right index finger in a mock reprimand..."I'm not *afull* professor, so you can't accord me that honor yet. I've still got another year of my apprenticeship, and Flitwick's only retiring to part-time teaching after the holiday break."

"But you'll be teaching first through fourth *alone*!" Ron protested. "That's over half the classes. And with Flitwick off to be the new editor of the biggest Charms journal out there, it's not like he'll be around to help you much. Shouldn't all that qualify you as a full professor?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not quite. Not until I've finished my apprenticeship, since it's the practical portion of the curriculum. Then the university officially grants me my degree. *Then* he'll retire fully and turn all the classes over to me."

Ron waved her off disinterestedly. "I don't care about the details! Point is, you'll be one of the youngest people *ever*...witch *or* wizard...to become a professor at Hogwarts.

That's bloody *amazing*, Hermione!"

Harry nodded in agreement, a dazed expression in his glowing green eyes. "As if doing four years' worth of university in half that time wasn't enough work!"

Hermione felt tears entering her eyes. She'd worked harder than she'd ever imagined she could at university, feeling the need to compensate for her lack of an orthodox seventh-year education. She had been fortunate enough...and remained tremendously grateful...that the Ministry of Magic had allowed her return to Hogwarts, finish her last year, and sit the N.E.W.T. examinations. She'd had nothing to offer them but her earnest assurances that she'd studied sufficiently during her year of absence to warrant a chance to return.

Wiping hurriedly at her eyes lest the boys make fun of her sentimentality, she rose and said as discreetly as she could while still making herself heard, "I need to use the restroom. I'll be right back."

"*Sure* you don't want another?" Ron cajoled, indicating her butterbeer as he raised his hand to flag down a flustered Madam Rosmerta. Hermione shook her head. She felt a bit on the woozy side already, despite the hearty meal she'd eaten before they'd drunk their first round.

Taking a deep breath, she dove straight through the crowd, muttering, "Excuse me, pardon me, so sorry," feeling terrible every time she bumped into...or bounced off of...another person. She'd nearly made it to the back of the building when Hagrid, attempting to rise from a bar stool that creaked precariously under his weight, inadvertently sent her flying.

Stifling her natural reaction to cry out, Hermione gasped and found herself reeling unavoidably in the direction of Professor Snape. She'd been amazed when she'd seen him grudgingly enter the building an hour or so earlier, a mutinous expression on his face for all to see. She had no doubt that he'd argued vehemently with Headmistress McGonagall in the hopes of being allowed to skip the party; no doubt he would have considered it a long-awaited perk of his promotion to Deputy Headmaster. But both the Headmistress and Albus Dumbledore...in the incorrigible form of his sparkly-eyed official portrait, who wandered freely about the castle...had obviously brought Snape under their control somehow.

Hermione would have amusedly busied herself with wondering about the nature of their threats if she hadn't been so chagrined at being hurled headlong into his person. The forbidding Potions master turned on his heel at the impact of her elbow with his back. His hand shot out and grasped her wrist, steadying her, while his eyes pinned her. His grip felt surprisingly strong for someone who had lain on the brink of death for nearly a year while the Potions experts at St. Mungo's perfected their antivenin.

"I'm so sorry, sir," she said immediately, dizzy from the heat exchanged between their skin. "It was very clumsy of me." He seemed to have made a full recovery, she noted; his hands were steady, and his forearm, just barely visible under the sleeves of his robes, was smoothly muscled.

"Hermione!" boomed Hagrid, reaching down a comforting hand the size of a dinner plate and patting her rather too forcefully on the shoulder. She caved under his weight, relieved when Snape increased the strength of his grip and drew her carefully away from the inebriated half-giant. "Di'n' see ye there. Yeh all righ'? An' you, Professor Snape?"

"It's no problem, Hagrid," she assured him as Snape simultaneously replied in a quiet tone that carried sonorously despite the din, "I believe there was no harm to either Miss Granger or myself."

"Got ter be gettin' back," Hagrid said, giving her a wink, "but yeh be sure ter have a good time! An' y' too, Professor!"

Hermione bit back a smile at the evident stumble in Hagrid's stride. He lumbered out, sending people flying this way and that like the bow of ship parting water.

Snape had released her hand, which Hermione registered with a disappointed flutter in her stomach. Turning to face him directly, she cursed herself for allowing her eyes to linger on the deliciously broad shape of his shoulders and the way his dark eyes glowed in the restaurant's shadows. The deep brown in them seemed to melt and reflect light like the bitterest chocolate.

"Sorry, sir," she repeated...rather too breathily, she feared.

"Do be more careful, Miss Granger," he murmured. Hermione was momentarily stunned that he hadn't chided her more harshly. She saw his eyes flicker toward Ron and Harry and followed his gaze. The boys were so deeply involved in their conversation that they leaned toward one another across the table. Ron said something to Harry with a repulsive look on his face that seemed to screw his features into a terrible grimace, and Harry burst out laughing raucously.

Snape's eyes returned to hers, and he raised an eyebrow. Realizing that she'd spent a good ten seconds watching him as he watched others, Hermione flushed even more brightly than usual, the combined effects of alcohol and Snape's heady, nearby presence, and made her escape to the restroom.

Bursting through the door feeling as though she was on fire, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief once it had shut behind her. She locked the door hastily and went straight to the sink, pulling back her snarled ponytail with one hand while splashing cool water over her face with the other. When she raised her head to examine her reflection in the dusty mirror overhanging the sink, she was relieved to see that while her cheeks were still flushed the telltale rose of arousal and alcohol, the intensity of the hue had faded somewhat.

She'd shrugged out of her heavy autumn coat a couple of hours before, but she felt the need to take a handful of the material of her simple dark-blue tee shirt and peel it away from her skin. The rush of cool air over her stomach calmed Hermione, but there was no escaping the fact that Snape had had the power to render her speechless and thoughtless since her sixth year, and her lustful preoccupation showed no signs of abating.

A few moments passed as she cast a much-needed cooling charm over herself and saw to other pressing needs. Feeling collected and poised once again...or as close as she could hope to get...Hermione unlocked the restroom door, heaved it open, and headed back to her seat. She was surprised to see that in the few minutes she'd been away, a large portion of the students had cleared out, likely to continue the party back in their House common rooms. It was predominantly teachers who remained, gathered into small clusters suffering from varying levels of visible intoxication.

She approached their booth at a leisurely pace, veering aside briefly to examine a beautiful, silk-covered, embroidered screen she'd never noticed before. Running an appreciative fingertip along the stunning, brightly-colored depiction of a mother and young child, Hermione only belatedly realized that she could hear Harry and Ron's conversation. Their voices carried clearly now that the noise level had dropped.

"...but c'mon, Harry, she's got to be kidding herself," Ron was saying through a mouthful of liquid. "It's bad enough she's spent the past two years locked in her room studying. 'S worse than when we were in school wif her, for Merlin's sake." She heard him gulp the remainder of his drink and belch loudly, and she shuddered.

"Wouldn't be so bad if she'd get out once in a while," Harry mused, slurping at his own drink, "or at least spend some time with us and Ginny, but she's really let herself go."

"Mus'f gained a stone, 't leas'," Ron continued on, his words increasingly muddled by drink. "Wha'd she eat, 'ookshanks?"

Harry snickered, a vile sound that felt like it cut straight through her throat and sucked the breath out of her, and slurped again from his mug. "Fills out her Muggle tops better now, though, doesn't she?"

Ron snorted before gulping, swallowing, and retorting, "Easy, mate. You're dating my sister, remember?"

"I meant nothing by it. Just saying, Hermione could stand to get her head out of her books and go for a walk once in awhile. Maybe shave her legs and put on a shorter skirt while she's at it!"

Hidden from their view, Hermione glanced down at her long, comfortable, dark-brown woolen skirt, biting her lip. It hadn't looked so drab in the Muggle department store.

And, more importantly given that she worked in a drafty castle, it had looked *warm*.

"ermione, wear a short skirt? Like a *girl*? Dream on, mate. She could give tha' old bat Pince a run for 'er money some days, I swear."

Hermione moved away from the silk screen, afraid she might collapse against it and damage the exquisite embroidery. She felt as though a vice had been clamped around her chest and was pressing down on her, inexorably and cruelly. Her eyes began darting wildly around the rear of the restaurant, seeking an escape.

She had no idea how she would justify her mysterious absence to the boys without broaching the topic of what they'd said; she would devise an excuse later. All she knew, at that moment, was that she needed to flee before she began crying openly at the staff party in front of faculty who, she was fairly certain, had already managed to listen in on Harry and Ron's conversation as well.

She couldn't believe that Ron, who'd practically begged her to date him, was speaking so ill of her. Granted, they'd both recognized from the beginning of the relationship that what they'd mistaken for chemistry was tension of a different sort, of an irreparable divide in personality that was only destined to drive them both to misery; but she'd thought they had parted on excellent and amiable terms. It had been nearly two years, and Hermione had finally felt as though they were regaining the ground of their friendship and putting behind them the awkwardness of their ill-advised romantic interlude.

He'd been her first time. She hadn't naïvely assumed that it would be anything life-altering, but she also hadn't thought that she would ever come to regret it so deeply. There had been only one boy since then, an exchange student at university who was a year younger and adorably disconcerted by her presence. She'd been charmed by his apparent infatuation until discovering that his attraction lay in her resemblance to the girlfriend back home who'd left him abruptly when he'd announced his intention to study abroad. Hermione had broken it off then, encouraging him to reestablish contact with the young woman who so obviously still held him under her thrall.

Harry continued to laugh, each crescendo driving a knife deeper between her ribs. The mortification was unendurable.

She caught sight of Madam Rosmerta returning through the kitchens, a slight fog covering the spectacles that were slung around her neck by a thin gold chain, resting comfortably on her ample breasts. With any luck, her glasses were fogged because she'd snuck a moment outside, exiting through an employee entrance in the back. Hermione was about to take a desperate stab at covertly entering the kitchens when Ron, his words now slurred almost beyond recognition, delivered his final blow.

"No point in 'er puttin' on a skirt anyway. Not like anybody's gonna want to get in that skirt, y'know?"

He brayed a laugh at his own joke. Hermione heard the liquid spray from his mouth and imagined the trajectories of the various droplets sending them in all directions. The boys' laughter stopped instantly, but she wasn't left to wonder at the reason for very long.

"Merlin!" she heard Ron gasp.

Harry echoed the exclamation with sudden seriousness, slurring rather too loudly, "Sorry, Snape. We di'n't see you there."

"Wha're *you* doing at a bar, anyway?" Ron demanded, his foolishness returning. "Haven' you got anywhere else t' slither 'round?"

"Ron, c'mon," Harry said reprovingly. "He was trying to leave and yous*pit* on 'im, for Merlin's sake."

"Sure 'e's been sprayed wi' worse," Ron retorted, snickering at his own innuendo. "'sides, 'e's seen Hermione. Bloody*works* wif 'er."

Hermione found it rather ominous that Snape, who'd apparently just been covered by Ron's butterbeer-laced expectoration, still hadn't spoken a word. She anticipated the forceful, driving sound of his retreating footsteps as he stalked out of the restaurant. Instead, after a long moment during which she imagined him looking down his nose superciliously at the two boys, he replied silkily, "Indeed. I commend you, Mr. Weasley, for remembering in your drunken stupor the name of your friend, let alone her place of employment."

"Well, c'mon, then," Ron nearly bellowed. "See, 'arry? 'e knows wha' 'm saying. Hermione's totally let herself go. Even Snape agrees."

"I do not recall agreeing with that statement." Snape's voice had lowered.

"C'mon, Snape. You've got eyes, haven' you? She looks like my great-aunt. You see that skirt she's wearin' tonight?"

"Miss Granger, to the best of my recollection, is appropriately and professionally dressed for every occasion." The acidity of Snape's tone was definitely increasing in strength. Hermione was floored to hear him follow with: "Perhaps you ought to consider remotely approaching Miss Granger's level of education and accomplishment before assuming yourself to be in a position to judge her, Mr. Weasley."

"Just because Ron and I di'n't go to university or get an apprenticeship doesn't automatically make us*stupid*," Harry interrupted angrily.

"Despite all evidence to the contrary, Mr. Potter?" Snape drawled. Through the tears drying in her eyes and her short, tortured breaths, Hermione found herself cracking a smile. She had no idea what she'd done to deserve Snape's vitriol on her behalf, but she knew that nothing but his compliments could possibly have ameliorated the sting of her friends' words.

"You callin' me an idiot, then?" Ron demanded belligerently.

"Nothing so lenient, Mr. Weasley. I am calling you an imbecile, an egotistical, shallow-minded, self-important fool who would be unable to recognize an intelligent and attractive witch if she beat you upside the head with your own wand. You should be so lucky as to have Miss Granger's attentions, especially of a romantic nature, fall in your favor."

The boys fell silent. Hermione eagerly imagined their mouths hanging open in stupefied shock. The telltale footfalls of Snape's retreat echoed through the rapidly emptying room. A moment later, she heard the door open and shut behind him and the accompanying gust of cold air rush into the room.

Hermione hardly heard the nasty, scathing things Harry and Ron muttered as they took their leave, having apparently forgotten all about the fact that she was still somewhere in the restaurant. She leaned against the wall and exhaled shakily before gathering her coat from their booth and donning it slowly.

She was contemplatively pulling on a warm knitted beret and her Gryffindor scarf when Madam Rosmerta called from behind the bar, "All right there, Hermione? You look a little shocked."

"I'm fine," she called back with a friendly wave goodbye. "I just realized something a little startling. Really, that's all. Have a good night!"

"You too, dear!" Rosmerta called, beaming at her like a protective aunt. Hermione stepped out into the crisp night air to confront and contemplate her realization all the way back to Hogwarts.

She owed Snape...immensely.

# 13-Dec

## Chapter 2 of 4

"She wanted to take the high road, but Severus Snape was just too insufferable a roommate."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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### 13 December

"Four dozen!" Minerva McGonagall crowed triumphantly. Hermione, who was having trouble refraining from fidgeting, crossed her legs and bounced the suspended foot lightly up and down. The Headmistress was positively beside herself with glee.

"We managed it," she announced to her staff, who all looked profoundly disinterested, save for kindly little Filius. "The Minister has asked me to thank each and every one of you personally. With that rash of teakettle recalls and everyone Flooing in from eight other countries needing special treatment for that curse, they just hadn't the room to house nearly fifty people."

"Where on earth did you put them, Minerva?" Pomona Sprout asked, wide-eyed. Hermione had to confess that she'd been wondering the very same thing. The Ministry of Magic had for months intended to house the four dozen assorted professors, adjunct professors, and of-age students who were traveling to London for the International Symposium on Magical Education. The sudden influx of injuries due to a rash of serial curses on popular purchases, especially kitchen items, had filled the beds of practically every Wizarding hotel in addition to the wards of St. Mungo's.

"Here and there," the Headmistress replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Suffice it to say, it took some work, but we've *just* managed to find the room. The Room of Requirement will be used for a dormitory to house the students...separate sections for male and female, of course...and the adults will inhabit various free guest and staff quarters. I daresay there's not a free bed remaining in this castle!"

"Goodness, this will be exciting," Madam Pomfrey remarked. It was unusual for her to venture down from the infirmary for a staff meeting. Hermione suspected that the Headmistress had demanded the presence of every adult in the castle. Even Trelawney had descended from her putrid, incense-soaked lair to walk among other human beings.

Snape, of course, looked the most put out of all, though he had no legitimate reason to be: he taught classes and was therefore required to attend every staff meeting. Only Trelawney seemed habitually able to worm her way out of that requirement, undoubtedly with the help of a convenient fit of Sight and copious amounts of cooking sherry.

Hermione found herself observing him with an anticipatory thrill, but she couldn't very well give away her secret before Filius had had a chance to explain the situation and accept the credit due him. Willing herself to remain calm, she halted her bouncing foot and forced her ankles together, wincing as one ankle bone struck the other.

"Good thing, too, isn't it?" mused the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, an older man whom Hermione had met only briefly when she'd been officially announced as Filius' apprentice. "I can't speak for everyone else, but I wouldn't have the power to force to castle to alter shape. I doubt anyone since Albus Dumbledore has had that capability."

"We don't even know the spells," the Headmistress admitted. "I'm sure Albus' portrait could tell us some, but even he wasn't required to charm new rooms into existence during his time. It would be next to impossible."

"But all that is behind us," she continued briskly, energized again. "We must ensure that all plans for the visiting faculty are in order. All Heads of House have reported to me individually that they've spoken with their students. The kitchens are, of course, prepared. I have lists of the faculty who will be rooming in each section of the castle; I will hand them to you individually some time this afternoon before our visitors arrive. I expect each of you to make an effort to get to know those staying near you and offer them any assistance they should wish."

"Visiting students will have their own common room as well as the library in which to study, and I've also given them permission to audit all lecture classes...though not midterm exams, of course. Do be sure to leave the doors open for a few extra minutes in case any should decide to join you and have difficulty finding the correct room."

All the professors nodded absently. Hermione nodded as well, though with impatience. Filius had caught her eye, and he winked at her and nodded. He wasn't likely to forget, she knew, but anxiety drove her to fret.

"Now," the Headmistress said, "are there any other announcements before we adjourn?"

"I do have one announcement," her mentor piped up in his characteristic squeak. Hermione immediately sat up straighter, breath bated. "Would you like to do the honors, Miss Granger, or shall I?"

Hermione found, with all eyes on her, that her tongue felt rather fuzzy. She nodded in his direction and he continued, "Well, it's rather an appropriate time to discuss this, as we've been talking about making modifications to the castle. Miss Granger and I are pleased to announce that we have a rather early Christmas gift for Severus."

Snape's eyes narrowed reflexively, sliding from the tiny Charms professor to Hermione in a smooth, fluid movement. "I beg your pardon?" he intoned with just a refined hint of perplexity.

"It was Hermione's idea, really, and she should get most of the credit," Filius assured them all. "I simply used some of my professional connections to get a hold of a few obscure books..."

Snape's expression had advanced from bewildered to downright suspicious. Hermione wondered if he ever indulged in simple confusion or leapt automatically into the highest state of paranoia. "If you'll recall, Professor Snape," she began, "you mentioned late last month that you wished you could charm the ceilings in your rooms."

Her voice had come dangerously close to quavering; Snape's gaze on her face and eyes was far too intense. "You told us that no amount of torchlight, even magically enhanced, managed to provide enough illumination during winter evenings. Well, I mentioned to Professor Flitwick that we might be able to modify the ancient charm used on the ceiling of the Great Hall..."

"Not to reflect the weather, of course," Filius clarified. "I'm afraid that particular portion of the incantation...though it would be too sophisticated for us anyway...has been lost to the ages. We couldn't find any way to piece it together in its entirety with the materials we looked through."

"We did find the basics, though," Hermione hastened to add, forcing herself to meet Snape's eyes levelly and speak in a cool, professional tone, "and we're confident that we can charm the ceilings of your rooms to provide greater illumination when you wish it. It will be similar to transmitting and extending daylight from the outdoors."

Snape looked unconvinced. "I'm afraid that's the only analogy I can provide you," she said, a little sheepishly. "You see, it's rather complicated spell work. But Professor

Flitwick and I have been researching exhaustively..."

"And we're happy to proceed whenever everyone can be spared to lend us help to augment our power," Filius finished with a graceful nod of his head. "We'd be much obliged. Hermione and I can handle the incantation ourselves, but the more raw power we can combine, the better off we shall be!"

"How intriguing, Severus," the Headmistress remarked in a probing tone. She was regarding her Potions Master with a stern look. "I'm sure you're anxious to proceed as soon as possible. You *were* quite voluble in your whining..."

"I do not *whine*, madam," he shot back silkily. "I was merely making an observation. The increased illumination would be... much appreciated."

"Then what better time to proceed than the present?" she said with finality. "We're all here...even Poppy and Sibyl...and can lend a hand."

"Splendid!" Filius cried happily, clapping his little hands in excitement. "Lead the way, Severus! You'll have some improved reading light tonight, I daresay!"

Snape duly led the large, chattering procession of Hogwarts faculty on the long trek to the dungeons. Hermione brought up the rear, her excitement having vanished and replaced immediately by heavy trepidation. Snape didn't look at all enthused about their project. She'd never seen him truly enthusiastic about anything, granted...she rather suspected a full smile would shatter his stiff, grim facial bones...but he didn't look remotely pleased or grateful.

He looked, in fact, like he wished to verbally pin her to a wall as he would have an errant fourth-year. His shoulders were rigid as they made their way down the damp stairs, his strides punctuated and edgy.

She could only hope that he would like his gift after the fact, when everyone had cleared his rooms and he was left with some much-desired peace. Attending regular staff meetings had elucidated very little for Hermione as to the true nature and personality of the acerbic Potions Master, but one fact she knew beyond a doubt was that he cherished his privacy.

When they finally arrived, everyone gathered outside the room, their easy conversations turning to hushed speculation. Hermione realized that Snape and Filius were flanking the door to his chambers, waiting for her. She'd never been inside them before, and the idea of entering his rooms...the place where he read his books, took his meals, and indulged in whatever pastimes required that beloved privacy...stole her breath suddenly.

He held the heavy oak door open, his lips curved slightly. She flashed suddenly on his expression when assigning them a particularly brutal potion and wondered if it was a peculiar brand of satisfaction he derived from seeing her daunted. Meeting his eyes and squaring her shoulders, she moved past him purposefully and stood in the center of his living room, trying to recall how to breathe again.

His chambers were... beautiful. There was simply no other word to describe them. They weren't frilly or lush in a feminine way, of course...there was a subtly dark and definite masculinity in the décor...but they were situated in precisely the way Hermione had imagined that he would organize his private life. The furniture, though deeply colored in blacks and browns, was sumptuous, as was the dark cream-colored carpeting; floor-to-ceiling shelves of incomparably lovely cherrywood lined three of the four walls; and the few *objets d'art* on the mantel above the fireplace were tasteful and clearly expensive.

He was a closet hedonist, it seemed. She looked at the thick, plush carpet before the fireplace, undoubtedly comfortable and warm to the touch, and lustfully envisioned its possibilities.

Filius wasted no time, organizing everyone into a circle. He had to beseech them to hold hands, as Poppy Pomfrey harbored an obvious distrust of Sibyl Trelawney. To worsen matters, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor looked disinclined to allow physical contact with anyone. Once they'd finally...and grudgingly...taken hold of others' hands and were in the required orientation, he nodded at Hermione from his position, diametrically opposite hers.

Hermione had ended up by Snape. As a matter of fact, he'd seemed set from the beginning on where he intended to stand, and it was directly beside her. She'd been startled at first and then slid into suspicion, figuring he wanted to be right there to witness her nervousness. Unfortunately, she was destined to indulge him if she didn't take a deep breath and speak clearly.

She began the incantation, and Filius joined her. The others stared at the ceiling with fleeting interest, then grew bored as the incantation lingered on and on. Finally, Filius murmured, "Now for the final words, Miss Granger," and she found herself instinctively squeezing the hands of her neighbors especially hard as she delivered the last words. Professor Sprout squeezed her hand back reassuringly, but Snape's remained impassive, almost inert. His skin was thick and cool.

For a long moment nothing happened, and Trelawney began to mutter under her breath. A sound, thunderous and reverberating, came from above them, and all murmuring ceased. Hermione was just about to give in to despair and pronounce their attempt ineffective when a telltale cracking rang throughout the room.

"Run!" Trelawney shouted. For perhaps the first and only time in the duration of her tenure at Hogwarts, everyone trusted her judgment; they practically dove out of the circle at a desperate speed, just quickly enough to avoid the rain of stone and wood.

In the aftermath, Hermione found herself squashed between Sprout and Snape on the floor, her face pressed against the now-dusty carpet. Coughing, she wiped off her lips and dusted off her robes, and looked up.

She instantly regretted it. The hole that had resulted in the ceiling of Snape's quarters was immense. From above them, sudden and agitated shouting could be heard as students several floors up peered through the newly created portal. A few waved tentatively and one had the audacity to call out, "Hello down there. Say, are you all in the *dungeons*?"

"Professor Snape," called another voice cheekily, "is that your *living room*?"

Across the circle from her, the Headmistress groaned. "I can't repair this," she said, throwing up her arms in frustration. "It's beyond my capability and that of everyone here, I presume. We'll have to call for the Ministry. The Department of Magical Architecture will have to be consulted. There's no way to patch it up in the meantime, not without risking further damage."

"The architects are all at Gringotts," Filius said, resignation entering his voice. "That faction, the last of You-Know-Who's followers, turned out to be responsible for the bombing. I understand they're having quite a challenging time of it, what with all the goblin curses inherent in the building..."

"There's nothing for it, then," the Headmistress announced. "Severus, you shall have to return to your house and commute every day. I've simply nothing else to offer you..."

"My only alternate residence," Snape returned, his voice nearly frozen with anger, "has been sold."

"Then you shall have to stay in someone else's rooms, I'm afraid. I realize it's not an ideal situation, but we're all adults here, and the problem was created with the best of intentions, I'm sure."

"Indeed," Filius insisted, turning anguished eyes on Snape. "I'm really very sorry, Severus. I simply can't account for... unless the structure had already been undermined by another charm... In any case, either Hermione or I would be more than happy to provide you with some temporary accommodation, I'm sure."

"Hermione is still in the Gryffindor hall, is she not?" Professor Vector spoke up thoughtfully. "Those rooms are slightly expandable, within reason. I can't create an entirely new one, but I'm sure Albus could help us enlarge her living room to section off a separate bedroom, at least. No other part of the castle will be open enough to allow that..."

Hermione could actually feel the air move as Snape's head swiveled to pierce her with his gaze. She'd been certain that the Headmistress would object to a male professor taking up residence in the rooms of a female apprentice...even if she was another professor's apprentice...but apparently the desperate need for extra space outweighed all other considerations.

Twelve days, she realized. Twelve days lay ahead in which she would have to live with Snape, at the very least, before Christmas Day arrived and their international visitors Portkeyed back to their homes to celebrate. There was no telling how much more time might pass before the magical architects returned from Gringotts and from their holiday to fix his chambers.

Snape practically growled his response as Hermione groaned dejectedly.

## 14-Dec

### Chapter 3 of 4

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Disclaimer: They're not mine.

#### 14 December

"Tell me, Miss Granger," Snape said, emerging from her bathroom with a menacing expression on his face, "is it your intention to learn to properly squeeze that infernal tube of toothpaste before you turn thirty?"

Hermione was momentarily shocked by the intensity of her physical response to the sight of his hair still slightly damp, curling at the ends, and the sheen of latent moisture on his skin.

Rather than betray any of these thoughts, she threw up her arms in exasperation. "I'm sorry, Professor, but *bold* you, I simply can't stomach any teeth-cleaning potions. The scent gives me a terrible headache."

"Pity we didn't brew them in Advanced Potions," Snape murmured with a glower in her direction. "Frequently."

Hermione glared back. She hadn't given much thought to the first time she would cohabitate with a man, but on those rare occasions when she'd envisioned it, it certainly hadn't been anything like *this*.

"Professor," she said, gritting her teeth, "I've apologized to you fourteen times. *Fourteen times*, and you've spent only *one* night in my chambers. Please. I realize you're not going to forgive me for damaging your rooms, but we've simply *got* to learn to get along civilly or we're going to drive one another mad."

"I would find your proposition more amenable were you to exit my bedroom," he snapped, and she realized that in her frustrated state she'd walked right past the privacy screens Poppy Pomfrey had lent them to section off a bedroom. Professor Vector had had only modest luck in expanding the size of her living room, which had left Hermione and the Headmistress with far less room than they'd anticipated when constructing Snape's impromptu bedroom.

Realizing that she was within inches of tripping over his bed, she flushed and darted away. "I'm sorry," she called over her shoulder. "Again. Truly, I am. But I'm going to breakfast now. If you'd prefer to use the shower earlier tomorrow, just let me know. I'd be happy to use one of the student bathrooms to give you some more time..."

She could actually feel Snape sneering at her back, but he gave no response. Hermione gathered her papers, intending to take a quick detour past Filius' office before reporting to the Great Hall, and made her escape.

Once safely in the hallway, she fought the urge to smash her head against the nearest wall. The man was intolerable. She felt awful about what had happened, but he, of course, apportioned none of the blame to Filius. As it had been her idea in the first place...her idea to do something *kind*, something *thoughtful* for him, she thought, outraged...she had apparently become, in his mind, single-handedly responsible for the nearly two weeks of drastic inconvenience now facing him.

Hermione did feel sorry for him. She wouldn't have wished sudden dispossession on anyone, regardless of how harshly they sometimes behaved; and she certainly would never have wished it on him. She'd wanted only to do something wonderful for him. Unable to bring herself to admit that she, too, had overheard those unbelievable prats, Harry and Ron, talking about her that night in the Three Broomsticks, she couldn't very well have thanked him in a straightforward manner. She'd wanted, instead, to provide him with a lovely gesture, something that proved she respected and cared about him as a person and wanted his life to be more comfortable.

Muttering angrily, she made her way into Filius' office and found him hard at work, poring over texts that were instantly familiar to her.

"I can't seem to make sense of it!" he said with a gusty sigh, shaking his head. He pounded a tiny fist on the ancient, yellowing parchment, and dust motes filled the air in an enormous cloud.

Hermione's heart constricted painfully as she wondered how many hours he'd spent dwelling on their spectacular failure.

"Really, Professor, you don't have to agonize over it," she insisted, sitting down across from him and gratefully accepting a cup of tea. "Professor Snape is anything but happy living with me until Christmas, but I'm sure he'll adjust. The Headmistress already offered to allow him to move in with one of the male faculty, but their chambers can't be expanded, and he values what little space my rooms can provide."

"And, after all, it was done with his happiness in mind," she added, feeling an overwhelming urge to hug her kindly mentor, who obviously felt the awkwardness of what had happened as deeply as she did. "We simply have to get through the Christmas holidays. I've heard the Ministry architects are brilliant; I'm sure his chambers will come out fully repaired and even more beautiful."

She didn't add that Snape wasn't likely to forgive her on that *orany* basis.

"It simply makes no sense." Filius leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

She noted the dust in his hair and gestured toward it, prompting him to scratch at his head and loose yet another cloud. "*It must* have been another charm that caused it to destabilize, but that would imply a highly unusual malleability in an architectural charm. After all, there had been no other obvious aesthetic modifications, and the charms intended to maintain the foundation should never have reacted with such volatility. I truly believe I'm correct in that assessment."

"I'm inclined to think along the same lines," Hermione agreed, equally pensively, "considering that we were very conservative in our modifications. I understand that architectural charms provide a certain degree of autonomy to the castle, but I can't imagine that it would have perceived such a minor aesthetic alteration as any kind of threat."

"No, no, it isn't that," he assured her, draining his own teacup and rising. "I'm convinced of it now. Well, my dear, I'm afraid I must be off to the gates to greet our guests, much as I would like to continue discussing this. I do feel so terrible for Severus, poor boy... Enjoy your breakfast, Hermione, and by all means, remind any fifth years who are hanging about that they're excused from the first period today. I rather think they've become so wrapped up in that latest essay that they've taken no notice whatsoever of Minerva's announcements the past few mornings."

"Certainly," she promised Filius, giving him a warm smile. "We should enjoy their dedication while it persists; I imagine that once the foreign students arrive, they'll be anything *but* focused."

Filius chuckled, hopping down from his chair and gathering his cloak. "To be sure," he agreed, heading for the door.

"Thank you, Professor, for all your help, even if it didn't turn out so well," she added softly, and he smiled and gave her an acknowledging wave as he exited the room.

She left shortly after Filius, meandering down to the Great Hall. Prior to the debacle with Snape's living room ceiling, she'd been very excited for the impending arrival of their international visitors. Now, she wasn't so sure. Snape dealt poorly with forced socialization under the best of circumstances. The idea of having to hear him mutter and curse over his additional holiday duties while pacing around *her* rooms put her in an especially foul mood. If the Headmistress forced him to chaperone the Christmas Eve ball, she would undoubtedly bear the brunt of his vociferous displeasure.

Entering the Great Hall several minutes later, Hermione winced and began to shoulder her way through the chaos. It appeared that the academic dedication had, precisely as she'd predicted, come to an end. The students were chattering amongst members of their own Houses and even, to a lesser degree, between House tables. All were excited about the upheaval soon to arrive at the castle, but their speculations about the freedom that would be allotted to them at the Christmas Eve ball had become absurdly bacchanalian.

"Good morning, dear," Professor Sprout called to Hermione as she mounted the stairs to the head table. "I'm afraid Minerva's running late in her office...shocking, that. I can't remember a day when she's been late for breakfast."

"The Headmistress does love her toast," the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor remarked as he dug into his oatmeal. Hermione carefully negotiated taking a seat between the two of them, cautious not to disrupt the four impressive and very voluminous bouquets of flowers beside Professor Sprout. She glanced with trepidation at the other side of the table, where she habitually sat beside Hagrid and Snape, wondering if he would attend breakfast and resume glowering uncharitably at her.

"Aren't you afraid Severus will miss your company this morning?" Professor Sprout asked, seemingly earnest. Hermione couldn't imagine the Potions master genuinely missing anyone's company, but she merely smiled and let Professor Sprout continue. "He's rather late himself. I wonder if he's helping Minerva. He *does* take his duties as Deputy so seriously."

Beside her, Professor Bogglesby snorted softly, making his opinion of Snape's authority perfectly clear. Hermione felt an unaccountable annoyance and fought the urge to shake pepper liberally into his oatmeal. Snape had been putting in excessively long hours since becoming Deputy Headmaster, dealing largely with the unpleasant topics to which the Headmistress could devote little time.

"I'm sure he'll help to welcome the visitors," Hermione agreed, spreading marmalade on her toast. No sooner had she completed the thought when a roar went up through the crowd of students, alerting the three of them that the visitors had arrived.

Hermione indelicately shoved the bulk of the toast into her mouth, chewing frantically. She knew that as soon as she moved from the table and set foot on the main floor once again, the remainder of her day would sweep by quickly, one task following another. She didn't find the thought as onerous as Snape undoubtedly did, but, after all, she had been assigned fewer visiting faculty whom she was supposed to serve.

She followed Professor Sprout away from the table and into the castle foyer, which was positively overflowing with people. A large French contingent appeared to be present; the robin's-egg blue of Beauxbatons robes threatened to make a minority of the simple Hogwarts black. Hermione found a relatively safe place at the periphery of the crowd and leaned against the wall, endeavoring to be unobtrusive.

The other faculty, entering with rapidly enlarging eyes, followed her example. The Headmistress had her hands full with the foreign students, turning them over, group by group, to the House prefects, Head Boy, and Head Girl. Twenty minutes later, when the students had been dispensed with and were tromping off toward the Room of Requirement, Hermione was able to move her sore, cramped legs and make her way to the center of the room.

Professor Sprout had been assigned as guide to four of the visiting faculty, who looked pleased but overwhelmed when she proffered the flowers. Clearly hesitant to shrink them in her presence, they struggled to shoulder the bouquets while making their way through the still-dense crowd.

Hermione stood forward slightly, awaiting the two Beauxbatons adjunct faculty to whom she'd been assigned. Before she had the opportunity to catch the Headmistress' attention, a broad-shouldered young man in a dark maroon robe appeared before her, hand outstretched.

"Hermione Granger!" he exclaimed. Perplexed, Hermione accepted his hand, and he pumped hers up and down exuberantly. "Devon Finch...well, Auror Finch, really, but I'd be so pleased if you'd just call me Devon."

"I, ah...sure, Devon," she replied, withdrawing her hand and studying him intently. He looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't seem to place him. "I confess I don't remember having met you before..."

"I was three years ahead of you," he explained, almost apologetic. "I wouldn't expect you to recognize me. Quite an age difference when you're still in school, of course." He had inviting blue eyes and sandy dark-blond hair that reminded her of amber. "I just wanted to introduce myself to you and tell you what a fan I am."

Hermione coughed. "I beg your pardon. A fan of what?"

"Of you," he clarified. "You're absolutely brilliant. I was just finishing up at the academy when the final battle occurred, and... Well, let's just say I wasn't their first pick to be on the front lines after bungling a few spells the month before. Anyway, I can't tell you how much time we spent dissecting and admiring the work you and Harry Potter and Ron Weasley did."

"Thank you," she said thickly. The compliment was unexpected. Most of the attention for the brute force of the spellwork employed during that hellish day had been biased toward Harry and Ron. Hermione tried not to feel resentful...as they'd gone on to attend the Auror Academy themselves, it was natural that people would associate them strongly with the physical aspects of the battle...but she'd sustained scars as legitimate as theirs.

"Not at all." His blue eyes sparkled in a way that was reminiscent of Dumbledore's, but she was acutely aware that he was anything but a fatherly older man. "May I... help with anything?"

"I...oh, dear," she exclaimed, turning in a circle. "I hope the two professors I was supposed to accompany haven't given up on me. The Headmistress will be furious with me, and rightly so..."

"Perhaps the two over there...?" Devon suggested, gesturing twenty feet to their right where a couple of Beauxbatons professors were chatting with Hagrid, awe still registering openly on their faces as they stared up at the half-giant. "Allow me to help. Are you near Gryffindor? I recall you were in Gryffindor. I'd love to see the castle again, although I was a Hufflepuff, I admit..."

Hermione smiled invitingly and allowed him to continue talking as they gathered their guests and escorted them to the Gryffindor wing. He was friendly nearly to the point of being brotherly, but just when she began to suspect that friendship was the extent of his interest, he would flash her a look that pushed the boundaries of mere politeness with its appraising quality.

He was attractive, she thought, and before long she'd found herself agreeing to have lunch with him. Despite the fact that he wasn't unpleasant on the eyes, it was his manners that really drew her in. He held open the doors for the Beauxbatons couple, who were, as it turned out, husband and wife; he wished them a good stay and chatted amiably with Hermione as they made their way to her office.

Between his polite inquiries about her apprenticeship and teaching duties, Hermione decided to remain as open-minded as possible about her lunch with him. Her first instinct had been to draw back slightly, remembering the vision that had passed before her eyes as she'd been cradled into Snape's body in the crowded restaurant, his long fingers firmly encircling her arm: the two of them in a dark corner, his head bent over hers, his lips trailing across her jawline.

She sighed, staring at the floor. She had to give Devon a chance. She was fairly certain that he was flirting with her, his fingers occasionally brushing against her swishing robes as they approached the Charms classroom and her office. Her fantasies about Severus Snape...when she indulged in them, or when they overtook her with an insurmountable urge...were fiery and enchanting, but they were far from reality. Snape wouldn't have stood outside the Charms classroom with her, talking freely and in such a friendly manner.

If anything, the fact that he was now forced to live in close quarters with her, witnessing her fold her underwear and perform all the unflattering, mundane chores of daily life, would ensure that no ardor ever developed between them. In jumping from annoying student to trying housemate, she would never be able to catch his attention as a desirable woman.

"...still on for lunch?" Devon was asking.

Hermione blushed, realizing that she'd been staring at her fingernails and rudely ignoring the affable Auror. "Absolutely," she assured him. She was afraid her smile would feel forced, but looking into his eyes, she found herself genuinely thrilled by the thought of a meal with an attractive man. "My classes should be finished by two. Perhaps I could meet you somewhere?"

"How about if I meet you here and we can head down to the kitchens?" he suggested with a lopsided smile. "I confess to an ulterior motive: I miss the house-elves' food terribly!"

She laughed. "One can hardly blame you for that. Lunch in the kitchens sounds lovely. I'll see you then."

Hermione watched his retreating back and toyed agitatedly with her hair. She found that she was holding her breath hopefully. Devon hadn't exactly set butterflies atwitter in her stomach, but the only man who did wasn't likely to reiterate his compliments of her any time soon. Giving Devon the opportunity to spark some chemistry between the two of them had the potential to relieve her of the most painfully deep and unrequited attraction of her life.

Letting her head fall back against the stone wall, Hermione worried at her bottom lip with her teeth. If only, she reflected desperately, she could have managed to forget the thought that had been dogging her all day: Snape in her shower, naked.

## 15-Dec

### Chapter 4 of 4

"She wanted to take the high road, but Severus Snape was just too insufferable a roommate."

Disclaimer: They're not mine.

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She needn't have been so worried the previous day, as it turned out: Snape didn't pace. Snape was not, by *any* stretch of the imagination, given to pacing, which rather surprised Hermione. He'd struck her for so many years as someone who would feel the need to burn off excessive nervous energy, or just expend a day's worth of frustration after suffering through the stupidity of his students.

Instead, he'd formed himself into a reasonable facsimile of the world's most tightly coiled spring. His feet were planted firmly on her floor; his knees were braced against her coffee table; his shoulders were hunched over as he scrawled viciously in red ink on a poor student's essay; and his hair hung around his ears, lank and obstructive.

Hermione couldn't help herself from glancing up every so often to examine him. He wasn't at all what she'd expected, and that feeling of surprise didn't end at the lack of pacing. He was almost intensely economical with his movements, stirring only as often as was necessary to completely dehumanize his students with his marking.

He was far more... adult... than she'd ever realized, and at times his outline took her breath away. She supposed it had become all the more apparent to her now, having had lunch with Auror Finch...Devon...the day before. It had gone well enough, and his sparkling blue eyes had charmed her into at least *considering* a second outing with him, but her knees hadn't given way to jelly at any point during their conversation. Directly following lunch, as Devon had walked her back to her classroom, she'd ascribed the lack of butterflies to the singularly unromantic setting of the Hogwarts kitchens. And an afternoon meal, she'd reminded herself, was hardly as conducive to thoughts of a sexual nature as an intimate dinner. Perhaps, she'd reasoned, she owed him at least that...one dinner.

Hermione knew that she had to resign herself to the impracticality of her situation. In the days following his defense of her to Harry and Ron, she'd wildly fantasized that perhaps Snape's words hinted a multitude of his own sins. Sins, she'd thought ardently, that might rival hers in their delicious detail and promise. Upon further interactions with him, however, she'd consistently had her hopes beaten down. Theirs was a complex history, and she had for many years immersed herself thoroughly in only her perspective, that of the guilty student inflamed and confused by her burgeoning attraction to someone older.

She'd been susceptible to his voice from a young age, of course, but many aspects of his physical appearance had almost repelled her until she'd grown older. In hindsight, it wasn't repulsion so much as intimidation. After all, she'd grown up beside Harry and Ron and had become accustomed to those boyish characteristics that lingered in younger men. Devon...gallant though he was...typified the young man in transition, with his shaggy hair and self-conscious, almost shuffling walk. There was nothing overtly threatening about males her age; they were far more understandable, somehow easier to dissect and predict.



Snape was another specimen entirely. He was large, for one; she honestly couldn't wrap her mind around how large. She'd sat in the teachers' lounge with him multiple times and recognized him as a tall, healthy, well-built human male, but in the delicate surroundings of her private rooms, he seemed an island of unlikely darkness.

Hermione let her gaze wander over the shape of his body as he, oblivious, drew a sharp red line through one of the hapless student's answers. She'd once shyly admitted to Ginny, who'd been studying for her anatomy exams to become a mediwitch, that she thought his body oddly beautiful.

Ginny had cocked her head to the side and regarded Hermione with a contemplative look. "He does have nice hands and a nice back," she'd said in a rather dreamy tone, and Hermione had immediately agreed. "He can be so *unpleasant*, though, Hermione. Can you imagine what it would be like to be with him? I suppose the sex would probably be good. Hell, it would *have* to be good because there would be nothing else! How could you possibly talk to him? He's got no other way to get a woman's attention."

Hermione had tried to laugh it off, but it was the last time she'd discussed her crush with Ginny. There had been no compelling reason to broach the topic with her best friend since then, so she'd nursed it silently. She hadn't been ashamed by Ginny's reaction...which, she imagined still, was probably identical to the reaction of most other witches whose paths he crossed...but it had caused her to investigate her own feelings a bit more deeply.

Hermione hadn't liked what she had uncovered. If Snape ever discovered how she felt about him...how she could, if she grew lax in controlling her wandering mind, fantasize about him...his true feelings on the matter would be of no consequence. In an understandable fury over the security of his position, he would undoubtedly hex her to within an inch of her life and then have her committed to St. Mungo's for observation.

She'd never strayed much beyond the manner in which he could kiss her and the feel of his skin, however, because even her wildest fantasies had been hemmed in by her lack of knowledge about him. Severus Snape was one of the Wizarding community's most infamous enigmas, and she had no doubt that he derived a perverse sense of satisfaction from cultivating that status to the best of his abilities. He was unpleasant; he was taciturn; he seemed almost prohibitively intelligent to anyone harboring the brief illusion that they could hold a conversation with him levelly and civilly. Hermione just wished that, in progressing from adolescent to young adult, she hadn't begun to find herself almost aroused by his imperiousness.

He set aside his quill and reached smoothly for another parchment, startling Hermione out of her reverie. She was almost positive that in the fraction of a second before he'd placed the parchment on the table, he'd caught her observing him through hazy eyes. His eyebrow had lifted perceptibly, and his lip had curled.

Mortified, Hermione shoved her face into her teacup so forcefully that she nearly chipped a tooth. He'd never been an approachable person, and her crush was unavoidable, but what should have been an acceptable, if strained, evening before her fireplace was somehow becoming charged with awareness. She'd hardly expected it to be *cozy*, but this was ridiculous.

Perhaps it was only on her side, she thought, returning to her novel. Perhaps he'd simply thought she was woolgathering, not fixated on him. After all, he was hardly the type of person to remain silent if the opportunity to torment her arose. The fact that he'd returned wordlessly to his grading probably indicated that he hadn't seen any impropriety in her behavior.

That made sense, right?

On the other hand, Severus Snape did not represent the human norm in any sense, and he was probably far more perceptive than the average person, if only because he'd been forced to survive on his wits for so long. He had to be profoundly observant, and she knew he had a keen and probing interest in determining the weaknesses and motives of others. He'd probably seen right through her. He'd probably realized months ago that her growing discomfiture in his presence was due to more than a latent childhood aversion.

Hermione threw aside her book, disgusted with her train of thought. Snape looked up and regarded her mockingly.

"You've been reading a staggering twenty minutes, Miss Granger," he murmured. "Do try not to overtax yourself."

"I'm no longer in the mood to read," she snapped. "Is that all right with you, Professor?"

"Has anything ever induced you to feel concern for my opinions, Miss Granger?"

He really *was* an insufferable man. She rose precipitately from her chair and stalked to the window, arms crossed over her chest. "A Christmas tree," she announced to no one in particular.

"I presume you are having a conversation with yourself, Miss Granger, as I am an unwilling participant."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Professor, I know you dislike me!" she exclaimed, turning to face him with her cheeks blazing angrily. "You've made that perfectly clear, and I can't stomach apologizing to you any more when you've done nothing but reject my apologies. I'm through with apologizing."

Snape, to her astonishment, was actually paying her the compliment of meeting her eyes. A prolonged, uncomfortable moment passed between them in which hope fluttered in Hermione's heart. Perhaps he would actually accept her apology, and they could coexist peacefully for the next ten days.

"And what has this to do with a Christmas tree?" he prompted finally.

Hermione couldn't restrain herself from sighing. "I want a Christmas tree," she clarified. "We could decorate it."

"Consider again my unwillingness as a participant, Miss Granger."

"Very well.../ could decorate it," she amended huffily. "I haven't had the opportunity to decorate my own Christmas tree in years. My last one was before my first year here, in fact. I should especially like to chop it down myself, I think, so that I could pick my own."

Snape made no comment. She drew aside the curtains over her window and stared balefully at the dark, snow-streaked vista outside. The Forbidden Forest loomed ahead, frighteningly to this façade of the castle in which her window lay, and she considered whether she would have the courage to enter it in search of a suitable Christmas tree. She wasn't a timid person, and she'd braved her fair share of challenges, but venturing into that thorny wilderness during the dark months of winter was a decidedly intimidating prospect.

"I would not recommend that you venture out this particular evening," Snape remarked calmly, as though he'd read her thoughts. Hermione decided to forgo wondering if he'd cast *Legilimens* in favor of feeling stupefied by the lack of animosity in his voice.

He was, as always, correct. She noted the snow flying by at alarming speeds; visibility waxed and waned rapidly. She suddenly regretted that she would not be able to step out that evening...nervous or not, she would undoubtedly have found a long walk to be a welcome diversion on a stuffy and awkward Saturday. But it *would* have been terribly dangerous to go floundering through the Forbidden Forest in inclement weather. She just didn't have the field experience for it.

Resigning herself to requesting that the house-elves procure a tree for her, Hermione ran her fingers absently along the rich material of the curtains, sighing again. Her reflection was backlit softly by the candlelight of the room, and the frost on the windowpane gave her skin an eerie glow. She wondered what she looked like to Snape, who had paused in his writing and was glancing up at her, frozen in his observation rather longer than strictly necessary.

He returned his gaze to his parchment a moment later. Just when she was preparing to retreat to her bedroom, Snape said quietly, "You do not have sufficient experience navigating the Forbidden Forest, Miss Granger, if that is indeed your plan to obtain a tree."

Hermione remained obstinately silent, grinding her jaw. She definitely hadn't felt any invasion of her mind, which made his propensity for guessing her thoughts especially grating. She was preparing a suitable rebuttal when he continued neutrally, "Minerva is making the rounds tomorrow evening. If you can quell your more foolish Gryffindor tendencies and muster the patience to wait until we have finished supper tomorrow, I will accompany you."

Her grip on the curtain grew slack. That was unexpected. She ran a finger anxiously along the loose strands at the nape of her neck that had escaped from her bound hair. "I would appreciate that, Professor," she said quietly, studying the carpet. "Thank you." Their eyes locked, and she was acutely aware of how low her Muggle sweater draped and the feel of the silky curtains against the flushed skin just above her shoulder blades.

Snape grunted in response and returned to his task. Hermione pressed her lips together, resisting the urge to bark a laugh. The moment had passed, but she felt a resurgence of her Christmas spirit all the same. She returned to her seat and resumed reading.