

A (Fangirl's) Christmas Carol

by Brenjunk

A Hogwarts version of the traditional tale, starring the dour Potions master and the resident know-it-all.

A Series of Bah-Humbugs

Chapter 1 of 5

A Hogwarts version of the traditional tale, starring the dour Potions master and the resident know-it-all.

Hermione gave one cauldron a stir, then quickly moved to another, taking care to stir this one counter-clockwise. She brushed a stray hair from her face and moved to another cauldron where she placed three scarab beetles and began to stir again.

Being a Potions apprentice was challenging. Who was she kidding? It was downright miserable. It would have been simply challenging if her master, Severus Snape, weren't such a grouse. Demanding perfection at every turn, he harped when things weren't exactly as he wanted them, even if they were done right. The man was never satisfied. Hermione huffed.

It was Christmas Eve, and she'd thought she might have a reprieve. She wasn't that fortunate. Severus had snapped and yelled all day, even more so than usual. He'd piled work upon her, and she feared she wouldn't get home until nearly midnight. Not that it mattered. She was going home to an empty apartment in Hogsmeade. Her parents had never really been the same since their memories had been restored. Their knowledge of their true past was sketchy, and they would often forget things. They had forgotten they had a daughter for six months. No matter what Hermione had tried, their memories could not be reestablished. They were just beginning to accept her once again. Hermione feared that if she showed up on their doorstep in Australia they'd treat her more like the milkman than their daughter.

"Come to Christmas dinner, Hermione!" Harry begged.

"Oh!" Hermione chewed her lower lip. "I can't, Harry."

"Why not? Don't tell me you have a date?"

She looked to the floor. "No, I just want to celebrate alone."

"You do realize that's self-defeating," Harry said with a smirk.

"Harry, I really appreciate the offer. It's just that..." She looked away.

"You feel like the odd man out?"

Her eyes met his. "Yes. You are all paired off so nicely, and I'm just there. The kids keep you all busy, and I feel left out. It's a family holiday, Harry. I really don't have any family."

Harry pulled her into a hug. "Of course you do, Hermione. We're your family."

"I know," she said into his coat. "But this Christmas, I don't want to be the afterthought."

"Hermione!"

"I know. I know you don't mean it. It's just how I feel. Please don't be upset. I'm not offended at all. It's just the natural way of things."

Harry made sure she was looking right at him. "You're welcome, always. You know that."

She smiled. "I do. Of course, I do."

"Well, if you change your mind, there will be plenty of goose to go around."

She'd pondered his invitation over and over again. She just couldn't bring herself to be subjected to all that holiday cheer without someone special to share it with. It would be best if she celebrated alone. Unfortunately, at the rate she was going with these potions, she'd be ringing in the New Year instead of celebrating Christmas this year.

She finished the Mandrake Draught and began to bottle it. She shook her head, knowing that Poppy still had a case of this in her stores. Severus had just given her this task to keep her busy. As if she weren't busy enough having to brew a Memory Potion and Draught of Peace at the same time.

"This is the life you have chosen," he'd harped. "If it's too much for you and you can't take the stress, perhaps another field would be better for you."

She frowned. Since surviving the war, she'd thought Severus Snape might become a better person. Granted he was a hero and all, but he certainly didn't act the part. The closest thing to a smile that ever graced his lips was an evil smirk. He never paid anyone a compliment, the students still turned and ran when he came down the hallway, and because of his surly attitude, he had no friends. Hermione was the only one he ever spoke to, and that was only because she was his apprentice.

Severus stalked up behind her as she moved to the memory potion, causing her to jump slightly. He gazed into the cauldron as she stirred it.

"It's too thick."

She glanced at him. "It will thin when I add the jobberknoll feathers."

He removed his wand and vanished the potion. "It is too thick. Even if it thins, it will still remain too thick. Start again." Turning, he stalked away.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," Hermione said under her breath.

Severus spun around. "What did you say?" he challenged.

She looked up and gave him a level look. "Merry Christmas, Master Snape."

He sneered at her. "Christmas... a waste of time! It's only a reason for people to slack off all day."

She looked at him curiously. "Certainly you want to celebrate, sir."

He got a faraway look in his eye. "Nonsense. I have nothing to celebrate. I am surrounded by dunderheads, and you are constantly jabbering at me, asking infernal questions that a know-it-all like you should already know. Name one thing that I should be thankful for!"

"You're alive," she muttered crossly.

"It would be better if I weren't." He turned then and disappeared into his private lab.

Severus stormed into his lab and threw himself into the chair behind his desk.

Merry Christmas indeed. The nerve of that woman. What is there to be merry about?

He marveled at the stupidity of everyone. They all pranced around with smiles on their faces and happy wishes to one another. Wishing meant nothing. Doing, that was where the action was. He'd done. Oh, he'd done. He still did. Did he get credit for his works? No, never.

He slaved in that stupid Potions classroom, trying to instill a good work ethic in the dunderheads he taught. They ignored him, made fun of him, laughed at him, and took his subject for granted. His mind raced to the last episode of sheer stupidity he'd encountered.

"Professor Snape?"

Severus wheeled around to see Timothy Bell looking at him in fear.

"Do I add the porcupine quills now?" the boy asked shyly.

Severus' eyes raked over the lad. He was extremely pale, slightly stooped over, and looked sickly. He'd noticed the child limping around the castle, but had not given it much thought. Now a fleeting question shot through his mind, but he was too absorbed in the retort that was to fly out of his mouth.

"What did the instructions say on the board?"

The boy squinted and looked puzzled. Severus huffed. "Do you want your cauldron to melt around you?"

Timothy's eyes grew wide. "No, sir," he said in wonderment.

"Then add the quills after you take it off the fire like it says on the board. Does the English language escape you, Mr. Bell?"

The boy shook his head. Severus leaned low. "Then. Pay. Attention. To. Detail."

A disaster had been averted that day, but during the very next class, the boy had added more bulbadox powder than necessary, causing a cloud of blue smoke to fill the classroom. That was just one example of the idiotic antics he had to suffer through in the classroom.

"Insufferable wastes of space," he muttered under his breath as he opened his Potions diary and began to scribble notes in it.

Time passed slowly. Severus took great care in recording his findings and accomplishments for the day. After a long while, Hermione straggled into his lab, her hair a mess. He glowered at her for disturbing his concentration.

"I'm done, sir. I'll be leaving now. Merry Christmas," she said.

"I suppose you'll be wanting tomorrow off?" he grouched.

"Um, yes sir..."

Severus frowned. "If you intend to be serious about your apprenticeship, then you must be willing to work even when all are wanting to play."

Hermione stuttered, looking at him in slight shock.

Severus heaved a great sigh, as if the entire world were out to get him. "Very well, but be here all the earlier the next day."

Hermione grinned and turned eagerly. "I will, Master Snape! Happy holiday to you!"

She'd rushed out before he'd even had a chance to object about the idea of him having a happy anything. Gazing after her, he frowned deeply. Creases that were hidden previously lined his face, which appeared worn and haggard and quite severe. He returned to his scribbling. His frown turned into a scowl as he heard a knock on his door. Couldn't everyone just leave him in peace?

"Severus?" he heard a voice call from the doorway. He rolled his eyes. That voice belonged to the person he wished would just disappear.

Harry Potter rushed in with a smile on his face.

"Hello, Severus! Merry Christmas!"

"What's so merry about it?" Severus grumbled.

"Why, it's the most wonderful time of the year!"

"According to whom?" Severus countered, glaring at Potter.

Potter stopped short, obviously not quite sure how to proceed. He decided to smile wider, which only made Severus want to hex him. He refrained.

"I wanted to invite you to Christmas dinner tomorrow, Severus."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Is this some sort of joke?"

Potter's eyes narrowed in response. "Hardly! Ginny and I would love to have you. You should know that by now, we invite you every year."

Severus looked back down at his diary. "I must decline."

Potter stepped over to Severus' desk and leaned over it. "Come on. It'll be fun. Just this once?"

Severus' head snapped up, and he glowered at Potter. "No."

The younger man straightened up. "Well, the invitation stands. You are always welcome."

Severus ignored him. Potter began to shift from foot to foot. "I'll just be going," he said finally. "Happy Christmas, Severus."

Severus didn't even look up when the other man left. He was relieved that the Boy-who-was-now-a-man-but-should-have-died-a-baby had finally departed.

Severus made his way down the hall to his doorway. Looking up, he was startled to see the Bloody Baron's head where his doorknob should be. His hand drew back in alarm, and he frowned down at the man's head, which was unusually bloody tonight. The ghost grimaced at him. Severus scowled and reached through the transparent head to open his door. Muttering to himself, he closed the door behind him, stalked to his favorite wing-backed chair by the fire, and settled in for the evening. He conjured up a mug of cocoa and opened his favorite Potions text, set on reading until his bedtime.

He'd only read a few paragraphs when there was a loud crashing sound from the hallway. He looked up to see the Bloody Baron move through his door, a terrifying look on his face. In an instant he was floating over Severus, his blank eyes seeming to bore into him, despite their vacancy. His gaunt face scowled at the man seated below him. Severus' eyebrow arched at the menacing figure.

"Severus Snape!" the ghost cried.

"Yes?" Severus said calmly.

"I am here to warn you!"

"Of what?" Severus said in a bored tone.

The Baron cried out, a low wail leaving his silver mouth. He spun around Severus' armchair and came to rest in front of him once again. This time, however, he held a large chain in his hand, which wrapped itself around his body. Severus felt fear flare up in his chest.

"Do you wish to end up like me?" he asked Severus in a gravelly voice.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I let my temper flare and rule over me, much as you do. Like you, I had few friends, and like you, I spent my life foolishly."

Severus' eyes grew wide. "Whatever do you mean? You were a masterful Slytherin in your day."

"There is more to life than cunning and a cutting remark! I let the worst of me overcome my better senses. I let hatred and anger rule me. Now, I am bound to the Earth, never able to rest."

"Baron, why do you insist on telling me this now? Surely, others know of your plight!" Severus eyed the Bloody Baron in fear. Never had they had such a conversation, and although Severus knew that the Baron had come to a terrible end, he'd never truly thought about his existence as a ghost.

"My deeds bound me to an existence imprisoned in this castle. I am unable to leave it and must remain until the end of time. There is no rest for me; I have no peace. I am doomed to this existence that has no meaning, no happiness, all because I gave no happiness to anyone when I was alive."

The ghost came to within centimeters of Severus' face. The dour man could feel the chill coming off the Baron. He shrank back.

"Do you wish to become like me?" the Baron asked darkly.

"No, of... of course I don't!" Severus replied adamantly while shaking his head vigorously back and forth. His eyes were wide with dread when he looked to the ghost who was merely a breath away from him.

The ghost pulled back and floated above Severus once again.

"You will be visited by three spirits this night. Your fate will be decided at the end of these visitations."

"What will these spirits do?" Severus asked. A look of foreboding came over his face.

The ghost glowered at Severus. "What they do is up to them. I urge you to pay attention!"

The Bloody Baron lifted up the chain that now hung down from his body and scraped on the floor. "If you wish to escape my fate, you will pay dire attention!"

With that, the Baron floated through Severus' door. Snape sprung from his seat and ran to the door, flinging it open. He looked up and down the corridor, but the Baron had disappeared from sight. Severus' breathing was coming rapidly, and he took some deep breaths to steady himself. Closing the door behind him, he turned in puzzlement to return to his seat by the hearth. Then a bright light assaulted his vision.

A/N: Thanks for reading. I love the original of this story, and brena and I just thought we could have some fun with a Snapey version. Many thanks, hugs, and chocolate to karelia for her beta work. debjunk

The Ghost Of You

Chapter 2 of 5

Severus is visited by the ghost of Christmas past.

"Lily?"

"Yes, Severus?"

"No, it can't be you. You're dead."

"Severus, it was very important that I come back and speak with you. I couldn't bear it any longer. I've seen you, watched what you've been making of this second chance you were given. A second chance that I pleaded that you get, and here you are wasting it!"

"Lily, why would I want to be here? The world has rejected me at every turn. I bring nothing but resentment and fear wherever I go." He took a deep breath, then muttered, "Why am I even bothering? I'm arguing with a hallucination!"

Severus abruptly turned away from the hearth and the image of Lily that stood there. He stalked into his kitchen, to the cupboard, and pulled out a bottle of Firewhiskey and a tumbler.

Drink in hand, Severus turned back towards the hearth, and found that his hallucination was still there. Her eyes looked incredibly sad as she bowed her head and began to shake her head.

"You just don't get it, do you, Severus?" she said quietly.

He walked back across the room to stand right in front of the ghostly image of the long-dead Lily Potter.

"What, that I'm obviously going barmy, and I'm not even fifty?"

Her head snapped up, and she stared into his dark eyes. "That's it! We're leaving now, since you aren't going to even try to listen."

Lily turned back towards the hearth and threw some powder into the flames.

"Evans Residence, Christmas Day...1969," she called out as the flames turned green.

Lily turned and grabbed Severus' free hand and pulled him into the fireplace with her.

In no time they tumbled out of the Floo and into the living room of Lily's childhood home.

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus whispered at his companion.

"They can't hear us, Severus."

"Fine! What is the bloody meaning of this, Lily?" he snarled at her.

"Severus, come on, let me show you."

The duo walked towards the dining room, and Severus watched in wonder as his younger self smiled and laughed with the Evans family.

"You were so happy, Severus."

"I don't see the point of this. I'm not that child anymore."

"No, but you still could have that kind of joy in your heart, Severus! There's still so much to live for!"

Instead of arguing with her, he continued to watch the scene in front of him.

His younger self took the bowl of mashed potatoes from Lily, who was sitting on his right. As she passed the bowl to him, the young redhead leaned in and whispered something in Severus' ear.

"Do you remember what I told you?"

Severus smiled sadly at the recollection and nodded yes in response.

Lily leaned in close to Severus and quietly said, "I can't wait till we get to Hogwarts!"

Suddenly, there was a ruckus at the dinner table.

"Mom! They're whispering again! I know they're talking about me!" Petunia snapped.

"Speaking of Hogwarts, it's time for us to move on." Lily said gently as she began to lead Severus back towards the fireplace.

"Hogwarts: Slytherin Common Room, December 20th...1972," Lily called out to the fireplace.

They popped out of the fireplace just in time to see second-year Severus Snape leave the dorm room.

"No, Lily. I don't need to see this."

"We're following you, Severus. You have no choice."

They followed the young Severus through the dungeons and up towards the overly decorated entrance hall. As soon as he took a step into the hall, he was ambushed by none other than Gryffindor's golden boys, The Marauders.

"Expelliarmus!"

"Petrificus Totalus!"

There he was disarmed, petrified and surrounded by his enemies without a teacher in sight.

Suddenly, they heard someone screeching towards them.

"James, Sirius, Peter and Remus, stop that right now! He didn't do anything to you; leave him alone!" Young Lily Evans chastised the group as she stalked towards them from the moving staircase.

"Aw, come on, Evans. You just don't know him like we do," James Potter said sweetly.

"Yeah, Evans, he did do something to us. He knows more curses and dark spells than anyone in our year! He offends us, and we're only trying to protect ourselves from scum like him," Sirius Black added.

Lily only shook her head in frustration at the boys and put herself between the Marauders and Severus. She then brandished her wand towards her friend's prone form, and he was mobile once more. Once satisfied that Severus was okay, she turned to James and said, "His wand, James?"

As James handed Snape's wand over to Lily, he looked past her and into Severus' eyes and said, "This isn't over, Snivellus."

In no time the group of Gryffindor boys stalked off and left the young Severus and Lily alone in the entrance hall.

"You can't always protect me from them," Severus said sharply.

"I was just on my way to make sure you were still coming to dinner on Christmas. What did you expect me to do, just stand there?"

"Of course I'm still coming. When I'm with your family..." Severus trailed off, not wanting to put words to his feelings.

"I understand," young Lily said with a smile.

As the two second-years wandered off together, Severus and Lily looked on.

"Why did I need to see that, Lily? Why do you insist on continuing to torture me from beyond the grave? Haven't I repented? Haven't I proven how much I regret our past?" Severus pleaded with the apparition.

"Severus, you need to see this. You need to see that you have been loved, and cared for. You are not unlovable."

"I..."

Just then the year changed, and an older Lily Evans and James Potter came into the hall from the moving staircase.

The older Severus instantly recognized what was about to happen and turned sharp, angry eyes to his ghostly companion.

"No, we aren't doing this. Take me back to the present. I don't need to see this."

"You do need to see this, Severus. You need to remember the path that you've taken was your own doing."

They watched as James handed Lily a long, skinny, brightly wrapped Christmas gift.

"Happy Christmas, Evans," he said triumphantly.

"James, you shouldn't have! I... I didn't get anything for you," she responded quietly.

"I honestly just want to see you open it and love it. That will be my gift from you."

Young Lily looked down at the package and began to unwrap it. She began to blush furiously as she gazed upon the diamond and ruby bracelet the box held.

"James... I... I can't accept this!"

"Yes, you can, Evans. You deserve this, and many more gifts like this one. When you wear it, think of me."

As James Potter leaned in to kiss Lily on the cheek, Severus looked over towards the stairway that led to the dungeons. There he found his younger self, wearing a look of utter hatred.

The younger Severus looked down at the small gift he had made himself for Lily, then over to where James was helping Lily put on her new bracelet.

Young Lily heard the sound of something hitting the stone floor, and caught the sight of Severus' dark head stalking down the stairwell.

"Severus!" she called out frantically.

"Let him go, Lily," James said softly.

"No, I can't... he doesn't understand. I need to explain!"

The observers continued to watch the scene play out in front of them.

The young Lily caught up to Severus finally and spun him around to face her.

"What?" he said snidely

"Severus, I... James, he was just..."

"Yes, I noticed. When were you going to tell me? You're such a liar, Lily. Accepting fine presents from that prat; I expected better of you. I thought our relationship meant something to you! Apparently, I was wrong."

"Severus! You do mean something to me! You're my best friend!"

"Maybe you should find another friend if you're going to keep fraternizing with the enemy."

Young Severus attempted to turn away from Lily, but she stopped him once more.

"No, no, you can't do this! Come to dinner on Christmas, just like you used to. It'll be like old times, and you'll see..."

"Yes, I'm sure I'll see. I'll see you taking pity on the poor, abused kid from the wrong side of town. I don't need your pity. Why don't you invite Potter to dinner? I'm sure he's the sort your parents hoped for."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means! Go on, Evans. Your destiny as the next Potter princess is waiting."

"Severus! Stop being so unreasonable! I'm not dating, Potter! He gave me a gift, that's all!"

"But you accepted it."

"It's rude to reject a gift, Severus."

"It's also rude to pretend to be friends with someone while stabbing them in the back."

Severus yanked his arm from Lily's grasp, turned and began stalking towards the dungeons once more.

"Severus! Severus, please..." Lily cried out as tears streamed down her face.

Just as the young Lily Evans collapsed on the hard stone floor in grief, so did the forty nine year old Severus Snape.

"Lily, please... I'm sorry. Please, you have to forgive me. I was an idiot, you weren't... I was such a fool," he cried at the ghost's feet.

She reached out a pale hand and touched his cheek.

"Severus, there is nothing to forgive."

"Yes, yes, there is... I destroyed our friendship over a bracelet. I was so upset at my own lot in life... I took it out on you. Then, I continued to drive the wedge between us to the end six months from this point. You would have forgiven me for this... If Only I would have..."

"This is the path you've taken, Severus. With this moment, you not only gave up on our friendship, you gave up on yourself. You withdrew so far into yourself and gave up on the possibility of ever feeling loved."

"How could I trust anyone else after you?" he pleaded.

"Severus, please listen. It's too late for us, but it's not too late for you. You can change. You've got to reconnect with your mortality. You've got to make your life worth living."

"What can I do, Lily?" Severus bowed his head and continued to weep at her feet as he asked for direction.

"Live... feel something other than anger. Feel the joy of love and the solace of friendship. Please, Severus... Live."

When Severus looked up again to respond to Lily, she was gone. He looked around and found he was back in his sitting room, kneeling in front of the hearth.

"Lily!" he yelled out to the empty room

When a reply didn't come, Severus Snape broke down in tears once more.

A/N: Thanks for Reading! Much love goes to karelia for the beta work! Up next: The Ghost of Christmas Present! ~ Brena

What's All Around You

Chapter 3 of 5

The ghost of Christmas Present makes its appearance.

Severus' weeping hadn't lasted long when he felt a gentle, yet icy hand on his shoulder. His head shot up, and he stared at the person owning the hand. Stooped down and gazing into his eyes was Albus Dumbledore.

Severus groaned within himself. "Not you, too..."

"My boy, it's wonderful to see you again."

"Sod off, you old coot."

"Now, now. Why would you be so harsh to an old friend?"

Severus' teeth ground together as he sneered at Dumbledore.

"Friends don't kill one another, remember, Dumbledore? I am no friend of yours, and you are certainly no friend of mine."

Albus reached into his robe and pulled out a small tin. It might have been silver at one time, but now it was just as gray and see-through as Dumbledore himself. He removed the lid and pushed the tin into Severus' face.

"Lemon drop?"

Severus batted the tin from his hand and stood up. Curling his hands into fists, he glowered hatefully at the man who had done so much to make his life miserable. He was so tense he felt as if he were about to shatter.

"Why are you here?" he snapped.

"Dear boy, you know why I'm here!" the old ghost said with a twinkle in his eye.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "I refuse to go anywhere with you!"

"Refuse if you must," Dumbledore replied, his eyes steadily holding Severus'. The ghost stood and now looked him straight in the eye. "Unfortunately, my boy, complain as you may, you have no choice!"

With that Dumbledore grasped Severus' hand, and the room began to spin. Severus gripped Dumbledore's hand as a wave of nausea enveloped him. Within a matter of seconds they had appeared in Timothy Bell's home.

Bell's parents were busily preparing the Christmas dinner. His father was chopping vegetables, and his mother was taking something out of the oven. She emerged, weighed down with a large turkey. Severus turned as he heard a commotion coming from the other room. Timothy's older sister, Katie, came rushing in.

"It's Tim!" she cried.

Her father dropped his knife, and her mother quickly placed the turkey on the stove before rushing out of the room. Severus felt a hand on his back, pushing him along to follow them. With a glare at Dumbledore, he stalked after the family, who were rushing upstairs.

Severus made his way up the stairs and to the bedroom where Timothy was. He stopped in the doorway as he saw the boy gasping for breath. His father ran to him and started waving his wand over him while his mother fumbled with several potions placed on his bedside table. She finally found the one she was searching for and hurried to pour it down Timothy's throat. His gasping subsided, but he fell back, exhausted.

"That... was... a... close one," he said between huge gasps of air.

His mother smoothed out his hair. "It's all right, Tim. You'll be just fine."

The young boy smiled at her lovingly.

Severus leaned back and whispered to Dumbledore. "Is there nothing that can be done? Surely, magic can cure the lad."

Dumbledore didn't bother whispering. His voice was strong. Despite the frightening situation, the timbre of his voice held the usual upbeat tone that had always made Severus' stomach turn. The man was just too chipper.

"They have taken him to every healer in the country. No one can discover what is wrong with him."

The boy was finally strong enough to rise from the bed. He got up gingerly, helped by his mother's strong hand on his arm.

"I'm fine, Mum," he told her, gently shaking off her hand.

Severus watched the boy limp over to his dresser and grab the brush, pulling it through his hair to straighten it out.

"Does he have these attacks often?" Severus asked Dumbledore.

"Almost every day. He doesn't like to bring attention to himself, so he stays in his room a lot. His roommates at Hogwarts help him get through the seizures, administering his potions when he is unable to function well enough to administer them himself."

"That is why I don't see him much. Come to think of it, I rarely see him at meals."

"The House-elves bring him his meals. Going up and down the stairs from the Gryffindor common room is very taxing for him."

"There must be something that can be done. For Merlin's sake, Dumbledore, we're wizards. This type of illness should never be seen amongst us."

Albus looked upon him sadly. "Alas, everything has been tried."

"A potion, perhaps? Something someone could develop specifically for him?"

Dumbledore shrugged.

"Well, what will become of him if he isn't cured?" Severus asked impatiently.

"I see an empty place at the table, and a family broken by loss."

Severus gazed at the young boy once again, his heart heavy as a pall overshadowed him. "Dumbledore, take me away from here. I cannot bear to watch it any longer."

Albus took Severus' hand once again, and the infernal spinning began. When they reappeared this time, Severus pulled his hand from Dumbledore's and glowered at him. "Must you do that? I do not..."

He looked around at his surroundings, finding himself in a cottage that was dimly lit. Hearing a whimpering sound coming from behind him, he turned and saw just who was

making such a pitiful noise. Hermione Granger sat with her head in her hands, crying in front of her fireplace.

Severus looked to her with concern. "What's wrong with her?"

"What do you think is wrong, Severus?"

Severus studied her, then shrugged. "She is obviously upset about something."

"Yes, well spotted. It would seem you've lost none of your deductive reasoning over the years, my boy."

Severus glowered at his former taskmaster. "How should I know what's troubling the girl?"

"You are her employer, are you not?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Yes."

"Then it is your job to know what's wrong with her. You probably see her more than anyone else she knows, yet you know nothing about her, do you?"

"I know she is annoying."

"Is she really?"

Severus glanced at the girl who remained crying, her hands covering her face. Truly, she was no girl. She was a woman. The chit had grown into a woman without him even realizing it.

Her grief gave him pause. She came and did her work without idle chatter. He'd never asked her anything about her life outside the Potions lab. Yes, she'd talked a little about her parents, especially when they'd lost their minds again last spring, and she'd told him a little about what she did outside of her job, but what did he really know about her? He had no clue as to what would make her so sad.

"Is it her parents?" he asked Dumbledore.

Dumbledore gave him an appraising look and nodded. "That is part of it. I'm surprised you've even paid attention, actually, Severus. I didn't expect you to have the slightest inkling what was going on with her." He eyed Severus carefully. "Perhaps there's hope yet..."

"Dumbledore, what are you on about?"

Dumbledore waved his wispy hand in front of him. "Never mind. As I was saying, her parents are a great burden for her right now. She is filled with guilt because of their condition. She feels totally responsible for their memory lapse, despite the fact that at her age, she had no idea that such a side-effect could occur. Her overachieving mind blames her for not knowing something that on the outside appears to be simple. She forgets that such a side-effect is rare and mostly undocumented." He stared solemnly at Hermione before continuing. "She also misses the relationship she had with them. They are finally accepting her as their daughter once again, but they have no real ties to her. She is just a person who comes to visit now and then. A close friend, maybe, but they remember nothing of her childhood or youth. Her mother, who should be a confidant, is barely cordial. She feels the loss of her mother the worst."

"Can nothing be done?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "Perhaps a potion would help, but she doesn't know exactly where to start. That is what has driven her as your apprentice. She hopes to be able to someday come up with a cure for them."

"She never told me that," Severus muttered.

"What would you have said if she had?"

Severus looked sheepishly at Dumbledore. "I would have derided her efforts."

"Is it such a wonder that she hasn't mentioned it, then?"

Severus looked down to the floor.

"That is not the only thing that is troubling her."

Severus' eyes returned to the weeping woman, who had now slid off her chair and was curled on the hearth rug. Her shoulders heaved with her tears.

"No one will ever want me," she cried.

Severus gave Dumbledore a puzzled look. Dumbledore's eyebrows rose as he looked to Severus reproachfully, as if to say he was a total dunderhead.

"Although still young, Miss Granger is feeling her age. She sees everyone around her paired off and having children, yet she has failed to find the person who is suited to her. She feels that her chance has passed."

Severus looked back at the woman. "She is so very young," he remarked.

"Miss Granger is twenty-six," Dumbledore explained.

"She is brilliant, surely someone notices..."

"She is too smart, Severus. Men are intimidated by her."

Severus huffed. "Anyone who is intimidated by knowledge is truly a dunderhead."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "Nevertheless, that is what she has to deal with, whether she realizes it or not. She feels it's her looks that turn men off. She truly doesn't realize that most men find her very attractive, but can't keep up with her mind."

"She is definitely attractive! How could she not see it?" Severus retorted.

Dumbledore nodded. "She doesn't believe it. No one has ever made her feel beautiful, and she feels her opportunity to find someone to love has passed."

Severus looked to the ground.

"Sound familiar?" Dumbledore asked slyly.

"Albus..." Severus snapped.

"You are not the only one to think love has passed you by. You are not the only one to think yourself unattractive when that isn't the case."

"Dumbledore!"

A cold hand was placed on his shoulder.

"You are not the only one who has given up hope for happiness in their life."

Severus examined the woman before him. Despite his sour attitude toward her, he'd been quite pleased with her progress. He'd just felt that to show his pleasure at her advancements would make her prideful. Pride and the Potions master never mixed. It resulted in dead potioners.

"Surely, she must know of her abilities and qualities," he whispered, almost to himself.

Dumbledore gazed at him thoughtfully. "She believes what others say positively about her just as much as you do."

Severus huffed, but ignored the old coot's insinuations. He looked sadly upon Hermione, who was now sitting up and wiping her tears away. Her eyes were puffy, and her hair was a mess, but he thought she looked beautiful nonetheless.

"It's a shame no one appreciates her," he murmured.

"It truly is," Dumbledore agreed before taking his hand and spiriting away from Hermione Granger's home.

Severus felt the wave of dizziness again and found himself in the middle of a party. He turned around full circle, looking at all the people milling around chattering and saluting each other with drinks. Many of the occupants had ginger hair. A small child ran right through him, causing him to sputter. Then, a spiky-haired man with glasses came through the door from the kitchen.

"Potter," Severus spat.

"Happy Christmas, everyone!" Harry called. "We are delighted to have you all in our home once again this year."

Ron Weasley hugged his wife, Lavender and smiled widely at Harry. "Oi, where's Hermione?" he asked.

Harry looked to his old friend. "She decided to have a quiet evening," Harry explained.

"Is Snape coming?" a voice came from the crowd.

Harry looked troubled. "Once again, he declined my offer."

"Well," the voice went on. Severus turned to see it belonged to Percy Weasley. "He would just frown and bring a pall over everything anyway."

A chorus of "quite rights" and "hear, hears" went around the room.

"I do wish he'd learn to live," Harry mused.

"The day that happens is the day hell freezes over!" Molly said with a laugh.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "We'll know the world's coming to an end on that day. The old git will never change. I think if he smiled his face would crack into a thousand pieces."

The entire room erupted in laughter. Severus turned and glowered at Dumbledore.

"These visions are not my fault," Dumbledore explained apologetically. "They are merely the truth of what is."

"The truth is that I am as hated as I thought."

Dumbledore nodded. "Too true, my boy." He patted Severus on the back. Despite his being a ghost, he sent Severus stumbling forward with the strength of his arm. "Perhaps you could work on changing that?"

Severus turned and glowered, but it made little effect, as a little, ginger-haired Weasley took the opportunity to run through him once again. Dumbledore looked on in amusement.

"There is nothing funny about this situation!" Severus snapped.

"My boy," Dumbledore began, once again placing a hand on his shoulder. "You do realize that despite their joking, these people would welcome you if you did decide to attend the party."

Severus sneered. "And talk about me behind my back."

"Well, you would deserve it, wouldn't you? You constantly harp on each of them throughout the year. They've all tried to be your friend, but you brush them off with snide remarks and ugly faces. Perhaps a heartfelt apology from you, mixed with the good will of the season would afford you yet another chance?"

Severus eyed the crowd, wondering just what it would be like to attend such a function and be welcomed. He had little time to mull it over, as Dumbledore took his hand again, and they spun away from the chattering group.

The spinning was so severe this time that Severus landed and immediately fell to the floor. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at his own cold, stone floor. His breath came heavily as his head lifted, and he looked around. Once again he was alone. Once again, he felt miserable. He sunk down on the floor, his head in his hands. Would this night ever end?

A/N: Thanks again go to karelia, who has been a saint in betaing this faster than lightning.

My Worst Nightmare(s)

Severus is visited by the ghost of Christmas future.

Severus was dreaming about the end of the war. Once again, he was inside the Shrieking Shack. Standing in front of his Dark Master, he stared at the cage that held Nagini because he knew what would happen next.

"Severussss..."

"No, Master, please..."

"Severussss..."

Nagini was floating towards him, as if in slow motion.

"NO!"

Severus startled awake and looked straight up to the clock on the mantle.

"Six a.m.... It's Christmas morning, and I've had no more hallucinations..."

"It's about time you woke up!"

Severus stared, horrified, at the visage of Lord Voldemort, who casually walked around his armchair to stand in front of him.

"We're taking a trip, Severus."

"Master?"

"Get up! I've wasted enough of my time on you tonight. We have unfinished business."

Severus wondered what business Voldemort might be talking about. Considering the dream he had just had, there was only one thing he could think to say.

"I didn't plan on surviving."

The Dark Lord grasped Severus' upper forearm and hauled him out of the chair violently.

"Your death will not come tonight. It is time for me to show you the future, Severus. You will gaze upon the fruits of your labors and see how you reap what you've sown."

"Bloody hell, you too? Fine! Get on with it, then! You always did have a tendency of speaking simply for the sake of hearing yourself talk."

"Silence!"

Severus watched as The Dark Ghost pulled a bright-red Santa hat from his robes. Voldemort reached into the hat and pulled out a black Christmas ornament from it. Severus eyed the black glass ball warily, but before he could question the purpose of the item, Voldemort threw the ornament down onto the stone floor where it made a deafening crash. Suddenly, the room filled with black smoke.

When the smoke cleared, Severus found himself standing in a sterile, polished hallway. He looked around and determined that he was in St. Mungo's. He turned to his erstwhile companion and asked the only question that came to mind.

"And what does St. Mungo's have to do with my future?"

"Hold your tongue, and follow me."

His guide led him to one of the larger rooms at the end of the hall. When they entered the room, Voldemort pointed a long bony finger at the hospital bed. From the doorway Severus watched as Mrs. Bell fussed over young Timothy.

Scattered around the room were other members of the Bell family, all of whom looked drawn and forlorn. His attention then focused in on Timothy, once again.

"He looks catatonic, is this temporary?"

Silence reigned while all occupants in the room stared at the hospital bed, clearly waiting.

"Mom, how much longer? Did the Healers give any indication?" Katie Bell asked sadly.

"Katie, we can't rush these things."

"It's just not fair! He's here, but he's not..."

"I know, sweetheart. But, it's not time yet..."

Mrs. Bell's thoughts were interrupted by the violent spasms coming from Timothy.

Severus watched in horror as his young student had the worst seizure of his life. There were screams for healers coming from multiple members of the family, and bodies were rushing in and out of the room while the episode continued for what felt like hours. On and on the boy shook while family and staff were helpless, unable to stop his suffering.

Finally, the seizure ended, and so did Timothy's life.

"No... NO!" cried Severus. "Why didn't they help him? There's got to be a way!"

"They can't hear you, Severus."

"Why didn't they help him? They just stood and watched as that fit ended his life!"

"It wasn't much of a life for him as of late, anyway. Honestly, the family is more than likely relieved. Good riddance, I say."

"How can you say that?"

Voldemort waved his hand dismissively. "There is now one less invalid taking up space in the world. Why would I be upset? That child has been suffering for years. The constant seizures finally broke his mind and created the catatonic state you previously noted. It was only a matter of time before they claimed his life also."

"This is my fault. I could have helped him..."

"Of course this is your fault! All you've done is wallow in your own pain! You have no concept of the world around you!"

"It doesn't have to be this way!"

"We're done here," Voldemort said with finality.

In no time, the Dark Lord was holding another black ornament which came from the red hat.

Severus watched as Voldemort gave him an evil grin and tossed the ornament down onto the tile floor with incredible force. The black smoke filled the room once again, and Severus managed to cough out, "Where are you taking me now?"

Silence was his response.

"I know this room," Severus said warily as he took in his surroundings.

"You do, do you?"

"Yes, this is Hermione Granger's flat."

"It was."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Look around. Do you think she's been here recently?"

Severus inspected the living area closer. All the furniture had been carefully covered with sheets, which were now covered in dust. The dust extended all around the flat, from the mantle to the sideboard. The duo continued to walk around the living area. Severus was examining everything for a sign that she could still be in residence and stopped in his tracks when he looked at the dining room table.

Hermione Granger's wand lay across a piece of parchment. Both items were clearly covered in dust and were further evidence that Miss Granger hadn't been present in quite some time. Severus leaned down to read the letter, but due to the dust and poor lighting he was unable to read the words.

"Allow me." Voldemort said while leaning down and letting out a puff of rotten, musty breath which cleared the dust from the parchment.

Dear Harry,

I wonder how long it will take you to find this. I know it'll be you, though. No one else would come looking for me at all. I'm sure you're wondering where I've gone, and then you're probably going to start feeling guilty. It's not your fault; you've been busy with your work and your family.

There's nothing left for me here; I hope you understand that. After everything that has happened, I just can't stay. I need to leave and find some peace. I can't look at all the happy couples anymore. I can't stand being the only one who never got married and had a family. It's not that I didn't want that! I did, and that's why I've left.

It is for the best, Harry. Please, don't go looking for me. You won't be able to find me anywhere but in your heart.

Love Always,

Hermione

"No, this can't happen. She wouldn't just disappear like this. She..."

"Why are you so upset, Severus? She's just a Mudblood. Don't tell me you have feelings for her?"

"She's my apprentice, and don't call her that!"

"I'll call her whatever I want. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, the Mudblood, why would she take off like this?"

"I... I know she was sad," Severus said quietly.

"Sad? That's it? She went and offed herself because she was sad?"

"No! She wouldn't do that! She just left the wizarding world, that's all."

Severus looked down at the neglected hardwood floor and waited for Voldemort's next scathing retort. He waited and waited, then looked up at his ghostly companion.

"Have you finished sulking?"

"I do not sulk. I was just considering what would have been so bad that Granger would have... left like this."

"And have you come up with any answers which are less than obvious?"

"I... I think this is my fault, too. She tried reaching out to me... and I... I turned my back on her."

"We're leaving... now."

"What? That's it?"

"You've seen what you were meant to see here; it's time to move on."

"How long are you going to..."

His sentence was cut off by the cloud of black smoke which was surrounding him.

Not this again.

Initially, Severus couldn't tell that the smoke had actually cleared since it was so dark where they were standing. As he took a step to try and see something, a wall sconce

lit up and illuminated his surroundings. The tall stone walls and long hallway gave him the feeling that he was in Hogwarts, although he didn't recognize the hall itself. He reached over and touched the cold, stone wall and felt magic course through him. "I am in Hogwarts... how strange," he said curiously.

"Figured that out, have you?" Voldemort said from behind him.

"I've never seen this corridor before."

"No one ever comes down here, that's why."

Severus continued to catalogue his surroundings. No windows, no portraits, and no classrooms; the hallway was truly deserted aside from the two of them and the occasional wall sconce.

"Follow me."

The duo began walking...in which direction, Severus could not discern. A few minutes later, they finally encountered a large, gilded portrait frame.

"Who would want their portrait in such a deserted area of the castle?"

"Maybe the occupant didn't choose his location, although one would think he'd appreciate being sequestered away from annoying, gawking children."

"Who is it?"

Voldemort only held out his hand once again and pointed at the frame, indicating that Severus should go look for himself.

Standing in front of the portrait, he was appalled to find himself sitting alone in an oil version of his lab. He continued to watch as the painted Severus moved around a lab table to stand closer to the edge of the painting. Once there, he called out, "Hello? Is someone there?"

Severus spoke to the painting, "Yes, I'm here. Why are you alone down here?"

The Severus in the frame did not respond, only stared quizzically out into the hall.

"I said hello! Why are you by yourself?" Severus demanded, frustrated.

"Hello? I know someone is out there! Please talk to me; I've been alone so long!"

Severus cried out, frustrated, and then began to beat his fists against the wall on either side of the frame.

"As entertaining as this may be, I should let you know he won't be able to hear you."

Severus turned his head to look at Voldemort.

"Why am I down here?"

"In the painting, or with me?"

"In the painting! Why am I alone down here?"

"Because no one wanted to deal with your sorry self in the afterlife, so they put your frame up in a place where no one would ever encounter you. So appropriate..."

"What?"

"You are as alone in death as you were in life. This is your legacy."

"NO! No, this can't happen, I'll change. I swear I'll change!"

"Don't cry your horse-tears to me, Severus Snape. You don't answer to me, unfortunately."

"Take me back! Take me back, and I'll change all of this!"

The portrait Severus called out once more, "Please, say something!"

When Severus turned back to look at the portrait once more, he found that he could not see due to the thick black smoke that was surrounding him.

A/N: I'm so sorry this took so long to update. We had originally hoped to finish it before the holidays. Then we hoped to finish it before the New Year. Now here it is, the middle of January, and this "Christmas" story is finally updating. Luckily there are only 2 more chapters left after this one. Thank you so much for hanging in with us!

Much Love and squishes go out to *tokarelia* for the beta work!

Awakening

Chapter 5 of 5

The results of the ghostly visits.

The black smoke surrounded Severus. He could neither see nor feel anything. Terror filled his heart as he realized he'd been judged and found unworthy. He groped about, trying to escape the darkness, but he was lost... utterly lost.

Despite being unable to see, he instinctively felt the smoke gathering tighter around him. It filled his nostrils and surrounded his body. It pressed upon him.

"Please!" he screamed. "Please, just give me another chance!"

The smoke continued to squeeze him. He felt it surround his neck and cut off his breathing. This was it, then... the end. He would be banished to a painting in an unknown corridor for eternity.

The darkness surrounding him began to come alive with little flashes of light. He gasped for breath, as his airway was constricted by the smoke. Blackness filled his mind....

Severus' eyes snapped open, and he coughed harshly. Looking around, he saw that he was in his bed, tangled horribly in his sheets. They curled around his neck tightly, practically strangling him. He turned and twisted until he was free. Staring at the bed, he struggled to catch his breath. He reached up to smooth his hair out of his eyes and realized there was something atop his head.

Grasping it, he brought it in front of his face. He stared in shock at the red Santa hat that Voldemort had carted around with him on their journey. The reality of what lay in his hand hit him like a slap in the face. He grasped the Santa hat and hugged it to his chest.

"Oh! I'm alive! They... they've given me another chance! I'm alive! I'm alive!"

He ran to his bathroom and looked into the mirror. His severe face stared back at him. Yes, he was definitely still alive. The smile that sprung onto his lips totally changed his appearance.

"Hmm," he mused as he looked at himself smiling. "I'll have to do that more often."

He strolled back out of the bathroom and noticed the single present that sat at the edge of his bed. Minerva always gave him a gift, despite the fact that she never received one in return. His eyes widened when he saw it.

"Christmas. Oh, Merlin, Christmas! I hope I haven't missed it!" He went to his bedside and checked his clock.

"Eight am. Well, that tells me nothing. Winky?"

The House-elf appeared with a pop. "You's wants something, Master Snape?"

"What day is it, Winky?" he asked.

The elf looked to him like he had a horn growing out of his head.

"It's Christmas, of course, sir."

Severus bounded up to her and scooped her into his arms.

"Splendid!" he cried. "I haven't missed it!" He spun her around, then set her back on the ground. She swayed a bit with the force of his motions, but the frightened look on her face made Severus laugh. That only caused the elf to begin to look terrorized.

"Winky thinks you need strong medicine, sir. Winky thinks you've gone mad!"

"Nonsense!" Severus straightened and gave Winky the dour scowl that usually adorned his face.

"That's better, sir," Winky remarked.

"Is there something wrong with being happy on Christmas?" Severus demanded.

Winky shook her head. "Not for everyone else, sir, but Winky thinks you is not the type to be happy on any day... sir."

Severus smirked at her. "Well, you're wrong." His smirk turned practically diabolical as he scooped her up once again and spun her around. This, of course, caused Winky to yelp and Disapparate as soon as he'd set her down again. He laughed aloud at her abrupt departure.

Becoming serious, a glint shone in his eyes. "I'm alive... and it's Christmas morning... and I've been given a second chance at life...."

He had much to do. Dressing quickly, he ran to his lab. He needed to work quickly if he was to accomplish everything he hoped.

Severus pulled a large Potions tome from his bookshelf. He flipped through the pages quickly, coming to the formula he was looking for. Running his hand down the ingredient list, he was relieved to find he had everything right in his stores. He rushed to gather it all and began to brew.

He knocked on the door of the humble town home. Katie Bell answered and looked startled to see her former Potions professor standing on their front stoop.

"Professor Snape?" She blatantly gaped at his smiling face.

"Miss Bell, Merry Christmas. Might I come in?"

She backed away in confusion but had the temerity to motion for him to enter.

"Are your parents at home?"

She nodded absently, all the time eyeing him. Turning, she called to her parents, who came bustling out of the kitchen with smiles on their faces. The smiles turned to looks of dread as they noted just who was in their doorway.

Mr. Bell was the first to recover. He extended his hand in welcome to Severus, who accepted it and pumped it up and down vigorously.

Merry Christmas, sir," Severus said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I have something you may find useful."

"Come in, come in," Mrs. Bell said as she remembered herself and her manners. "Have a seat!" She motioned him to the sofa.

He sat, and the family, minus Tim, gathered around him.

"It has come to my attention that young Tim has a rare condition that causes him to have seizures," Severus began.

All three Bells nodded their heads. Severus reached into his pocket and removed a large bottle.

"I have brewed this for him."

At Mrs. Bell's gasp, he held up his hand.

"It is not a cure. I am not quite that talented with a cauldron, given such short notice, but it will relieve and prevent Timothy's symptoms while I try to find a true cure."

Katie Bell's mouth dropped open while Mr. Bell just stared at the bottle incredulously, but Timothy's mother jumped from her seat and threw her arms around Severus.

"Oh! Professor! Thank you! Thank you!" She hugged him tightly.

Severus really didn't know what to do. This was the first time in his adult life that anyone had hugged him. He tentatively put his arms around her, the bottle still in his hand. He felt a warmth spread throughout his body. He could definitely get used to this.

Mrs. Bell pulled back and smoothed out her hair. "Thank you!" she cried again.

Severus handed her the bottle. "One teaspoon in the morning should control his seizures throughout the day."

Timothy's father stared at the bottle, his eyes tearing as he beheld the treasured gift. "You mean he'll be able to be like a normal child?" he asked in a raspy voice.

Severus nodded. "You should probably give him some straight away. It will help immediately."

Mrs. Bell disappeared for a few minutes. The other three just sat and looked at one another, not quite knowing what to say. They didn't need to wait long until the woman reappeared, followed closely by Timothy.

Severus smiled at him. Timothy stared, looking as if he was going to bolt back upstairs.

"My mum said you made that potion for me," the boy said.

Severus nodded. "I did. I was unaware of your condition until recently."

The boy nodded and smiled shyly. "Thank you, Professor." He stood looking at Severus with wide eyes. "Mum said you were going to look for a cure for my illness, too?"

Severus nodded again.

Growing bold, the boy looked to Severus curiously. "Why?"

Severus looked the lad up and down. "Because I think I can find it."

Timothy smiled. He ran to the kitchen and bounded back with a Christmas cookie shaped like a tree. "Merry Christmas, Professor Snape."

Severus took the cookie with a smile. "Merry Christmas to you, Timothy."

Severus stood in front of Hermione's door. The delivery of the potion had been the easy task of the day. Now, he needed to convince his Potions apprentice that not only was she a worthwhile person, but that he found her... attractive. He shifted from foot to foot, debating just when the perfect time to knock would be.

Rolling his eyes, he gathered his wits about him and knocked. It took a little while before the door opened. When it did, Hermione Granger, puffy-eyed and sniffing, stood before him. Her look of amazement at his appearance at her door made Severus want to chuckle, but he controlled himself.

Her appearance actually bothered him. He was originally going to pretend to be his dour, angry self, but he tossed out that idea when he saw she'd obviously been crying. His experiences the night before clued him in as to what the matter was about. He decided to play ignorant in any case.

"Hermione, might I come in?"

Her eyes grew even larger before she gathered her wits about her and stepped aside, motioning him in without a word.

After entering, he spun around. "Merry Christmas!" he said boisterously.

"Umm..." Hermione stared at him for a while. "Merry Christmas," she said without enthusiasm.

He led her to her sofa and sat down beside her.

"Hermione, I came by not just to wish you a Merry Christmas. I came by to apologize for my treatment of you... well... since the first day I met you, I guess."

Her mouth dropped open then, and she rubbed her eyes. She peeked out from behind her fists before rubbing them again. "You're still here," she muttered almost to herself. "I thought perhaps I'd fallen asleep by the fire."

He chuckled. "The most remarkable thing happened to me last night. Maybe I'll tell you the details someday, but suffice it to say, it has opened my eyes to my shortcomings." He grasped her hand within his. "I have treated you harshly, and it was without cause. I have been harder on you as my apprentice than necessary and have failed to advance you because of my sour disposition. I'm sorry for that."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a scroll. He handed it to her. "I should have given this to you months ago, but I could never bring myself to admit that you've accomplished everything you need to."

Hermione reached out slowly and pulled the scroll from his hand. She unwrapped it and read it quickly. Her gaze shot from the parchment to him and back to the parchment again. She gave a strangled laugh.

"I don't believe it! You've passed me, and I'm a full-fledged Potions mistress? But, I thought I wouldn't finish until next spring!"

He arched an eyebrow at her. "A normal student wouldn't. You, however, are extraordinary in everything you touch. I cannot consciously hold you back any longer. Congratulations, and Merry Christmas."

Tears streamed from her already puffy eyes. She sniffed before she spoke again. "Thank you, Professor. You don't know what this means."

His hand came up to her cheek, and he wiped her tears away. "It's Severus..."

She looked to him cautiously.

"You were crying before I arrived. Why?"

"I was just... lonely."

"You have friends. Why not visit with them?"

She shrugged.

"Why have you stayed as my apprentice when I've been so terrible to you?"

"You weren't that bad," she remarked. Her hand reached out and grasped his.

"Yes, I was," he corrected.

"You're brilliant. Despite your personality, I wanted to learn from you. I respect you."

"Do you think more could come of that respect?" he asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

His hand pulled out of hers, and he placed it at her neck, gently pulling her toward him. His lips found hers before delicately kissing her, afraid that if he was too forceful, he'd drive her away. She responded to him after a moment, eagerly returning his kiss. He was amazed to feel magic crackle between the two of them. Hermione pulled away and looked at him in wonder.

"Why did you do that?" she asked as she struggled to catch her breath.

"We're very much alike... kindred spirits, as it were. We're two lonely people who think no one can love us. I'd like to prove that assumption wrong."

Her eyes searched his. "Why would you want me?" she asked quietly.

"Do you not understand how beautiful and desirable you are?"

Hermione laughed at that and looked away. Severus reached out and gently turned her chin so she was looking at him again.

"Hermione, you are lovely."

"Please... don't..."

He kissed her again, but pulled away quickly when he felt her tears brush his cheek.

"You don't want this," he surmised. "I have been too awful for you to find anything worthwhile in me."

She hurriedly grasped his hands before he pulled them away. "No! I..." She gazed into his face. "Surprisingly, I find I want this more than anything."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I... I didn't think this was possible for me. I didn't think I'd ever find someone to care about who'd care about me. To find out that that person is you is simply overwhelming."

"I have felt the same way, Hermione. I didn't think anyone would care for me. I tried to protect myself from everyone by becoming a horrible person. I became as ugly on the inside as I am on the outside."

Her hands moved quickly to his face. "I've never felt you to be ugly, Severus. Your demeanor colored your face in a severe way, but I've always found you quite striking."

He smiled at her then.

"See," she told him. "You're absolutely gorgeous when you smile." She smiled at him too, but soon her face became tentative.

"Do you think this can work between us?" she asked.

He pulled her close and looked into her eyes. "I'd like to try."

"Me, too."

It was all the permission he needed. His lips searched out hers, and they were once again wrapped up in each other. Her arms came up around his neck, and he marveled that he was being hugged once again. He slid his arms around her and pulled her closer. The magic crackled around them once again. They both pulled back in amazement.

"Whatever could that mean?" Hermione asked as she gazed around them.

When she'd turned back to him, he rested his forehead on hers. "I think it means the spirits approve."

She smiled then.

"We have a party to attend," he murmured, sad to have to break up their time together.

She pulled back and looked at him oddly. "You don't attend parties, Severus."

"The new me does," he explained. "I believe we both have a standing invitation with Potter. We ought not keep him waiting."

She laughed and pulled her to him. "Who are you?" she asked in amazement.

"I'm the man I should have been years ago."

Once they'd Apparated, Severus grasped Hermione's hand like a lifeline.

"They won't want me here. Let's just go," he insisted.

"Nonsense. Come on, this was your idea!"

She dragged him to the door and knocked. Harry opened it, his face towards the interior of the home, where the party was in full swing. When he spun to see the new arrivals, his face lit up.

"Hermione!"

Harry did a double take when he saw who she'd come with. "Severus?" His mouth dropped open in amazement.

"Shut your mouth, Potter. I'm not a ghost, you know."

Harry snapped his mouth shut, then smiled tentatively in welcome. Stepping back, Harry let Severus and Hermione pass through the door.

Once inside, Severus stopped short. He turned and leaned in toward Harry, as if he were about to divulge a huge secret.

"I apologize for my constant grouching at you, Potter. Thank you for the invitation."

Harry's smile widened, and suddenly Severus found himself embraced for the third time that day.

"You've always been welcome!" Harry exclaimed. He pulled away slightly but kept one arm on Severus' shoulders as he led him into the home. Hermione followed close behind. Harry shouted into the lounge.

"Look who's come, everybody!" he called to his numerous family members.

All noise in the lounge stopped. All eyes shot to Severus' face. He suddenly wished he could shrink down to the size of a mouse and scurry away. They stared at him, and he stared back. Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke.

"I know I haven't been... pleasant... to any of you. I'd like to sincerely apologize and wish you all a Merry Christmas."

Looks softened, eyes widened, and some even smiled. Molly burst from her chair and ran over to Severus, grasping his hand in hers.

"Oh, Severus! Merry Christmas. You've brought Hermione, too! Do come in and sit with the family!"

With Molly's acceptance, the dam broke, and he found himself surrounded by Weasleys of all shapes and sizes. Looking around anxiously, he spotted Hermione squeezing between George and Ginny to stand by his side. The Weasley onslaught slowly petered away as everyone went back to their places on the couches and chairs spread about the lounge. Severus gave a start when he felt an arm encircle his waist, only to realize a second later that Hermione was leaning into him with her arm securely around him, claiming him as her own in front of her friends.

Suddenly, it seemed that it was just the two of them in the room. He looked down to see her smiling happily at him. He placed an arm around her shoulder and kissed her, oblivious to the cat calls coming from everywhere in the room.

A/N: Big hugs to karelia for her quick beta work. Just one more chapter to go! Thanks for reading along with us.