

# A Gifting of Book Wyrms

*by Ladymage Samiko*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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There are a great many stories about Christmas, some historical, some fantastical, and many in the space in between. This one may very well be true...or it may not. Whether you believe in it...or not...depends greatly on where you look for it. For all stories are true, somewhere. So perhaps if you look for it longwise, with a little bit of a squint (or maybe it's up with a little bit of a cross...? I do begin to forget these things), you will find the place where your reality meets theirs and what is written has come to pass.

This tale begins not at the beginning, for the beginning belongs to another's story and has been told by another teller. No, this tale begins quite some time later, upon a train and a few weeks before Christmas. This train was a very ordinary example of its kind; it did not fly, nor go on a single rail, nor even leave from a platform that can only be reached by those who can find the space between one atom and the next. No, it ran on ordinary tracks built by ordinary men and had itself been built by other ordinary men. This had been some time before, so the train was, at that point, a bit old and a bit shabby, but she had good bones and those ordinary men never had cause to be ashamed of their work, though they might...if they saw her as she now was...have been a bit embarrassed. They had meant her to be a solid workhorse of a steam engine, not a tinsel- and gilt-bedecked mover of starry-eyed children and jolly-faced 'elves' (who were far younger than they'd have the children believe). Then again, the men had had children and Christmases of their own.

Upon this Christmas season, there were three children in particular, one of whom is important to our tale: a girl of four, dolled up in Christmas splendour with a fortunate touch of practicality, by the name of Maeve. She had been quite excited through the beginnings of the evening, but with a tummy full of hot chocolate and biscuits and ears full of raucous carolling, she was more than ready to either pack it in or scream the train to a stand-still. Her mum, being wise in the ways of children, had a few quiet words with one of the larger-than-life elves, and the child was escorted out by her father's cousin, who was only too grateful to escape the juvenile chaos herself. With little Maeve in one hand and a glass of mulled wine in the other, Auntie Mynie navigated the three full cars of children towards the back of the train and its now blissfully deserted (having already doled out the desserts) dining car.

Except that it wasn't...quite...deserted.

Being Auntie Mynie, she noticed immediately that they were not quite alone, but her instincts also assured her that whoever it was was not a threat...and to be honest, she did not expect one...so she settled little Maeve atop a table, where the child promptly put her nose to the glass in order to better see the masses of coloured lights and even more colourful dioramas that had been erected along the track. That accomplished, Auntie Mynie looked about to identify the solitary figure, and mouth agape, she transformed immediately (though not literally, I must clarify) from the beloved Auntie Mynie to the awkwardly adolescent Miss Granger. She stared into the face of the most unlikely of all unlikely situations.

For it was Professor Snape. With a mug of cocoa. In the dining car. On a Christmas train.

Professor Severus Snape who detested children as much as overdone inducements of false cheer. Professor Snape, whom she had last seen bleeding out in a ramshackle house amidst a maelstrom of vile magic and death.

Her feet carried her forward, an action she was only dimly aware of, whilst she absorbed the appearance of a familiar scowl and an even more familiar, and formidable, nose.

"What are you doing *here*?"

Severus Snape had been very quietly enjoying a cocoa spiked liberally with peppermint schnapps and the illusion of a happy Christmas when his past walked through the train door and reacquainted him with every single, god-forsaken year of his existence. In an instant, he felt old and tired and quite thoroughly demoralised at the idea of re-establishing the defences that kept what little remained of his psyche intact. There was a little impulse to simply Oblivate the girl, but even that seemed more trouble than it was worth. Besides, given his relationship with the Fates, whatever disaster that was impending would only be revisited upon him ten-fold if he attempted to avoid it.

But to be grateful for small favours, at least his scowl would communicate nothing of his inner workings. He would likely be thoroughly humiliated by the end of the night, but *that* much he would be spared. And he was certainly not about to answer her question.

Not that he really cared, but, "You would seem to be surprised by the milieu rather than my continued existence, Miss Granger." Another swig of cocoa might make the ordeal a little more bearable, he thought, and acted accordingly.

There was little enough of her to see in the dim lights; a frizzy-haired figure made dumpy by Muggle winter clothing, including a sad excuse for a scarf. It not only obscured her form but her body language as well, for she made some sort of movement that he could not interpret. "We couldn't find your corpse, sir." He winced a bit at the memories and persona that particular title dredged up, not to mention the event in question. "Of the few possibilities, I considered the most logical to be that if we couldn't find a corpse, it was because there wasn't a corpse there to be found. I suppose you *could* have been hauled away by some random person, or the sun*could* have reduced you to ashes in the morning, but unlike *some people* who held to the most convenient hypothesis, I believed in the most credible.

"And you haven't answered my question."

"No," he agreed blithely. "Is that yours?" He disengaged a hand from his mug long enough to wave it languidly in the direction of the child on the table, whose nose was now pressed to the glass. The hair certainly matched, from what he could discern. Perhaps it would prove to be a Weasley red when the lights came on properly?

A bit perplexed, Hermione glanced behind her, then back at Professor Snape, then again for a better look. And then it was as much as she could do to restrict her mirth to no more than an irrepressible twitching of her lips. "Maeve is four," she managed to choke out. "Last July."

The dull burning of his cheeks was thankfully unnoticeable. The child's age meant that Miss Granger would have been very obviously pregnant the last time he had seen her, and there was no safe glamour she could have used to mask it. An image of her in such a state blinked into his mind, and he just as rapidly banished it. It was not something he had reason to contemplate.

She had regained her composure. "Maeve is my cousin's daughter," she explained. (As if he cared.) "They're up front with the two boys. Maeve's a bit tired, so we came back here." She shifted a bit from one foot to the other, and added softly, "I'm sorry if we disturbed you."

He sighed, and the weight of his history settled once more into his bones. "It is nothing you could help, Miss Granger. And nothing you can fix."

"May I sit down?" He nodded tersely, then stared just a second at the wine glass she set on the table. A sign that she had not been put into stasis when she passed out of his life. Visually, his cocoa probably registered as rather juvenile...pathetic. She slanted herself in the seat, keeping both him and the child in her field of vision. "Thank you."

The few words drifted down into the regular, metallic beat of the train's undercarriage. There was a slew of questions Hermione might have thought to ask, but none of them seemed particularly important, really. She found herself content to sit, watching both the lights through the far window and her young cousin, aware that Severus Snape was no farther than the width of a table. She found herself relaxing... feeling *safe*, in a way she hadn't felt for longer than she cared to acknowledge.

In the end, one question escaped her hold, emerging quiet and tentative: "Is there anything you'd like to know?"

"Pardon?"

She had to elaborate? "A...about the school... or anyone..." Her voice trailed away, awkward and trying to smooth the glaring corners of her words.

There was a pause, long enough that she thought it would continue indefinitely, but then, "How is my school?"

Hermione heard a tiny wisp of wistfulness, however he might have tried to mask it, and it softened the shield she'd always needed around him. "Hogwarts is well," she said gently. "Some of the damage is still being repaired, but the school knows what it needs. Minerva's the acting Headmistress, as you might have guessed."

"Acting Headmistress?"

Hermione watched him sidelong. "She refuses to accept a permanent appointment. Whatever her reasons, she's kept them to herself."

"I see."

"I..." she hesitated, her honesty vying against the sort of reaction he was likely to have. Honesty won, of course, but it took a moment more for her to decide how to broach the subject. "Minerva... went through your rooms after you... died." The darkness made the slight movements almost violently dramatic: the muscles of his jaw as his teeth clenched, the tightening of his grip around the tall mug. He said nothing. "I don't know what she did with most of your things, but..." Her hand rummaged for the small pouch in her pocket and then in the pouch itself. "She gave me your library. She said I was the best person to look after it." She laid the book on the table, slid the battered volume across the table. "This is the only one I have with me, but I've kept them all safe for you, if you want them."

Long fingers reclaimed the novel; it, too, looked a little older than the last time he had seen it. It *felt* a little older, the spine a little more cracked, the cardboard edges a little softer. He could not read it here, but he knew it as one of his oldest friends. *The Thin Man Trilogy* by Dashiell Hammett. A world of dry wit and decadence, cocktails and characters, hedonism and half-heroics. And a certain sort of justice. A wry smile always accompanied that thought; he'd slipped out of the house with a pound coin he'd nipped from Tobias's pocket change and raced to the shabby, secondhand book stall to buy the best bargain he could find. Heart racing just as quickly as his feet, he'd grabbed the three thickest books and glanced at the first pages. *I was leaning against the bar in a speakeasy on Fifty-second Street*...had sold him, and he'd plunked down the money and gotten his change before he could second-guess himself and increase the risk of Tobias discovering the loss and coming after him. Another sprint to the market for an apple or two...it has been a fall day, and they were cheap...and the money was spent. Up a tree with book and apples, and eight-year-old Severus had been as well-pleased as he had ever been...

Bells jingled merrily and insistently, and a cheery 'elf' voice informed passengers that their arrival at Santa's home was imminent. Parcels would be safe-guarded by elves, so everyone was free to leave belongings on the train, though it was recommended that money and valuables such as cameras be kept by parents. Please be certain that children disembark, so they don't miss this incredible experience!

Miss Granger made a wry face, which was quite clear in the violently brightening lights both inside and out. "Talk about timing. Are you... are you getting off? Will you be here later?"

There was no reason to refuse to answer; she wasn't blind. "Yes to both questions, Miss Granger."

She paused, quite obviously debating what she wanted to say next. "You're... welcome to come with us, if you like. Though I'd understand if you keep your distance; the boys are six and eight, and Gilly's... not big on discipline. One of the reasons I was glad to come back here with Evvie." He couldn't help curling a lip at the thought of inflicting two hooligans on himself; he'd had quite enough of that already and wasn't precisely able to hex them in this setting. He heard Granger giggle at his expression.

"I can't say I blame you," she grinned. "I didn't think they'd be as bad as they are; I haven't seen them for a while." She stood and gently shook her cousin awake, as the child had fallen asleep against the window. "I came along because I thought it might raise my Christmas spirit a bit; I think I'd have been better off at home watching *A Christmas Carol* again." She sandwiched murmured instructions between her words, tucking the little girl into hat and gloves and doing up her jacket.

There was a last swallow of chocolate in his mug; he drank it and rose. "Just be grateful Albus isn't in charge," he said drily, not missing her startled glance over. "Imagine the sheer anarchy. And quintuple the schmalz."

She laughed again. "I don't think I even want to try. I might break something. Say hello to Professor Snape, Maeve. He used to be a teacher of mine."

The child walked over to him and looked up solemnly. He looked down. A froth of slightly reddish curls and enormous hazel eyes. "Hello, Professor Snape. Merry Christmas. I like your nose. It's really big."

He was aware it was 'really big,' but he could not recall anyone ever saying they liked it. "Good evening, Maeve. Merry Christmas. Thank you for the compliment. Your nose is quite suitable for your face." Which was all he could honestly say about it, for a four-year-old's nose doesn't often present itself as distinctive. Even his had had the decency to lie low for a few years before declaring its presence to the nation at large.

The train squealed to a stop, huffing and puffing at its exertions and putting a temporary end to the conversation. Maeve stumbled, knocking into Severus's leg, and from some hidden corner in his psyche, instinct had him catching hold even as he braced himself against the jolt. The gesture did not go unnoticed, and Hermione acknowledged a sad, little pang of what was more visual metaphor than memory. Certainly, she couldn't remember Severus Snape ever being that nice to her. Not directly. She let the moment pass in silence...what was there to say?...and concentrated on getting herself and Maeve off the train. Snape followed, but kept his distance, particularly as woman and girl were swallowed up by the maelstrom of parents chasing running toddlers, unfolding various baby conveyances, and ordering older children to leave things/people alone. His eyes were sharp, though, and he watched Granger hand over the girl to her parents and siblings, then fall back a bit. After that, he deliberately turned his attention to his surroundings; the colours were bright and the employees rather over-cheerful, but on the whole, it was a lot better than he had expected...or indeed, had been accustomed to. His humour might be dry, but he hadn't been exaggerating when he mentioned Albus's proclivities. She ought to be bloody grateful she had never seen the common staff areas during her years at Hogwarts. He remembered quite a few times when he had seriously contemplated poking his eyes out and blowing his eardrums rather than spend one more second with the Headmaster's idea of Christmas cheer. He'd gotten worse once Harry Potter became a student, which Severus surmised was revenge for all the years prior when his solution to the agony was to drink copious amounts of Minerva's whiskey.

He smirked a bit at the memory. He'd gotten Minerva drunk a number of times, as well, and there was that one year she'd transformed into her feline form and gone staggering down the hall...

Albus hadn't appreciated that, for some reason.

Severus's hand brushed against a waist-high candy cane, one of many that lined the path, and was surprised to note that real snow topped it. It hadn't snowed for two weeks, and even that had been a rather pitiful attempt. He shrugged; likely the Muggles had used a machine in order to increase the realism. All part of the show.

He continued on his solitary stroll.

I shall draw a veil over much of the next few hours, in the assumption that you, my readers, are well-acquainted, either as participant or observer, with the experience of many excited children waiting to see Santa. There was racing, and shoving, and crying, and yes, even some well-behaved youngsters. One by one, Santa dealt with all of them and gave even the tiniest a small gift in anticipation of the holiday. He was a talented fellow, this fat man in a red suit, and if a child was disappointed with his present, it was because he or she did, in fact, truly deserve the disappointment. If he or she was elated, then that, too, was well-deserved.

Finally, there were but two people left, and they were not children at all. They certainly did not expect any sort of present from a jolly fat man in a beard.

"I have two more gifts in my sack," he announced in a booming basso. "You, dear girl," and here he pointed and beckoned, "and you, honourable sir, come not with your children but with yourselves alone. You, too, deserve presents." Miss Granger was visibly startled, but concluded that Santa would certainly be privy to the passenger lists, so that he might arrange to have the appropriate presents. (And that might have been true...for Severus Snape. She herself was listed as one of the Granger Party, not a lone adult.) She demurred, but gave way and accepted the reindeer-patterned package when she once again reasoned that her cousins had paid for the experience, and this was just one more thing that was included in the fees. She could always give it away if, like as not, she didn't want it. She was too old for toys.

Snape was so persistent in remaining precisely where he was and refusing to accept the gift that Santa was forced to rise from his snowflake-decorated throne and deliver it personally, taking the wizard's hand and flipping it palm up to deposit the squishy object there before Severus could manage to object either verbally or physically. (This did not stop him from glaring at the retreating man, though oddly enough, he didn't simply dump the thing on the ground, either. It might be surmised that he was, in some way, just a little touched.)

Miss Granger approached, a little hesitantly. The children were occupied playing with their new toys or in the snow. The parents had gathered together, as parents will, to tend the smallest children and exchange stories of child-rearing and its travails. As Santa had pointed out, they were the two lone adults. "Shall we open them together?"

The old Severus Snape would have sneered, perhaps shoved his own gift at Granger for her to deal with. But there was no reason to act that way now. It didn't really matter what it was, so why not open it here and now? Whatever it was, as a generic Santa Gift it could hardly be personally embarrassing, unlike Albus's specially chosen humiliations. He shrugged and began peeling off the paper, neither with the gusto of the children nor the careful precision of Miss Granger.

Both of them had received plush dragons about the length of Hermione's arm. Severus's was beautifully dramatic in shades of black and shimmering green, and Hermione's was marvellously striking in ambers and rich purples. There was something about the two of them that the witch and wizard couldn't quite place; they were not magical, but... Puzzled, they studied the toy creatures. "They're well made," Hermione offered tentatively.

Severus shrugged, probing the soft form with delicate fingers. Nothing, not even plastic eyes or maker's tags. Just cloth and batting. "We may be overly paranoid," he conceded. "This is a Muggle event, after all."

She blinked at him, a question forming that she should have thought of immediately on seeing him. "You weren't here to... investigate something, were you?"

He stared for a moment, tempted to lie with an affirmative, then shook his head. Quietly, he told her, "No, there is nothing." She nodded in return.

"Then... should we just enjoy our presents?" she suggested, a little amused by the wry expression he made. It was difficult to see Severus Snape 'enjoying' a soft toy. He shrugged, but if he were about to say something, it was forestalled by the ear-piercingly loud shout from several yards away for 'Auntie Mynie.' Said Auntie sighed, "If you'll excuse me?" He nodded, and she trotted off to attend to her family.

He watched, and while he might not have admitted it, he felt a little lonelier.

Some time later, the call went out: it was time to re-board the Christmas Train and return to London. Please don't forget your children's presents, and for God's sake, please don't forget your children. *We will* be doing a head count, and Santa *will not* visit any children who deliberately try to stay behind. The usual chaotic rush ensued, and Hermione was caught up in collecting her cousins. Severus simply mounted the steps and made his way once more to the dining car. It was a trifle busier as the 'elves' made sure of their stocks and prepped for the return service, but a tiny spell kept them away from his chosen table, where he watched the hustle and bustle. It was an

interesting mix of people who were fed up with the whole thing and just trying to get the job done and those who were genuinely 'into' the season and the children. The difference was very much evident when they plastered on their smiles to face the short hordes. Eventually, the work was completed and the employees retreated to whatever work or haven they had. Once again, the car was dark, and he was alone.

He fetched the book Hermione had given him earlier from an inner pocket. Perhaps a bit of reading was in order, and you could, if you felt the need, make the argument that the first novel was a Christmas story. A weak argument, maybe, but if you had to argue the point in the first place, a weak one was sufficient. But first, he grimaced, laying the book down next to the toy he'd been given...a silly thing to give to a grown man...a visit to the facilities was in order.

Hermione escaped her cousins with the same excuse; Daniel and Ioan were being complete brats, and she didn't feel she could spend a moment longer with them before letting loose with a plethora of hexes. After giving her story a veneer of verisimilitude, she slipped further back along the train, certain she'd find Professor Snape in the same place she'd found him to begin with. She slid open the door to the dining car, and...

...discovered a busy, glittering space that bore no resemblance to the earlier, deserted car. *This* car was done up in rich maple panelling, and otherwise painted in white with gilt trim. The lines were sleek, stark, and decadent, a look matched by the long dresses of the women who chatted and danced to music quietly played by a trio squeezed into an impossibly small space. Men lounged in severe black and white tuxedos. A smartly groomed bartender mixed drinks with facility, and these were served by equally smart waiters. Something about the noise was odd, but she couldn't quite place it. Hermione gaped from the door, unconsciously clutching her dragon (which she had brought knowing full well one of the boys would have annexed it otherwise), when something seemed to yank her hands, sending her stumbling into the car.

Formerly quiescent, the amber dragon now flew gracefully through the car over the heads of the revellers to curl up next to Severus's black, which was nesting quite comfortably upon a very familiar volume, its pages lying open.

"It's a book wyrm," came the flat declaration from directly behind her, and she jumped. "*Santa* gave us both bloody *book* wyrms."

She didn't dare look, instead focusing on the two animate 'toys.' "Aren't book wyrms somewhere on Luna's list of creatures that don't *actually* exist?"

"They are. I would surmise that Santa doesn't believe in the customary rules of reality."

"So that was the real McCoy."

She could almost *hear* the eyebrow lift. "A man who has book wyrms to give as gifts and who is certainly not a wizard..."

"Well, in that case, I think I'll have a drink. I know *I've* been a good girl this year, and I'm certainly not going back to the brats." With that, she threw a saucy grin over her shoulder and sashayed through the passengers to the bar. Severus watched her go. Did she realise that her winter gear had been replaced by a gown just as sleek and dangerous as any worn by the women around them? Royal purple silk framed a bare back and arms, skimmed over hips and flared somewhat as it dove down to the floor. It was a dress to make a man's thoughts sprint rather than drift in one direction, and one direction alone. Severus spared a glare for those damned wyrms cozing up atop *his* book. Granger was old enough to know her own mind, and even if it tended in the same general direction, it was hardly likely that *he* would be the object of even temporary affections.

Perhaps she had the right idea; it was definitely time for a drink. Or two. Or twenty. If this fantasy was indeed drawn from the pages of his novel, then he should be able to drink like an entire school of fishes and still be reasonably coherent in the morning. He made his own way to the bar, noting as he did that he, too, had been given a sartorial change; a long-tailed tuxedo had replaced the long, black coat, thick turtleneck, and wool trousers he had sported. A discreet check with a deliberately casual hand let him know that his hair had changed, too: cut short and slicked down. A thin moustache graced his lip. Nick Charles. The wyrms had turned him into *Nick Charles*. Unfortunately, he doubted they had changed his face as well. On him, the new addition probably looked absurd.

She was already sipping something when he reached her. "What the devil are you drinking, darling?" The endearment was pushed out of him like a reluctant diver off the high board, and he hadn't the least idea where it came from. Thankfully, she didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, Severus! I just asked for something to fit the season, and this is what he came up with. I think it's rather marvellous, actually." She took another sip, and he watched in fascination as the virulently green liquid disappeared.

The bartender turned his attention, and Severus said, "Something the colour of real liquor, barman." The man nodded, and proceeded to work his alchemy. "So what have you been doing, Miss Granger, that makes you a good girl for Santa?"

Hermione smirked. "Whatever I jolly well please, nosy Severus. I milked the Ministry for every last quarter-knut I could get my hands on while the gratitude was fresh. They'd like it back *now*, but I've got it, and I'm keeping it."

"Why, Miss Granger, how cynical!" In truth, he was more than a bit impressed; he wouldn't have believed she had it in her to be sufficiently mercenary.

"Cynicism," she pronounced with great deliberation, "'is merely the romantics' condom.'" The drink he'd just begun spurted across the bar. (It was a small favour that he turned his head in time to avoid spraying *her*.) She covered a grin with her hand, and he noted distantly that lace mitts covered the backs of her hands and her arms up to the elbow. "That's a quote," she continued, "but deny it if you can. It goes on: 'it protects them from the terrible scourges of uncontrolled emotion.'" Severus merely scowled and demanded another drink. He then angled a glance at her, brightly insouciant, and wondered if she recognised the admission she'd just made. She shattered his train of thought...whatever it might have been...by adding, "I finagled a medal for you, too, while I was at it." She was carefully not looking at him, and it didn't occur to him that she was watching the mirror behind the bar. "I didn't know if you'd want the medal itself or not, but it's the sort that comes with a tidy pension...something they didn't argue, seeing as how you're 'dead.' But there's no reneging if you decide to resurrect yourself."

It might be better if he kept himself sober. "Do you want my gratitude?"

She shrugged. "I don't expect it. But if you want your library back, a simple thank you...sincere or not...would be nice." She turned, setting her glass on the bar. "You know what else would be nice? I'd like to dance. Care to join me Mr. Snape? Or shall I snaffle one of these charming, no doubt illusionary, blokes? Or maybe I'll just dance by myself? I could do that, too." And with that, she lifted her arms as though a partner were there, and began shifting from one foot to the next, making her way to the tiny dance floor in the process. Bemused, he leaned against the bar and watched her dance alone, eyes closed, lips slightly pursed, moving to the music in a manner that was both sensual and comic. She could be making the biggest fool of herself, and she gave the impression that she didn't give a damn as long as she enjoyed herself.

Well, what the hell? The rest of the audience was imaginary; who gave a damn if he made an arse of himself?

"May I have this dance, my dear?"

Hermione knew she hadn't had that much alcohol...if, indeed, she'd had any, really...but the whole experience was a little...fuzzy? no, *fizzy* 'round the edges. It was like being inside the bottle of champagne; everything was a bit rosy, a bit bubbly, and whatever was outside it didn't really matter. She said things she wouldn't have dared; she danced because she wanted to. If the outside mattered, she might recall the formal balls of the first few post-war years, acting the wallflower because Ron wouldn't dance and no one else asked. But such memories stayed firmly in their places; she simply enjoyed the here and now, the feelings of being young and pretty and a little impetuous. It was certainly impetuous to have asked Professor Snape to dance.

"May I have this dance, my dear?"

Her eyes flew open, and her jaw dropped. There he was, somehow contriving to look dashing in his bow tie and tails, even with that little moustache she would never, *ever* have pictured him wearing. In something of a daze, she slipped her hand into his.

The music changed to a jaunty little number that he somehow managed to translate smoothly. Whether he knew the 'real' steps or not, he led with supreme confidence. The hand at her waist certainly knew what it was doing; that his bare fingers brushed her back was the fault of the dress. There was more than a touch of fey in Hermione's emotions now, for here she was, on a train, amidst people who could not possibly be there, but who were playing the music to which she was dancing with a man who was presumed dead by all who had known him. She was... light... and giddy... and... powerful. She could do anything, say anything...and there were certainly any number of questions she could ask, except that who would want to spoil a mood like this with those kinds of questions?

"Our wyrms seem to be getting on like a house on fire," Mr. Snape remarked, a bit dry.

Hermione glanced over, and her eyes began to twinkle, for it was truly rather adorable. The two were perched together at the edges of *The Thin Man*, holding it open to an indeterminate page. Severus's black was solidly planted atop the thicker chunk of text, while her amber used delicate claws to keep the book open without breaking the spine or bending the cover (at least, no more than it had already been). Heads together, they pored over the page, and Hermione fancied she could hear delighted chortles even with all of the music and voices. "I hope we're having as much fun as they are," she smiled.

"Why that book, Miss Granger?" he asked suddenly, the bluntness a counterpoint to the smooth sidestep they executed. "I have an entire library that you now have charge of; why have that one with you? Why have it at all?"

"Because I enjoy it." He executed a swift turn, and a bit of dizziness resulted. "After the war, I needed it. I needed something to take me *out, away, somewhere else*. And it was so obviously loved that it was the first I picked up. Now I enjoy it for itself. Why did *you* have it?"

"Luck," he replied laconically, but there was an impulsion to add, a little softly, "I needed it, too."

"Is that meant to surprise me, Severus Prince?" She smiled again, but this one was gentle. It didn't mock, and he couldn't bring himself to resent it. And the name... It was what he himself had written inside the cover in childishly round script: the boy he had styled himself as, the man he had thought he wanted to be.

Why not pretend that was who he was this evening?

"I exist to surprise people, Miss Granger," he drawled, and she laughed brightly.

"You'll certainly cause a stir if you pop up in Diagon Alley. And *please*, if you ever decide to run in to the Ministry and claim your pension...and don't forget back payments...tell me so I can be there. I *have* to see the looks on their self-satisfied little faces; can you imagine?" At that, he laughed, too, and whirled them around again in their dance.

How much time passed while they danced, while they talked of everything under the sun and over? Nothing too serious, nothing that would cast a pall over the evening, but everything else was a back and forth of information, sly comments, spine-free jabs. She learned that he was settled near Dover and raised superior messenger bats. He liked Scotch eggs and detested cauliflower. He discovered that she had a flat in Cardiff, but travelled all over the British Isles gathering information from the Fae folk of all kinds. She still had her ginger tomKneazle, who had learned to live with the Faehound she'd been gifted by some Welsh fairies. They tossed Monty Python quotes back and forth and somewhere in the middle of it all, almost unnoticed, agreed to meet for some serious games of Cluedo with an option on a round of Monopoly.

"Last call." The bartender's words are a liquid drop, not very jarring, not particularly remarkable, but sending out ripples nonetheless. For both Severus and Hermione, the drop is a chilling splash over the warmth, the camaraderie that had been wrapping around them. The train will be stopping soon; it must. They aren't alone, and while magic has been toying with reality and time, it can only go so far. No, the train will stop, and they will disembark and go each in a different direction. He would return to his bats, she to a colony of Irish selkies.

They stood apart and watched each other. "Midnight is striking," he said.

"Yes." They had arranged to meet; would they? Truly? Would they want to? "*Do* you want your books?" she blurted, unable to think of any other gambit.

He looked at her, sombre, contemplative. He had gotten along very well without them, counting them as just one more loss, but... it was a loss that had hurt. Still, Hermione had adopted his library, and even before tonight, he would have trusted her with them. "I could," he said hesitatingly, "visit. Look them over. Decide. I may not want all of them."

That was a lie.

And she knew it. One bibliophile knows another. She smiled. "I'll be home between Christmas and New Year's," she offered. "Just send a bat with a few hours' notice."

"Indeed."

The lights had dimmed, the people had left. What remained were the same sturdy tables and benches and the lights of the city as they sped towards the station. A duo of heavy beats sounded, and soft weights settled on their shoulders. The book itself remained on the table, its covers closed. Hermione reached over, picked it up gently. "It *is* yours." She held it out with both hands. Their fingertips touched when he reached for it, but after a moment, he pushed it gently towards her.

"I've had many years with it. For now, it belongs in your hands."

She hugged it to her. "Thank you. I'll take care of it."

"I know."

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, however hard they searched. Severus had seen her eyes dance and twinkle and laugh; now they were large and a liquid black in the darkness. It was a chance, especially now the magic had faded, but tonight he was still Severus Prince. Severus Prince was a man who dared. He stepped forward.

It was soft and warm and promising. Hermione closed her eyes to feel it better: the solid heat of his hand cupping her cheek, the dryness of his thin lips. She smiled: the nudge of a nose that would not be ignored even now. The shivery thrill that resonated through her.

She kissed him back.

The train pulled into the station, and loath though they might have been to admit it, the jolt of the braking wheels painfully heralded their arrival. Hermione helped Severus up from the floor where he'd landed, and they wordlessly made certain that everything was as it should be.

They had carefully said their farewells on the platform when Hermione turned back. "Severus," she called, just loud enough to be heard over the chaos, "*why did* you come on this train?"

He went still for a second, a man all in black, from turtleneck to duster, clutching a soft, fuzzy dragon...sorry, *book wyrm*...in his gloved hands. His expression warmed into something that was not quite a smile. "I came for the same reason you did. Hermione." And Severus Snape spun on his heel, walking swiftly into and through the crowd. She watched him go...at least until her cousins caught her up in their chatter and laughter and upset. Behind her automatic replies, she, too, smiled.

She would expect a bat...*both* bats (and a wyrm)...in a day or two.

And so it was.

*Author's Notes:*

I would daresay this wasn't quite what delhipsmith was expecting, as it is sort of a half of a hybrid of two of her prompts:

*1 - Encounter on a (muggle) train. Hermione is taking a long train trip (from where, to where, when and why are your choice). As she makes her way to the dining car she encounters a familiar face.*

*2 - A spell gone wrong in the library causes them to take on some (all?) of the attributes of their favorite character from their favorite novel; bonus points for surprising results (e.g., it turns out Snape is a fan of Lord Peter Wimsey, or Hermione secretly likes Westerns).*

It wasn't what I was expecting, either, as I had S & H on the Trans-Siberian railroad, engrossed in personal drama initially, but they stalled very early in the journey, and I had to scrap it. While this was going on, I had an absurd vision of Severus perched on one of those little children's trains they have in parks and malls. I took a chance and looked up information and found that Christmas trains are, in fact, A Thing. This one only has a brief connection to reality, but real ones are there to find if you look them up.

As a book, *The Thin Man* was published as one novel alone, but Hammett worked on the screenplays for that movie and the following two. I annexed them into a book trilogy, since I was working more from the witty comedy of the films than the heavier cynicism of the novel. It came to my attention towards the end that manuscripts for *After the Thin Man* and *Another Thin Man* were apparently written by Hammett and published in 2012. I haven't had a crack at them yet myself, but I do recommend the first two movies. William Powell & Myrna Loy are wonderful with each other, and Asta the Dog is no slouch either.

Hermione's quote on cynicism is from a Christmas episode of ye olde British sitcom *Waiting for God* with Stephanie Cole. Her character, Diana Trent, is a tough, cynical woman stuck in a retirement home after decades of crusading, adventuring, and women's libbing.

(PS for those of you reading shortly after posting...RL got in the way of... well, everything after the giffest reveal, so here we are today with a bit of Christmas in July.)