

The Resolution Solution

by GinnyW

A drunk Snape makes a list of New Years resolutions and now has one year to fulfill the entire list or he loses his magic.

The Resolutions

Chapter 1 of 5

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Disclaimer: I own nothing. Inspiration for this belongs to Vanityfair who wrote this brilliant list on her LiveJournal at the first of the year. JKR owns the universe.

It was New Year's Eve, and not a single guest had been invited to celebrate at Spinner's End.

Completing the last sentence on his list, Severus signed his name in his tight, messy scrawl at the bottom of the parchment, unaware that at that precise moment the clocks in all of Britain were chiming midnight. Promptly dropping his quill, he passed out from the copious amounts of alcohol that he'd consumed in his *celebration*.

He awoke the next morning, his head throbbing more with each breath he took. Slowly he lifted his head, a string of drool at the corner of his mouth stretching to a small pool on the desk. Severus wiped his mouth and began massaging his temples as he tried to clear his head.

Once he felt that he wouldn't do any serious damage with his wand, he pulled it from his sleeve and Summoned a flask of Hangover Relief which he had brewed fresh the day before in anticipation of his present condition. On New Year's Eve, if he was at a party, it was almost tradition that Severus frequently made poor decisions about sex, alcohol, wagers, dares, and should he really use his teeth to open a champagne bottle. It didn't matter if the party was hosted by Dumbledore or the Dark Lord. This year, Severus had thought he was safe because he was alone. If the worst he did was wallow in a bottle (or four) of firewhisky, then there was nothing to worry about.

Last year, he'd awakened to the maniacal face and bad breath of Bellatrix Lestrange. That was all well and good, however, the glow of the "morning after" wore off rather quickly when Rodolphus came barging into the room. Severus barely made it out of there with all of his appendages still attached and in their proper locations.

Thank God Severus had had enough sense to stay home alone this year!

Thank God he hadn't done anything stu...!

Severus' eyes suddenly flicked to the piece of parchment on his desk. There lay the culmination of last evening's work. He picked it up and began reading.

This Year's Top Ten New Year's Resolutions

1. Clear my name. I admit killing the one man who defended me in the past was probably not the best idea, but I have always risen to a challenge. I think Miss Granger might possibly be convinced to argue on my behalf particularly if I offer her hot sex... er... access to my library.

2. Demand respect from others by insisting that they call me by my proper title no longer Professor, but the Half-Blood Prince.

3. Find a girlfriend. And keep her. Preferably without the use of chains or the Imperius Curse though chains might be fun. (Chains for her, not me.)
4. Work on personal appearance. May finally work-up the courage to ask Lucius what he uses on his hair, providing he ever gets out of Azkaban. Also check out a rumor that Miss Granger's parents are dentists. (I wonder if I offer her hot sex... er... access to my library, would she put in a good word for me.)
5. Find new career. I never liked teaching anyway, even DADA. I'm thinking Minister of Magic, or failing that, the next Dark Lord.
6. Work to achieve inner peace. This could be easily accomplished if the Dark Lord and Potter did away with each other and saved me the hassle, but I'm not holding my breath.
7. Convince Narcissa that a large amount of money... er... a simple thank you is all that is required. Honestly, she is starting to get tiresome.
8. Buy property. I've lived at a boarding school for too long and it's time I had a place of my own that isn't a run-down and decrepit house in a dead town. Snape Castle or Snape Manor has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?
9. Work to invent an Anti-Stupidity Potion. Failing that, start spiking people's drinks with the Draught of Living Death. First up... Pettigrew.
10. Make new friends. Because matching tattoos and masks just aren't as exciting when you're nearing forty as it was when you were twenty.

Just below the list was his signature. And directly below that, in shimmering gold, a timer was counting down: 364 days, 13 hours, and 36 minutes.

Bloody hell!

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Fresh clothes and his daily infusion of caffeine made Severus feel like he could finally deal with the problem he was now facing. His head was now clear, and he grabbed the list and one of the books off the shelf and settled into a well-used armchair.

It took him only a few minutes to find what he was looking for in the dusty old tome. He read the fine print, and it was as he'd feared. Severus had accidentally written the resolutions on an Official Binding Resolution Contract which Albus Dumbledore had distributed to the staff years ago as a New Year's Eve party favor.

"Come, Severus," the sherbet lemon addict had said enticingly. "Just make one resolution this year, that you will be kinder to Sybill Trelawney no more Perma-Frizz in her shampoo."

For some idiotic reason, Severus hadn't destroyed the cursed parchment and had obviously grabbed it in his alcohol-induced madness. Which, in most cases wouldn't be a problem, but because he'd written the resolutions on New Year's Eve and apparently signed the damned parchment at the stroke of midnight (though he truly didn't remember that part), he was now bound to complete the list. Every single resolution he'd written on the parchment must be completed by the stroke of midnight on the 31st of December this year.

What the hell was I thinking in signing the bloody paper? He cursed himself. He knew the answer to that ridiculous question (hell, this entire thing was ridiculous). Severus always signed things when he was making a promise to himself. In this case, he had likely believed that the list was "a good idea." Obviously, his senses had left him at some point during his drinking binge.

There was no way to break the contract; it was as magically binding as an Unbreakable Vow, and he certainly knew all about *THAT*. If he broke any part of the Resolution Contract, or simply failed to fulfil any item on the list, the consequences were dire... he would lose his magic. Looking over the information he had found in the book, he growled when it reaffirmed his previous conclusion: there were no loopholes.

Slamming the book shut, he tossed it on the small end table next to his chair before looking over his foolhardy list again. He ran his fingers through his greasier-than-normal hair and winced. Perhaps he should start with item number four...

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239 Days, 18 Hours, 22 Minutes

Severus paced his living room floor, listening to the sounds of the clock ticking, waiting for the time to arrive when he needed to leave for his meeting, and worrying over the best way to accomplish one of the items on his list. He was certain that this entire process was supposed to be easier. There were too many things that he didn't have control over. How the hell could something *that* stupid become a binding contract?

Not for the first time in the last four months, he cursed magic and whatever deity who'd created it and its asinine rules. But even though he cursed magic, he wasn't about to give it up without a fight.

Over the last few months he had not stopped researching any possible way to nullify the contract. His search was still fruitless.

One thing he *did* learn was that any time he completed one of the items on his list, a gold line appeared through it.

The countdown, however, never stopped. It continued on as a constant reminder that he was working under a looming anvil.

He had been successful at crossing off two items from his list. The first had been rather simple. Though he knew that he hadn't the time to fully create an Anti-Stupidity Potion, he'd worked on it for two minutes, thus fulfilling that part of the ninth resolution. The next part well, slipping Wormtail the Draught of Living Death had been surprisingly simple. The fat, twitchy sod had keeled over in the middle of dinner one evening. The Dark Lord had merely sneered, and after Pettigrew's body remained stiff and still for the remainder of the meal, Voldemort had turned to Rookwood and instructed him to dispose of the body.

The odd gleam in the Dark Lord's red eyes caused Severus to wonder if he didn't suspect that Wormtail's rigor mortis was only the appearance of death. Regardless, Pettigrew was disposed of, and he hadn't turned up since.

That was how Severus had his first gold line marked through an item on his list. Still, he couldn't help but think of the benefits of an Anti-Stupidity Potion, so he had decided that once this entire mess was behind him, working on the creation of such a potion would definitely be worth the effort. After all, there were still dunderheads like Longbottom and Crabbe wasting perfectly good air and space.

The next item he'd watched, with great pleasure, become nothing more than a line was item number seven. That resolution was, in essence, to eliminate the pain in the arse that Narcissa Malfoy had become ever since he'd saved her son. Convincing her that it was only a "thank you" he wanted was much more difficult than he'd anticipated.

After he saved Draco's neck by killing Albus Dumbledore (on Dumbledore's own orders, damn him), Mrs. Malfoy kept throwing herself at Severus, stating that she knew ways in which to *properly* thank him. It wasn't that Severus was adverse to having a beautiful and willing witch perform sexual acts upon his person he was truly quite pleased with that prospect. He just couldn't help but envision an enraged Lucius Malfoy casting the Killing Curse on him the moment he was released from Azkaban and discovered what he and Narcissa had been up to in his absence.

After much discussion, (not to mention countless efforts to push Cissy away), Severus successfully got the woman to leave him alone. However, to do so, she finally made

a sizable contribution to the "Snape Manor Fund."

At the end of that day, the item was crossed off his list, and he was well on his way to being able to purchase that property for item number eight.

The most pressing matter for him to consider had been the ending of the war. There was no way he could even hope to clear his name, find himself a girlfriend (who wasn't already married), pursue a new career, make new friends, or achieve inner peace while serving the Dark Lord.

To accomplish these things, Severus had decided that his best option was to more openly help the Order of the Phoenix. He was still a spy, but after Dumbledore's death, he had no way to report his news, and sending anonymous hints just didn't work with Gryffindors. He had initially tried to contact Remus Lupin to begin passing on information to the Order. At first, Severus had offered to supply Remus with Wolfsbane as a show of good faith. When that didn't work, Severus had told Lupin that he'd brew up a potion that would force his little Metamorphmagus slut... er... bride to turn into something truly beautiful for a change.

The foolish werewolf refused.

And had the audacity to appear offended at Severus' generous offer.

No matter what Severus tried, Remus refused to trust him. The Gryffindor preferred to believe the idiotic rantings of a teenage boy over a man who had proven himself loyal to Dumbledore for nearly twenty years. Granted, Severus had to admit that actually killing Albus may have had something to do with the way that people felt about him right now. But, those were thoughts best left for item number one.

With that connection to Lupin severed, Severus found himself trying to decide exactly *who* he should contact within the Order. Minerva was out, and they had never gotten on well even when she had known they were on the same side... he had the sinking feeling that the moment she did see him, she'd be shouting for Aurors before he could even think of escaping or explaining. The same thoughts went for Moody, Shacklebolt, and Tonks.

And he didn't even want to think about approaching any of the Weasleys.

There were, of course, others in the Order, but he didn't feel that any of them were members who he could fully trust. In the end, he knew he was left with only one viable option: Hermione Granger. He was pleased when she accepted his request for a meeting.

The clock chimed four times. It was time to leave for his appointment. Severus pulled his wand from his sleeve and Apparated out of his house, appearing in a dingy little alleyway. Winding his way through the bins and onto the crowded streets of London, he found the busy Muggle pub where he was to meet the girl.

He was on guard, but even the Aurors wouldn't be stupid enough to cause a scene in the middle of a crowded street, nor were they likely to interfere inside the pub. No one liked to Obliviate Muggles unless they had to. Plus, Hermione had sworn that no one would know of their meeting or be there to entrap him... if she broke the contract he'd sent her via Owl Post (and that she'd subsequently signed and returned to him), the young witch would wind up with marks on her face to rival Miss Edgcombe's.

Severus was pleased that all of his research in magical contracts had taught him something.

"Professor Snape, I don't understand what you think you can get from me," Hermione said with a hiss once he arrived to a small table she occupied near the back of the pub.

"I am not trying to *get* anything from you at all, Miss Granger. I am only trying to end this bloody war and the only way that will happen is if Potter vanquishes the Dark Lord," he countered as he sat down with his back towards the wall. He suspiciously began eyeing the other occupants. As an afterthought, he softly muttered, "Oh, and call me the *Half-Blood Prince*."

Hermione was looking surprised at his first revelation, but then did a double-take at his last sentence, uncertain exactly what he said. "I'm sorry, what was that last bit, sir?"

"Nothing," he growled. *So much for item number two!*

Over the course of an hour, he seemed to be able to convince Miss Granger that he truly did wish to bring about the end of the war including the defeat of the Dark Lord. Snape gave her information on recently recruited Death Eaters, to show her he was serious about still being a spy; after all, he couldn't just show her a badge saying "I am a spy." They worked out methods of communication and their next meeting time and location. At the end of the hour, she also had a contract for him to sign. If he did anything to betray her or her friends, certain parts of his anatomy would take on the resemblance of an Abyssinian Shrivelfig.

Severus smirked; the girl learned quickly.

A/N: This story was written for the SS/HG Gift Exchange and was a gift for Vanityfair. It is based on a list that she wrote of "Snape's New Years Resolutions". The original list can be found on her LiveJournal here:

<http://vanityfair00.livejournal.com/33096.html>

This story is multi-chaptered and I will be uploading the remaining chapters over the next few weeks. :)

Thanks to my awesome betas, JuneW & SnarkyRoxy!

Passing the Halfway Mark

Chapter 2 of 5

Several items get crossed off of Severus list, but time is quickly running out!

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162 Days, 2 Hours, 12 Minutes

Unable to move another inch, Severus Snape collapsed onto the ground.

The Dark Lord was dead.

His final thought before falling into the sea of unconsciousness: *Thank God! Now I can finally get to work on the rest of my list of resolutions.*

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105 Days, 16 Hours, 33 Minutes

Severus had fallen into a coma when the Dark Lord fell. Now, nearly two months later, he'd awakened to find that two items had been crossed off of his list during his sleep.

During the battle, Severus had been hit by multiple hexes from both sides once his duplicity was discovered. It seemed that the younger fighters had always felt that their former professor was on the ugly side and thought that hexes hitting his face would do everyone a favor. Though they were debilitating, the combination of curses and hexes had an interesting effect on his appearance.

He was now handsome.

Severus' nose, though still a bit large, no longer bore the evidence of multiple breaks. His skin tone, though still somewhat pale, no longer bore the sallow, sickly appearance. Most notable were his mouth and his hair. The yellow, crooked teeth that had inhabited his mouth for the last forty years were now straight and only slightly off-white. And running his fingers through his hair... it had lost its natural greasiness. So much for resolution item number four.

The only unfortunate part was that this transformation had occurred without him offering Miss Granger hot sex... er... access to his personal library for her assistance ... which he had originally planned to do following the end of the war.

The other item that had been marked off during his coma was the all-important item number one: to clear his name.

Because of the spying that he'd been doing for the Order, the fact that the information he'd passed to Miss Granger had changed the tide of the war leading to the destruction of the Dark Lord, and a mysterious letter informing the wizarding world that he'd only fulfilled an Unbreakable Vow to Dumbledore by casting the Killing Curse against him, Severus had been cleared of all charges.

Yes, it was illegal to cast the Killing Curse; however, the letter also stated that Dumbledore had been on the verge of death and that the speeding up of that death by only a week was worth the effort of keeping a spy in Voldemort's camp. Not that this revelation made Severus feel any better about performing it. He'd known the circumstances and knew that it was likely that he'd have to kill Dumbledore in front of an audience... he'd just wished that none of it had been necessary.

Ultimately, all while Severus had been sleeping, the Wizengamot had decided that Severus had made the best decision that he could and that having him in Voldemort's camp had been what had won them the war.

Again, there went item number one, and again, Severus was disappointed that he did not have the opportunity to enlist the help of Miss Granger with offers of hot sex... er... use of his library.

That wasn't the biggest disappointment. Because of hexes and curses that he had been hit with, it was exactly six more weeks before Severus was released from St. Mungo's.

Leaving Severus with only two months to complete the remaining six bullets left on his list. Including the tasks of finding a new career and a girlfriend.

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63 Days, 8 Hours, 12 Minutes

Severus entered his home for the first time in several months. He had last been here four nights before the battle took place during which the Dark Lord had been defeated.

That was nearly four months ago.

The staff at St. Mungo's had been quite adamant that since he refused help from anyone and would be going home alone, that he must be able to care for himself. All Severus wanted to do was to get back home to his list. It had been so long since he'd seen the list that he was worried that he might have forgotten something on it, or that the way the last two items were fulfilled didn't correspond to what was written and the magic would not recognize the items as being completed.

Now that he was here, he dreaded the idea of walking through the door into the dank and musty house. Back when he had been teaching, he would cast special charms on the house to keep it from falling into further disrepair well, further than what it already was. The dust and cobwebs would still accumulate, of course. But the mildew and molds would not get any worse if the charms were placed. Since he'd been living in the house on a full-time basis after murdering Dumbledore, he had been keeping the small hovel in better shape than he had before.

It had been a safe place to live. The location was Secret-Kept and the Secret Keeper was dead.

Severus idly considered how he would be able to sell a Secret-Kept house, but soon decided he didn't care. There was enough money in the Snape Manor Fund for him to purchase something else... with or without selling this house. His bank account had been steadily growing. First, there were all of the raids he had began going on at the beginning of the year, next there was the sizable contribution made by Cissy, and finally, while he'd been in his coma, he'd received an Order of Merlin, Second Class for his services to the wizarding community. The reason it wasn't a First Class? He could only guess that people were looking down on him for having murdered Dumbledore.

Entering his home, Severus was stunned to find that it was... clean. The dust and molds that he expected were nowhere to be found. The book he'd been reading and the meal he'd been eating when he'd received his summons, had been cleared up from the table. Severus made his way through the house, finding the linens freshly washed, the bed made, kitchen clean, and so on.

He went back to the living room and hurried over to the desk he had in the corner to see that his list was still laying on top of it. Breathing a sigh of relief that it was not lost, he scanned the contents to ensure that the items he'd thought should be crossed off were. A small (oh, ever so small) smile appeared on his face when he noted that not just two items had been crossed out in the fine gold ink... but also a third.

He'd found inner peace, apparently. He wasn't sure how that had happened, but perhaps it was the fact that he'd been in a coma for two months.

That left five items remaining on his list. Glancing at the calendar that hung on the wall, he calculated his time left and sat down to create a plan to finish off the list. Only briefly did he give thought to the fact that the calendar was flipped to the correct month.

It wasn't until later that the thought occurred to him: If someone had been in his house to clean it... and his list was still laying on his desk when he'd arrived home... then it only stood to reason that someone else had read what it said.

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62 Days, 16 Hours, 23 Minutes

Severus had slept well for the first time since the first of the year. His list was half-complete.

He smiled again at the thought.

True, he had very few days left to complete the list, but for some reason he felt optimistic, more so than he had in the last twenty years. Voldemort was dead and he had actually survived the war. And by some miracle... he wasn't in Azkaban or suffering a fate comparable to or worse than a Dementor's Kiss. (Unsurprisingly, that was, again, the fate awaiting the worst of the war criminals.)

Before going to bed the night before, he'd sent off a short note to *Shacks and Stomping-Grounds for Stately Sorcerers (SSSS)*. If that wasn't a bit of an oxymoron, Severus didn't know what was, but he hoped that one of their agents would be able to help him in his search for a new home. He requested an appointment with someone at their earliest convenience. With only two months left to complete his list, Severus was motivated to cross off another item as soon as possible.

As he showered and dressed for the day, he began allowing himself to ponder the puzzle of how someone had obtained the Secret to his home. *Was it a person or a house-elf?* he wondered. There were very few people who knew the Secret, and the person who had held the Secret was dead. He wondered if a portrait could give away a Secret. That would sort of negate the purpose of something being a Secret, wouldn't it? But, perhaps...

It was a puzzle that he would not be able to solve by staring at the surprising white tiles of his shower walls (odd, he'd always thought that they were beige before). For now, he was grateful the person had cleaned his house while he'd been incapacitated.

While he was eating his breakfast that morning, an owl arrived with a letter from the SSSS; they would be expecting him at nine o'clock.

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60 Days, 5 Hours, 17 Minutes

Severus settled into the worn armchair in his sitting room after a long and successful day of "castle hunting" or "manor hunting" or whatever one wanted to call it. After casting a silent *Accio* at his list, it came sailing to his waiting hands where he noted that item number eight was now crossed off of his list. He allowed his lips to curve up into a small smirk as he Banished the parchment back to his desk.

Flicking his wand toward a tall curio cabinet in the corner, the door opened, and a bottle of nice sparkling wine and a glass came sailing towards him.

Minutes later he was sipping on the wine and congratulating himself on his recent accomplishment. The entire process had all seemed so... easy.

Severus' meeting with the representative from the SSSS a few days prior had been relatively straightforward, almost as if they had been expecting him. They had taken his information, specifications, and requests, and compiled a list of suitable properties for him to look at.

Over the last three days, they had toured those properties as quickly and as painlessly as possible, and it had taken almost no time at all to find the place that was absolutely perfect for him. It was almost as if they were leading him right to it. They had shown him only six places first, and Severus almost had the feeling that they had shown him those places first just so that he had something to say "no" to! Of course, he'd insisted on seeing a few places afterwards, just so he could compare some other properties. But the castle that they had shown him in Edinburgh was, in a word, perfect. It was everything that he was looking for.

The castle that he was purchasing had an ancient, but still working, Distraction Charm in place, so there was nothing to be concerned about in regards to being pestered by Muggles. However, he had already decided that he was not going to go through the trouble and hassle of another Fidelius Charm. That had been cast as a last resort during the height of the war after his orders to kill Dumbledore had been finalized and Severus knew that he'd need someplace to run to. His old friend and mentor had also wanted him to have a safe place to hide.

Now that the majority of Death Eaters were either dead or in prison and Severus' name had been cleared, Severus had no one to seclude himself from. He was, after all, supposed to be making "new friends." Although, he had yet to start that resolution.

Really, all Severus had to do with the castle was move in!

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28 Days, 16 Hours, 33 Minutes

Severus stared at the dark green envelope he held in his hands and sat back in his chair, thinking about the events of the last several weeks.

It was as if luck had truly been on his side and for the first time in his life, he was truly charmed. The tide that his life had turned since the day he'd come home from St. Mungo's was, in a word, blessed.

He took a sip of his coffee, while staring into the flames of the fire. He was sitting in the library of Snape Castle. It was everything he'd hoped it to be.

Though small, as far as castles went, it more than suited his needs. Oddly enough, he found that he preferred to spend most of his time on the main and upper floors; he even went so far as to put his Potions laboratory on the third floor. The dungeons were currently used for nothing more than storage, though Severus could think of a fair few things he'd like to do later with the rooms that were down there.

The purpose of the Potions laboratory was twofold. Severus always enjoyed tinkering and experimenting, even though he had preferred teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts at the school. Currently he was doing a bit of retail Potion-making and sales, though he was interviewing for various positions in the wizarding world. It seemed that he had his pick of almost any job.

Severus Snape quickly discovered that he was a commodity, one not only sought after but also in very high demand.

He was also, apparently, a very eligible bachelor.

Now that was something he had never considered.

He'd been on a date nearly every evening over the last fortnight. Unfortunately, of the several attractive witches that he'd dated, they'd all been nothing more than empty-headed dunderheads who he'd no sooner spend the night with than allow near a cauldron full of explosive ingredients. Sure, he was desperate for a girlfriend in order to complete item number three, but he wasn't stupid. To satisfy the magic, he knew that he would have to be involved with someone who he, at the very least, *liked*.

Apparently, two or three consecutive dates weren't enough for the enchanted parchment to be considered "having a girlfriend and keeping her."

Shuddering slightly as he thought about the disastrous turn his last date had taken, Severus took a sip of his coffee. It was their fourth date, and though he couldn't have considered himself particularly taken with the witch, he had decided that he could make do with her. He'd brought her back to his castle after taking her to a posh restaurant and become a bit frustrated and worried after glancing at his list and seeing that item number three still wasn't crossed off. Moments later, the witch had left the castle in a huff, careful to slam the main doors loudly on her way out, and yelling that Snape was the most disgusting and obscene man she'd ever dated in her life.

It turns out she hadn't like his suggestion of seeing if the list would be satisfied by using chains.

Severus snarled; it had almost hurt to hear her say that it wasn't his new good looks that she'd dated him for to begin with. It was the thrill of dating a man who had been a war hero... and she, apparently, didn't think that he looked much better now than he had before the battle.

Running his hand through his ... mercifully now ... non-greasy hair, Severus looked again at the envelope in his hand.

He knew what was inside the dark green unopened envelope. It was an invitation to a Christmas party at Potter's. With all the subtlety he'd come to expect from Gryffindors, the envelope's gold lettering loudly proclaimed, "It's a Christmas party!"

He wondered why he would actually be invited to such an event. Even with his contributions to the war effort, he highly doubted that there were many who would wish to have to spend time with Severus Snape. Even with a full social calendar, he was still a surly bastard and spending time with Harry Potter was definitely not his first choice of pastimes.

The world did not revolve around Harry Potter. Severus had refused to allow that in his classrooms, and would refuse to allow that again.

Why would Potter even want to invite him to something like a Christmas party? Christmas parties were for people like family, friends, and co-workers. They weren't for hated ex-teachers, ex-Death Eaters, and the most hated school rival of one's father.

What was Potter playing at? Was this some sort of political move, perhaps? Or was Potter inviting everyone who had been a member of the Order? Although Severus really didn't consider himself as much of an Order member since he'd killed its leader.

Did he dare show himself among those people? The victors of the war. They were the ones who had refused to accept his help throughout much of the prelude to the end. It was solely due to the "esteemed Miss Granger" that any of the other members of the Order and Wizengamot had even bothered to acknowledge his contributions to the war effort for what they truly were... an effort to put an end to the Dark Lord.

Severus may not be a social outcast when it came to dating or job-hunting, but when it came to the past... Was it really time to lay the past to rest?

Coming to a decision, Severus placed his cup into his saucer and flipped the envelope over, breaking the seal. He pulled out the formal invitation, gilded in gold lettering, just as the envelope had been.

The outside of the invitation again stated that it was for a Christmas party; opening the invitation gave him the date, time, and place of the function. Severus scoffed, as only Harry Potter would be able to get away with holding a private Christmas party at the Ministry of Magic.

Folded up inside of the invitation was a small piece of parchment. Curious, he placed the invitation in his lap and went to work carefully unfolding the parchment he'd just found.

He was surprised to see that it was a letter. Taken aback, both by the sender and to discover that he was indeed the intended recipient, Severus quickly read the contents:

Dear Severus,

I hope that you don't mind that I have taken the liberty at addressing you by your first name. To me, it seems to be just natural progression of things. Admittedly, I do realize that things might not have progressed the same way in your mind as they have in mine.

I do know that attending a private party held by Harry is not something that you would typically do. I know your feelings for Harry and his for you. I also know of the feelings of the other members of the Order for you, Severus. And they aren't what you think.

Now is the time to 'make new friends. Because matching tattoos and masks just aren't as exciting when you're nearing forty as it was when you were twenty.'

Please, Severus.

I realize that you must be upset with me over this. I really am sorry, but I only wish to help.

Sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

After reading the letter, Severus didn't know whether to crumple the missive and throw it into the fire or send along a reply. His emotions were warring with one another between anger and relief.

The little meddling twit!

Her!

It was *her*!

How the hell did a member of the Terrible Trio worm their way into his Secret-Kept house at Spinner's End? Not that he could put such a thing past Albus. Even dead, the man had a way of interfering in his life. Severus dropped the letter to his lap to join the invitation and sat back in his chair to think.

A/N: Poor Severus. He's really starting to run out of time here. :)

Thanks to my amazing betas, JuneW & SnarkyRoxy. They are absolutely wonderful! :)

A Rose By Any Other Name Is Still the Same

Chapter 3 of 5

Snape only has a few days left until the New Year and there are still items left on his list. Will attending Potter?s Christmas party help him?

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Inspiration for this belongs to Vanityfair who wrote this brilliant list on her LiveJournal at the first of the year. JKR owns the universe.

8 Days, 5 Hours, 11 Minutes

When it came down to it, he had decided that he had little choice but to attend Potter's Christmas party to see what Hermione Granger had to offer when it came to accomplishing his list. Severus had a new career, which he'd cleverly tricked the list into believing satisfied item number five. However, he still had three items left on his list and only eight days remaining until the New Year.

He was very quickly running out of time. He needed to complete all the items on the list by the stroke of midnight 31 December or else he would lose his magic. Hell, if he became a Muggle he wouldn't be able to see his own castle!

No, I will not think about failure! he told himself. I will not waste time being nervous or anxious. I will finish all the items. Or else.

Swallowing his pride, he Apparated into the Atrium at the Ministry and made his way to the night guard, who directed him to the lift and Potter's party. He knew he had arrived in the right place: the entire floor had been turned into a ballroom that rivaled the Great Hall at Hogwarts during the Yule Ball.

Severus was greeted by the smiling face of the youngest Weasley. The chipper young woman was dressed in deep forest green robes, which even Severus had to admit were quite fetching on her. She graciously welcomed him as he exited the lift, offering to take his cloak before ushering him into the room where many of the other guests were already "mingling," as she put it.

The room was a bustle of activity. Before Severus even knew what was happening, Hermione Granger appeared, slapped something on his chest with a Cheshire grin, and quickly headed off towards another group of people before Severus could even get out one snide remark.

He had written to her on numerous occasions since receiving the invitation to Potter's party; however, she'd been very evasive in her responses to him, always saying that she would speak with him in person, to trust her, and to please come to Harry's party.

Tonight he was bloody well going to talk to her in person and get some direct answers from her, one way or another!

Deciding that now was as good a time as any, he made to follow her, only to be stopped by Remus Lupin.

"Ah, the Half-Blood Prince, it's so nice that you could join us," Lupin said, clapping Severus on the shoulder with a smile.

Unimpressed by Remus' remark, Severus sneered. "Furry freak."

Lupin chuckled. "Come now, *Half-Blood Prince*, it's the holiday season. Almost the New Year, I might add. We've buried the Dark Lord. Wouldn't you say that it's time to bury our differences and build 'new friendships'?" he asked with a wink.

"What are you on about, Lupin?" Severus asked, becoming slightly nervous at what the werewolf knew. "And why do you keep calling me 'Half-Blood Prince'?"

Still smiling, Remus tapped on Severus' chest, indicating a white nametag that had been stuck on Severus' chest. The words prominently bore the name, "The Half-Blood Prince" in bold lettering. "Do you or do you not wish to be referred to by that name tonight, Severus... er... 'Half-Blood Prince'?"

Groaning, Severus ran his hands through his hair. "It seems that is my name for the evening. What are you so friendly for? Last that I recall you wanted nothing to do with me?"

"Last that I recall you had just murdered the head of the Order and then threatened to give my girlfriend a Permanent Face Altering Potion. And after that you expected me to trust you?"

When Severus didn't answer after several uncomfortable moments of silence, Remus sighed and went on. "Things have changed. We're starting over. Hi, I'm Remus Lupin, and you are?" he said holding out his hand.

Growling slightly, Severus took the werewolf's hand and briefly shook it. "The Half-Blood Prince," he replied.

"Pleasure to meet you, Prince."

Severus couldn't stop the rolling of his eyes even if he wanted to.

"You know, Hermione's gone through quite a bit of trouble for you," Remus said with a smile as he nodded towards the group of people that Hermione was currently among.

"What are you getting at, Lupin?"

"I hope that she's able to help you to get through the rest of your list, whatever it might consist of. She wasn't all that specific. Just asked us to play along when it came to the 'name thing' tonight, and being your friend. Which I should tell you, Prince, we've been friends much longer than you realize; you've just always had a bad habit of fighting it." Remus paused to grab two glasses of eggnog that were floating in the air and handed one to Severus before he continued speaking. "Please don't hurt Hermione. I really think that she cares a great deal for you."

Severus snorted. "Ah, I see you are worried about the irreplaceable Miss Granger. That ~~girl~~ is nothing more than just a pain in my backside. She has done nothing but be an irritant and a nuisance."

Remus turned and looked behind him to make sure that Hermione had not walked over to them and heard Severus' careless remark. "That is the precise sort of thing I'd wish to avoid, Severus. You have no idea what she's done for you! After you saved her life from Dolohov, she all but saved yours. She was by your side every day that you were unconscious while in St. Mungo's. She never told any of us how, but she somehow found a way to get Dumbledore's portrait to reveal the Secret of your house. Hermione fought tooth and nail against the Wizengamot to get them to drop the charges brought against you for Dumbledore's murder. Something in the information she got from his portrait. No one will speak of the details. It was all sealed.

"But that was how she discovered about your New Year's resolutions. Now, I don't know everything on the list. She did feel horrible about invading your privacy, but she does want what's best for you, Severus ... Half-Blood Prince, and I'll be damned if I'll let you hurt her."

Severus stood in place, stunned after Remus' little speech. He'd learned more in the one minute from what Lupin had just now said than he'd heard from anyone else since he'd been released from St. Mungo's.

"She had no right to go into my house. She had no right to go through my things." He had to force himself not to shout.

"Yes, but Hermione did those things only with your best interests at heart. At the time, she was trying to get evidence for the Wizengamot in your trial that you never even had to appear for. I'd be thanking her, Prince, not berating her."

"I'll try to remember that," Severus said with a scowl as he glanced back towards the witch, meeting her gaze. "So, I suppose I also have her to thank for all of my dates over the last few weeks?" he asked, turning back to Remus.

Curious, Remus raised his eyebrows and asked, "What all was exactly on this list?"

"Never mind," Severus mumbled.

Remus chuckled. "I see. Well then, I need to go find where my wife ran off to. I hope to see you soon, Half-Blood Prince."

"Good evening, Lupin."

Before Severus could move off to hide in the shadows, he was bombarded by two more people to converse with, and after that, yet another. Remus Lupin, however, was the only person to mention the "list," thankfully. Severus hoped that meant that no one else knew of its existence, although Severus had a sinking feeling that Potter at least knew about it.

Every person had a nametag, and everyone called him by the name, Half-Blood Prince. At least initially. When asked to explain the nametag, Severus simply stated that Miss Granger placed it on him. Then he went on to explain that his mother's maiden name was Prince and he was, in fact, half-blood. He'd then introduce himself by his given name, and some would call him Severus after that, but most continued calling him "Half-Blood Prince" or simply "Prince," as they thought it was humorous. A few others began wearing some unique titles on their nametags as well "Quidditch Queen," "Broom Jockey," "Mum's Favorite Child."

After two hours of small talk, he finally spotted his Gryffindor Princess, approaching him.

"Well, Little Miss Know-it-all, I suppose that you're feeling quite smug this evening?"

"Now, why would I be feeling smug?" Hermione asked. She'd finally just walked up to Severus. They'd been watching each other all evening, but each time it seemed that she'd been about to approach him, someone else would be there to strike up a conversation with him.

"Do you enjoy trying to control my life? Lording it over me that you know my little secrets?" Severus sneered. He'd not expected it, but from the moment that she approached him, he felt his anger bubbling up and nearly over the surface.

"I haven't lorded anything over you! I am only trying to help."

"Yes, helping by breaking into my home," he accused, taking a step towards her. "Encouraging women to date me? Women that you know nothing about, I might add. The last one. What was her name? Oh, yes, Mrs. Schmidt. She blamed the Death Eaters for the death of her husband. Me, being an ex-Death Eater, fell under that category. She tried to poison me during dinner."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Oh, Severus. I had no idea. I..."

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. "I don't want to hear your apologies."

They stared uncomfortably at each other for several minutes before Hermione finally forced herself to ask, "Will your list be completed by the New Year?"

"It is none of your concern," Snape replied tersely as he moved to step away.

Hermione grabbed his sleeve, stopping him. "I *am* concerned. I heard that you were hired by Roberts & Smythe. So, you have a new career, then?"

"Yes," he hissed, yanking his arm free. "But it doesn't matter that everything else is crossed off of the list but one item. The problem is the singular remaining item."

"I realize that," Hermione replied with a nod of her head. With another short pause, she tentatively asked, "So, after tonight, the only item remaining should be getting you a girlfriend?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, he replied, "*And keeping her...* So it would seem."

Hermione took a deep breath and look up at him. "I'm just going to ask this straight out then, in an effort to get it over with. Would you have dinner with me? I promise to explain, at least as best as I can, what has happened. What I've done. If nothing else, you will know exactly what you're mad at me for."

He looked at her for a few minutes, considering her offer. He still had several questions that he wanted answers to, and really, this was not the place to seek those answers. Besides, Lupin had said that the girl... no, young woman... was interested in him. They had spent all of that time together before the battle exchanging information and had developed a cautious working-relationship. From what he could deduce, she had taken that and allowed her teenage hormones to spin it into something much greater, but Severus could use that to his advantage. It wouldn't hurt to have dinner with her. He relaxed his scowl slightly into a fine line. "Be ready tomorrow at six. Where should I pick you up?" he asked.

"Erm... at H-Harry's," she stammered, surprised that he actually agreed.

With a sharp nod of his head, Severus turned and walked towards the lift. He spied Miss Weasley and requested his cloak. He'd accomplished more than enough in one evening.

He arrived home to Snape Castle, and walked over to where he had his list tucked away in a drawer. Sure enough, the only item remaining was for Severus Snape to find a girlfriend... and according to the countdown, he only had 7 days, 23 hours, and 51 minutes in which to do that.

Maybe he really should put some serious effort into wooing Miss Hermione Granger.

A/N: Well, only a week left to woo Miss Granger. Will he succeed? There are several loose ends in here, actually, that will be tied up in the conclusion of this story. So, if you are wondering about something likely it will still be coming up. I still haven't decided if this story will be one more chapter or two more chapters. Sorry about that, but there shouldn't be much of a wait. Thank you for reading! :)

Thanks to my amazing betas, JuneW & SnarkyRoxy. They are absolutely wonderful! :)

The Days When Passion Burns

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus only has one item left on his list, and the clock is ticking.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Inspiration for this belongs to Vanityfair who wrote this brilliant list on her LiveJournal at the first of the year. JKR owns the universe.

7 Days, 6 Hours, 20 Minutes

Severus had spent the majority of the next day preparing for his date with Hermione Granger, his last hope of finding a girlfriend before New Year's Eve. He had to admit that even without that deadline, he was somewhat attracted to her. Hell, in the deepest recesses of his mind he'd wanted to shag the living daylight out of her last New Year's Eve. Unfortunately, the fact remained that outside of teaching the girl for six years and meeting with her a few times to exchange information before the Dark Lord was killed, he really didn't know much about Hermione Granger at all.

However, from their brief conversation last evening, she was already more appealing than most of the other witches that he'd been out with over the last few weeks. Perhaps, since she obviously knew about the list already, they could work together to convince this simple piece of Charmed parchment that they were involved in a brief, serious relationship... in only the next seven days.

"Bloody hell!" Severus yelled as he realized the absurdity of that train of thought. There was no way this was going to work!

Rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hands in an effort to alleviate the dull ache that was now growing behind his eyes, Severus attempted to calm himself. He had only a few minutes until he was due to leave to pick up his dinner date. It had taken some considerable doing, but he had finally secured them reservations for dinner. It was, after all, Christmas Eve. Apparently that date meant that people lots of people enjoyed eating out at restaurants and celebrating.

He hadn't even bothered trying to make reservations for tomorrow night. The very idea that the girl would be joining him for another date, especially on Christmas Day, was almost absurd. Although, if he was truly interested in seeking her help in accomplishing this final task, he really didn't have any other choice but to see her after tonight.

He stopped by his desk and took a final glance at his list of resolutions. Since returning from Potter's Christmas party last night and ensuring that the other two items were indeed crossed out, he'd not looked. He just had to make sure one last time that his efforts tonight were going to the right item... that something hadn't come uncrossed.

That wouldn't really happen, would it? he wondered, briefly.

There it was, the only item not crossed out:

3. Find a girlfriend. And keep her. Preferably without the use of chains or the Imperius Curse though chains might be fun. (Chains for her, not me.)

In his recent efforts to find a girlfriend, the longest he'd dated any of the women had been five days, and that had not satisfied the enchanted parchment. He had considered trying to date them longer to see if it qualified as "keeping her," but he had not found a woman that he'd been interested in and could tolerate being around for that long. Most of them were undereducated woman, more interested in their looks and social status than in anything worth talking about.

He could already hear the jeers and laughing when the wizarding world learned how he, Severus Snape, lost his magic. There was no chance the contract could be satisfied by dating a woman, any woman, for a mere seven days, he was certain.

He cursed himself for not having the patience to continue dating any women, especially with so much at risk. Though he'd done extensive research, he had no idea what it would take to satisfy this final item. His eyes fleet over the words "chains" again, before he decided that was unlikely. It specifically said "without the use of chains or the Imperius Curse." Hmm... but what if he used chains *and* the Imperius Curse? If he could get away with chaining the girl up for a night of kinky sex after all, he'd written "chains might be fun" then he would be able to get away with casting an *Imperio*. Then again, the charmed parchment was like a ruddy solicitor and was unlikely to let him off with a technicality, so reluctantly he had to concede that neither was going to work.

After all, he'd found loop-holes for a few of the other resolutions. Why the hell couldn't he find one for this?

For the last few months, Severus had been under the delusion that real feelings must be involved to satisfy the contract. It was the entire term "girlfriend" that was hanging him up. Did that mean that he had to love her? Or that she had to love him? Unlikely, he decided, although mutual feelings of affection would likely be necessary. That could equate into varying levels of attraction; unfortunately with the previous dates, all of those levels of attraction soon left sometime during their date as they got to know one another. Severus had little tolerance for women who didn't possess any intellect, and most women had little tolerance for his... erm... wit.

Many times when he'd stared at his list, he'd wondered what it was that originally possessed him to include Miss Granger ... Hermione ... in so many of the original resolutions anyways. This was one of the small threads he was now clinging to; perhaps it *had* to be her. *Yes, it was ridiculous, but stranger things had happened*, he thought, *and seeing as how Albus Dumbledore was involved...*

The constant thinking in circles was intensifying his headache, and he realized that he was due to meet Hermione very soon. He decided that there would be time to give himself a migraine later, so he collected his winter cloak before setting out for the old Black residence.

He appeared on the doorsteps of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, at precisely six o'clock and knocked firmly on the door. He, unlike other members of the Order, remembered the obnoxious painting of Mrs. Black that hung in the hallway, and he was trying to make a somewhat decent impression on his date.

The door opened and he was surprised to be greeted by the tall and gangly red-head. The young man glowered at him slightly before opening the door wide enough to allow Severus entry into the house, then stepping in front of him, not allowing him to go any further than the entryway.

"Good evening, Mr. Weasley," Severus said.

"Snape," Ron replied.

"I'm here to escort..."

"I know why you're here," the younger wizard said, cutting Snape off.

"I see," Severus said with a scowl that he had once reserved solely for intimidating Longbottom.

"I'm not your student any longer, and if you think that you can go around trying to bully Hermione the same way that you did all of us in school, then you've got another think coming."

Deciding that he wasn't going to take this or any other kind of abuse, Severus closed the distance between himself and Weasley with a single stride. Leaning his face mere inches from his prey, he hissed, "You have no right to judge me, Weasley. Nor to even hint that I would treat my date in such a way. Keep your comments and your threats to yourself, or you will learn very quickly what I am truly capable of."

"What is going on down here?"

Severus stepped back from the wizard to see that Hermione had come down the stairs and was now assessing the situation before her. "Nothing, I assure you. I was just letting your friend here know that you are in safe hands."

Ron snorted.

"I'll be fine, Ron," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder and leaning up to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Don't wait up."

She turned and stepped towards Severus, and took his arm before he could get a good look at her. "Shall we?"

Severus nodded, ignoring the warning looks given by the other person in the small entryway, and led the young woman out through the door.

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Their date was starting out as uncomfortably as possible.

The maitre d' recognized the former Potions professor the moment the couple entered the restaurant. "Ah, *Mister* Snape, we had your reservation for six o'clock. When you did not arrive I had to give your table away to another couple. If you don't mind waiting, I'm sure we can find you something," the man simpered, insincerely.

"I made the reservation for six-thirty," Severus argued.

"Well, it is here in our books for six, *Mister* Snape."

Severus recognized the little whelp. He was a former student who had melted at least one cauldron every quarter, and thus had faced the former Potions master's wrath on multiple occasions. No wonder he was giving him such a hard time.

Torn between wanting to tear the boy limb from limb and trying to rein in his temper in order to impress his date, Severus finally settled for a growl. Then, with a Galleon, he asked if the maitre d' could possibly squeeze them in someplace.

And squeeze them in he did.

In the tiniest table in back near the kitchens, of course.

Groaning at the obvious cliché, Severus bit back the retort while his date stifled a giggle. "I trust you are enjoying yourself, Hermione?" he asked as they were seated.

"I am."

And with that, their date began.

The table to which they had been escorted was indeed small. Severus could hardly keep his feet off of Hermione's. The tops of his knees brushed the underside of the tabletop, and he had to be careful not to tip the entire table over. Not to mention that their plates, cutlery, and glasses barely fit on the table. He had no idea how it was going to accommodate anything else. *Although*, he assured himself, *that was often where magic came into play*.

The beginning of their date had been somewhat awkward. Severus could not get the idea out of his head that he was indeed sitting in one of the finest dining establishments in wizarding London with a lovely young witch, having a pleasant conversation, when not more than three years ago she had been sitting in his classroom manically waving her hand, barely able to keep her mouth shut.

Hermione wore a deep burgundy robe that fell slightly off of her shoulders and dipped down, accentuating her breast line. (And Severus had quite a time of it to not stare obviously at said breast line.) Despite his dislike for her House colors, Severus had to admit that the color suited her skin tones and brought out the golden hues in her hair. Her hair was pulled up loosely on top of her head with stray curls that rested on her shoulders. The fact that she wore only a slight amount of make-up to highlight the features she already had, unlike many of the witches he'd recently met, was hugely in her favor.

Appearance-wise, Hermione Granger was more than satisfactory.

The conversation, too, was pleasant. After stumbling through a few "Professors" and "Miss Grangers," they were able to find some common ground on the latest in Potions and Defense research, his fields of interest, and Charms and Transfiguration, which were hers.

After a lengthy conversation about the latest in the study of the defense of Unforgivables, Severus was left wondering if Hermione had revised for their date to try to impress him, or if she truly was that well versed in the subjects, even post-school. When he asked her this, she asked him how much he studied on latest theory on maintaining long-term Transfigurations.

As she was taking a bite of her chocolate mousse, he leaned cautiously over the table and spoke in a hushed voice, "You said that this evening you would explain what has happened, Hermione. You have yet to do that. I have several questions for you."

He watched, almost transfixed, as a satisfied look overcame Hermione as she swallowed the bite of pudding in her mouth. She smiled, obviously noticing his interest. Sitting back, Severus took a sip of his coffee, feigning indifference.

"Where do you wish me to start, Severus?" Hermione asked. She had obviously been waiting for him to bring up the subject.

"Why don't you start with how you learned the location of my Secret-Kept house?"

"Well," she began, after taking a deep breath and looking at him. "While you were in the coma at St. Mungo's, I was there to see you everyday."

At this confession, she took a drink of her own coffee, but immediately continued with her story when Severus did not react. He'd already heard that bit of information from Lupin at Potter's Christmas party last night.

"There were Aurors standing guard outside your door, and then I overheard Scrimgeour talking about how they could probably get away with having a trial without you even being conscious. Everyone would want Dumbledore's killer locked up and off of the streets." She stopped and waited for his reaction, uncertain if he would yell or if he'd expected her to say these things.

Noticing this, Severus motioned his hand waving her to continue. "It comes as no surprise. Go on."

"I went to Minerva's office and spoke with her to see if she knew of any way that we could help you. She didn't, but just as she was speaking, Dumbledore's portrait interrupted her. While Dumbledore was talking, we were again interrupted by the Board of Governors. You see, I had stopped by without an appointment and Minerva had become so caught up in our discussion that she had lost track of time..."

"The point, Hermione," Snape reprimanded, in an effort to put her back on track.

"Oh, yes. Sorry. Anyhow, some members of the Board of Governors came by to tour the grounds and speak with the new teachers. So, she left me there to speak with the portrait. The battle had only been a few days before and people were still recovering, otherwise I think that Minerva would've said something and retrieved the information that I did," she seemed to hastily explain. "The portrait of Dumbledore couldn't give me much information other than that he'd left a Last Will and Testament. He'd not wanted anyone to find it until after Harry had killed Voldemort, but the Will would exonerate you."

"And of course, you found this document."

"Of course."

"And he wrote in there the location of my house? I do have a hard time believing that, Hermione, as it seems that there was only one person ever at my house, and the Will was read by many persons."

"Well, there was the Will and a letter. They were both in the same location, but if one didn't think to look for them they never would've found them."

"And where, pray tell, did you find them?"

"In the Mirror of Erised," she said with a smirk. "I desired to find Dumbledore's Will, so that part was easy. Just like with Harry and the Philosopher's Stone, I looked in the mirror and saw that the legal document was suddenly sticking out of my pocket. But on a whim, I then desired to see if there was something else that could help you."

"Ah, I see. And that second letter must have held the address," Severus deduced.

"Yes. I'm sorry for invading your privacy like that, going to your house while you were in the coma. But I needed access to the house to gather some of the evidence for your trial. Even with Dumbledore's Will, Scrimgeour was pushing to have your trial as soon as possible. He had Harry as an eyewitness. They didn't want your testimony. And as I get reminded so very often... this isn't the Muggle world."

"No, it is not," Severus said in a firm tone. "So, you obviously found the evidence you needed for my acquittal."

"Well, seeing as you're presently sitting here and not in a dingy little cell in Azkaban, that would be the rational deduction."

"You are entirely too smug for your own good," Severus said without much conviction.

Hermione grinned impertinently, then went on to tell him about the nuisances of the trial sealed details he couldn't have heard from other sources or read about in the old issues of the *Daily Prophet*. It was a rather odd situation to be in, he admitted, to have been acquitted of a crime and never having had to be present for the trial. Truth be told, he'd not wanted to hear about it before. He'd wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the memory of his involvement in Albus Dumbledore's murder. The fact that most people were too scared to approach him, had played strongly in his favor as to why he'd not been harassed over this issue.

Severus watched Hermione as she sipped on her coffee. Listening to her outline how she had saved him while he'd been unconscious caused a mixture of feelings to rise up within him. No, this wasn't new. He knew that all of this had happened. He'd been told before. He knew that Hermione had somehow found her way into his house. He'd learned just last night that she'd spent nearly every waking moment at his bedside while he'd been in a coma. But having her confirm all of this to him was a bit overwhelming.

He narrowed his eyes at her as his emotions continued to swirl.

"What else did you want to know?" Hermione asked.

He looked at her for a long moment. "Being direct now, are you?"

"Well, yes. It seems to be the most logical thing. No reason to hold things back."

"Of course. Since you are offering yourself to me..." The corner of his lip quirked up as his voice trailed off suggestively.

"For much longer than you've known, Severus," she said with a cheeky grin.

"In that case, perhaps we should take this someplace else," he said. He scooted his chair out from the table, but before he could stand, he was stopped when a familiar-looking witch approached their table. Trimmed like a tree, the woman wore bright red and green robes with a large gold bow tied round the waist. She had another golden bow tied in her bouffant hair. And dangling from her earlobes, Severus could swear that he saw tiny little packages with flashing lights. And was that gold eyeshadow?

"Oh, Severus!" the shrill voice proclaimed.

"Deirdre," he groaned as he closed his eyes. He could swear that he could almost hear Hermione attempting to stifle a giggle.

"I thought that was you! I was sitting over there with my brother and I turned to him and said, 'I bet that's Severus Snape over there.' And lo and behold here you are!"

"Yes, here I am," he mumbled. This time Hermione did giggle, and Severus lightly kicked her under the table and glared at her. His dinner companion sucked on her lower lip and attempted to look abashed while Severus turned his attention back to the intruder.

"Well, Severus, it's just lucky that I saw you! For some reason I haven't been able to get an owl to you. My correspondences keep coming back unopened. I just cannot understand why. But I wanted to see you. I heard about your," she leaned in closer to the table and spoke a bit softer, although her voice was still rather shrill and Severus was certain that nearly half the restaurant could hear her, "you know, your addiction. I wanted to see if I could help you out. I ran into Margery and she told me how you... well, you tried to get her to use chains. Well, she's not into that kinky stuff, but I'm more than willing. In fact, if you wanted to make a threesome out of the deal..." Deirdre said while winking at Hermione.

At this, Severus jumped up from his chair, bumping the overcrowded table as he did so, and ever so eloquently tipping the table and its contents onto Hermione's lap.

Hermione, in turn, jumped as the remaining coffee, wine, and pudding fell onto her.

"I am not a sex addict!" Severus spat at Deirdre. "There is a reason that your letters have gone unopened. You are, perhaps, one of the most annoying little tarts that I've ever been forced to acquaint myself with. I had to take several potions just to keep from killing myself before, during, and after each evening in your horrible presence. Now, get out, before I do something that I truly regret. There is a lady here who *is* a lady and who *does* require my attention!"

Appearing highly affronted, Deirdre stomped her foot and huffed as she stormed off. That was when Severus heard the little tinkling bells on the woman's shoes.

Several waiters were rushing towards their table, all brandishing their wands and attempting to clear up the mess. Both Severus and Hermione had their wands out as well, and several flicks later, the table was set to rights and the majority of the damage had been cleared up.

Hermione, however, was obviously still not happy. Despite, or more likely in spite of, all the foolish wand-waving by three inept waiters, her robes were still covered in what had been left on their table. Now, even she couldn't get the mess to come off her robes without removing the robes entirely.

To make matters worse, they had drawn the attention of nearly every occupant in the vicinity. All eyes were waiting to see what would occur next in this drama that was more interesting than the latest episode of *The Days When Passion Burns*, a serial on the Wizarding Wireless Network that was listened to every afternoon, by nearly every house-witch in wizarding Europe.

His young date looked lost and undecided between tears, anger, and a slight mix of humor. Attempting to remedy the situation, Severus quickly flicked his wand. After conjuring a privacy screen around the area of their table, he took a step towards Hermione.

"Stay back, please," she said, as she took a step away and held her hand up to him.

"Hermione..." he began.

"Please tell me that you didn't actually shag that woman, Severus," she interrupted.

"Quiet!" he hissed, turning his head and peering around the screen. It may block sight, but certainly not sound.

"Bloody hell! *Muffliato!*" she said, pointing her wand at the screen. "It's your stupid spell!"

He looked at her at a loss for words, until she spoke again a moment later. "Now, tell me that you didn't actually shag that woman. Derdrie, DeeDee, Deirdre, whatever her name was!"

"That, my dear, is none of your damn business."

"Like hell it isn't!"

"Might I suggest that we take this conversation elsewhere, as that spell you cast only works to muffle the sounds, it will do little to shut out your shouting."

"Fine."

Hermione had her cloak on in a trice and stormed past the privacy screen.

Severus hastily settled the tab and followed her out of the restaurant, uncertain whether it was better to take her back to his place, like he had planned, or just escort her home. No matter what, he couldn't get it out of his head that this was yet another failed attempt at getting a girlfriend. He wondered what life would be like living as a Muggle and for a brief moment ran through a few choice modes of suicide.

"Are you going to answer my question, Severus?" Hermione asked once they were outside the restaurant.

"Yes, I did. But you need to understand the precarious situation that I am in, Hermione. If I don't complete my list by..."

"Sod your list, Severus! You do realize that finding a girlfriend and keeping her does not include shagging every woman that you come in contact with, don't you? Haven't you figured it out yet?"

"What are you blathering about, woman?"

She took a deep breath and exhaled. "It's freezing out here, Severus. I would like to go home now, please," she said, her voice suddenly much calmer.

"Hermione, if you know how to complete that last item on the list, I'd appreciate it if you'd just tell me. I'm running out of time here." He tried to hide the desperation in his voice, but quite frankly at this point Severus hardly cared.

"You can either escort me home now, Severus, or I will Apparate myself. Make your decision now."

Out of options, Severus linked his arm through Hermione's and they disappeared from the pavement, reappearing on the stoop of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Hermione opened the door and stepped inside. She turned to him before she disappeared within the old house and said, "Be here tomorrow at noon."

"I am not spending Christmas with Potter."

"Either be here or you will find yourself without my help. The clock is counting down, Severus, as I'm sure that you're plainly aware. If you'd prefer, however, I'm sure that if you hurry you may still be able to catch that lovely Miss Deirdre back at the restaurant."

Severus glowered at her. "Tomorrow at noon. Good evening, Hermione," he said dutifully through gritted teeth.

"Good night," she said before shutting the door.

The last thoughts he had before Disapparating was that she had better be telling the truth about knowing how to complete the last item, and she had better tell him how to do it first thing tomorrow so they could get on with it. Otherwise Severus had to make some new plans about either how to live life as a Muggle (he gave an involuntary shudder) or brewing a suicide potion so that he could get out of this hellish existence.

A/N: Well, I had written most of the ending of this story but wasn't happy with the way it was going. So, like a good little writer, I trashed it. Sorry. Not a total surprise. But that means that I lied. Really, that shouldn't surprise you. This is not the last chapter. The next chapter is not the last chapter. I have rewritten most of the final chapter, though, and I really like it. So, at least I know where we're going. :)

As always, thanks to my excellent betas, JuneW and SnarkyRoxy!

To Find a Girlfriend...

Chapter 5 of 5

It's Christmas and Severus has said that he would spend the day with Hermione.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Inspiration for this belongs to Vanityfair who wrote this brilliant list on her LiveJournal at the first of the year. JKR owns the universe.

6 Days, 19 Hours, 3 Minutes

It was Christmas morning. After taking Hermione home from the date from hell, Severus had not been able to sleep well. He'd tossed and turned. Visions of an obnoxiously dressed woman with gold ribbons and done up like a holiday tree, complete with tinkling bells, had flittered in and out of his dreams. His torture was complete with an image of Hermione Granger wandering into each room, holding up a piece of parchment in one hand and a giant hourglass in the other; while she harped on him about how he was running out of time and was about to be turned into a house-elf. "Did you actually shag that woman, Severus?" dream-Hermione shrieked.

As was typical for him, Severus was out of bed and fruitlessly wandering the halls of his castle by five that morning. It was a pattern that he'd long ago acquired when he'd been working at Hogwarts, teaching dunderheads for countless hours on end and being forced to serve two masters. The only thing that had kept him from suicide at that time had been a vow to Dumbledore to see the end of the war. It had not been an Unbreakable Vow what would be the point in that? but a vow, nonetheless.

Once the end of the war had come, the tide had turned in Severus' favor; there had been no need to carry through with those suicidal thoughts. (Of course, that didn't take into account that he'd been exceedingly worried about his resolutions list during Voldemort's downfall... but that was besides the point.) From his point of view, saying that

public opinion was completely in his favor would have been a bit extreme; but there was no doubt that some viewed him as a sought-after commodity, what with his war hero status and his improved appearance.

The fact that he was once again contemplating leaving this life and with that came the risk of locking himself into an afterlife where it was exceedingly possible that he'd be forced to spend eternity with the likes of James Potter, Sirius Black, and Albus Dumbledore certainly said something about how much Severus despised the consequences of not meeting the terms of the Resolution Contract. He'd spent the last several hours scouring his books on magical bonds, looking for any mention of Resolution Parchments and loopholes. Not that he hadn't done this a thousand times before, but Hermione had hinted the night before that she knew how to accomplish the final task. Severus had to admit that on some level it irritated him that the little know-it-all would practically taunt him with the fact that she knew how to help him, yet not divulge that important piece of information to him. No, instead the impertinent little witch demanded his presence at Potter's house today.

Then again, their date last night had been rudely interrupted, and Severus had not left Hermione with the best impression. Her taunting him with knowing that vital piece of information had obviously been her way of getting back at him for the embarrassment that she'd been forced to suffer: having her robes covered in chocolate mousse and coffee, after being propositioned for a threesome by Deirdre.

For a brief moment, Severus found himself wondering at Hermione's motivations at forcing him to spend time with yet more former Order members. (Hadn't he done that enough at Potter's party?)

Before Deirdre interrupted him and Hermione, he had been enjoying their date last night. He had taken pleasure in Hermione's company, her sense of humor, her intelligence, and their conversation, and he had to admit that she was a fair sight to look at. But after that fiasco, he found himself questioning what she even thought of him. He could not ask her outright, because Severus Snape wasn't the sort of man who allowed himself to be vulnerable. If she didn't potentially hold the answer to his problem, then he wouldn't even be bothering with her today; it would have been safer for his fragile ego that way.

"Bloody hell!" Severus swore out loud as he realized how stressful Christmas was going to be. He'd been so concerned about his cursed list all morning that he hadn't given a second thought as to what he would be expected to do today. The idea of not only spending the day with Potter, but also the sure-to-be-there Clan of the Redheads, was a nauseating thought. Thinking about it, Severus began to believe that anything would be better than spending the day with the Wonder Boy and his dopey sidekick.

Unfortunately, hiding was not an option, and looking at the clock on the wall he had... Bugger! He had less than an hour to ready himself for his day with Hermione, Potter, Weasley, and whoever else he was doomed to spend the day with. And it was at that moment that he realized that it was, in fact, a holiday. Not just any holiday, but Christmas.

Fuck.

Which meant he was definitely expected to bring Hermione a Christmas present.

Hastening his steps, Severus made his way to his bedroom to ready himself. He prayed that Albus was watching over him so that he might have enough time left over to find a suitable gift for the young woman, before he was expected to make his appearance at Grimmauld Place.

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Severus checked and re-checked his appearance in the mirror before he left his home. He felt like he had when he was a sixth-year student meeting a fifth-year Ravenclaw in the alcove behind the tapestry of Romeo and Juliet up on the fourth floor.

Promptly at noon, he Apparated to the stoop of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with flowers in hand. After patting his pocket to ensure that his gift was in the pocket of his robes, he knocked firmly on the door, just as he had the evening before.

Today, however, he was greeted by the smiling face of Hermione. She was wearing a green jumper (likely a gift from Molly Weasley) and a black skirt. *Very Muggle*, he thought.

"Happy Christmas, Severus."

"Hermione," he acknowledged with a nod as he entered the house and held out the flowers for her.

"Thank you. They're lovely."

Severus nodded again, uncertain of what else to say to her. He knew that the moment that the uncomfortable minute in the foyer was over, she would then drag him into the sitting room.

Hermione stood there staring at him, with the bouquet in her hands. Obviously she was waiting for the words that often followed a gift of flowers. Did she not know that purple hyacinths mean "I'm sorry"? Apparently not. He watched as her face slowly hardened. Severus dreaded the idea of her becoming angry again. It was not conducive to a tolerable day, nor was it helpful in completing his resolutions list.

With his ultimate goal clearly in his mind, Severus sighed and forced himself to speak the words that the young woman was obviously waiting for. "I wish to apologize for last night. I had no way of knowing that Miss Crowel was going to make an appearance. I am sorry that a scene was made and for any embarrassment that it may have caused you." There, that wasn't too hard. And it sounded convincing and somewhat contrite. It was only once he acknowledged this to himself that he realized that his apology was, in fact, sincere.

He decided it was best not to think on that right now.

Hermione smiled again. "I knew you had it in you, Severus." With a flick of her wand, she Conjured a vase for the flowers; and with a swish, she sent the flowers, now in the vase, sailing up the stairs.

"Shall we go?" she asked brightly.

"Go?" He groaned. This was just what he'd wanted. The only thing worse than spending the day at Grimmauld Place was spending it at the Burrow.

"Oh, your clothes!"

"My clothes?"

"Yes, we need to Transfigure your clothes," Hermione said.

"You will not!"

"But, Severus, you can't go there in wizard's robes," Hermione insisted. Her wand was still in her hand, and she was now pointing it at him with a calculated look on her face.

"I am quite certain that the Weasleys will not object to my clothes," he sneered, pushing her wand aside so that it was no longer aimed at him.

"The Weasleys?" Hermione crinkled her brow and frowned in thought, until she exclaimed, "Oh! We're not going to the Burrow."

Severus visibly relaxed. Not going to the Burrow. Thank Merlin.

"We're going to spend the holiday with Harry's relatives, the Dursleys."

So overcome with shock, Severus forgot to breathe for a moment. "WHAT?" Severus remembered Petunia Evans from when he'd visited Lily one summer between his fourth and fifth years at Hogwarts. She had been a horrid and insanely jealous person then. Since that time, he'd heard stories of Potter's time spent in the care of the Dursleys, and he had no desire to experience it first-hand. He didn't care what it cost him... he'd find another way to save his magic.

Wielding his wand, he turned his back on the young woman and headed towards the door. He missed the smirk on the girl's face.

"I am not going to spend my day in the presence of the Dursleys. Good day, Hermione," he said, reaching for the door handle.

"Oh, for pity's sake. I wasn't serious, Severus."

He turned around quickly and glared at her.

"I'm sorry," she then said, obviously realizing that she'd gone too far. "I just figured that if I told you it was something as horrible as that, then you would react better once I told you where we really are going."

From her words, Severus knew that he didn't want to know. It was far safer to just open the door, step out of the house, and Disapparate. The small voice in his head told him to at least hear her out, as it could possibly be worth almost anything if she could eliminate his final resolution. "Go on."

"Um. Well, I was going to take you to my parents' house." Her voice was tentative now, and Severus wondered what her motives were.

"That is still spending the day with Muggles. How is that supposed to be any better than Potter's family? You have the wrong wizard *Miss Granger*," he snarled, turning back towards the door.

"Wait, please."

"You cannot possibly expect me to believe that spending the day with your family will help me accomplish my final resolution. I shall find some other way."

"Please, Severus. If I don't show up with *someone*, then I'll have to spend the entire day listening to my aunt and grandmother telling me how hopeless life is without a man in it, and that I really need a boyfriend. Then, starting as early as tomorrow, they will proceed to set me up on dates with every eligible bachelor that they know."

"How do you know that they'll do that to you? You are far too young for such dismal expectations."

"I know because they tried doing it last Christmas, and the only thing that got me out of it was when I showed them a picture of Ron. Don't look at me like that. My mother already told them over three months ago that Ron and I aren't together anymore. In their opinion, three months is more than enough time to be single, and they will be pushing me hard to get another man."

"That is the most ridiculous thing that I've ever heard."

Hermione nodded in agreement and sighed. "But my grandmother believes that marrying young will equate to a lifetime of happiness. Typically, I just sit and nod my head, playing along with her demands. Just please come with me and help me to fend them off. I don't feel like dealing with them today."

Severus paused, his fingers wrapped around the door handle. Hermione's family sounded completely loony. Who would ever think that marriage for someone who was barely out of her teens would equal a lifetime of happiness? Especially when that person was a witch and stood a decent chance of living well into her hundreds. But, on the other hand, he could understand not wishing to argue with her family and to "play along," as she put it. And it was highly unlikely that anyone, outside of her parents, knew that she was a witch. How many times had Severus played along with Dumbledore, or wished that he had someone to help him fend off the Headmaster's gentle and not-so-gentle nudges towards romance with the likes of Sybill Trelawney, Maggie Rosmerta, and at one time, Nymphadora Tonks. Merlin, Dumbledore had been a barmy old codger ... rest his soul.

"Tell me how to accomplish the final task and break free of that ruddy Resolution Contract," he finally said as he considered possibly conceding to her asinine request. Instantly, he could see the decision warring on her face. Feeling something on his arm, he glanced and saw her hand gently resting on the crook of his arm.

"Find a girlfriend. And keep her," she said.

He glowered at her cheek for quoting his own resolution to him. "Let me guess: 'Preferably without the use of chains or the Imperius Curse.' I know the bloody resolution! Or have you forgotten that not only did I manage to write them, but I've been staring at the same sodding words for the greater part of a year?"

Instead of snapping her hand away from him like he'd anticipated, he was surprised to feel her tentative touch become a firm grasp.

"Let me finish," she said firmly, causing Severus to turn and face her fully. He could no longer hold on to the doorknob in the hopes of an easy escape from the madness she was proposing.

"Think about your resolutions, Severus. They were all specific you could do *something* to accomplish the item except for that one. Although how you accomplished the new career task without becoming the new Minister of Magic or the next Dark Lord is beyond me."

Severus waved her off, in an effort to encourage her to continue. The puzzlement that had suddenly covered her features was now quickly brushed aside as she continued, "The nature of a resolution is that you've made a firm decision to do something. Well, anyway, my point is that all of the ones that you wrote could be accomplished or ticked off a 'to-do' list."

"You are beginning to babble, Hermione," he pointed out to her, with no restraint on allowing his irritation to show.

"Yes. Sorry. I tend to do that sometimes. But what you're failing to see is that many people make such resolutions without a time-constraint. For example, every year I make a resolution to eat better. Judging by the wording of the contract, like every other ill-conceived resolution, that particular one will expire at midnight on December 31st. For that one, you simply need to have a girlfriend at the time... it should count as keeping her. Even if you don't keep her in January, you've still met the resolution as of December 31st. Once the resolution is crossed off, it cannot become uncrossed."

Severus thought for a moment. It sounded possible, although it worried him to count entirely on just that single belief. And that still meant that he needed a girlfriend by next week. Not to mention that he was still puzzled at how he could determine that a woman truly was his girlfriend.

"Severus?" she asked, releasing her hold on him.

"How certain are you of this?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"There is no way to be certain. It's just logical, wouldn't you say?"

He narrowed his eyes at her and gave her his best glare. "You are basing my entire existence as a wizard on an assumption?"

"What else would you conclude? I've wracked my brain over this."

After a long silence, he finally nodded. As much as he hated to admit it, her answer made some sense. However simplistic, it did seem to be the most logical assumption. That, by no means, meant that he wasn't going to keep trying to think of something that would become more of a guarantee. Regardless, he could not accomplish this task alone. "And this girlfriend...."

Her cheeks suddenly turned a rosy pink. It was really all the answer he needed, but she responded nonetheless. "I am volunteering for the position."

Of course, he'd been planning on wooing the young woman all along. However, the words she chose made it sound as if he was desperate, which after brief consideration, he supposed that he was. Still, he felt it necessary to make certain she was aware as to what she was offering to do.

"Let us make some things clear, first. I am not some pity case, and you will not treat me as such. I have dated several women over the last several weeks and it was not because of their lack of interest that I broke things off with them; it was because of my own. I cannot tolerate dimwitted witches who care little about intelligence, who worship such trash as those bleeding afternoon serials on the Wizarding Wireless, and who waste their money on rags such as *Witch Weekly*."

She snorted. "I most certainly do not pity you."

Surprising himself, Severus had to admit that he believed her. She had, after all, spent countless hours at his bedside when he'd been a patient of St. Mungo's. That was even before he'd become an overnight celebrity.

"And I'm nothing like those giggling women who listen to serials on the Wizarding Wireless and read every issue of *Witch Weekly* cover-to-cover."

"I do realize that."

"Then why did you make it a point to mention it?"

Severus ignored her question. "What do you think constitutes a girlfriend?"

"Oh, I don't really know. I suppose that I was thinking that we could see each other frequently over the next week or so and take things from there... allow things to go at a natural pace."

He scowled.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Again, I ask you if you are simply placing my existence as a wizard on such an ill conceived plan."

"What? You want us to push things quickly start shagging today and get married tomorrow?"

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her, more in amusement than anything else. "I never proposed marriage."

He could swear that he heard a small growl come from the witch's throat. The look on her face was clearly one of frustration. "What are you proposing, then?"

It was then that he realized that he had to be honest with her. But he didn't relish the idea of giving up that information yet... if ever. This was the first time that he'd felt in control of much of anything over the last year. Although, it truly wasn't many cards that he was holding now. It was obvious that he required her help, or some other woman's help, to complete the final task. However, it couldn't be denied that she'd seemed a touch anxious to get him to go to her parents' house, and he liked the idea that she actually needed him for something.

"I only ask that you desire to make an honest attempt at this..." he motioned his hand between them. "This... whatever it is. Simply going through the motions will not work."

"I realize that. Give me some credit, please."

"Furthermore, simply allowing things to move at a natural pace may not be in our... my... best interest."

She just continued to stare at him, their eyes locked. When after a full minute Hermione still said nothing, he decided to risk showing her what he meant.

Reaching out his arm, he quickly and firmly grabbed her about the waist. Hermione let out a small yelp, but uttered no protests. In a rapid, smooth motion, Severus leant near her face and crushed his lips to hers. The kiss he bestowed on her was hard, fast, and demanding. Severus wasted no time as his tongue sought to explore her mouth. On his tongue's retreat, he nipped at her lower lip before sucking her lip into his mouth, eliciting a moan from the woman in his arms. She tipped her head back slightly, and he felt her hands move up his back before she thread them through his hair. With one final nip with his teeth, Severus decreased the suction on her lip as he slowly pulled away and broke the kiss.

"At times there can be an advantage to moving things along quickly," he purred.

He savored the flushed cheeks and slightly swollen lips of the woman still in his arms as she tried to get her breathing back under control.

"I suppose that something can certainly be said for moving things along quicker," she said, obviously trying to carry an air of nonchalance whilst attempting to catch her breath.

Severus released his hold, allowing her to step back. He smirked at her still, slightly dazed appearance.

After another moment, she continued, "I simply wished to point out that if we push things too fast, then this entire effort will be for naught. Especially if you and I are not after the same thing ... and I am referring to something beyond crossing off your final resolution. The final outcome does not entirely rest on me. And I am not doing this purely to accomplish your blasted list."

"Although I am loath to admit it, I will say that it is due to more than just my desire to complete the contract that I am allowing anything to spark between us."

She nodded and smiled up at him. "I had hoped as much. It was hard not to notice that you named me specifically in some of your resolutions."

Of course, she'd noticed.

"I have been wanting to get my hands on that library of yours ever since I came across your list," she said cheekily.

"Yes, well, that will happen soon enough. In fact, if you'd like to go now..."

Severus never had a chance to finish what he was going to say when he saw her brandish her wand at him. With a quick wave he was dressed in a Muggle black suit with a white dress shirt. Looking down at himself, he could recognize the fine Transfiguration job that the witch had performed. Until he noted his tie... with bold red and gold stripes.

Scowling, he wasted no time in wielding his own wand and changing the stripes to the more suitable green and silver from his own House.

Hearing giggles, he glanced at Hermione and glowered. Though it stopped her snickering, it did not stop her from placing her hand on his elbow and saying the words he'd been dreading. "Now, it's time to go to my parents' house."

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Not more than five minutes later, Severus found himself being introduced to the Drs. Granger... Katherine and Steven.

Blessedly, both of Hermione's parents appeared to be at least ten years older than Severus. He still needed to ask Hermione what her parents' actual ages were once he was free of this place, but for now he wasn't feeling quite as much like a pedophile.

Her parents were both pleasant and polite, insisting that Severus call them by their first names and telling him that they'd heard quite a bit about him. To say that he was surprised that they hadn't had an adverse reaction to his age would be an understatement. But they both seemed rather pleased to meet him.

Next, he was ushered from the cramped entryway into the parlor where he was introduced to less than a dozen other people who he had found himself dreading to meet. Severus didn't even bother trying to commit the names to memory. He met aunts, uncles, and cousins. With only a few odd looks, most of which came from Hermione's uncles, he was led to the sofa where Hermione introduced him to her grandmother and another aunt.

After only a few minutes, Hermione did the unthinkable and excused herself to retrieve some refreshments. She refused Severus' offer to help, and it had been obvious from the nods of her head and the look in her eyes that she'd intended for Severus to stay seated on the sofa with her relatives.

The interrogation begins, he realized. It was time to fend off Hermione's relatives for her.

"So, Mr. Snape," the younger woman was now saying, "how did you meet our little Hermione?"

How to answer *that* question without sounding like he'd been lusting after the girl since she was eleven? (Or without telling the Muggles about the recent war.)

"We became associates after she left school," was his cryptic reply.

"Ahhh. And what is it that you do?"

"I am a pro ... chemist."

"A professional chemist? As opposed to an amateur chemist?" The question was heavily laced with skepticism.

"Yes," he answered smoothly. "I was just hired at a research lab. Before that I only worked in that field in my spare time."

"I see."

A still silence settled between them at that. Hermione's grandmother stared straight ahead, refusing to look at or acknowledge Severus, giving him an uneasy feeling. He was on the verge of excusing himself for a trip to the toilet or some other equally useful, but highly false, excuse when Hermione's grandmother spoke.

"I liked that Ronald bloke." The words were directed at Hermione's aunt, although the older of the two women had deigned to give Severus a cursory glance before making such a pronouncement.

"Mother," hissed the aunt, giving her mother a look of warning. "We never even met the boy."

"But we saw a picture. I liked his picture. It was almost as if I could see him waving at me."

Severus fought to appear impassive.

"You're being very rude." The younger of the two women said before turning her attention to Severus. "I apologize for my mother, Mr. Snape. She's never been one to hold her tongue."

Just as Snape was preparing to wave it off (despite his urge to fillet the old biddy alive) that same old biddy interrupted... again.

"Do not apologize for me! I saw a picture of that Ronald boy and I liked him. Nice smile. Nice face. A picture is worth a thousand words, some say." She stopped and looked at Severus full on. "I've never seen a picture of *you*."

"Oh for..." But Severus never had the chance to finish his statement when Hermione returned from fetching refreshments for them.

"Everything all right?" Hermione asked, handing Severus a mug.

He fought back a growl as he took a sip of his drink and sputtered. "What the bloody hell is this?"

"It's wassail."

Oh, yes... wassail. Of course. It couldn't have been something as simple as tea (with a large dollop of Firewhisky for good measure). Nor could it have been a cool glass of eggnog... heavy on the liquor. Instead, she had given him something that had most of the alcohol cooked out of it already.

"See, that's what I mean," the grandmother continued. "Hermione, we miss that Ronald fellow."

Severus had tried, honestly he had, but he could not hold his tongue any longer. "How in the hell could you possibly miss that annoying little whelp if you've never even met him?" he growled in a low voice.

Instantly, he felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder. He knew that it was an attempt to restrain him from saying all that he desired to. But in looking back up at the young woman he was surprised to see that she appeared to be nearly as angry as he felt.

"Grammy!" she snapped as she stood back up. "I brought someone here to spend Christmas with us and all you can do is insult him? I'll have you know that he is a very good man. I've known him for a very long time and I like him... a lot."

"Of course you do, dear. You're young. Young women are often easily enamored by gentlemen who are old enough to be their father."

Severus could take no more. Rather than annihilate the woman, as he so strongly wished to do, he pursed his lips tightly, stood from his seat, and walked purposefully out of the room to the foyer.

As he was walking he could hear Hermione's grandmother tell the girl that she was very disappointed in her. The last thing he heard before as he opened the front door to leave was Hermione's reply, "No, Grammy, I'm very disappointed in you."

With a forceful snap, he shut the door behind him and started down the stoop, intending to go to where Hermione had Apparated them when they'd first arrived.

"Severus, wait!"

He stopped and turned, watching as Hermione walked carefully down the icy steps and then picked up speed as she approached him. Both of their cloaks were draped over her arm and as she got closer, she offered his back to him.

"I'm very sorry. I had no idea they would respond like that."

His anger only on a thin leash, he chose to say nothing as he took his cloak back from her and donned it.

"I really am sorry. I told you that they like to control my love life. I just had no idea...."

"Of course you didn't." Severus couldn't help but to sneer at her. After nearly thirty years of people in the wizarding world attempting to make fun of him, degrade him, and otherwise try to destroy his moral character, why would he even think that things would be any different now. Perhaps he *would* do better in the Muggle world.

It was then that he remembered that it had just been Muggles who had treated him the same way that those in the wizarding world typically did. Although, he did feel justified in blaming Hermione for this latest episode.

"I didn't have any idea!" she insisted. "I don't often take someone into my home to meet any members of my extended family! I had no idea that Grammy would be so rude."

"Go back inside, Miss Granger. Spend the holiday with your relatives. When the day is done, go back home to the comforts offered by Ronald Weasley or someone else your own age. Above all else, leave me alone."

He turned and went back down the path until he felt a tug at his sleeve... followed by a much more forceful tug turning him back around to face the annoying wench.

"You are one of the most obnoxious and arrogant men that I've ever known, Severus Snape. How dare you lash out at me like that, as if you were some sort of wounded...." And then she stopped and stared for a moment, her mouth gaping open at him.

Severus snarled.

"How can I apologize for them hurting you like that, Severus? That certainly wasn't my intention. I wouldn't set you up to be... to be humiliated like that." She cast her eyes down as she said her last words.

In a flash, he walked up to her, still in a tower of frustration and anger. He tipped her chin up to force her to meet his gaze and spoke in a very soft voice laden with poison. "I told you, I don't want your pity."

"It's not pity, you great git."

She dared... dared to throw right back at him that which he had dished. Her bitter, dangerous tone was so soft and controlled that it spoke louder volumes than the high shrills which he was more accustomed to hearing from women. He couldn't help but show a bit of surprise and a modicum of respect for her.

"Then what would you call it, Miss Granger? You brought me here to embarrass me. I wouldn't be surprised if you were prepared to take your memories and share them with your little friends with that Pensieve that Potter now has. Or maybe you have that bug Skeeter somewhere on your person so that this can adorn the pages of tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*."

"Stop acting like a paranoid little prat, Severus. It doesn't become you. I've apologized for what happened. I am willing to make amends. What more do you want?"

He remained silent. After the silence had settled within them, growing increasingly uncomfortable, Hermione was coerced to speak again, although this time, her voice was quiet and calm. The emotion within was not filled with a toxin that would eat away at him and only serve to fuel his anger. No, this was worse; there was so much compassion behind her words that he was afraid that it would taint his very soul.

"I've cared about you for a long time, Severus. You may not be feeling the same things for me that I feel for you, and I understand that. I believe that it came from spending several weeks at your bedside. Perhaps, it was the moment that you saved me from Dolohov's curse on the battlefield, or when I protected you after you fell and got you safely to St. Mungo's once the major fighting had ceased. Maybe it began before that when you contacted me to be your liaison to the Order, and all of the meetings we had. Possibly it had even begun before then, I'm not really sure. I do know that somewhere along the way, it turned from admiration and hero worship to something much more.

"But despite what you may think, when one person cares for another, they do not wish to hear other people putting down the person that they lo...like. My family had no right to treat you that way, and the only thing I can do is apologize and be thankful that at least my own parents were polite."

Finished with her small rant, she stood there, nervously. Fidgeting with her hands, chewing on her lower lip, and now unable to keep eye contact with him.

Severus knew what typically came next after something like this, and then realization flooded him.... He actually *wanted* to do those things. He wanted to not only accept her apology, but he bloody well wanted to apologize to *her* for his behavior as well! The desire to kiss her, pull her up into his arms, and warm her from the bitter cold that was seeping through his suit, was overwhelming.

Loved.

She had been about to say "loved" *they do not wish to hear other people putting down the person that they loved.*

Suddenly, he understood what she had meant earlier about moving things along too quickly, even if they would be forced to move things much faster than ideal. Damn, such a thought would actually imply that, even if he did not have a contract to fulfill, he would be interested in the girl.

For Severus Snape, nothing was harder than admitting that someone else was right. And not only was she forcing him to do that, but Hermione Granger was compelling him to admit a growing attraction and feelings that he wasn't yet ready to face.

It was as she said. She had been a much larger part of his life than he had even known up until a few days ago. And even before that, they had worked together frequently prior to the death of the Dark Lord. After the first several meetings then, they had built a comfortable working relationship... the sort that had typically taken much longer to build with most other people.

The knowledge of how much she'd been involved even after the battle was something which he had not given much more than cursory consideration to before now. He had, after all, only been learning these things over the last couple of days.

He had been silent too long. She had laid her feelings out for him to see, and Hermione was still waiting for his response. Seemingly, on its own accord, Severus reached up his hand, cupping her face and brushing his thumb across her cold cheek. She looked up into his face, and her brown eyes began to warm him from the inside out.

"You need to get back inside before you catch your death," he said softly.

Confusion clouded her eyes instantly. She opened her mouth to protest, but he halted her by moving his hand and placing his finger to her lips.

"I will be by Grimmauld Place tomorrow morning at ten o'clock to pick you up. Today is Christmas, and you need to spend it with your family. Even your aunt and your grandmother."

She frowned, but nodded her head nonetheless. "Perhaps if you just came back inside, I could..." her voice trailed off when Severus began shaking his head.

"I am not, what most people call a people person. I loathe crowds, I hate meeting hordes of new people, and once someone insults me, I have reached my limit." Oddly

enough, the hurt look on her face now made him feel the urge to compromise with her. "But perhaps, later this week, I can have dinner with just you and your parents."

There was that beaming smile which had been absent from her face for the last two hours.

Severus leaned down and kissed her gently on the corner of her mouth. He stepped back and reached his hand in his pocket, and suddenly remembered the package in there. Glancing around him to be certain that no one else was watching from the Grangers' house, he pulled it from his pocket and handed it to Hermione. At the same time, with his other hand he flicked his wand and discreetly cast a Warming Charm.

She quickly removed the paper to reveal a wooden box. She ran her fingers over the walnut casing which had been elegantly hand-painted with what Severus knew to be a red crest, but had now become faded from spending too many years in a windowsill. Cautiously, she lifted the lid and peered inside, as the music box began to play *Pachelbel's Canon in D*.

"It's beautiful, Severus. The music is so clear, almost like I can hear the musicians playing. Wherever did you find it?"

He nodded. "It is a wizarding music box, Hermione. Not Muggle. It belonged to my great-grandmother."

Closing the lid carefully, she made to hand it back to him. "I can't accept an heirloom like this."

"I have other things that belonged to her. Keep it, please."

"But..."

"Hermione, do I seem like the type of man that would keep an heirloom with the Gryffindor crest on it?"

She stopped and looked back down at the box. Severus couldn't help the small smile from forming at the corner of his mouth. In truth, in his house he did have other things belonging to his great-grandmother, some of which also carried similar Gryffindor symbols. He just did not display them openly.

This music box had been the exception. His mother had kept it in the windowsill in her bedroom the entire time that Severus had been growing up, and he kept it there after his mother had died... even after moving into his new castle, he'd found a windowsill for it to set in. However, he felt unexpectedly pleased to see it in Hermione's hands now.

Standing on the tip of her toes, Hermione leaned up and kissed Severus on the cheek. She said a soft "thank you" in his ear before moving back to where she'd been standing.

"Tomorrow at ten."

"Yes, tomorrow at ten. Happy Christmas, Severus."

"Happy Christmas, Hermione."

And with that, Severus turned and walked quickly to the side of the house and Disapparated back to his home in Edinburgh. Upon entering his house, he didn't even bother to check his resolutions list. There was no way that the final resolution had been crossed off, but for the first time since this entire mess had begun, Severus finally felt as if completing the entire contract was at last within his grasp.

A/N: I am so very sorry about how long it took to get this story updated. To say that I became overwhelmed would be an understatement. This chapter was a bugger to write, mostly because there were things that had to happen so that I can actually finish the story. Also, I remind you that this story is written from Severus' POV, and the only thing that we have to go on is what she says and her action... and Severus' interpretations of these things.

Thank you to JuneW for her super-quick beta job! She is absolutely amazing. :) Any mistakes are mine and mine alone.