

Suffering From a Little Christmas Cheer

by Betz

This schmaltzy fic was inspired by Southern_Witch_69's 2005 WIKTT "How Could It Be Christmas Challenge." Severus Snape has been exonerated for the crime of killing Albus Dumbledore, but wizarding society still shuns him. Hermione wants to help some poor soul for Christmas, as she will be spending it alone since she broke up with Ron recently, and her parents are going away for the holidays and didn't invite her along. This story was written originally in 2005 and is not DH compliant.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This schmaltzy fic was inspired by Southern_Witch_69's 2005 "How Could It Be Christmas Challenge". I -loosely- adapted aspects #3 and #4 of the challenge, and ignored the rest of the requirements after #4. You can read the full details of the challenge here: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Potter_Place/conversations/messages/4127

- 1. It's preferred if the story takes place after sometime after HBP where Snape has been exonerated of his crimes, but people still shun him no matter that he helped Potter in the end.*
- 2. The pairing is S. Snape and H. Granger.*
- 3. A happy Hermione is in Diagon Alley buying last-minute Christmas gifts when she notices Professor Snape entering a shop. That one action ruins her festive mood because she feels that everyone should have someone to spend Christmas with.*
- 4. Hermione decides to ask Snape to accompany her to Christmas dinner:*
 - He must refuse her invitation initially.*
 - How she persuades him is up to you.*

- *He must end up obliging her request.*

- *Dinner can be at any number of places*

This fic was originally posted on my LiveJournal account back in December 2005, andt is AU, as it was written before Deathly Hallows was published.

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It was the first peacetime Christmas in what felt like a very long time. Ever since Voldemort's demise during the summer, the wizarding world seemed to be in a perpetual state of revelry. The normally cheerful Christmas season bubbled over with effusive joy this particular year.

This pleased all the shopkeepers in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, as witches and wizards spent money like it was going out of style, grateful they had all made it to the end of the war and lived. This gratitude translated into shopping sprees and optimism of the most material kind. Everyone was in a giving spirit with presents, warm smiles, and good will towards all.

Hermione had been caught up in the mood and even took to wearing a sprig of holly, a symbol of goodwill and peace, tucked into her bun as a sign of her Yuletide spirit. That spirit was dampened with the news that her parents, the Grangers, were going on a Caribbean cruise for the Christmas holidays and did not think to ask Hermione if she would like to come along.

"We thought that you would like to stay here with your friends for Christmas, the same as you have most years since you started Hogwarts," Mrs. Granger explained to her daughter.

"But I..." Hermione knew it was silly, as Christmases past predicted she would be spending the holiday season with Harry and Ron again, but this year she had wanted to spend the holidays with her parents. Everyone seemed to be celebrating with a strong emphasis on family, and Hermione had wanted to do that as well. She wanted to cry and felt childish for it, but held back her tears, putting on a brave face instead. "You and Dad have a wonderful time. Come back with a tan for all the neighbors and your patients to envy."

Hermione had failed to mention to her mother that she and Ron had broken up shortly before Halloween, and so she was not exactly welcome to stay at the Burrow this Christmas. Ron and Hermione had parted on good terms, but none of that mattered to the Weasley matron. Molly interpreted Hermione's break-up as if she'd been slighted herself, remarking about how an upstart of a witch had dumped **her** precious Ronniekins.

And so, walking around Diagon Alley four days before Christmas, Hermione smiled only a little bit when she saw a group of enchanted dolls in a window display break into carols, entertaining the children who watched with their noses pressed up against the window.

"Mummy, can I have the one in the blue dress with blond ringlets for Christmas?" a little girl begged.

The girl evoked memories of Hermione's childhood during this time of year. She remembered one particular holiday shopping season when she, as a small child, kept asking her mother for everything that caught her fancy in the store windows. Her mother told her that she could not have everything she wanted. "Hermione, you should be thankful you have everything you need. There are people less fortunate than you, especially children who do not have presents to look forward to on Christmas morning, people who do not have anyone to share the day with or food to put on the table."

The thought of people hungry and alone on Christmas with no presents to open or family to spend the day with had made adult-Hermione nearly burst into tears on top of her already melancholy state. She silently chastised herself for still being a thoughtless, greedy little girl and made a promise to herself to think of others first. Besides, a project to help others always cheered her up.

Looking at the bright and hopeful girl with pleading eyes, yanking on the sleeve of her mother's robes, Hermione suddenly decided to mentally slap herself and get out of her little pity-party just because her parents had presumed she would not be joining them this year, and Molly wasn't rolling out the welcome mat for her either. Of course, Harry had invited her to come stay with him at Grimmauld Place, but he would be spending Christmas day at the Burrow with Ginny and the rest of his adopted magical family.

There are people out there who lost family and will be all alone this Christmas, and here I am being selfish when I still have my parents, Harry and Ron around after the war. The whole Weasley family has to deal with the fact that Percy is no longer around.

Hermione decided to make it her personal mission to make some less fortunate soul's Christmas a little more cheerful this year.

But who do I know who will be spending Christmas alone?

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Severus Apparated directly to the parlor of his dilapidated home, thankful that the day had finally come to an end.

Yes, his name had been cleared of Albus Dumbledore's death by a well-hidden collection of thoughts the old Headmaster released to the Ministry Aurors posthumously, once the war was over. All the details of the Pensieve were corroborated by the portrait of Albus hanging in the office of Hogwarts' Headmistress, Professor McGonagall. Though Severus Snape, ex-professor and ex-Death Eater had been exonerated, no one was willing to give him the time of day, much less a job.

Even purveyors of eclectic finds and unusual potions in Knockturn Alley would not even entertain the idea of hiring Severus to brew some of the more legally questionable potions their clients requested. Severus had been branded a two-timing traitor and fence-sitting turncoat by the seedier side of the wizarding world. The more respectable segment of the wizarding world had less kind words than that when describing the man.

Minerva was pressured by the Ministry and several groups of parents from offering Severus his old job of Potions master at Hogwarts. The official Ministry letter explained that parents had expressed grave concern over letting their children be taught by a wizard who had murdered fellow staff members. What was to stop him from murdering the children, too?

Flopping without an ounce of grace into a sagging and worn upholstered chair by the fire, Severus groaned aloud.

"Accio muscle ointment." It took the last of his remaining strength to Summon the jar.

Fortunately, a bottle of cheap rotgut was already next to his chair, so he did not need to Summon that as well. After a couple hearty swings of alcohol, praying the stuff would not destroy the lining of his stomach before he finished the bottle, Severus sank back into his chair.

Once he finally pulled his shirt off, he began rubbing the ointment on his tired muscles, especially his biceps which felt like wobbly rubber bands.

"If I have to spend another day dumping broken chunks of cement into a skip, I may just decide to poison myself," Severus grumbled aloud. A few magic spells here and there would have lightened his workload, but with his reputation, he dared not risk using magic in a Muggle workplace and drawing attention from Aurors who would hex first, ask later.

He could not complain too much. At least he had a job this week.

Since the war ended, money had been tight, as he had to rely upon his savings to live off of. His savings had been heavily depleted during his years of spying because Voldemort had no fortune of his own to support his unemployed Death Eaters, and the Malfoy family claimed financial hardship. Actually, it was Lucius Malfoy's ego that

was broken with Severus' elevation to "most loyal follower" after the death of Dumbledore. The Dark Lord could force his followers to bestow their eternal souls unto him, but he could not get the Malfoys to part with a few hundred Galleons to throw Severus' way.

But now that peace reigned in the wizarding world, the only place Severus could find employment was in the Muggle world. He could not exactly claim to have worked at some "magical learning institution" in the Scottish Highlands without proof of employment, and the use of magic to forge Muggle documents such as school A-level and O-level certificates was restricted to official Hogwarts and Ministry business.

Thus, the former professor was relegated to finding work from those Muggles who would pay him cash, under the table. Mostly these jobs consisted of back-breaking manual labor where no one really bothered to check to see if they even had an education, much less a reputable job history. As long as Severus showed up like the other barely literate schlumps, and put in a good day's work, he got paid. Right now, money was all that was keeping cheap alcohol and the odd, stale Cornish pasty in his stomach.

Fortunately, his parents had eventually wound up completely owning the dwelling on Spinner's End, but Severus still had to pay the property taxes annually, and those would be due next in the spring. He did not want to think so far in the future when just making it from day to day was enough to keep him worn down.

Still, the demolition of the Muggle building he was working on was almost complete, and he could only hope that they might hire someone who had minimal carpentry skills. As much as he hated his father for forcing him to work during his summers before he came of age, carpentry was a skill that was pretty useful in the Muggle world, though it had been years since he had exercised it and even shunned it in an attempt to forget his Muggle heritage. If they wouldn't hire him on, Severus had overheard a few migrant workers talking about heading down to Cornwall for when the flower and produce harvesting season picked up later that winter. Not that the other workers mentioned this to him, as Severus was just as anti-social in the Muggle world as he was in the wizarding world.

He was a man caught between two worlds: a notorious outcast in one and an anonymous outcast in the other.

There wasn't much holding Severus to Britain, except that he had a place to live that he did not have to pay for, save for the annual property tax demanded from the Crown.

Spinner's End was not such a bad place to live, if you didn't mind the constant drafts through the paper-thin walls, the dry rot eating the place from the inside out, and the musty smell that pervaded everything, including the grey water that came from the tap. Also, there were the mice, who were particularly fond of Severus' rarer editions of Potions books, at least the ones he hadn't sold off. He didn't repair the dry rot damage for the same reason why he didn't fix his house...he was not particularly fond or attached to it, but not willing to move away. It was a love-hate thing with that house; he had bad memories growing up there, but it was paid for.

At least he would get a couple days of rest in a few days with Christmas and Boxing Day approaching, but for now, he was thankful no one else inhabited the run-down row houses on his street. He could not bear to see the cheery twinkling lights of another Christmas tree prominently displayed in a front parlor window or hear the sound of another bloody carol from those who were misled into believing that everyone wished to be a willing victim to the seasonal cheer that infected everyone...except Severus.

Offing himself with a nice painless poison certainly appealed to Severus at times, but he'd promised Albus that he Severus would continue to live. Only that promise kept him from seriously pulling out his cauldron and foraging for some deadly nightshade that he had noticed growing wild in an empty dirt lot behind the abandoned mill.

The fire was burning low, and the copper pot next to the hearth was empty. Severus knew he should have poached some firewood from some Muggle's back stoop, but he was so exhausted that he'd barely been able to Apparate home in the first place.

"I'll get some firewood in the morning," he promised himself before falling asleep in his chair, unmotivated to bother going to his bed or covering himself up, instead letting the alcohol alone keep him warm for now.

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To Hermione's amazement, the Ministry of Magic even after the war had no social welfare offices or anything of the like to help wizarding families that were experiencing financial hardship. It seemed that the general attitude was that if you worked and had a wand, then you could provide for yourself. There were no other departments for Hermione to harass with her offer to help those less fortunate.

Resigned to spending Christmas alone with nothing to do, Hermione traveled by Floo over to Hogsmeade for some Christmas tea over at Madam Puddifoot's. While she nibbled on a cranberry and sultana scone, she saw Professor McGonagall sweep into the small shop.

"Headmistress!" Hermione said, waving her old Head of House over to join her, as all the other tables were packed with other people who'd had the same idea as Minerva.

"Miss Granger, what a pleasant surprise," the elder witch replied. She joined Hermione for tea and explained that she was in between doing some last-minute Christmas shopping for members of the staff and her sister.

Over the course of an hour and a couple pots of tea, Hermione was given an update on the goings-on around the castle since she left months ago, after taking her N.E.W.T.s. Minerva was brought up to date on Hermione's apprenticeship with a very talented Potions master by the name of Tompkin Miller, the possibility of finishing her apprenticeship by next summer, and her currently single status.

"Well, it's not a common custom, but even if you are not a member of the staff, you are welcome to join me at Hogwarts for Christmas dinner, Hermione," the Headmistress offered.

"Oh, thank you. That's very kind. I was hoping to find some way to keep my mind off the fact I'll be spending Christmas day alone. I've been trying to find some witch or wizard who doesn't have enough money for a proper Christmas dinner to help out. In the Muggle world, around this time of year, a lot of people donate time and money to help others who are not so fortunate. Some people volunteer at shelters and soup kitchens for the day to help feed the poor and homeless. I guess I was surprised that there is not that sort of need for help in the wizarding world," Hermione said.

"Oh, there are witches and wizards who need exactly that sort of help; it's just that they are very few and far between. They are usually too proud or too ashamed to go to the Ministry to ask for help," Minerva explained, then muttered under her breath, "or too stubborn." She took a sip of tea, studying Hermione over the rim of her cup. "Since they do not come to the Ministry for help, the Ministry does not officially know of any people who need it; therefore, no such agency or department exists."

The Headmistress set down her tea cup and folded her fingers in front of her. "However, I do know of one or two people who are... stuck. The one wizard I know is currently without a steady job and, as I recently understand it, is living hand-to-mouth."

Hermione leaned forward and listened to McGonagall's tale of a lonely wizard who was too proud or stubborn to ask for help, would not accept anyone's invitation to come to Christmas dinner, but most probably deep down inside wouldn't mind a bit of Christmas cheer, though he'd never admit it aloud. Once or twice, Hermione found herself slightly misty-eyed as Minerva's tale went on, equal to any Dickensian tale of unfortunate souls who got a bit of bad luck in life, lost and forgotten after slipping through the cracks of the government and society.

"So you sent him an invitation and he refused?" Hermione asked, wiping at her nose before tucking her handkerchief away.

"Well, I was about to send it to him tonight, but I know what his answer will be."

"And no one will hire him?" Hermione asked, wondering why a wizard of talent was not working in these economically booming times.

Minerva smiled sardonically. "Who would hire the man who killed Albus Dumbledore?"

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Severus was going to eat a half-way decent meal tonight. His boss at the work site decided to hand out Christmas bonuses since the job was going faster than expected and under budget. The money was appreciated by all, as the town had never quite recovered from when the local mine closed down in the mid-eighties.

It had been a while since Severus had food to actually store in his cupboard. The bonus hadn't purchased much, but it was enough to keep him fed for a few days. He now had some tea, a bag of rice, a loaf of bread, a box of crackers, a couple tins of meat, some vegetables, butter and a few apples. There might even be something to eat on Christmas day, if he rationed his food.

The rest of his bonus had been spent on cheap alcohol to help keep him warm and forget how damn cold the house was, even when he stole enough firewood to get a good fire burning. He could have used a warming charm, but he was usually so worn out at the end of the day that he preferred to use alcohol to warm his bones. The cold room was an excuse to drink a lot. If the room was warm, then he would have one less reason to explain away why he drank as much as he did.

He had learned earlier that day that there would be no work tomorrow, Christmas Eve. All of his co-workers cheered while Severus grumbled that it was another day he wasn't going to get paid. The rest of the day Severus' co-workers went on about family and friends they were going to have over or visit for the Christmas hols. No one bothered asking Severus what he was doing. Nobody wanted to bother to feel obligated to invite him over if they discovered he was doing nothing, all by himself for Christmas.

His belly was now full of brown bread, instant gravy and some disgusting tinned corned beef that was only palatable due to the salty gravy. Severus settled in front of the fire, stretching his feet out, soaking up the heat of a crackling fire that warmed his icy toes.

An old song his father learned during The Slump and war years as a boy came back to haunt Severus. He could hear his father's baritone voice echoing throughout the house, like an old memory that would not go away, but wished he could wipe it clean from his mind. Severus began to unconsciously hum along with the memory of his father's voice.

On Monday we have bread and gravy,

On Tuesday it's gravy and bread,

On Wednesday it's white bread and gravy.

On Thursday it's rye bread instead,

On Friday the treat that ends up the week

We have gravy without any bread.

The song reminded Severus of meager dinners as a boy. He hated that song.

Severus was peacefully drifting off to sleep in his chair, groggy on plonk, when an annoying tapping at the window roused him.

It had been a while since Severus had an Owl from anyone, and he was actually curious for once to see who the hell was writing to him. The last letter he received via Owl was from Minerva, telling him she had exhausted all her connections and that no one was willing to hire him to even scrub cauldrons. He wondered if she realized that many of the children he'd given detention to over the years had whispered secretly to one another that they would pay to see Snape scrub cauldrons for the rest of his life.

After removing the letter from the plain brown owl, Severus broke the Hogwarts wax seal. He was not surprised to find Minerva writing to him again. It seemed that of the few people in the world still willing to deal with him, Minerva was one of the few he didn't mind hearing from. She did not look at him with the same teary or piteous look that Molly or Arthur would give him. Neither was she like Kingsley, regarding him skeptically, weighing the claim that Albus really did ask Severus to kill him, despite the evidence that exonerated him. Minerva dealt with him with respect and in the no-nonsense manner that she used when dealing with most people, Severus being no exception.

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*Dear Severus,*

*I know you do not want a long preamble, so I shall get to the point of my letter quickly. I am inviting you to Christmas dinner. You do not have to come to socialize beforehand, and you are not required to stick around afterwards, but your company during dinner would be appreciated by me. You are still my friend.*

*Though you always made a fuss about having to suffer Albus' cheer around the holidays, you would not have to worry about that from me. Flitwick has retired, and the new Charms teacher does not have his flare for decorating, so the decorations this year are much more subdued.*

*If you are unable to join me and a few staff members for dinner, then please stop by for a drink of sherry some evening.*

*Kindest regards,*

*Minerva*

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Though the offer for free food and alcohol sounded tempting, he did not want to suffer Minerva's good intentions. She never pitied Severus, but she'd certainly worn him down on her many offers to try and find some way for him to get him a job through the friend of a cousin that was the dressmaker for a wizard who worked for a Potions manufacturing firm...or something of the like. His old friend meant well, but it felt degrading.

Severus dreaded that he was walking down the same path as his Muggle father, shuffling into an employer's office, hat in his hand, so to speak, begging and scraping for the privilege of working. He wasn't going to do that, as he knew what to expect. Everyone would berate him on how far he had fallen and that a murderer like him didn't deserve respect, or even to live. That happened on a regular basis just venturing down Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley during his brief forays back into the magical world. In some ways it was better to only have himself know how far he had fallen, instead of the whole magical community who took great delight in rubbing it in his face.

Chuckling the letter into the fire, it sparkled and glowed briefly before being consumed by the flames. Little flakes of ash flitted up the chimney flue.

Back at Hogwarts, a little pile of ash appeared on Minerva's desk. The Headmistress had Severus' answer to her invitation.

Minerva grabbed a piece of parchment and began writing a letter to Hermione.

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An urgent tapping at the window woke Hermione from a restful night's sleep. Toeing on her slippers, she dashed to the window and threw open the sash. A Hogwarts owl hopped in and settled on top of Hermione's desk, ruffling its feathers and scattering little clumps of wet snow all over her notes and books.

With a swish of her hand, she dried the snow off her desk and the owl, double-checking to make sure there were no water stains left behind. She removed the letter from the owl's leg, then gave the bird a treat before it took off into the morning air.

Reading Minerva's letter, Hermione began to think of what she would do to get ready. After finishing her ablutions, she left the little apprentice cottage set near the back of the Potions master Miller's property. As she passed through the Potions garden, her cloak looking like it was becoming frosted from the light snow that fell, she examined the hellebore plants poking their maroon, green and white flowers through the snow.

Those rose hips look like they have ripened enough. I should mention that to Mr. Miller this morning. He may want me to harvest them today.

Hermione stepped through the back door and into the mudroom. She shook off her cloak that had gathered snow during her brief walk and set it on the peg by the door. Stepping into the kitchen, she was greeted by Mr. Miller's wife, Deirdre.

"Happy Christmas Eve, Hermione!"

"Happy Christmas Eve to you, Deirdre." Hermione liked the Potions master's wife, who had become like the witch-grandmother she'd never had, imparting bits of magical wisdom to Hermione each day. "And to you, Mr. Miller."

Though Deirdre insisted that Hermione call her by her first name, Tompkin Miller insisted on calling each other by their formal names, reminding Hermione of a certain other Potions master she knew. She had been thinking about Severus Snape quite a lot since coming across Professor McGonagall the other day in Hogsmeade

"Happy Christmas Eve, Miss Granger," the elderly Potions master replied gruffly.

"The rose hips look like they are ready for harvesting. The hellebores are emerging through the snow, too," Hermione said. Her daily morning report on the status of the garden and its plants was part of her apprenticeship duties.

"Ah, good. Christmas roses harvested on Christmas day fetch an excellent price," Mr. Miller commented. "The magic held within them is twice as potent than if harvested any other day. I'll show you how to do that tomorrow. I don't like to work or make you work on Christmas, but it has been five years since we've had a harvest on Christmas day."

"Oh," Hermione said. She was a little disheartened, wondering if she'd spend all day processing hellebore flower parts and unable to fulfill her new plans.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger. It's just half an hour of work in the garden, then setting them in the drying shed. You should be done in less than two hours," he assured her, seeing her crestfallen face.

Hermione perked up, knowing she'd have time to prepare what she needed to do on Christmas day. "What needs to be done today?" she asked. "I just found out I need to do some last-minute Christmas shopping."

"Then the rose hips can wait until after Boxing Day, Miss Granger. You best be off, as the stores will be packed today."

Hermione thanked her Master for the day off and trooped back through the snow to her cottage to prepare a list of everything she would need for Christmas day. Minerva had given her several ideas and suggestions.

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Bored, with nothing to do on Christmas Eve, Severus began drinking shortly after breakfast. He didn't feel like venturing out of his home, as it was still much colder outside than it was inside. For once Severus cast a warming charm, not wanting to relive another Christmas Eve in a cold house like he did so many times in his youth.

The day went by quickly, mostly spent going over the few Potions books he had left. This included his cherished first edition of *Delgado's Compendium of Mediterranean Plants for Potions*, created before the Spanish Inquisition made all subsequent printings obliterate all references to the magical properties of the plants listed. When he wasn't reading, he was drinking.

By the time night fell, Severus began considering to break his promise to Albus.

"Dumbledore is dead. He's not exactly around anymore," he mused aloud with a slur, examining the fire in the grate through the golden amber of the cheap Scotch he was currently swilling directly from the bottle. "What's to stop him from letting me kill myself?"

Even during the darkest days of the war, when it appeared that all his sacrifice for the Order was all for naught and that the Dark Lord might win, the fight in Severus would not allow him to give up. But the war was over, and Severus found little purpose to his life. He worked not for a sense of purpose to his life, but the fact it was easier to break his back with manual labor than to sit at home and starve to death. A wizard's magic would keep him alive long after a Muggle would have wasted away from starvation. Severus did not care to feel the pangs of insatiable hunger for weeks or months on end. Poison was a much easier route to go, though much more proactive in its end goal of death.

Raising the half-empty bottle of Scotch in a mock toast to the fire, Severus made a promise to himself. "If this Christmas winds up being the most depressing one yet, then I'll kill myself come New Year's Eve."

He chugged the Scotch down, unable to feel it burn its way down to his stomach, as he was already drunk.

To death, and the end of a wasted and thankless life.

Images of Albus Dumbledore struck by the curse cast by his own wand played over and over in his nightmares. This made him sleep restlessly, too drunk to wake himself from the night terrors.

He did not hear the Owl come in and drop off a small package by his feet in the middle of the night.

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Waking to cheery thoughts of things to do and ways to be useful, Hermione opened the few presents she had received from Harry, her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, and even a small gift from Ron to show he still thought of her as a friend. She knew she had a lot of cooking to do, besides her chore of harvesting and drying the hellebore flowers, so Hermione started her work immediately.

With driven purpose to provide a bit of Christmas cheer to Severus Snape that day, Hermione placed the small rib roast into the oven before going out into the Christmas snow to harvest the hellebores. She preferred a roast turkey for Christmas dinner, but Minerva had told her in her letter the other day that a nice rib roast would guarantee that Snape would have dinner with her.

As she had things cooking in her little kitchen of the potions apprentice's cottage, she was thankful that Molly had taught her some very useful cooking and housekeeping spells before she'd broken things off with Ron. She cast an Undetectable Extension Charm on the picnic hamper, the same spell that was used on the Weasleys' borrowed tent at the Quidditch World Cup. Then Hermione began loading the hamper with platters and bowls of food cast with stasis charms. The stasis charms would keep food hot and ready for serving and prevent it from cooking any further during the trip to Spinner's End...and during the time it might take to convince Snape that she was not some Polyjuiced Death Eater bent on revenge.

Hermione did have a small letter from Minerva to vouch for the sincerity of her presence when she arrived later that day. Still, she hoped she would not have to defend herself from any sudden hexes when she showed up on Snape's doorstep.

Once the hamper was packed with everything, Hermione double-checked herself in the mirror. She smoothed down a festive forest-green velvet dress she had bought

earlier that year in hopes of wearing it to the Burrow before she broke up with Ron.

"Well, I bought it to wear for Christmas," she said to her own reflection. "When else am I going to get to wear it?"

"There's always New Year's Eve," the mirror quipped back.

Hermione ignored the mirror and put on her good winter cloak. One last check of the hamper, and Hermione Apparated away to Severus Snape's home town.

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The room appeared darker than normal in the morning light. Severus wasn't even sure if it was morning, as the light was weak similarly to the late afternoon. A glance at the clock confirmed that it was indeed morning.

A quick heating charm on the windows removed the snow and frost that diminished the watery light. As it was, the sky was iron grey as snow flurries coated the ground in a blanket of bluish-white.

Huddled at the kitchen table, Severus wrapped his long fingers around the steaming mug of tea. He had a pair of woolen socks on to keep his toes warm, but he was still chilled to the bone.

You'd think in a town that mined coal, there would be coal to burn. Even if the mine shut down over ten years ago.

Severus didn't want coal to burn; he wanted wood. Wood that held the magic of the world within its fiber, with the potential with a magical beast's essence for a core to create glorious things or to destroy the world with mere words and intent.

Severus' father, Tobias, used to come home from the mines covered with coal dust, leaving a black trail of it as he trudged through the house up to the bath to soak away his tired muscles from a long day in the mines. Now it seemed that Severus had become like his father, coming home at the end of another back-breaking day of work, drinking his worries and cares away on cheap alcohol and growing more miserable with each passing day.

He pulled on his coat and boots and sneaked out to a new street. There he had scoped out for wood readily available, left on the porch by some trusting Muggle, who would no doubt wonder what the world was coming to when people would steal firewood.

After gathering enough wood, knowing that people would be too busy dealing with children unwrapping presents to bother checking into that shadow slipping up past the front gate and near the wood pile, Severus went back home. Two or three logs in the grate, a quick spell to ignite the wood, and Severus was finally feeling toasty warm in front of the fire. Well, the fortified wine helped too, but that was beside the point.

Staring at the fire, he let his mind drift away, hypnotized by the flames dancing and licking at the air. He was pleasantly relaxed as the morning advanced into the afternoon. His mind was blank and without thought when he felt the wards he'd set at the end of his abandoned street hum, signaling the arrival of someone.

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Hermione Apparated near the end of the town of Ossett. It looked like any other small town in the West Riding district of Yorkshire: rolling hills covered in snow, a small city center with a few church spires defining the outline, a river flowing past a main part of town. The road Hermione was now standing by was deserted that Christmas afternoon.

Recalling the landmarks Minerva gave Hermione in her letter, the young witch began to walk through the snow towards a smoke stack that looked like it hadn't been used in a few years; the bricks were worn and weathered over decades, possibly a century or more. As she turned down the street listed as Spinner's End, Hermione wondered if the old abandoned brick-built mill by the smoke stack was once a textile mill. Stepping onto the sidewalk that would lead to Snape's house, Hermione knew that the wizard would know of her arrival, as she could sense his wards, as subtle as they were.

Most of the row houses had lost their numbers years before, having been vacated and unlivable for ages. It was easy for Hermione to tell which house Snape lived in, as it was the only one with smoke coming out of the flue along the rooftop.

She stood before the door for a moment so that Snape could see who was there, if he even cared at all. Raising a hesitant hand to the black door with peeling paint, Hermione knocked.

The door opened, and she found herself in one of the more uncomfortable situations in her life. Hermione had never mentally divorced the image of Snape from Hogwarts, even after killing Albus Dumbledore. The black-clad professor's spirit seemed to be lurking around every corner of the school like a ghost, even though he was still alive and no longer taught there. And now Hermione was at the door to his private home, seeing him standing in a pair of worn, dirty blue jeans, a jumper with a rather obvious run trailing down the shoulder, and a pair of thick dark blue socks. He was glaring at her as if she was a door-to-door salesman trying to hawk her dubious wares. To ever imagine what Snape looked like at home, out of his black teaching robes or some black billowing cloak, was hard to do. Seeing him dressed as some unkempt common Muggle was even more awkward to witness.

"Mr. Snape," Hermione began. All morning long, she had rehearsed what she would say as soon as she set her eyes upon him. But now that the moment was here, words failed her. Taking a page from Minerva's handbook on how to deal with Snape, she brushed past him and into his home uninvited and began to get to work.

He waited for some explanation of her presence and was surprised when she barged right in. "Please come in, make yourself at home. Don't stand out there in the cold," Severus drawled in a very bored and dryly sarcastic manner, especially effective as Hermione was already inside his domicile.

Turning to regard the person she had elected to spend Christmas day with instead of moping back at her cottage all by herself, Hermione turned and smiled at him, trying to diffuse his attitude. "Don't mind if I do."

Nonplussed by the fact she had not gotten the hint she was not welcome, Severus folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the door jamb. The only reason he'd closed the door instead of keeping it open in hopes he would be chucking her back out was that he had finally gotten the house warm enough so that he didn't freeze his arse off every time he went to the loo.

"Let me guess. Minerva sent you," he said mutinously, glaring at her. "I don't need her or your pity, especially because it's Christmas."

Hermione looked at him and tried to give him a cheerful smile, but it was tinged with a little sadness. "You're confusing pity with compassion. Actually, I was complaining to Minerva a few days ago that I was going to be spending Christmas alone, and she suggested that we could at least keep each other company for the day. Why should we both sit at home alone when we can enjoy the day together?" Hermione reasoned.

"Let me make this clear. I will not enjoy your company, and if you think you will enjoy mine, I will make a point of being so unpleasant you will reconsider. I was rather enjoying my day alone. I suggest you go home," Severus suggested grimly.

Hermione's smile became a little more self-determined, and she hefted her food hamper onto the small wooden table in the kitchen area. Opening the hamper lid, she inhaled in an overly exaggerated manner.

Exhaling, she sighed, "What a pity. I have a nice rib roast with gravy, roasted Brussels sprouts, and potatoes for Christmas dinner." Hermione looked at him with an air of false detachment when she began to close the hamper lid and added, "But if you prefer, I can just take this back home and have twice as many leftovers for myself."

The scent of roasted, savoury meat hit Severus' nostrils, and he suddenly felt a strong and gnawing hunger pain rip through his stomach. It had been a while since he had

cooked or eaten a well-prepared meal, especially one that smelled as good as any the house-elves at Hogwarts would have cooked. He let go of the doorknob and walked over to the hamper in order to inspect the food. He wanted to make sure it was real food and not some olfactory illusion brought on by the appearance of Miss Granger.

His mouth watered as he spied the contents of the hamper and suddenly reconsidered the option of suffering Miss Granger's presence in order to have a truly decent meal.

"Very well, you can stay, but right after dinner I insist you must leave," the raven-haired wizard demanded.

"Fine," Hermione agreed, trying her best not to look triumphant. In his haste to eat, Snape never stipulated how long dinner was to last, she noted. "First, a little decor." Upon seeing the scowl plastered across his face, she amended her statement. "Nothing much, just something a little... festive."

After surveying the main room, Hermione selected a footstool by a well worn chair and Transfigured it into a Christmas tree with silver and gold ornaments.

"Silver and gold. How diplomatic of you, Miss Granger," he sneered, secretly preferring it to the gilded-lily decorating job Flitwick used to do in the Great Hall.

"Would you prefer red and gold?" Hermione sweetly said with a hint of threat as she looked at him. She would treat him with respect, but she had spent seven years directing Ron and Harry managing their study time, reminding them of homework, directing their efforts against Voldemort. Getting Snape to eat a good and free dinner was easy.

Severus sulked off to the cooker to make himself a cup of tea. "I suppose I should be hospitable and offer you a cup of tea, too," he grumbled.

"That would be lovely."

Hermione went to inspect the transfigured Christmas tree to make sure none of the ornaments had the footstool's upholstery pattern left on them. As she neared the bookcase, her breath caught in her chest. "You have a copy of *Wei Chan's Journal: Tales of a Potions Master From the Silk Road*?" she asked breathlessly.

Her hand reached out as if to touch it to see if it was real. Mr. Miller, her Potions master, had talked lovingly about getting his hands on a copy when one came on the market, but he hadn't seen one in four decades. Before her fingers could brush along the spine, Severus cleared his throat.

"No, I do not have a copy," he stated plainly. "I have the original. That is merely a false cover to make it look like a copy."

Hermione's eyes grew even wider, and her hand shrunk back, afraid to touch it for fear that it might turn to dust in her hands. She turned back to Snape, who was still standing by the kitchen passageway watching her to make sure she would not steal any of his precious texts. She asked politely without trying to beg, "May I?" It came out like a squeak.

Severus smirked at her openly. "If you do not bother me with incessant and pointless chatter during dinner, *might* let you browse it."

Her eyes narrowed, but she knew she had the upper hand. Minerva had given Hermione a list of Severus's favorite foods that the house-elves had prepared over the years, and Hermione had most of them in her hamper.

By the time Hermione got back to the kitchen area, Snape had cast a few basic cleaning charms and made the area presentable for dinner. He decided it was better to skip tea and get right to dinner. Stepping back from the table, he held out his hand, signaling that Hermione should take care of the rest, since she was the one to bring dinner.

Her wand moved in a ballet of motion as a green plaid tablecloth accented with red settled over the table and properly sized itself with another stroke of her wand. Matching linen napkins, plates, flatware and glasses flew out of the hamper and set themselves on the table. A couple of pewter candlesticks shot out of the hamper, followed by candles and a small centerpiece of pine, holly and boxwood.

Severus watched, impressed by the control and economy of her movements. She did not stick her arms out to the side and flap them like some other witches did when doing complex wand work requiring above average skill. When she was done and the table was set, he bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment of her ability.

With his hand, he offered Hermione the opportunity to sit at the table.

Hermione finally removed her cloak and asked, "Where should I put this?"

Severus swallowed hard. *Damn*. Suddenly he was acutely aware that there was a woman in his home, not a student or girl, but a full grown witch with all the curves to prove that she was of the female persuasion.

"There was no need for you to dress so..." Suddenly words failed Severus, for the first time in years. Any words that were running through his mind, finishing his sentence, might come out entirely the wrong way. *Ravishing, stunning, breathtaking...* "... formally."

Hermione ducked her head down and tried not to blush, feeling a bit silly that she had gone through the trouble of cleaning up and making herself look presentable, and he seemed to have chided her about it.

"It's no bother. I bought this dress earlier this year with the intent to wear it on Christmas day anyway, but that was before..." She trailed off, not wanting to go into any more details than she had to.

"Before what, Miss Granger?" He could see her discomfort and was pleased by that, especially since he felt like he was dressed like a complete and utter slob in her presence.

"Before Ron and I broke up a few months ago," she stated, squaring her shoulders. She kept her head held high just waiting for Snape to begin his barrage of derogatory comments about Ron, but none came.

Aha, that's why she's here instead of spending the day with Potter and Weasley, he correctly surmised. Severus could have unleashed a slew of unflattering comments about the youngest Weasley boy, but the urge to make himself presentable won over.

"If you will excuse me, I think I will clean up before dinner," Severus said and went to his bedroom.

Hermione sighed with relief and leaned against a bookcase as she let out her breath. She had been ready to let Snape know that she and Ron were still on good terms and had a whole litany of other defensive remarks to make about the character of her ex-boyfriend, but Snape seemed to have diplomatically dropped the subject.

In his bedroom, Severus gave himself a sniff of himself and realized he probably hadn't had a bath or shower since before his last day of work. After using a few hygiene charms he knew to remove any dirt and odor from his body, he dressed quickly, picking out his familiar black trousers, white linen shirt and black frock coat practically his uniform at Hogwarts. His clothes didn't fit him like they were tailored anymore, but they still fit. He glanced at himself in the mirror and noticed that his hair was looking particularly unkempt and oily. A quick brushing of his lank locks made it look even more greasy.

God, I hate to do this, but... Severus began swirling his wand about his crown. *'Vidalis Fuscus!'*

Looking at the mirror, he could see that his hair was clean and shiny. It also was flyaway now. Pulling out a hair tie, he put his mane back into a ponytail at the base of his skull. He shrugged, figuring that at this point he didn't care if he looked as formally dressed as she was as if he cared what she thought because he was just too hungry to care anymore.

In the kitchen, Hermione suddenly heard Snape clearing his throat behind her as she uncorked the bottle of Beaujolais. She spun around and momentarily stared at him.

Hermione wasn't sure what to think. Currently she was stuck somewhere between *He's gotten thinner, if that's even possible*, and *He's put muscle on*. There wasn't an ounce on Snape that wasn't either bone, sinew, skin or whipcord muscle on him.

"You look nice," she said sincerely.

Severus snorted and replied, "There is no need to lie, Miss Granger."

"I'm not lying. You've put on muscle." That last sentence slipped out.

He suddenly felt awkward and decided it was best to get down to the business of eating instead of letting uncomfortable thoughts of sentimentality take over. In an uncharacteristic move, Severus decided to let the gentlemanly side of him come out for once, and he pulled out a chair for his dining companion.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Sitting across from one another, they studied each other briefly. Then Hermione pointed her wand to the hamper, making a tureen full of hot potato leek soup and two soup bowls rise from the hamper. After settling them down on the table, Hermione stood to serve the soup by hand.

Severus nodded his head in appreciation of her gracious hospitality when he accepted his bowl. It took all his strength not to dive right into the soup and consume it in a single slurp. He waited until Miss Granger sat back down, and they both began to eat at the same time.

He had always liked potato leek soup, especially the stuff the Hogwarts house-elves made, but this was the best tasting version he ever had. He knew it only tasted so good because he was famished.

Once the soup was eaten, Hermione charmed the bowls, spoons and tureen back into the hamper. A chilled bowl full of simple greens and a couple bottles of salad dressing were next to grace the table.

As they ate the salad, which cleansed the palate for the main course, Severus decided a little conversation would not be out of order.

"Tell me, Miss Granger: Just where did you learn about my book which you were admiring earlier? It's not exactly well-known," he commented in a low silky voice. For all he knew, she worked for Flourish & Blotts and had been sent here to see what other books he was getting ready to sell off for money.

"I have a Potions apprenticeship under Potions master Tompkin Miller," she informed him. "Recently there have been some rare editions coming onto the market, and Mr. Miller has been buying as many as he can. One of the books on his 'must buy' list is that one."

"Does he have a copy of *Haricort's Guide to Native American Tribal Potions of the Great Plains*?"

"Yes," she answered, a little surprised. "He just bought it at Flourish & Blotts."

"Does it have a tea stain in the shape of a crescent on the table of contents page?" Severus asked with keen interest.

"Why, yes wait, how did you know?" she asked with astonishment.

Severus sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest trying not to pout. "At least I know it is in good hands with Miller," he said with a scowl. "Don't worry, Miss Granger. It was the owner previous to me who left the tea stain on that page."

Before she could ask what other books Snape had sold recently, he asked, "What other books has Miller bought recently?"

Over the course of the salad, Hermione listed all the books Mr. Miller had bought while Severus checked them off in a mental list he had in his head. He had been worrying about those precious tomes falling into the hands of some clueless oaf who fancied himself a Potions hobbyist.

As the salad plates and serving bowl were put away, Hermione asked, "Besides the ones Mr. Miller has, what other books have you sold?"

Groaning, Severus put a hand over his face. "You don't want to know." It pained him to think of how one of his few pride and joys, his library, had been reduced from four walls of rare books and compendiums full of knowledge and ancient magical secrets to just one wall. When he saw her face truly wanting to know, he says in a deadpan voice, "I've lost three-quarters of my library."

Hermione sucked in her breath and shuddered. "I can only imagine what it would be like to lose so many of my books, especially ones that are so rare."

"I told you to spare me your pity, Miss Granger," he growled.

"It's my sympathy this time, Mr. Snape," she threw back, bristled by his hostility. "You might remember from Hogwarts that I am rather fond of books."

Hermione levitated the rib roast, potatoes and Brussels sprouts from the hamper and set them on the table, her mouth set in a stern, grim line. They had been having a pleasant discussion, and she felt like he was being a snake by biting off her head for no reason. She finally conceded that maybe if she was living in a dingy house and was losing her books, who were like her friends, one by one over time, she might be a bit touchy about the subject too.

"Why don't you carve the roast," Hermione suggested, allowing him the honor, not trusting herself with a knife in her hand after Snape's biting comment.

Severus suddenly felt out of place. It was always his father who had carved the roast at Christmas dinner at home. Now he was sitting with a witch, almost like they were on a date, and he was going to carve the roast like the head of his own house.

They ate in silence before Severus silently admitted to himself that Miss Granger was being polite with her last comment about his books.

"So, tell me what is it like studying under Miller? I hear he is a rather harsh taskmaster," Severus said, trying to pretend that the conversation had never even stopped.

"He is a bit demanding, but he let me have yesterday off so I could buy everything for the feast we have been enjoying today."

Severus's hand slipped and the flatware clattered a little bit. Stunned, he asked, "You mean you didn't stop by Hogwarts and get all this from the house-elves before coming over?"

Smiling and laughing, Hermione said, "Heavens, no. While I was harvesting some Christmas rose this morning for Mr. Miller his first batch in five years I had the roast in the oven. Though, I must confess, I did swing by a bakery in Diagon Alley to buy the plum pudding yesterday. I made the brandied sauce for it, though."

Feeling very humble, Severus realized that Miss Granger had not picked up their dinner already hot, but had personally prepared all this wonderful food that he had been enjoying so much. It was as good as any Hogwarts feast he could remember. It possibly tasted a little better because she had prepared it with the knowledge that she was going to share it with him that day.

Severus lifted his glass and proposed a toast, "To the cook of this fine Christmas feast."

Hermione raised her glass of Beaujolais and said, "To fine food, fine wine and fine company this Christmas day." She didn't know what prompted her to add the last "fine"

to her toast, but Snape gave her a very penetrating stare that was equally unnerving and thrilling.

"Cheers."

They clinked glasses and drank.

"My compliments to your selection of wine," he said, trying not to sound too complimentary.

"The wine merchant was very helpful." Hermione started to laugh a little and hid her smile behind her hand. "I'm sorry," she quickly apologized. "I had no idea how this dinner was going to go when Minerva first suggested that I come over to your place with Christmas dinner in hand. I thought you just might hex me as I stood in the doorway, thinking this was some sort of joke. Minerva must have thought the same thing too, because she gave me a letter to give to you before you could slam the door in my face."

Severus gave her a wry smile. "Minerva was probably correct in the assessment of my actions. May I have the letter?"

"It's in my cloak."

"Then I'll read it after dinner." *Well, I guess that means I won't be kicking her out the moment I'm done eating.* He did think that after all her hard work and graciousness under the circumstances, he could let her browse a few other rare books he still had.

They spent the rest of the dinner discussing Hermione's apprenticeship, and she in kind asked Snape about his own. Comparing antidotes like a game, recounting the various disgusting jobs they had to do as apprentices, Severus won with a tale about how he had not scrubbed a cauldron to his master's liking and had to scrape all the little dregs he missed off of the bottom of the cauldron, then eat them as a lesson to always make sure a cauldron is completely clean.

Hermione groaned and laughed. Severus found himself laughing too, now that the memory was so far behind that he could no longer feel incensed and shameful, as he was at the time of the event.

When dinner was over, Severus was too full to eat dessert yet.

Feeling soporific from a full belly, wine and possibly the effect of Hermione's genuine smile and warm company, Severus asked, "Would you care to join me by the fire so you can browse some of my books while dinner settles before we have dessert?"

Hermione nodded her head. "Thank you, that sounds wonderful." She paused a moment before saying, "Would this be the proper time to mention that I have some brandy for after dinner?"

Severus suddenly felt very pampered. It had been a long time since he had drunk anything without a bottle cap or a screw top. Suddenly remembering that he had no brandy snifters left, as he had destroyed them in a drunken rage some months back, he was relieved that Miss Granger had brought a pair of her own.

"Allow me," Severus said, feeling very unlike himself.

Maybe it had been the fact he was being treated with a little kindness and a little respect, but suddenly he didn't feel the need to lash out at Miss Granger anymore. Of course the bitterness that had been festering inside of him for most of his life had not left him, but the desire to express that bitterness abated in the few hours time they had spent in each other's company this Christmas day.

He poured a small measure for Hermione, handing it to her before pouring a glass for himself. Since there was only one chair by the fire, he conjured a slightly more comfy version of his for her to sit in.

Suddenly feeling like a grown up, Hermione sat down with her snifter of brandy and took a tentative gulp of it, choking on it slightly.

Severus laughed lightly. "You've never had brandy before?"

"Only in my tea," she admitted.

"Here." Severus leaned forward and showed her how to grasp the bowl of the snifter, placing both of her hands around it. "Allow the heat of your hands to warm the brandy. Some use a flame to warm the brandy, but I find that releases the scent of it too quickly, and you lose some of the subtleties of the particular vintage."

Hermione tried not to blush as his hands covered hers as she cradled the bowl of the glass snifter.

While avoiding noticing Hermione's reaction to his touch, he sat back and grasped his own snifter, his large slender hand engulfing the bowl. He began swirling the contents around and around.

"Swirl it around, allowing it to coat the sides, so you may enjoy the vapors released," he told her before sticking his nose over the rim of the glass and inhaling. "Ah, Calvados," he sighed. It had been years since he had any.

"Yes, the wine merchant said that apple brandy would be something that I might like since I've never drunk brandy straight before," she mentioned, feeling a little less sophisticated due to the lack of her experience in these matters.

She sat there quietly, hypnotized, watching Snape alternate between swirling the amber liquid and inhaling deeply. His eyes were closed, and he had a peaceful look on his face, as if he was reaching some new level of Nirvana.

"Notice the scent of apples and hint of oak flavoring the brandy?" He opened his eyes and saw Miss Granger looking at him with rapt attention.

She shook herself out of her state and began swirling the brandy in her own glass.

"Sip slowly, but don't swallow it right away," he instructed her. "Allow it to wash over your tongue and caress the palate. Then allow it to slowly slide down your throat."

Suddenly Hermione felt her cheek burn. The way he was describing the simple act of drinking brandy sounded like the seduction of a lover. She tried not to think of what it would be like if she was the object he chose to seduce next.

Stop it this instant, she mentally berated herself. *This is Snape we're talking about. He's old enough to be your father. Besides, look at him.* This was supposed to make Hermione turn cold with revulsion of an unattractive ex-Death Eater touching her, but suddenly Snape didn't look quite as imposing, unattractive, or old in her eyes. If anything, her eyes traveled the length of his long legs and the way he had a sort of sinuous strength about his carriage. If anything, the thought of him touching her in a provocative manner sparked a little tendril of desire in her belly. It curled and unfurled.

In order to stop herself from blushing any further, she suddenly thought, *What would Ron think if I had moved on to Snape as my new boyfriend. What would Harry think?* That thought was like a bucket of ice water dumped on her awakening libido.

Hermione concentrated on the brandy and sipped it slowly, allowing the warm liquid to set fire to her tongue. She closed her mind to concentrate on the flavor and smells and suddenly found herself wondering what it would be like to kiss Snape. Would his tongue burn hers with the taste of brandy still lingering on his?

She swallowed the brandy a bit too quickly again and still coughed, feeling the liquid burn as it traveled to her stomach.

Snape smiled at her. "It takes a while for one to acquire the taste."

"I like it; it's just that I'm not used to something so strong," she admitted, hoping the brandy would explain the heated bloom on her cheek.

"That also takes a little time."

After another sip, Severus rose and fetched Wei Chan's journal. He presented it to Hermione to browse.

Out of respect, Hermione cast a cleansing charm on her hands before touching the book.

Severus went back to his own chair and watched as Miss Granger gingerly turned page after page. *This is nice. A good dinner, the company of a lovely witch who can appreciate knowledge and books wonder if she has moved on beyond simple rote. Well, if Miller has taken her as his apprentice, she must have proven herself able to be a bit more inventive and resourceful.*

Suddenly the thought of future evenings spent with Hermione joining him by the fire, reading or talking, invaded his mind. Severus immediately evicted the images of domesticity with Miss Granger out of his head.

An hour passed and Hermione finally finished perusing the book. "I wish I had more time to read this. And I know this is not the sort of book one lends out."

Severus gave her another wry smile, feeling very relaxed and at peace. "You are correct in your assessment. However," Severus said, hesitating, "perhaps for the price of another of your home-cooked meals, you can come over another evening and read it some more."

Hermione looked at him hopefully. "Really? I think that is a fair bargain." She knew that in actuality Snape was getting the better end of the deal in absolute terms, but the opportunity to read Wei Chan's journal, including additional notes in the margins that were probably never included in the published versions, was worth far more than a few hours effort in the kitchen.

"I'm ready for dessert, are you?" she asked.

Severus nodded and began walking back over to the table, but stopped himself. He offered his hand to Miss Granger to help her up from her seat.

"Thank you," she breathed. *This is... civilized. Snape can be rather charming when he's not being the penultimate bastard.*

As they ate their plum pudding, Severus asked, "So when do you finish with your apprenticeship, and what do you plan on doing afterwards?"

This was the opportunity Hermione was hoping to come across. She had been asked the same question by Minerva over tea. Hermione planned on opening a Potions brewing business, doing a combination of mass production and custom brewing.

"Mr. Miller says if I keep applying myself at the same rate, I should be completed with my studies by the summer. However, it seems though I will be accredited as a Potions mistress, I've heard it is near impossible to open a Potions business by yourself," she said. "I can't seem to find anyone who is interested in going into business with me, even though I have saved the capital to get it started. Minerva suggested that I talk to someone who has enough experience dealing with apothecaries and other places of distribution and doesn't mind dealing with Muggleborns." Looking at Severus hesitantly, Hermione soldiered on and said, "She suggested I talk with you."

Severus looked at Hermione and gazed at her trying to find out if this was indeed some ruse by Minerva to drag him back into the magical community, or if the witch sitting across from him really was sincerely interested in a business partner.

"So what was it the need of a business partner or spending Christmas day alone that drove you here? Or was it more of your so-called 'compassion' for my situation?" he asked coldly.

"Would it be so bad if it were all three?" Hermione asked rhetorically.

Severus studied Miss Granger as he slowly chewed another mouthful of plum pudding. *Would it be so bad to work with Miss Granger? She is not nearly as annoying as I remember her, she is in need of a business partner and is willing to front the capital. She is one of the more level-headed people I've met in a long time, not prone to nonsense and bouts of idiocy. It would be a way to become a productive member of wizarding society once more, I could even start rebuilding my library.*

"It is an interesting offer, Miss Granger," he said casually. "Of course, it is a matter that I cannot give you an answer to immediately and would require a contract drawn up even if I did agree to the arrangement. We can talk more about this over another home-cooked meal next week. Say next Saturday night?" Severus proposed. Of course he was interested, but he would let Hermione think he was indifferent to the situation in order to give him the advantage during negotiations of profits, duties and other matters.

Hermione was about to agree, but then decided to counter with the offer of another time. "How about New Year's Eve?"

"That would be fine." *Looks like your promise to kill yourself has been preempted by other plans, how fortunate.* "I believe you have a letter from Minerva for me? In case I was going to be less than accommodating to your company." He arched a brow and smirked, challenging Hermione to complain that he had not been accommodating at all this Christmas day well, not during the past hour or so, at least.

Hermione went over to her cloak hanging over her chair and found it in an inside pocket. "Here," she said, walking back and handing it over to Snape.

Severus looked over the seal before breaking it to read.

He read it, noting the letter said things Miss Granger had already mentioned about spending the day alone, Minerva's suggestion that Hermione spend it with him instead, and that the young witch in his company would have a business proposition for him.

Towards the bottom of the letter was a passage that piqued Severus' curiosity.

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*By now you should have figured out that the present I Owled you last night cannot be opened until after dinner and can only be opened if Miss Granger is present. Miss Granger does not know what is inside the box, as it is a surprise for both of you.*

*To open the box, you must both be holding it and say together, "Happy Christmas."*

*I do hope that I will be getting an Owl from you, hearing that you'll be coming over for some tea or sherry sometime this week. Tomorrow around four o'clock would be convenient.*

*Wishing you a sincere Happy Christmas.*

*Your friend,*

*Minerva*

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"Box?" Severus thought aloud. Hermione looked puzzled and he clarified. "Minerva sent me a present via Owl, and you have to help me open it."

Getting up from the table, Severus began looking around the living room where he was sleeping last night that was usually where he usually fell asleep, by the fire after drinking enough. He found the present behind a small pile of empty bottles under his chair, and he suddenly felt embarrassed about Miss Granger spying bottles lying about. He spelled them away quickly and retrieved the box. He didn't know what was in the box and did not want to damage anything inside with a Summoning charm in case it was fragile.

"Well, are you going to open it?" Hermione asked.

"Here, you'd better read the last half of the letter," Severus replied, handing over the letter for her.

He examined the box while she read.

"Are you done with dinner, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, seeing the half-eaten piece of plum pudding remaining on her plate.

"Yes, this is quite rich. I don't think I could eat any more. Are you ready to open that?" Hermione asked while gesturing at the present.

They stood in the middle of the living room, facing each other, their hands brushing against one another as they held the small box. Hermione's eyes flitted nervously while Severus was finally aware of her blushing in his presence.

Looking at each other, on the count of three they said, "Happy Christmas."

They each felt a small thrill from the intimacy of the moment, but were distracted by the box to reflect on it. The box opened with a small burst of sparks; a kissing ball full of mistletoe tied with a red plaid ribbon emerged from the box and hovered above their heads.

When they realized what was floating above their heads, they both gasped and tried to removed their hands from the box, but found they could not. Their hands were stuck to the box and to each other.

"If this is Minerva's idea of a joke..." Severus began.

"It's not funny," Hermione completed his sentence.

"What was Minerva thinking?" they both said in exasperation.

They shuffled sideways to get out from under the mistletoe, but the cursed object followed them everywhere they moved.

As they moved about, Severus and Hermione each took a turn to try and get their wands and failed as they could not grasp them. They both came to the realization there was only way to end the charm... or curse, as they were beginning to think of it.

"Miss Granger," Severus said trying not to get nervous over the fact he was going to have to kiss her to release themselves from their predicament. Actually, he'd had brief thoughts about kissing her throughout the night, but had banished them knowing a witch like her would never be interested in anyone like him, especially considering the fact he was once her professor and a Death Eater.

"I know," she said, sounding nervous. Actually, she was really excited at the prospect that he would have to kiss her to free themselves. She found the proximity of Snape to be a bit intoxicating, just like the slightly dizzy, floating feeling she had when she finished her brandy earlier.

"I hope you don't..." What could he say without sounding like he did not want this, when in actuality, he did want to kiss her, especially after he saw her when she first pulled off her cloak.

She shrugged, signaling that it was all right and she understood.

She doesn't want this, the raven-haired wizard thought, observing her nervousness. "Perhaps just a peck on the cheek will all that will be needed."

"Perhaps a peck on the lips, just in case it needs to be equal in the participation of the both of us," Hermione added, hoping she didn't sound too eager.

Severus swallowed nervously himself. "All right then."

They stood awkwardly, looking at each other. Severus finally began to dip his head, and Hermione craned her neck up. Before their lips met, they paused for a moment waiting for the other to balk. When no protest came from either of them, they pressed their lips together in a chaste kiss.

They remained that way for a second, then two, then three. Somewhere along the line, the charm was broken, and their hands were free, but they didn't notice. They kept their hands in one another's and felt their lips burn where they touched.

It was when Severus wanted to pull Hermione into an embrace and moved his hands, resulting in the box dropping on the floor, that they both realized the charm had ended.

Hermione stood there looking up at Severus and almost whimpered aloud from the loss of the touch of his lips on hers. He gazed into her eyes, and she felt like his eyes were penetrating her soul with that stare. "Happy Christmas," she whispered with a smile and backed away, not wanting to wait for Snape's scorn in case he didn't think it was a very good kiss.

Severus could have grabbed her and pulled her back into his arms for a proper kiss, but he decided he didn't want to push his luck. "Happy Christmas, Miss Granger," he said a bit gruffly, trying to tamp down the growing fire of awakening feelings inside of him.

The silence stretched between them, both unsure how to proceed, both not sure how to interpret the other's body language while trying to ignore their own bodies telling them to kiss again.

"I..." Hermione began, but was interrupted by the clock on the mantle chiming, signaling the top of the hour.

Noting the time, Severus decided it was easier for him to encourage Miss Granger to go than deal with her making a hasty retreat, giving him some polite, but painful excuse that she had to go anything to get away from him. "It's late. You probably have a long day ahead of you tomorrow. Let me get you your cloak."

As he stepped away, the kissing ball disintegrated in a shower of silver and gold glitter. Severus and Hermione both muttered curses under their breath as they tried to swat the offending material out of their hair and off their faces. They finally used their wands, cleaning the glitter off each other, and offered thanks to one another for the favor.

Severus helped Hermione with her cloak and then handed her the hamper.

"I have a really tiny kitchen, so I don't have much room for leftovers. Do you mind if I leave them here with you?" she offered, trying to find a diplomatic way to tell him he needed to eat more and that she'd noticed his rather bare cupboards.

"Not at all. They will be appreciated," Severus replied with some warmth.

"I can always pick up the hamper when I come back New Year's Eve," she added as a way to ensure she would come back, besides the promise of another hot, home-cooked meal for Severus to enjoy.

He walked Hermione to the door. Opening it, he felt a blast of cold air come into the room, but didn't care at the moment. The memory of Hermione's company this Christmas day would help keep him warm that night.

"Thank you," Hermione said, giving Severus a nervous smile. "I've had a lovely time. Really." She hoped he took her statement as sincere.

"Yes, thank you. Your cooking and company were a very... pleasant surprise." He gave her a small smile hoping it didn't come off as looking sinister.

"I guess I'll see you New Year's Eve then. Does six o'clock sound all right?" she asked.

He nodded.

Hermione rose up on her toes and placed a quick peck on his cheek. "Happy Christmas," she said quickly, hoping she wasn't being too forward. Then she turned and practically ran down the street, too shy to see if Snape was angry at her for kissing him like that. When she reached the end of the street, she Apparated away.

"Happy Christmas," Severus said absentmindedly, staring at the spot where she had disappeared, with a lopsided grin spreading across his face.

He closed the door and smiled a little more.

Walking back over by the fire, he was tempted to sit back down in his chair and finish off the brandy she'd left. Instead, he went to his bedroom and undressed. Sliding in between the sheets, he sighed and felt his body completely relax for the first time in a long while.

"Happy Christmas indeed, Miss Granger."

He slept peacefully and dreamt of a kiss to be shared with Miss Granger on New Year's Eve.

The End... or just the beginning?