

Let Nothing You Dismay

by Bluestocking

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: *These characters aren't mine. They belong to J.K. Rowling, and I'm just have a bit of fun with them.*

There is nothing that Hermione likes better than studying complex and difficult subjects, and there is no subject more complex and difficult than Severus Snape.

Is it any wonder, then, that she hasn't been able to take her eyes off of him?

Since returning to teach at Hogwarts, Hermione has mentally documented his every habit and predilection in detail, making a painstaking study of the mysteries of Snape. By now, she knows the drape of his hair and the sweep of his cape and the precise curl of his lip when he is especially disgusted with the world. She readily admires the sharp curve of his nose and the feline grace of his walk, and she can read his mood in a glance, a glare, a sigh.

But mostly she watches his eyes, dark and large and as eerie as they are expressive, at once his most beautiful and terrifying feature. Sometimes they glimmer with mirth; sometimes they glitter with cruel satisfaction. At times they narrow in lacerating fury, and on rare, wonderful occasions they even gleam with something like approval. Yet too often these days they are merely dull and flat with despair—wanting little, expecting less.

They look that way now as he sits in the corner of the staff room, sipping Firewhisky and skulking in the shadows of his colleagues' holiday cheer. Even beneath the glassy sheen of alcohol, there's a dim, half-dead hunger in his gaze, the sort of chronic, bone-deep want that has long reconciled itself to never being fulfilled.

It is, Hermione thinks, about time she did something to change that.

A sad sprig of charmed mistletoe hovers mockingly over his head—Flitwick's idea of an amusing joke, no doubt—and as Hermione approaches the table, Snape spares a tired, bleary-eyed glare—first for the sprig, then for her. "Not a word," he says darkly, his speech impressively crisp given the amount he's already drunk.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Hermione murmurs. His eyes are no less fascinating up close, and Hermione watches his gaze cycle through despair, annoyance, interest and attraction before settling down to some breathtaking combination of melancholy and wistfulness—all of it focussed on her.

"I suppose," Snape says suddenly, "that you've come to have a laugh as well."

"Of course not! I'd never—"

"Of course you wouldn't," he mutters, a sharp spike of bitterness in his voice. "You've come to wish the pitiful old man Happy Christmas. How charitable. How very *Dickensian* of you. But on the whole, I think I'd rather have the mockery, Professor Granger. At least it's honest."

"So am I," Hermione says with great dignity, refusing to play this game. It's true that at one time in her life, the idea of Professor Snape at the mercy of mistletoe would have been greatly amusing to her, and at another time in her life, his plight would have aroused her pity and sense of fair play. But times have changed, and so has she.

Now... no, it isn't pity she feels at the sight of Severus Snape beneath the mistletoe, and it isn't amusement, either. It's something that warms her and chills her and terrifies and elates her, something that gives her the boldness to say, "I came to tell you that I can help you with that. If you'll let me. If you trust me."

In his eyes there is confusion, followed by the briefest flicker of fear—and is that interest? "You know of a counter-curse?"

"Of a sort," Hermione says, summoning all her Gryffindor courage. Boldness has carried her this far; she'd be foolish to abandon it now. "It goes like this."

She leans forward to close the gap between them, close enough to see the scars on his throat and the stubble on his jaw, the brown of his eyes and the mingled hope and desire they can't quite conceal. For once, his lips aren't pressed thin with disapproval or puckered in distaste; they're parted and lovely and soft, as though simply waiting for somebody to notice and kiss them.

So Hermione does.

The kiss tastes like Firewhisky and coincidentally, it makes her feel quite drunk indeed. Judging by the enthusiastic response she receives, Hermione suspects that the feeling is mutual. After a frozen moment of surprise, Snape's hand tangles in her curls and his awful nose bumps hers—once, twice, until they find the right angle and fit together as closely as two oddly-shaped souls can.

It's perfect.

It isn't until they've managed to pull away for a moment, gasping for air, that Hermione realizes that the cure has worked: the ignominious mistletoe is gone, having dropped harmlessly out of the air and onto the table. They both stare at the sprig for a moment, mouths tingling with the phantom heat of their kiss.

"That is... a most effective cure," Snape finally says, his voice curiously neutral. He looks better than she's ever seen him, his eyes bright, his hair mussed and his cheeks pink with colour. He looks alive and dazed and off-balance, and it's a wonderful sight. "It seems to have done the trick."

"Yes," is all Hermione can say, her earlier boldness having abandoned her. Her face feels crimson with heat. It was only a cure, after all. Only a cure and a stupid risk. She was naïve to think otherwise. On the other side of the room, there is a burst of drunken laughter and song; Hooch has started serenading them all with bawdy ballads

"Of course," Snape continues, "I should like to be more proficient in the counter-curse. It's quite useful, after all." His eyes lock with hers, and in them she sees promise, speculation—and a welcome challenge. "Perhaps... perhaps you would be willing to engage in some hands-on instruction in more—ah—*private* surroundings?"

And just like that, Hermione can breathe again.

"Splendid," she agrees. "I would hate for you to miss out on any of the variations in the counter-curse. There are so many ways it can be applied, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes," Snape agrees, smirking in a way that curls Hermione's toes. "Many variations, and I would prefer to practice them all in depth." He pauses and frowns off into the distance, the pink returning to his cheeks. "I must warn you, it's been many years since I... last studied this counter-curse and its variations, and I fear I never had much opportunity for practice."

Ah. So. Hermione purses her lips, considering. Finally, she lays her hand on his arm, warm and wiry through the layers of wool, until he will meet her gaze again.

"Well, then we—we may need to practice multiple times," she dares to say. "You're obviously a very quick study, and practice will make perfect. It always does."

For as long as she lives, Hermione will never forget the look of astonishment on his face. It's like a flower blooming, slow and exquisite—a hopeful crocus rising from the bleak, frozen ground.

It's one of the loveliest things she's ever seen.

"Do you know, I think it will," Snape finally agrees, a tinge of wonder and—yes!—contentment in his voice. "It will indeed."