

Choose Something Like A Star

by *TeddyRadiator*

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

A/N: I do not own these characters, but I would have liked to have had the chance to show them what a much nicer owner I could have been. Hence, this story.

This was the Christmas gift to a group of friends on LiveJournal, but in reality I wanted to share it with a larger audience eventually.

It was originally called Christmas Rose, but as there is another story by that title (and since it's by Subversa and no doubt a much better one than this little offering), I changed the title based on the Robert Frost poem, which has always reminded me of Severus Snape. I hope the meaning of the poem will become clearer as the story progresses.

The rating is for later chapters.

For DMuse and The 'Teddypeeps'

Overture

O Star (the fairest one in sight),

We grant your loftiness the right

To some obscurity of cloud --

It will not do to say of night,

Since dark is what brings out your light.

Some mystery becomes the proud.

But to be wholly taciturn

*In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

It was the most beautiful autumn anyone could remember in the tiny village of Bottlebury Marsh, and Hermione and Rose Granger spent most of September and early October strolling through the charming little lanes of the Barnsley town they had come to think of as their own. The russet and golden leaves seemed made to match Rose's lovely dark auburn hair, and her bright blue eyes danced as she and her mother raked leaves and held races to see who would be awarded the coveted jump into the fragrant pile afterward.

Hermione almost always 'let' Rose win, but she made sure her daughter knew that she had to work for even this most inane of prizes. Hermione didn't want her daughter to ever think she was being pandered to or patronised. The Weasleys did enough of that. They spoiled their lovely granddaughter and smothered her with all the affection they missed giving to her late father.

Rose was climbing to her feet, breathless with laughter and covered in dead foliage. "That was tops, Mum! Next time, you get to do it!"

"Maybe tomorrow," Hermione smiled, and held out her hand, which Rose took affably. Hermione drew her daughter into her arms, and they grinned at one another as they rubbed noses, their signature sign of affection. "Let's get home and cleaned up for tea."

Rose nodded, and they headed for home, arm in arm. Hermione smiled at her daughter, who was chatting away about everything and nothing in particular. She was glad Rose resembled Ron so much, and herself so little. At age ten, Rose was already tall, like her father, and Hermione privately thought by next year she would actually be looking up at her good natured, clever daughter. That pleased Hermione. It was a fitting tribute to his memory.

As they walked, Hermione's thoughts turned to the past. She'd been only a little older than Rose when she met Ron on the train to Hogwarts, tall and gangly and full of Weasley bluster and brashness. Now it was Rose's turn; she would be heading to Hogwarts the following September; according to Headmistress McGonagall, her name had appeared on the book register the day she was born. She was excited about it, already talking of classes and dorms and roommates and which House she'd be sorted into, of course. She was already hoping for Gryffindor; not so much in tribute to her mother, but because she so wanted to follow in the footsteps of the father she had never known.

Hermione squinted at the weak, watery late autumn sun. She still thought of Ron fondly, but the memories were fading, like an old film grown grainy and indistinct, even with the benefit of a Pensieve. But she still remembered that last night, before the final battle at Hogwarts, when they had sealed their love in that way that all lovers do, full of first time fumbling and shyness and laughter and hope.

Hermione could still remember very clearly the stark, life-changing moments after the dust and ruin had finally settled, and the quiet of Hogwarts grew more unnerving than the screams of battle. She could still recall the feeling of fear and dread, walking into the Great Hall, and seeing the Weasleys huddled around a still form. She could hear Molly's wailing and Ginny's sobs; she could still remember running toward them, her heart thumping sickeningly in her chest, only to be halted by a weeping Harry Potter, holding her back.

"You don't want to see it, Hermione," he wept, still reeling from the final moments of his own epic battle to finish Tom Riddle's reign of terror once and for all.

"Let me go to him!" she'd cried, battling against her dearest friend.

"You'll want to remember him the way he was-"

"No!" she screamed, breaking away from him, and racing to Ron's side. She looked down at the boy she'd given her heart and her love to, and then she fainted dead away. Harry had been right. She hadn't wanted to see him like this. It was the last in a long list of things she hadn't wanted to see that night, and it was the one that sent her over the edge and into St. Mungo's for a week, too traumatised to do more than lie in bed and weep.

A few short weeks later, having moved into her parents' empty house, she was further troubled by what had felt like some sort of stomach bug. After several days of being unable to keep anything down, even with Anti-Nausea Potions, she returned to St. Mungo's. Two hours later she emerged, a changed woman, leaning heavily on the arms of Harry and Molly Weasley, clutching a parchment with a title something along the lines of *So, You're Having A Baby! Don't Worry - Witches Do It All The Time, So Suck It Up and Be Prepared.*

Her pregnancy was a time of such conflict and change, Hermione felt as if she were in a Muggle video on fast forward. After the initial morning sickness passed and she grew accustomed to teetering about on fat feet, she actually didn't mind. Of course, the Weasleys were beside themselves - especially Molly, who found the entire situation beautifully poignant.

Hermione resigned herself to the fact that this child was destined to grow up spoiled rotten by its grandmother. But he or she would also grow up as part of a loving, close-knit family, and Hermione found that comforting. Her own parents were far away, in Australia, unaware they had either a daughter or an impending grandchild. Once she realised she would be unable to restore their memories, Hermione was left only with the sense of gratitude that she had this little piece of Ron left in her life, with which to start a new family. This would be her life now- just herself and her little stranger.

We will be our own little tribe she told herself. *We'll make our own traditions and our own decisions, and if the Wizarding world doesn't like that they can go hang* Hermione thought, clutching her rapidly levitating belly. "You and I, little one," she said fiercely to her unborn child. "We can take on the world."

At last, the day arrived, and the Mediwitch placed Rose in Hermione's arms. Seeing this crying, red-faced, long-limbed little girl, Hermione thought her heart would burst. "Rose Helen Molly Granger," she said, tears of pure joy and love streaming from her bloodshot eyes and down her swollen face. "Her name is Rose." She closed her eyes and whispered, "Oh, Ronald, look what we made."

The next ten years passed in a blur. When Rose started Muggle Infant school, Hermione decided to enroll in St. Mungo's internship programme in order to become a Healer. She worked like a witch possessed, earning her degree in record time, which surprised no one except herself. By then, the stipends given to the 'heroes of the war' had been doled out, and Hermione found to her delight that, including the Weasley's generous gift of Ron's share, she was a wealthy woman. With a little smart investing, she could stay at home with Rose and spend as much time as possible with her until the girl left for Hogwarts.

The ten years since the end of Tom Riddle's war had been one of turmoil and unease in the Wizarding world, and while Hermione had not gone completely Muggle, she did her best to shield her daughter from the harsher realities of their special world. She had purposely moved to a Muggle town and enrolled Rose into a the local school for the first few years of her education, and while they waited for the day her Hogwarts letter arrived, Hermione taught Rose how to live with one foot in her late father's world, and one foot in Hermione's.

Though she was too much of a Weasley to ever truly be called stunningly beautiful, Rose had character, and integrity, and an inner serenity that charmed everyone. Even at ten, she was one of the most caring individuals Hermione had ever known. She never met a stranger, never turned a blind eye to those being wronged, never knew anything but love and the right to be loved. Had it not been for Hermione's pragmatic nature, their house would have been overrun with dogs, cats, hamsters and gerbils as well as any other manner of unwanted and unloved house pets. Rose regularly adopted the broken or abused dolls abandoned by friends and cousins. Her soft heart could not bear to see an animal in distress or hear a child crying.

It staggered Hermione that Rose was almost eleven years old. In a way, they had grown up together, and were as much friends as they were mother and daughter. Hermione taught her daughter how to knit, and sing, and her love for Muggle films. Rose grew into a wonderful companion, with her father's likability and her mother's keen intellect. Hermione often bragged that Rose had taught her as much as she'd taught Rose, and they loved one another's company.

Hermione always made a point of telling Rose that her father had died a hero's death, and always made sure Rose knew she was proud of him, but in reality, Hermione was more proud of Rose, and her place in the hearts of everyone who met her. For Rose Helen Molly Granger was universally loved, and she expected to love and be loved in return by everyone she met.

Which is how Hermione Granger came to find Severus Snape, living rough in Knockturn Alley, barely alive.

Opening words: Choose Something Like A Star - Robert Frost

Part the First

Chapter 2 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Part The First Advent Hymn

Light of those whose dreary dwelling borders on the shades of death,

Come, and by thy love's revealing dissipate the clouds beneath.

The beginning of November blew in like a screeching hippogriff, dropping temperatures down into the negative numbers and limning the windows with hoary frost even before the Christmas decs were up in the shops. Squinting against the biting wind, Hermione cast a Warming Charm over herself and Rose as they made their way through Diagon Alley. She needn't have bothered. Rose was so excited and keyed up, she was radiating body heat enough for the both of them.

Hermione had promised Rose they could go shopping that day to catch post-Samhain bargains for the growing Weasley family, but she had waited until they arrived to reveal the true purpose for coming to Wizarding London that day. It was a little early, strictly speaking, but Rose's school reports had been so stellar that one of her Christmas gifts that year was to be her first wand. Upon hearing this, Rose was transported, and even though she tried her best to remain level-headed and grownup about the entire thing, her anticipation was impossible to contain.

Diagon Alley was heaving that day, and more than once they'd met with throngs of people and miles of queues. In the years after the war, the district had grown back bigger and better than ever. As always, Hermione's heart beat a little faster when she was here, surrounded by magic, feeling part of something unique and special and truly wonderful. She envied Rose, just at the beginning of her own magical journey toward becoming the powerful witch Hermione suspected her to be. Rose's first wand would be the first stepping stone on the path of that journey.

Ollivander's was packed, so Rose reluctantly agreed with Hermione's suggestion that they grab lunch and return a little later in the afternoon, when the crowds were thinner. They jostled along, making their way toward Fred and George's shop toward the far end of the Alley. After stopping by and saying hello to her uncles, they finally found a small cafe with one tiny table available, and were enjoying their tea and scones when, outside the window, Hermione saw a flash of light out of the corner of her eye. As she turned to pinpoint the source of the light, Rose gasped, "Mum, oh, Mum, he's hexing him! Make him stop!" And just like that, Rose Granger jumped out of her chair and was out the door and running toward trouble, shouting at someone out of Hermione's line of sight.

"Rose!" Hermione cried, but a crowd outside blocked her view. She dashed out of the cafe just in time to see her daughter galloping toward Knockturn Alley, waving her arms.

Her heart in her throat, Hermione raced down the alley, calling her daughter's name and threatening all sorts of retribution if she didn't stop running and come back here now, Rose, I mean it! but she was losing the race, and the crowd seemed almost of a mind to slow her down.

Panting, Hermione was just about to start blasting people out of the way when she turned the corner and came upon her daughter, lying on the ground, trying to shield something or someone with her small body. "Rose! Oh, gods, Rose!" she screamed, and just as a grubby man in a shabby, filthy robe reached for her daughter, Hermione shrieked, "Touch one hair on her head and you'll be buttoning your fly with your teeth, you oik!"

The man, who reminded her of a hyena, flashed a rotten, grey-toothed smile in the light. "You and whose army, witch!" He laughed. "He got what he deserved, and if I can't get no satisfaction from that, I reckon she'll do."

He reached for Rose, but a spell flew from Hermione's lips before she gave it conscious thought. Rose cried out as the hex sliced through the air directly over her head, then screamed as a smoking hand landed by her side. The man's screams joined her daughter's. Hermione thought she could hear the entire alley screaming. She realised if she didn't get out of there quickly, the Aurors would show up and poor Harry would be spending the evening at the Ministry trying to talk the Wizengamot out of putting her in Azkaban.

"Rose, come here now!" Hermione bellowed. She pointed her wand at the man, who was whimpering and clutching the stump where his hand had been. "If I were you I'd get the hell out of here now, mister. I'd say you're going to need your remaining hand tonight, seeing as you're not going to get any satisfaction out of either my daughter or that poor sod you were trying to rape."

Evidently chummy was smarter than he first appeared, because he stumbled away, but not before snatching up his severed hand and loping off back down Knockturn Alley, looking furtively over his shoulder. A cluster of witches and wizards, attracted by the commotion, watched Hermione with slitted, unreadable eyes. She turned, wand at the ready and hissed, "Anyone else got a problem?" Apparently, no one did, and one by one they drifted away like dirty smoke.

Hermione flew to her daughter's side and grasped her arms. "Rose, what in Merlin's name were you doing?" She looked into her daughter's frightened eyes. "Knockturn Alley is dangerous, Rose, you know that! What were you-"

"I couldn't let that man hurt him, Mum. He was defenseless! You've always said we have to protect those whose can't protect themselves!" Rose was crying now, her adrenaline-fueled bravery dissipating, leaving behind only a frightened ten-year-old. She pointed at the still figure on the ground. "He was trying to get away from that man, but the man stunned him and was trying to take off his clothes." Rose coloured slightly. She may have been precocious enough to know about the birds and the bees, but she was also old enough to understand wrong when she saw it. She glanced down at the fallen man. "I don't think he wanted that man to touch him."

"No, I'm sure he didn't, Rose," Hermione said, and together they peered down at the unconscious man. He was dressed in a threadbare robe, and she gasped at his face. It was covered in bruises and contusions; this man had been pummeled before Rose set out to rescue him.

Something about the physique and the shape of the swollen face rang a bell in Hermione. She leaned in closer, wrinkling her nose at the odour of unwashed body and the unpleasant stink of sex musk. Oh gods. Either he'd already been raped, or he was a prostitute down on his luck. Either way, she had to get him out of the cold and into St. Mungo's. He was unconscious, in a part of Knockturn Alley even its own denizens avoided. Suddenly Hermione felt like she and Rose were two very small kittens in a basket full of vipers.

As she looked more closely, she noticed an unmistakable cuff around his wrist. A magic-suppression cuff; one that had been given to several Death Eaters after the war to ensure that their magical signature could be blocked, up to and including

"Shite!" Quickly, Hermione summoned her Patronus. "Harry, come to Knockturn Alley, Cabbage Row, right now. It's an emergency!"

Hastily, she cast a Disillusionment charm on herself, Rose and the unconscious man. Groping blindly for her daughter, she felt Rose's hand clutch at hers. "Mum-what's going on?" Her voice sounded very small.

"Nothing we can do anything about until your Uncle Harry comes, darling," Hermione said, in her most brisk, Mum-knows-best voice. "But don't worry, Rose, you did a good thing."

Rose gave her mother's hand a reassuring squeeze. In a hushed voice, she asked, "Do you know this wizard, Mum?"

Before Hermione could answer that question - and it was quite a question - Harry Apparated directly in front of them, wand at the ready, in full Auror mode. "Hermione?" he called, jumping as the little trio appeared in the corner. "Jeez, you scared the crap out of me!" He peered into the growing shadows.

"Are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost," Harry said, his eyes still sweeping the Alley cautiously.

"I have," she said, and pointed down at the unconscious man.

Harry's eyes widened. "Merlin's y-fronts," he muttered, kneeling beside the man in rags. "I can't believe he's come to this."

"It is Snape, isn't it, Harry? I'm not going mad, am I?" Hermione said, shivering.

"It is. He's not been seen for absolutely ages, but no one was exactly looking for him, you know?"

"Well, they should have been!" Hermione declared, her anger rising. "Is this the best Wizarding Britain can do? Is this how they treat their heroes?" Impulsively, she pulled out her wand. "Hold on to me, Rose." With a wave of her wand, Hermione gently elevated the unconscious Snape. She awkwardly grasped one of his ankles with her wand hand.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Harry said, looking at his friend a little wildly. "He needs to be taken-"

"Meet me at home," Hermione replied, then spun away with Rose and her former professor in tow.

"-to hospital, Hermione!"

Harry arrived seconds behind her, but in spite of his words, he helped her maneuver the levitated Snape to the floor of her small front room. Hermione turned to her wide-eyed daughter. "Rose, run a bath. Make the water hot, but not too hot, and bring me the healing salve and the medicated soap and plenty of large towels."

"Yes, Mum," Rose replied, nodding, and flew up to the bathroom. Shortly they could hear water running.

"Hermione, what are you doing?"

"Examining him for broken bones." She gingerly pushed Snape's hair off of his face. He moaned softly as her hands brushed over a particularly nasty bruise, and she winced. Grimly, she added, "I'm going to try to take care of this man, seeing as no one else has bothered."

Harry put a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, stop. You-you just can't kidnap him and bring him home like a stray dog! You know how prideful he is-"

"Oh really? The last I heard of Severus Snape, he was being told by the grateful Ministry of Magic that he wouldn't have to go to Azkaban, and that, out of generosity, he would only have to wear a magic-suppression cuff for a mere fifteen years." She turned on him. "Besides, you told me he was working at an apothecary."

Harry made a face. "I thought he was! I mean, I hadn't checked up on him, or anything, but - you get busy, you know, and I sort of didn't think about it, and then Ginny got pregnant and I just "

It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to say, "You just couldn't be arsed to help out the one person you literally owe your life," but she remained silent. She could not truly berate Harry for something she had not done, either.

She sighed. "I guess we both of us are guilty of abandoning him." Harry nodded, unable to defend himself any more than could she. Hermione squared her shoulders, her mind made up. "Well, I'm not going to dump him off to St. Mungo's. They'll just patch him up and send him out into the cold. It's very obvious he's been living on the street."

Alarmed, Harry said, "What are you going to do, Hermione? I wasn't kidding before. He's not a stray; he's a proud man. If he'd wanted help, he knew he could ask for it. It's very clear he didn't want help, and if I was a betting wizard, I'd say he doesn't want it now."

"I know. And yes, he's not going to thank me when he wakes up, but at least I can send him on his way with clean clothes and a hot bath and food." Maybe she'd been as guilty as Harry of not giving Severus Snape much thought, but he was here now, and she wasn't going to let him leave until he was well enough to cope. She wouldn't just turf him out to be at the mercy of scum like that rapist. Not on her watch.

Rose came into the room, her large blue eyes troubled. "The bath is ready, Mum. And I've made up the spare bedroom." She looked from her mother to her Uncle Harry. "He's so pitiful, Mum. You are going to help him, aren't you?" Her sweet blue eyes were swimming with tears. "I feel so sorry for him."

Harry looked at Hermione for a long moment, then rolled his eyes. "Oh, hell." He started for the bath. "Come on, Hermione, let's get your stray cleaned up."

Several hours, two Pain Potions and one Dreamless Sleep Draught later, Hermione, Harry and Rose stood by as their guest slumbered peacefully in bed. It had taken four changes of bath water to get the man clean, but Hermione didn't believe Cleansing charms did the work of good old fashioned soap and water when faced with this much filth. She and Harry had worked in tandem, trying to be as gentle as possible. Snape was thin to the point of emaciation, and his dried, weathered skin spoke of malnutrition, dehydration, and despair.

Later, as the Sleeping Draught went to work and Snape's unconsciousness gradually gave way to a healing sleep, Hermione healed his bruises and took the opportunity to examine him thoroughly. The diagnostic revealed he'd been sexually assaulted as well as beaten. Whatever his now one-handed associate had claimed he'd paid for, he'd not been satisfied with, and taken by force. Hermione could tell it wasn't consensual.

Tears welled in her eyes, and in spite of her extensive training her hands shook as she uttered the Healing spells and chants. "You didn't deserve this," she said, quietly, to the sleeping wizard. Snape was either deeply unconscious or very good at pretending, but when his eyes fluttered open, he looked at Hermione blankly, clearly not recognising her.

Thinking it wasn't the most perfect moment for a tearful (or not) reunion, Hermione gently commanded, "Drink this, Mr. Snape," and held his head as she poured the extra-strength potions in his mouth. He watched her with distrustful bloodshot eyes, and she waited until the Pain Potions did their job before finishing her healing spells.

When Hermione healed the last of Snape's cuts and bruises, Rose came into the room and set a small pitcher of water on the night stand. She crossed to the bed and put her arms around her mother, who held her close. "I'm proud of you, Rose," said Hermione. "Even though, at the time I wanted to hex you for frightening me so." She kissed her daughter's hair. It smelled of apple shampoo and tenderness. "You were very brave. A true Gryffindor."

Rose hugged her mother tighter, her unspoken pleasure at the compliment evident. Finally she pulled away, whispering, "Is this really *the* Professor Snape, Mum?" Rose had raptly listened to her aunts' and uncles' stories of the Dark wizard who had always been faithful to the memory of Uncle Harry's mum, and who had helped to rid the world of evil.

Hermione nodded glumly. "Yes, darling. It is Severus Snape. But he hasn't been a professor for a long time." She shook her head remorsefully, and she and Rose turned to the door just as Harry walked in, looking grim.

He ran his fingers distractedly through his messy hair. "I've just been speaking with the Aurors' Office.

"The apothecary sacked him, the bastards. Said it was bad for business, employing him. Apparently he worked clandestinely under a pseudonym for awhile, but that was discovered and he lost his contracts. Things got bad enough that he was forced to sell his house and his equipment to have something to live on.

"He was living in a little bedsit in Knockturn Alley until about a month ago. He was evicted for non-payment. By all accounts he's been living rough for awhile. Eyewitnesses say that he'd been approached by chummy and offered money in exchange for sex. He agreed, but then he must've changed his mind and gave the man his money back. Looks like chummy wouldn't take no for an answer. The bastard knew Snape couldn't fight back, so he held him down, beat him and raped him. When Snape managed to get away, the scum started hexing him."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Oh, Harry! And no one tried to help?"

Harry grimaced. "Well, what do you think, Hermione? Snape's not exactly the most popular wizard. A lot of those people wouldn't mind seeing him wallowing." He looked disgusted. "They'd think it was what he deserved after playing both ends against the middle."

Hermione shook her head. "To think, he was so desperate as to allow-

"How else would you make a living if no one will hire you, your magic has been suppressed, you have no money and nowhere to live and you're too proud to go to any of your friends to ask for help?" Harry looked angry, but his anger wasn't directed at Hermione.

Hermione huffed, "But what about his war stipend? Surely he received as much or more than we did. Merlin knows he deserved it! Don't tell me he'd spent it all."

Harry's expression grew darker. "No. That's something else I just found out. Snape's got money, plenty of it, but the Ministry won't let him touch it until the end of his sentence. The Wizengamot placed a hold on his vault at Gringotts, Hermione. Every sickle of his money, including his War stipend, was frozen. I'd say he'd been living on the proceeds from his house and whatever money he had squirreled away, hoping to hang on until the fifteen years were up."

Hermione felt sick to her stomach. "If things go on the way they are, he won't be around when his fifteen years are up." She shook her head. "Fudge." She spat the name from her mouth like something foul. "I'd bet galleons to gurdyroots that berk Cornelius Fudge is behind this. He always hated Professor Snape."

Harry replied, "You're probably right."

Hermione frowned. "What I can't understand is why I never thought of him in all this time. It's like I just blocked everything out that happened before the end of the war." She looked at Harry helplessly. "I feel awful that I didn't even try to visit him. After all he did for us, I just crossed him off my Christmas card list and pretended he didn't exist anymore."

Harry squeezed her shoulder sympathetically. "We all did, Hermione. After Ron died, and the nightmare was finally over, I just wanted to get on with my life and start a family and be normal again." He looked down at the still figure in the bed. "I guess I thought he was one of those wizards who could always take care of himself."

Harry looked grim. "If he'd gone to anyone, me, you, Arthur, Professor McGonagall, we would have taken him in and helped him," he said. "But he's too damn stubborn and proud, Hermione. You can only help someone like that when their pride gives way to common sense." They both looked at the injured wizard, and Harry shook his head regretfully. "It looks like he hadn't got to that stage yet."

"No man is an island, Harry," Hermione said, her heart aching with guilt. "I know he's proud, but I have to at least try to do something right by him. I'd say that's not happened too often in his life, and he deserves better than being neglected to death."

Part the Second

Chapter 3 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Thank you for the wonderful reviews. I need to reiterate that I do not own these characters, but if I did, I'd be given them lots of cuddles, especially this one.

He drifted up through layers of warmth and softness, idly wondering if he was dead. It was too blissfully clean here to be his former residence, too comfortable to be St. Mungo's, and too warm to be outdoors. Ergo, he was dead. He pried open one sticky eye and saw auburn hair, and knew he was dead.

"Hello at last," he said tiredly. "I thought I'd be here much earlier, but better late than never, as they say." His words, while faintly buffed with his old ironic tone, were too weak to sound truly like the boy Lily Evans had once known, but he didn't think it mattered. "Although I will say, I'm not nearly as thrilled to see you as I thought I'd be," he concluded, his words growing more slurry and indistinct.

The fuzzy outline of his companion moved, and just before blessed sleep descended again, he thought he heard Lily say, "Mum, he woke up. I think he was talking to me!"

Waking again, hours later, he knew he was dead because he was in hell. Everything hurt - his head, his stomach, his chest, his ~~h~~arse. He groaned beseechingly. "Take the money back," he whined, trying to wave away the ugly bastard who'd given him coin to walk into the back of Knockturn Alley with him. "I'd rather starve, on second thought."

It was all coming back now. He'd not eaten in four days, and two young wizards, old enough to know who he was, stole his purse which held the last of his pitiful dosh. He'd sworn that he'd rather die than go cap in hand to any of his friends to ask for help, but after four days of living rough, with only a handful of water from a puddle to sustain him, he realised that pride could be swallowed very easily on an empty stomach. When the bullet-headed wizard had looked him up and down and barked, "How much, Snape?" then given him half, Severus had numbly slunk behind the man as they headed to a part of Knockturn Alley known for its deep alcoves and dark corners.

As he trained his eyes on the back of the man leading Severus into the shadows, he told himself it was just something he had to do, the latest in a lot of arse reamings he'd endured for the Greater Good. This one would just be literal as well as figurative. It wasn't as if he were engaged in it; it was just something happening to his body he wasn't involved. He just had to do it to survive.

As they walked to their destination, Severus pondered how far and how fast he'd fallen. After somehow surviving Nagini's attack, he believed he could learn to live without friends as long as he was able to support himself until the resentful public forgot about him. But the Ministry took his wand and his magic, and froze his assets for fifteen years. He accepted it stoically; it was, after all, preferable to Azkaban.

Exiled to his boyhood home in disgrace, Severus prepared to live the life of a magic-less pariah, holed up in his old house in Spinner's End, surrounded by his books. Then the wizard he was brewing for read an article in the Prophet damning those who gave aid and assistance to former Death Eaters, and told him his services were no longer needed. And the wolf came to the door, and the house and the books were eventually sold so he could keep body and soul together.

He'd decided he could survive as long as he could scrape together enough money doing the odd jobs in order to keep a roof, any roof over his head. But those jobs dried up and the landlord, never the most charitable of wizards, unceremoniously threw him out, after Accio-ing Snape's remaining galleon as back rent. The purse holding his last few knuts and sickles had been hidden in his shoe, or the money-grubbing bastard would have gotten that one as well.

In the end, it didn't matter. A wizard without magic is next to useless, even one as well-versed in the Muggle world as Severus. Without money, he couldn't begin again in Muggle London; and without Muggle London, Severus would be condemned to Knockturn Alley. From there he knew he would have to do things he'd sworn he'd never do in order to survive.

Looking at the sneering contempt on the face of his first 'customer,' a weary, sick desolation passed over and through him, and he thought *'m as good as dead. I'm not going to be found with an arse full of some stranger's leavings.* Just as the man put his hand on Severus' shoulder, Severus handed him the coin he'd been paid in advance.

"Take it. I've changed my mind. Seek another." He'd made to leave, but was spun around by the oafish wizard.

"Ere, Snape, you might have changed your mind, but I haven't," he leered, pushing him against the wall.

The next few moments were thankfully a bit muddled in Severus' mind. He remembered tasting blood in his mouth and the blistering hex that broke his nose and made him see stars. He remembered the burning sensation as his robes were unceremoniously jerked away and the rasp against his face as it was scraped along the cobbles. He distinctly remembered the foolish feeling that he'd been had, literally.

He remembered catching the rapist off guard and throwing him against the wall, then turning to run, knowing it was futile, but refusing to lie there and have the last vestiges of his self-preservation ground into the dirt. As he ran, he heard the mocking voices and derisory laughter following him the Great Severus Snape, reduced to running like the coward he was, clutching a threadbare robe to his skinny body. A laughingstock, to the great delight of the denizens of the lowest, most craven corner of Knockturn Alley.

A curse hit him from behind like the Hogwarts Express, and even as he fell, he thought, *Finally. Sell my bones at least I'll be worth something to someone then.*

A sound in the room brought his awareness back to the present, but when he tried to turn his head, a burst of pain of the most unmanly kind exploded over his consciousness, and he whimpered self-pityingly. Gods, death would truly be preferable to this...

Then a gentle hand lifted his head, and a smooth, cool vial was pressed to his lips. "Please drink this. It will help, I promise." As helpless as a baby bird, Severus opened his mouth, letting a thick, warm liquid trickle down his throat. It tasted faintly of cinnamon and hyssop, and he knew he was being given a powerful Pain Potion. He tried to focus his eyes, but it wasn't possible. In the dim light, he could barely make out the form of the person who held him so tenderly. A woman, smelling of mint and vanilla and safety. He tried to speak. "Shh, please don't tax yourself," said the woman, her voice quietly competent. "Try to rest. You are safe. No one will hurt you here. You need to get your strength back."

Severus lay back, thinking he should thank her, because he actually did feel out of harm's way. Not since he was a little boy staying at his grandmother's house did he feel so protected and safe. The heavy narcotic pull of the potion was sending him down, however, and no matter how he tried, he could not resist its siren's call...

His fever had broken again, for what she hoped was the final time. He was in far worse shape than Hermione had originally assessed, but she thought the worst of it might finally be behind him now. There had been moments, though, when Hermione had been more frightened than she was willing to admit. She had never seen anyone run such a high fever.

Now that he was out of the woods, Hermione allowed herself the small luxury of simply observing her guest. Where had the cruel, sneering professor of her school days gone? Even in his feverish delirium, he exhibited none of the bitter, caustic anger that catalogued Hermione's admittedly spotty recollections of him. It was as if the passing years had wrung him out, and took that malicious, bad-tempered part of him with it.

He wasn't defeated, exactly; Hermione could still see his old defiant steel beneath. No, not defeated; it was more like an acceptance, a tired resignation. It made Hermione wonder if she had really ever even known this man at all.

Watching him sleeping restlessly, Hermione took her hairbrush in hand again. Early on, she discovered that the simple act of gently brushing his hair was something that always soothed him through the fever nightmares and the pain. Most of the time, he was consciously unaware of it. But he would sigh and make little sounds of pleasure, so she knew that on some level it comforted him.

As her brush moved slowly through his hair, Hermione felt a measure of calm settling into her own heart. This palliative act was soothing to her as well, and she took a quiet joy in running her fingers through his black, silken locks, admiring its sleek softness. As she brushed, the faint scowl on his face relaxed, and his shoulders dropped a little. His long, slender hand flexed slowly, like a cat's will, when being stroked.

On impulse she ran her nails over his scalp, and he took a deep breath. A soft laugh sighed from his lips, startling Hermione into stillness. She had never heard anything like it; a slow, dark chuckle that sounded surprisingly sensual. It reverberated against her chest.

Sleepily, he caught one of her hands, brought it to his lips and kissed it. "That's so nice. Don't stop," he rumbled, and nuzzled against her palm with another soft kiss. His voice was deep and intimate; a lover's voice. "So sweet. Don't stop," he said, before drifting off, a smile almost touching his lips.

With her hand caught against his gaunt cheek, Hermione sat as still as possible, not wanting to disturb him so he would stay nestled against her hand. She was, however, shaken to her very foundations, and even though he obviously was unaware that it was actually her, it spoke volumes about him. Even if he had been a bastard in school, something in his soul both appreciated and longed for affection. He also longed to administer it in return.

More disturbingly, it told her something about herself. For when her former professor had laughed his low, sexy laugh and kissed her hand, Hermione felt a queer heat rise in her body that had nothing to do with illness or fever. It was a feeling she'd not had in a long time, and one she would have never associated with Severus Snape. All the more disturbing was the fact that she welcomed it, and felt an almost irresistible longing to hear that throaty, sensuous chuckle again.

Severus was faintly aware of a soothing, lovely sensation, but he couldn't focus enough to name it. He was no longer burning with fever, and the blissful sensation was replaced with another Potion, and some cool water that tasted sweet and fresh and wholesome.

Shades of memories of the past days drifted in and out of his awareness. At one point he remembered screaming and flailing, dragging himself to the surface of consciousness, and feeling strong hands holding him down while a gentle voice urged him to calm, that it was only a nightmare. He called for Lily to take pity on him. He called for Minerva McGonagall, who had always been kind to him before the war.

At times, it seemed as if both women were in the room with him, holding his hands. He sobbed miserably, wondering when the nightmare would end. He babbled, and soiled himself in his delirium, but he woke up between these bouts of madness clean and comfortably and exhausted.

He was given tomato soup, and it tasted so good he wept like a weak child. He was spoken to tenderly and hushed and petted, and a sweet voice told him it was alright, that he would be alright, just rest...

For an interminable amount of time, he slept. He would awaken, to the soothing sensation of someone running a brush through his hair. His potioneer's nose picked up the scent of baking; he detected nutmeg and cloves and sage and winter cooking smells. They comforted him.

The next time Severus awoke, his eyes were clear, and he lay quietly trying to catalogue the damage to his body. He still felt sore, but it was the deep, muscular soreness that goes with healing. The stabbing agony was dulled now, and he took a deep breath and felt no pain.

He took a hesitant look around and saw a woman sitting in a chair, reading a book. Her wild hair fluffed out around her in corkscrews, catching the afternoon sun as it slanted through the window. It had been a little over ten years, but he'd know that mad hair anywhere on earth.

"Granger?" he croaked. Hermione Granger looked up from the book, her large amber-coloured eyes wide. A smile broke across her face like the sun appearing from the clouds, and she laid her book on the table and approached his bed, withdrawing her wand and casting diagnostic spells even as she spoke.

"Mr. Snape! I must say, it's so good to see you awake." She sounded tearful. Her tone, though sincere, was soft, as if afraid to startle him. "You've been unconscious for almost two weeks." Whatever her spells told her was evidently satisfactory, and she tucked her wand back into her sleeve and looked down on him. "We've been so very worried about you." She stroked his hair from his face, and he resisted the urge to press his cheek against her gentle hand. "How do you feel? Are you in any pain?"

Severus blinked several times. "What am I doing here?" he said, sounding frighteningly weak to his own ears. "Am I in St. Mungo's?"

Granger smiled as if remembering a private joke. "You're actually in my home, Mr. Snape. My daughter saw you being attacked and ran to your rescue."

He stared at her blankly, trying to make sense of her words. She might as well have been speaking Gobbledegook. "Wha-" The word stuck on his rasping, dry vocal chords, and instantly she was pressing a glass of cool water to his lips.

"Small sips. You choked the other day and I thought I was going to lose you." She smiled to take the alarm out of her words, but he could see the concern in her eyes. "When you're feeling better, I'll tell you all about the daring rescue."

He lay back, the questions he needed to ask forming in his mind, but the bed was so soft, and he was so comfortable! *I'll close my eyes and gather my thoughts*, he told himself. *I'll just lie here until I'm ready to start asking questions. Just to rest my eyes while I pull myself together...*

When he awoke for good, it was dark. He gingerly sat up, felt no dizziness or nausea, and looked around. The moonlight was bright and filled the room with a surprising amount of light. It was so quiet it felt as if the world were asleep and he was the only one awake. He was in a small bedroom painted cream and blue, and then he remembered.

He stared at his surroundings, bewildered, wondering what on earth he was doing in Hermione Granger's house, in the middle of the night, in a black t-shirt that said "I am the proud parent of a Bottlebury Marsh Infant School Student" and a pair of black tracksuit trousers.

He mentally took stock of his body, but felt no pain. Miss Granger had certainly healed him, but why? His old self whispered to leave now, while the house was asleep, to go and disappear while he was healthy enough to move, but he shook his head. *Idiot! You don't even know where you are where are you going to go, on no money, in a pair of track suit bottoms and Hermione Granger's cast-off t-shirt?*

He lay back down, and laced his hands behind his head. He was warm, comfortable and safe. How long had it been since any of those adjectives applied to him? He sighed, fighting the self-pity that had become his constant companion in the last three years, along with the ever-increasing surety of never being able to feel whole again. He noticed ruefully that the cuff that suppressed his magic was still securely clamped to his wrist. Not even Granger could remove that.

He was curious and hungry, but he imagined Granger would be up soon to resolve both of those issues, so all there was to do was wait. He felt as if he'd been sleeping for years. For all he knew, he had. All he was certain of was the sickening feeling that he'd sunk as low as was humanly possible, only to wake up in this soft nest like the pitiable charity case Granger no doubt considered him to be.

And yet, what was he supposed to do now, that he'd hit the bottom and lived? *Well, my boy, life is a wheel. When you have reached the bottom and there is nowhere left to go, you know the wheel is starting its ascent again.* He could almost hear the old poof saying it.

Lying in this peaceful, welcoming room, Severus wondered where the wheel was taking him. And if he should revert to type, and jump off before things felt like they might just look positive? Was he that scared of happiness now? He always had been, but he'd thought before that he'd reached the bottom. He hadn't known the bottom until lately. Not really.

He rolled over, reveling in the softness of the sheets. The feel of being in such a quiet, comfortable environment bordered on decadent to him, after three years of living in that scratchy, noisy hovel Greenbrown had let out to him. Severus frowned; he couldn't work out exactly why he was here instead of St. Mungo's, though. He would have thought she was being rather overly generous with her hospitality, but at this stage of his life, that old imp Pride was no longer holding the reins over his heart. As hungry as he was, he no longer had the appetite for biting the hand that fed him.

He dozed off and on for the next few hours until the grey dawn heralded movement and life in the house. He heard soft female voices murmuring, and quiet laughter. He sat up, thinking he should have already made his consciousness known, when a young girl with dark red hair entered the room with a tray. Seeing him awake and alert surprised her so much she yelped a little squeak of shock and dropped the tray, sending a plate of eggs, bacon and toast flying, along with orange juice and coffee.

Severus looked at the hot food splattered all over the floor and sighed. "Story of my life," he muttered. The young girl looked up at him with enormous blue eyes.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She held out a hand and imperiously said, "Now, don't move. I'm going to get Mum." Her mannerisms were so familiar it actually startled him into laughter. The girl was the spitting image of a Weasley, but the reincarnation of a first-year Hermione Granger. Except for the lack of wild hair and prominent teeth, she might as well have been wearing a Gryffindor robe and waving her hand in the air.

There was a commotion downstairs, and the young girl appeared with Hermione Granger in tow. She was saying, "I'm sorry for the mess, Mum, but I wasn't expecting him to be awake!" Far from sounding frightened, the young girl was practically bouncing with excitement. "Is he going to be alright, Mum?"

Severus looked at Hermione Granger, trying to reconcile this lovely young woman with the over-achieving swot he remembered from so long ago, and shook his head. "Mum? We've been busy, haven't we, Miss Granger, or should I say, Mrs. Weasley?"

Hermione looked surprised, then the same smile he remembered during his first lucid moments returned. "Good morning, Mr. Snape! Sorry about that, but Rose usually brings your morning meals, and I forgot to tell her you were awake. My monitor, you know," she said, beaming as she pointed to a little circular object by his bed. It resembled an old fashioned Sneak-o-scope, but he saw nothing amiss from it.

He turned back to his diminutive hostess. "I apologise for startling you." He swallowed. "I have to say, I was rather looking forward to that," he finished, looking regretfully down at the spoiled food on the floor.

"Where are my manners?" Hermione said, and *Evanescio*'d the mess. "You must be ravenous. I've been feeding you liquids and some fluids intravenously, but I was hoping you'd feel up to something solid." She turned to Rose. "Sweetheart, go and finish getting dressed. You don't want to be late for school again. Mrs. Jason will have my head if you miss one more Morning Call."

She turned back to Severus. "We've been so worried about you, I've grown terribly negligent of poor Rose's timetable. She's been late for school more times in the past two weeks than in her entire life."

Rose, standing by her mother, hadn't moved. "Oh, Mum, can't I stay in today? I want to talk to Mr. Snape!"

Severus frowned at the two young women, and Hermione laughed. "Now there's the Professor Snape I remember!" She turned to Rose. "Darling, I'm sure you would find Mr. Snape quite fascinating, but the poor man has just woken up and he's starving to boot, so perhaps he would agree to speak to you soon. But for now, school. March!" She pointed to the door with a mock-imperious expression.

With a disappointed groan, Rose nevertheless obeyed her mother and left the adults on their own. Hermione made a little moue of an apology. "I'm afraid Rose has spent her entire life hearing about you and has developed a bit of hero worship, along with the rest of us."

When Severus didn't reply, she gave him a tight little smile. "Right, that'll be more breakfast then. Those eggs won't crack themselves." She turned to go.

"Why not?"

She looked back at him, her expression faintly puzzled. "Why not what?"

Snape nodded toward the wand she still held. "You're a witch. Why don't you make the eggs crack themselves?" When she didn't reply, he added with a dismissive shrug, "I just don't see why you wouldn't use magic if you had it." He looked down at the blue duvet covering his body, hating the bitterness in his tone. "Forgive me, Mrs. Weasley. I spoke out of turn. Your magic is yours to do with, or not, as you will. I'm afraid after ten years of living without, I can't help but wonder why you would if you didn't have to."

For a moment, he thought she wouldn't reply. Then, in an oddly flat tone, she said, "I use magic often, Mr. Snape. And you're right; it's hard not to take for granted that which you use without thought. I actually prefer to do things the Muggle way when I can. I think if Hogwarts taught me anything, it was that relying on magic to do everything is as dangerous as suppressing it."

She seemed to realise how tactless her statement sounded to Severus, and hastily added, "But I usually cook the Muggle way. It's like Potions, you know? You put more of yourself into it when you use your hands instead of your wand." She made to leave, then hesitated at the door. "And I'm not married; it's Miss. Miss Granger, if you prefer, but I do hope you'll call me Hermione." She gave him the tight little smile again, and left Severus alone with his thoughts.

Part the Third

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Thank you to all of your reviews! I am transported with your encouragement. Special thanks to stgulik, who is the best beta in the world, and always wants you, the reader, to have the best teddyradiator fic possible.

Part The Third

He ate two eggs, four rashers of bacon, two pieces of toast with jam, and downed three glasses of milk and a cup of tea. Hermione, after sending Rose off to school, sat by him and chatted while he ate, catching him up on news of herself and other former students. They both knew that she was making small talk just to stay in the room in case his very empty stomach might consider the food to be too much, but Severus admitted to himself he welcomed her company. He had gone for weeks without talking to another soul, and it surprised and disturbed him that he actually found the company of another so welcome after weeks of enforced solitude and squalor.

Once he'd finished and sat back, exhausted from devouring the largest meal he'd had in months, he dozed, only to be awoken by Miss Granger's soft hands and her quiet voice urging him to take a cocktail of healing potions. He sat up, and after gaining the courage to ask the location of the loo, he swung his legs over the bed for the first time, feeling as weak as a newborn, cursing his inability to take himself to the toilet.

As Hermione held on, they stumbled inelegantly across the landing to the bathroom. "Please don't feel uncomfortable, Mr. Snape," she was saying, as if reading his thoughts. "If it helps any, please remember I am a registered Healer, and there's not much I haven't seen or done for a patient."

Staggering against the door, Severus grunted. "I have no doubt you are highly competent, Miss Granger. However, there are some things a man must do alone, and this is one of them."

She blushed in a way that made the word 'charming' come to his addled mind. "Of course. I'll just be across the hall. I'll come and help you back to bed when you're, you know. Finished."

It was only later that he found himself idly wondering which statement had caused her to blush so charmingly: his artless insistence on taking himself to toilet, or that inadvertent, rarest of gifts a compliment on her abilities.

For the next week, Severus did nothing but eat and sleep and putter around the little house Hermione and Rose shared. He ate anything and everything put in front of him, and glowered ineffectively at Hermione when she teased that their cat Sam had better watch his food bowl while Severus was in the house.

He treated Rose with rather shy respect, as if unsure how to act around her. When she asked what Hermione cringingly thought of as a 'dunderhead' question, he replied with acerbic wit, but without the cruel malice that had been part of her educational years. He was so very different from the crackling, harsh wizard Hermione remembered from her school days. Whatever anger and bitterness he had carried from the war had been literally wrung from him by the past ten years, leaving behind a rather quiet, contemplative soul.

Rose Granger, Severus decided, was not an irritating little carbuncle, as he believed most children to be. As he silently watched mother and daughter interact, he thought of the Granger and Weasley he remembered from Hogwarts. They, along with Potter, had spent their last year of school on the run. And apparently, she'd been left with this reminder of it - a bright, clever little girl who sounded like a carbon copy of her mother but looked absurdly like her father. Not that he cared, he told himself. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It was all ancient history, the war. He'd just hoped that-

No, he shook his head mentally. That was then, and this was now. She and the boy had undoubtedly loved one another, and had produced this intelligent, tender-hearted daughter. That is their reality. *What is my reality?* he wondered, hearing their girlish laughter throughout the house. *What in Merlin's name am I still doing here?*

Severus needed to leave. If he didn't go soon, he was afraid he'd start looking for any excuse to stay. For a week now, he and Hermione had been having increasingly animated, thought-provoking conversations, each one growing longer and more absorbing until yesterday, when they'd looked up and it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and they'd had to make a mad dash so they wouldn't be late picking Rose up from school. It had been a comfortable, sort of sheepish feeling, having enjoyed something more than either had been willing to admit.

He broached the subject at the kitchen table while Hermione made Saturday morning pancakes. "I believe I have overstayed your hospitality, Miss Granger."

She turned to him, spatula in hand, frowning. "Oh, we're back to Miss Granger now, are we?" She gave him a sad little smile. "And to think of all the hope I felt when you actually called me Hermione, Severus."

Cheeky little wench, he thought. While he had never objected to her using his Christian name, he'd never given her permission either, even though she'd insisted he use hers from the off. She watched him pensively, and he thought, not for the first time since he stumbled out of the loo and into her arms, what an attractive woman she was. He winced. All the more reason to get away before he made a proper fool of himself.

"I have taken advantage of you long enough... Hermione. I am grateful that you and Rose took me in after - well, after what happened, but I can't in good conscience sit around here like a lemon, day after day, existing on your charity."

"We've had this conversation before, Severus. You aren't imposing. You are a friend in need. That's what friends do they take care of one another." The last words seemed to stick in her throat and she turned back to the hob.

He growled. "I don't like feeling like a pity case."

"Well, good, because you're not." Her voice was clipped and formal; she was angry, or possibly hurt. It was hard for Severus to tell without benefit of her lovely expressive eyes telegraphing her emotions.

He took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm in the way."

"Oh, bollocks." She turned back to him. "For the final time, Severus, you are not-" she ticked off his excuses on her fingers. "-in the way, a pity case, my new pet project, Rose's stray, or any of another dozen or so things you've called yourself." She flipped the last pancake into a plate and placed it in front of him. "Eat up while they're hot." She took a tray with another plate of pancakes into the front room, where Rose sat watching Saturday morning telly and talking to one of her school friends on her mobile.

Returning to the kitchen, Hermione watched Severus tuck in. Now that his appetite had returned, it pleased Hermione to no end to see him eat. He rolled his eyes at her cooking and groaned with delight when his belly was full. He ate neatly, as if conscious of how he appeared to others when doing something as personal as feeding himself. Hermione felt a secret pride that he had grown stronger and healthier while in her care. He no longer looked like a starving scarecrow. There was something tremendously gratifying, watching his gaunt cheeks fill out to something approaching normal.

"I'm not going to send you out into the cold with a few galleons to keep body and soul together," she said archly. "For your information, Severus Snape, I worked very hard

to nurse you back to health. I don't relish you out there somewhere undoing all my good work."

He looked stonily down at his plate. "I told you, I will find a way to repay you," he said, his voice sounding hollow.

She made an exasperated sound. "Severus, stop that now! I'm not trying to make you feel obligated, you prat, I'm trying to tell you that I don't want you to leave. I can't make myself any clearer." She sat down beside him and laid a soft hand on his wrist. "It's winter. Christmas is coming." He risked a glance at her, and she touched his shoulder. "Rose and I have come to care about you very much," she said quietly. "I want only one thing from you. I can't make you do it - and I don't want to make you do it - but there is one thing I really, really want."

Here we go, he thought. "And that would be?" he asked.

Hermione gazed at him levelly. "I want you to stay here, at least until Christmas. I've been speaking with Harry and some others, and we want to help." Her voice was imploring. "I've been blessed; many of my friends are blessed. It's time you received some of those blessings, too, Severus. No matter what you might think, you deserve them."

Her expression grew angry. "You certainly did *not* deserve the crap the Wizengamot has forced you to endure. I know it's been ten years coming, but I want to help. You've been through too much shit and been fucked around too much."

He straightened, eyebrows reaching for his hairline. "I hope you don't kiss Rose with that mouth," he said, awed by her vehemence on his behalf.

She burst out laughing. "See? No dramatics, no martyrdom. Just hang around and work with me on Potions, or help Rose with her homework if you feel you must do something, but just allow a little holiday karma to come your way for once, Severus. It's not charity; it's friendship. Please don't be too proud to be my friend."

He was watching her intently. A tiny dollop of maple syrup clung to his bottom lip, and Hermione resisted an insane urge to lick it from his mouth. She'd been thinking along those lines a great deal in the past week, actually.

Let's face it, girl, she told herself. *You can be as pragmatic and altruistic as you like, but the fact remains that you want him to stay because you're falling in love with him. You're just using that old chestnut, 'I don't want you out on the street,' but what you're really saying is, 'I don't want you anywhere else but here with me. For a long time. Perhaps forever.'*

She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind as he took a tentative sip of tea, found it to his liking, and turned to her. With something like surprised exasperation, he said quietly, "You are making it very difficult for me to leave." When she grinned triumphantly, he looked deeply into her eyes, searching her, testing her, daring her.

She didn't care. His words had given her too much hope to back down now. Hermione tried once again. "Severus, in spite of how it came about, I do enjoy your company." She leaned back in her chair and smiled. "I'm glad you're here. Besides, no one remarks over my cooking like you. You make me feel like a gourmet."

He gave her a keen look. "For years I subsisted on the toughest cut of pride ever carved. Even that is gone now." He hesitantly reached out to touch her hand. Something like his old smirk twitched his lips. He added dryly, "After that, anyone's cooking is marvelous to me."

Hermione blinked, then gasped at his impudence. "Oh, you, you Slytherin!" she hissed, swatting his bicep. Then she laughed and gave him a mock reproachful look. "Here I am, making this sincere, dramatic announcement, and you're making fun of me *and* my cooking! You should be ashamed, Severus Snape!"

He looked surprisingly pleased with her reaction. After a moment's hesitation, he replied quietly, "That was delicious. And you *are* a good cook, as well you know." He looked away. "But I still feel like a gooseberry. Without magic, I'm less than useless. Remember that in a month's time when you're bemoaning the fact that I'm about as helpful as an extra navel."

Hermione's heart cramped for him. "Severus, you still have your ability. It's not like you'll never access it again. You are one of the most powerful wizards I have ever known. Remember who you are!"

He snorted and sat back from the table. "Who I was and who I am now are two vastly different creatures, Hermione," he scoffed, holding up his arm to show the black, malignant cuff. "I read up on these, you know. Many wizards never retrieve all of their magic after wearing one. The magical signature changes over time, and the longer the cuff is worn, the weaker the signature. Upon removal, some wizards are left less than Squibs." He looked away bitterly. "And what am I without magic? Nothing."

Hermione was silent. She could have spouted platitudes to contradict him, but they would have been lies. Magic was part of their being; part of their souls. She could remember times during the war when she had been nearly depleted of magic. It was exhausting and sickening; like a low-grade fever that wouldn't break. It made her feel physically weak; she couldn't concentrate properly. She was depressed.

It was magical depletion that she and Harry later deduced had caused Ron to behave so abominably when they took turns wearing the Horcrux. If it could make someone feel so dreadful for just a few hours, what must ten years of it feel like for Severus?

"No, not anymore," she said to herself, and without explanation, stood up and left Severus sitting confused in the kitchen. She stalked into her front room, grabbed a handful of Floo powder and shouted, "Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place!" She stepped through the flames and landed in the library, where Ginny was playing with the kids. Harry was just entering the room with a cup of coffee.

"Hermione!" he said, with a smile made of equal parts hospitality and confusion. "Is everything-"

"Harry," she said without preamble, "it's time for you to pull your finger out and fire the big guns with it. I want you to go to Kingsley and remind him that you're the Boy Who Lived. He owes you."

Part the Fourth

Chapter 5 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

I must thank you all for your wonderful reviews and comments. They make me feel wonderful.

Special thanks to the most awesome beta in the universe, stgulk, for her flawless work, her suggestions, her encouragement and her delicious sense of humour.

While Hermione was off on her cryptic mission, Severus returned to the kitchen to do the washing up. *Start as you mean to go on then*, he told himself. If he was, indeed, planning on staying indefinitely as a guest of the Grangers, he could at least tidy up after himself. Rose eventually wandered in and began drying the dishes, citing that as 'her job.'

"Mum and I always work together," she said, working neatly and efficiently. "Mum always washes and I always dry. She says many hands make light work." Severus nodded, and gave her the last plate. He remembered helping his own mum in very much the same way when he was Rose's age.

Hermione had still not returned by the time they were done, so Rose returned to the telly while Severus distracted himself by perusing Hermione's small but impressive collection of books. As his eyes roamed over the various spines, he could not help but approve of her taste. It was, after all, startlingly similar to his. Having to sell the family home on Spinner's End had not been nearly as upsetting to Severus as having to part with his beloved books. He had spent almost twenty-five years amassing a personal library to rival most wizards, only to stand by and watch as all the volumes were shrunk down into boxes and carried off, never to be seen again.

He had a feeling he knew where Hermione had gone and why, and he felt his old prideful resentment wanting to rise. He shook his head. What was wrong with him that he railed against the fact that Hermione genuinely wanted to help him? Was Dumbledore's old broken record still scratching away, about how undeserving he was? Wasn't it time to learn a new tune?

Frustrated with his conflicting thoughts, his eyes fell across a well-worn first edition of *Potion: The Physical Manifestation of the Magical Intent* by J. Brabington Forsmythe. It was an extremely rare book; he had known of only three still in existence. He had owned one of them. Easing it carefully from the shelf, his heart skipped a beat. As someone who cherished his books and was intimately familiar with their every physical attribute, Severus found the pattern of worn fibers on the cover disturbingly familiar. The customary *ex libris* wizarding stamp had been removed from the flyleaf. Flipping open the back cover, he noted with a jolt a tiny mark, the same mark he habitually placed on the back cover of every book he possessed. Although it looked like an innocuous little blot of ink, it was in reality *another* magical identification stamp, one that the seller had not detected.

Severus turned toward the fireplace just as the Floo activated, and Hermione came striding in, looking steely-eyed and ready to do battle. She relaxed when she spotted him. "Severus! Sorry about that - just a little business I needed to attend to. Have a seat and I'll make us a cup of tea." She indicated the book in his hands. "What did you find to read?"

"One of *my own* books," he said, then closed his eyes, wondering to which planet his manners had emigrated. He sounded as if he were accusing her of stealing.

With a puzzled expression, she said, "*Your* books?"

Haltingly, Severus told her how he'd been forced to sell his entire collection, and showed her the magical stamp the sellers had overlooked. Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Show me the stamp, Severus," she said, and he opened the book to the back cover. With a wave of her wand, a glyph rose from the small mark, revealing a complicated runic-like symbol. It wavered in the air, shimmering like air above a hot pavement, then snapped together to form the letters "STS" over the book.

Hermione looked at the letters, her face strained. "I checked this book for marks, and I remember seeing this glyph." She turned to him. "Why did it never occur to me that this was yours, Severus?" She looked genuinely upset, and he felt a pang of conscience.

"Why should it?" he asked diffidently, still holding the book.

She looked up at him with troubled eyes. "Because I knew your initials. I knew you collected books. I should have put two and two together." She looked away, and murmured as if to herself, "Why was it so easy to forget you?" In a small sad voice, she asked, "How could I forget Severus Snape?"

Severus took a deep breath. "Hermione, I think -"

Her eyes grew wide. "Hang on!" She interrupted, holding up a finger. She turned to Severus with dawning excitement. "I bought this book at a crate sale at Flourish and Blotts about two years ago. You know, they have these huge boxes of books-" she indicated with her hands, "- and you make an offer for the entire crate. Well, they had a massive overstock and anyone could see they were selling them for a song, and I -"

She stopped and grabbed his hand. "Come with me, Severus!" She all but dragged him up the stairs to a small attic room that she used for storage. "I pulled out a few of the rarer books and stored away the others until I could decide how to build my library. Ah, here they are!" She retrieved a small cigar-shaped box, and from it withdrew ten small crate-like boxes. "We'd better stand back," she said impishly, and enlarged the boxes until the two of them were surrounded by ten enormous wooden crates.

On impulse, Severus opened the one nearest to him and froze. He opened a second crate, and a third. By the fourth crate he was almost hyperventilating. Every book in the crates had once belonged to him. He turned to Hermione, trembling with excitement. "These are all-" He stopped and looked down into the crate. "These were all mine."

He looked back up at the young witch. She was beaming with delight. "Well, they're yours again!" she declared.

His excitement faded. He shook his head. "No. I sold them. You bought them fairly. They belong to you."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be daft, Severus! You sold them because you had to, and I bought them because I could." Her face was alight with joy. "Isn't serendipity wonderful?" She gave him a little hug and released him before he could react. "Happy Christmas!"

He looked from the lovely witch down to the old friends he'd thought lost to him forever, and tried to think of words adequate enough to tell Hermione how he felt, how jubilant and humbled he was. All he could do was smile. He couldn't help it. He felt elated. "Thank you, Hermione. You have no idea-" He touched her cheek. "Just, thank you."

Hermione patted his arm. "Now I've gotten *my* Christmas pressie. A smile from Severus Snape. Rarer than his books, but all the most precious for it."

Abashed, he looked down in confusion. His emotions were so hair-trigger, he wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. Instead of doing either, he reached into one of the crates and withdrew a worn, well-thumbed copy of the children's classic, *My First Wand*. In monetary terms it was too battered to have been worth anything. By rights, it should be in a rubbish bin somewhere, and yet it had somehow found its way back to him, through Hermione. He had shown her little more than scathing derision for most of her life - and she and her daughter had given him nothing but compassion and friendship since their reunion.

"This book belonged to my mother. She used to read it to me when I was a little younger than Rose." He pressed the book in Hermione's hands. "I didn't keep it so much to read, but because it reminded me of when she used to read it to me. I'd like to give it to Rose, if you think she'd like it."

Hermione's smile almost carved him up with tenderness. "Rose Granger, daughter of Hermione, not want a book? Have you *met* her?" Tilting her head, she added, "You know, I bet she would love for you to read it to her. You have such a lovely speaking voice. Would you do that?"

"I would." He looked at Hermione, who was still looking at the crates with a look of confused frustration on her pretty face. He knew what had placed the frown line between her soft brows. Severus made a decision.

"Hermione," he began, and took her hand. Her eyes grew wide, but allowed him to draw her closer. When she was almost touching him, he said, "You keep asking why you forgot about me, why you didn't go back to the Shrieking Shack." When she nodded, he bit his lower lip.

"I am the reason."

She looked into his face, as if trying to comprehend those four words. "What are you saying, Severus?"

He gripped her hand tightly. "I can show you why, but we need a Pensieve."

"Severus, my boy! I'm so glad to see you! And Hermione! You're looking lovelier than ever!" Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, rose with difficulty from her chair and accepted Hermione's peck on the cheek. "I hoped I would see you sometime soon."

After Severus had made his cryptic request for the use of a Pensieve, Hermione had called on her former Head of House, now Headmistress, who agreed to let them come round the following day and use the large one that took pride of place in the Headmistress' study. Severus had both looked forward to and dreaded the meeting.

Minerva sat back down, gasping. "I'm afraid my breath is as short as my days now," she huffed, without an ounce of self-pity. She fixed Severus with a patented glare. "I'm sorry I haven't been by to see you, my dear boy. I tried to get messages to you, but my owls kept returning with my letters. Where have you been?"

Sitting across from the woman he had known practically his entire life, Severus realised with a shock that Minerva was dying. He shot a look to Hermione, who returned it gravely.

Minerva had been the only person who had called on him after he lost the house, but her visits had ceased abruptly six months before. Hermione had warned him that Minerva had fallen very ill, but Severus had not realised it was this serious. Since the war, the *Daily Prophet* had always been discouraged from printing personal news about the headmistress or the staff.

All this time, he had half-believed Minerva had stopped visiting him because he drove her away. Now, he realised the truth: she had stopped because she was no longer able to do so. In fact, she was barely strong enough to stand for longer than a few minutes at a time. It grieved Severus to see this mighty witch grown so frail and weak.

Her tone, though, was still brisk and no-nonsense, and the gimlet eye that locked on Severus was uncompromising. "Well, Severus? Are you going to tell me what happened? You're not so old that I can't wrinkle it out of you if so needed."

"Merlin forbid that anyone would think that, Minerva," Severus replied dryly. "Greenbrown threw me out," he replied, unable to look her in the eye. "I didn't have a stable address, until recently," he concluded, risking a glance at Hermione. *And after what I show you today, Hermione, that could change* he thought.

Minerva shook her head. "Why didn't you contact me, boy?" She looked more disappointed than disapproving. "Why will you persist in believing that you're not worthy of the help of your friends?"

He opened his mouth to answer, and felt Hermione's hand gently alight on his arm. "I've asked the same thing, Minerva."

Avoiding both pairs of eyes, Severus murmured, "Because it's very easy to alienate your friends, and then get angry at them for allowing themselves to be alienated by you. That is, if you're stubborn, and you have money." He looked at Minerva and confessed, "After the money ran out, I realised I'd been swallowing my pride and licking my wounds for so long, I was at the point of starving to death." At Minerva's bemused look, he felt his face grow warm. "I've become a little fixated with food lately. I didn't have very much the month before Hermione and Rose found me."

Minerva nodded, having already heard about Severus' situation from Hermione. "All I can say is thank Merlin for Rose." She smiled. "Mimsey!"

A plump little house-elf instantly popped into the room, beaming a great smile. "Yes, Headmistress, ma'am?" she squeaked, obviously delighted to be of service.

Without breaking eye contact with Severus, the headmistress answered, "Mimsey, please bring some extra cakes for Mr. Snape. And some of that gingerbread he was so fond of."

The house-elf nodded enthusiastically, and disappeared instantly. It seemed like only a few seconds had passed before she reappeared with a tray groaning with gingerbread, petit fours, scones, fairy cakes and tea fittings. Severus' impressive nose quivered at the delicious assortment of goodies. He caught a look between the two women. It was fond, and it was indulgent, and he resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at them as he piled his plate with gingerbread, two scones and several petit fours the pink ones, which he never allowed himself in the presence of others.

When they finished their repast, Minerva caught Severus' eye, and he nodded. He could not put this off any longer. Minerva began, "Now, what has brought you two here today to commandeer my Pensieve?"

Severus turned to Hermione. "There is a memory I have to share with you, but I will need your help in accessing it." He had never asked someone to extract his memories, and to be honest, wasn't sure it would work.

Hermione watched him carefully. "Yesterday you said that you were the reason I forgot about you." When he nodded, she added, "Will this memory show me why?"

"Yes," he said. Hermione lifted her wand to his temple. He concentrated hard as she pulled out a strand of memory as gently as a mother pulling her daughter's hair into a braid, and stirred the memory into the Pensieve.

Turning to Hermione, Severus said quietly, "We're going to be visiting a particularly pivotal moment in time, during the year you, Potter and Weasley were on the run, searching for Horcruxes." He swallowed. "Something significant happened on this night, but until now, you were unaware of it."

Glancing at Minerva apprehensively, Hermione took Severus' proffered hand, and together they lowered their faces into the swirling contents of the bowl.

The sight that met her eyes was so distinct she immediately knew where she was and on which day. It was the Forest of Dean on that bitterly cold Boxing Day, eleven years earlier. She could remember so vividly the dry, cold air that night. The stillness all around her as she left the two boys alone in the tent, her thoughts so jumbled and tinged with anger and fear she could barely think straight. Ron had just returned to them, and she was overcome by both the thrill of seeing him again and a burning fury that he'd behaved so selfishly in the first place. Their reunion could only be described as an awkward detente of sorts, and Ron had the good sense to heed Harry's suggestion to leave her alone.

Harry and Ron had been strangely reticent about what had actually happened when they destroyed the locket; neither seemed capable of looking her in the eye. Rather than confess her throat-constricting relief that the Horcrux was finally gone and Ron was back, she'd muttered something about 'checking the wards' and left the warmth of the tent to do battle with her thoughts.

As she had walked the invisible boundaries of her strongest, most impenetrable wards, it was preternaturally silent, except for the wind sloughing softly in the trees, and the flakes of snow that fell like whispers into the night. Amongst the tall trees, she had felt so lonesome she thought she might cry. The boys were oddly divorced from her, and while she knew it had something to do with the Horcrux, she had neither the resources nor the energy to speculate or discover why.

She had been cold, she had been tired, she had been hungry, and she had wanted to be somewhere warm, where no one had ever heard the name Lord Voldemort or Harry Potter or Hermione Granger. She had wanted a hot bath and a soft bed. She had wanted her mum. She had wanted to go home.

In the Pensieve, Hermione observed her memory-self through someone else's eyes, as if someone were walking beside her. She looked at Severus in confusion. He

merely gazed forward, watching her eighteen-year-old self trudging tiredly down the line of the wards.

As she watched, she suddenly recalled the feeling of powerful magic touching her wards that night. It had been strong, masculine magic, the kind that could break through her wards like a knife slicing through butter if it chose. It had felt like static in her head. It had rubbed up against her magic in the dry, cold, moisture-free air, crackling against her in a way that should have bothered her, but in reality felt familiar. Almost comforting.

She had thought she was merely imagining it, like a person will imagine a scent they associate with a friend. She could clearly remember her confusion; later she would tell herself she had imagined it as a balm to the alienation of the boys, and her own loneliness.

In her memory, she had walked the perimeter and returned to the outside of the tent, where she'd sat guard for the rest of the night. But as her memory-self turned away from the tent instead, Hermione was filled with sudden, clear knowledge that this was the moment when reality and her recollection parted ways.

The perspective changed, and that's when she saw him at the edge of the clearing, just inside her innermost ward. Severus Snape, the despised Headmaster of Hogwarts, stood watching her. In the cold, hard light of the moon, immobile as the tall pines of the forest, he looked like a pagan statue left in the clearing by some ancient tribe. Surrounding him was an ethereal, almost mystical aura that gave him an aesthetic beauty that seemed reserved for Hermione alone. He was wearing his customary black, his pale face and hands making the snow grey by comparison. As Hermione watched, the moon shone bright and lustrous in his glistening, midnight-black hair. The wind suddenly picked it up and swirled it behind him.

He turned and looked at her memory-self, as if he'd been expecting her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be in the Forest of Dean in the middle of the night in the middle of the coldest winter she could ever remember. She realised that he had been the unseen person walking beside her, on the other side of her wards. *He had been able to see her.*

He watched her approach with the calm, passive indifference of a Buddha. Watching her memory-self approach this dark sorcerer, Hermione turned and looked at the actual Severus. "What is this? A dream?" Almost the moment the words left her mouth she cursed her stupidity. This was no dream. This was his apology. Instead of the night she remembered as passing with no incident save a long, lonely walk around strong wards, he was showing her the actual true events which had passed.

Part The Fifth

Chapter 6 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

I am thrilled with the reception of this story. Thank you for continuing to support my little fluffy, sentimental story. Thank you, stgulik, for always being right on the money about these things. This chapter is dedicated to her.

If Severus' memory of Hermione's wards sounds familiar, it was because this was the inspiration for Droxy's Folly. Apologies for the repeated usage of the plot device, but I really, really love the idea of Hermione's wards being so strong, and yet so protective.

In the memory, eighteen-year-old Hermione approached him, her expression carefully shuttered. Hermione imagined that she would have been afraid, but would have tried not to show it. He was, after all, Dumbledore's murderer, Lord Voldemort's right-hand man he was not a wizard to trifle with. In the middle of the forest in the middle of the night, surrounded by trees and moonlight, Severus Snape radiated power. Power to pass through her strongest wards; power to strike her to the ground with a whispered curse.

When she was within six feet of him, he made what appeared to be a slight bow, as if acknowledging her presence. For a moment, they merely gazed at one another, and Hermione could see her memory-self shivering, possibly from the cold. She could have been simply frightened. Hermione, thinking back to those dark days, thought it was probably a fairly potent mixture of both.

In a flash of movement, Headmaster Snape whipped the cloak from his shoulders and wrapped her within, placing a strong Warming charm over both of them. He turned and looked out over the forest. "Well met in moonlight, Miss Granger." His voice was soft, and edged with a feathery tremble of exhaustion.

For a moment, the memory-Hermione simply looked at him. It was obvious that she was as curious as she was frightened, but the deep quiet of the night cast a spell over them both, and neither seemed inclined to break it. Finally, in a voice that sounded amazingly brave, memory-Hermione said, "I have a reason to be here, Headmaster. Can you say the same?"

For a long moment, he remained silent. Then, he turned and looked at her, wrapped in his voluminous cloak like a child masquerading in grown-up garb. "An errand needed running." There was resentment and sadness in his voice, and memory-Hermione continued to meet his gaze, challenging him. Finally, he sighed. "Are you well? Do you need anything? Food, potions?" Rather wryly, he drawled, "The will to keep going?"

Stonily, she replied, "I suspect we have enough to survive. *Ofeverything* we need to keep going, sir." He nodded, and looked away, as if seeking something, perhaps an answer, in the sougning pines. Hermione gasped, then blurted, "It was you! You brought Harry the sword of Gryffindor! How did you know where-" She huffed, and her breath roiled, ghostly grey, from her lips. "Black. He overheard me, didn't he?"

The headmaster nodded. "Yes. But I wouldn't be too hard on the old fellow." He sneered. "The task was accomplished, so I suppose we must feel some gratitude to the pompous arse for giving away your position." He squinted up at the moon, as if gauging its path across the sky. "The end is coming, Miss Granger. Please be ready. Please make sure *he* is ready." Neither had to clarify who *he* was.

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I am ready. As much as I can be, sir. I have been, ever since I was eleven."

For the first time in her life, Hermione, watching her memory-self, saw how she looked through the eyes of someone else. As her eighteen-year-old self spoke to Headmaster Snape, Hermione could see the emotions dancing across her face: weariness, fear, resolve, uncertainty. The young girl swallowed, and whispered, "Professor, why are you here? I mean," she shook her head. "I know what you did, but why? I thought you-you hated Harry."

For a moment, he was silent, as if he hadn't heard her. She reached for his arm, and he looked down at the place where her slender fingers curled around his bicep. The headmaster scowled at her, grimacing, and something, perhaps the concern and the confusion he saw there, undid him, and he turned away, breathing hard enough to

form clouds of vapour around his dark head. At that moment, Hermione thought he was angry with her impertinence.

"I never professed to feel otherwise, Miss Granger," he hissed warningly.

The younger Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Then why? If you hate us so much, if you are truly You-Know-Who's man, why did you do it?"

He shook his arm free. "Why do you think, Miss Granger? Why have I done anything and everything Dumbledore wanted me to do for the past sixteen years, no matter how repugnant? Because he commanded it! Even from the grave he is still commanding me to do his will!" He turned to Hermione with a voice rising in pain and fury. "You must protect the boy, Severus! Take the sword to Potter, Severus! Try to save Draco's soul, Severus! At the proper time, kill me, Severus!" Snape roared, his eyes wild and staring. He was looking through Hermione as if she wasn't there; as if the one who had commanded him was still standing by, bidding Headmaster Snape to obey him, even at the risk of Snape's very soul.

Suddenly his face crumpled, and with a sobbing wail he buried his head in his hands. "Oh, gods," he wept, and his shoulders shook. "I'm so tired, so bloody sick and tired of it all. Oh gods *damn* him! Please, end this madness! I can't take it... why me? Why do I have to endure this?"

He fell to his knees, at Hermione's feet. "Thank Merlin this will be over soon," he moaned. He choked, "Soon... I don't want... I don't..."

Hermione saw her younger self gasp as understanding dawned. "Oh, Merlin. Dumbledore - he made you do it, didn't he? I knew Harry didn't have it right, it just didn't make sense that-"

"He made me. He told me I had to." The headmaster bent double, as if in pain. "Oh, gods, I should have turned my wand on myself!"

In their reality, Hermione looked up at the real Severus, and though he watched with the stillness of a statue, she saw bleak sadness as he watched his memory-self. The Severus Snape in the Pensieve wept inconsolably, and eleven years later, Hermione's heart ached to see the exhaustion and hopelessness in the face of the man she had come to care for so deeply. Whatever was happening at Hogwarts had been killing him by inches. It was simply awful to watch.

Hermione watched as her memory-self knelt in front of him and tried to calm him, but it was as if a dam had broken, and he no longer had the strength to fight against the anguish which tore through his soul. Finally, she opened the edges of the cloak and drew him into the warmth of the garment. He looked at her with huge, hopeless eyes, clasped her to himself and buried his head on her shoulder. He sobbed like all heartbroken beings cry when there is nothing left but despair, and comfort can no longer bring peace, but only a short reprieve from the agony.

Hermione rocked him, her young face full of stunned disbelief. Looking at her younger self, Hermione knew very well what she was thinking. Everything she had ever known and understood about Dumbledore had just been up-ended by the weeping man in her arms. She must have been stricken with the realisation of the truth.

Looking into the headmaster's woeful face, the young Hermione whispered, "And who will make sure you are ready, sir? Who is looking out for you?" She watched him carefully, her face bewildered and sad. "You're all alone, aren't you, Professor? Dumbledore made you take his life, and then he left you alone to take all the blame." The young girl's expression softened into regretful, inexplicable sympathy for the wizard.

Between his sobs, he rasped, "There is no one. There must be no one. No one can help me, Miss Granger. I do not deserve it. I have no right to deserve it. I accept my fate. I accept it," he said, and his face twisted again. "But gods, why does it have to hurt so much?"

Tears streamed down his face, which looked faintly blue in the moonlight. He looked at her with the careworn, tired eyes of a child, bewildered and pitiful. Hermione cried as she rocked the desolate wizard and crooned and shushed him. Gradually he calmed, and as she made gentle noises and stroked his hair, he slumped against her, spent and dazed.

Finally, he sat up with a deep shuddering breath, and wiped away his tears. For several moments they sat still, the tall trees of the forest their only witnesses. He turned to her, and Hermione watched, rapt, as the headmaster looked down at her, and his expression changed. He was looking at her not as a professor looks at a student, but as a man looks at a woman.

He wiped the tears from her cheeks, caressing her face with the tips of his fingers. "I wish so badly things could have been different," he said, softly. He stroked her hair gently, an almost fond expression stealing over his stern features. "For such a little one, you have such a great heart." Then he leaned forward and kissed her. Hermione watched her eighteen-year-old self start at first, then accept this gentlest of caresses, and even at a distance she could see the longing and hope and heartache that traveled in that kiss. It was brief and tender and held a sweet, selfish edge, taking more than it gave. When at last his mouth drew away from hers, Hermione gasped at the same time as her memory-self, because they had both forgotten to breathe.

The headmaster quietly drew her into his arms and held her. "May you live and find the happiness you deserve, Hermione Granger," he said, his voice so heavy with hopelessness Hermione's tears began anew.

"Please don't give up, Professor," she was saying, her own tears flowing freely. "I believe... you... did what you did because he made you, not because you wanted to. I believe you're on our side! One day, this will all be over and you can explain to everyone what really happened! You'll be free then."

He shook his head sadly, and with a surprising amount of pity in his voice, he said, "I will never be free, little Granger. Freedom isn't a luxury meant for the likes of me." He wiped his eyes and sniffed. As she watched, something like a mask descended over his features, though his tone remained gentle. "Just like this moment. It isn't for you to keep in your heart, even as much as you would like to."

The memory-Hermione visibly swallowed. "It's because I might give you away, isn't it? Because I might do or say something that would make this entire house of cards fall over? Because I might be captured, and betray you?"

He toyed with one of the buttons on the cloak he'd given her, and sniffed again. His nose was starting to run, and he tiredly wiped it on his sleeve like a first-year. "I am sorry, but yes."

"I won't tell. I promise!" she pleaded. "Please don't Obliviate me. I could be a witness for you!"

The headmaster actually smiled indulgently at her stubborn insistence. Almost gently, he replied, "I know you wouldn't tell. You were always the strong one." He gazed down at her face, tipped trustingly up to his. His voice was like a whisper of silver. "You always were the clever one."

"I wish I could remember this," she whispered, as they stood up and he removed his heavy cloak from her shoulders. While he stroked her arms to keep her warm, she sobbed, "Because one day this will be over, and-"

"I know. Thank Merlin, it will all be over soon," he said soothingly. "Be well, Hermione." He stepped back, his eyes filling. "When we next meet, it will be the end. Fight well." He graced her with a sad smile. "I have no need to tell you to fight bravely, little lioness."

Hermione was crying so hard she could barely speak. "Be well, Severus Snape," she said. "Please don't walk into that last fight prepared to die. Please fight to live."

Snape shook his head, his eyes dull with sadness. "I fear we will not meet again this side of the veil."

From her vantage point in the memory, Hermione could see his hand shaking as he raised his wand to her forehead. *Obliviate!* echoed in the trees, and her memory-self grew still, her face blank.

The headmaster wove a complex symbol in the air over her head. "You will walk the night, checking your wards. You will not remember seeing me." His voice throbbed with unshed tears and regret. "You will forget me this night, Hermione Granger."

Hermione watched as her memory-self swayed a little, and he pressed his lips against her forehead for a final time. "Forget me, Hermione Granger," he whispered again, and he pressed his palm over her eyelids. When he removed his hand, her eyes were closed, and she looked as if she were asleep on her feet.

Headmaster Snape then placed his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around, until her back was to him, and again whispered, "Forget me."

The memory faded.

Raising their heads from the bowl, Hermione looked at Severus, her expression hurt and bewildered. Tears ran unchecked down her face. "And I did forget," she said. "Often. Even in the Shrieking Shack." Hermione sobbed, "Oh, Severus, it was so awful. We saw Nagini attack you, and it was terrible. And afterward, you were so pitiful, just lying there, dying."

She grew more agitated. "And I just walked away from that Shack as if nothing had happened!" She shook her head. "I didn't even remember you enough to try to go back to retrieve you."

Severus stood with his head bowed apologetically. His voice was calm, though immeasurably sad. "You were fighting for your life, Hermione. Your best friend and the father of your child died that night. I never blamed you for not coming back for me. I wasn't important."

"But you were!" she argued. "For years I kept thinking I had done something and forgot about it, or forgot to do something that I should have done. You didn't just make me forget that night in the Forest of Dean, Severus. You made me forget how important you were!"

Severus reluctantly met her gaze. His tone was resolute. "Hermione, seeing you in the forest that night gave me the strength to walk into the Shrieking Shack. When you approached me that night in the forest, I was so tired and weary of life." He took a deep breath, a stricken expression passing over his angular face. "There were times during that last year of the war I cannot swear I was strictly sane." He glanced at Minerva, who gave him an anguished look, and Hermione saw an old connection pass between the two former colleagues.

"And no, Minerva, I don't blame you, either. I had to say things, to do things that can never be forgiven. We all had our parts to play."

"But if I had only known, Severus!" the headmistress interjected, shaking her head sadly. "We were so cruel to you that year. All of us, so blinded by Albus and his damned Greater Good."

Severus crossed over to Minerva and knelt by her chair. Hermione could not hear his words, so softly were they spoken, but his tone was calm, kind. Minerva lowered her head and cried, as Severus consoled his former rival and friend. Hermione stood apart from them and waited. This was a private moment between them in which she could contribute nothing.

Finally, Minerva looked up at Hermione with an apologetic wave of her hand. "I'm sorry, dear. When you get old and feeble you get overwrought so easily." She daubed her eyes. "Those were dark times. We treated him abominably, and Severus had every right to spit in our faces once the truth was finally known." She gave Severus a weak, watery smile, and patted his shoulder clumsily. "Poor wee thing."

Severus chuckled and rose to his feet, wincing as his knees popped in protest. "Less of the 'poor wee thing,' if you don't mind," he chastised, doing a fairly credible imitation of the headmistress' brogue. "Hermione has stuffed me with enough food to nourish the population of Hogsmeade. If she thinks I still look like a 'poor wee thing' she will start Imperiusing me to eat more."

"As if she'd need to. I saw the way you tucked into those petit fours. You always did love the pink ones." She smiled at him. "You always had a harsh bark as well. It took some of us a little longer to understand it was hiding a tender heart." She winked at Hermione. "But that's a secret I'm not allowed to divulge."

Severus glanced at Hermione ruefully and rolled his eyes. "Oh, Gryffindors never repeat secrets, do they?" he grumbled. "They just make sure they're heard loud and clear the first time."

Minerva blew her nose. "Nonsense. It's no sin to have a soft heart, Severus." Her tone turned a little frosty, as she glanced at the sleeping portrait of Dumbledore. "It is a sin to take advantage of one," she said, shaking her head dolefully. "Those were terrible times, Severus. Looking back, I don't know how you didn't break."

"I did break, Minerva. I broke into so many pieces there was hardly anything left for the Dark Lord to kill, in the end." Something in her expression must have troubled him, and he tugged at his earlobe. "After I placed the sword where Potter would stumble over it, I was to return immediately to Hogwarts, but I couldn't bear the thought of it." A tender look crossed his stern features. "And then I felt your magic, Hermione, as I walked around. It was so..." He paused, trying to put feelings into words. "It was so protective and strong, and I thought, 'In all my life, no one has put so much effort in protecting me as Granger has in protecting Potter.'" His expression grew astonishingly wistful. "I broke that night. For a mad moment I just wanted to know what it felt like to be that loved and protected."

Hermione looked at Severus, who was gazing down at the swirling Pensieve. A glance at Minerva showed the same look of sorrow she knew she must be wearing. She leaned against his shoulder, stroking his arm, and he sighed. "And so I stepped through your wards. It was like wrapping a warm blanket around me, and it was... it was like home. It called to me like a beacon of light." He looked oddly contrite. "I just wanted to see you, to touch something that I hadn't tainted with my darkness. For one selfish, weak moment, I wanted to stay in that ward, forever protected, like Potter and Weasley."

Severus continued. "I knew confronting you was possibly the most foolish thing I'd ever done, but I couldn't help myself." He ducked his head, and the curtain of his hair hid his features. "For so long, all I had planned was my death. Duty and death. Spending those few stolen moments with you made me realise I didn't want to die. For that brief time, life seemed unbearably sweet." He looked away. "I had no illusions. I knew that I was not supposed to survive, you see. You made me long for yet another thing I could never have. Hope."

He looked into her eyes, and Hermione had never seen such bleak regret. "I had to forget hope. And in order to do that, I had to make you forget me."

Hermione felt Minerva press a handkerchief into her fumbling hands. Wiping her eyes, she mourned, "Oh, Severus, it's so sad! I understand why you did it, but it's so heartbreaking. You were so alone." *And I wasn't allowed to remember that you kissed me. I would never have wanted to forget that.*

"It was a very selfish thing," he admitted reluctantly. He looked up and squinted, as he had that night. "It was so quiet there, and talking with you, knowing you were alive and safe; it was the only thing that gave me any comfort or peace that entire year."

Hermione looked down at the swirling Pensieve, her expression inconsolable. "All these years I thought I was the most thoughtless, selfish git on the planet." She started slightly. Almost to herself, she murmured, "You know, something else bothers me. Why on earth didn't Harry remember to check on you, either? You never Obliviated *him*."

Severus was still for a moment. "Because he's a thoughtless, selfish git?"

Hermione stared at him in surprise, then laughed in spite of the situation. "Oh, he's not that bad, honestly! He's tried so hard to be so many things to so many people."

Severus held out his hand. "I haven't done myself any favours, Hermione. I wallowed in self-pity, thinking I would be satisfied when I had nothing left. It turns out that when I reached that point I realised how much I wanted everything I'd walked away from." He looked into her lovely eyes. "I'm sorry I Obliviated you. I did us both a disservice." He shook his head. "Please forgive me."

"I do forgive you, Severus." She daubed her eyes with Minerva's handkerchief again. "I saw a lot of things that year I wish *could* forget, but you weren't one of them. Thank you for giving that memory back to me." She put her arms around him, and he allowed himself to be comforted. His arms felt different, and it dawned on Hermione that, unlike that grief-stricken night in the Forest of Dean, this time she could provide him with exactly what he needed.

Over her shoulder, Severus looked down at Minerva, who was watching him carefully. She gave him a look that said, "This is good, boy. I approve. Try to enjoy something for once in your life."

Or at least, he told himself that's what her look meant.

That evening, after they returned from Hogwarts, Rose noticed that Mr. Snape and her mother were strangely quiet. It wasn't a bad quiet, like they'd had an argument. It was a calm sort of quiet; it made the house seem peaceful. Rose watched him very carefully as they played their nightly game of chess.

Halfway through the game, her mother brought them both a drink - a mug of cocoa for her, and a cup of tea for Mr. Snape. As she sat the cups on the table, Mum stroked Rose's hair, like always, and as she passed Mr. Snape, she put a hand on his shoulder. To Rose's surprise, he looked up at her mum with an odd sort of look on his face. Odd, but nice. It reminded Rose of how Poppy Weasley sometimes looked at Grana Molly. Mr. Snape then placed his own hand over her mum's, and held it for a moment, before returning his attention back to Rose and their game.

Rose smiled at him affectionately, and let him win.

Part The Sixth

Chapter 7 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Thank you all for your amazing comments. I am thrilled to pieces that so many of you are enjoying the story. Give some love to Jules, the best beta in fandom, for working so hard to get this story polished up - she put the awe in awesome!

During the third week of December, Hermione received a letter from the most officious owl Severus had ever seen, requesting her presence at the Ministry the following day. She read the missive with grim satisfaction; though she didn't discuss it with him, Severus deduced it must be something about his sentence. He didn't want to push it.

Over the previous weeks, he had become more comfortable without magic than he had been in the last ten years. Severus had always thought of himself as a survivor, but he had always equated the act of surviving with the state of existence. He had told himself repeatedly that he was existing for the end of his sentence. The past few weeks with Hermione and Rose, however, had felt more like living.

Almost by osmosis, he fell into the daily schedule of their lives, and they accepted him as if he'd been there for months instead of weeks. What had once smacked of charity to him merely felt like routine. His toothbrush sat in the little holder alongside theirs; the razors he used to shave himself appeared with the weekly shopping.

He would walk into his room and find a new shirt or a pair of socks sitting on the bed, the tags still dangling from the cuffs, and he would feel the quiet, almost boyish joy at having something new to wear. When he thanked Hermione, he felt her pleasure in his satisfaction. It made him feel at once a treasured part of their lives and a weak, vain fool.

She indulged him in other ways as well. His teeth, never his best feature, had been in horrendous shape, but Hermione was not a daughter of dentists for naught. Once she'd repaired the damaged done by neglect and malnutrition, apples became one of Severus' guilt-free pleasures. He hadn't enjoyed the feel of biting into a crisp, tart apple for a long time, and now he couldn't seem to get enough. Because he loved them so much, they became Rose's favourite afternoon snack as well, so Hermione kept the fruit bowl full. The three of them could often be found sitting around the table of an evening, munching away on Galas, Russets and Braeburns as Severus assisted Rose with her homework.

The energy level of the house always increased when Rose blew through the door every afternoon, talking of school and books and friends and the upcoming holidays. She would bustle in, throwing her coat on the rack and her books on the table, chatting away a mile a minute, filling the house with smiles, laughter and the force of nature that was Rose Granger.

She always greeted Severus with a bone-crushing hug, whether he welcomed it or not. It never occurred to her that he wouldn't want to be touched. In the end, he simply accepted her suffocating embraces, muttering, "Anything for a quiet life." He grumbled to Hermione that Rose treated him like her favourite pet, or a doll she'd inherited.

She brought him a cup of tea every evening, and in turn, Severus honoured her request to improve her Chess game. Wizards Chess had been dear to her late father's heart, but it was a game Hermione had never really enjoyed. Rose secretly delighted in sharing this one activity with Mr. Snape alone.

Because she had never known him as a magical being, Rose accepted Severus in a way that not even Hermione could do, and while he cared for the mother more with every passing day, he also felt a contented kinship with the daughter. Watching Rose, Severus often wondered what his own children would have been like if he had had any. Rose made him feel normal, and in turn, Severus unwittingly gave Rose a hero to worship.

On the last Friday before the school holidays commenced, Hermione descended the stairs dressed in very official and formal-looking robes. She looked professional and very assertive, and Severus' heart leapt at the sight of her. He had ever been a fool for a smart, powerful witch. The lovely eyes and heart-shaped bottom didn't detract, either.

"Severus, I have an errand to run. Could I impose on you to pick up Rose from school this afternoon? It won't take long," she said hastily.

"It would be no imposition," he said, formally. Hermione awarded him with a grateful smile.

"Thanks. I'll send word to her Head you'll be there to pick her up, so they'll be expecting you." She made a little noise as she pushed an earring through her pierced lobe. "You'll need to be there around two-thirty. They're letting school out a little early for the Christmas fair tonight in the village." She slung the strap of a briefcase over her shoulder. "Oh, and if you'd like, tell Rose if she's made at least a ninety percent on her Reading test, we'll go and pick a Christmas tree in the village this evening."

"Agreed," he said, returning to his book. Hermione watched him for a moment, her expression thoughtful, then grabbed a handful of Floo power and left in a flash of green light.

When Hermione came home that afternoon, she found Rose bouncing with excitement. "I made ninety-seven percent on my test, Mum! Ninety-seven percent!" she exclaimed, dancing around and waving the test results in the air under Hermione's nose. "Severus said we could get our tree tonight!"

Hermione gave her daughter a hug. "Well done, Rose! I'm so proud of you!" She looked over Rose's shoulder to Severus, who was leaning in the doorway, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. "So it's 'Severus' now, is it?"

He smirked slightly. "I asked what I could give her as a reward for doing well, and that was her choice." He quirked a brow. "I actually meant for her to choose either chocolate or butterbeer, but as I didn't make the parameters specific enough, I'm afraid she caught me on the technicality."

Hermione turned to Rose, who was smiling up at her mother. "Well, that is a special gift, Rose. I should be very proud, if I were you." She said to Severus, "Thank you for revising with her last night."

Confidently, Rose replied, "Aw, I knew I was gonna do well on the test, Mum. Severus taught me some great mnemonics."

At Hermione's baffled expression, Severus laughed. "*Mnemonics*, Rose."

She grinned cheekily. "Those too." Rose turned toward Severus, "Can I have an apple, Severus?"

"May I-"

"*May* I have an apple, Severus?" Nodding, he tossed her a Russet and she caught it deftly, polishing it on her shirt like a cricketer. She snagged his arm as she headed toward the kitchen. "C'mon, I want to finish my homework early, so we can have loads of time in the village this evening!"

With a martyred sigh that fooled no one, Severus allowed himself to be dragged toward the table where Rose's schoolwork lay scattered haphazardly. Hermione caught his eye as he passed, and a wave of affection for him almost made her knees buckle. "Oh, hell," she murmured out loud. She had it *bad*.

To Severus, the evening was magical. Even though they were in a Muggle village with no real magic in evidence, the night stood out in Severus' mind as magical for many reasons. The cold weather held, and there was a dry snow falling as they strolled through Bottlebury Marsh, drinking mulled wine and listening to the local brass band playing holiday favourites.

Hermione looked like a vision in a bright red coat with large black buttons. A matching beret and mittens completed the look, and Severus felt a surge of possessive pride, walking up the High Street with this lovely creature on his arm. Rose, bedecked in purple, skipped along on his right side. Severus felt quietly satisfied, flanked by these formidable young women.

Hermione had insisted on buying him a proper winter coat - black, of course, with black woolen gloves to match. He had been so cold living rough; now, if unable to get warm, he suffered panic attacks, causing his muscles to cramp painfully. To prevent this, Hermione cast surreptitious Warming charms over the three of them. The snow crunched under their feet, and the sound added to the ambience of the evening. It was as if they were in a Christmas card come to life, full of fairy lights, falling snow and pink cheeks, mulled wine and band music.

While Rose joined her school mates in line at the Father Christmas grotto, Hermione and Severus strolled around the square, admiring the decorations. As Hermione nestled companionably against him, Severus thought with some shock that, but for this pretty little witch now chatting away by his side, he would no doubt be dead now.

By rights, he should be a frozen statistic; a tawdry little sideline on the back pages of the *Prophet*. At one time he'd resigned himself to such a fate; now he could not remotely identify with that defeated, hopeless man. Only the suppression cuff served as a grim reminder of those dark, despairing days when the best he could hope for was a quick, painless, anonymous death.

Villagers smiled at them as they passed and wished them a Happy Christmas. At one of the street market stalls, a plump little woman gave them both steaming cups of very strong, very sweet tea. "There you go, love," she said, her warm Yorkshire accent lilting and homely to his ears.

"Thank you," he said, just as Rose arrived, rosy-cheeked and full of excitement. "Did you tell Father Christmas about your test grades?" he asked offhandedly.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Oh, he doesn't want to know all that! All he asked is what I wanted for Christmas," she said, clearly showing a growing skepticism for the whole 'Father Christmas' thing.

"And did you tell him, Rose? He isn't a mind-reader, you know," Hermione said, solemnly.

"Oh, Mum, I'm not a baby," Rose said, blushing. She turned to Severus. "Father Christmas is for the little kids."

Before Severus could contradict her, the stall-owner reached over the counter and handed Severus a candy cane. At his puzzled expression, she nodded toward Rose. "On the house, love. A sweetie, for your daughter." She looked at Rose affectionately. "Lovely hair. When I was a young girl, I had ginger hair meself."

Filled with a sudden, inexplicable pleasure for being mistaken for Rose's father, Severus repaid the stall-holder with a purred, "So, not so long ago, then?"

The older woman guffawed and swatted his arm playfully. "Oh, give over, you! I'd watch him, love," she laughed, addressing Hermione. "He's got a silver tongue, that one."

Hermione watched him carefully as they strolled away. "That was really sweet, you know," she said, biting her lower lip. Severus walked on, sipping his tea. It was too hot to drink, but it felt wonderful in his hands.

"She seemed like a decent sort."

Hermione pulled one of her long, curly hairs from his coat. "Gods, you've had this coat for less than a week and I've already shed all over it. I'm worse than poor Crookshanks ever was."

"I don't mind that you shed on me, Hermione. You look very festive tonight, by the way."

Absurdly pleased, Hermione blushed. "Thank you, Severus." She shrugged modestly. "You look rather dashing yourself."

He rolled his eyes. "Hardly. I do have to look in the mirror when I shave. I may stand behind it, but I'm under no illusions about my face."

Hermione looked at him levelly. "Nevertheless, you do have a bearing that is striking. And you're quite graceful, the way you walk. And you have nice hands and I love your eyes, and-"

She stopped, suddenly aware of Severus staring down at her intently. Swallowing, she said, "I think you've got this physical quality about you that's very... alluring."

His expression plainly told her he didn't believe her. "Well, it's true," she said as they resumed walking. "And you have a lovely voice." A tiny smile graced the corners of her mouth. "I've always thought you had an amazing speaking voice, even when I was a student. You could make the most mundane thing sound fascinating."

In a tone that could only be described as glossy, he replied, "Imagine what I might sound like if I were speaking on a subject that excited me."

Hermione didn't react at first. Then a slow smile spread across her face, and he felt a delicious little frisson of desire pass between them. "Now *that* would definitely be

worth listening to, Severus," she said, a little flirtatiously. Severus felt his arousal ramp up a notch. Other parts of his body were waking up and having a look around as well, which he found rather delightful.

They continued their stroll through the various trader stalls and food vendors. Emboldened, Hermione asked, "So, do you, Severus?"

"Do I what?" he asked mildly, sipping his tea.

"Have a silver tongue?"

Only Providence prevented him from choking on his drink. In the most persuasive, velvet tone he could dredge up from the old days, he crooned, "Would you like to discover for yourself?"

"Yes," she said immediately. That one word seemed to hold the answer to every question about sex he'd ever pondered. He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, and they resumed their walk, each almost painfully, absurdly pleased with the other.

Just then, Rose bounded up, accompanied by several girls, all giggling and talking at once. "There you are!" Rose turned to Hermione. "Mum, this Sonia, Dierdre, and Ashley." She turned to the gaggle of little girls. "And this is my mum and my friend, Severus."

"Hello, girls," Hermione replied, smiling.

"Good evening, ladies," Severus said, his voice deep and formal, and to his consternation, all of them, Rose included, started giggling.

"See? I told you he sounds like a movie star!" Rose crowed to her friends and they darted away, glancing back occasionally, then laughing behind their hands.

Disconcerted, Severus turned to Hermione, who was trying very hard not to laugh. "I think you have the beginnings of a fan club," she teased.

"Ha bloody ha."

"Enjoy it, Severus. You must realise that Rose is crazy about you. She wanted to show you off to her friends."

He turned to her, dumbfounded. "Why me? Why do I always have to be the freak?"

Hermione stilled, the playfulness gone from her face. Severus thought, *I've only fucking done it again. I've said and done the wrong thing.*

Hermione finally walked on, leading him down the High Street. "You're not a freak, Severus," she said quietly. "Granted, you can be a right pain in the arse at times with this chip on your shoulder, but being unique and interesting does not a freak make." Her tone, while clipped, sounded more frustrated than angry. "Take a compliment for what it is. Rose and I have no hidden agendas. We're not setting you up. We're not laughing at you behind your back. We happen to like you, you big pillock!"

They walked in silence. "Hermione -" Severus began, at a loss for words, "I-I'm sorry. I'm just not used to being held in such regard." He sighed. "I'm not used to any of this. And as lovely as it feels, it's still hard to accept. I feel certain that, at any moment, the rug will be pulled from under my feet, and I'll be the butt of the joke again."

Hermione replied by leaning her head against his shoulder. The gesture was both comforting and affirming, as if she were trying to take as much comfort from him as she gave. "I know, Severus, but honestly! We're not in school anymore. You really need to work on your trust issues."

Feeling the pleasant, warm weight of her body against his arm, Severus thought of the old woman in the stall who thought Rose was his daughter. By proxy, she must have assumed Hermione was his wife. *I could make my life here. People accept me here* he thought. Looking down at Hermione, he knew he wanted to. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her.

Hermione, I'm in love with you, but I'm terrified I'll balls this up. I've done everything I can to discourage it; nothing works. I've tried being aloof; you and Rose just hug me tighter. I've tried being irascible; you tell me to suck it up. I've gotten angry; you've placated me and told me to get over it.

No matter what I do, you have forgiven me and petted me all the more. In fact, you treat me like Argus used to treat that flea bag, Mrs. Norris. The old fool doted on that mangy furball. That's how you and Rose treat me, Hermione, and I secretly lap it up, just like Mrs. Norris did, because -

Severus' breath caught. Because Mrs. Norris knew Argus loved her. That cat might have been foul-tempered, mistrustful and distinctly odourous, but she knew what love was. She knew Filch petted and indulged and lavished time and care on her because he loved her. *Like you love me*, his heart whispered, and the realisation made him shiver, despite Hermione's Warming charms.

He brushed a finger across the tip of Hermione's nose to get her attention. She looked up at him questioningly. He swallowed. "I will work on them. You and Rose are good teachers." He smiled ruefully. "Perhaps I am a stubborn pupil, but I do want to learn."

Hermione smiled up at him with complete confidence. "Don't worry, Severus. I don't give up that easily." She laughed mischievously. "Perhaps you and Rose can develop a series of *menomics* to aid you."

Severus closed his eyes. "I will certainly try. Hard."

"Don't try, Severus," she said, saluting him with her cup of tea. "Just do it." She laced her fingers with his, and they quietly strolled over to the tree stand.

"I can't believe it's finally Christmas Eve!" Rose cried, as the three of them sat in the kitchen. Hermione was removing the latest batch of cookies from the oven as Severus brewed the tea and Rose finished wrapping the last of her cousins' presents. "It'll be forever until tomorrow comes."

Severus nodded empathetically, remembering his own childhood. Time seemed to move so slowly around Christmas. Over the past ten years, time had dragged those same reluctant feet toward the end of his sentence. *Five more years*, he told himself. *Five more Christmases and I'll truly be free.* He pondered the word as he watched Hermione's delectable bum, bent over the open oven door. *Free to do what? What more do I want to do than what I'm doing now?*

Hermione turned around with another baking sheet of cookies. She gave him a warning look as he snuck one of them onto a plate.

"Stealing," she accused archly.

"Quality Control," he countered smugly. She responded by breaking off a piece and holding it up to his mouth, and he allowed her to feed him, resisting the urge to lick her fingers. She gave him a smile that he felt down to his toes.

Severus glanced up just as Rose gave her mother a pointed look, then flicked her eyes toward him. "Ask him," she said through gritted teeth.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Alright! Merlin, Rose, you're like a Niffler on a hunt when you get something on your mind."

Severus scowled. "Ask him what?" he growled warily.

Hermione coloured slightly. "Okay. A little history here." She sat down and took her cup of tea from his hand with a little nod. "Thanks. Well. Four years ago, I bought Rose

a karaoke machine." Doubtfully, she said, "You do know what a- okay, good," she smiled, at his terse nod.

"We decided that on Christmas Eve we would stage a concert for Harry and his family and for Fred and George's families and Molly and Arthur. We rehearsed for weeks, it seems, but the day before Christmas Eve, Fleur Weasley went into labour."

"I see," Severus said, recalling something in the *Prophet* about yet another Weasley progeny being born on Christmas Eve after a very difficult labour.

"So, anyway, Rose and I were useless at hospital, and no one would leave to come to our little concert, so," she blushed slightly, "we decided to go ahead and do it anyway and sing to the sofa."

Severus suppressed a smile. Barely. "So you and Rose sang to an empty sofa," he said, biting his lip. "At least you were in no imminent danger of your audience walking out on you."

"Ha bloody ha," she said, smiling. "Actually, we had such a good time, we decided that every year, we'd have our concert, but since the sofa seemed to enjoy it so much..." She raised her eyebrows in invitation.

"You saw no reason to invite anyone else to join it, I believe?"

She nodded, impressed. "In one. It's been our favourite holiday tradition since. But Rose and I have been discussing this, and," she announced, in a mock formal voice, "we'd really, really like you to come as a guest of the sofa and attend our concert."

Severus looked at her in wonder. "I hardly have any other pressing engagements, Hermione. Besides, where else would I go, except to my room?"

She dropped her shoulders. "Well that's just it, Severus. Even if there were a dozen other places you could be, including your room, we would still want you here with us, regardless." She softened. "This is a sort of special tradition to Rose and me. We want to make you a part of it." She risked a glance at his unreadable face. "This is important to me, Severus. It would mean a great deal to me if you'd sit in, as it were."

Severus pondered her words. She looked so hopeful; she looked afraid. Formally, he replied, "In that case, I would be honoured to attend."

"YAY!"

The both turned to see Rose in the doorway. "I knew you'd come, Severus! You're gonna love it."

Hermione gave him look of excruciatingly Gryffindorish sincerity. "The sofa's given us rave reviews."

"Then how could I refuse?"

Rose cheered. "Excellent! Come on then, we've only an hour to dress!" She turned and galloped up the stairs.

"Dress?" Severus said, dubiously.

Hermione nodded. A smile prinked the corner of her mouth. "Oh yes. The Granger Girls Christmas Eve Sofa Concert is a very formal affair."

Severus found dress robes hanging on the back of his door. They were reminiscent of his teaching robes: beautifully cut, obviously new and obviously tailored for him. They fit perfectly, and he brushed his fingertips over the cloth with the appreciative caress of a lover of fine clothing. Using one of Rose's cast-off elastic bands, he pulled his long, black hair back into a queue. After he dressed, he stared at himself in the mirror for a long time, wondering how the hell he had gone from a homeless, failed prostitute in rags to an honoured guest in fine robes in two short months. He felt at once like his old self and a fraud.

In reality, he only outwardly resembled the professor of Hermione's school days. Mentally, he was not that wizard anymore. The Severus Snape from those days would have been out the door after the first hug, sneering and snarking all the way. Nor was he the whipped cur of a man who had slunk into the dark alleyway with a bullet-headed wizard, clutching a few Sickles in exchange for the use of his pitiful body.

He had gained over two stone since the beginning of November. He could no longer count his ribs, nor feel his hipbones riding so close to the surface of his skin. His eyes shone bright and alert from a face that was pale, but held a healthy glow beneath. He felt even better than he looked. He had the appetite of a horse, slept like a clean conscience and enjoyed his days in safety and relative peace, surrounded by those who cared about him. He was warm and comfortable and, dare he hope, loved. He was in love with a beautiful witch and unless he was fatally mistaken, she held him in high regard as well.

But the cuff on his right wrist told another story. It reminded him he still wasn't whole, and that made him feel like a fake in his fine robes and glowing, well-fed body. Until his magic returned, and he could somehow give something back to Hermione and Rose, he would always feel like their pet, and not a true contributing member of the house.

He was still considering these things as he sat on the sofa, in anticipation of whatever was to come. In his hands was a meticulously hand-lettered programme entitled "The Granger Girls' Fifth Annual Christmas Eve Sofa Concert." On the cover was a drawing by Rose, featuring a fairly accurate illustration of Severus, a long, thin figure in black, sitting on the Granger sofa, while music notes danced over his head.

His likeness was scowling, as if giving serious consideration to yanking down one of the semi-quavers and throttling it. Severus suppressed the urge to laugh, and he thought of Rose and Hermione sneaking about, creating this programme, rehearsing without his knowledge.

Then the lights dimmed, leaving him in darkness, except for the fairy lights of the Christmas tree. A drum roll sounded, and Hermione stepped into the room in a body-hugging robe of dark green velvet, trimmed in gold. Her hair fell in soft ringlets, and she gave him a glorious smile. Severus stared in foolish wonder at this gorgeous goddess, dressed in her slinky sheath of a robe, and thanked Merlin for the generous cut of his. He was doubly thankful he didn't have to stand.

Next, Rose appeared in a lovely, floor-length red velvet dress trimmed with white ribbons, her dark auburn hair gleaming in the light. In a clear, girlish voice, Rose said, "Welcome to the Granger Girls' Christmas Eve Sofa Concert!" A series of bell-like notes chimed in the air, followed by the sound of a large chord rolling through the room like a gong.

Rose looked at Severus, and put her hands to her heart and sang, *"I don't want a lot for Christmas, there is just one thing I need,"*

Hermione adopted the same pose, and looking into his eyes, she sang, *"I don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree,"*

Together they sang, *"I just want you for my own, more than you will ever know,"*

Then Hermione stepped up to him and took his hand, singing, *"Make my wish come true, all I want for Christmas is YOU!"*

Severus sat, frozen, his heart pounding, his breath coming rapidly. Cold sweet beaded on his forehead. Suddenly he was out of the room, bounding up the stairs two at a time, trying to breathe. From the front room he dimly heard Rose's bewildered voice, saying, "Mum, what did we do?"

He slammed the door and leaned against it, fighting tears. Gasping, trying to breathe, he clawed at his throat, and forced open the top of the robe so forcefully the button

flew from the collar.

Part the Seventh

Chapter 8 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

Thank you again for the incredible reviews you have given me. I am overwhelmed and thrilled and touched beyond words. As always, give a shout-out to the mighty stgulik, who is the best beta in the world. And, as always, these characters belong to JKR and not me - I would have given them lots more love and chocolate.

From the other side of the door, he heard a soft tapping. "Severus? Are you alright? Severus, let me in."

"Go away," he rasped, shivering.

"Not happening," was the calm reply. "Let me in."

Knowing that she would eventually force her way in, Severus stepped away from the door and crossed the room, wrapping his long arms protectively around his torso. He sat down on the bed just as Hermione opened the door and walked in.

He could not look up when he felt the bed sag as she sat down beside him. She smelled of lemons and vanilla and basil, and he wanted to die. He fumbled into his pocket and produced a handkerchief to blot the clammy sweat from his face. He couldn't seem to get a good, deep breath.

For a moment, she merely sat beside him, rubbing his back soothingly. He pulled the elastic band from his hair and shook it loose, allowing it to fall forward to curtain his face. Instantly Hermione tucked a strand behind his ear, and her hand drifted down to clasp his own, and he held on gratefully.

As his trip-hammer heartbeat gradually slowed, his distress abated slightly, and he could breathe easier. "Care to talk about it?" she said, after a pause. In a lightly teasing voice, she added, "I take it you didn't do a runner because of my terrible singing voice."

"No," he said, scornfully. As an afterthought, he added, "You both have lovely voices."

"Then why, Severus?"

How could he tell her? How could he look her in the eye and tell her he had a panic attack because he wanted this so badly? What would she think if he said he wanted her and Rose and his fine robes and happiness, and he was too damn frightened to believe he could truly have it, because it all seemed too good for him?

Twice he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Hermione finally said, "Look at me, Severus, please."

Reluctantly, he turned to face her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I should have explained why I ran away. I am a coward. I hurt Rose's feelings. That was unforgivable."

Hermione sighed. "You see, I think that's your main problem. You think every mistake you make is unforgivable. Just because Lily Evans didn't have the guts and the depth of soul to forgive you, you don't think you deserve to be forgiven, and so you won't forgive yourself."

He looked at her resentfully, knowing she was right on so many levels, knowing she was wrong on others. "I want too much, and I'm afraid."

Nodding, Hermione said, "Well, at least we're getting somewhere. Severus, do you want me?"

"What sort of question is that?"

She considered. "A fairly valid one at this stage of the game, I think. Now, here are the rules. I'm going to ask a question and you have to answer it truthfully. But you can't answer a question with a question. Agreed?"

Severus glowered. "I fail to see how-"

"Good, we're agreed," she replied briskly. "Question number one: Do you want me?"

Looking into her sweet brown eyes, Severus rumbled, "You know I do."

Hermione nodded. "Well, good. You have me. Now, that takes care of question number one."

"But-"

She put her hand over his mouth. "No, I'm asking the questions here. Question number two: Do you want to stay here with Rose and me? For a long time? Perhaps... forever?"

His mouth twitched. "That's three questions."

"Don't be a numpty! Answer the question."

Severus lowered his head. "I'm not easy to live with."

Hermione shrugged thoughtfully. "Well, sometimes, I agree. But I must urge you to answer the question." She smiled at Severus, and he felt a little better.

"Yes."

"Good. You have that, too. Now, third and most important question." She took his face in her hands. "What are you afraid of, Severus? Aside from losing your magic forever, what are you truly afraid of?"

He looked at her, and his trembling ceased. A strange calmness swept over him, and it felt like grace. The tight band that constricted his breathing loosened completely. "I'm afraid of losing you and Rose." He swallowed, and the tension seeped from his body. Casting his fate into the lap of the gods, he uttered the truest statement he'd ever voiced. "I truly believe I could live without my magic forever, as long as I didn't have to live without you."

Hermione gave him a radiant smile, and put her arms around him. "Oh, Severus, we're not the type of women to love you and leave you. I'm not going anywhere, and neither is Rose." She placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "So stop feeling so bloody insecure and enjoy yourself."

He held onto her like a lifeline, breathing in her scent and her warmth. *This? Mine, forever?*

"This. Yours, forever," she repeated, and he flushed as he realised he'd spoken aloud. She laughed, a sweet, breathless sound. Then, so close he could feel her lips brush deliciously against his ear with each word, she murmured, "Question number four: So what are you going to do to ensure that, Severus Snape?"

Severus pulled her closer, holding her so tight he could feel her heart beat against his chest. "Never walk out on your concert again?"

He could feel her sides shaking with relieved laughter. She pulled back just enough to find his lips, and pressed hers to them in a hard, swift kiss, laughing at his startled, incredulous expression. "Right answer."

He finally released her. "It's not going to change overnight, Hermione," he confessed. "It took me ten years before I could admit to myself I even had the right to need someone."

She gave him a devilish little smirk. "Severus. Do the math. Rose and I have been re-enacting that concert for four years. We could've invited the Weasleys over. They love to hear Rose sing. But we didn't. We never wanted to sing to anyone else - until this year. Now, if we can wait four years until the right person came along to share the concert with the sofa, I think we can be patient enough for you to come to grips with us."

She turned a bit until they faced one another on the bed. Severus looked down at their joined hands. His was long and pale, and hers looked so small and fragile. He could see so much capability and integrity in that tiny hand, sitting trustingly within his.

"Well, bugger this self-doubting shite." He barked a shaky laugh, brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I'm missing the concert of the season."

Looking back on that particular Christmas, Severus recalled many things. But one of its sweetest moments was sitting as the sole (living, breathing) audience member of the remainder of the 'concert' he'd almost foolishly derailed. The Granger Girls, as they say, had been in fine form.

He remembered many of their songs from his Muggle childhood. Even in the Snape household, Decembers included Christmas music wafting from the cracked and gaffer tape-mended Roberts radio his father kept in the front room. Amongst the traditional favourites, Severus was treated to a lively rendition of 'Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree,' 'Jingle Bell Rock,' "Merry Christmas Everybody," and "I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day." It was like having a Time-Turner; the songs took him to his childhood, but brought no hurt or remorse back into the future with them.

After each song, Severus dutifully applauded, and even smiled as Hermione treated him to the finale, a rather flirtatious version of "Santa Baby." Watching her performance without the filter of insecurity clouding his judgment, he felt a certain thrill of being 'in' on the joke.

As Hermione played the part of the Yuletide gold-digger, she actually draped herself on his lap. He shuffled around, trying to make sure she didn't land on his burgeoning erection, and she grinned at the deer-caught-in-the-Lumos look in his eyes.

Not to be outdone, Severus managed to sneak an arm around her waist, and she gave him a look of pleased surprise, only removing herself from his lap when the song ended. Both Severus and Rose applauded Hermione, who took several exaggerated bows.

"That's the best you've ever sung that one, Mum!" Rose said, hugging her mother. "It's ever so much better when you have someone to sing to, isn't it?"

Hermione, holding onto her daughter, looked at Severus, and she smiled. "I think you're right. Next year, we'll take it on the road, as they say."

"Yay us!" Rose laughed, and they flopped down on the sofa with Severus, one Granger on either side.

He handed Hermione a glass of wine. "Thank you, ladies. That was most enjoyable. I feel very privileged to have been your audience for this evening."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Thank you, Severus," she said, obviously pleased. He felt a surge of relief. Somehow, some way, he had not totally bollocksed things up this time. Finally, he felt like he'd done something right.

He felt a warm hand on his arm and turned to find Rose looking at him expectantly. "Severus, we always sing one more song. Would you like to hear it?"

"I should feel honoured, Rose." He turned to Hermione. "Will you be joining in on this song, Hermione?" Before he could stop himself, he added, "Shall I ready my lap in preparation?"

Hermione froze, then broke into peals of laughter. Just as he was suspecting the laugh to be on him, she squeezed his hand, still chuckling. "Oh, Severus, I wish I had known you were this funny in school! I would have enjoyed your classes so much more."

Mollified, Severus edged a finger under his repaired collar. It was suddenly very warm in the room. "Merlin forbid. I had a reputation to uphold." He turned thoughtful. "And to be honest, there was very little to laugh about in those days. Even with everything that's happened, I much prefer things as they are right now."

Hermione's warm, brown eyes shone with affection. "You know, I do too."

Rose, attuned to the adults, but not really understanding the subliminal pulse between them, piped up, "I'm really glad things are the way they are, too. This is going to be the best Christmas ever."

Severus met Hermione's gaze, and the sudden painful hope that had blossomed in his chest threatened to overwhelm him again. Sensing his emotions, she placed her warm hand over his. "I think you're right, Rose." For a giddy moment, he thought Hermione might lean forward and kiss him - really kiss him. He wondered what on earth he would do - what on earth he *should* do, if she did.

Then she broke the spell and turned back to her daughter. "Well, let's have that last song, then, darling. Singer's choice. You pick."

Instead of standing, Rose sat back against the sofa. In the quiet of the moment, her soft, sweet voice rose in the room, and Severus listened with an increasing tightness in his throat:

"Now, out of the night, soft as the dawn into the light,

This child, innocent child, soft as a fawn, this child is born.

One small heart, one pair of eyes, one work of art, here in my arms.

Here he lies, trusting and warm, blessed this morn,

A child is born..."

Hermione took up the repeated verse, singing a harmony with her daughter, and Severus listened, cradled between their voices and their unconditional love. He looked toward the Christmas tree, and a feeling welled in his breast until his heart felt as if it were bleeding, and he willed himself not to weep at the beauty of it. The soft melody, sung in their sweet voices, washed over him like a tender, healing embrace, and with it came the happy knowledge that this was for *him*, all of it. The food, the decorations, their pretty clothes, their music all gifts for him.

Severus closed his eyes and prayed a selfish, grasping prayer, full of longing, and he sent it into the heavens, borne on the strains of the lullaby the two girls sang to him. It floated in the air like the most delicate incense, and he felt purified by this song, sung by angels, sung in innocence and honesty and hope.

It took him to a place where he had always wanted to be. He had spent so much of his life on the outside, peering through the foggy glass at protection and love and comfort within. It had always seemed so elusive, but even now their voices beckoned him to come inside and join them, and he wanted that more than anything else on this earth.

All too soon, the song ended and their voices receded. Severus opened his eyes and found Hermione watching him intently, her eyes full of the same emotion he felt, and it shook him. He must have returned her intense gaze, for she dropped her eyes and said, rather meekly, "That's one of the first songs I ever taught Rose, but she's so much better at it than I ever was."

Severus turned to Rose. He could not stop the trembling in his voice. "I think-" He had to stop, and take a deep breath. "I think that is the most beautiful song I have ever heard, Rose."

"Thanks," she breathed, looking both embarrassed and pleased. She lowered her eyes shyly to the sofa cushion, tracing the pattern in the fabric with a tiny finger. "Severus, would you sing a Christmas song for us?"

"Rose," Hermione said, faintly chastising. "One doesn't perform for an audience, then ask them to return the favour."

"Singing for my supper, now, is it?" Severus asked, his tone teasing enough not to cause offence. "I think what your mother is trying to say is that, given my temperament, not to mention my past, I have never given the impression of being able to carry a tune."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. Shaking her head, she replied, "Oh, no, not at all! I just didn't want to put you on the spot and I thought-"

"It's alright, Hermione," he interrupted. "In truth, I have sung on occasion." He was delighted at the surprise in her face.

"Well, I must say, you never cease to amaze."

"May it be ever thus," he replied, and was warmed by her laughter.

"Go on, then!" Rose said, encouragingly. She turned away. "We won't look if that helps. Mum says a good way to overcome stage fright is to have your audience not look at you."

Quirking his eyebrow at Hermione, he saluted her with his second glass of wine. "Dutch courage." After taking a large sip, he thought for a moment, then cleared his throat. He called forth from the rusty depths of memory a hymn sung in the little church his family occasionally attended at Christmas Mass.

"I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Saviour did come for to die?"

For poor orn'ry people like you and like I, I wonder as I wander out under the sky."

He sang it clearly, and managed not to make a fool of himself on the higher notes. It was a strange little carol; the vicar at their tiny church had been American, and he'd taught his congregation the song. Even as a boy, Severus had always identified with its plaintive melody, and the melancholy feeling of isolation in the words.

"If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing, a star in the sky or a bird on the wing;

Or all of God's angels in heaven for to sing, he surely would have it for he was the king."

Once again it was as if the clock turned back to those days before magic and Lily and darkness and hopelessness took over his life, and he felt the music and the moment meld into a perfect point as the two witches joined him on the last two lines of the song, harmonising as if they'd all been singing together since, well, forever.

"I wonder as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Saviour did come for to die?"

For poor orn'ry people like you and like I, I wonder as I wander out under the sky."

As the song ended, Rose and Hermione applauded wildly. "You were terrific, Severus!" Rose enthused, her bright eyes bouncing with the surprised glee all children have when they discover something about an adult they heretofore have not known. "You should have been singing with us all along! We need to sing the whole concert again!"

"No we don't!" Hermione laughed. "There's always next year," she added, looking at him. Her hand touched his again, and she looked at him like, oh gods, like a woman looks at a man, and Severus felt his arousal rear up like a hunger.

Hermione saw the sudden heat spark in his gaze, and her belly felt as if it were swelling, and with it came the sweet admission: *want you, Severus Snape. And I think you want me, too.*

Rose, oblivious to the exchange, prattled on about singing, and what songs she was planning to sing at the Burrow the following evening. The mention of tomorrow brought Hermione out of her reverie, and she winked at Severus. With an exaggerated stretch, she made a huge production of yawning and looking at the clock. "Well, Rose, our concert has gone into overtime, and it's getting way past your bedtime." Her voice was faintly chiding. "After all, Father Christmas is very busy and he can't hang about all night."

Rose rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Okay, Mum. I'll go and get ready for-" she put the words in visible quotation marks, using her fingers, "-'Father Christmas'".

Frowning slightly, Severus replied in a parody of his stern, lecturing voice, "I would heed your mother's warnings, Rose. I myself had a word with Father Christmas on your behalf, and while he agrees that you've been a very worthy little girl this year," here he dropped into a heavy Northern accent, "he can't swan about Yorkshire half the night, waiting for you to retire to Bedfordshire."

His reward was a delighted grin from the young girl, and a warm hug. "Good night, Severus. I'm really glad you liked the concert."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Severus planted a swift kiss on the crown of her coppery hair. "Goodnight, Rose. Pleasant dreams."

Rose turned to her mother and hugged her, and the two of them nuzzled noses together. "G'night, Mum. Happy Christmas." With a final beaming smile to Severus, Rose left them. They heard her tread on the stairs, and just as she finished her evening ablutions, Hermione gave Severus a knowing look.

"...And three, two, one..." she breathed, and they both heard Rose's door shut. In an instant, Hermione cast a Muffliato charm on the upstairs door. "If I don't, she'll never go to sleep, and we'll never get it started, much less all put out," Hermione said, and her smile was almost as mischievous as her daughter's.

Close on the heels of the sound-diffusing spell, she cast what to Severus' discerning eye was a rather perfectly executed Patronus. A large, playful otter burst from her wand, and blinked at her flirtatiously. "Rose is finally in bed, so give it about an hour and come on through!"

The otter dashed away, leaving traces of lovely, iridescent magic. Severus watched it leave, and felt a pang of envy; he couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to conjure a Patronus, either mentally or magically. He almost mentioned it, but stopped himself before the words left his lips; he didn't want to appear maudlin. If and when his magic returned, he believed he would have good reason to cast a Patronus again, and that thought eased his spirit.

Hermione waited until her messenger disappeared completely before gesturing toward the kitchen with a tilt of her head. "That brandy Bill and Fleur sent round yesterday looks promising. Would you like a glass before we start?"

Puzzled, Severus said, "That is the second reference to 'starting.' And yes, by the way, brandy does sound nice."

As they walked into the kitchen, Hermione explained, "Every year, Harry helps me play Father Christmas for Rose. I keep all her gifts secreted away over at Grimmauld Place, and when Rose goes to sleep, Harry brings them over and helps me set them up." She gestured self-deprecatingly. "I like to have her Father Christmas gifts all sitting out, as if the old fellow has just pulled them from his sack, so I don't wrap them beforehand. She already has mountains of wrapped presents from the family, so this is just a little extra thing I've always loved doing."

"I see." He nodded sagely, but the half-smile belied his solemnity. "And since you have a very precocious daughter who is just as adept at solving riddles as her mother was at that age, you can't have them lying around just any old place."

She blushed, flattered that he remembered she had been the one to solve his riddle while helping Harry find the Philosopher's Stone. "Very true," she said with a laugh. "Two years ago I tried. Harry and Ginny have been so good to us, and I wanted to give them a break."

She made a mock shiver. "I won't bore you with the details, but let's just say it was a harrowing experience, trying to stay one step ahead of Sherlock Granger up there. She was like a bloodhound." Hermione's pride was as obvious as her exasperation. "I was exhausted by Christmas Eve just trying to keep coming up with hiding places she couldn't find."

"Merlin forbid," he drawled, but there was no real sarcasm in his voice. "So Mr. Potter will be arriving within the hour to assist you-"

"Nope. He's just bringing the swag. You're playing Father Christmas with me this year," Hermione said with a smile. It faded somewhat when he didn't reply. "That is, if you don't mind. I told Harry he could skip his duties this year." She made a face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to presume-"

"Hermione," he interrupted, "I will be more than happy to assist you with Rose's Father Christmas. Providing I don't have to don the red robe and beard. A bit too Albus for my taste." Hermione's laugh made Severus' heart do a strange little leap in his chest, and he hastily took a gulp of brandy in order to calm it.

The kitchen was cozy and brightly lit, and Severus felt a sense of well-being. Perhaps Christmas, a holiday he'd once avidly deplored, was finally growing on him. Or perhaps it was the simple fact of sitting on a bar stool a mere arm's length from the woman he loved. Being so close to her was at once lovely and disconcerting. His earlier attack of nerves still hung between them, and he was unsure how to proceed.

Hermione seemed to have no qualms in this regard. She leaned against the counter, propped up on her elbows, so close their hands were almost touching. Severus relaxed a little. For a moment, their easy conversation stilled, and there was an awkward silence.

Finally, he spoke. "Hermione, would you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

Surprised, she shook her head. "Not at all."

He hesitated for a moment. "Do you miss him? Weasley?"

It was the last question Hermione would have guessed he would ask, and it took her aback momentarily. She pondered for a moment. "I miss our friendship. The three of us." She smiled unapologetically. "I know we weren't your favourites by a long shot, but we cared for one another very much. I miss that."

"To tell the truth, though, if Ronald were still alive, I can't honestly say we'd still be together, even for Rose's sake." She looked at him wistfully. "We were chalk and cheese, after all."

She smiled. "I remember this talk I had with Harry, shortly after Rose was born. I didn't realise it at the time but I was suffering from what Muggles call Post-partum Depression."

"I've heard of it," Severus interjected, nodding encouragement.

"Well, it knocked me for a loop. I moped around for ages. Harry and Ginny were over visiting, and I'd been waxing on about Ron, and how much I missed him, and what a good father he would have been, and what a great provider, and loving husband and all this rubbish..." She chuckled. "Harry let me canonise Ron for about five minutes, and then he just rolled his eyes and said to me, 'Well, I don't know what Ron Weasley you're talking about, but the one I remember could be a right git. He certainly wasn't the saint you've placed on that pedestal you're so desperately polishing!'"

Severus shook his head and Hermione laughed in remembrance. Who knew Boy Potter had such insights?

Hermione continued with a laugh still in her voice, "Oh, I got very indignant, I can assure you! I was defending Ron, saying how wonderful he would have been, and Harry said, 'I'm sure he would have, eventually, but what you can't do is pretend that Ron was anything but what he was.'" She shrugged. "Harry was right, of course. Ron used to drive me mad. I used to fume for hours at his table manners alone!"

They both chuckled, then Hermione grew solemn. "I got very upset at Harry. I couldn't understand why he was being so disloyal. I told him Ron wasn't perfect, but he could've been!"

"Well, Harry put the kibosh on that straight away. He told me in no uncertain terms that if I had the least thought that I could've single-handedly changed all of Ron's less-than-angelic habits, I still had a lot to learn about blokes." She looked at Severus thoughtfully. "I tell you - that shut me up! I finally realised that, to love someone, you have to accept who and what they are, and not feel the need to change them. You have to start at ground zero." She sighed. "I suppose if I were perfectly honest, Ron and I would have probably spent more time at one another's throats than in one another's arms, but I always felt sad that we'd never had a chance to find out for sure."

Severus nodded. "I can see that, certainly." He paused. "But you have Rose, and she's the best parts of both of you."

"She is, isn't she?" Hermione said, a mother's pride clearly shining in her eyes. She became solemn again. "Do you still miss her?"

Severus looked mildly surprised. "Who? Lily?" At Hermione's uncertain nod, he sat quietly for several seconds, looking into his brandy glass. "I miss the friendship we made when we first met. Before Hogwarts, when it was just the two of us and I had her all to myself. I couldn't understand why we couldn't stay that way."

He glanced at Hermione. "I used to believe that Hogwarts was to blame for all that happened between us, but it wasn't Hogwarts. It was growing up." He gave a little shrug. "Again, chalk and cheese."

"And like you, when she died, I put her on a pedestal. It's the natural thing to do, but it gives the living no peace, and does the dead no favours." There was a slight bitterness in his tone. "Unfortunately, I didn't have a friend like Potter to prevent me from keeping her there. No, if anything, Dumbledore spent the next seventeen years making sure I kept her on that pedestal, until he no longer had need of either of us."

He looked at Hermione and touched her hand. "But if I've learned anything from these past two months, it's that I've put her back where she belongs. A bittersweet memory of a friend I lost. I've paid my debt to her, and to Dumbledore, and to everyone else." He looked at her intently. "I can start at ground zero now. And Hermione?"

"Yes?"

He hesitantly reached out to stroke her cheek. "I don't want you to wonder or worry about her." His severe features softened. "You will never have to play second fiddle to anyone in my life. Or my heart."

Hermione started, and a smile of such beauty blossomed across her face it took his breath away. For a long moment, the statement hung between them, both fragile and sterling. They held one another's gaze, then her eyes dropped shyly.

"Severus, would you mind me asking *you* a personal question?"

He smiled wryly. "Believe it or not, I wouldn't."

She took a sip of brandy, as if to give herself courage. In a soft voice that was achingly vulnerable, she asked, "Have you had... many lovers?"

He stilled for a moment, and looked at her appraisingly. Finally he murmured, "Not very many. But I do have a very good imagination." He looked down into his brandy glass, and Hermione could see the reflection of the amber liquid shining in his black eyes.

"That sort of surprises me. Not the good imagination part," she added hastily.

He gave her a questioning look. "Just the part about lovers?"

She leaned in a little closer. "Yes, to be perfectly honest. I imagined you to be quite jaded and experienced."

Severus looked a little nonplussed. "I'm almost sad enough to consider that a compliment. Jaded, yes. Experienced, not overly." He looked at her carefully. "But I do believe sex is more about the giving than the receiving." He stroked the top of her hand. "I have always tried to be a generous lover."

Hermione felt her face grow warm. "It's just that I don't have an awful lot of experience, as you might imagine. And you have to be aware of this persona you have." She was groping blindly, trying not to make a complete muppet of herself. "I mean, some girls, good girls, have a weakness for bad boys."

He sat his glass down on the counter, then turned in his seat until he faced her fully. With more savior faire than he could have ever hoped for, he reached for her and yanked her into his arms with a swift jerk that made her squeak in delight. Tucked between his legs, she felt warm and lushly ripe, and Severus seriously pondered the logistics of sitting her on the counter and-

Looking at her with eyes that threatened to incinerate her, he purred, "Are you one of those good girls who like bad boys, Hermione?"

Lightly placing her hands on his shoulders, she teasingly replied, "I might be. Unless, of course, you would prefer a bad girl." When his smirk grew too smug for description, she added, "I may not have much experience, but I have always been a fast learner."

He gently slid his hands around her waist, urging her closer, then he nuzzled her neck, murmuring, "Why don't we just see how we go then, hmm?" He placed a slow, soft kiss against the slim, satiny column of her throat. When she whimpered and pressed against him, he mentally counted to ten before he trusted himself to speak without quavering. He purred, "I'll be very patient, and you will tell me what pleases you, won't you?" She shivered, and he felt lightheaded with anticipation.

"Oh, you'll know," she whispered unsteadily. "Believe me, you'll know. But don't stop experimenting on my account."

With a devilish grin, he took her head in his large, warm hands and kissed her. It was not the kiss he had taken from her in the Forest of Dean; this kiss was all about giving. Hermione clutched his shoulders as his surprisingly soft mouth suckled her own, nuzzling her lips with sensual, teasing caresses. His kisses were sweet; brandy-flavoured, with a taste uniquely his, and before she could stop herself Hermione delved between his warm, parted lips with her tongue to explore him. He froze; then with a moan he enveloped her in his arms and proceeded to turn her blood to fire. He ravished her mouth with his own, nipping, licking, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth with a little, teasing bite that turned her hips to sponge.

Long, slim fingers slid through her hair, gently turning her, instructing her on how to fully enjoy him. His long tongue slid into her mouth and she sucked on it wantonly, making a hungry little growling noise that inflamed him and he stood, pulling her closer to devour her more completely, until they were straining against one another.

Gradually, as their desire-fueled kisses left them breathless and panting, she peppered his throat with tiny kisses, unable to get enough of him. He sighed, aching with desire for her. Even with an erection that could cut glass, even insensate with need, he forced himself to act unhurried and patient. His voice was incredibly smooth, even to his own ears. As he palmed a breast and squeezed gently, he purred, "Why don't we take this somewhere a little more private?"

"Love to," she moaned, arching against his large, warm hand. Her eyes were shining with want as he closed the gap, and his lips were a breath away from joining his hand. "But-

The Floo roared into life, and they jumped away from one another, as if shocked by static electricity.

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed. "Typical Harry. Timing like shit." She patted Severus' arm, and with a look of sincere regret, pulled away. Transfiguring her slinky robes into Muggle jeans and a t-shirt, she grabbed his hand and pulled him from the kitchen. "Come on. The sooner we get this done," she said, her eyes bright and glowing with heat, "the sooner we can take this somewhere a little more private."

Part the Eighth

Chapter 9 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

As always, this story is brought to you by stgulik's House of Great Beta Work, and I couldn't do it without her - just like I can't do it without you!

By the way, this chapter contains explicit sexual content.

Severus followed Hermione over to the fireplace, where a red-faced and sweating Harry Potter burst from the Floo, hair standing on end and arms full of packages. He looked disheveled and excited, and when he turned to Hermione with a look Severus could not decipher, she squealed and clapped her hands.

"You did it, didn't you?" When Potter smiled his reply, she fairly danced, crying, "You did! Oh, Harry, thank you! I owe you one or twenty!"

Potter laughed. "Make it around fifteen or so. It wasn't easy, but I will have to say this is one of those times I'm glad I was The Boy Who Lived." He gave Severus a nod. "Good evening, Mr. Snape. Ready to get stuck in?"

Refraining from comment, Severus helped Potter retrieve all the packages from the Floo. "Are these all from Father Christmas?" Severus drawled, as present after present was stacked in the corner. "Do we think Father Christmas robbed a vault at Gringotts?"

Hermione laughed. It did look as if someone had bought out Diagon Alley. She pointed at the various mounds of presents. "That's Father Christmas. These are from Molly and Arthur, that bunch came from Charlie and his partner in Romania, and this group is from the rest of the aunts and uncles." She gestured to another set of wrapped presents already beneath the tree. "And those are the gifts Rose will take with her tomorrow when she goes to the Burrow for her grandparents and cousins."

Severus looked at Hermione quizzically. It sounded very much like Hermione would not be joining her daughter. A dozen wild ideas flew into his head, and he could barely manage to reply, "Do you not go to the Burrow with Rose?"

With a shake of her head, Hermione said, "Nope. Christmas Day and Boxing Day are all about the Grandparents and the kids. Molly and Arthur have all the grandchildren over, and we adults get two days to recover from Father Christmas. I usually spend Christmas Day in my pajamas, eating goodies and watching old Muggle films. Either that, or soaking in the bath."

Severus nodded, uncertain. Was this her way of hinting that he, too, should make himself scarce for the day? No. He didn't believe that. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. She put her arm around Severus and led him away from Harry, who was busy separating the boxes to make sure they corresponded with the meticulous list Hermione had given him. "I said that's what I *usually* do," she whispered. "This year, we're making new Christmas traditions, so you'll just have to lounge around in your pjs and eat junk food with me. That is, if I let you out of bed long enough to turn on the telly." His expression didn't change, but he could feel a flush creep upward, and Hermione gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

With her eyes still glowing, she stepped back, raising her voice so that Harry could hear. "Do you like Muggle films, Severus?" She sounded as innocent as a lamb.

Having only just succeeded in taming the erection Hermione had given him in the kitchen, Severus felt it stir anew, and hoped that a shag would be in the cards for Christmas day. He attempted to deflate his tenting trousers by reminding himself that Potter was in the next room, and would be for some time. He answered rather lamely, "I remember a Muggle Christmas film called *The Bishop's Wife*. My mother was fond of it."

From the front room, Harry exclaimed, "Hey, Cary Grant! I like that one too." He sat the Christmas list on the table. "Right, everything's in order. All presents present and accounted for." He said it in a way that gave Severus the impression this was a very old, very lame joke between him and Hermione.

Harry then turned to Severus. "And speaking of holiday traditions: we adults take full advantage of Molly and Arthur's loss of sanity by having everyone else over at Grimmauld Place on Boxing Day afternoon. We just eat leftovers and play card games and enjoy the quiet for a few precious hours before our little darlings return to us after two days of sugar, over-stimulation and sleep deprivation. Hermione always stops by, and I would consider it an honour if you'd join us as well, sir."

Severus glanced at Hermione, who was smiling and nodding enthusiastically. "It would mean a lot to me if you come with me," she said. "It's your choice, of course."

Choices. How few choices he'd been given, and how many he'd chosen unwisely. And now this lovely witch and her daughter were giving him new choices; choices that had no strings attached, except the ones they'd ruthlessly dragged around his heart. And he thought he was safe here. Hah. He didn't stand a chance. He might as well get it over with.

"I should very much like to come, Mr. Potter, if you're sure I'll be welcome."

Harry beamed, and Severus thought for a moment how little he'd changed. Still the overly-energetic pup he'd always been. "You'll be more than welcome. There'll be a few familiar faces there, and everyone will be happy to see you." Harry turned and prepared to leave, but his voice sounded strangely knowing. "Well, I guess that's all you need me for, Hermione, so I'll just be going."

"Don't you dare, Harry Potter!" she exclaimed, and grasped Severus' hand. "It's all well and good you fannying about with the presents, but I've been waiting on pins and needles for days now, and this poor man is going to want to finish Tom Riddle's job when he finds out!"

"But I was working on presents!"

"Multi-task." Her tone was murderous.

Harry had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry to keep you waiting, sir."

Puzzled, Severus scowled, "Since I have no idea what you are prattling on about, Mr. Potter, I am neither awash with anticipation, nor do I know what I'm supposed to be waiting *for*."

Harry's eyes grew wide. He turned to his friend and in an almost accusatory tone, he chastised, "You mean, you didn't tell him?"

Hermione huffed. "Well, I didn't think you'd be beating about the bush for so long, and I wanted it to be a surprise."

Severus felt the tension between them. "Tell. Me. What? Mr. Potter?"

Harry stilled, and his playful pup demeanor vanished. Suddenly, Severus saw the man Harry Potter had become, the man James Potter never had the chance to be. And although he still looked like his father, there was nothing of James Potter's smug superiority in his son's bearing. He faced Severus with dignity and respect.

"Mr. Snape, ever since Rose discovered you, Hermione and I have been petitioning the Wizengamot on your behalf. What was done to you was a travesty. And Hermione and I aren't alone in feeling this way. Many others stood on your behalf. In taking away your magic and garnishing your war stipend, the Wizengamot did you a grave injustice."

Hermione turned to Severus, sorrow in her eyes. "But we did you a greater one, Severus. We knew the truth, but we were too caught up in our own little worlds to keep up with you. We should have looked out for one of our own, and made sure you were alright. I know your Obliviate had something to do with it, but that doesn't make it right. We should have done more." She looked down at his hand, clasped trustingly with hers. "I should have done more."

Severus raised her chin so that their eyes met. "Hermione, I should have done more. It's no one's fault but mine. I told myself I neither needed nor deserved anyone's help or charity. You've done more for me in the last month than I've allowed anyone to do in my entire life." It was his turn to look away. "That was my blindness, my choice. I chose this."

Harry cleared his throat. "Well, you didn't deserve how you'd been left to fend for yourself, even if that was your choice. So, we did something about it."

Harry removed a rolled-up parchment from his pocket and enlarged it. He grinned. "I have to say that Kingsley wasn't entirely thrilled that I showed up at his house yesterday demanding he call an extraordinary meeting of the full session of the Wizengamot on Christmas Eve. Of course, it helped that I brought a crate of single malt Ogden's Old Firewhisky, along with every Order member except Hermione, *and* I pulled the 'You're-A-Mean-One-Mister-Grinch' card, and the 'Tom-Riddle-Is-Dead-Because-Of-Snape' card, and even the 'Do-Something-Right-For-Once-It's-Christmas' card."

"Harry," Hermione growled threateningly. "I realise you are telling the tale, but I'm going to be pulling the Unforgivable card if you don't get on with it."

Harry blushed. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry!" He took a deep breath as he presented the parchment to Severus. "This is your full pardon, sir, for any and all acts performed during the course of war as a spy for the Order. Your war stipend has been fully returned to you, and it, along with your personal vault, is available for instant access at Gringotts. The stipend includes interest accrued for the past ten years. I made them put it in writing and magically bind it and this is the Gringotts receipt to that effect."

Stunned beyond utterance, Severus took the parchments and his vault keys numbly, like a sleepwalker. He looked at Hermione, who was smiling, but tears glittered on the edge of her lashes.

Potter withdrew another small box from his jeans pocket and enlarged it with a tap of his wand, handing it to Severus. "Here is your Order of Merlin, First Class, for your heroic efforts as a spy in bringing about the demise of the reign of terror perpetuated by Tom Riddle, AKA Lord Voldemort, along with the right and privileges contained therein, awarded by a grateful Ministry, etcetera etcetera..." Harry gave Severus a wink. "I use mine as a paperweight in my study. But that's another story. And last but certainly not least..."

He produced another small box and tapped it with his wand. *Engorgio!*

The box grew until it took on the exact size and shape of an Olivander's box. Hermione took it in hand and opened it carefully. Severus beheld his own ebony wand nestled within, and he almost started hyperventilating. His wand! For the last ten years, it had been secreted away in some forgotten corner of the Ministry, little more than a stick of wood. He had resigned himself to never seeing it again. That meant-

Harry gently divested Severus of his documents and his Order of Merlin. Then he turned to Hermione. "I think it's only fitting that you do this last bit, Hermione. After all, none of us would be here without you."

She looked up at Severus, formally offering him his wand. His fingers trembled they curled around the handle. Touching the tip of her wand to his, she recited from the Official Proclamation: "*Veneficus liber aufero redimio!*" And the cuff that had been magically sealed onto his wrist ten long years ago snapped open and fell onto the floor with a hollow, impotent clink.

The room was silent. Then a burst of magic so intense it took Severus' breath away rushed from and into his body, his heart, his lungs, his brain, his *soul*, and it was so wonderful and beautiful it literally drove him to his knees. Harry and Hermione staggered back as Severus' restored magical signature pierced them, hungrily seeking out the other magical souls in the room and embracing them, recognising them as kindred.

"Damn, that was intense," Harry said, awed. Hermione couldn't speak. Severus' magic had been like a tongue of flame that rolled over her roughshod, then ran down her spine and into her groin. He was unspeakably beautiful; glowing, shimmering with magic. Looking at the dark-eyed wizard, augmented with his power, panting like a runner, head flung back in ecstasy, Hermione gasped. *Gods, if I thought I wanted you before* she thought, *her head spinning, it was nothing compared to how much I want you now.*

When Severus' eyes cleared, he found himself on his knees in the center of the room, laughing and feeling so damn good he wanted to fly. He raised his wand and shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A huge Bengal tiger flew from his wand and bounded into the room. The three of them stared at it in shock. "My doe is gone," said Severus numbly.

The tiger turned to its master and gave a mighty, triumphant roar that thundered through the room and rattled the windows in their panes. Severus gasped at the magnificent beast. It seemed to take up the entire room, and it was as powerful and confident a Patronus as he'd ever cast. He felt a momentary pang for the loss of his doe Patronus, but the tiger then turned and looked him in the eye and Severus recognised its significance.

"This is a *Patronabeo*," Severus said. He turned to Hermione and Harry, who looked puzzled at the word. "A transitional Patronus." His eyes found Hermione's. "When a person experiences a life-changing event, it can cause their Patronus to change."

Harry nodded. "Of course! Tonks' changed when she fell in love with Remus."

The tiger, huge and magnificent, watched them impassively. Its uncompromising gaze seemed to say, "Pontificate all you want. I'm not going anywhere." Severus felt a sweet surge of happiness and knew that this Patronus was a new beginning. He found both comfort and anticipation in that thought.

"You're beautiful," Hermione said to the great cat, which graced her with a look of such haughty splendour she laughed. She looked at Severus, and he saw things reflected in her eyes that also felt as new and powerful as his restored magic. "And so are you. I can't think of a Patronus so fitting. Proud, strong, protective."

Severus staggered to his feet. And suddenly she was in his arms, and he was holding her, and the tears were sparking in his eyes and he didn't care that Potter was watching. He was holding on to hope, and hope was soft and warm and shaped like this bossy little witch and her big, compassionate heart.

"Was this what you were doing the other day?" he asked, when he could trust his voice. "When you asked me to pick up Rose from school?"

Hermione nodded. "I didn't want to say anything until we had the documents signed. I was asked to testify on your behalf. I got Harry involved so you wouldn't have to go back there. You've done and said enough. It was time for the Ministry to grow a pair and do the right thing."

Severus, still overwhelmed, turned to thank Harry. Suddenly, they heard a galloping sound from the back of the house. Hermione's eyes widened in panic, and she turned toward the mountain of presents, casting the fastest Notice-Me-Not Charm Severus had ever witnessed.

The items faded just as Rose crashed through the door. She stared at the three adults in confused excitement, wide-eyed and eager. "Has Father Christmas come?"

Harry, covering for Hermione, exclaimed, "Not yet. But I just stopped by to let your mum know he's on his way, Rosie dear!" Harry staggered back as the young girl rushed into his arms, squealing his name.

Severus grimaced. "That burst I experienced when my magic returned *might* have cancelled out your Silencing spells," he said apologetically. Hermione shrugged, too happy to care.

After gracing her uncle with a kiss, Rose breathlessly reported, "I heard a sound like an explosion and - and then a roar and then, oh, Severus, you have your magic back!"

The three adults looked at her in surprise, and her mother laughed, and pulled her into her arms. "Yes, darling, he has!" She looked up at Severus, and he found himself in the embrace of the two witches, feeling as if he truly belonged there.

"How did you know, Rose?" Severus asked, with a slight smile on his angular face.

Struggling to answer, the young girl closed her eyes, as if visualising to herself. "It was like a humming or a vibration. It was really deep and loud." She looked at Severus with something like awe. "You must be very powerful, Severus. I've never felt that even from Mum, and she's like the most powerful witch I know."

Severus nodded sagely. "Indeed she is." He glanced at Hermione. "Although I would not be surprised if you turn out to be just as powerful one day. I, too, can sense magical vibrations in others, and yours is just as strong as your Mother's."

Rose turned to her mother, delighted at Severus' prediction. He pulled Hermione and Rose closer. He felt joy coursing through his veins; the simple, perfect pleasure of his own magic, restored and powerful again. "Thank you," he said, simply, and his eyes met those of the boy he once thought of as his enemy. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry returned his nod. "Thank you, sir. I'd say as Christmas presents go, this is about the best one I've ever received."

Severus tilted his head, puzzled. "Received? Given, don't you mean?"

"That, too, sir."

Severus looked down at the lovely witches in his arms. "I suppose you realise that anything I say right now is totally inadequate to how I feel, but-"

Harry rubbed his nose and cleared his throat again. "Well, I'd better be going before Father Christmas reaches London." He gave Rose another hug, then smiled at Severus and Hermione. "See you on Boxing Day."

Severus allowed Hermione to disengage herself from him just long enough to embrace her friend and whisper her thanks. "Happy Christmas, Harry," she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "You have the best timing in the world."

Severus held out his hand. "Thank you, Harry. I am grateful that you would do this for me, on this night of all nights. I'm sure you'd rather be home, spending it with your family."

Harry took his hand without hesitation. He looked at Severus, then to Hermione, to Rose and then back to Severus. In a voice tight with emotion, he said, "I'm spending it with my family, sir. Happy Christmas."

It took another hour to persuade Rose to return to bed, that Father Christmas had not *actually* arrived, and neither would he unless she obeyed her mother. Once they left her with a cup of cocoa to help speed her on to her dreams, Hermione and Severus resumed their task of displaying Rose's Christmas Day gifts. When it looked properly presented to Hermione's exacting specifications of how and where Father Christmas would place each and every gift, she turned to Severus, who had been only too happy to do most of the work using his newly restored magic, and kissed his cheek, her eyes promising things of which Severus had never thought to dream.

When they were done, and the clock chimed midnight, Hermione rose and took his hand, wordlessly leading him upstairs. Severus followed her, his heart pounding, and as they crossed the threshold of her bedroom, she quietly closed and warded the door.

Trembling in anticipation, Severus took the diminutive witch in his arms, and before he could speak, she rose on tiptoe and placed a soft kiss on his lips. She was warm and supple, and in spite of his early declaration that he would take things slowly, his mouth descended upon hers hungrily, with a moan of arousal. He drank in her kiss, and thirstily searched for more. He would be generous later - oh yes, very generous.

Hands moved of their own accord, touching her everywhere at once. His fingers settled in her wild mane, pulling her face closer to his, and when his tongue swiped against her mouth, she opened her lips and he felt her suck his tongue into her mouth almost impatiently. He clamped his large hand against the back of her head and slanted her head to open her fully to him, and he ravenously devoured her, without consideration of comfort or will. Hermione could barely draw breath, and yet she could not deny herself his wicked, demanding tongue, battling against hers in the most sensual of dances. His body pressed against hers like a hot brand that she could feel through her clothing. He lavished her with this banquet of lips and tongues and when she imagined his warm wet mouth sliding down her body, her knees almost buckled. His soft moans and sighs excited her; her gasps and mewls of pleasure ignited him.

When at last they broke apart, they were both panting, their moist breath stirring one another's hair. He looked down at Hermione's lovely face, flushed and glowing, her lips swollen by his kisses, and he sucked hard on her plump, bottom lip, so doped with desire he could barely think. His cock was straining in his trousers in a way that was impossible to hide, and he adjusted himself to find some relief. He found none. Gradually, her warm eyes opened, and he stroked her cheek with shaking fingers. "I'm I'm a little nervous, Severus," she confessed breathlessly.

He shook his head. "Shh, that doesn't matter, love. It's been a long time for me as well. We'll take it slow." A smile tilted his lips. "We have all the time in the world."

As he placed warm, slow kisses against her throat, she whispered, "I realise I don't have much experience, but I do know what I like, and how to tell you how I like it done."

Merlin's nightgown! he thought, raising his head from her satiny shoulder. Adopting what he hoped was a playful tone of voice, he drawled, "I'm all ears, unless you'd like to give me a practical demonstration."

Her head tilted thoughtfully. "I could, I suppose, unless you would be averse to watching me and my vibrator." Her blush at her own forwardness made Severus lightheaded, and he decided to quit before he scared the poor girl away. He pulled her into his arms and pressed her head against his chest.

"Don't misunderstand me, witch. The thought of watching you pleasure yourself is almost as arousing as making love to you, but," he added, pressing his lips to her forehead, "as I mentioned before, I have a good enough imagination, should you not feel able to favour me."

She smirked at the obvious challenge of his words. She stepped back and said, "That was so Slytherin it was almost cliché, Severus Snape."

He returned her smirk and raised her a purr. "And yet, it worked, did it not?"

She laughed. "You know, I think it might have." She gave his hair a stroke, then walked over to her nightstand and opened the top drawer. "Who knows? This lesson may be for my benefit as much as yours." She glanced over her shoulder at him provocatively. "After all, demonstrations are made to instruct one in how to emulate the process, are they not?"

He took a deep breath to calm his pounding heart. With the little amount of reasoning left in his endorphin-intoxicated brain, he countered, "Perhaps we both have lessons to teach, Miss Granger."

She approached him again, and he closed his eyes and swore softly as her small hand cupped his erection. "You always were a passionate teacher on the subjects you enjoyed. Hard," she said, taking his breath away with an eager stroke of his aching cock, "but very passionate."

He slid his hands under her shirt, his fingers caressing her tender skin. With a soft chuckle, he countered, "The lessons may get a great deal harder before the night is through, Miss Granger."

They undressed one another silently, their fingers trembling, their breaths shaky and loud in the room. Severus watched Hermione carefully as she caressed his pale skin. In her eyes, dark and wanting, he saw no revulsion at his scars or pity for his thin, angular frame. Instead, he saw affection, trust, acceptance, desire. It rocked him to his very being, and he made a silent promise that before the night was out, she would know the depth of his gratitude.

She turned around so that he could unhook the fastenings of her bra, and when she turned back and he pulled the garment from her shoulders, he whispered, "Sweet Nimue." Her breasts were everything Severus had ever wanted: rounded and full, with large, rosy nipples. Before his next breath he was on his knees, caressing the soft, luscious mounds. "Oh, you are beautiful," he breathed, his voice dark with longing.

She gasped and whimpered as his mouth closed over one succulent nipple, and he moaned around it, sending a vibration through her that shuddered down her spine into

her core. Hermione could barely think against the delicious, devastating pleasure of feeling his warm, slippery tongue flicking over her most sensitive flesh, worshipping at her breast.

She looked down at his pale body, lean and ascetic, and cradled him to her, crooning her appreciation. At the sound of his whispered name, he looked up at her, and his dark eyes burned, scorching any inhibitions from her mind, and she stroked his dark hair as he licked and sucked her nipples until they were glistening in the candlelight and hard as candy in his mouth. He slid her knickers from her hips and stroked her thighs, making them tremble.

Just as his large hands reached around to cup her bottom and pull her closer, she put her hands on his shoulders and stepped away, hissing as his teeth released her nipple with a reluctant little tug. He looked up at her uncomprehendingly, and she leaned forward and kissed him passionately, until he relaxed again.

Gently breaking the kiss, Hermione stood, her eyes locked on his. "You inspire me, Severus Snape." She continued playfully, "I believe there is the matter of educating you in the art of pleasing me." She backed away until she was lying on the bed, propped up on several pillows. He slowly rose to his feet and sat down at the end, resting his back against one of the posts at the foot of the bed. Their eyes met, and Hermione bit her lip as she reached for the vibrator. "Of course, you could give me a demonstration as well," she added coyly, and he smirked.

Cocking his head in a way that was almost coquettish, he quietly murmured, "Hermione, if you entertain any thought that I'll not touch myself while watching you masturbate with your vibrator, I'm afraid you have quite an exaggerated impression of my self-discipline."

She saw that he had unbuttoned his trousers, and was easing his impressive cock from its confines. She watched intently as he caressed its length and heard his breath hitch in his throat, and when she caressed her breast and gently rolled the nipple in her fingers, he moaned her name softly. Hermione felt that irresistible power a woman has over her wizard. "I love the sounds you make when you're aroused."

He looked at her with eyes that were burning with sexual secrets. His pale skin had a delicate tinge of pink. "Then you'll definitely enjoy the next hour or so," he purred, his voice low and dark and sensuously warm.

Hermione felt her own body flush. "I like it hard," she said, in a rush, wanting to tell him, and afraid her nerve would fail her. "I want it hard fast and deep. I want to be fucked until I can't do anything but scream your name."

He closed his eyes and gave his tumescent cock a hard stroke. "And have your previous lovers given you what you want?"

"No," she said, unwilling to admit that, beside Ron, she'd only ever had sex twice. "But I'm sure you'll pay attention, Severus, so you'll know what to do the next time."

He laughed his dark, sexy chuckle, and that excited her even more. "The next time, witch, you'll have no need of a vibrator." Hermione closed her eyes. She was so wet, almost shamefully so. She hesitated then, but he said, "No, I want to see you. I want to know how to send you careening to the heavens with my body. Don't deny yourself."

She answered with a soft moan. "Merlin, you were right. You are sexy as sin when you talk about something that interests you."

"I'm just warming up to the subject." Her breathing hitched, and a wave of almost feral arousal surged through him. With a lustful sneer, he said, "Show me, Hermione." He enticingly caressed the head of his cock with the tips of his fingers. "Show me how to make a goddess like you scream a man's name."

Breathing hard, more aroused than she'd ever been in her life, Hermione opened her thighs, revealing herself to him. "Oh, fuck yes," he swore softly, and wrapped his fist around his large member. Hermione took a deep breath, and as she touched the vibrator to her already glistening labia and switched it on, and he made a startled hiss, as if he'd felt the intense vibrations himself.

At first, she closed her eyes, allowing the sensations to wash over her, acutely aware of Severus' presence, his soft murmurs urging her on, his incendiary gaze as he drank in the sight of her, but as her pleasure grew, and her body became taut and ready, she found herself watching him as he stroked himself steadily. She noted how he twisted his wrist on the upstroke, how he fondled and caressed his balls to his perineum. It was unbearably erotic, watching him. His face was curiously blank; his mouth open, his lips parted and wet. His eyes were glazed with arousal. He was beautiful and intense and radiating desire and magic and power, and it was thrilling, this performance for him alone, and she grew more uninhibited and abandoned.

She began to mewl, and her hips bucked against the vibrating dildo, and she whispered, "Severus, gods, I'm so close... so close..."

"Fuck, Hermione, do it," he moaned, as his hips began to rock against the downward stroke of his hand. His face was flushed and his mouth formed an O of intense pleasure. He crooned helplessly, "I'm going to come, watching you play with yourself. Come, witch. I want to see it."

"I want to feel you come in me," she moaned, delirious at the rough edge of his dark voice. She felt her own orgasm ramping up to the point where she could no longer back down from it. "Come in me," she rasped, and just as she felt her climax peak, he surged forward, and plucked the vibrator from her hands. Holding onto his turgid member, he plunged it into her pulsing cunt with a hoarse cry.

His eyes rolled back, and he mewled, "Oh, fuck, what a sweet pussy-" Hermione cried out, impaled on this massive pole deep within. He pulled away and thrust himself to the hilt so hard they both cried out. He looked down at her, his eyes wild with lust, and growled, "Come with me, girl. You have to. I can't hold back."

At his command, her body leapt to obey. Artlessly, she threw her head back and howled his name, and he grunted with each hard thrust. They cried out together, each feeding on the pleasure of the other. His mouth descended on her aching nipples, causing her to shudder with each throbbing note of the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced.

She heard his roar of release, then felt him surge within her, his issue spurting eager and hot into her. Her orgasm continued to ripple through her, clutching his cock like a vise. Hermione fell back, gasping, and he collapsed on her, moaning rapturously. She held him tightly to her, feeling as if she were floating off the bed.

Severus rolled over so that Hermione could at last breathe, but winced at the protrusion humming away beneath him. He reached under and retrieved the still-merrily buzzing vibrator, switched it off, and then licked it like a lolly, causing Hermione to shiver with pleasure. Finally, he tossed it aside and drew her into his arms, kissing her gently.

For several moments, neither spoke. Then Hermione giggled. "Fuck, what a sweet pussy." She grinned up at him. "That's the nastiest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Disheveled and smugly satisfied, Severus rumbled, "Typical. Here I am, recovering from the most erotic moment of my life, and you're teasing me about it."

Hermione snuggled closer. "I'm not teasing. I'm going to buy a Pensieve so I can relive it over and over." She turned to look into his face. "Did I really give Severus Snape the most erotic moment of his life?"

He looked down at her imperiously. "Hermione, I was a spy and a Death Eater. I've been a recluse and a derelict. I've lied my head off about just about every aspect of my life, but I've never lied about sex." He pulled her closer. "Besides, I don't exactly have a plethora of women beating down my door demanding of my services."

"More fool them."

"Stop. You'll have me hard again, and I want to bask in the glory of this moment a little longer."

Hermione sighed contentedly, and Severus shifted so that he could look down upon her, cradled securely in his arms. "You know," she said, "I fit rather perfectly in this little place between your arm and your shoulder."

"It had not escaped my notice," he rumbled, looking down at her with his little half-smile. He lazily stroked her downy skin. "After I recover from that breath-taking demonstration, I plan on discovering other ways we fit perfectly together."

She made an adorable little giggling noise, and nuzzled against his chest. "There are other things I'd like to try as well."

"Such as?"

She gave him a look that made his bollocks tingle. It was a smile so rich he could taste it.

"Everything."

He smiled to himself. Basking was probably overrated. He could always do it later.

Part the Ninth

Chapter 10 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

I cannot tell you how much your incredible comments have affected me. I will never be able to thank you enough for the amazing words of support and encouragement. This is the penultimate chapter, and I want to tell you that this has been such a joy.

As I have told many of you, for some reason, perhaps the season itself, this fic affected me like none other ever has, and I found myself quite emotional about it. Your kinship with me regarding this has validated everything I hoped this fic would do - that is, touch my readers the way it touched me.

I want to thank stgulik, my beta, who is simply everything a writer needs to fly without wings or broom. Thank you, Jules. You are my Christmas Rose.

Hermione woke to Christmas sunlight streaming into the room. She stretched, wincing at the bright light and her protesting muscles. Severus had teased her that after the night's activities he would need to brew extra Pain Potion, not only for her but for his own benefit.

The room was cold, and she turned over to snuggle next to Severus, who simply radiated body heat. She opened her eyes to see if he was awake, and found the bed empty.

Hermione sat up in bed and held herself very still. She could sense the soft shimmer of her daughter's blooming magic, and her own signature. The deep thrum she had felt last night after Severus' magic rejuvenated itself was absent now. He was not in the house.

Dressing, Hermione thought of what this might mean. It was Christmas Day. Had he decided, now that his magic and his financial security had been restored, he was no longer beholden to stay? Had he, in his own insecure ramblings, decided she no longer needed him there, after last night? No, she could not believe it. She wouldn't believe it.

Hermione put the memories of last night aside. They had done things to and for one another that were so indecent her face burned when she remembered them. It had been so intense, so perfect. If he had bailed on her after that, she would hex his bollocks to Halifax if she ever saw him again!

Even as she warned herself not to think about it, the images of their lovemaking hurtled into the forefront of her mind, and she felt again the breathless, sense-stealing sensation of their bodies fused together. Severus had been a creature of sexual, burning intensity, and he'd possessed her with almost brutal hunger. She had reveled in every moment of it and begged for more. She shivered at the memory of their first real joining, after she had asked to experience 'everything' with him. She closed her eyes, remembering how he'd loomed over her, his eyes full of desire and sin, and crooned, "You truly are a goddess, my love. I am merely your humble acolyte."

She'd been helpless with lust, moaning, begging. He had teased and fondled and made her so slick and ready for him, and his first deep, plunging thrust had almost blinded her with pleasure. She had growled so loudly he'd thought he was hurting her. He had pulled away, uncertain, and she'd grabbed him, yanking him closer, moaning feverishly, "Oh, fucking hell, Severus, let go! I want you to pound into me, dammit!"

He'd given her a little crooked smile of surprise, then growled, "My pleasure," and proceeded to fuck her into the mattress, slamming into her as if he were being graded for his efforts. She recalled the soft hairs of his chest rasping against her nipples, the filthy, dark promises he had whispered in her ear as he danced against her skin. It had been wild, and glorious and not a little animalistic. Hermione felt a wave of pure longing wash over her, remembering the sound of his hips slapping against hers, and the delicious feeling of being totally overtaken by his passion. Severus looked like a satyr, dark and desirous, driving and driving and *driving* into her with such power she came over and over, crying out his name.

As he roared to his own climax, he'd cried out, "I love you!" as he shouted his orgasm into the room. Hermione had only just renewed the Muffliato charm on Rose's room, thank Merlin.

It had been decadent and adventurous and wondrous and now he was gone.

She walked into his room. She opened his wardrobe. His clothes were gone. She looked into the chest of drawers. There was nothing left in the room except the faintest trace of his cologne. For a moment, Hermione felt physically ill. She sat down on his bed, trying to hold back her tears. Hearing the sounds of Rose playing downstairs, she took several deep breaths and composed herself. Rose was her daughter, her life, her first priority. It was time to tell Rose that Severus was gone.

Hermione thought about Rose and her open, loving nature, and her own hurt feelings soured into anger. *Okay, he fucked you and left. You're a big girl you can take rejection. But you've walked out on Rose. That's unforgivable, Mister. You may have just topped Tom Riddle in the All-Time-Bastards-Who've-Pissed-Me-Off List, Snape.*

Hermione forced her anger away, because it was starting to feel too much like heartbreak again. She walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

At the bottom of the stairs, Hermione forced a smile on her face, and greeted her daughter with a "Good morning, darling, Happy Christmas!"

Rose jumped up from the floor, where she'd been playing with her Father Christmas loot, and rushed to hug and rub noses. After wishing Hermione Happy Christmas, she

looked around with a curious smile and asked, "Where's Severus, Mum? I haven't felt him in the house since I woke up."

She put her hands on her daughter's shoulders and took a deep, steadying breath. "Rose, he was gone when I woke up. I think he might have left, honey."

Rose's smile faded, and she grew still, "Left? As in, gone? For good?" Hermione nodded, not trusting her voice.

Still disbelieving, Rose shook her head with a little, uneasy smile. "No, he wouldn't do that, Mum. He lives here." She stated her words emphatically, as if saying them would make them true.

Hermione's throat tightened, and it became hard to speak. "Love, his things aren't in his room." The dawning horror in Rose's eyes was unbearable, and Hermione had to look away. "He didn't leave anything behind."

She watched in dismay as Rose's blue eyes filled with tears. "But-But why, Mum? Why would he leave us? I thought he was happy here!" She buried her head against her mother's shoulder. "How could he leave us without saying goodbye, Mum? Did you two have a fight?"

Hermione winced, wishing she'd waited until Rose was older before telling her of the night she and Ron had fought, and he'd walked out on her and Harry. It had fixated in Rose's mind that anytime two people argued, one of them bailed. It also brought to mind that she might have been pushing Severus too much. Perhaps she'd been so blinded by her feelings that she'd frightened him away with her neediness. There had been moments when she had taken over to make everything right for Severus. She'd made a point of telling him about wanting to change Ron and learning her lesson, but had she?

Severus was a man, a wizard. Now that his magic had been restored and was just as powerful as ever, he would want to make his own choices. Hadn't he said time and time again that he'd had enough of having to take what others had forced upon him? Did he see her as doing the same? Perhaps he'd had enough of her typical, bossy, I-know-what's-best-so-shut-up-and-do-what-I-say personality. If that were so, it wouldn't be the first time she'd pushed someone away. It would, however, be the most painful.

Hermione could feel the sobs threaten. Seeing Rose so upset was making it difficult to sound pragmatic. Perhaps she'd pushed him once too often; still, he could have done them the courtesy of saying goodbye, instead of sneaking out on them. Hermione held her distressed daughter, fighting her own tears.

"No, sweetie. We didn't fight. I don't know why he's gone. Maybe he thought it would be easier on us if he was gone when we woke up. *Coward.*

"Well, he's wrong!" Rose sniffed. Her tears made Hermione's rush traitorously to the surface. "He lives here with us, Mum! I really liked him! He was smart, and he talked to me about Hogwarts and potions. He promised he was going to teach me all sorts of cool magical things." She buried her face in her mother's breast and sobbed. "He talked to me like I was someone *he* liked."

"Well, of course he liked you, precious. Who wouldn't like you, Rose darling?" Hermione soothed, rocking her bereft daughter. The anger that had raged within was blackening; curling back into a painful feeling of loss, and Hermione felt her own tears sliding down her face. Damn him! It was all well and good, telling herself that she was well rid of the mardy bum, but her heart wasn't buying it. She thought they had made a breakthrough. He had told her he loved her, for fuck's sake!

Hermione shook her head angrily, wiping her tears away. "Look at us, Rosie. It's Christmas, darling! We have pressies to open and you've got two whole days playing with your cousins at the Burrow." She was amazed how normal her voice sounded when her heart was breaking. *He's not worth it*, she said to herself. He's not worth spoiling my daughter's Christmas.

"But it's not the same, Mum," Rose said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "The three of us here felt nice. It'll never be the same now."

Hermione felt as if her heart was going to snap. Her emotions see-sawed again, and the anger against Snape returned! *I'll teach you to break my daughter's heart, you dick*, she thought, fuming. *Just you wait, Severus Snape. You can run, but you can't hide-*

The Floo flared into life and the devil himself stepped through, looking harried and wild-eyed and not a little alarmed at being faced by two tear-stained, upset witches. "Has someone died?" he asked. Rose dashed toward him and leapt into his arms so quickly he almost fell backward. He uttered a short laugh. "Rose, we must have a discussion soon about your reckless enthusiasm. It's hideously Gryffindor." He enveloped the child in a tender embrace. "Happy Christmas, Rose."

She only held him tighter, and when she sobbed, "We thought you had left us forever! We thought you didn't love us anymore!" Severus looked as if she'd slapped him in the face. Stunned, he looked from the weeping child to her mother, who was staring at him with a mixture of hurt and anger so intense his eyes widened.

"Why on earth would you think that?" he said, his features twisted in confusion. "My note made it perfectly clear when to expect my return."

Hermione could practically hear her stomach hit the floor with a loud thud. Swallowing, she said, "What note?"

Carefully disengaging himself from Rose's choking embrace, Severus went to Hermione and clasped her face in his hands. They were freezing; he'd forgotten his gloves. "Happy Christmas, Hermione." His gentle words baffled her even more.

"Severus, what is going on?" Exasperated, Hermione placed her hands against his chest. His coat was covered in frost. "I woke up and you were gone, no word, nothing! What was I to think?"

He looked at her incredulously. "That I had just upped stakes and left? After everything that's happened?" His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "After last night?" He tilted his head. "I left a note for you in the kitchen did you not see it?"

Hermione felt a flush creeping up her face. "Actually, I hadn't made it that far."

Severus flicked his wand through the air. "*Accio note!*" A short piece of parchment flew into his hand, and with an arched brow, he wordlessly passed it to Hermione.

Hermione,

Now that I have both the means and the ability, I thought I'd do a quick dash into Diagon Alley and see what I could find in the way of some Christmas gifts for Rose. And, seeing as how I can personally attest to Father Christmas what a very good girl you've been (or very bad, depending on one's point of view, re: last night's demonstration and hands-on research), there may be something in the old red-clad sod's bag for you as well.

Go back to bed. I'll need warming up when I return, you saucy minx.

S

Hermione turned to her daughter. Almost cringing, she said, "Sweetie, I need to have a talk with Severus. Why don't you go upstairs and get dressed? Uncle Harry will be here soon to take you to the Burrow."

"Okay," she replied, drying her tears. As Rose walked by Severus, she gave him another hug. "I knew you wouldn't just leave us," she said, confidentially, and left the adults alone in the room. For a moment Hermione could barely make herself look at him. When she did, he was giving her such a chiding look she felt like a moronic first year again.

"But your clothes were gone," she began. "I looked in your wardrobe and-

"Did you look in yours?"

Hermione stilled, and closed her eyes. *Oh. Yes. Now I-*

"I moved all my clothes there this morning while you were sleeping off our night of glorious abandon. Or did you forget you demanded I move my things to your room?" His eyes narrowed, and he fixed her with a gimlet stare. "I understand you said it during the throes of passion, but it was one of the most significant moments of our relationship." He pursed his lips. "I think I'm going to take the high road and pretend your memory lapse was due to my overwhelming sexual prowess, and not early onset senility on your part."

Hermione slumped. "Oh, gods, I do remember, Severus." She gave him a sheepish smile. "And I meant every word, but-" She blew the air from her lips, feeling more like a fool with every passing second. "Well, I was a little overwhelmed by your sexual prowess."

"Now you're just digging the hole deeper." With a rueful chuckle, he pulled her closer. "I forgive you. It's hard to blame someone for being in a post-coital fog when one is responsible for it, but honestly, witch, you used to pay closer attention when you were celibate."

Cringing, Hermione looked down at the parchment again. "I'm so sorry," she said, in a small voice, tears threatening again. "I've been such an idiot."

"Indeed," the voice, while faintly chiding, still sounded wounded.

"And I hurt you. I've been a fool! I thought that maybe-"

"You thought, 'now that he has his magic back and the Ministry's returned his wallet, the greasy git doesn't think he needs me anymore'. Is that about the size of it?" When Hermione didn't answer, he sighed. "You didn't believe in me," he said sadly.

"I didn't believe in *me*," she said quietly, finally admitting the truth to herself. She risked a glance at him, and to her surprise and dawning hope, he was smiling and shaking his head.

He wound a wild curl around his long finger. In a tender voice, he asked, "Hermione, last night you asked me what I was afraid of. What *are* you afraid of?"

Hermione looked at him, and the air in the room seemed to grow still and warm. Entwining her hand with his, she whispered, "I'm I'm afraid of being too bossy, of scaring you away."

Severus looked into her sweet intelligent face and for once, her assertive, no-nonsense demeanour was absent, and she looked as vulnerable as she did the night she met him in the Forest of Dean.

She took his hand in hers, and stroked it tenderly, tracing the blue veins that ran over the top. "I've fallen in love with you, Severus Snape. I want you to be here, but more than that, I want you to *want* to be here." She took a deep, bracing breath. "And if that's not what you want, I'll help you to do whatever it takes to make you happy. But now you've asked for the truth, I'm afraid you'll leave. And all I want is for you to stay. Now. For a very long time. Forever."

He sat down and ran a distracted hand through his messy hair. "I don't know what I find more surprising, Hermione: the fact that you jumped to the wrong conclusion or the fact that I'm not offended by it. There was a time when your reaction would have sent me coldly stalking away, seething in resentment over the slight. I would have scuttled back to my hovel, drank myself into a stupor and told myself I was well rid of such a mistrustful harpy, so lacking in faith."

He looked up at her, and shrugged. "But the fact of the matter is that I live with that harpy and her Gryffindor of a daughter, and I love them both more than reason dictates. The idea that anyone gives a fuck enough to miss me when they've mistakenly believe I've left *them* seems rather ironic, when you think that two months ago no bugger gave a toss whether I lived or died. And I'm not including you in that statement, Hermione; I'm not trying to replant that guilt."

Hermione sagged with relief, causing tears to threaten again. "So, you're not upset that I was mentally hexing your bollocks off?" she asked, trying on a smile for size.

He looked at her and rolled his eyes. "Only if you're still mentally hexing them." His dark eyes swept over her rapaciously. "Actually, I'd rather hoped that later, you'd do an encore of that thing you did with them last night. After the obligatory junk food and Muggle films, of course." He held out his hand, and when she joined him on the sofa he took her in his arms, nuzzling her with his unspeakable nose. "Hermione, not four hours ago I was being tied up, blindfolded, teased with feathers and seared into heaven. I seem to recall at one point you slid your very talented tongue around my arsehole until I was almost deranged. And *that* was just the preliminaries to the best blowjob I've ever received.

"I also vaguely remember screaming 'You belong to me, witch' and 'I love you' and 'I'm never going to let you out of my sight'." Wryly, he added, "Apparently those weren't nearly as memorable to you as 'Oh, fuck, what a sweet pussy.'" At her shaking laugh, he smirked, pleased. "And unless you're telling me you're never going to do those degenerate things again, do you honestly think I'd be stupid enough to leave a woman who performs such deviant acts upon my person and demands I do the same in return?"

Hermione blushed to her hairline, and Severus kissed her, his smile softening his harsh features. "I would have thought that alone would convince you that I can't live without you." He looked at her with eyes that were full of emotion. "But you already knew that. I told you that last night."

"Before your magic-"

"Yes, having my magic and my finances restored was a miraculous thing, but who convinced the Wizengamot to rescind the sentence? Who believed in me when no one else did?" He held her head between his large hands. "Who saved me for no other reason than she just wanted me to have a chance at a normal, safe life?"

To her surprise, his eyes filled with tears. "How in Merlin's name could I not love you, Hermione Granger? How on earth could magic and money ever compare with you and Rose?"

They were holding one another tightly, and she could feel her relief, and she was crying and whispering her love for him and promising all sorts of new depravity as long as he would forgive her and stay with her and never stop loving her and -

"Shh, love. You're working yourself into a right state! It's alright. I'm going nowhere that doesn't involve me coming back here afterward." He pulled away and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Now, with regards to that delicious litany of filth you've just promised, I say we have some breakfast before we open presents. I'll need sustenance if I'm to keep up with you. I'm not a young wizard anymore, you know."

Hermione laughed through her tears. "Anything you want. A full English, oatmeal, fruit-"

"All of the above," he answered with mock imperiousness. "And I want it fed to me from your lovely hands while you sing to me."

When she responded with a tremulous smile, Severus sobered. "I am sorry, Hermione. Truly. Had I any inkling that you wouldn't read my note, I would have told you before I left, but I was in a hurry to be gone and back before Rose left for the Burrow." He tipped her face up to his, and planted a gentle, sweet kiss on her lips. "Am I forgiven?"

Hermione's reply was to return his kiss, equally soft and promising.

"Good," he said, sighing against her. A quiet, comfortable moment passed between them. "If I'm perfectly honest, Hermione, I don't mind you being bossy. You're only bossy with those you really care about. And I don't mind you being needy. No one has ever needed me; not really. It's a pleasant feeling, being needed like this. I have a purpose and a future now, and that pleases me. Being the lonely, misunderstood Byronic figure is pants." He pressed his forehead to hers. "I love you, witch. I want to

share my life with you and Rose. I'm not planning on going anywhere, so work on *your* trust issues and stop feeling so bloody insecure."

She pulled him as close as humanly possible. "We'll work on it together."

He looked at her solemnly. "A wise woman told me to not try. Just do."

She sighed happily, "Then I'll do it," and pulled him down to her lips.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Hermione and Severus jumped apart and looked guiltily over the sofa at the doorway, where Rose stood. She was beaming, and clapping her hands. "I knew you two would snog on Christmas!"

Dryly, Severus gave Hermione a long-suffering look. "I see the know-it-all gene runs in the family."

Rose ran into the room and hugged them so hard their heads knocked together. She kissed Severus' dark, Floo-mussed hair. "I don't care what you call me, Severus. I'd rather be a know-it-all than a know-nothing-at-all."

"It always worked well for your mother, Rose."

Suddenly Rose stilled and she looked at the two adults. Her eyes grew large, and with quiet excitement, she said, "Are you and Mum going to get married?"

Without answering, Severus pulled something small from his pocket and set it on the floor. *Engorgio!* he intoned, and it expanded into a huge box, brimming with beautifully-wrapped presents. One by one, he sent eight boxes floating toward Rose, who watched in fascination as they landed gracefully at her feet. There were the same number of presents left in the box, and Severus sent all but one of them under the tree. The last was a small case, no bigger than the palm of his hand. With quiet dignity, Severus solemnly placed it in Hermione's hand.

"I was going to mention this later, but since Rose has brought up the subject, I would like for you to open this gift, Hermione. Now that I think on it, it would be fitting for Rose to act as witness. If it suits, I would be honoured for you to keep it."

With shaking hands, Hermione opened the box to reveal a plain, white gold ring. It held a flawless diamond, surrounded by sapphires. "It was my grandmother's," Severus said quietly. "The Princes thought of Mother as an outcast, but my Nan always had time for me." He looked at Hermione with quiet pride. "She would have loved you and Rose."

He took the ring out of the box, and said, "Hermione Granger, I'm never going to run out on you. I'm never going to make you sorry you took me in, and I'm never going to regret one moment of being part of your life. I only want your happiness, and I hope you will allow me to contribute to it."

The ring seemed to leap onto her finger. She stared at it, awestruck.

Severus brought her hand to his lips, and asked, with a shaking voice, "Hermione, will you consent to be my wife?"

Hermione looked up at Severus and opened her mouth-

"Yes, yes she will! Say yes, Mum, say yes!" Rose was jumping up and down, her eyes full of happiness.

Hermione burst out laughing and threw her arms around Severus, kissing him soundly. "Is that a yes?" he growled between kisses.

"Of course, yes!" she laughed. Severus sighed with relief, pulling her to him.

Hermione and Rose were flanking Severus, inundating him with his presents, when the Floo opened and Harry stepped in. "Merry Christmas everyone!" He held his arms open for Rose, who flew into them with boundless joy. "Happy Christmas, Rosie! Heavens, you're getting too big for me to pick up and whirl around!" He smiled down at the little girl. "Did Father Christmas make it?" He looked at Hermione and Severus and winked. "He was a bit late getting over to Grimmauld Place, but he managed."

"Uncle Harry, Mum and Severus are getting married!" Harry's smile turned into a look of such stunned surprise that even Rose laughed at him. "This is the best Christmas EVER!"

"Well, that's that's great news!" Harry bounded over and threw his arms around his friend. "I'm so glad for you both." He pulled away and faced Severus, who held himself stiffly, as if afraid Harry would challenge him. Instead, Harry held out his hand. "Congratulations, sir. I know Hermione will make you very happy."

Severus took his hand and nodded, ruefully hearing the silent addition: *and you'd better make her happy or you'll answer to me, the Weasleys and Rose* "Thank you, Harry. I know it may be a bit of a shock to your family, but-

"I don't care!" The adults turned toward a very determined-looking Rose. She returned their looks with the same protective obstinacy Harry had seen on Hermione's face a thousand times. "I think it's great, but if Grana or Poppy or *anyone* says anything bad about it, I'll tell them to suck it up!"

Severus looked at the young girl and tried not to laugh in the face of such indignant defiance. Not unkindly, he explained, "What your uncle means is that people who don't really like me very much may say unkind things about your mum marrying me. Your grandparents are accepting people, but the Wizarding world can be very cruel."

She took Severus' hand, her brow furrowing. "But you're a hero, Severus. Everyone knows you are. And my dad was a hero, and everybody liked him, so what's the difference?"

Severus cast Hermione a baleful look. "Well, your father was-

"It doesn't matter! I'll bet he would be happy that Mum's marrying someone like him. People should be nice about you marrying Mum."

Severus looked down at the little girl, so like her father, so like her mother, and his chest swelled. "You honour me, Rose. Your father was a great hero." He turned to Hermione. "With this support, I find I'm not at all afraid of rejoining the Wizarding world." He cocked an eye toward the little girl. "With the Granger girls defending me?"

Harry grinned. "Rita Skeeter doesn't stand a chance." He sobered. "You know you'll always have my support. And yes, I will use my reputation shamelessly to ensure the rest of the Wizarding world gives it as well. It's the least I can do."

For a moment, they were all silent, before Rose piped up, "C'mon, Uncle Harry, let's go! I can't wait to tell everyone!"

"Harry, before you leave with Rose, I would like to present you with something, if I may." For the first time since he had returned from Diagon Alley, Severus looked a bit apprehensive. From within his cloak he withdrew a small present, elegantly wrapped like the rest, and enlarged it to the size of a box of chocolates.

Harry took the present, his expression friendly but puzzled. "Thank you, sir."

Severus made a dismissive gesture. "It's the least I can do."

Harry tore the paper open with one ripping motion. "Philistine," Hermione muttered.

"Anal," he countered, sticking his tongue out at his old friend. Hermione forced herself not to look at Severus. She could feel his eyes on her, and she knew if she looked into those black eyes, a giggling fit would ensue from which she would never recover, nor would she be able to explain.

Harry finished demolishing the elegant wrapping to reveal an ornate box. Opening it, his expression changed from wonder to delight. It gave Severus a quiet joy he thought he'd never associate with a Potter.

"What is it, Uncle Harry?" Rose piped.

Harry blinked and sniffed. "It's- it's a treasure chest, Rosie. Dozens of photos of my Mum." He pulled a few out and discovered several bits of parchment, tied with a black ribbon. "Are these letters?" he asked.

Severus nodded. "That box contains every photo and letter and souvenir I ever kept of your mother, Harry. It was in my vault at Gringotts. I would have given it to you sooner, had I access to it."

Harry looked up at Severus, his eyes shining. "This is a priceless gift. I don't know what to say." He looked hungrily over the trove of items in the box, and Severus realised it no longer hurt to see Lily's eyes in James Potter's face. Giving the box to Harry had been the right thing to do.

Harry was saying, "Are you sure you wish to part with the letters and other things? I mean, I'll treasure this forever, but..." he broke off, visibly moved.

"I am quite sure, Harry. Your mother was my first friend, and I cared for her dearly, but it's time these were given to her son, where they belong. If I had any doubts of it, the Patronus I cast last night put paid to them."

Harry nodded, blinking hard. "I'm sorry she never forgave you before she died." He looked pensive. "As I've gotten older, I've learned a great deal about true friendships, and while I don't know why she didn't, she should have. I truly want to believe she was just too immature to understand. But I think she would be proud of you."

Harry met his eyes, man to man. "You're free now, Severus. You owe nothing more to anyone, including my mum."

Severus nodded. "I know. I don't think I truly realised it until I came here." He looked at Hermione. "I want to think you are right about Lily. She was very special, and now that I understand the love of a good woman, I appreciate even more the sacrifice she made."

Packages were shrunk, coats were doffed, hugs and kisses were given, and in a whirl of Floo powder and Rose-flavoured energy, Hermione and Severus were alone at last. For a moment they simply held one another. The quiet of the little house was a bit bereft without Rose, but it was nevertheless comforting and familiar.

Finally, Hermione pulled away from her lover, and took his hands in hers. "We've still got presents to open."

He looked down his long nose at her, and purred salaciously, "Ah, yes. As it happens, I passed Madam Provocteur's Shoppe of Delights while on my rounds this morning. I found the most delightful little addition to your 'toy collection'." He took her hand and pressed it against his growing erection. "I should be happy to demonstrate its features for you."

Hermione looked up into his dark eyes and felt her body grow hot and damp at the intensity she saw therein. Huskily, she said, "First one up the stairs gets a special Christmas present."

He smirked. "I can out-Apparate you any day of the week."

Grand Finale

Chapter 11 of 11

At Christmas, what do you give to the wizard who has...nothing?

I am very proud to note this was a TPP Featured Story, December 2012

And so we come to the end of this little Christmas story about two people who found love, and a home and a family. I will admit I've rarely had a story affect me so much as this one. I have never felt so validated as a writer as I have while reading your reviews, and I cannot thank you enough.

Special thanks as always goes to stgulik, the best friend a writer can have a beta who first, last and always puts the story first yea, even before my ego, and makes sure you have the best of me. A person who is a friend, a confidante and a helluva beta. In my humble opinion, the best beta in fanfiction.

And thank all my LJ 'Teddypeeps', who encouragingly read through the original rough draft and offered all sorts of amazing support. I won't list them all here because I know you want to get to the story and tell me to shut up, but they deserve my deepest gratitude, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention them here.

And when at times the mob is swayed to carry praise or blame too far,

We may Choose Something Like A Star to stay our minds on, and be stayed.

It was the first white Christmas in almost fifteen years. Bottlebury Marsh, fresh and frosty and genteel, looked like the quintessential 'picture print by Currier and Ives.' Hermione had set out the drinks and nibbles and was just taking her first sip of wine when Severus wandered in, his restless eyes roving over the various goodies on the table. After purloining several triangles of his favourite egg and cress sandwiches, he accepted a glass of wine with a small frown. "It isn't like Rose to be late."

"She'll be here," Hermione said, patting his arm reassuringly and reached up to kiss his cheek. After almost twenty years of marriage, she was still touched at the way Severus worried about Rose. They were as close as any father and daughter.

True to her word on that first Christmas, Rose had happily burst into the Burrow and announced, "Severus and Mum are getting married, and if you don't like it, tough, 'cause he's my best friend!"

The Weasleys, while accepting, hadn't been that thrilled at the announcement. Their love for Rose, however, was all-encompassing and indulgent, and so they, too, welcomed Severus into the family with open arms.

The Wizarding world got wind of it and was after it like a Niffler on Amortensia, but the furor died down almost as quickly as it flared. It was hard for Rita Skeeter to get a good scandal going when all anyone could talk about was the tender relationship between Hermione Granger's brilliant daughter and the once-disgraced spy. In many ways, Rose had been the catalyst for Severus' re-entry into the world of Wizarding Britain.

As she grew, so did Rose's strength and reputation, both as a witch and as a woman of integrity and compassion. With typical forthright Granger passion, Hogwarts' newest Potions mistress Rose Snape was Severus' staunchest supporter, alongside her mother, and those who tried to besmirch his name in her presence found themselves on the receiving end of a very tough, hex-wielding young witch.

Severus checked his watch again. "I'm going to send a Patronus if she doesn't come soon," he fretted. Hermione smiled. He often declared that only Molly Weasley outdid Hermione in over-protectiveness, but in reality he was the one who always ensured that Rose was suitably dressed on wintry days, adequately fed when exam time meant hours of revising in the library, and properly chaperoned when a series of completely unworthy dunderheaded suitors called.

Severus had been the one who decided when Rose was old enough to wear grown-up, formal robes, and how much pocket money she should have for trips into Hogsmeade. He bought her first wand, helped her brew her first potion, and counted one of the proudest moments of his life the day Rose asked him to formally adopt her and give her his name.

The fact that she was approaching her thirtieth birthday was inconsequential; to Severus, she would always be his young Rose, and he would always worry about her when she was not home at her appointed hour.

The Floo sparked into life, and Rose burst into the room with the same brio and energy as she had as a ten year old. "I'm home!" she sang out.

"Rose, darling! You look marvelous." Hermione held out her arms and waited to be bowled over, and was not disappointed as her daughter flew into her arms. Rose gave her mother a hug and they rubbed noses. She then looked to her mother's right, where her stern-faced, angular stepfather stood patiently, formally waiting his turn.

"Severus! I've missed you." She enveloped her stepfather in a hug. "You've put weight on."

"Your mother is determined to fatten me up," he replied mildly, giving Hermione a fond glance. "She says that a Hogwarts headmaster should look well-fed and smugly self-satisfied."

"And she's right. It suits you. I can't wait for you two to move to the castle next spring." Severus' appointment as Headmaster had been met with surprisingly little resistance. Rose, of course, had spearheaded the campaign. "It'll be like old times, living together again."

She gave him another affectionate little hug before turning back to Hermione. In a voice that strived to sound casual, she said, "Speaking of old times, you'll never guess who I ran into last week. Harry's back in England, and I invited him round for dinner this evening. I hope you two don't mind."

Severus crossed his arms. "The jig is up, dear. We know."

Rose grew still. "Know what?" she asked.

Hermione sighed. "About you and Harry. Now, don't panic," she said, as Rose's eyes grew huge and she paled. "We're not upset."

"Well," Severus added, his tone rather miffed, "we are disappointed you didn't confide in us, Rose, but we respect your decisions. You know that."

Rose's discomfort was obvious. "I wasn't sure how you'd take it."

Dryly, Hermione replied, "Neither did Harry, which is why he stopped by two days ago and spilled the whole story."

Rose looked from her mother to her adopted father. They could actually see her sag with relief. "You're really not too freaked out about this?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "Well, to be perfectly frank--"

"What sort of hypocrites would your mother and I be if we were?" Severus interjected, giving Hermione a look that told Rose this had been an ongoing discussion for the past two days. "Might I remind you that I am eighteen years older than your mother? She was two years younger than you are now when you two first dragged me home."

Rose looked at Severus, her relief palpable. As long as Severus was on her side, Mum would come around. He had that way of doing that. She gave him another hug, and a kiss on the cheek for good measure.

"After the accident, he was so lost, even with the boys," she explained. "We started corresponding by owl, and things just developed between us."

Three years before, Hermione, Ginny, and Lily Potter had gone into Muggle London for a bit of early Christmas shopping. They were walking across a busy intersection when a drunk driver seemingly came out of nowhere and struck them down. Ginny and Lily had taken the brunt of the impact, and Hermione had been so critically injured she'd been unable to attend their funerals. Harry and the boys had been devastated. Shortly thereafter, trying to come to terms with his loss, he'd taken a long-term Auror assignment in the States. They hadn't seen him or his sons in a long time.

So when Harry had shown up out of the blue to tell Hermione and Severus that he and their daughter Rose had been seeing one another for the past six months, and planned to get married, their shock was beyond compare. Severus, ever the protective father, had grilled Harry about the practical matters his two sons and their feelings, the Weasleys, the press, and most importantly, Rose herself.

"Harry, I know better than most how it feels to lose someone I loved." Severus took a deep breath. "Even you cannot be blind to the resemblance Rose and Ginevra share."

Far from being offended, Harry nodded. "Believe me, Severus, Rose and I have discussed this." He shook his head. "I've known Rose all her life, and they are very different, despite the family resemblance. I loved Ginny very much. I always will, but I have no desire to mold Rose into her image." He smiled. "Besides, you know these Granger women more than anyone. Do you honestly think Rose would settle for playing second fiddle to anyone, even Ginny?"

Severus looked at the younger man keenly. He was shaken to the core. It was as if he were hearing his own voice, twenty years earlier, assuring Hermione, "You will never have to play second fiddle to anyone in my life. Or my heart." At that moment, he felt a kinship to Harry Potter he would have never dreamed possible.

It had been enough to convince Severus. That night, lying in bed, Severus turned to his still-bewildered wife and took her in his arms. "Wait until Christmas Eve, Hermione. When we see them together, we will know if this is serious. But really, who are we to protest?"

"Her parents," Hermione had said, rather morosely. "Am I just being silly?"

"You're being her mother," Severus had replied, pressing his lips to her forehead. "Her mistakes are hers to make. We cannot wrap her in cotton wool."

Now, watching Rose, glowing with excitement and relief, Hermione gave in with what she hoped was good grace. If her husband, of all wizards, trusted Harry, then who was she to argue?

Christmas Eve at the Snapes' was a quiet affair. It was just the four of them around the dinner table, but they were prepared for more; Severus and Hermione had taken

over the tradition of Boxing Day from Harry after Ginny's passing.

They talked of old times and those who were no longer with them. Hermione found it surprising that Harry could speak of Ginny and Lily so easily, and when he turned to Rose and took her hand, Hermione's anxiety faded. They looked happy; they looked in love.

It struck Hermione that she and Harry, and Severus to a certain extent, had found their first love during the most difficult of times, stealing moments of desperation and fear. This second relationship was a different love, borne of quiet talks and comfortable silences, confident faith and unhurried embraces, just as her love for Severus had been. She turned to look at her husband and his expression mirrored her own feelings as he threaded his fingers with hers under the table.

After the roast chicken had been consumed and the toasts drunk, Hermione and Rose suddenly got up and left the room. Severus poured Harry a brandy and gestured toward the front room. "Shall we retire to the sofa? We might as well relax while the 'girls' get ready."

Harry, who obviously thought this was a euphemism for the Father of the Bride talk he'd been anticipating all day, frowned in puzzlement. "Ready for what, Severus?"

Severus seated himself on the old sofa and indicated that Harry join him. He took an appreciative sip of brandy and sighed contentedly. "For the Granger Girls' Annual Christmas Eve Sofa Concert, of course."

As always, the witches were in fine form. After a few songs, Harry quietly asked, "You mean, they do this every year?" He watched Rose, awestruck. "I didn't even know they could sing like this."

"Every year since Rose was six," Severus said, placidly, his eyes on the saucy, wiggling bottom of his wife as she pranced around, singing her heart out. "And in all that time, you and I and have been the only privileged audience, except for the sofa." Hermione caught his eye and winked, and Severus raised an eyebrow in the way that carried a very clear message. She blushed prettily, and launched into the next song, to the thunderous applause of their adoring public.

They sang all the old favourites and some carols, and Rose announced a new addition to the repertoire. "Cynthia Brown, the American Charms professor, taught me a new song." She turned her attention to Severus. "When I first heard it, I immediately thought of you."

Severus scowled. "If you start singing about the Grinch, I shall not be amused,"

Rose rolled her eyes. "As if!" She smiled gently. "Seriously, it really reminds me of you."

He took Hermione's hand as she joined him on the sofa with Harry. "I shall look forward to it."

The music started and Rose smiled at Harry, then at her mother, and sang to Severus,

"Do you remember me? I sat upon your knee. I wrote to you with childhood fantasies.

Well, I'm all grown up now, but still need help somehow. I'm not a child but my heart still can dream.

So here's my lifelong wish, my grown-up Christmas list, not for myself, but for a world in need:

No more lives torn apart, and wars would never start, and time would heal all hearts.

Everyone would have a friend, that right would always win, and love would never end:

This is my grown-up Christmas list.

As children we believed the grandest sight to see was something lovely wrapped beneath the tree.

Well, heaven surely knows that packages and bows can never heal a hurting human soul.

What is this illusion called the innocence of youth? Maybe only in our blind belief can we ever find the truth!

There'd be... No more lives torn apart, and wars would never start, and time would heal all hearts.

Everyone would have a friend, that right would always win, and love would never end:

This is my grown-up Christmas list, this is my only lifelong wish, this is my Grown-up Christmas List..."

As the song ended, Hermione sniffled and she made a little moue of apology as Severus handed her his handkerchief. Harry said rather hoarsely, "I think I'd like to put in my order for that list as well, Rosie."

Rose smiled at Harry, then looked at Severus expectantly, and he could tell in her expression she knew his thoughts. He cleared his throat. "Albus used to say that music was a magic far beyond all we do." He gave Rose a tremulous smile. "I hate when the old poof is right."

Everyone laughed, and Rose looked at Severus and Hermione, and her eyes filled. "You know, all those years ago when you took me to see Father Christmas. Remember, Severus? The year you came to live with Mum and me?"

Severus, not trusting his voice, merely nodded. She returned his nod, understanding. "Well, this is what I asked for. A home filled with those I love most in the world." Her voice broke, and the tears spilled over her eyes. "I got my wish!" She kissed her parents, then Harry, then turned back to Severus. The affection in her eyes was just as warm and gentle as the first day she'd breezed into his life, dropping his breakfast tray on the floor in her excitement at finding him awake.

This little girl saved my life, Severus thought, not for the first time. *In every possible way a life can be saved* He knew of no one else, even his beloved wife, whom it could be said had loved him from the moment they met, and whose opinion of him had never wavered.

Softly, he replied, "It was the same thing I asked Father Christmas for that year as well, Rose." He kissed her cheek. "I told you he was listening."

Hermione sniffed. "Gods, we are turning into such a bunch of sops!" She laughed, sweeping a tear from her lashes.

"Speak for yourself, Madam," Severus said loftily, then brought his wife's hand to his lips. He retrieved his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "Now dry your tears, woman. You still have a grand finale to sing."

All good things come to an end Severus thought, as Hermione and Rose began their last song. It was the traditional finale since the Christmas after his and Hermione's marriage. The bell-like melody chimed out, then the first chord was struck, and Severus' smiled as Rose began,

"I don't want a lot for Christmas, there is just one thing I need,"

Hermione took up the next line,

"I don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree,"

Together, the girls put their hands to their hearts and sang,

I just want you for my own, more than you will ever know,

Make my wish come true, All I Want For Christmas Is You.

And off they went, prancing and singing, going through the paces of their little chorus line dance, singing like no one was listening, save the sofa. It was the same as it had been every year, and even though he knew how it always ended, Severus was filled with a momentary wistfulness.

For in the past twenty years, as they sang the last line, *"All I Want For Christmas Is You!"* both girls would launch themselves at him, covering him with hugs and kisses until he declared them unfit for a dignified person such as himself. They would laugh and hold him tighter, telling him he hadn't had his quota of hugs and kisses yet. And he would accept their accolades with an air of quiet resignation which fooled no one, least of all himself.

And then there had been that Christmas three years ago, when Hermione was still recovering from the awful accident. Unable to stand for long periods, she had sung the song sitting on his knee, and he and Rose had wept as he held his two witches, knowing that they'd nearly lost her, and how precious she was. She had been their real Christmas gift that year. The song had taken on new significance for him, and he'd looked forward to it since.

But this year, even though he would again welcome his wife into his arms, Rose would be going to another, for the song was no longer sung just to him anymore. *It is fitting*, he told himself, smiling at his girls. *Be happy, Rose. Make your wizard as happy as you and your mother have made me, and I can let you go with a full heart. Even to Harry Potter.*

The song was nearing its final, climactic moment, and Severus leaned over and said to Harry, "You'd better brace yourself, Potter," just as the two women rushed toward the sofa, laughing and singing, and suddenly Severus' arms were full of witches, and the love of his life and the daughter of his heart were hugging and laughing and covering *his* face with lipsticked kisses and his heart leapt with the thought, *They chose me!* and close on its heels was the thought, *They will always choose me. That is my gift.*

He was holding on to them so tightly their ribs squeaked and they grunted and Potter was laughing at them, but Severus didn't care. His heart was full, like the arms that held the best parts of his life together, and would always chose him and him alone. His arms were full.

His arms were full.

Finite Incantatum

I Wonder as I Wander Appalachian Carol

My Grown-up Christmas List Amy Grant

All I Want For Christmas Mariah Carey

A Child Is Born - Wilder/Jones